Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

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Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Blind Assassin*, winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, is a virtuoso performance, an intricate layering of texts and ironies. Constructed like a Russian wooden doll, the novel is a nested series of stories within stories; and like the nested dolls, one story hides another until it is opened to reveal another one surprisingly similar to it. The narrator of the framing novel, eighty-two-year-old Iris Chase Griffen, a clever and compelling storyteller, tells a story replete with Gothic motifs such as sacrificial maidens, powerful and predatory men, wars, betrayals, and conspiracies. She is driven to complete her memoirs despite her failing health in order to retell the story of her family—a tale of a fall from fortune, the tragic deaths of her parents, sister, husband, and daughter, and the alienation of her granddaughter. 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. Just as the novel encompasses multiple narratives, it develops many by now familiar Atwood themes (for example, power and powerlessness, entrapment, and gender relationships) and includes several genres: science fiction, tragedy, realism, and Gothic.

Intertwined within Iris’s story are several parallel narrative strands woven in varying gradations of emotional depth and veracity. Untangling these narrative strands and matching them with the framing story becomes a game in which the reader is invited to participate. A central interpolated narrative is the novel *The Blind Assassin*, purportedly the
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posthumously published novel written by Iris’s sister, Laura Chase. This novel describes a love affair between an affluent young woman and a disreputable young man. In the course of this novel, the young man tells a science-fiction story about a blind assassin. By nesting three novels with the same name within each other, Atwood is pointing to the intricacies and ambiguities of the narrative art, a theme that has shaped much of her work. These three novels and a series of interpolated newspaper articles retell the same story in different ways. By this means, Atwood reflects upon the nature of fiction and of reading. Stories both conceal and reveal information, and, in consequence, readers interpret and reinterpret, finding new meanings and following different threads of plot or symbolism in each reading. To mitigate confusion here I shall refer to the science-fiction novel of the planet Zycron as *The Blind Assassin* 1, the “Laura Chase novel” of the two unnamed young lovers as *The Blind Assassin* 2, and the complete novel (also referred to as the framing novel) as *The Blind Assassin* 3.

The story *The Blind Assassin* 1 is the novel’s symbolic center, for it brings to a focus the motifs of hiding, blindness, futile sacrifice, and silencing that reverberate through the book. The story mirrors the real worlds of Port Ticonderoga and Toronto that are also caught up in hypocrisy, class conflict, and economic injustice. Sacrifice has become an empty ritual in the city of Sakiel-Norn, just as the personal sacrifices of the men and women in Toronto are in vain. The sacrificial maidens of Sakiel-Norn are speechless, and the assassin is blind. In Canada, Norval Chase has lost an eye in the war, and his daughters, Iris and Laura, are both speechless and blind, each in her own way. Similarly, just as the storyteller of the science-fiction novel reinvents his stories, slanting them differently for different audiences, so too Iris reinvents and rewrites her fictions.

These novels depict complex amalgamations of passions, of love and hate, of secrets and silences. Imagery of burning and of Hell infiltrates the narrative. In telling these interwoven stories, Atwood pursues a larger project: The book lays bare the basis of narrative and adumbrates a social critique of the hypocrisy, injustice, classism, and sexism of the twentieth century. My purpose here is to elucidate how the Gothic structure, imagery, and narrative strategies provide the means to carry out this project.

**GOTHIC NARRATIVE**

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. Its narratives feature interruptions, layering of stories, and a difficulty in telling the story. Eve Sedgwick explains that “the novel’s form . . . is likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales, changes of narrators, and such . . . devices as found manuscripts or interpolated histories” (9). Mysteries and puzzles abound. Sexual stereotyping is common, with women portrayed as fragile, passive, frightened, and in need of rescue, while men are active, dominating, assertive, and threatening.

Across the theoretical spectrum, feminist criticism views the Gothic novel as a story of gender role inequalities and their concomitant anxieties. In a Bakhtinian reading, Jacqueline Howard argues that Gothic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “reveals the contradictions and dilemmas posed by the privileging of moral and aesthetic sensibility in women” (141). She points to tensions between different discourses, a male discourse of power in contrast to a female discourse of moral superiority, but physical weakness and fragility. Thus, although women are seen as morally superior, they are “weak, delicate and disordered” (141). Coral Ann Howells writes that “to be angelic and robed in white is only the romantic side of eighteenth-century convention, the other side of which is the condemnation of woman to a passive role in which she can be sacrificed by society for sexual and economic interests” (Howells, Love, Mystery and Misery, 11). Kate Ellis’s Marxist critique asserts that the Gothic reflects bourgeois anxiety about keeping women at home. According to Claire Kahane, the Gothic probes psychological issues raised for women by a society that has devalued caring, nurturing, and the maternal principle.

The Gothic plot is based on hiding and revealing, on secrecy and stealth, and similarly the narrative tends to be convoluted and mysterious. Typically the heroine is a motherless young woman struggling to find her way through the mazes of a hostile patriarchal society. She encounters secrets and solves mysteries as she seeks to escape from a series of perils, particularly from threatening older men.

The traditional female Gothic tale (for example, Ann Radcliffe, The Mysteries of Udolpho, 1794; or Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, 1848) tells of a woman literally or figuratively imprisoned in a tower, a castle, or a cell, threatened in some mysterious way by an ambiguous older male figure who has power over her. Typically the tale ends when the young woman escapes from this man and becomes romantically attached to a
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Younger man, usually her rescuer (although in some variants, the woman, like Jane Eyre, marries the suitably tamed older man). This Gothic plot replicates the “master narrative” of women’s development in postindustrial society (Massé). The woman’s story is a tale of leaving the parental home, the father’s space, and learning to mute her self, to lose her subjectivity, to turn inward and focus on her feelings, to suppress her ego in the service of others, especially of a male authority figure, be he lover or husband. Such are the stories of Laura and Iris; but, as is often the case with Atwood, the plot takes a surprising twist, laying bare the contradictions and the social implications of the genre.

Atwood’s earlier novel, Lady Oracle—full of plot devices such as disguises, ghostly appearances, doubled characters, mysteriously threatening men, and novels nested within novels—is a comic Gothic book. In contrast, The Blind Assassin is a tragic novel that uses Gothic plot devices and narrative strategies to tell Iris’s story of two orphaned and silenced sisters. This novel delineates the falls of two great houses, the “old money” Chase family of Port Ticonderoga and the nouveau riche Griffen family of Toronto. The cycle of events is set in motion when Iris’s father, Norval Chase, returns physically and psychically wounded from serving in World War I. A combination of evil, tragic flaws, and blindness leads to the collapse of the Chase and Griffen dynasties. By the end of the novel, the only family member left is Iris’s wayward granddaughter, Sabrina, for whom Iris writes her memoir in the hope that knowledge of the family secrets her narrative reveals will free Sabrina and empower her to reshape her life.

Two important motifs of this novel are hiding/revealing, and speech/silence. The female protagonists vacillate between these poles as they struggle to discover how to live in a dangerous society. Iris’s story focuses on her sister, Laura, who kills herself by driving off a bridge. As she endeavors to understand her sister’s life more clearly, Iris must unravel clues. The narrative recapitulates her process of uncovering, discovering, as its layers of stories unfold to reveal hidden meanings. Strands of narrative are superimposed on each other, one thread running ahead of another, so that the reader must watch in fascination as the patterns of the stories shift like kaleidoscopic images. In the process of writing her memoir of Laura, Iris first conceals and then reveals her own story.

THE STORY OF SAKIEL-NORN

To unravel the intertwined strands of narrative in this complex novel, let us start with the central fiction, The Blind Assassin 1. Critics speak
of it as a science-fiction novel, but 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. The tale evolves as an unnamed man tells stories to entertain his lover during their assignations. Blindness and betrayal are the keynotes of this novel. The exploitative and hypocritical Snilfards grow rich from selling the intricate carpets woven by young children of the working class. These children become blind from their labor and are then sold as sexual slaves; however, some of them escape and become highly skilled assassins. (And, as we shall see, this plot recapitulates a version of the stories of Laura and Iris.)

The spiritual values of Sakiel-Norn degenerate: Although once the Snilfards sacrificed their own children to gods they believed in, they now sacrifice slave girls instead, performing an empty ritual that has lost its meaning for them. The tongues of the sacrificial young women are cut so that they will not cry out and disturb the rites. The hero of this tale, one of the blind assassins, falls in love with and rescues the sacrificial maiden he had been hired to kill in a complicated palace plot.

But the love story of the blind assassin and the tongueless girl (*The Blind Assassin*) is never completed. When the lovers discuss the evolving story, the woman proposes a happy ending but the man rejects it. In fact, when under an assumed name he publishes a revised version of this story, he omits the love plot altogether and produces instead a fable about the overthrow of class distinctions as all of the city’s inhabitants join forces to fight interplanetary invaders.

**ANGELS AND DEVILS**

As is the case in the tale of Sakiel-Norn, the plot of Iris’s memoir also revolves around hiding and revealing, secrecy and silence, sacrifice and betrayal. In the Gothic tradition, sexuality is often the basis of these secrets. Women in that tradition are often portrayed as innocent and threatened by male sexuality, and to that end *The Blind Assassin* utilizes imagery of angels and devils, fire and ice to characterize women, men, and sexuality.

When Liliana Chase dies from a miscarriage in 1925, her nine-year-old daughter, Iris, overhears conversations that attribute her death to Norval’s excessive sexual demands on his fragile wife. In this manner Iris learns the gender stereotypes of frail, sexless women and demanding, dangerous men. Reenie, the Chase family housekeeper, is a staunch
believer in Victorian ideology, and therefore she teaches Laura and Iris that women should be “angels in the house”: dependent, selfless, pure, and devoted to family. Liliana and Laura are presented as serious and chaste, and they are linked to imagery of Heaven and angels, water and ice. In contrast, men are expected to be independent, assertive, and active in the larger world of business. While two of the Chase women are compared to angels, the men in the novel are associated with diabolic imagery. Indeed, the three male figures—Norval, Alex, and Richard—are each shown to be sexually demanding and dangerous, and they are repeatedly depicted in imagery of fire and Hell.

The feminine angel imagery first appears when Iris visits the cemetery where the Chase family monument is adorned with two softly draped female stone angels, “white marble, Victorian, sentimental” (44), indicating women’s role as pure, chaste, inert, lifeless.1 When Laura is little, she believes the angels were meant to be her and Iris, although the more realistic Iris disagrees (45). As she grows up, Laura is indifferent to social conventions and her concern with heavenly matters is radically innocent and earnest. Throughout her life she questions the Bible, cutting out passages she finds unpalatable, wondering about “the seating arrangements in Heaven” (513), and getting expelled from school in part for asking “Does God lie?”. She asserts that she does not wish to get married and explains that there are no marriages in Heaven. Moreover, she is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of saving others. One review of her posthumously published novel even claims that she “writes like an angel.”

Liliana is an “angel in the house,” morally superior, self-sacrificing, but physically frail and weak. Reenie reverently describes her as an angel (69) and “a saint on earth” (142); Iris views her as “selfless” (73). Her first two appearances in the novel connect her with winter, whiteness and cold. The first is a photograph of her in a frozen scene. Pictured with a group of friends before she is married, she looks jaunty, adventuresome. In the second vignette she is at an ice skating party, where Norval Chase, who previously knelt to lace up her skates, proposes and she responds appropriately, in passivity and silence: “What did [she] do at this crucial moment? She studied the ice. She did not reply at once. This meant yes” (69). Iris’s description of this scene both reiterates and subverts the angelic imagery of whiteness, purity, and passivity, for the ice’s seemingly solid surface conceals depths of instability. Although the skaters’ world seems firm, secure, pure, and innocent, something darker and more turbulent lurks beneath: “under their feet . . . the ice . . . white also, and under that the river water, with its
eddies and undertows, dark but unseen. This was how I pictured that time... before Laura and I were born—so blank, so innocent, so solid to all appearances, but thin ice all the same. Beneath the surfaces of things was the unsaid, boiling slowly” (69).

The marriage that results from this romantic proposal lives up to Iris’s description of turbulence beneath a seemingly calm surface. Norval leaves for war almost immediately after the wedding, and by the time he returns he and his wife have already grown apart and become strangers to each other. A veteran scorched in the cauldron of battle, he has lost his innocence through experiences of war and sexual relations with other women. Although Liliana silently forgives him, it is with an air of martyrdom: “Breakfast in a haze of forgiveness, coffee with forgiveness, porridge with forgiveness... He would have been helpless against it, for how can you repudiate something that is never spoken” (77).

In contrast to the white and frozen outdoor scene of the proposal, an apparently cozy domestic scene introduces disconcerting fire imagery. Sitting near the fireplace with her parents in the morning room of their home, Avilion, in November 1919, the young Iris recites a poem about the letter F: “F is for Fire, / Good servant, bad master...” The picture accompanying the poem shows a “leaping man covered in flames—wings of fire coming from his heels and shoulders” (81–82). Iris is “in love” with the man of fire because “the fire can’t hurt him, nothing can hurt him,” and she draws “extra flames” with her crayons (81–82). The invincible winged man of fire carries a weight of implied connotations including passion, rebellion, the devil, and dangerous sexuality. And in this family scene before the fireplace, Iris is attuned to her father’s restlessness, his disillusionment with the home life he had previously desired.

Iris intuits correctly that just as the solid ice concealed the turbulent water below, the quiet domesticity is a fragile facade covering an uncomfortable relationship. Her mother (who, unbeknownst to Iris, is pregnant with Laura) “is recovering from a recent, mysterious illness, said to have something to do with her nerves” (80). Iris senses that her father feels “a certain nostalgia for the war” as he “stares into the flames, watching the fields and woods and houses and towns and men and brothers go up in smoke... This is his home, this besieged castle; he is its werewolf” (82).

A more striking fiery image characterizes Norval when, years later, he dresses up as Santa Claus crowned with a wreath of burning candles. His costume terrifies Laura, for she confuses his costume...
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with his ordinary self, and thinks that he is just pretending to be like other people most of the time, while “underneath he was burning up” (385).

Alex Thomas is also associated with fire imagery. A war orphan of unknown parentage, called by his adoptive father “a brand snatched from the burning” (215), Alex is a shadow figure, a demon lover, and later the author of the science-fiction novel *The Blind Assassin*. He is a union activist, and in 1934 he is sought by the police for allegedly setting Norval Chase's button factory on fire. Laura hides him, concealing him first in the cellar and then in the attic of Avilion. Iris, who is then eighteen and chafing at the restrictions of her narrow life in Port Ticonderoga, dreams of him in dreams that are suffused with subconscious erotic imagery. She imagines herself “fleeing with him . . . away from a burning building. . . . It was Avilion that was burning” (216–17). Despite her dreams, when he responds sexually she is “transfixed,” motionless, and she flees down the stairs. She knows that to respond to his advances “would be dangerous, at least for me” (218). She does not reveal this event to Laura, and, consequently, Alex remains a charged secret between the sisters.

Laura’s hiding of Alex is a reversal of a typical Gothic plot device, for more frequently an older man conceals a woman as prisoner under his control. In fact, both Iris and Laura will be trapped in the house of an older man when, in order to save his button factories and guarantee his daughters’ financial security during the Depression, Norval gives Iris in marriage to the most diabolic of the novel’s three men, the clothing manufacturer Richard Griffen.

Norval is blind to Richard’s real nature, and Iris believes she has no other choice. Numbed by her father’s suggestion, the eighteen-year-old Iris consents to marry a wealthy businessman twice her age whom she hardly knows, and thus she sacrifices herself for the good of her family. The scene in which Richard proposes to Iris is vastly different from Norval’s proposal to Liliana. Commensurate with his large ambitions and inflated sense of himself, Richard has reserved a table in the Imperial Room of the Royal York Hotel in Toronto. The room is ornately decorated with chandeliers and maroon velvet drapes, and seems “leathery, ponderous, paunchy” to Iris. There is a smell of burning, of “hot metal and smoldering cloth” (227). Iris is silent and hears little of what Richard says. When she is married to him, she loses control of her life and becomes an appurtenance belonging to Richard, a beautifully groomed trophy wife. Much later, Iris remembers the four fireplaces in their house, and the “flames licking on flesh” (229).
But Richard is even more dramatically described with fire imagery that links him to the flaming man in the young Iris’s picture book. Laura later sends Iris a coded message: a picture from Iris’s wedding album that she has altered, tinting Richard’s hands red and painting flames coming out of his head, “as if the skull itself were burning” (451). But, as we shall see, Iris is initially blind to the warning encoded in this picture.

Iris herself participates in both the fire and ice imagery. We have seen that she hopes to be invulnerable like the flaming man in her ABC book, and that she experiences erotic dreams in terms of burning. But she also participates in the imagery of ice and cold. For example, after she accepts Richard’s proposal she describes her feelings of numbness and terror by invoking the imagery of Lucifer’s fall from Heaven. She feels cold, and experiences herself as falling “endlessly down” because of her failure to believe in God (228). “The arctic waste of starched white bedsheet stretched out to infinity” and she thinks she can never “get back to where it was warm” (228). However, she is a realist, and believes that the marriage is her only alternative. Whereas Laura is linked to the angel imagery, Iris reminds her sister repeatedly in different contexts that “this isn’t heaven.” Although Iris at first behaves according to the stereotypes of femininity that reduce her to passivity and dependence, she is ultimately able to resist. The novel’s association of angelic women with white and ice, and diabolic men with red and fire is elaborated in its concern with costume and disguise, appearance and reality.

COSTUME AND DISGUISE

Clothing, costume, and disguise are among the devices that people choose to hide or reveal themselves. For example, in The Blind Assassin 2, the unnamed woman ineffectively attempts to disguise herself on her forays into the working-class neighborhoods to meet her lover. Nevertheless, he is annoyed because, lacking the proper clothing, she remains overdressed. In The Blind Assassin 1, the male Snifards of Sakiel-Norn wear thin platinum masks that disguise their emotions and the women cover their faces with silky veils, “since imperviousness and subterfuge were reserved for the nobility” (16).

Iris’s memoir, The Blind Assassin 3, uses imagery of costume and disguise to indicate how mysterious and confusing men are to her and her sister. Their father, Norval Chase, a complex and enigmatic man, is a distant figure to his daughters, and his strangeness is conveyed in
nonhuman imagery: metal, fire, animal, monster. When she is young, Iris thinks "his medals [are] like holes shot in the cloth [of his clothing], through which the dull gleam of his real, metal body can be seen" (76). He seems to be a "shambling monster with one eye, so sad" (78). When drunk he paces in the small tower room of Avilion, his "bad foot dragging . . . Light step, heavy step, like an animal with one foot in a trap" (78). His agitated pacing and his "bad foot" suggest Captain Ahab of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, another man turned into a haunted and obsessive figure by his encounter with evil.

Iris remarks that people like to wear costumes and uniforms "because you could pretend to be someone else" (332). Richard's sister, Winifred, who arranges costume balls for charities, such as the 1936 costume ball on the theme of Xanadu, notes that people are able to "be as revealing or concealing as [they] might wish," draping themselves in veils and scarves, or baring themselves in scanty costumes (333). The clothing that people wear functions both to hide and to reveal their personalities and social status. The devious Winifred wears "green alligator shoes" and carries "a reptilian purse" (506). Laura, who tends to the ascetic, wears clothing that looks "less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in" (2). And when she drives off the bridge, she is wearing white gloves, an indication that her hands are clean.

In contrast to her sister, Iris wears elaborately tailored clothing that signals her wealth and status. Winifred picks out much of Iris's clothing, seeking to control her under the pretext of helping her dress appropriately for Richard's social milieu. Wearing these clothes signals Iris's submission to her sister-in-law and husband. Not surprisingly, her clothing hints at her vulnerability: When she and Richard go to Avilion for the first time after Norval's death, she is wearing an "eggshell linen suit" (312) and matching hat. Her hat gets broken, as is usually the fate of eggshells. The light-colored, expensive costume (and the attention she pays to it) seems inappropriate, because she has just been orphaned and because she and Richard are driving six hours on muddy roads. When they arrive at Avilion, Laura is waiting for them. She is barefoot and Iris wonders about this. I take it to be an indication of her unconventionality, her vulnerability, her fragility, and her lack of concern for social niceties and for material goods.

As Iris gains independence from Richard and begins to assert herself, her relationship to clothing changes. When she visits the head of Laura's school to deal with a complaint, Iris wears clothing intended to
demonstrate her position as the bearer of Richard's power. She manipulates the costume and its symbolism for her own purposes. She elects to wear a hat with a "dead pheasant on it, or parts of one," and an "impressive" cashmere coat trimmed with wolverine (373). Her intent is to convey the impression that there are four eyes, rather than two, staring at the administrator.

**BLINDNESS, SECRETS, DISGUISE, LIES, AND BETRAYAL**

But more serious than the superficial disguise achieved by costume is the far more damaging disguise accomplished by lying. Through misrepresentation, concealment, and outright prevarication, the characters in this novel hide information, thus contributing to the blindness of others. As signaled by its title, blindness is a central theme of the novel. But whereas the blind assassin of the science fiction novel has sharpened his other senses to compensate for his blindness, the characters in the framing novel remain blind and fail to see important clues. Norval Chase epitomizes blindness, for he returns from the war with one bad eye that he covers with a patch. Throughout the novel Iris, like the traditional Gothic heroine, misperceives or fails to see a great deal.

Richard strives to keep Iris blind to his misdeeds by concealing information or by lying. Although Norval thought he was "sound," Richard turns out to be sinister, or as Iris later puts it, "rodent-like." Soon after his marriage he reneges on the promise he made to Norval, for he closes the button factory and fires the workers. He conspires with his sister to keep Iris silent and uninformed, and he preys upon Laura, who is vulnerable because of her belief in the efficacy of personal sacrifice. As in Greek tragedies, the audience, having picked up the clues that Iris liberally sprinkles through her tale, watches in horror as the events unfold relentlessly.

Richard, a villain of Dickensian proportions, lies to and betrays Laura and Iris. His public version of events is colored by his determination to further his image of power and prominence. He is able to manipulate the newspapers to slant stories about his family in a more favorable light. In his private life, in order to dominate and control Iris, he lies and-withholds information from her. On his honeymoon trip with Iris, Richard tears up the telegrams informing them about the death of Iris's father. Several years later, to cover up the fact that Laura has become pregnant with Richard's child, Winifred and Richard concoct a story that Laura has had a mental breakdown. They ship her off to a shady abortion clinic-cum-sanitarium and prevent Iris from receiving her letters.
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SACRIFICE

Sacrifice, as Howells indicates, is a component of Gothic fiction (Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery*, 11), and it constitutes an important motif of this novel. Men are sacrificed to the evils of war and economic depression, while the Chase family women are willingly or unwillingly sacrificed for lost causes.

Both the inner and the framing novels comment on the tendency of patriarchal societies to sacrifice women. There is a history of female sacrifice in the Chase family. Iris’s grandmother, Adelia Montfort, was married off to Benjamin Chase in order to ensure her financial security. And Iris’s mother, Liliana, works as a volunteer for many good causes, sacrificing her health in the process, so that she dies when Iris is nine and Laura is six. Iris and Laura are silenced by their situations and sacrificed by their father, who mistakenly believes that Iris’s marriage to Richard Griffen will insure their well-being.

Sacrifice is an ideal that many talk about but that Laura takes quite literally. As a child of six, when Laura asks what sacrifice means (in connection with soldiers said to have “willingly made the supreme sacrifice”), she is told: “They gave their lives to God, because that’s what God wants. It’s like Jesus, who died for all of our sins” (150). Consequently, Laura believes that she too can sacrifice herself and make pacts with God to save other people. When she is six she tries to drown herself in the belief that this will restore her dead mother to life (150–51). And as a young woman she erroneously believes that she can save Alex Thomas’s life by consenting to Richard Griffen’s sexual overtures. Richard leads her to believe that he will turn Alex in to the authorities for setting fire to the button factory. Later, she explains to Iris: “It was horrible, but I had to do it. I had to make the sacrifice . . . that’s what I promised God. I knew if I did that, it would save Alex” (487). Laura’s sacrifice is in vain, for Richard never knew where Alex was hiding. In any event Alex dies in World War II.

Laura kept the secret of Richard’s sexual pursuit from Iris. Among the secrets and silences of the novel, this is perhaps the most egregious. Laura’s silence combines with the deception practiced by Richard and Winifred to keep Iris from learning Laura’s side of the story in time to save her.

But although Laura is silenced in life, she is given voice posthumously through Iris, who tells her story after her suicide. In fact, Iris offers two versions of Laura’s story. The first version appears in the novel *The Blind Assassin*, purportedly written by Laura. This novel
describes the trysts of two unnamed lovers who meet clandestinely in a series of shabby houses. Readers are led to believe that the woman in the story is Laura herself. But Iris tells an alternative (truer?) version in her unpublished memoir, the framing novel *The Blind Assassin*. We learn that the upper-class woman who visits a disreputable lover is Iris herself, and the lover is Alex Thomas. By presenting these two parallel versions, Atwood continues her project of laying bare both the complicated relationship between fact and fiction and the duplicitous nature of narrative itself.

**NARRATIVE STRATEGIES**

In *The Blind Assassin*, the story is frequently interrupted by interpolated sections from the “Laura Chase novel” or by newspaper clippings about the social milieu of the Griffen family. Iris’s narration takes new turns, and similar stories are repeated by different narrators in different versions. Every character in the novel conceals information, and every character fabricates stories that shape the narration in significant ways. Laura never tells her story of Richard’s sexual abuse directly; instead she leaves coded messages. Alex Thomas tells science fiction stories that encode his socialist messages about Canadian society during the Depression and his critique of the moneyed class. Richard Griffen and his sister, Winifred, falsify and censor the information that they convey or withhold. But Iris has her own secrets, too, and manages a satisfying revenge. Indeed, her stories (*The Blind Assassin* 2 and 3) are a means of finding her voice, speaking out after long silence. As often happens in Atwood’s novels, the female storyteller comes to understand her life and to exercise power and control through telling her tale. Iris wields her story like a weapon, captivating her readers and gaining justification and revenge against her husband and sister-in-law.

In this book, each of the nested narratives works in its own way to hide and reveal, convey or conceal information, and each of the protagonists is silent or speaks—sometimes openly, more often in code—as she chooses how (or whether) to reveal her emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Thus the novel explores the ways that narrative works by secrecy and cunning, by concealing and revealing. For just as paintings contain white spaces that add depth and contrast to the colored parts, and music may have discords and rests that set off and enrich its harmony and melody, works of fiction both hide and reveal, provide and withhold information.
Each of the genres informing this novel—Gothic, memoir, science fiction and tragedy—relies heavily on hiding and revealing. The Gothic is grounded in secrets and coded knowledge. Memoir pretends to assert the truth, but it can only recount a selection of one person’s memories long after the fact. Speculative science-fiction speaks in code, refiguring contemporary society into other times and places. Greek tragedy often derives its power from dramatic irony, as the characters struggle to learn what the audience already knows. Even realist fictions must speak in codes and symbols, and develop their themes by hints and allusions. By including these genres and emphasizing the subterfuge that underlies them, Atwood furthers her metafictive project of revealing the literary conventions that underlie fiction. Moreover, the metafictive project also exposes the social conventions that undermine women’s power and strive to silence their voices. According to Gayle Greene, metafiction is “a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behavior” (1–2).

We trust Iris’s narration, although, as she admits, her view is very limited. In her story Richard Griffen remains a flat character, almost a caricature, a Dickensian villain. Whereas Offred, the narrator of Atwood’s earlier novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is able to speak of her oppressive Commander and his wife with sympathy and compassion, Iris never extends this generosity to Richard Griffen. We never see his viewpoint or learn of his early life.

The voice of the eighty-two-year-old Iris is bitter, cynical, wryly humorous, as she contemplates the indignities of her failing body or the deterioration of her family’s former mansion. As a child she is stolid, practical, unquestioning. She discovers that the way to gain her mother’s approbation is by obedience and silence. As a married woman, insecurity and her fear of her husband effectively silence her. She finds her voice when she leaves Richard and tells the stories of her life.

Laura is the most complex character in *The Blind Assassin*. She is always curious, always pressing to learn more, to seek the underlying meanings of what she hears. For Laura, every phrase, every idiom, every word in a poem is a code she must decipher. Innocent, guileless, direct, and almost painfully honest, she takes whatever she hears literally. She continually questions the Bible stories she has learned. She is expelled from a private school because of her unconventional behavior and partly for raising the question: “Does God lie?” She is aware of the perfidy and betrayal at the roots of Western institutions. Yet Laura
remains silent about Richard’s sexual abuse, because the pact she believes she has made with God demands secrecy. Her most powerful stories are told in code: She colors the faces of the black-and-white family portraits, and cuts passages out of the family Bible.

It is only after Laura’s death that Iris learns the significance of the clues she has left (such as the altered wedding picture of Richard with red hands and a flaming skull) that point to Richard’s sexual abuse. The final clue lies in the notebooks that she leaves in Iris’s drawer the day she drives off the bridge. Through most of the novel we are led to believe Laura’s notebooks contain the manuscript of her novel, *The Blind Assassin*. Instead, we learn at the end of Iris’s memoir that they contain a list of dates, words, and a string of Xs that form the encrypted revelation of Richard’s rape, thus revealing to Iris what she has been too blind to perceive. Iris in fact had been writing the novel to commemorate and record for herself her own affair with Alex Thomas, an affair that she has concealed from both Richard and Laura. In attributing *The Blind Assassin* to Laura, Iris simultaneously hides and reveals her own story. By publishing the novel she is able to proclaim the affair publicly, while shielding herself from blame. Moreover, she promotes the misconception in order to avenge herself against Richard for his betrayal. Presumably, knowledge of Iris’s affair might anger Richard, but it would not drive him to kill himself. When he believes it is Laura’s story, he kills himself. (Actually, Iris does not make clear the means of his death. The newspaper announces that he has a cerebral hemorrhage, but we are led to believe from Iris’s hints that he kills himself.)

We have seen that the story of Sakiel-Norn is an allegory of the economic injustice, the intrigue and betrayal rampant in the social world of Toronto during the Depression. And Iris’s memoir, *The Blind Assassin*, operates in a similar fashion, exposing the hypocrisy, the social and economic injustice and spiritual malaise of our world. Blindness, betrayal, sacrifice, and silence lie at the heart of all three stories.

Who, then, is the blind assassin? All of the characters share some of the responsibility for Laura’s death. Laura’s posthumous farewell message to Iris consists of a passage in her old notebooks, her schoolgirl translation of the conclusion to Book IV of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in which Dido, betrayed by Aeneas, kills herself (abetted by Iris). Thus, Laura indicts Iris as the assassin. And, in an interview Atwood refers to Iris as the blind assassin (Gussow, 2).
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But there is another sinister assassin contained in Iris’s novel: time itself. In each of the texts that comprise The Blind Assassin 3 there are frequent references to time, as for example, “time itself will devour all now alive” (129) in the science-fiction story. The aging Iris thinks about time: “When you’re young . . . [y]ou move from now to now, crumpling time up in your hands, tossing it away” (396). Moreover, the title The Blind Assassin invites comparison to Emily Dickinson’s “blonde assassin.” In Dickinson’s poem, the “blonde assassin” is the obliterating power of time, the frost that nips the unaware flower in the bud, “beheading” it. And it is partly to forestall time’s power and its erosion of memory that Iris writes her first novel to commemorate her love affair. Her second novel aims to influence the future by revealing Sabrina’s ancestry, thus giving her the possibility of a new story and a new future.

A secret of parentage often underlies the Gothic, and that is the case here. Finding one’s true parent often resolves a mystery and leads to the resolution of the plot. In this novel there are two revelations of paternity: Laura reveals that Richard fathered the child she was compelled to abort. And in her memoir, Iris informs Sabrina that her grandfather was not Richard after all. As she addresses Sabrina at the end of her memoir, Iris explains: “Your real grandfather was Alex Thomas, and as to who his own father was, well, the sky’s the limit. . . . Your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation. You’re free to reinvent yourself at will” (513). By leaving the story for Sabrina, Iris hopes to give her the means of reinventing herself, creating a new identity, a new story.

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. In this novel, the young lover died in the war many years ago. Iris, now an older woman, clarifies the mysteries, for it turns out that she has held the key to a central secret. The last secret she reveals is the secret of her daughter’s paternity, a secret Freudians believe is the original story, the secret at the core of all narrative, all quests for knowledge.

Given the Hell the novel describes, and the inevitability of death and destruction, can there be even a temporary stay against tragedy? I would argue that the novel contains celebration despite its grim tenor. Michelle A. Massé argues that there are ways for women to resist the Gothic. She explains that the “transition from blindness to insight can lead to purposive action through aggression or subversion” (264) and that another approach, the refusal “to accept the binary options of subordinated/oppressed,” remains a utopian future possibility (240). I
would argue that Iris approaches that utopian possibility. For after she
makes “the transition from blindness to insight” with the discovery of
Richard’s perfidy, she immediately leaves his house and becomes self-
supporting, selling antiques, starting with artifacts from the Chase fam-
ily home. She proves an astute businesswoman. By engaging in business,
she transforms herself from a sedate domestic object into an active par-
ticipant in the world of work. By disposing of the family heirlooms, she
indicates her rejection of a tradition that kept women subservient, pas-
sive “angels in the house.” The angel in the house was supposed to dust
and polish the family artifacts; Iris sells them. Thus, the objects that
(like the submissive feminine angels in the house themselves) functioned
as decorations and objects of conspicuous consumption become the
means of her transformation. Through her purposive action she rejects
the role of the subservient, dominated wife that had kept her enthralled,
and becomes an active agent. Further, by telling the story of her affair
and of Richard’s misbehavior, she liberates herself from “the binary
options of subordinated/oppressed” and has the last word.

Additionally, Iris undergoes another transformation, from being the
object of discourse to becoming the subject. At one point Iris feels that
she is the blank paper on which someone else is inscribing a story. She
thinks of herself as “blank paper, on which—just discernible—there’s
the colorless imprint of a signature, not hers” (407). At another time
she thinks: “I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body [Richard
bruises her during sex] were a kind of code, which blossomed, then
faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who
held the key to it? I was sand, I was snow—written on, rewritten,
smoothed over” (371). In each of these passages she is the vehicle for
someone else’s story. But in the end of the novel her story is the one
that survives. At one point Iris wonders if she remembers accurately,
then decides that her memory is true now because she is “the only sur-
vivor” (217–18). Her story is now the official one, and in telling it she
registers her resistance to the Gothic plot, her transformation from
silence to speech, from dominated wife to independent agent. Thus,
amidst the despair and tragedy lies an affirmation of the powers of the
imagination and the force of storytelling itself.

Additionally, despite the novel’s tragic subject matter, celebration of
the imagination and a recognition of the dangers and powers of stories
pervades the novel. Alex’s fictional hero, the blind assassin, lives by his
wits, spinning fictions to save himself from death after the invading
army catches him. Alex also lives by his wits, writing under assumed
names the science-fiction stories that earn him a meager living while he
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remains underground, wanted by the police. Laura’s coded journal explains her story to Iris. And by her fictions Iris seeks to justify her sister and herself and gain revenge. One of the novel’s intertexts is Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream.” Laura questions Iris at some length about the artist/poet figure in the poem (334). Coleridge’s incantatory lines here are a celebration of art and the imagination. The dangerous poet with flashing eyes and floating hair has seen a vision and translates it into song:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle around him thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Laura questions why others fear him. But storytellers are all dangerous people; their stories have power to save or destroy, to help or to harm. We need stories to comfort us and to make order out of our lives. For we live in a complex and ambiguous world. In Paradise or utopia there is no need for stories, for “Happiness is a garden walled with glass: there’s no way in or out. In Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys” (518). But for us who inhabit the real world, stories are essential: “It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road” (518). The stories we tell may be ambiguous, incomplete, an uncertain blend of truth and lies. Yet this is what gives them their power.

Laura imagines that Heaven is a place where everyone sits at a circular table, so that everyone is at someone’s right hand (513). The more practical Iris often reminds her sister that we do not live in Heaven yet. Accordingly, because her story reveals the sinister aspects of life that we usually try to overlook or hide she names it a “left-handed book” (513).

In his Republic Plato calls poets liars and, consequently, banishes them from his ideal society. Margaret Atwood agrees that storytellers lie. In Murder in the Dark, she claims that writers are inveterate prevaricators. Indeed, her novel The Blind Assassin contains three interlocking novels narrated by characters who lie by omission or commission. Not only do the storytellers themselves lie, but the stories they narrate are about treachery, betrayal, guile, encryption, disguise, and downright falsehood. But, whereas Plato would cast storytellers
out of his society, Atwood, recognizing that our world is a fallen one, invites them in.

NOTES

1. Atwood’s use of two stone angels in the graveyard alludes to Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1961), an important Canadian novel, narrated by another cantankerous old woman, Hagar Shipley.

2. The concept of apparent solidity overlaying a threatening depth is prominent in Atwood’s first published book, *The Circle Game* (1966). One of its poems, “A Place: Fragments,” reads “Watch that man / walking on cement as though on snowshoes: / senses the road / a muskeg, . . . or crust of ice that / easily might break” (89).

3. Fire imagery is prevalent in each of the narratives. For example, in Laura’s novel the young woman tells her lover “you’ll burn yourself up” (10). During the Depression, disaffected employees or union agitators set Norval Chase’s button factory on fire and burn effigies of Chase and his daughters. The eighty-two-year-old Iris even quotes from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to describe a burger restaurant called The Fire Pit with references to Lucifer’s fiery fall from Heaven (293–94).

4. Lying is, of course, a betrayal of trust, and reinforcing the idea of betrayal, the novel contains abundant intertextual references to other fictions on this theme. The décor of the Chase family home includes stained glass windows depicting Tristan and Isolde, legendary treacherous lovers (60–61). The Chase family house is named Avilion for the place where King Arthur went to die after he was betrayed. Repeated allusions to the Arthurian legend remind us of the perfidious lovers Guinevere and Launcelot. Several quotations from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* allude to Lucifer’s betrayal of God and of Adam and Eve. Taking her laundry down to the basement, the eighty-two-year-old Iris thinks of herself as Little Red Riding Hood, reminding us of sexual predation. Most ominously, Laura’s posthumous farewell message to Iris consists of a passage in her old notebooks, her schoolgirl translation of the conclusion to Book IV of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in which Dido, betrayed by Aeneas, kills herself (abetted by Iris).

5. Several feminist theorists explore lying as a moral issue of particular relevance to women. For example, Adrienne Rich, in her essay “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” (1973), writes: “Women have been driven mad, ‘gaslighted,’ for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other: not to undermine each others’ sense of reality for the sake of expediency” (190). bell hooks writes: “men use lying, and that includes withholding information, as a way to control and subordinate” (40).

6. As she does here, Atwood often writes metafiction, a project defined as fiction that “self-consciously examine[s] the nature of fiction itself” (Murfin and Ray, 210).