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**A TRIANGULAR BARGAIN:  
NARRATION AND POWER IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S  
*THE BLIND ASSASSIN AND ALIAS GRACE***

by

Alyssa Michelle Quinn

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

English  
in the Department of English

Approved:

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes reader-writer relationships in two novels by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*. The plots of both these novels revolve around scenes of storytelling, in which tensions arise between the narrator and her audience. In *The Blind Assassin*, the elderly protagonist tells her granddaughter the truth about their family's past in an effort to achieve redemption. In *Alias Grace*, a convicted murderess tells her story to a psychiatrist who hopes to prove either her guilt or innocence. In my thesis, I examine how each of these narrative relationships reflects the relative powers of narrator and audience to define truth, shape identities, and assign meaning. Both parties have specific motivations for entering the relationship, and so each one vies for control of the story, sometimes to disastrous effect. Drawing on contemporary literary theory, this research explores the respective powers of reader, writer, and the text itself, and discusses how each one shapes the meaning of narrative. The thesis finally concludes that successfully navigating the narrative relationship can lead to personal empowerment and social connection, while failing to do so can be destructive. Ultimately, this project hopes to provide insight for real-world readers and writers as they enter into narrative relationships of their own.

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A Triangular Bargain:  
Narration and Power in Margaret Atwood's  
*The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*

On the planet Zycron, in the city of Sakiel-Norn, a horizontal slab of marble lies on top of a hill. Each year, nine young girls are led to this altar to be sacrificed, their throats slit in honor of the Goddess of the Five Moons. To prevent them from screaming when the High Priest draws his knife, their tongues are cut out before the sacrifice, leaving them forever speechless. Their voices would be a threat to the status quo and to the city's ruling elite, so the girls (always chosen from the lower class) are led—silent, veiled, and draped with flowers—up to the altar to die.

Silence and powerlessness are often equated in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), from which the story of Sakiel-Norn comes. In the book, Iris Chase Griffen recalls the events of her childhood and her subsequent marriage to the morally corrupt Toronto businessman, Richard Griffen. She ultimately reveals that, throughout their marriage, Richard sexually abused her younger sister Laura, who consequently commits suicide. As she looks back on her life and her past mistakes, Iris reflects that she "shouldn't have taken a vow of silence" (508). By writing her memoirs, however, she breaks that vow and tells her granddaughter Sabrina the truth about their family's past. Similarly, in Atwood's historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996), Grace Marks is a long-silent convicted murderess who has spent nearly thirty years incarcerated, although she disavows any memory of her alleged crime. Dr. Simon Jordan, a young expert in the burgeoning field of mental illness, visits her in the Kingston Penitentiary and interviews her about her past in an effort to unlock her amnesia and ascertain her guilt or

innocence. While each of the narrators in these two novels achieves power through reclaiming their voices, their audiences also have specific goals and desires that complicate the narrative relationship. The result is a delicate balance of power between teller and listener, in which the dynamics of narration reflect conflicted personal identities and competing worldviews.

Because they involve narrators addressing specific audiences, the narrative relationships in *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace* are perhaps atypical. *Alias Grace*'s oral narrative, which offers immediate and explicit interaction between narrator and narratee, is an especially exaggerated version of the relationship. But because of this exaggeration, these novels act as magnifying glasses for everyday narrative situations. They amplify the tensions experienced by the typical reader and writer and, by doing so, offer insight into the real-world study of literature. By highlighting the power struggles between the readers and writers in these two novels, Atwood instructs *her* reader how to become what she calls the "Ideal Reader," which she defines in her book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* as "the reader who...is conscious of everything that you are doing in a literary way, responds on an emotional level at the right places, laughs at the jokes, doesn't mistake irony for straight comment, gets the puns" (168). Atwood's Ideal Reader is someone who will understand her, and by defining it as such, she surrenders power to us; if we fail to fulfill that notion, she will have lost something—a connection she hopes to achieve.

The characters in *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace* are similarly vulnerable. Ultimately, the question for Iris, Sabrina, Grace, and Dr. Jordan is: who has power to assign meaning? The narrator or the audience? Chris Weedon argues that narrative "can be understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world" (24). Given this, the risks for readers and writers are high. As they each struggle to find meaning, define



truth, and make sense of themselves, they exercise their powers of interpretation over each other. However, in order to successfully navigate the narrative relationship, each party must surrender certain powers as well. Failure to do so, these books suggest, can cause great damage.

Narrators have significant power to shape meaning and truth, simply by deciding what to include in or omit from their narratives. In *Alias Grace*, Grace's deliberate deceptions emphasize her power over her audience. She frequently omits information in order to punish Dr. Jordan, or simply because "that is all he is entitled to" (216). She also omits information in order to retain control of the narrative, saying, "I have little enough of my own, and I need to keep something for myself" (101). Although her story has been appropriated and warped by others (the newspapers, the doctors, the prison wardens, and the judges and witnesses at her trial), Grace recognizes that it is something precious, possibly the last thing she owns, since in prison, even "the nightdress you wear one week, next to your skin while you sleep, may two weeks previous have been lying close to the heart of your worst enemy" (237). Grace's story, even more intimate than a nightdress, must therefore be carefully guarded. But at the same time that she gains power by withholding information, she also experiences a thrill from sharing her tale, so much so that she embellishes it to engage Dr. Jordan. She tries to make her story as interesting as possible and "rich in incident" (247). When she sees him become especially animated, she expresses delight at being able to "bring a little pleasure into a fellow being's life" (281). While this may be true, the delight surely comes from her ability to manipulate him as well. As Atwood says, Grace has "strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her... comes from a blend of these two motives" ("In Search" 1515). Although Simon realizes Grace may be unreliable, all he has to work with is what she chooses to tell, putting her in a position of power over him.

Iris's reliability in *The Blind Assassin* is similarly suspect, although it is not as easy for readers to identify her omissions and embellishments. Because Grace always tells us what she is not telling Dr. Jordan, we are privy to every narrative decision. But it's not until the end of *The Blind Assassin* that we become aware of Iris's ultimate deception, the information she has withheld from the reader all along: her authorship of the novel-within-a-novel. Also called *The Blind Assassin*, it's the story of the politically radical pulp science fiction writer, Alex Thomas, which has been attributed to Laura all along. The revelation of its true author forces the reader to wonder what other details Iris has manipulated. Indeed, Iris reveals herself to be a skilled liar, as when Richard questions her about Laura's whereabouts:

I didn't happen by any chance to know where she was? I did not. I hadn't heard from her? I had not. I wouldn't hesitate to inform him, in that eventuality? I would not hesitate. Those were my very words. It was a sentence without an object, and therefore not technically a lie. (443)

The grammatical hairsplitting in this passage suggests that Iris views language as a tool. Her dexterity with words gives her power. The claim that "a sentence without an object" cannot lie further emphasizes writers' power because fiction also has no "object"—that is, no objective reality to use when gauging its truth. When we speculate whether Atwood's *Grace Marks* is guilty or innocent, there is of course no answer. Atwood has not provided us with one, and because *Alias Grace* is fictional, no truth exists outside of it. This becomes complicated when we remember that *Alias Grace* is *historical* fiction. It does, in fact, refer to actual events and an actual woman named Grace Marks, who was either guilty of murder or not. An objective truth does exist there. However, it is buried in history. Our ability to discover it is as limited as our

ability to discover the truth of Atwood's novel. The unreliability of narrators like Grace and Iris, therefore, accurately reflect truth's elusiveness in the real world.

Even when Iris and Grace decide to tell the truth, they still control which version of the truth is told. Iris admits that, in writing *The Blind Assassin*, she wrote "what [she] remembered but also what [she] imagined, which is also the truth" (512). When Dr. Jordan asks Grace a question, she gives him "an answer" (68), not *the* answer. Both Iris and Grace use the flexibility of truth to their advantage. Each packs her story with painstaking detail, documenting the minutiae of daily life from childhood onward. These details give the illusion of full disclosure and objective reality, causing the reader to trust the narrator. The details indicate another form of narrative control as well: the narrator tells what she wants to, not what the reader hopes to hear. In *Alias Grace*, Grace gives Dr. Jordan not "the clarifying details of the murders" that he is looking for, but "story after story of the struggles of working-class women" (Siddall 95). These are the things Grace truly wants to tell. She seems surprisingly unconcerned with the question of her innocence. Instead, it's the story of her childhood hardships, poverty, immigration, and the realities of servant life that she cares about; as Dr. Jordan says, "every button and candle-end seems accounted for" (185). By focusing on these details, Grace reclaims her story and infuses it with her class consciousness. Iris similarly frustrates her reader with "a maddening array of detail" (E. Ingersoll 550). Compared to Grace's, Iris's commentary is directed largely inward; at the beginning of virtually every chapter, she expounds on the weather, her daily walks, the aches of her aging body, and her writing process. These seemingly mundane details reinforce themes of time, aging, and death, subjects the elderly Iris is especially concerned with. As much as we want her to reveal the truth, Iris instead forces us to dwell in her body. She makes us wait. The narrative is hers.

By making us wait, the narrator displays another of her powers: power over time, both fictive and real. Iris manipulates real time by dragging out her story, delaying the ultimate revelation. As Earl Ingersoll points out, timing is very much related to truth in this novel: “The revelations toward which the narrative slowly draws its readers—taking its own good time—could all be made...well before this long narrative completes itself. However, their “truth” would be diminished without the slow preparation for the end” (544). By extending the time it takes readers to finish the story, Iris ensures that they feel the full emotional repercussions of its ending. Time is especially crucial because Iris is running out of it; as she approaches death, so does the reader, in a way, because the story will be over. Peter Brooks argues that “narrative must tend towards its end, seek illumination in its own death” and therefore that “pleasure can come from postponement” (103). According to Brooks, the reader’s desire to reach the end stands opposite to the desire for detour, for deviance, “the compulsion of imposed delay” (109). These conflicting desires are part of what permits the narrator to stretch or condense time and to hide information in plain sight; although readers may desire truth, they also dread the closure it brings, so they go along with the narrator’s delays.

Iris’s manipulation of fictive time also grants her power over truth. Although her detailed descriptions usually give the impression of the slow progress of years, at times she accelerates considerably. Once, in the space of two pages, she cycles through three seasons with the phrases “It became autumn...It became winter...It became spring” (140-41). She comments on her ability to control time as she writes about World War II: “I turn back the page: the war is still raging... But on this page, a fresh, clean page, I will cause the war to end—I alone, with a stroke of my black plastic pen. All I have to do is write: *1918. November 11. Armistice Day.* There. It’s over” (75). Iris’s tone in this passage betrays a hint of sarcasm, a trace of scorn at her role as god

on the page. She knows she can spend as much or as little time as she wants dwelling on the events of history; she can speed up wars, gloss over death, relive only the good moments if she chooses to. Yet time haunts her. Its “sharp invisible teeth” (418) grind away at her conscience. Only by reliving her story in all its horror can she regain control over it and finally “get away from where [she’s] been” (396). As such, she accepts her power over time and uses it to achieve her narrative goals.

However, memory is fallible and sometimes the truth eludes narrators themselves, undermining their power. While its unverifiable nature allows the narrator’s reconstruction of the past to go largely unchallenged, this power might paradoxically impede the goals of narration. Iris refers to “the tyranny of Art” (145) when describing a statue’s transition from representation to reality: “No one knows what Colonel Parkman really looked like, since he left no pictorial evidence of himself and the statue wasn’t erected until 1885, *but he looks like this now*” (145, emphasis added). She makes a similar statement when describing her fading memory of her mother, saying “now she looked only like her photographs” (142). Iris is frustrated with art’s role as reconstruction because only by telling the truth—*the* truth—can she achieve her narrative goal of absolution. A representation is not good enough for her; that’s what the novel-within-a-novel was. A roman à clef, it fictionalized Iris’s story and concealed her role in it, combining “presence and anonymity...confession without penance, truth without consequences” (494) in a way that rendered it less effective than a true memoir. What she needs now is something objective and comprehensive, which, as her memory fades, remains just beyond her reach. Grace is an even more obvious example of this predicament. Although the empty space left by her amnesia provides an opportunity for invention, what she wants from her narrative is not a lie that would acquit her but the truth, whatever that may be. Significantly, she doesn’t explicitly deny

committing the murders, but only “denies the *memory* of it” (78), and expresses what a great relief it would be “to know the whole truth at last” (320). Her narrative goal is to “get to the bottom of it” (320). But sadly, there may be no bottom; her faulty memory diminishes her narrative power.

Just as the elusiveness of objective truth stymies narrators, it can also unravel readers. *Alias Grace* is a case study in this phenomenon. As Fiona Tolan states, “At the beginning of *Alias Grace*, the reader is led to assume, firstly, that the novel will conclude with a revelation of truth; secondly, that the truth is held by Grace and will be revealed by Grace; and thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, that there is a truth to be revealed” (228). These are natural assumptions to make, especially in a novel displaying so many elements of detective fiction. But soon after the novel begins, the reader experiences an epistemological crisis. The real-world reader’s anxiety about the possibility of truth is mirrored and exaggerated in Dr. Simon Jordan’s reactions to Grace’s narrative. Initially, “he believes in a recoverable and accurate narrative of what happened and that he, in his capacity as a psychiatrist, is in control of that part of the narrative” (Siddall 291). Although he claims to care exclusively about the truth, and tells Grace he is only interested in what she wants to say herself, he has very specific ideas about the existence of truth and his ability to unlock it, which influence his “reading” of her story. At first, Dr. Jordan’s clinical, dispassionate attitude seems to make him an ideal audience; Grace can say anything to him and “he would not be put out or shocked, or even very surprised, he would only write it down” (99). But his objectivity actually prevents him from realizing the emotional truth of Grace’s story. After she describes the conditions of poverty she grew up in and the tragic circumstances surrounding her family’s emigration from Ireland to Canada, Dr. Jordan tells his colleague, “I have managed to ascertain a good deal about her family situation as a child, and

about her crossing of the Atlantic, as an emigrant; but none of it is very far out of the ordinary—only the usual poverty and hardships” (133). By minimizing Grace’s struggles, Dr. Jordan misses the point of her story. He continues to see Grace as a “subject,” an “object of his investigations,” and a “hard nut to crack” (54) and consequently severs his emotional self from the narrative relationship; or, at least, he tries to.

In the end, Dr. Jordan’s role as medical professional and his role as reader prove incompatible, and his misreading of Grace’s story completely destabilizes him. The more Grace tells, the harder it is for him “to keep track of the pieces. It’s as if she’s drawing his energy out of him — using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances” (291). As Dr. Jordan’s efforts to discover objective truth fail, he frantically tries to reassert control over the narrative relationship. After his landlord and landlady’s marital troubles throw Dr. Jordan’s domestic life into turmoil, he “considers asking Grace Marks for advice...but [thinks] better of it. He must retain his position of all-knowing authority in her eyes” (289). This desire to maintain the upper hand eventually manifests itself in violent thoughts. He describes his desire to “pry” the truth out of Grace, reflecting that “he’s got the hook in her mouth” and now just has to yank her out (322). He even admits that at times “he would like to slap her” (362). This urge illustrates a desire for dominance, but also a desire for physical contact. Dr. Jordan can touch Grace, even if he can’t get a firm hold on her story; in the absence of objective truth, he objectifies her instead, evident in his fantasy of raping her (352). His inability to see his relationship with Grace as anything more than a “contest of wills” (322) makes him unprepared for the emotional impact the tale has on him. He gives us a perfect example of how *not* to read Atwood’s novels, or, for that matter, any narrative at all.

In contrast to *Alias Grace*, which makes readers doubt the possibility of truth, *The Blind Assassin* seems to offer “a narrative in which the truth will ultimately be revealed” (E. Ingersoll 549). The structure of the novel itself, which features newspaper fragments interspersed like a collection of clues, teaches the reader to expect and to want a revelation of truth. And indeed, the novel does end with not one but several climactic revelations, most notably Iris’s authorship of *The Blind Assassin* and Richard’s repeated rape of Laura. But even here, truth has its limitations. In Iris’s words, “You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn’t necessarily get you the truth” (395). Although the question of *what happened* may be clearer here than in Grace’s story, the question of whom to blame remains unresolved. To what extent is Iris complicit in Richard’s crime? It’s a question she asks herself continuously (she is, ironically, even more concerned with the question of her guilt or innocence than Grace seems to be) and it’s a question the reader wants to answer; like Dr. Jordan, we feel we have the power to grant her absolution. But ultimately, Iris says that “forgiveness... isn’t Sabrina’s to bestow” (521), implying that her audience lacks the power to assign meaning. Once again, the reader’s desire to uncover or impose absolute truth is thwarted.

By forcing them to question the existence of truth, narratives challenge readers’ beliefs and alter their identities. Grace, although primarily a narrator, provides an example of someone who reads and is shaped by texts, mostly newspapers and other journalistic writings. She reflects on all the different descriptions of her: “that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height” (23) and wonders how all these things can be true at once. Gillian Siddall comments on the textual construction of Grace’s identity, saying that “when [Grace] is finally pardoned, she sees her shift from ‘celebrated murderess’ to ‘innocent woman wrongly accused’ as requiring a ‘different



arrangement of the face' (443)" and that "her guilt and now innocence are determined not by what actually happened... but by discourses and institutions to which Grace has little access" (87). It makes sense that the texts Grace reads influence her behavior and self-concept, since they are written explicitly about her, but this phenomenon can also be extrapolated to society as a whole. In the vein of Marxist and Feminist literary theory, narrative can be seen as a social institution that shapes the identities and ideologies of readers. Indeed, one critic speculates that Atwood herself might claim "that all writing is political," because it encompasses numerous "arenas of power," including the personal, national, and economic (Sheckels vii). As such, narrative discourse on a large scale has much the same effect as it does on Grace's individual scale.

Dr. Jordan, however, offers an example of a reader who is affected more personally than politically by narrative. Grace's story leaves him "close to nervous exhaustion," his wits addled and his mental state "tumultuous and morbid" (424). He flees Kingston and joins the Union army upon the outbreak of the Civil War. In a deeply ironic turn of events, he sustains a head injury and loses many memories, "among them his interest in Lunatic Asylums" (430), a fundamental shift in identity that is arguably caused by Grace's narrative. Dr. Jordan's example demonstrates how narrative, even divorced from its political implications, can profoundly affect readers. The act of storytelling alone has power; simply listening to another person's experiences can offer the audience new emotions and perspectives, putting it at the mercy of the narrator. But not all changes to the reader's identity are negative. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris eventually identifies her granddaughter, Sabrina, as her audience. The narrative ultimately reveals Sabrina's true lineage: her grandfather was not Richard, but Alex Thomas. "As to who his own father was, well, the sky's the limit," Iris tells Sabrina. "Your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation.

You're free to reinvent yourself at will" (513). In this case, the narrator does not attempt to pin down the reader's identity; rather, she allows it to expand, to evolve. The same might be said of reading in general; inhabiting the worlds of other people (whether fictional or real) allows readers to take on a new range of identities and fully explore their own.

Narrative also shapes narrators' identities. Claiming one's own story often leads to empowerment and a renewed sense of self, so much so that "many psychologists give the narrative act a central position in therapy" (Fludernik 1) and literary critics frequently discuss "the self-liberating potential of an individual's act of storytelling" (Hogsette 263). Atwood herself revisits this concept in numerous works, perhaps most explicitly in her debut novel, *The Edible Woman*. As the protagonist's sense of identity and her control over her life slip, the narrative switches from first- to third-person. Atwood is not alone in suggesting that there is inherent power in first-person narration; other "radical postmodern texts use shifts in person... in order to illustrate protagonists' dissolving identities" as well (Fludernik 97). However, *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace* suggest that first-person doesn't automatically empower narrators. Although I will argue that Iris and Grace do ultimately achieve empowerment through their respective narratives, the process is more complex than simply using "I." For Iris, embracing her narrative identity means distinguishing herself from her sister. Throughout the novel, Laura acts as Iris's double, and their "too-close association" (Tolan 265) prevents Iris from claiming her identity. As a child, Laura declares that her favorite letter is L, her initial, but Iris reflects that she "never had a favorite letter that began [her] name—*I is for Iris*—because I was everybody's letter" (88). Her inability to claim the letter I follows her into adulthood, when she says of her husband and sister-in-law: "They're in the habit of speaking of me in the third person, as if I'm a child or pet" (37). Iris's disenfranchisement in her marriage is another

example of her conflation with Laura: both are forced into unpleasant sexual relations with Richard and both are described as “written on” (46; 371), a phrase that implies passivity. In an attempt to move from written-on to writer, Iris pens the novel-within-a-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, as a “memorial...For Alex [Thomas], but also for [herself].” But even here, she cannot disentangle herself from Laura, saying, “Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It’s a left-handed book. That’s why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it” (513). Iris is kept “out of sight” by her use of third- rather than first-person to write *The Blind Assassin*, despite the fact that she sees it more as a diary than as fiction, not “as writing—just writing down...recording” (512). Finally, she publishes the story under Laura’s name. Although this narrative act does give her a certain measure of power (after all, it enables her to exact revenge on Richard), it’s not enough. The claim that Iris finds her voice “when she leaves Richard and tells the stories of her life” (Stein 148) is an oversimplification. Her anxiety over her identity remains, and is reflected in the feeling that “even in the course of [her] most legitimate and daily actions...[she] is trespassing.” She describes her house as feeling like “a stranger’s,” and says that her various possessions “[deny her] ownership of them” (56). She still has a long journey to complete.

Only over the course of writing her memoir can Iris gradually tease herself out from Laura and regain her identity and inner peace, a process that is symbolized by a growing awareness of her body. Initially, even Iris’s and Laura’s bodies are conflated. Iris describes the “peculiar sensation” of watching Laura from behind, saying it felt “as if [she] was watching [herself]” (389). Repeatedly, the image of a bodiless hand is used to represent Iris’s fractured identity and her fusion with her sister: in a picture of Iris and Alex Thomas, Laura’s hand is visible, “cut by the margin, scissored off at the wrist...left to its own devices” (5); when the girls

hold hands while ice skating, their mittens “froze stuck together, so that when [they] took them off there were two woolen hands holding on to each other, empty and blue” (140). All of these images reinforce Iris as “an appendage: Laura’s odd, extra hand, attached to no body” (287). Even as she writes her memoirs, Iris feels disconnected from her own hand, saying, “sometimes it seems to me that it’s only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me” (373). However, she increasingly describes the pain in her arthritic joints as well, detailing the struggle of “squeezing [the words] out through the fingers” (66). Although unpleasant, these sensations indicate a reclamation of her body, and by extension, her narrative voice. According to Anette Barnard and Jan-Louis Kruger, “A strong connection...exists between the hand and the voice of the...author” (21). Indeed, Iris expresses concern over the idea of a disembodied *voice* as well, wondering if “I’d merely been talking to myself out loud. It’s hard to know. Does my voice simply flow out of me like air when I’m not paying attention?” (203). Writing her first-person memoirs under her own name is the opposite of this; it requires a deliberate, even painful, act of expression. As she engages in this act, she frequently inserts Laura’s voice into her own narration, but she does so consciously, italicizing Laura’s words and commenting on them. By doing so, she clearly demarcates the boundary between herself and her sister.

Grace also appropriates others’ voices to establish her own. She frequently and seamlessly slips from her own narrative voice into the voice of someone else, as in the following passage:

Once you start feeling sorry for yourself they’ve got you where they want you.  
Then they send for the Chaplain.

Oh come to my arms, poor wandering soul. There is more joy in Heaven over the one lost lamb. Ease your troubled mind. Kneel at my feet. Wring your hands in anguish.... Shed tears of remorse. Confess, confess. Let me forgive and pity. Let me get up a Petition for you. Tell me all. (35)

The absence of quotes or dialogue tags here disrupts the boundary between Grace's voice and the voices around her. Paradoxically, this strengthens her narrative control rather than weakening it, as Tolan recognizes. She argues that by assimilating these voices, Grace "exercises an authorial intention that indicates a central self." Because she appropriates the voices of people in positions of authority, such as the governor of the penitentiary, his wife, priests, doctors, the prison warden, and even Mary Whitney, she "mocks the power discourse she is articulating," which "places her in control of the discourses that she chooses to appropriate" (231-232). Tolan's analysis shows how Grace and Iris use opposite means to achieve the same goal. In each case, the narrator displays an awareness of the relationship between her voice and others' voices, whether by blurring or highlighting the boundaries between the two. In this way, their narratives help them to regain identities that have been stolen from them.

But despite narrative's ability to liberate the narrator, her identity, embedded as it is in the text, is still subject to reader interpretation and judgement. Even Dr. Jordan, who insists he is "a doctor, not a judge" and is therefore unconcerned with "the question of [Grace's] guilt or innocence" (307) colors her with his own preconceptions and desires. After comparing Grace's situation to Bellini's *La sonnambula*, he says "he wants her to be Amina. He wants her to be vindicated" (322). The reader cannot help casting judgement on the narrator, something Iris is aware of in *The Blind Assassin*. Throughout the story, she continually thinks of Sabrina as a sort of judge, wondering "which side of the family she'll chose to be buried with" (47). The reference

to burial shows that Iris doesn't expect to be forgiven while she is alive. It is inevitable, therefore, that she ultimately names Sabrina as her audience. Only her narrative can bring her absolution; or, more correctly, only her reader.

Of course, the reader's role as judge carries inherent risk for the narrator. In addition to the possibility of forgiveness, there is the possibility of condemnation, or simply misunderstanding. The epilogue to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes this risk. The novel is the story of Offred, a handmaid in the dystopian society of Gilead, who subverts patriarchal rule by telling her story, a particularly revolutionary act in a society that has outlawed women's literacy. Only in the epilogue (titled "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale") do we discover that the story was recorded on cassette tapes, discovered at a later date (after the fall of Gilead) by one Professor James Pieixoto who, we learn, transcribed and edited the manuscript we have just finished reading. The epilogue is a transcript of Pieixoto's lecture at the 12<sup>th</sup> Symposium on Gileadean Studies, and is peppered with chauvinistic humor and academic presumption. David Hogsette argues that Pieixoto's misreading invalidates Offred's speech act:

How heroic is Offred's act of rediscovering and transmitting her voice when we consider that her text is exposed to (and composed by) a chauvinistically focused light? [...] In other words, can we consider Offred's text self-liberating if it is Pieixoto who defragments the narrative by imposing his own phallogentric order onto her text? (271)

Hogsette's analysis raises interesting questions about the reader's role in interpreting narrative, and by extension, the narrator's identity. To what extent does the reader (especially an overbearing reader with an agenda) influence the meaning of the text for the author? After all,

Dr. Jordan's "misreading" of Grace's story, while it unraveled him, did not prevent her from taking joy in the telling of it, suggesting that the narrative act does not depend on an audience. However, while there is debate over the definition of narrative, most critics agree that it involves an audience. In his *Dictionary of Narratology*, Gerald Prince defines narrative as "The recounting...of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES" (qtd. in Fludernik 5). Even if the narrative is never actually read or listened to, it still depends on an implied reader for its existence. As Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Act of Reading*, the implied reader "has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader" (qtd. in Yanling 983). The very structuring of a narrative is grounded, at least subconsciously, in the narrator anticipating a reader, which is why Iris finds it impossible to write "for no one" (43), despite her best efforts to do so:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it. (283)

This belief creates a dilemma: imagining an audience prevents narrators from telling the truth, but without imagining an audience, the narrator cannot narrate at all. As Atwood says, "Despite the hazards a reader may pose, a reader must be postulated by a writer, and always is" (*Negotiating* 133). This certainly holds true for Iris, who eventually gives in and postulates a reader: first Myra and finally Sabrina. Indeed, the fact that we are holding the manuscript in our hands implies that Sabrina read it. In the final chapter of her memoir, Iris says she will place the

completed manuscript in her steamer trunk for Sabrina, saying that “the lawyer has the key, and his orders” (520). The fact that we are reading Iris’s words suggests Sabrina did find the manuscript and chose to publish it. The presence of Iris’s obituary (which she could not have included herself) reinforces this interpretation. Whether this is the case or not, the interdependence of reader and narrative is indisputable. As Offred says in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Because I am telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (267). The reverse, however, is equally true; a reader is implied; therefore, the narrative can exist. *The Blind Assassin* offers further evidence for narrative’s dependence on a reader for its existence. In the novel-within-a-novel, a man tells his lover a science-fiction story of his own invention. One chapter opens with him looking out the window, waiting for the woman’s arrival. At the chapter’s close, she still hasn’t arrived, and the man turns away from the window and “prowls, nests of words in his head” (280). This image prompts a realization: if she never comes, the story will stop. Not only will it cease to be told; it will cease to be created. It will cease to exist.

If Iser’s implied reader has power in the structuring and production of narrative, the actual reader has power in interpreting it, another way in which readers can be seen as co-producers of the text. In his landmark essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes claims that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (148). Order and meaning are supplied by the audience, not the narrator. *Alias Grace* makes this abstraction concrete. By transcribing Grace’s story, Dr. Jordan is literally co-creating it; he is her hand. Furthermore, we know that Dr. Jordan’s attitudes influence his transcript because Grace remarks on changes in the way he writes, at times observing that he records eagerly and with animation, and at others simply stating, “He did not write this down” (243). By choosing what to include and what to omit, Dr. Jordan shapes the text that is produced. He may be taking even greater liberties, as



Grace realizes, saying, "And he wrote that down as well. Or I suppose he wrote it down. I cannot be certain, because I never see what he writes down; and sometimes I imagine that whatever he is writing down, it cannot possibly be anything that has come out of my mouth as he does not understand much of what I say, although I try to put things as clearly as I can" (242-43). Grace's illiteracy and her dependence on Dr. Jordan, who has "the knack of writing so quickly" (161), seem to reinforce the disparity in their levels of social power. However, the situation goes beyond that, and illustrates Barthes's theory. The gap between what Grace tells and what Dr. Jordan writes means that there are *two* narratives here. Which is legitimate? Both? Neither? Some hybrid between the two? But even this is a simplification. In reality, there are at least *three* narratives: the one Grace tells, the one Dr. Jordan writes, and the one we read. The multiplicity of stories about the *same events* illustrates the reader's role in constructing narrative. If the narrator was solely responsible for its production, there would be only one narrative—Grace's.

The more the reader becomes involved in the co-production of the text, the more the question of narrative ownership and control rises to the surface. The power struggle between Grace and Dr. Jordan has already been described, but the desire for control is not unique to their relationship. The two lovers in *The Blind Assassin's* novel-within-a-novel display a similar dynamic. At one point, the woman refers to the science-fiction story her lover is telling as "my story." "Your story?" the man asks. "Yes," she replies. "Isn't it for me?" (254). This tension resurfaces when the woman announces that she's "thought out the next part of [the story]" (341) and tries to direct the plot. Her lover is amused at first, but proceeds with his own ideas, prompting the following exchange:

No, she says. That's not what will happen.

Oh no? Says who?

Don't say *oh no*. Says me. Listen—it's this way. (342)

It soon becomes clear that their conflicting ideas about the narrative reflect, as Weedon called it, their "competing ways of giving meaning to the world." Her naïveté meets his hardened pessimism; his Communist sympathies clash with her conservative, upper-class background. The narrative takes on a political charge, and the question of control becomes fundamentally important; it becomes a matter of competing worldviews.

Although orally delivered stories allow for more interaction (and therefore more fluidity of narrative control), written texts also allow readers to vie for ownership. Hypertext has been called by some critics the realization of Barthes's death of the author, because of its many contributors and constant mutability (Keep). *The Blind Assassin*, though set decades before the advent of the internet, has its own kind of hypertext: the graffiti covered bathroom stalls that recur throughout the novel. Iris, on her frequent walks around Port Ticonderoga, makes note of all the public bathrooms and has settled on the one in the doughnut shop as her favorite, because of the graffiti in the stalls, which offers not only "text, but the commentary on it as well" (84):

The newest message was in gold marker: *You can't get to Heaven without Jesus*. Already the annotators had been at work. *Jesus* had been crossed out, and *Death* written above it, in black.

And below that, in green: *Heaven is in a grain of sand. Blake*.

And below that, in orange: *Heaven is on the Planet Xenor. Laura Chase*.

Another misquote. (482)

The interaction between these comments blurs the line between audience and author.

Contributors cross easily from reader to writer, building upon, modifying, and even literally crossing out earlier authors' words, as in replacing "Jesus" with "Death." They also misquote

published authors, such as Laura and William Blake. By doing so, they take ownership of these authors' texts, shaping others' messages to fit their whims and suggesting that ownership of a text depends simply on who appropriates it. In the film *Il Postino*, referenced by Atwood in a lecture at the University of Ottawa, a main character tells the fictionalized version of Pablo Neruda, "Poems don't belong to those who write them, they belong to those who need them." Atwood echoes this statement, saying of her experiences writing historical fiction: "The past no longer belongs only to those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it" ("In Search" 1516). Because the past is itself a textual construction, this principle can be applied to other narratives, including *The Blind Assassin*. The novel closes with Iris leaving herself and her story in Sabrina's hands because she's "the one—the only one—who needs it now" (513). Whether authors want them to or not, readers will bend narratives into the shapes they need. However, as was seen with Dr. Jordan, bending the tale too far out of shape can be disastrous. The balance of power between reader and writer is therefore delicate.

Ultimately, the text resists control by either narrator or reader. It becomes an independent agent, emphasizing the power of story and language itself. Both Iris and Grace comment on this phenomenon and the dangers it involves. At first, Iris anthropomorphizes *The Blind Assassin* by calling it "such a thin book, so helpless" (40). Although this connotes weakness, it also animates the text, giving it life. Later on, Iris acknowledges the text's power by describing her loss of control over the novel: "The thing is out there in the world, replicating itself in God knows how many forms, without any say-so from me" (283). Grace echoes Iris's concerns, when she describes using magazine pages as toilet paper: "You should never let your picture be in a

magazine or newspaper if you can help it, as you never know what ends your face may be made to serve, by others, once it has got out of your control” (216). Aside from the fear of what the text will do post-publication, at times narrators also feel a lack of control over the story as it’s being told. Grace describes feeling trapped inside her story, subject to its narrative twists and turns, rather than creator of them: “Today I must go on with the story. Or the story must go on with me, carrying me inside it, along the track it must travel...although I hurl myself against the walls of it and scream and cry, and beg to God himself to let me out” (298). This description suggests that narrative is impossible to avoid; life, once lived, turns itself into a story we tell ourselves over and over, whether deliberately or not. The narrator becomes powerless in the face of her narrative.

But just as there are risks involved in readers and writers usurping too much power, there is risk in giving the text too much power as well. There is risk for the lover of language who relies so heavily on words that, when they betray her, she is undone. For example, when Iris cannot remember the definition of the word “escarpment,” she is deeply unsettled:

In the beginning was the word, we once believed. Did God know what a flimsy thing the word might be? How tenuous, how casually erased? Perhaps this is what happened to Laura—pushed her quite literally over the edge. The words she had relied on, building her house of cards on them, believing them solid, had flipped over and shown her their hollow centers, and then skittered away from her like so much waste paper. *God. Trust. Sacrifice. Justice. Faith. Hope. Love.* Not to mention *sister*. (490)

In this passage, Iris reminds us that language and story are always a kind of artifice, and that forgetting that fact can be dangerous; to equate a text with abstract ideals such as “Faith” and

“Love” is always to be disappointed, because these words have “hollow centers.” But while a belief in such concepts can be dangerous, it is equally dangerous to reduce a text to its material components. As Atwood says in *Negotiating with the Dead*, “if you are a lover of books as books—as objects, that is—and ignore the human element in them—that is, their voices—you will be committing an error of the soul” (145). Ultimately, idealizing texts and objectifying them amount to the same thing; in both cases, the reader invests too much in the text itself and believes that ink and paper alone have inherent power.

The truth, however, is that a text can be considered alive “only through its interaction with a reader” (*Negotiating* 140). As artifice, the text provides only the scaffolding for intellectual thought, an opportunity for the reader to make meaning. So we return to the notion of interdependence. An intricate web of power exists between reader, writer, and text. Early on in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris describes Laura’s “fatal triangular bargain” (2). She is referring to the pact Laura made with Richard and with God, in an effort to save Alex Thomas, a pact that ultimately causes her suicide. But the idea of a triangular bargain applies perfectly to the reader-writer-text relationship. Early on in *Alias Grace*, Grace worries that she will be sent back to the lunatic asylum, or else put in solitary confinement, to which Dr. Jordan replies, “I give you my word that as long as you continue to talk to me...you shall remain as you were” (42). Later, when Grace is reluctant to talk, he reminds her of their “bargain” (67). Although at first this seems manipulative of him, a way of capitalizing on his elevated social position, it is actually a realistic description of the narrative relationship. It *is* a bargain. Each party gives and takes, surrenders power and gains it.

Seeing the narrative relationship in terms of power discourse does not diminish its worth. Far from it: it teaches us how to approach narration by making us aware of the risks and by

preparing us for the vulnerability of reading and writing. Vulnerability is the precursor to any meaningful, intimate relationship, including the narrative one. Without it, we miss out on the connection storytelling offers. Although the two lovers in *The Blind Assassin* compete over control of the Sakiel-Norn story, they also bond over it. When the man leaves town and cannot contact the woman, she searches magazine racks for his latest publication, which she believes will contain a “message meant only for her” (400). The story, which has carried an erotic charge the entire time, has become a secret language only the two of them know. Just as Brooks argued, the structure of narrative makes it erotic, and the frequent interruptions and delays in the narrative heighten both the sexual tension and emotional intimacy between the lovers. Even Grace and Dr. Jordan’s relationship offers connection and intimacy; although it is warped on Dr. Jordan’s end, Grace benefits from it. The novel concludes with her addressing Simon, sharing with him the news of her pardon and subsequent marriage. She describes the joy she received from telling him her story all those years ago and goes on to tell him things she has told no one else (459), suggesting that they have forged a kind of intimacy. Finally, Iris and Sabrina achieve an implied reconciliation through Iris’s narrative. I say “implied,” because although we never actually see Sabrina read the manuscript, its publication suggests she did and reacted positively. Even disregarding Sabrina, we know there is at least one audience who came to sympathize with and understand Iris: us. We are her actual readers. We take on Sabrina’s role.

This realization prompts another: just as we are the actual readers, Margaret Atwood is the actual writer. The triangular dynamic is not just an imaginary relationship between fictional characters and their fictional texts; it is the relationship between us, Atwood, and the physical novels we hold in our hands. Suddenly, the burden of negotiating this balance of power rests on us. Will we be like Dr. Jordan, unraveled by our insistence on objective truth and blind to the

humanity of the tale? Or can we achieve Atwood's standards for the Ideal Reader, someone who will connect with and understand her? Trying to connect with the author, however, carries its own set of complications, in addition to the ones faced by the characters of *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*. For example, Atwood warns against confusing the writer with the text (*Negotiating* 132). In her books, Iris and Grace tell the histories of their lives, and in the world of the novel, those stories function as non-fiction. But Atwood's novels are fictional; although produced by her, they are not *about* her. Given that, can we connect with Atwood on any substantial level? After all, says Atwood, "We assume too easily that a text exists to act as a communication between the writer and the reader. But doesn't it also act as a disguise, even a shield—a protection?" (*Negotiating* 132). Michel Foucault replaces individual authors with "the author function," arguing that "it would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker" (215). Atwood agrees, saying that even if we could connect to the author through her work, that author no longer exists: "Too much time has elapsed...and the person who wrote the book is now a different person" (*Negotiating* 37). The author exists neither within nor without the text.

We are left with only one option: to connect with a *version* of the author. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth coins the term "implied author" to describe "the picture the reader gets" of the author based on what is written, which is distinct from both the actual author and the narrator (71). This framework prevents the reader from conflating author with text, as Atwood warns against, while still enabling him to connect with the authorial presence. Booth critiques Flaubert's claim that "we do not know what Shakespeare loved or hated," arguing instead that "we do know what *this* Shakespeare loved and hated" (76). Similarly, through the characters of Iris and Grace, we understand what *this* Atwood loved, hated, hoped, and feared. We understand

*this* Atwood's attitudes towards storytelling and the narrative relationship. Although she straddles the line between person and character, she remains a deeply *human* presence, and it's this human presence we can connect to.

Atwood is famous for saying that it's not her business what the reader gets out of her books, and of not being overly concerned with their reaction to her work (C. Ingersoll 151; 5; 168). However, she also doesn't "rule out communication" (151). "I write for people who like to read books," she says (144). Assuming that we fall into that category, then we are not only her audience; we are her intended audience, her "implied reader," to use another term of Booth's. We are the ones she imagined while writing. It's true that she can never picture us fully, because "specific readers are as different from each other as you can imagine" (168). But she does picture this: our love of reading, and our belief in narrative. That, then, is how we are drawn together: through the beautiful triangular bargain.



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## Reflective Writing

Completing an Undergraduate Honors Thesis has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my college career. I loved having the freedom to pursue my own research questions and to explore issues that are central to my identity as a reader and writer. The process was certainly challenging, but I have grown enormously throughout it.

One of the most challenging aspects of writing this thesis was navigating the field of literary theory for the first time. Often dense and esoteric, it's an intimidating area of study to approach. However, with the help of my advisor, I learned how to identify which theoretical texts would be most relevant to my project, and reading them became interesting and even enjoyable once I connected them to the novels I was studying. The more theory I read, the easier it became to understand other texts, and comparing and contrasting various perspectives offered me a valuable set of theoretical frameworks through which to view the reader-writer relationship.

Another challenge of the thesis came from its sheer length. Sustaining a logical train of thought over nearly thirty pages required careful planning, but it also forced my thinking to deepen and elicited an argument that was more fully developed than any I'd constructed before. Spending roughly a year on the project allowed my thinking to evolve, and the end result was much more comprehensive and sophisticated than my initial idea.

The most rewarding moments while writing my thesis came when I made breakthroughs after struggling at length with specific questions. After spending weeks, sometimes even months, mulling an idea over, the moment of epiphany was especially rewarding. It was also rewarding to be able to integrate into a community of researchers. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to discuss my thesis with faculty and other students, and doing so often lead to highly engaging

conversations. Even simple things such as using the Inter-Library Loan System to request a specific book, or attending my thesis defense and being asked interesting questions about my project, gave me a sense of legitimacy; the thesis, in a way, was my initiation into academia. Having discovered what satisfaction research offers, I will definitely pursue similar projects in the future.

I learned a lot about the respective roles of readers and writers from completing this project. By comparing various theoretical concepts, such as Foucault's "author function," Booth's "implied author," and Barthes's "death of the author," I reevaluated my own understanding of, and relationship with, the authors I read and love. By analyzing the elusiveness of truth as depicted in both *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*, I came to believe less and less in the existence of true objectivity, and to place more stock in the subjective interpretations—the *stories*—we create and share as humans. And finally, I reexamined my own relationship to texts themselves; having worshipped books for much of my life, and treated them as virtually sacred objects, I came to realize the limitations of their power. As I say in my thesis, they are only alive through their interaction with a reader—with me. In all these ways, the process of thesis-writing had a very real impact on my beliefs and my identity as a reader and writer.

The thesis also impacted me as a creative writer. Whereas before I gave little thought to the narrator and narratee in my fiction, I now see *the way the story is told* as inseparable from the story itself. This new awareness has enriched my writing by allowing me to branch out thematically into the issues of storytelling, truth, identity, guilt, and atonement that Atwood is so conscious of. Furthermore, this thesis has made me consider my relationship to my own readers, and to reevaluate my purpose as a writer. I certainly gain a lot of personal satisfaction from writing, independent of an audience. But a great part of the reward also comes from connecting

with others, from seeing my writing have an impact on them. The writing workshop that is the foundation of most university creative writing programs is based on the belief that reader response matters, and many of my most triumphant moments as a writer have come when a classmate thanked me for sharing my work with them. Knowing that someone *enjoyed* reading my work is worth more than publication, more than any accolade.

The best advice I can give to Honors students at the beginning of the thesis-writing process is to pick the right advisor. I was anxious about asking my advisor to work with me, because I was unsure if his research interests aligned with mine. However, I respected him enormously as a professor and knew he would help me craft a better product, which he did; he was incredibly helpful during the entire process. Pick an advisor who will challenge you, someone who will reassure you when you feel discouraged, someone who will help clarify your ideas while allowing you to retain ownership of them. Also, pick a topic you are genuinely excited about, something that has real significance for you as an intellectual being. With such a long and consuming project, it's important to pick something that matters deeply to you.

Overall, writing this thesis has been one of the best academic decisions I've ever made. It has exposed me to a multitude of new ideas and has increased my skill as a reader, writer, and thinker. I feel much more prepared to enter graduate school now that I know I can craft an extended argument like this one. I'm certain the lessons I've learned over the past year will continue to shape me, both creatively and critically, for the rest of my academic career.

## Author Bio

Alyssa Quinn graduated from Utah State University in the Spring of 2016, majoring in English with a creative writing emphasis, and minoring in sociology. While an undergraduate, she worked as a tutor and supervisor at the university's Writing Center, was a loyal member of the Bull Pen Creative Writing Club, and had several pieces of writing published in both local anthologies and national journals. She graduated as CHASS Valedictorian, CHASS Scholar of the Year, and the Outstanding Creative Writing Student of the Year. She will begin graduate school in the Fall of 2016 to continue her studies in English.