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Reminiscence and the Metafictional Labyrinth: Exploring Stratum of Reality in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

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Abstract

The architecture of memory in the novel is built upon three separate narrative strata: Iris's current reflections, the inner story, *The Blind Assassin* and a pulp science-fiction story buried inside that story. The bitter, contemporary memoir of the elderly Iris Chase Griffen, which offers a scathing reflection on her family's industrial downfall in Ontario, makes up the outermost layer. The second layer is contained within this frame. *The Blind Assassin*, a posthumously released novella credited to Iris's sister Laura, details a covert liaison between a wealthy woman and a fugitive. The third and deepest layer of this novella is an escapist science fiction story about the planet Zycron that the fugitive tells his beloved. Atwood implies that the most persistent conflicts take place in the private sphere by contrasting the domestic transgressions in the Griffen household with the industrial deterioration of the Chase family. Margaret Atwood skillfully creates a multi-layered metafictional labyrinth in *The Blind Assassin*, where memory serves as both a narrative technique and a way to examine reality itself. The story illustrates how memory is a flexible, selective and frequently erratic reconstruction of the past rather than a solid archive through Iris Chase's retrospective narration.

Key Words: Labyrinth, Blindness, Memoir, Patriarchal, Reality



Introduction

A significant accomplishment in postmodern historiographic metafiction, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) questions the conventional lines separating personal memory from historical record. The novel's start sets up a multi-layered, intricate scenario that serves as a 'metafictional labyrinth', where the narrative process itself continuously obstructs the pursuit of truth. The plot revolves around the elderly Iris Chase Griffen and is set against the stormy backdrop of 20th-century Canada, from the height of Victorian industrialism through the Great Depression to the late 1990s. Iris faces the demons of her past as she starts writing her memoirs, chief among them the mysterious suicide of her sister Laura and the publication of a scandalous novella that turned Laura into a cult figure.

The architecture of memory in the novel is built upon three separate narrative strata: Iris's current reflections, the inner novella, *The Blind Assassin* and a pulp science-fiction story buried inside that novella. This structural complication fulfills a crucial thematic function by reflecting the psychological disintegration of a protagonist who has been silenced for decades by corporate and patriarchal forces. According to Atwood, truth is a subjective construct that must be assembled from bits of confession and fiction rather than a single, objective thing found in the newspaper clippings that punctuate the narrative. The introduction sets the setting for an examination of how stories can both hide suffering and ultimately offer the only way to recover a lost identity by drawing the reader into this labyrinth.

Exploration

Margaret Atwood uses a complex 'Russian Doll' or tripartite narrative structure in *The Blind Assassin* to physically represent the novel's themes of revelation and concealment. The bitter, contemporary memoir of the elderly Iris Chase Griffen, which offers a scathing reflection on her family's industrial downfall in Ontario, makes up the outermost layer. The second layer is contained within this frame. *The Blind Assassin*, a posthumously released novella credited to Iris's sister Laura, details a covert liaison between a wealthy woman and a fugitive. The third and deepest layer of this novella is an escapist science fiction story about the planet Zycron that the fugitive tells his beloved. In addition to showcasing technical mastery, this intricate nesting simulates the characters' blindness and the splintered nature of trauma. Atwood emphasizes how truth is frequently hidden beneath layers of social performance and storytelling, only to be fully reconstructed once the narrator chooses to



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remove the final mask of authorship, by making the reader traverse these overlapping boundaries between fiction and reality.

Margaret Atwood uses the private sphere in *The Blind Assassin* as a major site of systematic oppression and political conflict rather than as a haven. Atwood shows how the family is a microcosm of the larger patriarchal and fascist systems of the mid-20th century through the domestic life of Iris Chase Griffen. Iris is essentially commodified by her marriage to Richard Griffen, which is a transactional arrangement meant to preserve her father's company. Iris experiences a politics of silence at the Griffen estate in Avilion, where her freedom is eliminated and her whereabouts are tracked. According to Atwood, the most significant power disparities are carried out in private, concealed behind a façade of respectability, while the public world deals with the Great Depression and World War II.

The novel demonstrates how, in these political power struggles, women are frequently reduced to ornamental objects, their actual identities hidden beneath social norms. Iris considers the terrifying aspects of her private past and this loss of agency as she notes:

“The history of the world is a series of events; the history of a life is a series of emotions. But there are no emotions in the official records. Only the facts remain, and facts are not the truth” (*TBA*, 495).

Atwood implies that the most persistent conflicts take place in the private sphere by contrasting the domestic transgressions in the Griffen household with the industrial deterioration of the Chase family. The novel's newspaper clippings are not where true history can be found; rather, it may be found in the quiet, hidden realities of women negotiating domestic incarceration.

The Blind Assassin's story functions as the novel's emotional and structural core, serving as a false curtain that simultaneously hides and eventually exposes the protagonist's most profound realities. For most of the story, the reader is under the impression that the inner story, which describes a scandalous affair between an affluent socialite and a fugitive, is an accurate document that Iris's sister Laura left behind. But in the end, this text-within-a-text turns out to be a deft work of metafiction written by Iris herself. Iris builds a double-layered shield by posting her own experiences under her sister's name, protecting herself from the



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societal consequences of her adultery but also commemorating the one time in her life when she felt fully alive.

This literary trick demonstrates Atwood's long-standing interest in the hazy line separating fact and fiction. The inner story serves as a veil because it permits the truth to exist in a setting where the strict, patriarchal world Iris lives in cannot prosecute it. Iris observes the significance of what is left unsaid in official histories as she considers the nature of secrets and the ability of the written word to transcend the physical self:

“I've never been a fan of the truth; it's too often used as a blunt instrument. And yet, I've ended up writing this. Why? To set the record straight? But which record? And whose truth?” (TBA, 433).

By using this storytelling technique, Atwood implies that fiction is frequently the only secure medium for the truth, enabling Iris to recover her identity from a past that might have otherwise obliterated her.

Margaret Atwood uses the decline of the Chase family's button factory in *The Blind Assassin* as a multi-layered metaphor for the harsh growth of contemporary industrial capitalism and the breakdown of the Victorian social order. The factory under Iris's grandfather exemplifies a paternalistic form of gentlemanly capitalism, in which a sense of obligation to the local community and employees softens hierarchical hierarchies. Despite its inequality, this system is stable because of mutual reliance and tradition. However, this older paradigm becomes unsustainable as industrialization picks up speed and economic conditions change. Richard Griffen's presence heralds a new, predatory brand of capitalism that is unconcerned with human cost or community relationships and is motivated by profit, efficiency and global development. This change is exacerbated by the start of the Great Depression, which makes Port Ticonderoga an emblem of industrial collapse characterized by poverty, unemployment and social disintegration. Atwood challenges the notion of progress, exposing how corporate power and technical advancement trash the very working force that formerly supported them. The fragility of social ideals associated with wealth and rank is revealed by this economic collapse, which also turns into a moral crisis. Conflict is unavoidable as class tensions increase in this void. This discontent is personified by socialist activist Alex Thomas, who speaks for the underprivileged working class that is shut out of



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Iris's and other elite circles. His presence draws attention to the growing disparity between privilege and adversity, implying that an unstable system vulnerable to injustice and uprising exists beneath the surface of seeming order.

Atwood recommends that decompose of the factory is inextricably linked to decompose of the family unit and the societal fabric of Canada between the wars. The Chase family's hard-won status and security are symbolized by the buttons themselves, which are little, useful, and easily broken. Iris notes the callousness of the new industrial era as she considers the harsh reality of how riches is created and destroyed:

“The silver-plated world was being eaten away from beneath, as if by acid; the dark, chaotic world was breaking through the surface” (*TBA*, 273).

The novel's focus on how class hierarchies only offer a flimsy façade of stability is highlighted by this vision of decay. The industrial decay has spread from the factory floor into Iris's life by the time she is coerced into marrying Griffen, demonstrating that the weak are the first to perish in the conflict between capital and humanity.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood navigates the themes of visual deception, entrapment and the frailty of truth through a complex web of symbolism and imagery. The recurrent theme of photography, which Iris Chase Griffen sees as a carefully chosen mask intended to convey a false impression of stability and affluence rather than as a record of reality, is central to this metaphorical environment. The novel's obsession with textiles and costumes reflects this visual illusion; Iris's pricey attire both as a literal cage and a mark of status, signifying her helplessness in the Griffen home. *The Blind Assassin* himself, who is based on the science fiction story in the inner novella and represents the youngsters who are blinded to execute delicate weaving, is arguably the most eerie emblem. The Chase sisters, who gave their lives to preserve the fragile fabric of their family's reputation and industrial survival, are poignantly symbolized by this. A shaky veneer concealing a chaotic or predatory depth is a recurring theme in the novel's imagery. Atwood employs the material world to mirror Iris's inner mental state, in which lovely things frequently hide decay or peril. Iris's contemplation of the hidden costs of her social standing captures this sense of the real world's deceit:

“The silver-plated world was being eaten away from beneath, as if by acid;



the dark, chaotic world was breaking through the surface” (*TBA*, 273).

In the end, these symbols—the pictures, the blind weavers and the deteriorating surfaces combine to imply that history is constructed from carefully selected pieces and that what is seen is frequently less significant than what is concealed in the frame's shadows.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood skillfully creates a multi-layered metafictional labyrinth in *The Blind Assassin*, where memory serves as both a narrative technique and a way to examine reality itself. The story illustrates how memory is a flexible, selective and frequently erratic reconstruction of the past rather than a solid archive through Iris Chase’s retrospective narration. This instability makes it difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction, leading readers to doubt the veracity of each layer of the story. Several layers of reality coexist and interact because to Atwood’s complex structure, which includes embedded texts, shifting views and stories inside stories. The real events of Iris’s life are mirrored and refracted by the science fiction story nested within the book, implying that fiction can occasionally communicate more profound emotional truths than factual recounting. This relationship highlights the thought that actuality isn’t outstanding or permanent but is instead shaped by awareness, influence and storytelling itself.

Furthermore, the novel’s act of memory is closely related to concepts of agency and voice. Through her story, Iris is able to reclaim control over a life that was previously characterized by manipulation, quiet and repression. However, the gaps and ambiguities in her story serve as a reminder that total transparency is unachievable, despite her best efforts to uncover hidden truths. In the end, Atwood challenges readers to engage in a difficult process of interpretation, where meaning must be actively created rather than passively absorbed. The fractured and manufactured character of human experience is reflected in the novel’s metafictional design, which also questions traditional narrative assumptions. As they make their way through this labyrinth, readers realize that reality itself can be just as complex, elusive and interpretive as the narratives we tell about it.

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