

From an Obscured Gaze to a Seeing Eye? Iris as Victim, Villain, and Avenger in the Role of Writer-as-Assassin in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

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Abstract

In the postmodern period, first-person-limited, unreliable, female narrators may have a greater difficulty in “seeing” and, thus, depicting their landscapes than previous eras’ storytellers. Iris (Chase) Griffen, narrator-protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*, spins a complicated, self-reflective text exploring her attempts at composing a world vision that consumes the novel’s larger part. Iris’s search for answers about her identity as well as that of other characters may leave readers in the lurch, waiting for their “story,” in Ross Chambers’s terms, as an agreed-upon product. Nonetheless, having amassed assorted textual materials, Iris stockpiles the ammunition she needs to do her “job” as a storyteller-assassin who creates and destroys, as characters suffer a fall. Assuming guises dependent on location, Iris enacts the conflicting roles of a victim, social product, villain, and blind assassin to assault her culture’s masculinist architectures that bar women’s points of views in opposition to what Henry James presents as the unending panoramas offered by his metaphorical “House of Fiction.” Iris’s struggle to construct her life story mirrors the difficulty many women face more broadly, in which they face competing, irreconcilable values. In the novel, Iris’s ability to play differing parts with equal aplomb compels readers to view her as a complex narrator, constructing and assassinating fellow characters to render her female descendants’ fates as open ended.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *Blind Assassin*, narration, women’s writing, feminism, poststructuralism

Margaret Atwood’s (2000) novel, *The Blind Assassin*, opens with a striking image. Narrator-protagonist, Iris (Chase) Griffen, aged 83, states that her sister, Laura, drove Iris’s car off of a Toronto bridge in 1945, decades before. This fatal act on Laura’s part likely constituted a suicide. Readers, as detectives, must attempt to piece together the novel’s fragmentary narrative to discover the event’s tragic cause and assign blame accordingly. The audience will hope to uncover the nature of Iris’s multifaceted relationships with other characters whose deaths, disappearances, or removals she also influences blindly but purposefully before vanishing herself into “the unknown country,” which does not signify either a place of rest or torment for her, as it does for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, considering suicide, but somewhere else entirely. Atwood’s readers, searching for clues about Iris and the cast, may find assembling the book’s parts arduous. Iris’s final destination, located beyond her castle and other residences, exists beyond her milieu’s static, Cartesian-based dualisms and past the boundaries of southern Ontario’s patriarchally constructed page. For Atwood, Hamlet’s quandary of whether “to be or not to be” may represent the question protagonists ask. However, for Iris, both being and not being signifies the

answer, without the requisite for female characters to commit to any temporal-spatial location. Atwood presents *The Blind Assassin* as a multilayered, postmodernist novel foregrounding the memoir of an unreliable female narrator with a failing memory and changing stances. Atwood employs complex compositional strategies highlighting poststructural and feminist positions that test readers’ trust in the narrative view and, thus, the textual message itself via a negotiation with the author that Ross Chambers (1984) calls the reader/writer “contract” (p. 22). As an author-as-character herself, Iris shares her conflicting roles with *The Blind Assassin*’s readers as a pawn to family members, nemesis to her sister, and hoped-for heroine to progenitors as she resides in locations offering diverging but masculinist landscapes. Atwood explores Iris’s problematic identities as an autobiographer,

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novelist, and writer-as-assassin as Iris both tells and retracts a story in which she is simultaneously a casualty, product, villain, and usurper of her masculinist culture as aligned with her ever-changing perspectives on her history.

Chambers explains that the relationship an author and audience members forge

depends on social agreements, implicit pacts or contracts [between the parties] in order to produce exchanges that are themselves a function of desires, purposes, constraints It is only on the strength of such agreements that narratives can exert their impact and produce change . . . [or offer a] point. (p. 22)

Readers possess expectations they demand be met, and novelists must “earn the authority to narrate in the very act of storytelling” and “master certain ‘tactical’ devices” of their art to clench the deal with audience-members-as-consumers (p. 23). Authors must decide how best to employ their weapons of choice, including point-of-view considerations, in composing the written form. In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood refuses to conform to some traditional constraints of “showmanship” that authors adopt to create novels that, according to Chambers, function as commodities they hope to sell both literally and figuratively. Yet, to draw an audience, Atwood does enact the key storytelling strategy that Chambers argues novelists must apply to produce effective prose. In fashioning Iris as a narrator-as-writer with a story to reveal, Atwood proposes to share what Chambers calls a “secret” (p. 25), even if this enigma’s contents remain mysterious, both unexplainable and nontransmittable, for audience members as the outcome of their engaging the book. Because, as narrator, Iris commits to no single view of events in *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood’s readers may never discern whether or not Iris is culpable for Laura’s death or even comprehend how Laura’s demise should be seen: as tragic, redemptive, or even, based on Enlightenment-grounded binaries, meaningless. Atwood’s refusal to provide an answer to her book’s riddle represents a positive outcome for the destinies of female family successors, who may fill in their own blanks concerning their stories’ conclusions.

The Blind Assassin: A Literature Review

Since *The Blind Assassin*’s publication, scholars have examined it through various lenses, including the psychoanalytical, gender-concerned, politico-economic, historiographic, and narratological. J. Brooks Bouson (2003), applying feminist theory, proposes that Atwood’s female characters are bound together by their “victimization,” whereas Hilde Staels (2004), identifying Iris as a writer contemplating the past, focuses on her “self-victimization.” Paula Farca (2010) argues that Atwood’s women, parodying male discourses to illuminate their problematic status, form intergenerational liaisons, and Susan Watkins (2013) discusses how Iris, an aging female writer, tells her story. From a politico-economic

view, Alaina Kaus (2015) argues that with market liberalism at play, the characters themselves possess market values. Implementing a historiographic stance, S. Isabella and Sundarsingh (2010) explore how Atwood’s female characters utilize “History and Fiction” to foreground their accounts, Coral Ann Howells (1996) portrays the novel’s interrogation of typical Canadian accounts, and Alan Robinson (2006) explains how Iris resurrects family ghosts via historiographical and hermeneutic systems. Discussing narratological concerns, Ellen McWilliams (2007) reveals the obstacles Iris negotiates that female writers have met traditionally, Chung-Hao Ku (2004) documents implementations of Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine* bridging the divide between the self and the Other, and Magali Cornier Michael (2010) places Iris among female writers redefining narrative modes, including by, according to Shuli Barzilai (2010), utilizing *ekphrasis* to formulate meaning.

Through the female characters’ artistically based social negotiations, Bouson (2010) argues, *The Blind Assassin* presents an account of early 20th-century women’s interactions with patriarchal culture, which they interrogate through storytelling acts. By assembling the women’s accounts, readers have an opportunity to sort out Atwood’s book’s “puzzle” (pp. 15-16). Anette Barnard and Kruger (2005) argue that Atwood’s disruption of cohesion and imposition of multiple voices fragmenting the text allow readers to enact its meaning. Moreover, Earl Ingersoll (2003) calls the novel a “mystery” for which Atwood rejects a totalistic conclusion, whereas Ruth Parkin-Gounelas (2004) proposes that Iris introduces deceptive memories and multiple layers into the narrative to obfuscate her part in Laura’s fate, and Fiona Tolan (2010) poses Iris as the book’s villain. Nevertheless, no one has examined how Iris’s positioning of herself, through Atwood’s postmodern narrative technique and rendering of point-of-view, affects readers’ ability to understand and, thus, champion Iris as a simultaneous casualty, product, villain, and usurper of her masculinist world, which she constructs and erases to refute her series of patriarchally inspired, spatio-temporal placements.

Genre Considerations

The Blind Assassin offers a collection of interfacing texts, and Iris’s memoir, a first-person-limited narrative written in present tense, spanning her life, and directed to her granddaughter, Sabrina, comprises its bulk, while as its outermost frame, Iris presents another autobiographical but loosely rendered contemplation of herself as an aging writer composed the same year. The book, somewhat linearly assembled, is interspersed with other texts, including photographs, newspaper articles, and Laura’s presumed novella, *The Blind Assassin*, a third-person narrative illustrating an affair between a man and woman in which the science-fiction tales of an unnamed figure resembling labor agitator and pulp writer, Alex Thomas, are imbedded. With the novel’s mise-en-abyme structure,

Atwood offers simultaneous discourses mirroring one another thematically and, according to Margaret Reynolds and Noakes (2002), creating a collage effect that seem to present answers. Atwood renders Iris's account with historiographic flair, and to locate a collective "truth" about Iris's motivations, readers might wish to impose a hierarchy on the book's interlocking pieces. Yet, the audience will discover gaps and inconsistencies in the larger text, which an anonymous, intervening source has edited.

Atwood implies that compared with male counterparts and even female predecessors, women writers, including authors-as-characters, such as Iris, must adopt new strategies, including a reconsideration of narrative perspective. Composing *The Blind Assassin* as Iris's fragmented self-narrative, Atwood, striking a hard bargain with readers-as-consumers, asks them to question her text at all points. The goal is to uncover facets of Iris's character as she describes herself as a youth, wife, sister, lover, mother, and aging writer, roles that she records and enacts varyingly according to her changing locations and their patriarchally mandated agendas. Foregrounding no single identity fulfills Iris's desires for self-conception, and as the novel's premier "blind assassin," she co-opts others' stories and formulates her own narrative as a victim, product, villain, and avenger. In forging her various presences, Iris, as a writer-assassin, is blinded to her work's outcome, one that destroys while promoting regenerative, if untold possibilities for herself and her lineage. Iris contemplates her life in light of her impending death to establish a fluid persona that she can affirm and that female predecessors might validate or "buy," even if they find themselves, like Atwood's readers, emptyhanded afterwards, lacking a tangible grip on the answer-as-commodity to the looming question she poses concerning the nature of Iris's subjectivity and her progeny's heritage. Forestalling readers' judgment of Iris's character as she navigates the confining landscapes of her postwar, patriarchal milieu, Atwood explores Iris's contradictory account as Iris moves within a series of multilayered, male-dominated texts to mold others' fates as she sees fit to propel herself and other characters to a place beyond hegemonic categorizations fixed by language's structures. Acting as an assassin by occupation, Iris writes and unwrites others' identities, along with her own, leaving them open for change in ways to improve her progeny's vistas and to make her "point" in closing the reader/writer contract as a professional for hire.

Mixing Truth and Fiction, or Truth Is Fiction

Via *The Blind Assassin*'s innovative form, Atwood plays with the audience's reader-based expectations for the novel genre's conclusion, according to which members expect certain narratorial secrets to be unfolded. In writing her nonfictional memoir and autobiography, Iris is supposed to be sharing "truths" and imparting "realities." Moreover, the newspaper articles, photos, and novella that she presents as

context for her work should render complexity to the book to enact a "whole" or more complete picture for audience members, with their purchasing power and, thus, clout involving a successful reader/writer transaction. However, in a post-modern schema, every new insight that Iris poses in the book is one that is subject to change, as she creates, considers, and advances contradictory claims about herself, family, and community members. In the novel's present tense, Iris, a writer of advanced age possessing Romantic compositional notions, draws herself as a conduit for artistic impulses. Inspired by her form, Iris moves her pen across the page and lets her imagination take hold. Yet, simultaneously, Iris privileges memory's place in (re)constructing the past. Art may be inspired by the muse, and emotion-imbued memories draw supposedly from the heart. Nonetheless, Iris's "insightfully" wrought memoir; clandestinely presented novella; fable-like, science-fiction inserts; documentary-style news clippings, and true-as-life photos represent fictional texts, even though Iris keeps promising readers that she is conveying accuracy in her events' rendition. For example, to show gratitude to Laura and Alex for the guidance they have provided in her coming-of-age story by acting as bridges, according to Chapter One's title, across which she walks, Iris hides the novella's authorship until the end.

Iris's advances of so-called facts are followed by their retractions, and Iris doctors the narrative in the same manner that Laura cuts herself out of Iris's picnic photo with Alex to meet both girls' desired vision of events. Readers, trying to unlock the book's revelation, discover history, like Iris's memoir, to be produced retrospectively and mediated as such, while one is blinded to the current events' significance as well. *The Blind Assassin*'s plot elements, whirling in a state of flux, never add up to some culminating point and corresponding moment of Joycean epiphany for audience members seeking this transactional, Modernistic experience. Instead, Cherene Sherrard (1999) describes the "biomythography" as a fictional "reenvisioning of a life experience which reveals multilayered histories and collective memory" (p. 130), and *The Blind Assassin* builds upon this genre.

Point-of-View Considerations

Twentieth-century writers and narratologists have produced point-of-view theories, especially regarding the first-person-limited, to which Atwood reacts in postmodern fashion in composing *The Blind Assassin* through Iris's eyes. Henry James (1881/1971), defining the limited viewpoint for Realists, argues that writers must "represent life" according to mimetic premises (p. 389). In implementing the limited view, James believes, writers can fashion narrators possessing unique perspectives. James states, "Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad of forms . . . Experience is never limited; it is never complete" (p. 397). Calling for writers to explore a character's psychological interior as opposed to spinning intricate, mythico-wrought plots acted out by

character types, James advises writers to “try and catch the colour of life itself” by painting the perspectives of dynamic characters involved in complex, remarkable situations (p. 413). Implementing the first-person-limited, Realists desired to offer intimate portraits of characters in opposition to prototypes involving the invasive, “objective” presence of an omniscient narrator dividing characters from readers.

However, Atwood takes James’s tenets to their next logical, postmodern steps. First, depicted through Iris’s perspective, Atwood questions whether either life or art, in which persons and pieces represent copies of copies, mimeographed through generations, can, according to Ferdinand Saussure’s (1983) and Jacques Derrida’s (1976) poststructuralistic linguistic models, signify anything of so-called original value. In describing both her female progenitors’ uncannily similar lifestyles and their prized museum pieces, Iris exposes the practices of replication perpetuating both gender roles and art as commodification in the novel through a series of standing forms. Abiding by the dictates of those dead and gone, Iris believes she and Laura “were brought up by” Grandmother Adelia, with her portrait’s eyes following them, and “her conception of who [they] ought to be” (Atwood, 2000, p. 62), replicators of her own oppressive story at the Chase mansion. In the book, Atwood, like James, also provides readers with intimate introductions to elaborately detailed, psychologically complex characters, including Iris and Laura, possessing what E. M. Forster (1927/1956) calls “round qualities” (p. 103). However, Atwood refuses to allow readers to “know” her characters in that readers cannot trust Iris’s representation of her cast. Finally, Atwood shows the million-fold choices that Iris, as protagonist, might make via some Jamesian “window of opportunity” in her various abodes without Iris ever having to commit to any path. Encompassing the possibilities presented to her era’s women, Iris catalogs the colorful array of props and costumes she amasses throughout life, with some serving as chapter names, to place herself in each social setting. Nonetheless, Iris fails to qualify any item as a treasured possession associated with some core aspect of her “being.”

In his Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, James (1881/1971) presents a metaphor involving the limited view invoking a “house of fiction” offering inhabitants, peering outward, multiple panoramas or sight angles. Occupants can see the outer landscape’s aspects depicted uniquely from windows at differing levels. Depending on the window, one will have an “impression distinct from any other” (p. 52) of a given tree in the yard, for example. Applying this metaphor, James, regarding “truth” as pluralistic and relativistic, argued that with the limited view, authors could describe a character’s individualistic experiences in depth as opposed to rendering society’s collective moments in generic form. Similarly, follower Norman Friedman (1955) identifies the limited narrator as a “fixed center” (p. 108) or camera lens filtering the story’s plot to provide a “genuine” picture of events. However, in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris refuses to act as a

Jamesian membrane through which details pass fluidly to grant readers free access to the narrative. Iris denies readers any reward of understanding she, her “self,” or anyone else. Instead of relaying “realistic” and “precise” information by standing at an open window and gazing at the picturesque scenery from a fixed position, Iris visits all of James’s windows, with some broken, others barred, and all distorting women’s views. Iris’s abodes, including the ancient Avilion and contemporarily wrought house of her husband, Richard Griffen, with their styles effected and manufactured, bring her “pleasure,” such as that about which she reads in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” as being a “pleasure-dome” (Atwood, 2000, p. 333). Nonetheless, for Iris, the novel’s sky signifies a blue “dome” (p. 405) through which she cannot escape, at least not in league with a male figure paralleling the city of Sakiel-Norn’s blind assassin from the novella and Alex himself, one who might descend from the heavens on a rope to rescue her, perhaps even as an elderly woman, but never does, because female characters gaze at a proverbial glass ceiling in the book. Still, when Laura asks questions about Kubla Khan’s magical landscape, Iris explains that she is no schoolteacher to explain its significance, in juxtaposition to the girls’ tutors, “Miss Violence” and Mr. Erskine, who approach their academic subjects via romantic, mythical idealizations imposing constraints on women as tight and ridiculous as the antiquated corset.

Modernist and postmodernist writers introduce perforations into narrative perspective models providing greater variation in the patterns that authors, including Atwood, apply, as exemplified previously. Burkhard Niederhoff (2011, n.p.) describes “intermediate cases, embeddings, transgressions or unusual combinations” of points of view, and other contemporary narratologists broaden perspective discussions likewise by adding ideological, lingual, perceptual, and spatio-temporal factors to the calculation. Feminist scholar Susan Lanser (1981) explains that “[u]nlike such textual elements as character, plot, or imagery, point of view is essentially a *relationship* [between the seer and his or her object] rather than a concrete entity” (p. 13). Casting Iris as a seer possessing what Lanser calls a reciprocal “relationship” with her patriarchally influenced objects of study involving a system of their visual, lingual, and ideological co-assessment, Atwood depicts Iris as a character studying her various landscapes while declining to commit to any Jamesian window of sight, with features that limit women’s storytelling acts. For Iris, all “houses of fiction” in the novel function as castles of some sort, providing not only lavish enjoyment and protection but also the reality of imprisonment for women in clouding their “clear” or unimpaired vantage points. At her childhood residence, Avilion, a fortress left in ruins, Iris languishes in her role as a princess; in Richard’s domain, an asylum similar to Laura’s mental hospital that his sister, Winifred, decorates, Iris hides away as Richard’s wife; in Alex’s unsafe, minimalistic, and temporary hideouts, Iris, his lover, must not be seen and cannot stay; and in Iris’s own

small house, she secludes herself as an old witch and cannot navigate the premises alone, such as by descending to the dungeon-like basement to launder clothing. Then, there are the intrusions of those caring for Iris, such as house servants Reenie and Myra, tasked with protecting a castle's keep. While Iris, stationed in each varying compound, peers out its windows, others standing outside gaze in, too, calling attention to the postmodern consideration that Iris's vision and, thus, her message to readers, wanting unrestricted access, is mediated at all levels. According to Jacques Lacan (1964/1978), discussing "the split between the eye and the gaze," in contemporary landscapes, one may be aware of being watched as much as of watching. Furthermore, Michel Foucault (1975) offers a related incarceration-based theory based on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon conceptualization, in which a population's members are being watched potentially at all times by an unseen eye and must decide how, if at all, to modify their behavior under oppressive surveilling mechanisms (pp. 195-210). Like Sakiel-Norn's male assassin, arriving costumed as a female to kill but then save the sacrificial maiden, Iris decides to modify her dress, attitude, and posture for each of her distinctive settings, even as she interrogates and fulfills the appropriate moment's role.

For Lanser and Wayne Booth, an author's gender, values, and socioeconomic station all contribute to a text's perspective, and in discussing characters-as-writers, such as Iris, including these components in point-of-view considerations is important in evaluating her narratorial persona. In assessing a story's perspective, Booth (1961/1983) urges readers to consider the narrator's position as well as his or her psychological state and "privilege" regarding the place from which he or she is providing information (pp. 160-163). Indeed, some narrators boast having a more privileged location than others that remain isolated, such as Iris, who finds herself on the periphery, no matter her residence. Booth defines the "unreliable narrator," one remaining at a distance from the culture and exhibiting a disconnect with normative values, as representing a child or an elderly person lacking full cognitive capacities, one having a criminal background or hiding the truth, and/or one possessing a psychologically impaired mind-set. In addition to being a first-person-limited narrator, Iris may fit each of Booth's unreliable-narrator categories, depending on the lens one applies. First, Iris offers conflicting accounts tied to her multiple subjectivities, either because she possesses a schism in her subjectivity in psychoanalytic terms, due to her performance of various conflicting women's roles, or because she wishes to hide her part in others' calamitous outcomes, such as Laura's, as in a prototypical detective piece narrated from the guilty party's perspective. As a second qualifier for unreliability, Iris foregrounds her memory-related and age-based health issues. As an octogenarian, Iris covers a time span of nearly a century in her narrative, involving not only her own history but also that of generations prior, and there exists a spatio-temporal divide between her childhood and the present hour that raises

metaphysical questions about their exploration's nature. As a last indicator for unreliability, Iris has never recovered from the psychological effects wrought by her obsessive love affair with Alex, which at many points makes her unstable.

As a female author, Iris is also fallible according to Enlightenment-based ideologies silencing women's voices. Atwood demonstrates that Iris's patriarchal milieu would not have valued her work had she presented it for review, regardless of whether it comprised autobiographical or fictional components and regardless of the style and format she favored. Until Iris is writing as an elderly woman, she has not considered offering her text to readers for consideration and does not even name herself, prior to the end, as the novella's author. In postmodern terms, Iris fulfills the unreliable, fallible teller's role within her culture's masculinist constraints. Nonetheless, Atwood assumes an arguably positive stance toward Iris, a narrator exploring everything she sees but providing no clear picture of it to critique her patriarchal backdrop. While James (1908/1972) expresses that narrators should avoid presenting any moral component to a tale, because the focalizer represents a "window" and "mirror" reflecting society without judgment (p. 249), narratologist Ansgar Nunning suggests that narrators' perspectives are tied inescapably to their "psychological idiosyncrasies, attitudes, [and] norms and values" (Nunning, 2001, p. 213). Combining Realism with Postmodernism, Iris's tableau includes not only James's "portrait of a lady," one such as the aristocratic Isabel Archer, who must "affron[t] her destiny" (James, 1881/1971, p. 12), but also that of the blind assassin: a prostitute, miscreant, and an orphan.

Narrating From Within the House of Fiction: A Room With No View

While Forster (1908) penned *A Room With a View* to indicate the importance for the contemplative, upper-class protagonist, Lucy Honeychurch, of having a "view" in her travels, and Virginia Woolf (1929/1989) proposed that the aspiring female author needs "a room of one's own" in an essay of that title, according to *The Blind Assassin's* postmodern outlook, having a window does not grant one the means of sight for women narrating their stories.

At Avilion: Iris as a Youth, Sister, and Cultural Casualty

At the novel's outset, Iris posits herself, like Laura, as a casualty of social strictures to gain readers' sympathy and present herself as a likeable narrator-protagonist poised to fulfill the book's heroic role, which traditional readers expect in Chambers's reader/writer contract's terms. As a victim of others' wrongdoings and failures, Iris grows up at Avilion, named according to Adelia's Modernist, fairytale-founded, Arcadian notions. In having Avilion constructed, Adelia may have envisioned King Arthur's island from Tennyson's *Idylls*

of the King, a narrative the girls read. As a protected location, Tennyson's fantastical retreat does not suffer from Nature's ravages, but the Chase estate, and Iris, as its inhabitant, is less fortunate. When Iris is nine, Liliana, her mother, dies, and when Iris reaches 18, her father, Norval, faces bankruptcy in the 1930s depression. In the end, the Chase factories are disbanded. Reenie seeks another job and marries after setting, like Iris's other female forbearers, a patriarchally inspired, if rebellious, example of women's suffering and compliance in maintaining antiquated standards and playing a wife to Norval and a mother to the girls. When Norval dies, Iris and Laura must fend for themselves, and Laura translates the maxim, "there's no place like home," to mean that home cannot exist as a location for them (Atwood, 2000, p. 447). In the same passage, at a later time, Iris tells herself that "[h]ome is where the heart is," but because, as an aging woman, she has become "heartless," she is hence "homeless" (p. 447). The novel offers the sisters no comforting place and no secure point-of-view in any known, masculinist realm, whether earthly, heavenly, or mythical. Nevertheless, the premise that Iris, being heartless and homeless like Sakiel-Norn's blind assassins, possesses no residence at Avilion, can allow her female descendants to picture themselves elsewhere and anywhere.

Although Iris loses the Chase house representing her inheritance, she does not feel comfortable there, especially once Richard, its new owner via marriage, begins to revamp it. Eventually, Avilion serves as an assisted-living facility called "Valhalla," signifying a place of eternal feasting for male warriors, such as Norval, an alcoholic wounded in an overseas conflict pursued to defend the home front. This home represents one that Iris, a veteran's daughter and not a war hero herself, must leave. Nevertheless, Iris assumes that smokers will burn down the house and destroy its history associated with male-dominated, Victorian purposes. Meanwhile, the button factory, of which Iris is dispossessed similarly after it did catch fire, is salvaged and becomes a tourist attraction, allowing onlookers to gaze upon the past without experiencing it. Inside, Myra owns a souvenir shop called the Gingerbread House, like that depicted in Hansel and Gretel, where instead of hungry children, old ladies, including Iris, feast upon art and history generated for consumptive purposes, as if to memorialize themselves through reminiscent fabrications of some ideal form. Like Iris evaluating the yesteryear via simulations of its bric-a-brac, Derrida (1976) presents a deconstruction-based theory posing a gap between the signifier and signified, according to which, he explains, a thing cannot resemble its name. Even the town itself, named after a defeated battle hero, represents an emblematic loss. Iris's masculinist-constructed, childhood home was never hers in the first place. Shelley Boyd (2013) compares *The Blind Assassin* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and in both works, the daughters face their estates' destruction. *King Lear* represents a genre tragedy, with Goneril killing Regan and ending her own life, but Laura's end and Iris's

subsequent disappearance invite a reading of the scenario in which Iris's heirs write open futures because of their kingdom's forfeiture.

Analyzing her early years, Iris invokes herself as a pawn moved around the board by characters embroiled in a masculinist society, including her parents, even if this version of herself, in postmodern terms, represents as much of a construction as do the other characters' recordings. Still, Iris's grandfather, Benjamin, who depicts the button factory's history in his gold-embossed book, and Adelia, who fashions scrapbooks memorializing girls' debuts in elegant dresses, imprint their identities upon Iris, regarding their texts as quaint but curiously forceful. In the "Avilion" chapter, Iris lists the miscellaneous objects that Laura finds in collecting tokens on Avilion's uninhabited premises later on, as if Laura is trying to locate pieces of a story concerning how the sisters became victims of their male-invoked fate and how they might save some treasure representing their "true" essence with which to describe and value themselves. However, many trifles that Laura recovers are associated with traditional female roles, and these items' displacement from their locations within the Chase home is positive for Iris's descendants' futures, which may place heirs beyond the household's confines. In an interview, Atwood likens the novel genre's form to a "capacious container" (Gussow, 2000, p. B7), and here, it represents one that Iris attempts to fill with a past as vast and random in matter as the memorabilia littering Avilion's rooms. Amid *The Blind Assassin's* narrative's clutter, readers wanting answers about Iris may pan for clues that never surface, and despite her ruminations, Iris discovers that "[i]t is no longer possible to know" the nature of her story's elements, such as the terms of her parents' relationship specific to World War I (Atwood, 2000, p. 72). Although this lack of knowledge on readers' parts could lead to a failure of Iris's narrative in Chambers's transactional terms, Atwood implies that leaving women's questions unresolved provides them with the benefit of their retaining no permanent, inviolable answers.

At Richard's Palace and Alex's Rooms: Iris as a Wife, Mistress, and Social Product

Avilion's dining-room's stained-glass windows, picturing the tragic fairytale lovers, Iseult and Tristan, offer Iris a colored, romantic world receding from view as she becomes an adult with a classical bent that she foregrounds in her narrative to challenge depictions of her victimization and posit herself as her masculinist culture's product. Still, in leaving Avilion, Iris enters houses with clear, glass windowpanes transparent in nature but no less opaque for women's purposes of viewing their worlds. Having failed in business, Norval, who married a woman of his choice, urges Iris to tie herself to Richard, an older business associate she hardly knows. The Chase patriarch sacrifices Iris to save his pride, if not his legacy, in terms of the mansion and factory.

Likewise, in Alex's parallel saga on Planet Zycron, set 8,000 years before, power shifts are ever present: The rising aristocracy threatens the ruling class, and men treat women abjectly, from the sacrificial maidens to the king's mistress herself, who he plans to sell into slavery, because "everything was for sale," in the city's epicenter (p. 28). In Luce Irigaray's (1998) Marxist-based theory concerning women's objectification and marketplace commodification, men exchange women, who are displayed for social consumption, as commodities: In a male-dominated culture, mothers hold a use value, virgins an exchange value, and prostitutes possess both. Similarly, during the novel, Iris, first as a virgin and then as a wife and mother, fulfills, in Irigaray's terms, her "value" as a social product.

If marrying Richard makes Iris, barely an adult, a victim, she also represents an outcome of culturally enacted norms, as she considers her fate, as well as that of her father, sister, Reenie, and the button-factory workers, in reviewing her options as a woman facing displacement and replacement within male-centered realms. As a female character, Iris is defined, according to Judith Butler's theory of gender conceptions, not only by sex but also by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and other identity aspects comprising gender, an ideation formulated by social strictures as opposed to being generated by personhood (Butler, 2004). Yet, like Sakiel-Norn's virgins, singing about "absence and silence" (Atwood, 2000, p. 29), the king's mistress, requesting courtship-inspired poems that he fails to pen, and perhaps even the king's wife, mentioned only briefly, as if she possesses no desires, Iris discovers that the noble gesture of self-sacrifice she offers in becoming a wife is meaningless to everyone involved, including her family, community, and Richard. When Laura tints Iris's wedding photos, making them appear hyperreal, Iris is upset that her pictures, serving as "clues and evidence" for her story, according to Barzilai (2010, p. 156), are ruined. Nevertheless, despite her position as a social product, Iris cannot "recall having been present" at the ceremony at all (Atwood, 2000, p. 239) to memorialize its function or signify her compliance with her role as Richard's wife. Betty Friedan (1963) depicts the emptiness that Iris encounters as a housewife during this era as "the problem that has no name"; for Friedan, the "silent question" that housewives were asking themselves concerning their state was, "'Is this all?'" (p. 15). In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris as a wife searches for something else, too, if locating no new function for herself that might crystallize forms for female heirs.

When Iris moves to Richard's house, a refurbished, contemporary palace of his choosing and purchase, Iris is no less ready to call this space her own. The Griffen abode, decorated in pearly shades, prefigures Laura's Bella Vista hospital room, and its sanitized, airy, heavenly nature is no more freeing than Iris's ancestors' heavy, ornamented fortress rendered as Valhalla in Norse mythology. Even as wallpaper patterns and paint colors change with the era, for Iris, the roles for women and the windows out of which they gaze at their prospects do

not. Indeed, Iris mentions that the Griffen garden, a landscape women before her must have observed similarly while imprisoned in the bedroom, remains unaltered. When Iris designs its plot, she discovers she has no plans for it, because her person has been co-opted systematically by those making every decision for her, from clothing choices to grooming practices. Winifred, both decorating Richard's palace and bedecking Iris's body as temples, might appear at any time, as if Winifred does not possess her own space either, and under Winifred's influence, Iris is expected, like an expensive piece of furniture, to bear the weight of a masculinist regime wishing her to be gracious, dependent, submissive, and virginal. Feeling herself "erased, featureless, like an oval of used soap, or the moon on its wane" (Atwood, 2000, p. 235), Iris retreats to the bathroom, a room without windows, first prior to her wedding night, then on her honeymoon, and at the Griffen abode, because her view is blocked at every angle by Richard, the new king, or his sister, the High Priestess in the Sakiel-Norn allegory. Although Richard requires Iris for the bedroom's sexual pleasures, she remains peripheral to him, while Winifred, roaming the premises, is "necessary" (p. 331). Nevertheless, in the novel, writing and secretion practices offer a means for women to gain subjectivity (Ku, 2004), and in advancing age, Iris, visiting the donut shop's bathroom, aligns washroom writing acts with composing messages to other occupants sharing this private space for urination and defecation. Because the messages presented, representing scribbles, lack clear meaning, women may interpret them however they want, validating their perspective decisions, whatever these may be.

As Richard's romantic partner, Iris finds that her marriage transaction goes unrecorded in "official" historical accounts, such as the one that Benjamin offers in his leather-bound book relaying economic success. Gothic literature focuses on the motifs of what Gina Wisker (2012) calls "pursuit, terror, power, and the potential of real rape" (pp. 51-52), and Iris's and Richard's union represents what Wisker might deem a "tale of conformity and hidden abuse" (2012, p. 134). Just as Iris, maintained in one masculinist stronghold or another, stays indoors mostly and looks out windows at what lies beyond, her suffering in marriage is not only veiled from public view but also exists as an acceptable version of the contract itself, a context precluding Iris from fashioning herself simply as a martyr. Still, in Butler's (2004) theory of gender as involving a performative act allowing one to function within social boundaries, Iris cannot signify her gender and lay claim to any value supposedly associated with it, for better or worse, despite her entrenchment in the book's varying locations linked to traditional female functions. While Iris's fate in marriage is perhaps no worse than that of Laura's, who Richard sends to a mental institution for refusing the place he fashions for her, a bedroom festooned in pink, Laura becomes a saint for her later supposed suicide, while Iris, in old age, is left as the town's recluse. Of the sisters, Laura represents the more independent, stubborn, and

giving character, attempting to avoid the patriarchal Griffen landscape by escaping on the train and providing for herself by working at a fair. There, Laura makes the donuts of which Iris finds herself to be the center, absent of features. Iris neither aligns herself with the sacrificial maiden's role, nor does she become the predatory opportunist Winifred plays, either. Avoiding these dualisms as exemplary of her lineage's options, Iris invokes and mimics both offices in turn.

Nonetheless, Richard, a foil to the Chase men and sweatshop tycoon, compensates Iris, an aristocratic wife, with new money. As a social product, Iris benefits from the "sale" of her person via what Irigaray (1998) describes as the market exchange's terms, ones not unlike Chambers's reader/writer contract in which both parties possess obligations and expect returns. While Laura colors Richard's photograph green to indicate his financial appetites, and green signifies Benjamin's book's shade, Iris also conforms to her newest part, having acting lessons, clothes, and makeup, along with the house Richard purchases to replace the one she left, which, "out of sight," is also "out of mind" for her until Norval dies, Laura phones, and Iris reconsiders her alliances. Having given herself over to outward appearances like the Chase and Griffen houses to be remodeled, Iris dresses stylishly and applies potions to soften her hands and brighten her face. Simone Beauvoir (1997), discussing women's conceptions, argues that "[t]he social significance of the toilette allows woman to express, by her way of dressing, her attitude toward society. If she is submissive to the established order, she will assume a discreet and stylish personality" (p. 547). In their storytelling, Alex compares Iris, who he implies is a "pampered society bride," to Sakiel-Norn's sacrificial virgins: Both ceremoniously "fulfill [their] duties with decorum" (Atwood, 2000, pp. 29, 28), as if their actions represent temple-residence rites, and as a new wife, Iris is seduced by the popular culture depicted in women's magazines to mirror its modes. Capitalism engineers one's gender and thus one's story, and, according to Isabel Carrera (1994), Iris represents not only a product but also a consumer who consumes.

Following matriarchal leads dictated by patriarchal codes, Iris, a cultural product, acts as a hostess, housewife, and, eventually, mother at Richard's palace. Iris represents a rich, nominally educated socialite, yet, to her credit, in postmodern terms, she remains unrefined and unimpressed by her surrounding system of patriarchal enterprise and industry. At the Chase home, Iris had confused original masterpieces with fabricated classics, and she possesses no relationship with the museums, buildings, and high-culture artifacts Richard dispatches her to see for educational purposes on their honeymoon. Both Irigaray (1985), describing women as the "sex which is not one," and Cixous (1975), calling for women to implement *écriture féminine*, founded on the original relationship that women, as language teachers, possess with their children, posit that in a patriarchally inscribed universe, women are constructed by numerous forces, least of all themselves. Yet, in "actuality," Iris possesses no real

"self" at all to assert as a female character contained in masculinist spaces. Iris's only escape lies in tending a rock-filled garden, a barren landscape, where she holds no responsibility to nurture anything living, from the perspective of her culture's fatherly origins, back to the primordial Garden of Eden. Still, stones may roll, and Sakiel-Norn's vanished people could live beneath their city's rubble. Years later, Richard's house with its "squinny" windows (Atwood, 2000, p. 295), from which Iris, as a wife, had difficulty seeing, boasts a broken, second-floor pane allowing for the possible departure, one Iris herself never made, of some female resident.

Richard's house serves as Iris's prison, and she walks about town, enters shops, and attends movies to escape it, even though she is subject to male purview in these public areas. Iris cannot express her "self" in Alex's changing series of rooms either, because there she assumes an identity as his mistress while retaining her function as Richard's wife. Iris does not possess her own place, and there is no location where she might meet Alex on "free" ground in some alternate space that she and Alex, as storytellers, might invent together to empower men and women equally. Indeed, Zycron's inhabitants of an alternate universe later people Earth. Having fled Richard's palace, Iris hides in Alex's hovel-like sanctuaries, located often on the town's wrong side but offering furnishings that seem offputtingly similar to Iris, if of lesser quality, like the shoes worn by the street's women exhibiting their perambulation's value and nature. The narratives that the lovers tell to release themselves of the tedium and duress of their affair's constraints become barriers demarcating their respective gender roles, and Iris realizes that there is little difference between her marriage to Richard and liaison with Alex, men dedicated to their given occupations and not to her. Alex, both like Richard and the alien creature Alex himself invents for his stories, "love[s]" Iris by attempting to "assimilate her" into himself (p. 279), and while Iris resists Alex's mission to possess her, she never escapes his gravitational pull, one as strong and bright as the Apollonian sun of masculinist truth in Nietzsche's (1886/2008) war between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. While Alex signifies his own milieu's outcome, Iris represents his mistress and a prostitute, according to her jokes and Irigaray's (1998) portrayal of women's use values, with prostitutes having both male exchange and use purposes. As in being paired with Richard, Iris remains contained within the same patriarchal strictures.

In the novella, the maiden trusts the assassin to lead her from the castle, even though outside the city gates, there lies as much danger as within. Yet, Iris is unable to abandon her comfortable metropolitan lifestyle, and neither does Alex wish to take Iris with him to an open, foreign country. Like "Kubla Khan's" lover, Alex, whose name means "to aid," is absent when needed. Meanwhile, similar to Adelia, Iris possesses "no money of her own" (Atwood, 2000, p. 60), because everything belongs to Richard via marriage, and Iris

is unwilling to get a paying job herself. Indeed, as a waitress, a role Laura suggested for the two sisters, Iris's obligation would be to serve all men, instead of a handful. Before departing for Spain, Alex asks Iris to leave Richard and his house, but she declines. In reply, Alex decides that if Iris were to get a room, he would obsess about other men possessing her through their gaze instead of him or Richard. No matter where Iris travels in her contemporary world, she remains a captive of some masculinist-created stronghold, while Alex, slipping among apartments to avoid detection for his Communist leanings, the tenor of which remains murky, is less impeded. When Alex flees to Spain, his fate remains open. Iris expects his reappearance until receiving the telegram, which does not provide the confirmation of his death that a body's return would. It is easy for Alex as a younger aged male to vanish, his corporal form missing, yet the elderly Iris imagines death via heart failure as the path to freedom from the patriarchally sewn cloaks that she has donned and exchanged as so many costumes.

Before news of Alex's death, Iris imagined getting an apartment with her daughter, Aimee, above a grocer's store to await Alex, and, once, Iris dreams that he or his semblance appears at her tower-like residence of an unknown location, where she considers sneaking out of the bedroom window to meet him but does not want to "fall" (Atwood, 2000, p. 468). Iris does not want to drop into the night or, later, tumble alone into her cellar as an aging woman facing the end, although, in this state, women's possibilities for journeys might present themselves more openly, Atwood suggests, as one enters a state of mental darkness, and the "self" disintegrates. Both sisters live with Richard while setting their sights on Alex, and the romantic Laura dies when she loses Alex, while Iris, steeped in classicism, pines in old age. Like Iseult, Laura assumedly commits suicide, and Iris deconstructs her "self" as a woman alone in her tomb-like house.

In the book, Iris resides in various tower-like structures sheltering but imprisoning her. The mythical Rapunzel makes herself accessible to male rescuers, yet Iris does not offer any hand in her escape, because she foresees having nowhere to go. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris is rendered a zero, a space defined by absence, the scooped-out egg. She acts as the indefinable male obsession: Alex "invents[s]" and "makes[s] her up" as with his stories' characters (Atwood, 2000, p. 276). Still, Iris's lack of subjectivity provides her and her lineage with options: Even as Iris contemplates being with Alex, she hopes to forget her name, to black out and float in space, as "[s]he render[s] herself up, is blotted out" (Atwood, 2000, p. 261). Iris, spinning tales with Alex, has wished for happy endings, yet she will not receive one herself, because reaching foregone conclusions involves writing stories that then have been told. When Alex argues that all stories terminate with wolves, Iris refuses to agree with him. Instead, claiming that there are other endings without speculating about their essence, she leaves her descendants' fates open to unfold as they will.

At an Unspecified Location: Iris as (Not) a Mother and Villain

On her honeymoon, Iris, without foreknowledge, stays at a hotel later associated with Paris's Nazi headquarters. Moreover, she describes Richard as a fascist. However, composing a self-narrative, Iris also writes of "her struggle" from her jail-cell-as-small-house to inspire future generations to remember her. From the beginning, Iris acknowledges her significance not only as a casualty and product of her masculinist system but also a villain in its terms. Nonetheless, psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1998) describes a scenario involving "the bonds of love" in which all parties in a liaison are complicit in adhering to and recapitulating acts of domination because they do not recognize them as such: Even when parties espouse equality and personal autonomy, they may apply a set of dominating strategies with sexual partners, family members, and community relations. Still, Iris raises questions of where to draw the line between being compliant to and forming an alliance with the Griffens once she believes Richard had been raping Laura. With Iris's professed inability to protect Laura, if also herself and later Aimee, Iris flees Richard's palace. Iris cannot abscond to Alex's rooms now that he is gone, nor return to the Chase mansion, never refurbished, even though Laura admits to having lived there after Bella Vista. When Iris leaves Richard, an unacceptable act for a woman of her stature and purposed grounds, because Laura's novella is unpublished, and Richard remains above suspicion, Atwood places Iris in no notable space at all. Although victorious, Iris remains vague concerning her downgraded living circumstances, which she has detailed in excess, down to the items she packs in her suitcase to travel from one residence to another in earlier periods, such as with her honeymoon. Iris provides no clear timeline demarcating her new independence, even though she has referenced historical events as backdrops anchoring her spatio-temporally to prior scenes, such as World War I, either.

As a woman with a small house but someone without a known social residence, Iris represents an outlaw without refuge, even though she pits Richard as the novel's darker force. Although Iris's location remains remote, if her own, during Aimee's early childhood, Iris does not skip town and the masculinist constraints and figures associated with it. Indeed, Winifred, with legal support, seizes Aimee subsequent to Iris leaving her home territory and sharing a bed with an unnamed man at a hotel in a maneuver placing her, as both a mother and so-called prostitute, beyond masculine use values in Irigaray's market-exchange theory. In the novel, Iris does not represent the traditional mother figure taking steadfast care of her wards; she critiques Liliana, rejects the matriarchal part with Laura, watches her daughter be removed, and finds herself barred from involvement with Sabrina. Nevertheless, because Iris both reaches out to her granddaughter through writing but avoids assuming an overly directive tact toward her in prototypical terms, Iris,

who might be called a villain in masculinist terms, allows descendants to depict a mother's role in broader strictures or refuse it totally.

At the Small House: Iris as a Writer, Assassin, and an Avenger

Regardless of the years' passage, Iris's cottage, like Coleridge's pleasure dome, retains its masculinist structure providing limited sightlines for women. Yet, it is at Iris's little house where she assumes a writer's personality to address Laura's case as well as her own. In *The Blind Assassin*, as with William Faulkner's (1936) novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, readers must assemble the book's events and assign blame for family members' misfortunes spanning multiple generations. Reading represents a decoding act, but Faulkner's narrative's structure, like Atwood's, remains one of mirrors and endless reflections. After *The Blind Assassin's* digressions and detours, readers return to its puzzle concerning Laura's death presented in the first sentence. Where did Laura go, and why? The mystery as to whether Laura committed suicide and, if so, who is to blame remains unsolved, to Iris's benefit, detriment, and sense of affected removal from the so-called crime scene. In Atwood's *Alias Grace* (Atwood, 1996), a novel with a similar theme portraying a female character involved with criminal circumstances, readers never learn whether Grace Marks is guilty of the murders of her employer and his housekeeper/mistress either. Grace, like Iris, represents both a "villain" and a "victim" (Cooke, 1998, p. 325), and Atwood's (1979) novel, *Life Before Man*, is concerned similarly with the narrator's former lover's suicide and the corresponding nature of the couple's involvement. Iris's name derives from the eye's black-hole center, signifying an expanse beyond mapped locations, and in her varied settings, Iris portrays herself as a victim, product, and villain. Now, as a writer-as-blind-assassin, Iris will avenge her female line. In keeping secrets, representing logocentrically constructed knowledge gaps, and telling lies, signifying displacements of masculinist truths, Iris chooses a middle ground for herself, never accepting nor defying any one self-characterization. Iris's ability to, as Butler (2004) puts it, perform and "trouble" her gender allows her to play diverging roles supporting and undermining women's stances.

In *The Blind Assassin*, a postmodern narrative about someone constructing a narrative, Iris assumes her function as a writer-killer undertaking the task of character assassination to dispel singularly defined female constructs. Indeed, as a writer, Iris is intent on, if unable and even unwilling to, understand and convey Laura's persona. Iris remarks that Laura possesses the same traits as the average person, except that Laura refuses to hide her essence, a feature that Iris finds "frighten[ing]" to others (Atwood, 2000, p. 89). Also, Iris is jealous of her alter-ego, who utilizes Iris's property, from her nail file, hairbrush, and car to the white gloves that Laura wears to her death to nullify any fingerprints associated with her location, one now beyond the pale. By the conclusion,

the sisters are conflated, so that any damage Iris does in affecting Laura's death, Iris renders to herself. Iris represents her sister's maker and savior but also her grim reaper, and Iris creates and removes many of the book's agents, including Laura, from their hegemonic settings to free them from the masculinist lines of which they cannot break loose themselves. Ultimately, Iris believes that she does not own the "I" in her name in the manner that Laura wields the "L" (p. 88), because everyone possesses an "I" with which to tell one's story. Yet, Iris's name's expansiveness leads her to become an avenger of women and a leader at their forefront's cause, whatever that might be.

Like many of Atwood's novels, *The Blind Assassin* deals with social strictures, whether women accept these standards, and how they will be judged if refusing to comply. Often, Atwood's female characters face bleak futures and view themselves as having fractured identities (Deery, 1997, p. 4). However, Iris, grappling with multiple subjectivities and choosing none, is empowered, not dysfunctional, in her fluctuating state. Iris contemplates Laura as another version of her "self," and Atwood presents comparisons between the protagonist and female family members, such as Liliana and Winifred, too, propelling Iris to contemplate her personality's set of fissures based on these outliers. Besides likening herself to family, Iris divides herself still further upon seeing women, who she resembles, walking the street, too. The breaches in Iris's semblance allow her to represent a large, diverse female sphere as opposed to rendering her a casualty in terms of Lacan's (1985) mirror stage theory, in which people are damaged, if left enlightened, upon discovering their subjectivity. McWilliams (2007, p. 30) finds that Atwood's "novel is fundamentally concerned with the idea of selfhood as a narrative construction or invention", and as an octogenarian, Iris posits herself as being "perfect" and in her prime (Atwood, 2000, p. 311), because she has tried on every self available to female characters but assumed no single cast. Beryl Donaldson-Langer (1981, p. 91) argues that *The Blind Assassin* possesses an "absence of viable role models". Nevertheless, this lack of inspiring prototypes renders Iris free of the masculinist-constructed identities for women that she attempts, deconstructs, and finally explodes in the book. Many of Atwood's (1969) novels, such as *The Edible Woman*, invoke a society demanding that women choose between marriage and having a career, yet as a widow and writer, Iris assumes both of these roles, along with others, and problematizes each via its appropriate locale.

In reliving her past, Iris believes that she is gaining insight into her affairs. However, Iris also reveals her "wish to conceal," one common to others holding secret knowledge of their backgrounds. Then, she admits that what she has written is "wrong"; the "truth" is missing, because Iris's message represents "a voice outside the window" (Atwood, 2000, pp. 448, 395). Alternately, Iris confesses that she is buried alive in the so-called information she has amassed. As a writer exploring and judging her past and Atwood's novel's protagonist, Iris represents a "remembering self" recalling her

“historical self” as she veers between “self-reproach and the desire to justify or vindicate herself” (Robinson, 2006, n.p.). Nonetheless, Iris’s compiling of logocentric knowledge leaves her speechless and confused, because, as a female writer, she both lacks information concerning women’s affairs, reproducible in feminine lights, and possesses it in excess. Iris represents an unreliable, fallible narrator, unable to assemble the “full” details of Laura’s death. Hence, in traditional terms, Iris’s culpability in Laura’s tragedy is blunted and diffused. Nonetheless, with her position as protagonist-narrator decentered, Iris resigns any claim to male-enacted legitimacy and Socratic-based insight. In the face of readers’ expectations for the novel genre, Iris offers no singular secret to be revealed and no one case to make. Instead, as a writer-assassin, she builds and destroys the book’s characters, including herself, morphing from the young princess in the castle to the aging witch in the gingerbread house to render women’s possibilities open.

Iris as a Vanished Writer: The Conclusion and Beginning

Because *The Blind Assassin* possesses discontinuous narratives and multiple viewpoints, Iris cannot create a Modernistic, totalistic effect for her story and so tell a definitive and perhaps redeeming story about herself for which readers, once satisfied, may acquit her of her failings. The diverse facets of Iris’s character, linked with Atwood’s book’s structure, may affect her believability and likeability as a storyteller for readers choosing to view her as a customary narrator. Instead, Atwood forces audience members to reconsider their “normative” reading practices in light of the book’s narrative perspective and forms. While Iris represents a narrator with a first-person-limited, fallible view, a female character marginalized by socioeconomic and family-related circumstances, in postmodern terms, all first-person narrators become “unreliable” and untrustworthy. Possessing a faulty memory and shifting views, as a blind killer, Iris dispels any meaning she creates and posits no one account. In commencing the writing of her book, Iris states that she has no audience in mind and that “[t]hings written down can” be “harm[ful]” (Atwood, 2000, p. 287), but it is only through the destruction of gender norms that Iris’s line may generate beginnings. In the novella, the maiden escapes her city before the truth about her absence can be discovered, while Iris hides her authorship from town residents. The maiden’s secret brings destruction to Sakiel-Norn, and Iris’s tale causes Richard’s downfall, even his death, as well as the loss of her daughter and social position. Despite enacting their own personal and cultural tragedies, the maiden and Iris face fates unknown and undescribed. At first, Iris does not imagine her readers, but later she admits her wish to make her book available to Myra and Sabrina. Iris hopes to avenge herself and Laura through an act of writing, signifying “a commemoration of wounds endured

. . . and resented” (Atwood, 2000, p. 508). Nonetheless, to avoid affixing potential readers, such as Sabrina, with identities solidified in masculinist terms, Iris avoids imagining Sabrina’s future life after envisioning her entering the door for their first meeting.

By leaving Iris’s identity and *The Blind Assassin*’s tenor open ended, Atwood creates a living story for women where nothing is finalized, and later, the unnamed editor and artist can gather up and strew Iris’s collected works throughout the novel as a pastiche representing Iris’s bright, jagged “[s]hards” invoking a place called “home” (Atwood, 2000, p. 57). In assisting Laura to enact her fate, Iris kills and sends her sister to a different and perhaps superior location beyond the page before traveling there herself. While Hamlet was afraid of entering the “unknown country,” Atwood implies that to affect changes for women, characters such as Iris must enter open spaces to expand the options of those remaining in the living world. Looking at the picnic photograph, Iris remarks,

The picture is of happiness, the story not. 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. It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road. (Atwood, 2000, p. 518)

For an assassin, killing is amoral. It is simply one’s job. The novel’s blind assassins, like Iris, are orphans and pickpockets, without parents and without traditional strictures. In James’s terms, writers portray what they see, but in postmodern terms, they may also depict what they do not see. The writer-assassin is blind because she does not know how her new location’s landscape will appear. *The Blind Assassin* may both frustrate readers and give them their money’s worth in terms of its plot twists and turns, with its secret and promise being that the ending is open.

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