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POSTMODERN PUZZLES: CREATING  
VERSIONS OF THE TRUTH AND IDENTITY  
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE ROBBER  
BRIDE, ALIAS GRACE, AND THE BLIND  
ASSASSIN

Maggie Raymond  
*University of Texas at Tyler*

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POSTMODERN PUZZLES:  
CREATING VERSIONS OF THE TRUTH AND IDENTITY IN MARGARET  
ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*, *ALIAS GRACE*, AND *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

by

MARGUERITE RAYMOND

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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Carolyn Tilghman, Ph. D., Committee Chair

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MARGUERITE RAYMOND

has been approved for the thesis requirement on  
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Approvals:



Thesis Chair: Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D.



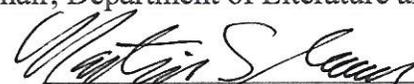
Member: Ann Beebe, Ph.D.



Member: Catherine Ross, Ph.D.



Chair, Department of Literature and Languages



Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

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ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*, *ALIAS GRACE*, AND *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

Marguerite Raymond

Thesis Chair: Carolyn Tilghman. Ph. D.

The University of Texas at Tyler  
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Although difficult to universally characterize Margaret Atwood as a feminist postmodern writer, three of Atwood's novels (*The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin*) use postmodern techniques to build a conversation with readers about how female identity is created by having readers co-create meaning, consider the influence of intertexts, and question discourses. By emphasizing the role of the reader and the construction of text through storytelling, the traditional roles of author and reader are questioned, and Atwood develops a conversation with readers over their respective roles in creating and interpreting text. In *The Robber Bride*, Tony, Charis, and Roz tell Zenia's story through their respective memories, but the arbitrary nature of what they choose to remember and what they choose to share challenges the biased nature of who tells the story/history. Grace Marks, in *Alias Grace*, tells her own story alongside the historical documents and narratives about her and fictional excerpts, highlighting how what is considered fact may be based on an agenda or fictional structures. In *The Blind*

*Assassin*, Iris Chase Griffen has the largest control of her story in comparison to the other storytellers under study by choosing the elements that corroborate her narrative agenda. However, in each novel, readers are never given a complete answer to the identities in question. Instead, Atwood develops a conversation with the reader through his or her interaction with these three novels that makes him or her consider the construction of identity and how female characters in particular are defined.

## Introduction

Postmodern novels separate themselves from modernist novels by how they re-contextualize texts in history, put forth the possibilities of relative interpretations of truth and reality, and engage the reader in creating the meaning of a text. Furthermore, they consider the competing discourses and narrative structures that influence how writers construct their stories and how readers interpret those stories. Within *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin*, author Margaret Atwood employs several of these postmodern techniques and specifically calls attention to the highly constructed nature of the respective narratives to make readers actively participate in the novels' meanings and develop a conversation about the construction of female identity in literature. Referred to as the "villainess novels" by Nathalie Cooke, the female characters of each book are deeply flawed and often defined by forces outside of their own control (137). In each story, the reader is presented with a puzzle to be solved regarding a female character's identity and is given the opportunity to become a co-creator of the narrative by forming his or her own interpretation of the truth based on the information that Atwood shares while becoming a more critical reader who takes into consideration the factors involved in constructing a text.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Bran Nicol devotes a section to Atwood where he notes that "the recurrent concern in all her fiction is with the constructed nature of history and the way cultural myths operate as kinds of scripts that dictate our behavior" (149). Although *Alias Grace* is the only work based on the story of a real woman, both *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin* also challenge the traditional views of history and make the reader consider its construction as Atwood

leaves unclear which parts of the truth her narrators choose to reveal or not in their narratives. These novels, too, consider the role of myths and history in shaping how readers interpret the texts and structure the identities and roles of different characters.

Atwood's female characters in these novels gain increasing agency in the construction of their own stories; however, all of them fail to reveal the entire truth about themselves or the events they record, suggesting that identities and events cannot be defined in only one way and can change based on how they are interpreted and by whom. Zenia is presented as a dangerous other woman in *The Robber Bride* by the three women whom she has victimized, and Grace Marks, who is called a murderess in the historical documents Atwood includes alongside the fiction, attempts to piece together the narrative of her choice in *Alias Grace*. *The Blind Assassin* introduces a female character in charge of her own narrative, Iris Chase Griffen, but the reader cannot be certain of the absolute truth of her role as a blind assassin in her sister's suicide. In all three novels, the constructed natures of their texts cause a heightened awareness in the reader regarding the construction of storytelling and female identity. Consequently, the reader must come to terms with how he or she uses narratives to construct meaning not only from texts but specifically in terms of classifying the identities, roles, and functions of female characters while reading.

Zenia, Grace, and Iris are each fallible characters, and the stories surrounding them only emphasize certain aspects of their character. Through growing agency and control of their narratives, each character shows the power of storytelling to disrupt the cultural myths and social dichotomies surrounding them. Even Iris, who has control of her narrative, uses mythology and Gothic tropes to both delineate and challenge the

expectations of the type of victim she should or should not be. Atwood hints at this idea of breaking expectations of female characters by commenting in “Spotty-Handed Villainesses” that “but is it not, today—well, somehow *unfeminist* do depict a woman behaving badly? Isn’t bad behavior supposed to be the monopoly of men?” (126). She challenges the assumptions that even feminist theory has brought to the table and shows that society must embrace all aspects of the female identity, including those that put women into a negative light and showcase their capacity for villainy.

In her speech, “In Search of *Alias Grace*,” Atwood muses on the ability of the fallibility of memory to grow into history. Asking “how do we *know* we know what we think we know?,” she notes that “for history as for the individual, forgetting can be just as convenient as remembering, and remembering what was once forgotten can be distinctly uncomfortable” (160-1). Thus, the puzzles that she presents readers at the beginning of each novel (Zenia’s reemergence from the dead, Grace’s involvement in Nancy’s murder, and Iris’s role as a blind assassin) are left unanswered by Atwood. Although there may be truth to be discovered for each character, readers may not know what they think they know by the time they have finished reading each book. Instead, readers must create their own interpretations of the clues and discourses surrounding the text in order to determine answers to the puzzle.

## Chapter 1: *The Robber Bride*

At its heart, *The Robber Bride* deals with the postmodern idea of calling attention to the constructed nature of text, and by doing so, questions the larger notion of constructed female identity. Atwood achieves this not only by calling direct attention to the novel's constructed nature and the reader's subjective interpretation but also by including intertexts such as fairy tales, Gothic vampire lore, and mythology to question the validity of the truth in forming identity and to show how fluid the lines between the traditional dichotomies of good/evil, villain/victim, and powerful/powerless can be. Atwood uses the character of Zenia in particular to challenge assumed discourses about the villainous "other woman." Each of the novel's three narrators (Tony, Charis, and Roz) take turns relating her memories of Zenia, and they frame her as a villainous fairy-tale character and a battle-ready enemy that they must band against in order to survive. Since Zenia has preyed upon the men in their lives and so committed a "sin" against the other women, they set her up as a villain. However, Atwood's nuanced presentation of their narratives shows the discrepancies between the memories of each of the three women telling Zenia's story and the power that the storyteller has in creating and shaping her narrative.

Atwood does not let Zenia in *The Robber Bride* have agency in detailing her own past or identity. Instead, her story is told through the narratives of Tony, Charis, and Roz who give conflicting versions of Zenia and her motivations, exposing in the process that there is not one single truth that can capture Zenia's identity, but rather that there are multiple, complicated sides that may still leave the reader with an incomplete answer. The disparate versions come to a head at the end of the novel where they relate

their separate, final meetings with Zenia before she is found dead at the hotel where they left her, and the reader realizes that the function of Zenia's specific identity is not as important to the novel's meaning as is the effect she has on the other women and how they choose to remember her. According to Bran Nicol, "the postmodern subject possesses a valuable critical awareness" (13). That awareness is necessary for the reader as his or her construction of their own interpretation of Zenia's identity from the conflicting versions to realize that identity itself is constructed by interpretations and can be fluid depending on who is interpreting it.

Tony, Charis, and Roz choose the experiences they relate, and each of them casts herself as Zenia's victim. In the first section of *The Robber Bride*, "The Toxique," each woman begins her tale with Zenia's death and subsequent reappearance at the Toxique. Then, in "Black Enamel," they look to the past through flashbacks and their memories to relate how Zenia entered each of their lives and the devastation with which she left them. However, Atwood forces the reader to consider how accurate and unbiased those memories may be: "Yet history is not a true palindrome, thinks Tony. We can't really run it backwards and end up at a clean start. Too many of the pieces have gone missing; also we know too much, we know the outcome" (121). According to Nicol, the narrator of a novel recreating the past "inevitably favours one character over another and subtly pushes the reader to accept his or her interpretation of events" (101). Postmodern novels try to expose the natural bias inherent in their narrators to create awareness of the inability to tell the entire story. Tony, Roz, and Charis favor their own motivations over Zenia's, and the three of their narratives combined lead to more questions about Zenia rather than a definitive conclusion of who she really is.

The women in charge of Zenia's story and with explaining her identity know the outcome of their experience with her—the loss of their significant others—and that shadows how they remember and interpret experiences. For example, after becoming friends in college, West invites Tony to a party where she first meets Zenia—whom Tony later realizes is a girlfriend that she did not know he had. As West introduces them, Tony notices “a proprietary reverence in his voice, and a huskiness, that Tony doesn't like at all. *Mine*, is what he means” (141). She colors the remembrance of the experience with her future relationship with West: “She's lost something. She's lost West. Tsol. Reverof. It's a dumb thought: how can you lose somebody you never really had?” (142). Unlike with Charis and Roz, Tony's relationship with West involves Zenia from the beginning. Although Tony paints Zenia as the “other woman” and someone who takes West from her due to later events, in the beginning it was Zenia and West, not Tony and West. The constructed nature of the victim and victor identities is further blurred since it is ultimately Tony who ends up with West.

The idea of female identity as fluid is mentioned in Elizabeth Flynn's *Feminism Beyond Modernism*. In her book, she writes that “within a postmodern frame of reference, names and categories are seen as fluid rather than rigid, their boundaries permeable rather than fixed” (Flynn 39). In addition to not clearly defining her as a victim or victor, Atwood refuses to delineate Zenia's gender identity throughout the novel, highlighting both the feminine and masculine qualities she displays depending on which character she interacts with. Shaista Irshad and Niroj Banerji dig into the implications of Zenia's fluid gender traits in “Subversion of Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*.” They suggest that Zenia

projects herself as oppressed and physically abused before Tony, as a cancer patient before Charis and as a religious hybrid before Roz to evoke their sense of pity and sympathy and to exploit the same to her own advantage. Thus Zenia's character of displaying co-existence of both masculinity and femininity . . . is an example of Atwood's deconstruction and subversion of gender. (Irshad and Banerji n.p.)

Atwood challenges what is labeled as feminine behavior not only with Zenia but also the other female and male characters in the book. Postmodern literature and feminism question the traditional "representations of women and men as binary opposites and . . . [discover] evidence that both women and men are capable of being victims and executioners" (Flynn 14). By how Tony, Charis, and Roz each recount their experience with Zenia, they and their male significant others are presented as victims of Zenia's executions. Both Charis and Roz's significant others die in their pursuit of Zenia, and West, Tony's now husband, barely survives according to her: "Despite everything, despite Zenia, he's still here. It seems a miracle really. Some days she can't get over it" (7). Later, she remarks on how "frangible" he seems (10). In a reversal of traditional roles, West, a tall male, is seen as weak and needing the diminutive female, Tony, to protect him from the dangerous Zenia. Atwood makes the critical reader consider how the ideas of strength and weakness are constructed and are fluid from male to female and not easily defined as a characteristic of one or the other.

Additionally, Atwood considers how the fluid nature of identity mirrors the construction of history and memory. History, and those that win the wars, determines the subjective beginnings and endings as well as which moments are important for victory or

loss, and “the basic postmodernist claim here is that the notion of *objective* reconstruction according to the evidence is just a myth” (Butler 33). The novel opens with Tony, a history professor, musing about the arbitrary nature of beginnings. She thinks, “The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began. It must have been someplace long ago and distant in space.” She goes on to choose the moment for Zenia, thereby turning Zenia’s story into a reflection of her own (3). It is the winners of war that get to determine the beginnings of their story in the scope of history, and here it is Tony that, as one of the three winners in the war between the women and Zenia, wins the chance to choose the beginning of Zenia’s story.

Atwood emphasizes Tony’s interest in wars and contrasts the knowable outcomes of history and wars with readers’ desires for certainty: “She likes clear outcomes” (4). Readers assume that, like in most history tales, by the end of the battle and the story there will be a clear victor and the resolution will answer lingering questions. However, Zenia’s identity, even whether she is alive or dead, is not so clear, and by the end of the novel, Atwood denies her readers a “clear outcome.” This occurs in spite of the fact that Tony’s repeated references to battles and wars create in the reader the expectation of knowing the winner and the loser, the victor and the victim in this “battle” among the women. For instance, at Zenia’s funeral in the beginning of the book, Tony implies that Zenia could come back from the dead and indicates that Zenia’s vengefulness could extend past the grave. She wonders if they should have sacrificed something, “a bowl of blood, a bowl of pain, some death. Then maybe she would stay buried” (14). By comparing Zenia to the powerful dead of the past and herself as a survivor of the battle against Zenia, Tony highlights in her history storytelling the deadly and dangerous

aspects of Zenia's identity and sets Zenia up as someone to be feared and herself, Charis, and Roz as individuals to be pitied.

Atwood brings the arbitrary nature of identifying historical victims and victors to the forefront in Tony's narrative. Soon after seeming to establish Tony, Charis, and Roz as the victims of Zenia, she blurs the line between victim and victor. In a heated argument with another professor, Tony blurts, "Which victims? . . . They were all victims! They took turns! Actually, they took turns trying to avoid being the victims. That's the whole point about war!" (22) The lines between victor and victim are fluid according to Tony, and identification with either is defined only by how others interpret those roles. Although Atwood makes the three women to appear as victims of Zenia, the truth might not be so easy to find and define. As it is with history, the ones who are left are the ones who get to decide who the victims and victors are. Furthermore, Atwood challenges the reader to consider how and by whom history has been written. According to her study, "*All history is written backwards . . . . We choose a significant event and examine its causes and its consequences, but who decides whether the event is significant*" (121). Atwood's readers must have a critical awareness about who chooses the significant events that compose Zenia's story in order to understand how her identity has been framed and constructed. Likewise, that same awareness of the construction of historical storytelling must also guide the reader in considering the subjective nature of the interpretation of historical events.

As the narrative of Tony and Zenia's relationship progresses in Tony's historical retelling of events, Atwood compares and contrasts the nature of the history of wars with the construction of narrative. Tony's interest in wars preconditions her to look at battles

and wars and how they work together to create an outcome. She knows the answers about why and how each battle was fought in relation to how it ends. Although Tony spends all day thinking about wars, Zenia throws her off by making her question deadly problems that may not have solutions or a predictable outcome. Tony reacts by being “taken aback by [Zenia’s] questions. They aren’t abstract problems—they’re too personal for that—and there are no correct solutions to them. But it would be a tactical error to let her dismay show” (145). The war-like nature of their relationship is indicated by Tony’s use of the word “tactical”—a word she may not have used originally, but with the victor and victim motif she has established, the reader becomes aware again of the constructed nature of Tony’s development of Zenia’s identity. However, the reader should also consider that while Tony constructs a history of “war” and problems with no solutions regarding Zenia, she does so with knowing how their battles will end much to her “dismay.”

Roz frames her history with Zenia as the story of outsiders trying to fit in. She first establishes her outsider nature with the story of her own upbringing. Considered a DP, Displaced Person, by her schoolmates, she had “something about her that set her apart, an invisible barrier, faint and hardly there, like the surface of water, but strong nonetheless. . . . She wasn’t like the others, she was among them but she wasn’t part of them” (360). By establishing her own past as a victim of displacement, Roz establishes her and Zenia’s shared history of not being able to conform to the expected norms of behavior and background. Roz continues her story of her past with emphasizing how she always felt like “an oddity, a hybrid, a strange half-person” (381). Her continued insistence in creating her story of her own victimization sets the historical dichotomy of

victor and victim against Zenia. Donna L. Potts, in her article “‘The Old Maps Are Dissolving’: Intertextuality and Identity in Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*,” suggests that because the women “have so thoroughly accepted their victim status as women and as Canadians, they fail to see themselves as potential victimizers” (292). The fluid nature between victim and victor that Roz has established makes critical readers reconsider the rigid, traditional historical boundaries between those that exist outside the norm.

When it is Charis’s turn to reconstruct her history with Zenia, her version begins with her teaching a yoga class. In reference to her students, she remarks that “the faces are not important to her, because the face is the individualism, the very thing that Charis wants to help these women transcend” (241). Although Zenia’s true identity is never fully revealed to the reader, Atwood’s choice of the word “transcend” clues the reader into how the construction of individual perspectives of history can be limiting. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “transcend” as “to pass or extend beyond or above (a non-physical limit); to go beyond the limits of (something immaterial); to exceed.” Culture tends to define identity with dichotomous terms such as victor and victim or good and evil; however, *The Robber Bride* challenges those labels by continuously showing how blurred the lines really are. Tony, Roz, and Charis are not as different from Zenia as they would like to believe, and “Atwood is involved in an intriguing counter-discourse that regards all identities derived from opposite discourses” (Müller 253).

In addition to the historical narrative, the critical reader must also analyze the intertexts that Atwood chooses throughout *The Robber Bride*, which make the reader reconsider traditional narratives and how, through Zenia, they can be re-interpreted to

reflect a more feminist, nuanced understanding of identity. History is not much more than “another narrative, whose paradigm structures were no better than fictional, and was a slave to its own (often unconsciously used myths, metaphors, and stereotypes” (Butler 32). These myths and stereotypes tend to define identity within a male and female binary; however, Zenia takes on roles within each binary and challenges the traditional dichotomy. In her essay, “Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodernist Culture,” Rita Felski notes that “rather than expressing the truth of female identity, then, art becomes a means of questioning identity. Art has the power to be uncanny and unsettling, to estrange us from the everyday and challenge our routine assumptions” (38). Similarly, Atwood’s play on traditional myths and fairy tales forces her reader to confront the accepted versions of truth that society puts forth and instead reconsider different versions of truth. In her essay on “Spotty-Handed Villainesses,” Atwood comments that “We live in an age not only of gender crossover but also of *genre* crossover, so you can throw all of the above into the cauldron and stir” (131). Zenia’s gender and genre crossover places her in a place unexplored according to Atwood’s essay, as *The Robber Bride* questions the concept of the “evil” other woman and the fairy-tale standards that have constructed this stereotype in traditional narrative.

Many of Atwood’s works cross the borders of genre not just separately but within the works themselves. According to Coral Ann Howells, Atwood’s works have elements of

popular women’s romance, Gothic romance, fairy tales, wilderness survival narratives, domestic comedy, science fiction fantasy, spy thrillers, the dystopia, the *kunstlerroman*, the fictive autobiography, and the

historical novel. To consider generic perspectives with an emphasis on pluralism would seem to be the appropriate course to take in our contemporary context of poststructuralism and postmodernist aesthetics. (139)

Within *The Robber Bride*, Atwood uses elements of popular fairy tales, Gothic literature, and mythology in particular. The reader can look at how she constructs and weaves each element throughout each genre not only to show the crossover but also to expose the constructed nature of each one. By capitalizing on the cultural knowledge of the structure and outcomes of the fairy tales, traditional Gothic literature, and mythology, Atwood can challenge the reader's ingrained expectations of characters embodying good versus evil, villain and victim, and powerful versus powerless.

*The Robber Bride* flips the traditional fairy tale of "The Robber Bridegroom." Instead, it presents an "updated feminized version" as well as "the key Gothic elements of the unspeakable and the buried life, though it also exploits the shock effects which occur when Gothic transgresses generic borders between fantasy and realism, crossing from the female romance to the detective thriller and to documentary history" (Howells 147). For example, as Roz divulges her version of the events of Zenia's past, she brings insight to the reader on how traditional fairy-tale villains and victims can evolve. She reminisces about Tony when she "The Robber Bridegroom" story to her twin girls when they were younger. Wanting to change all the characters to female, the twins have Tony change it to "The Robber Bride" but they want her to still keep her victims female. While Roz makes a connection to Zenia "preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron," she does not see the victims as her twins have

suggested for the story (327). She sees the traditional dichotomy of male versus female and decides to “let the grooms take it in the neck for once” (327). However, the men in Atwood’s tale are not the victims of this story. What Roz fails to see is that the female characters can be both the predator and the prey and that Zenia’s story is about her, Tony, and Charis playing the victims of Zenia’s “Robber Bride.” Likewise, the men in their lives are neither the predator nor prey in this tale, but a device that Zenia can use against the female narrators to exert her power over their lives and happiness. Because Roz is preconditioned to see a male versus female binary and a victor and victim binary, she assumes that it is the male characters who deserve to act as victims for once. However, “the title is subverted by Atwood to *The Robber Bride* to elucidate and prove the hollowness, artificiality and instability of gender identity” (Irshad and Banerji). Zenia’s villainy extends more to the three woman than to the men who they have lost to her, and her actions fail to be clearly defined as either masculine or feminine.

The juxtaposition of female versus female is hinted at just before Roz is reminded of “The Robber Bride/Bridegroom” switch. Roz is lost in her own fairy-tale version of her relationship with Zenia. She defines jealousy as the key inspiration for murder and brings to mind for the reader two fairy-tales of female versus female conflict that are based in jealousy. First, Zenia is painted as a witch. Roz imagines her “dead and melting” like the Wicked Witch of the West, but then decides that is not enough and that she would rather imagine her ugly: “Some nice jowls, a double chin, a permanent scowl. Blacken a few teeth, like children’s drawings of witches. Better” (322). By bringing the traditional idea of the villainess and witch to the forefront of her imagination, she paints Zenia’s story as charged with those associations, and the reader

through those cultural association connects her easily to the villain's role. However, the tables quickly turn on Roz's narrative, and the reader is forced to confront how easily they have associated Zenia with the fairy-tale witch. After imagining Zenia as the evil witch, it is instead Roz who becomes the witch who appeals to her mirror:

*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most beautiful of us all?*

*Depends, says the mirror. Beauty is only skin deep.*

*Right you are, says Roz, I'll take some anyway. Now answer my question." (322)*

Atwood makes the reader reconsider the lines between good and evil female characters. Roz has switched roles with the traditional conception of what an evil woman looks like, dead and/or ugly, to become the Evil Queen from *Snow White*, who holds on to youth and beauty and is jealous of the other woman. In her essay, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses," Atwood remarks on one of the interesting challenges of portraying a female character who acts outside of the standard norms of society. Her stories are "about human beings, and human beings divide behavior into good and bad. The characters judge each other, and the reader judges the characters" (128). Roz first judges Zenia, using her looks to trick the reader into drawing conclusions about her character, but then falls into the trap herself as the reader than judges her for her preoccupation with her own vanity.

Likewise, Tony notes the reflections that the women cast on each other and the similarities between them and Zenia. She asks, "Was she in any way like us? thinks Tony. Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?" (520). Although the majority of the novel is constructed around the three women aligning themselves as

victims against Zenia's tactics, Tony finds the connections between themselves and their capacity for villainy just as easily as their capacity for victimization. Similarly, Roz has an earlier connection to the same idea. She remarks that "it's the extremes that attract her. Extreme good, extreme evil: the abilities required are similar" (435). After imagining herself as an angel, she immediately counters with the other "extreme"—Zenia: "Either way, she would like to be someone else. But not just anyone. Sometimes—for a day at least, or even for an hour, or if nothing else was available then five minutes would do—sometimes she would like to be Zenia" (435). Not only are the lines between good and evil blurred, the lines of identity and what and who the women should be are blurred as well. Roz gives the readers insight into how females cannot be stuck in the juxtaposition of either angel or devil and that the good and the bad have shades of both within them. Howells suggests that "as the Other Woman, Zenia represents the otherness which these women cannot acknowledge, but which is necessary for self-definition" (148). By embracing all aspects of their respective characters instead of limiting themselves and Zenia to rigid constructs, they can begin to understand the freedom of blurring identities to better understand not only Zenia, but themselves.

The mirror motif, present throughout the entirety of *The Robber Bride*, reveals to the reader that each of their three narratives are just as much about Tony, Charis and Roz as it is about Zenia. As he or she progresses through the novel and considers what each narrator chooses to tell or not to tell about Zenia, the reader learns less about Zenia and more about Tony, Charis, and Roz as they detail their past with Zenia. Through each construction of Zenia's narrative, these women share their own desires, fears, and

villainous tendencies. In reference to writing about female characters, Atwood suggests that “female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face” (Atwood “Spotty” 135). After believing that Zenia is buried, Tony witnesses Zenia re-emergence through the mirror of the restaurant where she, Charis, and Roz are dining, leading her to question what Zenia was “doing here, on this side of the mirror” (37). Just as her story is not told directly by her, Zenia’s physical emergence in the novel is a reflection of her and not her actual self. As the mirror imagery continues throughout each of the three narratives, the reader must acknowledge that Zenia’s role in the novel is to be a reflection of the other three women and that she is without any substance that can answer the question of who she really is.

As the reader questions the narratives of traditional fairy tales, such as “The Robber Bridegroom” and *Snow White and the Evil Queen*, another “fairy tale” of society is upended as well. Patricia Goldblatt suggest the female characters, “rather than becoming recalcitrant and cynical, all sustain the golden illusion of the fairy-tale ending. In short, they hold to the belief, the myth perpetuated by society: marriage” (276). None of the three women get the happy marital ending of the traditional fairy tale. Charis’s boyfriend leaves her, Roz’s husband commits suicide, and even though Tony and West are still together at the end, she continually questions his passion for her. At the end, instead of a prince coming to rescue the princess from the evil witch such as in *Snow White*, the three women band together to free themselves from Zenia’s hold. It is through their own coming together that they are finally able to end their (and Zenia’s) tale.

In addition to the traditional fairy tales, Atwood includes references to Zenia's vampire-like qualities, highlighting the Gothic genre. In *Contemporary Fiction and the Fantastic*, Lucie Armitt argues that the mirror motif is shaped by a Gothic element as well, since it "is also conventional vampire mythology and feeds into the fact that Zenia is, for each of the protagonists, a monster in the shape of their own reflected anxieties, while failing to cast a firm shadow of her own" (Armitt 75). For example, Roz focuses on Zenia's plastic surgery opposed to her own weight, and Tony focuses on Zenia's voluptuousness opposed to her own diminutive size. Because they each choose which aspect of Zenia's is worth recounting, the reader is unable to know the extent of the truth of Zenia's identity versus that of the three other women. Focusing on her beauty or health or sexuality, whichever element that they feel that they are missing, Tony, Roz, and Charis project their wants onto her and their reconstructions of their memories of her. However, instead of reconstructing Zenia, they reveal more about their own insecurities and desires since "Zenia offers each of the women a seductive reflection of themselves as they wish to be seen" (Tolan 53). In this way, although she is depicted as an external threat by Tony, Charis, and Roz, she is really a manifestation of their own insecure psyches. For example, when Tony first sees Zenia at a college party, her entrance, where "a couple of the women glance over at Tony as she comes in, then shift their eyes quickly away," is contrasted to how Zenia is seen at the same party: "All the others, in their black, sink into the black background of the walls. Zenia stands out: her face and hands and torso swim against the darkness" (138-9). Tony yearns to be noticed, specifically by West, yet it is Zenia who captures his and the rest of the party's attention. Similar to how the mirror motif underscores the reflection that Zenia plays for

the other women, Atwood suggests that the supernatural can reflect the other characters as well: “Vampire and werewolf stories . . . in these, the threat is from outside, true, but the threatening thing may also conceal a split-off part of the character’s own psyche” (Atwood “Spotty” 130). Zenia represents the desires that the three women are unable to realize, including a passionate relationship with their partners and the ability to embrace their evil, “villain” side.

Furthermore, the reader is asked again to consider the constructed, subjective nature of fiction as Gothic tropes develop in the novel. If Tony, Roz, and Charis are the ones who construct Zenia’s story, they are also the ones who can frame it within the Gothic narrative, and “by magnifying Zenia to monstrous proportions, they simultaneously validate their own status as her victims. The Gothic narrative provides a code by which they can inscribe themselves as innocent victims of an external and supernatural threat” (Tolan 50). By using the reader’s preconceptions about villainy and victims within Gothic stories, the women are able to construct their own version of events with Zenia as the Gothic monster and themselves as the helpless, innocent victims needing rescue from her. They give Zenia supernatural elements, such as her return from the dead, and similarities to vampire lore in order to squarely frame her within the dangerous threat that Gothic villains serve. In contrast, they present themselves as helpless around her and unable to truly face her.

Atwood plays on the idea of traditional vampire lore in order to clue the reader about how the women are the victims of their own doing to a certain extent. The novel begins with supernatural influence when “Zenia returns from the dead” and the effect that rise from the dead and re-entrance into their lives has on Tony, Roz, and Charis

(4). Believing Zenia dead, her memory still haunts the three women, but seeing her again prompts them to look within themselves for the connections they have with her. Charis notes that her reaction to Zenia has less to do with Zenia than it does with herself: “It’s not fear . . . She makes me sick. She makes me sick of myself” (36). Charis’s narrative of Zenia paints a picture of a woman sick with cancer who makes Charis want to “summon up all her energy, the energy of the light, and heal her, right on the spot” (246). Charis has spent much of her adult life trying to heal her own scars from her abused past and Zenia’s appeal to her desire to heal is reflective of her own journey. Although Charis initially lets Zenia walk away, when Zenia reappears at her door days later, she invites her in and Zenia “collapses” into Charis’s arms, similar to a Gothic heroine overwhelmed by events or a vampire allowed entrance (246). Their individuality is blurred as they are joined together, and the reader must begin to challenge the expectations of the Gothic frame and the role of the helpless female victim overwhelmed by the supernatural, external threats in order to attempt to solve the question of Zenia’s true relationship with the three women.

The vampire character in Gothic literature is often seen as the evil villain; however, what responsibility does the one who opens the door have regarding the fallout of events? Earlier in the novel, Tony notes the culpability that she must share with Zenia for the havoc in her life. In reconstructing her history with Zenia, Tony remarks:

people like Zenia can never step through your doorway, can never enter and entangle themselves in your life, unless you invite them. There has to be recognition, an offer of hospitality, a word of greeting. Tony has come to realize this, although she didn’t at the time. The question she asks

about herself now is simply: why did she do it? What was there about her, and also about Zenia, that made such a thing not only possible but necessary? (127)

Tony acknowledges the flawed, changed perception that time can project onto past memories. She admits that her present has influenced the narrative of her past, and the reader must consider what impact the present can have on any reconstruction of memory and literature since it is those who win the “wars” who get to tell their version of the story. Additionally, the reader must consider what role the victim has in letting the villain into their lives voluntarily. No one made any of the women forge a relationship with Zenia—they all chose to invite her into their lives and their relationships.

As well as fairy tales and Gothic vampire lore, mythology figures into the intertexts of *The Robber Bride*. Goddess imagery permeates the text, and the reader must consider how mythology itself is constructed since “Zenia of *The Robber Bride* is herself a story, a myth” (Wilson 224). Potts draws comparisons between the three narrators and the three goddess linked to the “Judgement of Paris:” Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera. In contrast, Zenia is strategically positioned as Andromache, a “victim of the community’s collective fury primarily because she is a foreigner; her insignificant status as a slave and mistress ensures that her death will not result in more violence” (Potts 286). By associating these mythological women with the women of *The Robber Bride*, relations of power are subtly reversed. Tony, Charis, and Roz should have the power, and Zenia should be a sacrifice meant to dissuade continuing violence.

Sharon R. Wilson also analyzes mythological intertexts throughout *The Robber Bride* in “Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood’s Works.” She describes Zenia as

a “postmodern Snake Goddess” whose “contradictory roles as Circe *femme fatale*, seductress-goddess, devouring vagina, harpy, sex object, abused child, career woman, and friend . . . suggest not only the contradictory roles a woman is imagined to play or does play, but the endless number of goddesses who are all part of the Great Goddess” (224). Each of the three female narrators focus on different parts of Zenia’s traits, failing to give the entire picture of her. The contradictory memories come to a head as they relate to each other the last moments of Zenia’s life and cannot agree on the details of the room they were supposedly all in at different times. Suggesting that Zenia is more of an intangible figure than a definable character, Atwood plays with the reader’s expectations for an agreed upon answer and ending for the three women, showcasing how art, and in this case the construction of narrative, “is not just a means to truth, but also a way of questioning the desire for truth” (Felski 40). The goal of the Zenia’s story is not to reveal her true past and identity but to examine how readers in their journey of examining Zenia’s story acknowledge the subjective nature of memory and realize the tenuous nature of defining female identity.

Although the three women continually construct their narratives to demonstrate how they are the victims of Zenia, the truth of Zenia’s death is unclear, and each may have played a role in her death by hoping to prevent future distress to themselves and those around them. Tony imagines different scenarios for confronting Zenia, one of them including “a neat red hole placed competently in the exact centre of Zenia’s forehead” (452); Charis has a vision of her other self, Karen, who “throws [Zenia] over the balcony railing, she watches her flutter down, down from the tower, and hit the edge of the fountain, and burst like an old squash” (474); and Roz admits to thinking of wanting to

“sneak up behind Zenia, bop her on the head with a lamp or something. Tie her up with pantyhose. Make it look like a sex killing. . . . it’s just the kind of sordid ending a woman like Zenia deserves” (488). Zenia is found dead soon after each of their encounters with her, and it is unclear if it is murder or suicide. Either way, each of the three women is able to find reconciliation and peace after her death: Tony with West, Charis with her daughter, Augusta; and Roz with her son, Larry.

Through Tony, Charis, and Roz, the reader attempts to determine the secrets of Zenia’s past and her motivations behind her actions. They position themselves and those they love as her victims, yet Zenia is the one who is dead at the end of the narrative while they survive. Atwood does not let Zenia have her own voice in her story and instead uses her to show the reader how fluid identity can be. The lines between victim and victor as well as strong and weak are blurred as the reader attempts to understand the differing interpretations of Zenia’s identity and the bias that colors the construction of memory.

## Chapter 2: *Alias Grace*

Atwood's *Alias Grace* offers commentary on how identity is more complicated than one person's interpretation of it. In it, Atwood mixes historical documents with fiction to emphasize the multiple possible stories of Grace Marks, a young woman accused of murder and later pardoned for it in the 1800s. Throughout the novel, the reader acts as a detective and attempts to solve the question of whether Grace really is a murderess or not. However, Atwood never makes Grace's innocence or guilt clear, and the reader is left without a satisfying single answer to her identity. Unlike Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, Atwood creates a fictional voice for Grace to counter the historical documents she also includes as part of the novel's construction, such as newspaper articles, penitentiary records, and memoirs. Grace herself weaves her own story like the legendary Scheherazade in which the story becomes more important than the answers or truth. By showing the complicated possibilities that lead to Grace's crimes and by giving Grace her own "voice," even if fictionalized, Atwood challenges reader presumptions of the simplified ideas of murderess or innocent bystander, while making the reader consider a more nuanced version of Grace's identity as he or she considers the motivations behind the construction of the differing narratives that occur in the novel.

Atwood adds pieces of historical documents throughout the novel and, by including them alongside Grace's fictional narrative, she gathers multiple sides of the story together to show how they all combine to contribute to the construction of Grace's identity. Each chapter is named after a quilting pattern, reflecting the constructed nature of not only Grace's identity but also the creation of stories, historical or fictional. Grace quilts as she tells her story to her listener, Dr. Jordan, piecing everything together at the

end in the way *she* wants it to fit: “But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different” (460). By highlighting how she differentiates her Tree from the patterns before it by choosing to construct it differently, the Tree reflects the constructed nature of text itself. Just as Grace chooses which fabrics to include in her quilting or which information to release and which to keep silent about, an author chooses what information to divulge or what not to divulge. Grace herself admits to the reader her intent to make her story “as interesting as I can,” which is the same intention that many authors, of fiction and of history have (247).

By piecing Grace’s fictional narrative together with fictions alongside nonfictions, Atwood casts doubt on the historical documents detailing Grace’s past. Nicol suggests that “the unbridgeable gap between the real past and representations of it is precisely what motivates the postmodern historical novel” (Nicol 103). Atwood combines both the past and representations of it in *Alias Grace*, yet the reader must be aware that the representations of the past include the historical documents Atwood includes and that the real past that Atwood imagines is still just a representation of one possibility of an unknowable truth. Readers follow the constructions of the author’s “story, but no historian can claim that this one is *the* story, even if that is what he or she is aiming at” (Butler 34). Postmodern writers challenge the reader to understand that there can be different interpretations of a truth based on what the author chooses to tell or not to tell, and Atwood exposes the many possible sides of Grace’s story through both history and fiction. This combination not only provides different avenues for the reader’s interpretation, it also blurs the lines between fact and fiction.

One historical document that Atwood challenges for its singular representation of Grace is Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*. The postmodern novel, and especially if historiographic metafiction, "involves the find of 'frames' foregrounded by metafiction . . . [and] draws attention to these frames and their function, and often breaks them" (Nicol 102). For example, in *Alias Grace*, Atwood juxtaposes an excerpt from the historical *Life in the Clearings* in which Moodie first meets Grace Marks with an excerpt from the fictional poem, "The Prisoner," by Emily Brontë she jumps into Grace's own fictionalized narrative. Both of the excerpts from Moodie and Brontë include a description of the prisoner's looks. Moodie writes that Grace's "complexion is fair, and must, before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled, have been very brilliant," while Brontë's poem talks about the captive's face being "as soft and mild // As sculptured marble saint" (19). Both representations build the protagonist up, but Brontë does so to capture the strength of the prisoner and Moodie does so as a contrast against what she sees as Grace's true character, using adjectives such as "cunning," "cruel," "stealthy," and "furtive" (19). Traditionally, the reader expects the historical testimony to be accurate and unbiased. However, with its arrangement next to the two fictionalized accounts, the reader becomes more aware of the historical author's own arbitrary interpretation of events and he or she uses the similarities of the constructed nature of narrative and fiction to challenge the seemingly unbiased nature of history. Butler remarks on how postmodern texts question the "god-like" nature of the author and challenge the reader to create his or her own meaning from his or her own interpretation of text: "Why should not these [meanings] originate in the reader just as much as the author? Authorial (or historical) attention should no more be trusted than realism" (23). Atwood's positioning

of Moodie's work alongside other fictional and historical works urges the reader to determine his or her own meanings and signifiers of events instead of relying on the author to explain the significance of everything, even if that author is a historian and not a fiction writer.

Atwood expands on Moodie in the "Author's Afterword." She notes the influence of fiction on Moodie's account, writing that "Moodie can't resist the potential for literary melodrama, and the cutting of Nancy's body into four quarters is not only pure invention but pure Harrison Ainsworth. The influence of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*—a favourite of Moodie's—is evident in the tale of the bloodshot eyes that were said to be haunting Grace Marks" (462). The lines between nonfiction and fiction are blurred as Atwood admits, "the true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma" (463). A puzzle with no solution, Grace Marks cannot be blamed or pardoned through either historical documents or a fictionalized recounting. As Grace tells Dr. Jordan, "just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God's truth" (257). Fiction and history are constructed by what is chosen to be told and how to tell it. Grace constructs one side of her identity, but it is only one piece of a larger work that escapes the story.

Grace chooses which pieces of truth to keep and which pieces to discard, much like she does with the quilt she makes while speaking with Dr. Jordan. Atwood's "deliberate use of quilting" as a structural frame "offers a kind of patchwork shape to the novel, which indicates ways in which we read patterns into events to make sense of them, leads the reader into trying to determine 'the truth' and yet enacts the difficulties of constructing a single final narrative" (Wisker 124). At the end of the novel, Grace

creates her own quilt as she determines how it will fit together just as she concludes the story as she sees fit. She has taken the narratives that have attempted to label her, and instead constructed an identity that she chooses to share on her own terms. For example, in her narrative to Dr. Jordan, she decides to include her early past and immigration to Canada. Grace notes how in her Confession, they included that she was originally from Ireland and “made it sound like a crime, and I don’t know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such” (103). Furthermore, she also includes the abuse of her father, setting her up in his mind as a victim early on: “Also his rages had returned, stronger than before my mother died. Already my arms were black and blue, and then one night he threw me against the wall, as he’d sometimes done with my mother, shouting that I was a slut and a whore, and I fainted” (129). Since Dr. Jordan is preconditioned to identify Grace as a victim due to her past, he will apply that pattern once they theoretically get to the part of her story about Nancy. However, the more critical reader should question that assumption because it is built on a preconceived pattern exploited by Grace.

One of the quilt patterns that highlights the construction of a relative identity is “Attic Windows.” Grace shares that “if you looked at it one way it was closed boxes, and when you looked at it another way the boxes were open . . . and that is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light” (162). Neither answer, open or closed, is correct or incorrect. It is just two different views of the same thing. As part of the “Secret Drawer” section, the deeper meaning of the pattern is expanded on by Sharon Wilson in “Quilting as Narrative Art: Metafictional Construction in *Alias Grace*,” who argues that the pattern “underline[s] the

sense in which we hide ourselves from our selves” (129). If Grace sees something one way or chooses one version to share, it does not mean that there is not another way or version of her story to view as truthful. The critical reader begins to understand that even Grace herself does not be look at things in the only possible way, and her story is not able to capture the perfect truth of her character.

As the reader attempts to solve the puzzle of Grace’s guilt or innocence, he or she becomes increasingly involved in the story’s meaning and process. The realization that the puzzle is not about Grace’s identity but about how identity is constructed to begin with slowly dawns on the reader as they interact with the “postmodern conventions that allow [Grace] to construct her life story in a way that challenges essentialist notions of identity” (Siddall 85). An increased awareness of the text as a constructed work is echoed throughout the novel as the reader becomes part of the story itself, a silent listener for Grace. As she chooses what she tells Dr. Jordan and her reader, she comments on how she perceives the ways that others have defined her. The reader must follow her lead in “her ability to see the ways in which her identity is constructed for her—and the extent to which she must negotiate those constructions within the confines of her imprisonment” to better understand the “vital and strategic components of the novel” (Siddall 88). For example, Grace confides in her reader what she should tell Dr. Jordan when it is time to reveal the events of the day of the murders. She muses:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? Because now we are almost there. I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was

different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said, for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own. (295)

Grace is very aware not only of the versions of her story that she has told but also the different versions that have been told about her and to her by the others. Her uncertainty in her own identity and role in the murders becomes clear as she concludes “it might have happened,” but she cannot tell Dr. Jordan, the reader, or even herself for sure that it has (296). Jackie Shead in *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer* compares this to “the work of a juror when arriving at an assessment of truth. *Alias Grace* could therefore be deemed an appeal, asking us to evaluate a cold case in the light of the new evidence it submits, one in which Grace’s life story, and the cruelty of the penitentiary punishment book, speak on her behalf” (180). If Grace herself does not know her guilt or innocence, it is up to the reader to make his or her own decision about Grace’s innocence or guilt. The reader’s decision colors how he or she sees the book, either focusing on the elements that highlight Grace’s involvement in murder or those that pardon her.

In *Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic*, Lucie Armitt builds on the role of the reader by comparing him or her to Dr. Jordan: “Our point of readerly identification lies with Dr. Jordan who, like us, treats Grace’s case as a complex puzzle to be unraveled/made sense of” (95). However, Grace’s main audience, Dr. Jordan, comes with his own presuppositions about Grace and has his own reasons to try and “solve” the puzzle that surrounds her. The reader becomes aware that Grace carefully chooses what to tell Dr. Jordan and that she shares those choices with the reader outside of Dr. Jordan’s knowledge. Playing off the idea that “the experience of life under patriarchy allows for

the possibility of developing an understanding both of the falseness and partiality of the dominant view and a vision of reality which is deeper and more complex than that view,” the reader becomes increasingly aware of the constructed nature of the image Grace attempts to counter with her own narrative and slowly realizes that the simple dichotomy of murderess or victim put on her by outside forces will not be enough to fully or truly characterize her (Hartsock 27).

Atwood pulls from the traditional detective novel made popular in the nineteenth-century to emphasize the detective work that readers must go through in reconstructing the narrative with their own interpretations. Regarding the construction of narrative, Shead argues that Atwood’s “reworking of the crime tradition encompasses female concerns and modes of apprehension” (“Preface”). Traditionally, the point of the crime detective novel was the big reveal of the murderer (or murderess) at the end. However, Atwood’s focus on Grace’s crime is more about the process of gathering clues and information and how the reader interprets those clues.

Atwood positions Dr. Jordan as an active fill-in for the reader in the detective role. The reader sees how he chooses to interpret the information Grace gives him and then analyzes his or her own process of interpretation. With Grace’s stories of class and gender issues, the critical reader must consider what culpability outside forces may have had on Grace’s story, and how he or she contributes to those same forces within his or her own life experiences: “Just as her protagonists must discover themselves as interpellated subjects, inevitably connected to the moral issues they investigate, Atwood’s detective-readers are, from the outset, both investigator and culprit” (Shead 166-7). Because Dr. Jordan is unable to see his own culpability and patriarchal bias towards Grace’s situation,

the reader is better able to see his or her own role in the assumptions that he or she makes in his or her own interpretations of Grace's actions.

For example, Grace comments on the different roles that she and Dr. Jordan have in society and how their differences in class and gender do not allow him to understand her: "He is not making a joke. He really does not know. Men such as him do not have to clean up the messes they make, but we have to clean up our own messes, and theirs into the bargain" (214). Dr. Jordan, due to the interpretations and assumptions that he brings to Grace's story, is unable to fully understand Grace's confession and the clues that she leaves him about how the house functioned and worked within the servant's sphere as well as the relationship between Nancy and Grace. Similarly, he is unable to see his own role in what information she chooses to share and what clues she gives. At one point, Grace wants to please him "because he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves another" (247). As the reader acts as detective, he or she must take into account the clues and "incidents" that Grace may have placed in her storytelling to entertain Dr. Jordan as opposed to simply revealing the true reality of events. Even though he may not be able to detect that information, the reader can consider the influence that the detective may have on the witness and the desire of the witness to manipulate events in order to entertain her audience.

In addition to the stories that Grace tells to Dr. Jordan, the reader must also use the detective process to determine the role and influence that the media's accounts and fictional constructions have in determining Grace's guilt or innocence. According to

Shead, “while critics are disposed to come down on one side or another, equally important is the suspension of certainty, and the activity of weighing conflicting accounts, for this draws attention to the idea reality is open to interpretation and requires the evaluation of competing discourses” (169). Throughout *Alias Grace*, Atwood shows how Grace constantly is defined in extremes: devil vs. angel, victim vs. murderess, sane vs. insane. However, the reader should not fall into the same trap as Dr. Jordan in attempting to choose one definition over another. The critical reader must instead consider how these competing ideas can come together to reveal a larger picture of Grace’s identity. She is more than just the murderess or innocent victim dragged along with McDermott. Who she is and what she is or is not a victim of changes based on the perspectives she is seen by and the situations she participates in. At various points in her story, she is defined by her status as an immigrant, a lower class servant, a woman, a daughter, and now as a storyteller.

Crime detective novels blend with fairy tales and Gothic influences as Atwood positions Grace as a modern Scheherazade, telling her stories to Dr. Jordan for a chance at her freedom. Scheherazade, in the *One Thousand and One Nights* tale, keeps the king, Shahryar, interested in the stories she tells so that he will spare her life until he eventually falls in love with her. Grace similarly tells Dr. Jordan stories and does not give him everything he wants to hear, keeping him interested until the next visit. While his goal is to detect the truth, she focuses on the larger influence of storytelling and its possible influence on testimony and truth. As their meetings continue, Dr. Jordan begins to think of Grace in sexual terms, but he leaves before a sexual relationship can be established between the two of them, failing to fulfil the role of a prince come to save the damsel in

distress. The readerly desire for completion of the tale is ignored, and while Grace's story ends in a marriage, it is not quite the fairy-tale ending expected.

A reader's expectations about Grace's truth is challenged by his or her associations with the traditional tale of Scheherazade. He or she expects Grace's long stories and background to eventually climax with her testimony of what really happened to Nancy Montgomery; that her tales have an end point. However, when her time with Dr. Jordan is cut short, while she still tells the reader parts of her story here and there, she does not provide the reader with a solid conclusion of how her tales end. According to Sharon Wilson, "as a tool of feminist critique, feminist metafiction can reveal the conventionality of the codes of fiction, how they have been constructed, and how they can be changed" (122). Atwood takes the fairy tale of Scheherazade and applies it to Grace Marks, but makes the readers consider what may have happened if Scheherazade was not able to finish her tales. What is the role of the storyteller if no one is listening?

Atwood draws connections between the construction of how Grace tells her story and how the media chooses to tell her story as well. The newspaper clippings, excerpts from Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*, and penitentiary records combine to build a figure that plays on the victim or villain theme. By taking control of Grace's identity and narrative, the media creates a celebrity to exploit as they choose: "Atwood's exploration of the construction of celebrity—told in a mixture of historical documents, newspaper reports, romanticized accounts, and fictional plots—pointedly mirror the workings of celebrity, sensationalism, and media hype in the late twentieth century" (Becker 37). Storytellers must keep the interest of their reader or listener. Whether is it the author with the book or Grace with her narrative or Scheherazade with Shahryar, in order

to survive, they must above all entertain. The media does something similar. They construct their stories in a way to entertain and engage their reader. For their purposes, their concern is the celebrity they create and not the nuances beyond dichotomy. Grace, for them, is either guilty or innocent, victim or villain, and nothing in between.

Grace has identified herself through the media's story for so long that she almost does not know how to identify herself when her story changes at the end of the book. When she first meets Dr. Jordan, she does not seem to understand why he would want to hear her story from her. She counters that he "should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself. In any case I can't remember, I can remember other things but I have lost that part of my memory entirely. They must have told you that" (41). With the gaps and inconsistencies that exist in her memory, Grace relies on the stories that the media has told in order to shape the aftermath of Nancy's death. On her release from prison, Grace comments on how "it was very strange to realize that I would not be a celebrated murderess any more, but seen perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly, . . . and an object of pity rather than of horror and fear. . . . Of course to those who do not know my story I will not be anybody in particular" (443). Since her story has changed in the media, her identity has changed as well, and she must learn how to survive with the story about her changed or maybe even unknown since even at the end of the novel her memories do not return and no definitive truth is given by her or the other forces telling her story.

In one of the passages from Moodie that Atwood interweaves throughout Grace's fictional account, Moodie plays up accounts of Grace from the media and from other

people but not those from Grace's own testimony. Describing her first visit to the penitentiary to see Grace, she writes, "My chief object in visiting their department was to look at the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from the public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon her trial, and whose able pleading saved her from the gallows, on which her wretched accomplice closed his guilty career" (3). Moodie has not come to meet Grace Marks and learn her story from her; she has come to meet Grace Marks, the "celebrated murderess" and continue the entertaining story the media has already constructed.

Atwood remarks on the process of constructing the novel in the "Author's Afterword," again making the reader consider how stories are put together. She notes how the media's portrayal of Grace's celebrity was reflective of the "contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life?" (462). History writers "fix upon a narrative shape or genre for what they have to tell us, which they will borrow from the currently available conventions for making them" (Butler 34). In Grace's case, writers, such as Moodie, buy into the conventional dichotomy of devil or angel. Grace could only be perfectly innocent or perfectly guilty, and they use those conventions to drive their stories of her in order to entertain their audience.

The critical reader, instead of following in Moodie's footsteps by continuing the story of celebrity, must consider his or her own presuppositions about the duality of guilt versus innocence and let the storyteller begin at the beginning. Even though Grace gets

her own turn to tell her story through Atwood's fictional narrative, she never gives the reader/listener an absolute answer about what happened the day of Nancy's death. But, she leaves with the reader something else—the ability to consider identity from several perspectives. In the story that she does tell, she constructs her own version, similar to the media's construction of her celebrity, by choosing what to include or not to include based on her audience, Dr. Jordan. She notes as she begins the novel, "This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (6). Atwood makes the reader focus on the fact that Grace is there to tell a "story" and entertain her audience; her goal is not to reveal the truth. The reader should note the choice of words as he or she reads, examining the construction of memory and storytelling versus the absolute definiteness of truth. Her lawyer posits to Dr. Jordan, "Has she been lying to you, you ask? Let me put it this way—did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether" (377). Grace's stories were not, as Dr. Jordan thought, a conduit for knowing which parts of her story were true and which were false. The more critical readers should instead be able to bring their own interpretation to the story placed before them and understand that the author cannot direct them to all of the truth.

In addition to the fairy-tale of Scheherzade, detective fiction, and media, Atwood uses the conventions of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction in order to challenge its narratives and turn it on its head. Ghosts, the supernatural, and madness are hallmarks of Gothic fiction, and in *Alias Grace*, Grace's haunting comes from her own past. Colette Tennant in her novel, *Reading the Gothic in Margaret Atwood's Novels*, notes a common pattern: "Atwood's protagonists are haunted from within as well as from without" and

“must make that necessary journey to the interior, becoming aware of what lies buried in their psyches before they can ever hope to escape the exterior traps that surround them” (11). Since Grace claims to not be able to remember what caused Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear’s deaths, she must dig deep through her own past and her memories to begin to understand her own role in past events.

Before meeting Dr. Jordan, Grace’s narrative takes on the Gothic quality of a woman trapped with constant reminders of death and murder below the surface. Scrapbooking with the Governor’s wife and daughters, the daughters include poems. One of them is signed by a Nancy, which evokes for Grace images of Nancy’s “rotten bones” and how “her face was all black by the time they found her, there must have been a dreadful smell” (26). For Grace, the rotting image of death permeates an otherwise innocent gathering of women doing the otherwise innocent activity of scrapbooking. Additionally, while sitting with the Governor’s wife, Grace comments on how the Governor’s wife collects newspaper stories about famous criminals. Similar to how the narrative itself is pieced together like a scrapbook, Grace’s storytelling is placed alongside newspaper clippings, historical narrative selections, and fiction. Grace describes how

the Governor’s wife cuts these crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in; she will even write away for old newspapers with crimes that were done before her time. It is her collection, she is a lady and they are all collecting things these days, and so she must collect something . . . and in any case she likes to horrify her acquaintances. (26)

It is not people that interest the Governor's wife but the crimes they committed. Her interest in the blood and the death permeates her hobby and brings it to the front of Grace's mind. Even the room they are in becomes a place that serves only to remind her of death, and after spending time with them while they scrapbook, the carpet reminds her of "thick strangled tongues" (27). It is unclear to the reader whether it is Grace's subconscious memories coming out or the media newspapers that influence her mind.

Grace is usually in the Asylum, which is a trapped environment that the reader roots for her to escape. It is described as having "only a little window high up with bars on the inside" and only the bare necessities (31). She compares the Asylum to where she was before and hints at her struggle between sanity and insanity, telling her reader that "I told them I wasn't mad, that I wasn't the one, but they wouldn't listen" (31). Atwood shows how precarious that line between sanity and insanity can really be. She has Grace recount that while some of the women probably were insane, many of them had reasons to play at being insane because they needed housing or to escape an abusive relationship. She also makes readers consider how they construct their ideas about sanity and insanity. Since no one listens to Grace, readers assume one thing or another about her—what if they had listened to her? What might they have discovered about her identity?

If the critical reader listens to Grace, they may be able to construct meaning from her hints that she "wasn't the one" and her references to what Mary Whitney would have said. The slipperiness between their shared identity and questions of sanity and insanity and what is real or not real intensify during a hypnosis session with Dr. DuPont, whose identity is also under question. Dr. Jordan plays the role of the audience preconditioned

about how to react in the face of the supernatural: “he believes in nothing, he expects trickery and longs to discover how it is worked, but at the same time he wishes to be astonished” (395). While in Gothic literature, the supernatural often can be explained in one way or another, no truth is ever given regarding Grace and Mary’s combined identity. Like Dr. Jordan, the reader “longs to discover” if Mary is really part of Grace or an act. According to Tennant, this is a typical Gothic transformation that happens throughout Atwood’s novels. Through Mary’s voice, she admits to her involvement in the murders but insists, “You’ve deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!” (401). Just as Dr. Jordan “can’t state anything with certainty . . . because the truth eludes him,” the reader cannot for sure know if Mary Whitney truly possessed Grace, if Grace uses her as a convenient cover, or if there is a further explanation to be had (407). Similar to the fluidity of victim and victor in *The Robber Bride*, the reader must piece together all the different parts of Grace’s past and the pieces of her narrative to decide if she is the victim of her situation or a victor for surviving it. Heidi Darroch in “Hysteria and Traumatic Testimony: Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*” suggests that “a focus on the dynamics of victimization is in part what has earned Atwood the label of feminist; . . . however, her fiction tends to posit passivity rather than activism in the face of persecution or, at best, point to the possibility of storytelling as a means of recuperating a fragile or fragmented self” (103+). Through her storytelling first to Dr. Jordan and then to the reader, Grace attempts to reconstruct her own identity, which has been broken and picked apart by the media, her lawyer, her own conflicting testimony, and possible possession by Mary Whitney.

Similar to *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin*, there is “a sort of melding of personalities with those of the protagonists. In these works, the central characters’ identities are fused with other characters . . . a typical pattern in Gothic literature” (147). This fusion of identities is also contrasted with the split of identities in an Emily Dickinson poem that leads the “Pandora’s Box” chapter where Grace undergoes the hypnotism: “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind— // As if my Brain had split—” (394). From the stories that Grace tells the reader combined with the other historical documents and Dr. Jordan’s fictional analysis, it is impossible for the reader to “discover” if Grace really suffers from a personality split or if the deceased Mary has possessed her or if there is another option.

The traps and prison that hold Grace are more than the Gothic tropes of penitentiary and the asylum; it is also Mary’s real or imagined spirit that haunts her. However, she is able to find peace at the end through her quilting. She brings herself together with Mary and Nancy through the pieces of their garments that Grace has collected, and she combines them in her Tree of Paradise quilt “so we will all be together” (460). By the end of the novel, she is freed from her literal and mental prisons and has let her identity be fused with the women who have most influenced her life. The reader does not get to the end of her story to discover her guilt or innocence, but instead he or she listens to what Grace thinks is the real story—the influence these women had on her.

Similar to *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood chooses to showcase the construction of text, memory, and meaning through Grace’s storytelling and the reader’s involvement in interpreting the information she gives. The combination

of history and fiction throughout *Alias Grace* confirms how “all history books tell you a story, where the most basic evidence or facts . . . can give rise to interminable, essentially disputable interpretations” (Butler 33). The reader becomes less involved in determining one interpretation and one truth and more involved in determining how those interpretations come about and the possibility that other interpretations exist at the same time.

### Chapter 3: *The Blind Assassin*

Atwood has readers play a larger role in determining the guilt or innocence of her female character in *The Blind Assassin* than he or she did with Grace in *Alias Grace*. Unlike Zenia or Grace, Iris Chase Griffen has sole construction of her narrative for her granddaughter, Sabrina, in an attempt to explain her and her sister, Laura's past. From the beginning of *The Blind Assassin*, the constructed nature of the text is brought to life. Part I presents what appears to be the guiding puzzle of the novel: did Laura Chase purposefully drive off the bridge, and, if so, why? Atwood places the narrator's text alongside a news report of the death as well as the prologue to Laura Chase's novel, also entitled "The Blind Assassin." However, it slowly becomes clear, as the reader continues, that Laura may not be either the woman in the photograph in the prologue of *The Blind Assassin* nor its author. In this regard, Atwood plays on the reader's expectations. It is through Iris's presentation of events that an awareness of the construction of the story becomes apparent to readers as they consider their own role in deciding how to deal with the information they are given by the narrative. Adding to this information are intertexts of Gothic fiction and classical mythology that combine to layer clues for readers about the truth behind Laura's suicide and challenge their expectations of the female victim in fiction.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood emphasizes how stories can be told differently based on whom the author thinks will read or listen to the tale. For instance, she highlights how Alex chooses to begin his story of Zycron which he tells to the unnamed female protagonist of the embedded "The Blind Assassin" tale when he asks what kind of story she wants to hear. By listing options for her to choose from, he gives her a role in

the creation of the story, much as Atwood gives readers a role in the creation of her novel. Her request for “another dimension of space, and also the tombs and the dead women, please?” shapes the story that he tells, and he responds, “That’s a tall order, but I’ll see what I can do” (9). He develops the story based on her requests and challenges the outcomes that she expects. Similarly, readers of *The Blind Assassin* novel expect to figure out why Laura killed herself and which sister is the one shown in the photograph. Readers bring their own expectations, but how they interpret the information given to them throughout the course of the novel shapes their respective perceptions of the truths presented by the narrative.

Furthermore, Atwood challenges reader expectations when Iris recounts the ceremony given for Laura’s Memorial Prize. Iris comments on the nature of the actual book versus the story that the readers remember. The real story for them is figuring out who the real versions of the people in the story are, besides Laura whom they presume is the main woman. Iris recounts that “what people remember isn’t the book itself, so much as the furor” surrounding the book (39). The Laura Chase “The Blind Assassin” becomes more than the text of the written story, which begs the question for readers: what does this furor mean for their assumptions about the characters in the story?

In addition to the construction of the narrative against reader expectations, Atwood continues her novelistic engagement with readers about the truth of memory by having Iris comment on its construction. Through Reenie’s stories, Iris creates her own interpretation of her family history and, in particular, her mother and father’s relationship. However, the nature of the stories she is told by Reenie changes. According to Iris, this change was “in relation to my age, and also in relation to

how distracted she was at the time. Nevertheless, in this way I collected enough fragments of the past to make a reconstruction of it, which must have borne as much relation to the real thing as a mosaic portrait would to the original. I didn't want realism anyway" (67). Iris acknowledges that because the story has been biased by the teller and then subsequently reconstructed by her own interpretations, it bears only a slight resemblance to how events may have actually occurred. The reader must apply such acknowledgements to the story that Iris tells about her and Laura's life as well. Her bias and interpretations change the story so that, while still resembling the actuality of the events that happened, it may not represent the unbiased truth. By reconstructing Iris's "mosaic" of events, the readers construct their own interpretations to determine what they see as possible truths of the events Iris shares when she tells her story.

In this way, Atwood challenges the notions of memory as a realistic recreation and instead ties her readers' imaginations to it: "As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it. But you must have known that for some time. . . . What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought of myself as recording. A bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall" (512). Here, Iris connects memory with imagination as both are able to lead to versions of the truth. It is through recollection and the imagining of events that she is able to visualize her memories and lead her readers to the truth presented to them by their own experiences and imaginations; however, her critical reader now knows that some of Iris's narrative may not be a reflection of actual events but how she imagines them to be or what she wants to be true.

The reader's role in interpreting Iris's version of events takes on a greater role in *The Blind Assassin* as compared to *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* in that readers are

forced to do more work in reconstructing and interpreting events. In *The Robber Bride*, readers piece together the three narratives to determine what they can glean about Zenia's past, but they are denied a definite answer. In *Alias Grace*, they listen along with Dr. Jordan to what Grace chooses to tell them, but she does not give a definite answer as to her own guilt or innocence. However, in *The Blind Assassin*, the reader takes on the role of Sabrina, Iris's granddaughter and intended reader of her story. It is through her that readers participate in the story, and while Iris provides a plausible answer and explanation to end the story, her previous admission to the questionable motives while authoring her memories ultimately makes readers responsible for deciding Iris's role as a blind assassin in her sister's death.

According to James Harold in "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*," "an audience's participation in narrative is much more subtle and complex than philosophers generally acknowledge" (130). Atwood's complicated narrative and the gradually dawning awareness of her readers throughout *The Blind Assassin* speaks to Harold's point. Characteristic of postmodern novels, by becoming aware of the constructed nature of narrative, readers can participate more fully in the construction of a novel's meaning. *The Blind Assassin* exemplifies how taking the clues given to readers and interpreting them becomes the main point of the narrative; ultimately discovering the truth of Iris and Laura's past is not the crux of the novel, the process of how readers interpret what the truth is remains the overarching point of the work.

Following her historical work with *Alias Grace*, Atwood continues her exploration into the construction of history by having Iris act as historian to her family's lives. According to Earl Ingersoll in "Waiting for the End: Closure in Margaret

Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*," "Iris represents herself as a 'historian,' if not a detective, examining the events leading up to her sister's apparent suicide, the reader is also constructed as a 'detective,' attending to the clues offered by the narrative to support the reader's suspicions" (543+). Readers interpret the clues and mosaic pieces that Iris has left in her narrative for Sabrina, but in putting together the puzzle, they realize that Iris has intentionally led them to the conclusion of her choice. Iris has left "the reader on neither the inside nor the out, deceived into believing s/he is heading toward the origin of the tragedy, but only ever participating in the tragedy's repetition, by deferred action, in the substitution of narrative for narrative" (Parkin-Gounelas 685). It is impossible for the reader to identify the exact moment or sequence that led to Laura's suicide as the memories and the interpretations of those memories are now colored by the outcome. At the end of Iris's narrative, readers must decide their own end of the novel and whether to accept or reject Iris's version of events or her role as a blind assassin. When Iris finally admits her role in the embedded novel, "The Blind Assassin," readers may or may not find that they have created the same interpretation that Iris wanted them to see.

Not every reader will come to the conclusion in the same way, and just like Iris's process of finding the moment that she played the blind assassin to her sister, when reflecting on the information he or she has received, the reader may find that learning the outcome changes how he or she looks at the past events. Harold suggests that "we need to keep in mind that which points of view matter to the reader's experience and understanding of narrative will vary with respect both to the individual reader and to their work" (142). While the author can make choices about which information to share or not to direct the reader to the same goal, readers interpret the information differently based

on their own experiences or valuation of character motivations, plot structure, or language. In other words, how the reader interprets the text creates the meaning of the text.

Atwood places Iris's narrative beside newspaper clippings and excerpts from "Laura's" novel, "The Blind Assassin," to show the same events from seemingly different perspectives. Similar to how Grace constructs quilt patterns in the way she sees as fit in *Alias Grace*, Iris's full narrative for Sabrina is created with the pieces that have influenced her and that she is putting it together. Yet, the reader has to work to understand the clues that Iris leaves for him or her to decipher. Karen Stein, in "A Left-Handed Story: *The Blind Assassin*," notes the involvement of the reader in the story, writing that "untangling these narrative strands and matching them with the framing story becomes a game in which the reader is invited to participate" (135). One of the narrative strands that Iris leaves for Sabrina is a chapter of Laura's "The Blind Assassin," "Yellow Curtains." The female protagonist is able to escape whatever has been holding her back from Alex and waits for him to return to her. However, the chapter concludes that "none of this happens, of course. Or it does happen, but not so you would notice. It happens in another dimension of space" (465). With the reader still unclear about which sister could be identified as the female character, Iris repeats her phrasing later, writing that "Alex belonged, for Laura, in another dimension of space" and suggests that Laura's tryst with Alex could only happen in the fictional narrative and not in their real lives (500). However, the reader gets to make the ultimate decision as to whether the phrasing identifies either Laura or Iris (or both) as the one who experienced a real relationship with Alex.

According to Tomoko Kuribayoshi, in his “A Mouse in the Castle of Tigers,” “the layering of the multiple narratives reveals the ways in which Iris, as one of the oppressed, both hides (often even from herself) and conveys her knowledge of what is actually happening around her” (17). By treating Iris’s main narrative as a series of clues to help the reader understand the events and situations leading up to Laura’s suicide, the reader must treat Iris as he or she would any witness and, while “readers may hope that [Iris] will deal honestly with them,” he or she is instead “made aware of her ability to conceal, and her collusion in an official cover-up” (Shead 113). The critical reader must continuously question the information that Iris chooses to reveal or hide within her narrative and to consider the reliability of Iris as a narrator. The reader cannot take the information divulged by Iris to the reader without thought as to its authenticity.

In the end, Iris and Laura are just characters in a narrative, and Atwood is commenting on the constructed nature of characters within their fictional world. Towards the end of her narrative, Iris begrudgingly admits how she was “like some vaporous novelistic heroine who’s been forgotten in the pages of her own book and left to yellow and mildew and crumble away like the book itself” (474). Furthermore, she remarks directly to her intended reader, Sabrina, that “By the time you read this last page, that—if anywhere—is the only place I will be” (521). Atwood again highlights the constructed nature of the text as the novel accordingly ends with Iris’s death. The reader must acknowledge that characters can only live through the literature as long as their story lives on and is read.

Contrasted to the opinions that the readers of Laura’s “The Blind Assassin” novel had of her, Iris tries to manipulate the image that will live on after she is physically

gone. This intention is alluded to earlier in the novel as Iris ponders on the motivations regarding why authors write their stories: “Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we’re still alive. . . . At the very least we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down” (95). Readers must decide if Iris’s intention in revealing the truth, or at least her version of the truth, to Sabrina is honest or part of a more selfish need to be remembered: “Readers thus confront a biased, possibly unreliable narrator and a character about whose acts and motivation they, like the narrator herself can only make conjectures, which as in Atwood’s preceding novel, may perhaps be *alias* Laura” (Robinson 348). Similar to Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, Iris has carefully chosen which parts of her narrative to include or not as well as which articles and excerpts to place alongside it. She positions both herself and Laura as victims of their own stories in the hope of relieving her guilt of unintentionally acting as Laura’s blind assassin. In the end, Iris attempts to take control of the identity she wants leave Sabrina with and includes outside evidence to reinforce the identity that she claims.

Atwood again makes readers consider the construction of identity by foregrounding *The Blind Assassin* using Gothic and mythological intertexts. Similar to *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* includes the Gothic imagery, plot devices, and characteristics that readers are familiar with in order to challenge their expectations about a woman in danger from an older, villainous man. However, instead, of being rescued by a Gothic hero, Iris becomes the hero of her own story since she is the only one able to save herself, and she urges Sabrina to be the hero of her own story as well.

Given an increasing agency to tell her own story apart from Zenia and Grace, Iris has full control over her narrative. Zenia's story is told through the other women, Grace tells her story alongside the media, but Iris as a storyteller determines her own story. According to Stein, "storytelling is her way to re-envision, understand, and justify her life; to gain power; to avenge herself on those who have betrayed her; and to set her life in order" (135). Because she has the power to tell her own story, she has some agency in determining the identity she presents to Sabrina. Colette Tennant in her book, *Reading the Gothic in Margaret Atwood Novels*, suggests that "through her didactic use of the Gothic, Atwood admonishes her readers to proceed through her fiction with care, to read the world around them with caution" (191). Identity is constructed by individuals and outside forces just as an author constructs a text. Certain structures, like genre or cultural dialogues, influence how others interpret those texts and identities, showing that Iris alone cannot manage to capture her identity as a whole. Other discourses around her influence how the reader can determine how to see Iris—either a blind assassin or a sacrifice to patriarchal society. Compared to *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, where the individual female's story fights against the outside forces that determine identity, in *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood shows the reverse to be true as well: even where female characters have agency to determine their own identity, outside forces interfere and both internal and external forces are necessary to understand nuances of identity.

Atwood's pastiche of narrative, newspaper clippings, and embedded "The Blind Assassin" excerpts resemble aspects of Gothic literature. Her passages take turns enlightening other passages and adding clues; as Stein notes "hiding and revealing are the hallmarks of Gothic fiction, which is built on conventions such as dreams, interrupted

narration, imprisoning structures, disguises, exploration of secrets, mysterious pictures, signs, and secret or hidden rooms or other enclosures” (136-7). As in Gothic fiction, secrets are an important aspect of *The Blind Assassin*. The novel explores the secrets of Laura and Iris’s past as Iris uses her memories to sort out what she was blind to regarding Laura’s life and to expose those secrets and traps that she fell into to her granddaughter. For instance, Iris relates to Sabrina an important clue that Laura left her. In it, Laura reinforces Iris’s blindness to the truth. Laura colors Richard, her rapist, with red hands and an image “as if the skull itself were burning” alongside Iris whose face Laura has “bleached . . . so that the eyes and the nose and mouth looked fogged over” (451). This dream-like image reveals the inner natures of Richard and Iris as perceived by Laura. Kuribayashi comments on the nature of victims to hide the truth and/or be blind to the answers in front of them, suggesting it is done “out of the desire to protect themselves. At the same time victims may leave coded messages and/or recognize and decipher such. Laura leaves messages to which only Iris has access and which Iris is expected to understand though she often fails to do so, possibly on purpose to protect herself” (21). Instead of telling Iris the truth, Laura hides the clue in Iris’s wedding album, and the clue is not revealed, at least according to Iris’s narrative, until after Laura’s suicide.

Laura does not see herself as a victim, but rather Alex’s savior. However, when she learns of his death and her failure (in her own eyes) to keep him safe, her status changes to that of a victim and her victimization becomes more apparent to her. On the other hand, Iris presents herself as a victim of her circumstances, yet as her narrative progresses, her own role as the blind assassin comes to light, revising “the Gothic

tradition as a means of freeing women from their perceptions of themselves as victims” (Tennant 191). Instead of Gothic tales, in which the reader is led to view the female characters as victims of their situations and of the predatory men in their lives, Atwood writes a novel where the two female characters, who can initially be seen as victims, through their own stories, identify as something more complicated and nuanced than simply being the victims of their circumstances.

The dichotomy of traditional Gothic definitions of victim and oppressor are paralleled through the science fiction story Alex tells in the embedded “The Blind Assassin.” Stein suggests that “although it is set on the planet Zycron it is really a Gothic adventure romance of conspiracy and intrigue, the story of a beautiful young woman silenced and intended for sacrifice” (139). It, too, shows the vulnerability of young women, such as Iris and Laura, and their abuse at the hands of powerful men. In Alex’s story, there is a young man who comes to save one of the girls intended for sacrifice and a love story begins to bloom. However, the culmination of the rescue is never given in Alex’s story or in Iris’s “The Blind Assassin.” In his published version, “the girl has been all but forgotten” along with her savior, the blind assassin, and “the two of them have simply vanished” (401). When the girl in “The Blind Assassin” asks what happened, he simply replies that he has “forgotten” about it and “never wrote it” (460). Since he has abandoned the idea of the Gothic hero come to rescue a victimized female, the reader must reconsider the notions of who can really save Iris or if she is the one most in need of being saved.

Iris shakes off her identification as a victim to come to her own rescue from Richard’s oppression. According to Stein, “the denouement of a Gothic fiction typically

restores the entrapped heroine to a daylight world where all mysteries are resolved and a young lover supersedes the older man” (150). However, in *The Blind Assassin*, the young lover, Alex, dies in the war, and her sister commits suicide. Instead of being rescued by another man, it is up to Iris to find a way to save herself and begin a new life on her own independent terms. After receiving the telegram announcing Alex’s death, Iris writes, “This is when she wakes up really” (469). It is through their deaths that Iris finds the inspiration to take her daughter and leave Richard and eventually publish “The Blind Assassin” under her sister’s name. Unfortunately, even though she escapes the trappings of a Gothic story and becomes independent, she falls into the traps of her gender and class with rumors spread about her situation and the eventual loss of her daughter to Winifred.

In addition to the Gothic genre, mythology is alluded to throughout the novel, and mythological references help to layer the clues and add insight for the astute reader. A stand in for class differences and the power of those with money, *The Blind Assassin* also shows the victimization within that class as well. Wisker compares it to “a Greek tragedy” due to its “appearance of piety and propriety versus hidden murder, abuse, rape, and other violence” (133). Iris also follows the arc of the tragic hero. Her roles as victim and assassin are blurred as she goes back and forth between each, never clear if it is her situation or her choices that drive her and her sister’s fates. She compares her blindness to her actions (or lack of action at times) to the Greek goddess, Justitia: “I did believe, at first, that I only wanted justice. . . But as Mr. Erskine also pointed out, Eros with his bow and arrow is not the only blind god. Justitia is the other one. Clumsy blind gods with edged weapons” (497). In Greek tragedies, no matter how good the intentions of the

tragic hero, they are fated to have doom follow them as a result of their actions. Iris publishes her “The Blind Assassin” under Laura’s name to get justice for both her sister and herself. However, it leads to Richard’s presumed suicide, and Winifred’s ability to eventually take Iris’s daughter, Aimee, from Iris. Additionally, Aimee’s confusion over her parentage and volatile family life leads to drug and alcohol abuse, concluding in an early death for her.

By the end of *The Blind Assassin*, Sabrina, Iris’s granddaughter, is the only one left of the family, and Iris encourages her in one of her last passages “to reinvent yourself at will” (513). This “hopeful postmodernist message” intended for the granddaughter following Iris can be offered to the next generation of women as well by suggesting that women can “escape entrapment in the dangerous literary and cultural constructs—particularly those of the self-sacrificial woman and victim of sexual trauma—that have traditionally defined and confined femininity” (Bousen 251+). Contrasted against the continued fated doom that the Greek tragedy has structured for the Griffen and Chase families, Iris’s message of reinvention suggests that the structure should not be assumed and that there may be a way for Sabrina to escape the same fate as the other women in her family. For the postmodern reader, he or she must consider the implications of gendered constructions that influence the dichotomy of fate versus free will and how that affects how he or she interprets Iris’s guilt and responsibility in her life and the ability of women to break that pattern.

As well as calling attention to shaping of *The Blind Assassin* like that of a Greek tragedy, the mythological allusions cast clues for readers to discover regarding Laura’s rape and Iris’s role as her assassin. For example, early in the main novel, Iris describes a

statue that was mistakenly sent to and kept at their home, Avilion. The statue is of “Medusa, with a lovely impervious gaze, the snakes writhing up out of her head like anguished thoughts” (58). In some versions of Medusa’s story, she is raped by Neptune in Minerva’s temple and subsequently is the one punished by Minerva who curses her looks and gives her the infamous snakes and power to turn men to stone. Neptune, as one of the main gods, abuses the power that he holds over Medusa, and Minerva, instead of punishing Neptune for raping Medusa, uses her power to doubly punish Medusa. Atwood intentionally includes this allusion to have Iris leave clues about Laura’s rape by Richard in Iris’s home. Iris further punishes Laura for her rape by not believing Laura, publicizing her own past relationships with Alex, and delivering a cruel revelation of his death to Laura. The critical reader should consider the context of this myth and the double role of victim that women are required to take in this social construction: not only the act of being raped but society’s indictment and punishment of them as well, in particular by other women.

Virgil’s *Aeneid* also serves as Laura’s inspiration for her actions in the novel and Iris’s role in her suffering. One of the notebooks that Laura leaves Iris, with clues about the truth, contains a translation of Dido’s tale. Laura sees herself as Dido whose self-induced injuries are related to the vanishing of Aeneas who, similar to Alex, has left for war. It is the goddess, Iris, who has the power to tell Dido that she “release[s] you from your body” and end her suffering (499). The Iris of Atwood’s novel also gives Laura the reason to end her suffering by letting her know of Alex’s death. Realizing that her efforts to keep Alex safe have been in vain, Laura commits suicide. However, Iris gives her voice and spirit a chance to live by naming her the author of “The Blind Assassin” and

giving her a presumed relationship with Alex, if only “in another dimension of space” (500). Atwood’s use of mythology throughout Iris’s narrative gives insight into the abuses that those in power have over the weak, especially in terms of the unequal relationship between Iris and Laura. By engaging in the construction of a typical myth, readers must consider the roles and punishments that women not only receive but give to other women as well and the blaming of victims for situations outside of their own control.

A combination of genres in the novel add layers and context for the clues that Iris leaves for her readers. Eventually, readers are forced to consider the real crimes committed and who or what should be held responsible for the destruction of the Chase and Griffen families. The overarching detective work required by readers suggests that “just as the traditional thriller hero moves through a threatening world where double dealing and false identities make interpretation difficult, the Chase sisters inhabit a world made treacherous simply by virtue of their situation as females caught up in the power struggles of patriarchy and capitalism” (Shead 127). The fluidity between the two sisters and uncertainty throughout the main narrative about which one is the woman in “The Blind Assassin” challenges readers to acknowledge the constructed nature of the text in order to investigate the truth of Iris’s narrative. However, Atwood’s ability to alternately hide and emphasize certain parts of her story makes critical readers question the intentions of narrative and memory and despite a resolution given by Iris, he or she can never be completely certain of Iris’s intentions and the truth of her story.

## Conclusion

In November 1996, Atwood delivered “In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,” as the Bronfman Lecture in Ottawa. In it, she discusses the nature of memory and the past and how they relate to writing. She ended the lecture by saying, “I am not one of those who believes there is no truth to be known; but I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth . . . truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us” (175). *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin* each challenge the reader to determine the truth about a female character’s past. However, since Atwood does not provide the reader with a specific answer, readers participate in creating each novel’s meaning as they become increasingly involved in the process in understanding that there cannot be an absolutely knowable truth, that many versions of the same truth can exist, and that the construction of memory is similar to the construction of fiction.

Identity is blurred in each novel, and readers find that it is the construction of identity that is under question in Atwood’s novels and not the original puzzle presented at the beginning of each narrative. While readers are never told which version of Zenia’s past is true in *The Robber Bride*, they begin to understand how different narrators may choose to focus on different parts of a background depending on their own motivations and biases and that memory is not necessarily a reliable re-creation of the past. Atwood pushes that idea further in *Alias Grace* to suggest that even traditional narratives, such as historical accounts like Moodie’s, may have their own biases and misinterpretations which can shadow versions of Grace’s identity. Finally, in *The Blind Assassin*, memory and imagination both lead to valid interpretations of a truth.

Beginning with *The Robber Bride*, continuing through *Alias Grace*, and ending with *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood creates a conversation with her readers about the discourses that define female characters and encourages her readers to question conventions, such as mythology, fairy-tales, and Gothic villains, in order to find a larger, more encompassing answer to female identity. By giving each woman in these novels increasing agency and control over her narrative, Atwood shows her readers how female identity and storytelling cannot be defined solely by outside forces or solely by the woman who tells her own story. Varying aspects of a narrative work together to offer modes for identity formation; however, it is readers themselves who in the end get to decide how those pieces work together to create their interpretation of each female character.

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