

**Writing Bodies into History:  
Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin***

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## Abstract

Historical fiction simultaneously can be used to document history while also questioning traditional history and ways of knowing. In particular, Margaret Atwood's historical fiction questions traditional history and patriarchal voice by highlighting textuality and storytelling and challenging history's ability to access "real" events, ideas and meanings. In this thesis I focus on two of Atwood's later works, Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, which participate in the contemporary rethinking of history not only by problematising traditional history but also by incorporating the body as a way of telling history.

Traditional history has been critiqued by new historicists, deconstructionists, feminists, Marxists and others who argue that history has in the past denied a variety of voices from the production of history, has not properly accounted for the sociohistorical nor adequately reflected on the nature of history itself. Today, literature is very much involved with this contemporary rethinking of history. In fact, Canadian historical fiction can function as a means of chronicling history, but also as a tool by which the documenting of history may be challenged. Historical novels that draw upon historical facts but deal explicitly with the problem of writing about these facts and integrate them in an artistic whole are instances of historical metafiction. Importantly, Atwood engages with historical metafiction or rather what Linda Hutcheon terms as historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon explains in "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction" that historiographic metafiction is more than just self-consciously fictive constructs that thematise their own discursive process. In these novels there is usually a clearly definable narrating voice that overtly addresses a reader (230). In historiographic metafiction the narrator actively speaks to the problems of writing history and detailing 'real' events. Atwood's novels, Alias Grace and

The Blind Assassin, are in the realm of what could be considered historical novels and also could be considered historiographic metafiction.

Thus, in the introduction of this thesis I establish the connection between history and literature, then note some of the contemporary issues surrounding history and address Atwood's involvement in writing historical fictions and historiographic metafiction. Clearly, the problems associated with traditional history cannot be addressed without acknowledging its deficiency in representation. While Atwood's Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin offer critical perspectives on the past, they also recuperate the history and ultimately the lives of women who have been left out of absolute and totalising traditional histories. Thus, I further discuss women's absence in history and look at the female body as a possible site of resistance and textual representations of the body as a way of retrieving women's history.

In the first section of this thesis, I examine how Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin provide a contemporary critique of historical perspectives and knowledge through the narrated life stories of Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffin. In telling Grace's and Iris's stories, Atwood underlines the multiplicity of history while deconstructing assumption of objectivity, neutrality and transparency of representation. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, Atwood problematises official versions of history and in doing so resists its replacement with one definitive account of events.

Atwood engages in both deconstructive and reconstructive practices of history. Thus, in the second and third section of this thesis I discuss how, first, Alias Grace, and, second, The Blind Assassin, are historical novels that actively engage in the telling of the past. I offer a feminist reading of Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, using body theory to illustrate how

Atwood underscores women's history by writing the woman's body into history. Specifically, in this thesis I argue that in writing women's history, Atwood uses the body as a way of recuperating the past lives of women. Textual representations of bodies while encoded by the time in which they lived are then signs to be read. In discussing this I emphasise how textual representation of female bodies can present a site for feminist identities and concerns.

Atwood, who recognises that gender makes women's lives profoundly different, both emphasises the importance of questioning traditional history from which women are not included and the need to write women into history from a female perspective. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin Atwood chronicles the lives of women during two distinct time periods, the mid-nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, highlighting a general history of women's lives during these times. This thesis illustrates how Atwood writes the female body into history using textual bodies as records of the past.

## CHAPTER I:

### *Introduction*

Margaret Atwood consistently challenges traditional modes of thought through her writing. Constantly pushing boundaries and experimenting with different genres and subject matter, Atwood explores the unexplored through her writing. As Atwood breaks new ground through her writing and particularly through her fiction, she gives expression to the wide spectrum of experiences that women encounter. In doing so, she writes the female body, giving flesh to her female protagonists. In Atwood's body of work, the female body is at work as various power structures mark the flesh of Atwood's protagonists. In the writing of the female body, Atwood brings awareness to the socio-cultural realities of the time in which her characters live and in doing so she often engages in the writing of the past. As Atwood writes the past, she also brings awareness to the way in which the past is constructed as she delves into the genre of the historical novel. Atwood has written several novels that are set in the past and that also examine the writing of history and the problems associated with reconstructing the past. Atwood's historical fiction questions traditional history and patriarchal voice by highlighting textuality and storytelling and challenging history's ability to access 'real' events, ideas and meanings. Examples of this are found in many of her novels, including The



Handmaid's Tale. In this thesis I will focus on two of Atwood's later novels, Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, which participate in the contemporary rethinking of history not only by problematising traditional history but also by incorporating the female body as a way of telling history.

Traditionally, history has been understood as the documented story of men throughout the ages, and their involvement with war, politics and economic change. It includes accounts of personal fortunes and misfortunes of "great" men and the events that surround them. Within the last several decades, there has been an upheaval among historians, which has prompted many questions about representing the past and the objectivity of history. Traditional history has been critiqued by new-historicists, deconstructionists, feminists, Marxists and others who argue that history has in the past denied a variety of voices from the production of history, has not properly accounted for the sociohistorical nor adequately reflected on the nature of history itself. Herb Wyile, Jennifer Andrews and Robert Viau note that, "Poststructuralist critiques of traditional rationalist models of interpreting historical evidence and representing the past have precipitated an epistemological and political upheaval among historians, throwing into question the very possibility of accurately representing the past" (7). Poststructuralists question the validity of conventional history in a highly fragmented world, suggesting the impossibility of reconstructing the past. So while feminist and Marxists, for example, struggle to produce a more demographically varied social history reflecting the untold stories of those that have been marginalised or excluded, the ability to accurately reconstruct the past, in a fair and objective way, has been placed into question. Hayden White argues in Tropics of Discourse that history does not just emerge, that it is neither

transparent nor neutral. He suggests that “how a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with meaning of a particular kind” (85). Thus, a historian writes the past depending on his/her interpretation of the events and depending on what type of story he/she wants to tell. Keith Jenkins states that “to write a history is to construct one kind of narrative rather than another, not to represent the past ‘plain’, so that White’s concerns centre on how historians create criteria for what would count as ‘realistic’ so as to give their narratives authority” (117). White acknowledges that historical accounts are interpretative; thus he emphasises that historians be more careful in their reconstruction. It is the translation from fact to fiction that is of interest to White; for example, the way in which events are organised that would make a particular historical account “hot” or “cold” (90). According to White, the merit of a historical account is wrapped in the historian’s ability to adequately organise the details of the past (90). Although White refers to the writing of history as a “fictive-making operation,” he also states that as such “it in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge” (85). Although historical narratives may blur the line between fact and fiction, that does not eliminate their value. Historical narratives are still worth writing, worth reading and worth thinking about, in an attempt to know the past. Nevertheless, authority is a real concern for historians as traditional historical narratives are being questioned not only by White but also by others.

Clearly, the problems associated with traditional history cannot be addressed without acknowledging its deficiency in representation. The working class, people of non-white descent and women are among the many groups who have been systematically

left out of history. S. J. Kleinberg argues that “this has distorted the way we view the past; indeed it warps history by making it seem as though only [white, middle class] men have participated in events worthy of preservation and by misrepresenting what actually happened” (ix). Renowned historians have recorded historical events and provided us with an authorised history devoid of sufficient representation. As such, retrieving the history of those who have been omitted is a concern for many historians. Joan Wallach Scott points out that “the story of development of human society has been told largely through male agency; and the identification of men with ‘humanity’ has resulted for the most part in the disappearance of women from the record of the past” (5). The “record of the past” includes historical texts, autobiographies and documentaries, which chronicled the history of “man” kind alone. While there has been an increasing interest in the lost history of women and works have emerged chronicling the lives of women, the question had been asked many times: where are the women in history?

During the 1960s and 1970s a growing number of female historians were simultaneously exploring women’s history in various countries around the world. They uncovered the strong and the exploited, pioneers, labourers and homemakers among the many voiceless women who had been overlooked by male historians. However, while being explored, women’s history continued to lack importance in the academic world. Discussing her involvement in the field of history during the late 1960s Gerda Lerner recounts that the status of women in the profession was marginal and the status of Women’s History was non-existent: “At the time when political and institutional history was the measure of significance and social history had only recently been elevated to legitimacy, the subject “woman” was doubly marginal” (Lerner 6). Social history was of

little importance to historians making the social history of women completely insignificant. Major events and the men who lead them proceeded to dominate historians' interests. However, as social history made some ground and with the rise of Women's Studies came the increased recognition of Women's History. Recuperating the lives of women of the past centuries became the goal of many academics, particularly historians, and the vast material that has emerged is overwhelming while remaining incomplete. Lerner insists that "historians must painstakingly restore the actual records of women's contribution at any given period of time" (353). Official records either omit women or write about them in a biased way. Even written accounts of notable women do not describe the experiences and the history of average women at that given time. The very fact that they were written about signals their exceptionality. As mentioned, records of the past have been written predominantly by men and the women men wrote about were exceptions to the norm. As a result, contemporary historians work hard to recuperate the lives of all women throughout the centuries.

When considering omissions and misrepresentations in history, alternative records need to be considered. Kleinberg notes that "writing the history of women broadens the entire field of historical research. It does this by generating new questions and expanding the sources we use to answer them" (xi). Thus, while filling in the gaps of women's history emphasis is placed on increasing inquiry and growing sources. New social histories are connecting women's experiences with historical developments, and Ann Gordon, Mary Jo Buhle and Nancy Schrom Dye argue that "at the same time, historians of women are beginning to delve more deeply into women's responses to the social changes which affected their lives" (83). Historians are exploring women's awareness of

social changes and the ways in which they deal with them. And, while questions surrounding the lives of women continue to increase so too do the sources used to answer new questions. Accordingly, then, when thinking about expanding sources, literature surfaces as a viable source for historical inquiry. Atwood, both a feminist and an author, is concerned not only with women's absence and misrepresentation in history, but also with questioning history and expanding historical knowledge in general. While literature written in the past has been used for historical exploration, literature set in the past can be seen as a non-traditional way of investigating history. Thus, in the practice of Women's History with importance on inquiry and expanding sources, Atwood's historical novels can be used to retrieve women's histories.

When thinking about history and literature, it is important to challenge the presumption that history is fact and storytelling is fiction and that the two exist in binary opposition. Instead, the lines of fact and fiction are blurred as history is woven and story emerges from past lived events. As mentioned, Hayden White asserts history's strong link to fiction. White points out that "in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterpart in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (82). Although White notes there is an unwillingness to view history in such a way, he sees an obvious connection between the two. His assessment of historical narratives as being "as much invented as found" undeniably binds history with fiction. While White draws attention to the fictive nature of history, history's involvement with fiction is also noteworthy.

The historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Sir Walter Scott paving the way for others to follow. Gyorgy Lukacs argues that his novels are specifically historical in that he derived “the individuality of characters from historical peculiarity of their age” (15). Historical novels traditionally include characters that are usually socially and psychologically realistic. The characters behave and think similarly to those who lived during the time in which the novel is set, as perceived by the author. Historical novels grasp historical particularities of characters but also of events. As the historical novel has evolved, many novels have explored the morals and social development of specific time periods. And, as the historical novel has developed it has also made its mark on Canadian literature. Herb Wyile suggests that by the late twentieth century, historical novels established strong roots in Canada’s literary world as authors began to handle historical material in a new and complex manner (4). Contemporary historical fiction began to reflect the turmoil that historiography had experienced over the years. Wyile notes that, “Writers of fiction, like their counterparts in the discipline of history, have increasingly occupied themselves with finding and telling the stories of those left out of traditional history”(5). In addition to writing untold stories of the past, contemporary novelists are also participating in the investigation of the process of historical representation and the problems associated with representing the past in an objective and neutral way.

Today, Canadian literature is very much involved not only with history but also with the contemporary rethinking of history: “In Canada, historical fiction explores the fundamental aspects of both Canadian history, specifically, and the writing of history, more generally” (Wyile, Andrews and Viau 8). Thus, Canadian historical fiction

functions as a means of chronicling history, but also as a tool by which the documenting of history may be challenged. Martin Kuester defines historical novels as “works of fiction that deal with questions of historical consciousness in a historically conditioned situation on the levels of author, narrator, characters, or action” (27). By this definition, Canadian authors such as Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, Daphne Marlatt and many others, along with Atwood, inhabit this popular genre. Furthermore, Kuester suggests that historical novels that draw upon historical facts but deal explicitly with the problem of writing about these facts and integrate them in an artistic whole are instances of historical metafiction (56). For example, Timothy Findley’s The Wars draws upon historical facts but goes one step further and overtly deals with the problems of integrating facts and fiction into a complete piece of writing. The present day narrator’s memory of the events of World War I exists in the form of textual and photographic documentation only. Three of the novel’s five parts are told in different styles and points of view. Kuester proposes that the “different approaches that the narrator makes to his material [exist] in order to arrive at a coherent vision of historical events” (58). As the different styles and points of view of writing are pieced together, Findley highlights the difficulty of reconstructing the past. As an example of historical metafiction, The Wars illustrates the historical events of the First World War while at the same time it contextualises the issues of reconstructing the past into an artistic whole.

Similarly, Atwood engages with historical metafiction or rather what Linda Hutcheon terms as historiographic metafiction, “a recent but popular variant” of historical metafiction (230). Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction is more than just self-consciously fictive constructs that thematise their own discursive process. In these

novels there is usually a clearly definable narrating voice that overtly addresses a reader (230). In historiographic metafiction the narrator actively speaks to the problems of writing history and detailing 'real' events. "Historiographic metafiction questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing- of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we make sense of it" (Hutcheon 22). In alignment with postmodern literature, historiographic metafiction is highly self reflexive and resists fixed structures with single meanings, thus providing an opportunity for exploration. A number of Atwood's novels, including The Handmaid's Tale (1985), and, more specifically, Alias Grace (1996) and The Blind Assassin (2000), are historical novels and historiographic metafiction.

The Handmaid's Tale is not a historical novel in the most exacting sense because it is set in the future and it is grounded in an imaginary future historical period. However, it does address the issues of accurately representing past events and the narrator overtly speaks of these issues. Although The Handmaid's Tale is not a historical novel, Kuester points out that "the tale is a historical report, and the discussion of its veracity as well as the handmaid's remarks on her own version- or- rather versions- of the past focus on some of the main problems of writing historical texts, whether they be novelistic or factual" (125). Offred's story of her existence as a handmaid follows a plot line that is consciously constructed. At the Beginning of Chapter 23 Offred admits that her text is a historical reconstruction. She explains, "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it" (168). Her telling of her own story undergoes changes and



revisions in the act of telling. She comments on the importance of “perspective” and problematises the issue of telling “actual” events as story. As she tells her story into a tape recorder she knows that from being spoken, to being listened to and finally written down that “it’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was...” (168) and the “story” will undergo several changes. However, it is not until the “Historical Notes on the Handmaid’s Tale” that we discover how true are her feelings. We learn that the tale is being told through historians Professors Wade and Pieixoto from Cambridge, England, who reconstructed a coherent story, “arrangements [that] are based on some guesswork” from two-hundred year old tape recorders’ “approximately thirty tape cassettes” (313), in fact, which represent an odd form of ‘oral history’. Thus, although in a subversive way, by means of a futuristic tale, Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale stresses the problems of writing history, from the arrangement of facts to the validity of primary sources, and highlights the complex relationship between fact and fiction and accurate representation. Additionally, The Handmaid’s Tale underscores another point that is important when looking at history. Through the male grand narrative, the voice of women is often lost. According to Coomi S. Vevaina, Offred’s “narrative status diminishes considerably in Pieixoto’s reconstruction of her story. ...her narrative warning against moral dictatorship and atrocity is summarily dismissed in an ‘editorial aside’ by the male professional historian who is interested in reconstructing his grand impersonal narrative of a vanished nation’s history” (87). Through her characters Professors Wade and Pieixoto and their telling of Offred’s story, Atwood calls attention to the fact that most histories, even those of women, are written by men and discount the experiences of women.

The Handmaid's Tale, like Atwood's more recent works and like other historiographic metafiction, is intensely self-reflective but also grounded in historical, social and political realities (Roa 77). Although many of her novels would not be referred to as historical novels in the strictest sense, they belong to a group of novels that, as Kuester suggests "may be read as revisions of history told from a marginalised feminine perspective" (126). Obviously, Atwood is very much concerned with varying perspectives and versions of the past. Evidence of this is again seen in one of Margaret Atwood's more recent texts, The Penelopiad (2005). It is not a historical novel; instead it is a revisiting of the ancient myth of Penelope, Odysseus and the Trojan Wars, which many argue has a historical basis in Ancient Greece. However, as Lukacs argues, "one can treat ...myth as a 'precursor' of the historical novel" (15). Mythological stories, like historical novels, are considered to be a blend of both fact and fiction. In the Penelopiad, Atwood retells the ancient myth once told in Homer's The Odyssey. Atwood, who usually writes from a female perspective, does the same in the Penelopiad. In doing so, she undercuts the male-dominated tradition of mythical stories by giving women the power of voice. Her version is told by Penelope and her twelve maids and quickly undermines the original versions, giving new life to Penelope and offering twists to this ancient story. Penelope addresses the reader, regularly reflecting on the authenticity of the authorised story and dispelling it with a version of her own. She explains "there's some truth to the [original] story" (48), but, "the more I think about this version of events, the more I like it. It makes sense" (28). While she offers an alternative version, she does not offer it as "truth" but rather as a story that makes sense and gives voice to the voiceless. Atwood suggests that there is more than one way to write the past.

Eleonora Roa quotes Atwood's claim that "truth is composite" and notes that the claim suggests "a high degree of sensitivity towards the dangers of absolute and intransigent ways of thinking, in a manner that indicates an inclination on her part to counter dogmatic and totalising systems of thought" (xi). Atwood resists traditional modes of thought that marginalise alternative ways of thinking. Atwood's novels offer critical perspectives on the past and in doing so recuperate the history and ultimately the lives of women who have been left out of absolute and totalising traditional histories.

As mentioned, in the past history was centred on the history of the public sphere as the general framework for historical writing, while details of women's lives were left out. Atwood, who often incorporates feminist issues into her writing, recognises that gender makes women's lives profoundly different. As a result, Atwood emphasises the importance of questioning traditional history in which women are not included and the need to write women into history from a female perspective. On those who have recorded the past, Atwood admits that she "was often deeply frustrated... not by what past recorders had written down, but by what they'd left out" (Curious Pursuits 225). In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin Atwood chronicles the lives of women during two distinct time periods and in doing so highlights a general history of women's lives during these times, recuperating the history of those who have been left out. Through fictional narrative and actual documents, Alias Grace outlines the way in which women's lives were limited by the values and gender and class expectations of the nineteenth century. Similarly, in The Blind Assassin, Atwood "provides a kind of fictional documentation of the ways in which gender and class expectations shaped and confined women's lives in the first half of the twentieth century" (Bouson 252). As Iris and Laura Chase are

dominated by the men in their lives as well as by societal expectations, the novel highlights the oppression each experiences. Both novels recover the underrepresented history while at the same time underscoring the possibility of multiple histories and challenging the idea of one official, objective, neutral and transparent history.

In Alias Grace, as Grace tells her story we never know whether Grace is lying when she claims to not remember important events. She suggests that she makes up some of her story to please others, but there is no way of telling to what extent she does so. Susan Rowland explains that “the book provides us with several possibilities; Grace could be lying ...or telling an ‘embroidered’ truth, or be suffering from amnesia or madness, so finding herself radically unknowable” (250). Grace and her story are notably unknowable, as history is also unknowable. As Atwood offers several possibilities to Grace and her story, she shows how history too has multiple possibilities. Additionally, Atwood juxtaposes Grace’s narrative with actual archived documents that appear in the epigraphs to the chapters. Hilde Staels points out, in doing so, she shows how “facts are discursive, always interpreted, given meaning by institutions or individuals. In the epitaphs and in the narrative text, Atwood questions received versions of history” (430). Similarly, Atwood questions received versions of history in The Blind Assassin. Iris frames her narrative around a series of news stories, society news pieces, engagements and birth announcements that piece together a very public, official history of her and her family’s lives. Although these documents are Atwood’s creations, like the documents in Alias Grace they tell a specific authorised story. When Iris narrates her private story she contests the official version, undercutting the official version with her own personal account of the events. However, as an eighty-two year old woman Iris’s

narration is reliant on her memory and she herself comments on the difficulty of remembering the past. So while Iris offers an alternative version of her past, it too is inevitably flawed, bringing into question the possibility of accurately representing the past. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, Atwood problematises official versions of history and in doing so resists its replacement with one definitive account of events, for Atwood is not concerned with substituting a different version of history, but with questioning traditional history and offering alternative ways of constructing history.

In writing novels, Atwood is writing women's history, using the textual body as a way of recuperating the past lives of women. Helene Cixous explains that "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement" (2). She must write her self through her own movement, for her own sake, in order to transform social and cultural structures. For, Cixous makes clear that "until now, ...writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously"(5). Thus it is vital that woman write; write her self and her story, making her story part of the cultural landscape and part of history. Importantly, Atwood writes about women, actively putting women, through textual representation of the body, into the text but also into history. Through Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, in accordance with the recent turn to the body as a site of difference and resistance, the female body as it has been written into history is explored.

In Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality, Avril Horner explains that the 'body' for Judith Butler is the product of both language and materiality (5). According to Horner, Butler argues that "language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified" (68). The body and textual representations of the body are thus strongly intertwined. Butler also argues in Bodies That Matter that "'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through forcible reiteration of norms"(1-2). Regulatory norms of "sex" and "gender" work in a performative manner imposing cultural expectations upon the surface of the body. Butler explains that "regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (2). Performativity is a conditional practice that is a result of the regulations set by society's norms. While Butler questions the biological nature of sexual difference, she highlights the way in which lived bodies as historical and cultural constructs are systems of meaning, signification, and representation.

Like Butler, Elizabeth Grosz claims that the material body is inseparable from its various cultural and historical representations. Bodies are not natural objects in any simple way; they are neither precultural nor ahistorical and instead are not only inscribed, marked and engraved by social pressures but represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural forces. Grosz affirms that "the body is not outside

history, for it is produced through and in history” (146). Each body is shaped by the history and distinctiveness of its own existence. As such, Grosz asserts that “bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated” (35). Textual representations of bodies while encoded are also then signs to be read. As signs to be read, textual inscribed bodies provide types of information. For example the clothing one wears signifies class, gender and even the time in which one lives. Tattoos and branding often signify affiliations to people, places or things. Furthermore, “if bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices” (Grosz 36). Clothing, ornamentation, makeup and bodily movements can signal women’s acceptance and absorption of patriarchal norms; however they can also signal resistance and opposition. With this in mind, I believe Atwood in her two novels uses bodies as signs to be read and also as sites of struggle and resistance by writing the female body into history. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin the body, as both language and materiality, encoded and read, tells a version of women’s history.

In terms of thinking about the body, traditionally women have been strongly linked to the body while men have been connected or associated with the mind. For the purpose of this thesis the body’s common association with women is not an association that needs to be dispelled. However, it is necessary to break down the negative assumptions surrounding the female body as it is coded with terms that have been traditionally devalued, such as frail, passive, reproductive and mainly unproductive.

Additionally, the mind/body opposition, which is reflective of male/female opposition, needs to be discarded; the body should not be considered separate from the mind. Instead the body might be understood as at work with the mind. Grosz explains that “it is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority, and it is through the body that he or she can receive, code and translate inputs of the ‘external world’” (9). The mind and body are working in conjunction with one another and together the body is “a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feeling affects)” (9). Lived experiences and the responses to such experiences project themselves through the body, showing through from the inside out. Lived experiences showing through the body are characterised through textual representation of the body in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin.

Importantly, the body is marked both voluntarily and involuntarily. Through gender and race, hairstyles, clothing, and movements that have been undertaken in day to day life, or through inscriptions that occur both violently and in more subtle forms through coercive measures such as cultural values and norms, markings on the body all produce the effects of meaning. Grosz confirms that “every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence. It is possible to construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual and social body” (142). As such, the body is a viable source from which information might be retrieved. Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffen, as three-dimensional characters of a realistic novel, present a rendering of the times in which each lived. Through textual representation of the body Atwood offers the female body to be read. Clothing, jewellery, living spaces and work, to name a few, all mark the body, binding individuals to systems of significance in which they become signs to be



read (Grosz 35). In this thesis I will examine the way in which gender performance and the productive, commodified and resisting body is encoded and can be read as a social history of women in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin.

Looking at the body as a construction from the outside in and inside out, I will discuss how Grace and Iris are constrained by their bodies, while at the same time they choose to use or perform their bodies in a purposeful way. So strongly encoded with meaning, the body holds a message to be read in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin. In Alias Grace, during her interviews with Dr. Jordon, Grace narrates, “while he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me- drawing on my skin” (77). Grace acknowledges that her body is encoded and being written on, being read. In The Blind Assassin, when Iris’s husband physically abuses her, the bruises on her body become “a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. ... I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over” (469). Female bodies in both novels are signs that can be read and tell a particular story or, rather, stories. For example, Iris’s bruises that surface and then fade signal the history of abuse that she experiences as well as Richard’s perpetual domination. As for Grace, her feelings of being drawn on, marked by what Dr. Jordan is recording, signifies the various ways Grace has been depicted and the impression these depictions have left on her. Additionally, Grace’s performance as a domestic worker and Iris’s performance as a socialite, as well as the clothing that they wear, for example, also participate in this important telling. In the two historical novels textual representations of bodies are encoded and tell very specific versions of history, ones that acknowledge women’s experiences in the patriarchal eras represented in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin.

Overall, Margaret Atwood does two things that I view as being extremely important in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin. First, Atwood questions traditional history and received versions of “truth” in both the novels. By providing a historical framework for the novels, “Atwood’s novels not only destabilise the authority of official documents but also recuperate previously de-authorised texts and discourses” (Michael 426). Second, in recuperating de-authorised discourses, Atwood opens up a space to investigate the marginalised history of women. Through the textual representations of the female body, Atwood exposes the patriarchal nature of the past and recovers vital accounts of history. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin textual representations of the body can be read and used to recuperate the vital social history of women. Therefore, in the first section of this thesis, I will examine how Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin provide a contemporary critique of historical perspectives and knowledge through the narrated life stories of Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffen. In telling Grace’s and Iris’s stories, Atwood underlines the multiplicity of history while deconstructing assumptions of objectivity, neutrality and transparency of representation. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin Atwood engages in both deconstructive and reconstructive practices of history. Thus, in the second and third section of this thesis I will discuss how, first, Alias Grace, and, second, The Blind Assassin, are historical novels that actively engage in the telling of the past. I will offer a feminist reading of Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, using as a theoretical base both feminist theory and body theory. In this thesis I will illustrate how Atwood underscores women’s history by writing the woman’s body into history. In discussing this I will emphasise how textual representation of female bodies can present a site for feminist identities and concerns.

## CHAPTER II:

### *Problematizing History in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin*

Historiographic metafiction is intensely self-reflective, demonstrating a strong self-awareness of both history and fiction as human constructs, and providing an opportunity to rethink and rework forms and contents of the past. Authors who write historiographic metafiction are postmodern writers, engaging in inquiry and subversion and frequently challenging traditional notions of thought. Postmodernism undercuts prevailing values, order and conventions that dominate mainstream culture and asks “what happened here” in regards to the outsiders and the marginalized, resisting the need to give a definitive answer. Margaret Atwood’s feminist and postmodern consciousness assist her in engaging with historiographic metafiction. Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin are examples of historiographic metafiction, that challenge assumptions about the neutrality of both history and knowledge, critique “official” history, and offer multiple versions of the past. While many historians today also consciously address these issues in their writing, Atwood does so in an indirect, yet equally effective way. Neither novel specifically speaks to the writing of history; however, each novel addresses the problems associated with reconstructing the past. In Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, Atwood highlights the way in which “facts” are managed and challenges history’s ability

to know the past “plain”. This is seen through the use of intertext in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin. It is further shown through the narratives of Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffen, as each struggles to tell her own story against the larger backdrop of the authorised story.

Alias Grace is set in nineteenth-century colonial Upper Canada. Atwood fictionalises the “true story” of Grace Marks, an Irish immigrant, domestic worker and accused murderer. At the age of sixteen, Grace, together with the stableman James McDermott, was convicted for murdering her employer, the gentleman Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper/mistress Nancy Montgomery. McDermott was hanged and Grace was sentenced to life imprisonment, thanks to her lawyer’s defence. Grace was initially sent to a lunatic asylum in Toronto after experiencing fits of “madness” and, though she was convicted of the crime, she never admitted guilt. More importantly her guilt has never been proven. Atwood notes that in researching the story of Grace Marks, “the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’”(558). As a result of such ambiguity, Atwood is able not only to deconstruct the “official” story of Grace Marks but also to reconstruct her own version of the story. In Alias Grace Atwood tells history from a female perspective, challenging and resisting authorised discourses that constitute official history. She also destabilises the notion that history happens and is simply written. For example, the use of epigraphs, which are taken from a variety of sources including excerpts from official records of the past as well as poetry and other creative writing, shows the underlying idea in the novel that history and fiction are both discursive constructs. Additionally, the patchwork quilt that Grace works on during her narrative exemplifies the way in which history is piecework,

patched together to create unity, and, of course, unlike official history quilting also signals a form of female discourse. Finally, Grace's narrative mirrors the ways in which history is fragmented, unreliable and to a large extent unknowable. Grace's story, like history, is shaped into a coherent cohesive entity that is neither neutral nor naturally composed.

The actual Grace Marks was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s and her case is amply documented in archives. In Alias Grace, Atwood quotes many official documents, mostly in the epigraphs to the chapters. The epigraphs, including newspaper clippings and extracts from Grace's and James McDermott's confession during the trial, establish the historical basis for the novel and the context of Grace's story. They are, of course, records written mostly by men. The epigraphs present pieces of the official story about Grace, supporting the official view of her as an insane temptress and guilty murderess. Also included as epigraphs are accounts by the nineteenth-century British immigrant and author Susanna Moodie, who captures the popular opinion of Grace at that time. Her depiction, while colourful, is biased due to her upper middle-class ideology. And, although her account is from a female perspective, it is framed in patriarchal assumptions that dominated the mid-nineteenth century. Moodie sees Grace as a feeble minded young girl and hopes that "all her previous guilt may be attributed to the incipient workings of ... frightful malady"(51). Moodie describes Grace in Life in the Clearing (1853): "Among the raving maniacs I recognised the singular face of Grace Marks- no longer sad and despairing, but lightened up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment"(51). The description of Grace is constructed by Moodie, a "literary lady", who according to the novel "is inclined to –

embroider”(223), likely in an attempt to amuse her audience. Moodie further writes that, “on perceiving that strangers were observing her, she fled shrieking away like a phantom into one of the side rooms”(51). With an audience in sight, Grace performs the role of the madwoman. Thus, if the reader believes Moodie’s account of Grace is accurate, then it may be Grace rather than Moodie who is interested in amusing her audience putting Moodie’s description, again, in question. In the novel, Grace tells her early nineteenth century psychoanalyst that her confession contains solely what her lawyer wanted her to say at the time of her trial, showing that Grace is quite willing to do as she is expected. Grace admits of her confession that “it was only what the lawyer told me to say, and things made up from newspapers” (114). As for the newspaper reports, Grace explains that “they said I was eighteen or nineteen or not more than twenty, when I was only just turned sixteen, and they couldn’t even get the names right” (115). The news reports, like Grace’s confession, and eyewitness accounts of Grace are but versions of reality. The reader can never be sure whether Grace’s actions are legitimate or the accounts of her accurate. Ultimately, these versions of reality are assembled based on perception, whether they are news articles or authorised reports. Consequently, the news articles or authorised reports meant to signal historical accuracy actually do the reverse. In one instance, two separate epigraphs on the same page include a description of a face, first by Susanna Moodie, that exhibits “a cunning, cruel expression” and, then by Emily Bronte that “was as soft and mild/ As sculptured marble saint; or slumbering unweaned child”(19). The opposing images underscore the way that something can be seen in more than one way. In another case, two other epigraphs, this time describing Grace, also contradict one another. The Chronicle and Gazette, Kinston, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1843, describes

Grace as not “exhibiting any traces of broken rest and a guilty conscious” (417), while Grace herself admits, according to her lawyer Kenneth MacKenzie, as told by Susanna Moodie, in Life in the Clearing, that “she should never know a moment’s peace”, adding that Nancy “Montgomery, her terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me for a moment” (417). Overall, the sheer number of epigraphs taken from a variety of sources and placed side by side on the page challenge the legitimacy of each other and while containing traces of truth, each represents the way in which the validity or truth of history may be questioned.

In addition to newspaper reports, fragments of confessions, and Moodie’s account of Grace, portraits of Grace Marks and James McDermott published by the Toronto Star and Transcript, as well as a popular ballad, are also included in the novel. Captured in print, in a portrait or song, Grace is constructed by these texts. The epigraphs, which are historical, are interpretations of what Grace is thought to have been like. The epigraphs are also utilised in another way which point to the construction of history. The epigraphs’ historical documentation are at times followed by fragments of poetry. The coupling of the historical documents with the discourse of poetic imagery exemplifies the way in which the line between poetic speech and figurative language, and historical documentation and realistic text are blurred. Hayden White suggests in Figural Realism that “historical discourse should [not] be considered... ‘workings of our minds’ in its efforts to know reality or to describe it but, rather, as a special kind of language use which, like metaphoric speech, symbolic language, and allegorical representation, always means more than it literally says, says something that it seems to mean, and reveals something about the world only at the cost of concealing something” (7). The

way that history is interpreted and constructed is similar to that of literary discourse. Figurative language is in play whereby as much is revealed as is concealed. Overall, as seen through the use of epigraphs, the authorised story of Grace Marks, like history in general, is an interpretative construction of the past.

As a construction, Grace's story is put together piece by piece. Atwood fills in the gaps of Grace's official story through her own interpretation of historical evidence in reconstructing the fictive life of Grace Marks. In doing so, Atwood, shows how like Grace's story, history is piecemeal, interpreted and constructed into a coherent story. Atwood underscores this through the metaphor of the quilt and quilting. Magali Cornier Michael suggests that "In choosing patchwork quilting as the metaphor and model for an alternative form with which to think about and reconstruct the past, the novel participates both in current reconceptualisations of history and in a revaluation of a form traditionally associated with women and disassociated from the serious and valued realms of official history and art" (426). In using quilting as a framework to destabilise traditional notions of history Atwood provides a space to validate female discourse and art. Quilting is a domestic activity generally carried out by women; however it is also a handicraft. Patchwork quilts were often excluded from mainstream art because they are associated with women's work in the same way that women's history was excluded from traditional history. In Alias Grace quilting, as a unifying motif, quickly becomes associated with ways of conceptualising history from a female perspective.

Jennifer Murray agrees: "Quilting, quilt-in-process, quilt-as-pattern-to-be-interpreted, women and their relationship to the quilt-as-object- the metaphor is extensive and is crafted into Atwood's version of the story of Grace Marks to a multitude of



meaning-producing effects” (64). Quilting is a metaphor for the rewriting of the history of Grace Marks. As Grace tells her story she not only recounts stories involving quilts, such as when she talks of quilts being cleaned and mended and of their multiple patterns, but she herself quilts while talking to Dr. Jordan. The quilts’ multiple meanings and quilting as a process signal the text’s self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs, as foundations for rethinking and reworking contents of the past to provide various meanings. The piecing together of the quilt symbolises the piecing together of information from historical documents, drawing attention to its modes of construction and representation. For example, Grace speaks about the winter quilts and notes of their construction that they “were of deeper colours than the summer ones, with reds and oranges and blues and purples; and some of them had silks and velvets and brocade pieces in them” (185). Specific attention to the construction of the quilts, then reference to the same quilts when hung being viewed as “flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war” and then when placed on tops of beds as warnings of “the dangerous things that may take place in a bed” (186), signals the recognition of the potential multiplicity of meaning and interpretation of the quilts. The quilts importantly communicate secret messages revealing different things at different times to different people. Additionally, assembled from pieces of old cloth, the quilt is both a fragmented and unified object; the patchwork represents the process of making meaning from traces of the past. As in the art of quilting, Atwood has selected, eliminated, ordered, assembled and filled in absences from various historical fragments, created something new from something already in existence and rather than attempting to conceal the process of piecing it together, the stitching is intentionally visible. The fragmented narration of Atwood’s novel evokes the necessity

to piece the story together. While the reconstructed story of Grace Marks is a reassembly, like quilting, it is not constructed haphazardly but constitutes a meaningful pattern. Unlike the conventional process of history making, Grace's story is purposely not chronologically organised. As Magali Cornier Micheal puts it Grace's story, like the "quilt patchwork offers an alternative means of reconceptualising history- as nonlinear, nonteleological, nonpatrilineal, ... incorporating both uniformity and disjunction" (428). The story's pattern resists linear structure and a single authoritative meaning, while still offering a comprehensive way of recounting the past. Grace's story, like the process of quilting, exemplifies an alternative way of constructing history.

Interpretations of the meanings of quilt patterns further highlight history- making as an interpretative endeavour. The multiplicity of meanings behind the quilts, patterns of which appear at the beginning of each section and also function as the title of the section, are displayed in the interpretation of the Attic Windows. Grace recounts her observation of the quilt pattern: "if you look at it one way it was closed boxes, and when you looked at it another way the boxes were open, ... and that is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces or else the light" (188). The act of interpretation is clearly implied in this passage. The way in which the quilts are interpreted is similar to that of a historian interpreting historical evidence: what is seen depends on how one looks at it. As is the case in the interpretation of the quilt patterns, like history, there is no absolute, definitive perspective; instead there are only different ways of understanding. Coral Ann Howells argues in Margaret Atwood: "Interpretation is evidently a matter of perception, and meaning is not fixed but changes according to the circumstance of its reception" (150). The concept of interpretative

choices is further reflected in Grace's initial understanding of the Attic Window. Grace explains to Dr. Jordan that she originally misunderstood the name of the pattern and believed it to be Attic Widows. The phonetic difference changed her understanding of the quilt's meaning. When she tells this to Dr. Jordan she explains that when discovering her error, she and Mary Whitney, another young servant in her household, both laughed hysterically over the confusion between Windows and Widows, which sets in motion another misunderstanding. Grace narrates, "We could not stop laughing... We buried our faces against the quilts, and by the time [Mrs. Honey] had opened the door Mary was composed again, but I was face down with my shoulders heaving, and Mrs. Honey said, What is the matter, girls, and Mary stood up and said, Please Mrs. Honey, it's just that Grace is crying about her dead mother" (188). The duality between laughing and crying and the image of "heaving" being associated with either emotion shows how interpretation overshadows Grace's anecdote. It also suggests the possibility of misleading interpretations as the two girls cover up their case of the giggles. The response to the story and interpretation becomes more important than the story itself. Overall, through the example of the quilt patterns, specifically the Attic Windows, the question of interpretative choice comes to light. The way that history is constructed is also a question of interpretative choice. The way in which events are interpreted and viewed dictates the way history is written. Thus, through the motif of the quilt, Atwood engages the reader to see that history is a construction, interpreted and pieced together into a coherent entity, with the possibility of producing multiple meanings.

Like quilting, the story of the historical Grace Marks is also fragmented, pieced together and interpreted. The narrative story of Grace Marks highlights that history is

interpreted and constructed. Atwood's rewriting of the historical Grace Marks also shows that history is ambiguous, unreliable and in many ways unknowable. Atwood challenges traditional history by rewriting the history of Grace through the voice of a woman; Grace narrates her own life story. Grace's narrative includes her public story that she tells Dr. Simon Jordan as well as her private reflections. Grace's narrative is one of several narratives that make up the narrative structure of Alias Grace. A large number of traceable historical documents, many of which contradict one another, detail the authorised story of Grace. The historical documents, which are official yet highly subjective, along with the third person narration of Dr. Simon Jordan's thoughts, account for the bulk of the narration that is not narrated by Grace. The layering of the narration exemplifies the ways in which history and literature are discursive processes, both artistically arranged. The reflective process of Grace's narrative highlights the inner workings of story telling and the necessity of telling stories. Grace explains, "[w]hen you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion. ... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else" (355). The events of her own story are not seen as clear or logically organised in her own mind until she tells it. In the novel, Grace comments on what she will tell Dr. Jordan of her own life. She ponders, "What should I tell him when he comes back? He will want to know about the arrest, and the trial and what was said. Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour" (424). Like quilting, Grace's non-linear story is assembled as Grace chooses what to say and what not to say. Grace's narrative is

purposely pleasing as she adds “a touch of colour” for Dr. Jordan’s entertainment. Grace is conscious of the story she is telling Dr. Jordan and admits to holding back. She further narrates, “I should not speak to him so freely, and decide I will not...” (187). Grace picks and chooses which part of the story she wishes to share with Dr. Jordan and when she realises she has been too open she decides to pull back and become less informative. Even Dr. Jordan is aware of the tactics that plague Grace’s narration. He suspiciously explains of Grace’s storytelling, “She manages to tell me as little as possible, or as little as possible of what I want to learn” (152). Grace’s story is told piece by piece and Grace is conscious of the pieces she reveals. As Grace’s story is obviously constructed or rather pieced together, it is Dr. Jordan’s job, along with the reader, to determine what is the truth and what she is not telling. As a historian interprets evidence to construct his or her story, Dr. Jordan and the reader must do the same. However, as is the case when constructing history, Grace’s story can be stitched into more than one pattern.

Importantly, the ambiguous nature of Grace’s narration is a response to the major question that is at the centre of Atwood’s novel. Did Grace murder Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery? Grace’s discussions with Dr. Jordan are based on finding the answer to the question of Grace’s guilt. Dr. Jordan is a psychiatrist who is attempting to retrieve Grace’s so-called lost memories of the murder, as Grace claims not to remember the events of the night in question. Dr. Jordan’s services are requested by a large group of people who are petitioning for Grace’s release. As such, in an attempt to plead her own case it would seem inevitable that Grace should select evidence to tell Dr. Jordan that would lead to her release. However, she resists telling Dr. Jordan the whole story, perhaps in an attempt to rebel against male authority. On the other hand, Grace may not

be deliberately withholding information but might really be uncertain about what happened. It is uncertain whether Grace is a murderer, a paramour, insane, an amnesiac, all or none of these things. Through the ambiguity of Grace and her narrative, Atwood shows how, like Grace and her story, history is not always clear and does not necessarily answer "what happened here", and if it does then there may be more than one answer, or the answer may be vague. Even Grace acknowledges her own ambiguous nature. She reflects, "I think of all the things that have been written about me .... And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23). The written accounts that Atwood includes in the novel, which act as an authorised version of Grace's story, are no more certain in their accounts than Grace's own story. Grace cautions Dr. Jordan in believing such official accounts. She explains, "Just because a thing is written down, Sir, does not mean it is God's truth..." (305). The written accounts are not only ambiguous in nature, but also unreliable. In providing the official document of the historical Grace Marks, and using them as a backdrop to the fictional story of Grace, Atwood shows how both are invented while offering some truth. While they might provide a perspective on the real story of Grace Marks, as records of the past they are unreliable.

Still Grace's cautionary advice could also be applied to her own narrative and Atwood as author. Grace's own reliability comes into question, as it is never determined whether she suffers from madness, memory loss or is instead a calculated murderess. Simon Jordan asks himself, "How much of her story can he allow himself to believe?" (385). He explains of Grace: "Why should she be expected to produce nothing but the pure, entire, and unblemished truth? Anyone in her position would select and rearrange, to give a positive impression" (386). So perhaps with her release in mind or as a returned

gift to Dr. Jordan for being a much needed listener, Grace's narrative is more of an embellishment than an accurate account. Either way, due to Grace's possible motives, Grace is an unreliable narrator. At the very least, Grace acknowledges that she has "remembered wrong" and "invented", saying, "I knew I'd remembered it wrong, ... But I didn't see why I shouldn't make it come out in a better way... the real sunrise was nothing like the one I'd invented for myself, but was instead only a soiled yellowish white, like a dead fish floating in the harbour" (280). With Grace's questionable state of mind and the problems associated with remembering the past, Grace's narrative lacks overall reliability. Furthermore, Grace's narrative is infiltrated with a sense of instability, switching between present and past, and between fluent detailed reflection and traumatic memory lapses. As to the question of Grace's guilt or innocence, her story gives us no more answers than we had when we started. Near the end of the novel, Dr. Jordan leaves wondering whether Grace is "a true amnesiac. Or simply contrary. Or simply guilty. She could of course be insane" (386). Nonetheless, he knows that he "should caution himself against absolutism" (386). In terms of Grace Marks and history in general there are no absolutes. In the same way that history does not provide one definitive answer, Alias Grace also resists such resolution. Howells believes: "Atwood's failure to solve Grace's case through fiction is surely symptomatic of her views on history, where the truth cannot be known but is always a question of perspective and a matter of interpretation" (Where Are the Voices Coming From 37). And while Alias Grace eludes definitive interpretation, Atwood concludes "although there undoubtedly was a truth... truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us" (Curious Pursuits 228). Although there is truth in the past, truth is to a large extent unknowable. As for the story of Grace

Marks, the fictional Grace, like the historical Grace, “remains an enigma” (Alias Grace 556).

The opening epigraph is a powerful quotation by William Morris in the voice of a woman that speaks to the life story of Grace Marks but also to history in general and those who have written it: “Whatever may have happened through these years, God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie” (1). The speaker in this bold quotation from “The Defence of Guenevere” is Guenevere, who like Grace is accused of misdeeds. Although it seems to imply Grace’s innocence, its inclusion really asks the reader to consider the multiple possibilities of Grace’s life suggesting the instability of “truth”. Additionally, it is Atwood’s way of encouraging active readership of literature and history, suggesting again multiple possibilities for both. Importantly, Atwood is not suggesting that history is a lie or that the accounts of Grace’s life are a lie; instead through her fictive construction of Grace Marks she shows how neither are entirely true. Alias Grace addresses the contemporary issues that surround the writing of history. In examining the writing of history as a process that relies on interpretation, Atwood asks us to be aware of the contradictions that plague Grace’s story and, importantly, authorised historical accounts. Ultimately, by not providing the reader with the answer to Grace’s guilt or innocence Atwood shows how truth is unknowable.

Similarly, in The Blind Assassin many questions arise to which definitive answers are not given. In this novel answers are sought to things that have been deliberately hidden as opposed to forgotten. The Blind Assassin is also a novel in which the reader must figure out “what happened” here. And while we are given some answers to some of the questions, Atwood again leaves much to be interpreted. In The Blind Assassin



Atwood reconstructs a version of Canadian history in the twentieth century, told by an eighty-two year old woman, Iris Chase Griffen. Howells explains: "With its shifting boundaries between subjective and objective representations of reality and its duplicitous mixture of fact and fiction, Iris's autobiographical narrative is a memorial to the end of an era as it offers retrospective views of some of the key national and international events of the past century and of Canada's changing social and political ideologies" (Margaret Atwood 155). The novel presents varied perspectives on the past and with a mixture of fiction and fact it highlights some of the main issues that plagued the first half of the twentieth century. The Blind Assassin is an example of historiographic metafiction, as Iris reflects upon the difficulty of reconstructing the past as she writes her memoir. Through Atwood's use of the novel within a novel framework as well as through the newspaper documents that appear throughout The Blind Assassin, she underscores the ways in which history is interpreted and constructed. Iris's narrative, which is embedded in a series of stories within stories, also shows how history is ambiguous, unreliable and in many ways unknowable.

In The Blind Assassin, Atwood chronicles society through the family history of two sisters. The Blind Assassin, like Alias Grace, offers a social history through the perspective of a female voice. The main narrative of the novel contains fragments of a pulp science fiction story embedded in a published story framed in the retrospective narrative of Iris Chase Griffen. The story within story structure of the novel coincides with Atwood's postmodern tendencies; the story is highly fragmented and resists traditional forms of the novel. With several narrative strands, it is up to the reader to attempt to put the story together. Karen F. Stein explains: "[O]ne story hides another

until it is opened to reveal another one surprisingly similar to it" (135). As readers, we work our way through the embedded stories with anticipation to know what is not known; however, as the story unfolds there are no definitive explanations and the reader is left with as many questions as answers. The first sentence reads: "Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off the bridge" (3). This opening sentence generates a variety of questions: Was it a suicide or an accident? Why did it happen? What events led up to this incident? Did the narrator/sister play a role in this apparent suicide? The answers to these questions are hidden in the history of Iris and Laura Griffen. Instead of the novel reading like a traditional biography, the life story of both girls is wrapped up in the 1940s novel "The Blind Assassin" and the embedded science fiction story. The answers are in codes and they are also not absolute. As Iris represents herself as a "historian", one who is recounting the past, she shows through her life writing how the lines between fact and fiction are blurred as the 1940s novel and its pulp science fiction story parallel her own story. With the blurring of fact and fiction, Atwood shows how easily fact and fiction overlap in recounting the past. While Atwood highlights the way in which fact and fiction are blurred, she also shows how there is more than one way to interpret the past. The integration of story within story within Iris's memoir exemplifies the way in which history and fiction are constructs.

Divided into fifteen parts, The Blind Assassin, like Alias Grace, incorporates a number of different kinds of writing, including newspaper clippings, sections of a novel, descriptions of photographs and images, excerpts from etiquette writings, as well as the reminiscences of Iris, an elderly woman who is compiling the story of her life for her granddaughter. Readers might presume that the pieces of Iris's story will easily come

together as she unravels her story and provides answers as to the cause of her sister Laura Chase's fateful drive off the bridge. However, each piece of evidence is interpretative and the clues to the history of the lives of both women are wrapped in significant developments of the story from which the reader must infer meaning. One of the clues that emerges as a key to understanding the lives of Iris and Laura is the photograph of three individuals sitting under an apple tree. It is first mentioned in part one as a treasured object by the woman in Laura Chase's novel, providing one last trace of her lost lover. In her detailed description, it is a picture of herself "too young" with "this man". She writes, "The photo is of the two of them together, her and this man, on a picnic. *Picnic* is written on the back, on pencil- not his name or hers, just *picnic*. She knows the names, she doesn't need to write them down" (7). In the photograph is also a disembodied hand at the edge of the photo, showing that this interpreted photo of two is actually a photo of three. The photograph is never fully explained until its last appearance in part fifteen. The disembodied hand belongs to Iris, who inadvertently had a "hand" in Laura's death. The image of the "hand" reappears every time Iris offers the reader a glimpse of the photo. In part five the reader learns that the three people in the picture are Laura and Iris at the 1934 Chase and Sons Labour Day Celebration picnic hosted by their father and his button company, as well as Alex Thomas, a former student of divinity turned activist. The photo of the two girls with Alex under the apple tree is published in the local newspaper the day after the picnic and as mentioned appears throughout the story in various forms. However, the picture itself not only assists with plot development, but also symbolises the interpretative nature of the past. Without names stencilled to the back of the photo, an outside observer would not be able to

identify the individuals in the picture; furthermore, Laura's interpretation of the two person photo is a description of what she sees. The photo, as we later discover, has been modified from the original; the image of a hand represents the purposeful omission of the third person in the photo. When Laura later works for the newspaper, she steals the negative and make two prints of it. Laura presents Iris with one of the pictures with herself cut out of it and keeps one of the pictures for herself, with Iris cut out of it. Only the hand of the other sister is visible in each photo. With each reappearance of the picture another way in which to view it is underlined. As a record of the past, the photograph exemplifies the variety of ways the past might be viewed and even manipulated. Thus the picture, and the past, can be interpreted in a number of ways. Importantly, historians often use photographs to reconstruct the past. Photographs are considered to be primary sources and as in the case of the photo in Blind Assassin more than one interpretation can be made. Despite many historians' reliance on photographs as reflections of the past, as primary sources, they do not represent the past "plain".

Like the photographs, the newspaper clippings symbolise authorised accounts of the past. There are several newspaper articles scattered throughout The Blind Assassin. Unlike the articles in Alias Grace, the articles in The Blind Assassin are not actual published articles. However, much like the articles in Alias Grace, these articles act as a catalyst to the plot as each reports a version of an event. More importantly, they act as an official authorised account of deaths, births, and social and political activities of the time. The novel commences with a newspaper report that details the accidental death of Laura Chase in 1945. Three more deaths are then recorded within the first thirty pages through newspaper obituaries, the death of Iris's husband Richard Griffen in 1947, of

their daughter Aimee in 1975 and then Iris's sister in law Winifred Prior in 1998. The obituaries cement the official events of the past as do the articles that highlight the changing political and social ideologies of the time, with headlines such as "Army Quells Strike Violence", "Chase Supports Relief Efforts" and "Toronto High Noon Gossip". Iris's narration is grounded in reality and the newspaper articles act as official records of the past. And although they constitute the backdrop to Iris's story, they also juxtapose her version of events, which in turn signals the array of ways in which past can be interpreted.

Additionally, although the articles summarise details of what happened as well as indicating whom and when, they frequently leave the reader with more questions than answers. The first article in the novel, pulled from The Toronto Star and dated May 26, 1945, is headlined "Questions Raised in City Death". In the article questions are raised about the safety of the streetcar tracks on the road and suggest that the tracks may have been a contributing factor in the accident of Laura Chase. The question raised is really for those reading the novel, which is the question of whether Laura's accidental death was really an accident at all. The article is an interpretation of the cause of Laura's death; an interpretation, according to Iris, that is inaccurate. Atwood signals the reader to question the reliability of the article, as an official account of the past, as well as question the way news articles represent the past. In the second article that reports Iris's husband's death in The Globe and Mail, on June 4, 1947, it states "[Richard Griffen] had apparently suffered a cerebral haemorrhage" (17), after being found dead in his sailboat. The "haemorrhage," however, may be apparent but its cause was not. As the reader unravels the events leading up to Richard's death, Iris suggests that his death, like

Laura's, was likely a suicide. Even though the article declares that "Police report that no foul play is suspected" (17), Richard was a respected man of the community and a cover up would not be out of the question. Thus the official report on his death may be official but may not be accurate. The authorised account of the event is no more reliable than the article that outlines Laura's death.

Reliability of the news reports is again put into question, as the "Toronto High Noon Gossip" column comments on the upcoming marriage of Iris Chase to Richard Griffen. As the article details what will be worn as well as who will attend, the wedding "promises to be among the not-to-be-missed, event on the bridal calendar" (159). However, the future wedding of Iris and the eligible bachelor Richard with all its bells and whistles is not what it seems. The fetching and youthful "bride-to-be" is marrying Richard out of obligation and the marriage that follows is loveless and filled with betrayal. The celebratory tone of the pending wedding is appearance only; in reality it is a day of sadness for Iris, as are the years that follow. Through the news reports, Atwood shows how perception is not reality or at least it is only one version of reality. Official accounts of events in the form of news reporting are suspect and used as primary sources, official accounts of the past are also suspect. News reports are used by historians to reconstruct the past; in The Blind Assassin, Atwood draws a parallel between the interpretative nature of both fictive news pieces and actual news reports. While the articles are important in establishing the historical context of the novel, they are also present to question the historical reliability of news articles and history in general.

While the reports both act as a backdrop to the historical aspects of the novel and question the reliability of history, the articles also juxtapose the story that Iris narrates.

According to J. Brooks Bouson: "Iris's memoir dialogically contests the public and official version of events and tells the unofficial and secret version of family history" (253). The news articles detail the prominent lives of the upper-class Chases and Griffens, while Iris's memoir exposes the personal and cultural traumas of the families. The news articles offer "official" accounts of what has happened. By contrast, Iris's story is that of an eighty-two year old woman reliant on her memory to reconstruct the past. Her story, like that of Grace Marks, is one that is both somewhat unreliable and needs to be pieced together for coherence. Although the narratives frequently parallel one another, acting as a guide and providing the reader with a sense of familiarity during the unfolding of the narrative, the newspaper pieces, which establish a timeline, play against what Iris is telling us (Bouson 252). Iris's split identity, in public a proper society wife and in private a mistress, leaves the reader wondering whether she is a deceiver, an illusionist or simply a woman who wants to make right the wrongs of her past. Is Iris's memoir a colourful version of the past that she can leave as a gift to her granddaughter or a confessional? Is Iris writing to entertain or expose the truths of her past? The motivation behind Iris's memoir inevitably affects her story. As an elderly woman recounting her past, Iris comments on her failing body and mind. Has Iris accurately remembered the past? With so many unanswered questions, through Iris's story Atwood reflects upon the nature of both fiction and history, whereby as much is revealed as is concealed and readers must interpret and reinterpret to find meaning.

Like the quilt in Alias Grace, Iris's steamer trunk symbolises the piecing together of Iris's narrative, storing materials, such as Iris's memoirs, the manuscript version of the author's copy of the 1940s novel, and newspaper clippings recording important events of

Iris's public life. However, as the reader pieces together Iris's story, it becomes apparent that Iris's memoir is not just about herself, but about her and her sister Laura. Iris's story starts with the focus on Laura, who kills herself by driving off of a bridge. As she struggles to understand her sister's life more clearly, Iris and the reader unravel clues. Iris's and Laura's stories collide and the lines between their story are blurred during the unfolding of the "Blind Assassin" portion of the novel. The modernist masterpiece, which recounts the scandalous affair between a rich socialite and her socialist-activist lover, is supposedly written by Laura. As Atwood weaves together various strands of the narrative, it is discovered that not only is the romance not written by Laura but the 1940s novel is a fictional work written to memorialise a "real" love relationship. Iris as deceiver or illusionist is established when Iris admits to writing the novel and exposes herself and her affair with Alex Thomas. Karen F. Stein states that "in the process of writing her memoir of Laura, Iris first conceals and then reveals her own story" (138). Iris sets out to write one story and instead writes another as she covers up and uncovers, constructs and reconstructs the past. Through her writing, Iris reveals the illegitimacy of her daughter and of course the "hand" she played in Laura's suicide. However, in the process of uncovering and discovering the layers and hidden meaning of the story, Iris as narrator becomes suspect. Iris confesses of the novel: "Laura didn't write a word of it...I wrote it myself" (642). She later explains that, "you could say that [Laura] was my collaborator" and finally reveals, "the real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers" (644). How much Laura influenced Iris's writing is unclear to the reader and obviously unclear to Iris. She as much as admits her unreliability with



the story's uncertain blend of truth and lies. Iris claims to be writing her memoirs to offer the truth about her family's history, but truth itself is a very slippery concept for Iris.

As possible deceiver or illusionist, the motivation behind Iris's narrative also comes into question along with her ability to narrate the "truth". As an ageing woman with skeletons in her closet, Iris feels compelled to confess the "truth" of hidden family secrets and expose the role she played in the suffering. Unable to forget the past, Iris writes her memoir to relieve herself of the burden of lies. However, Iris's ability to capture the truth of her story is problematic. J. Brooks Bouson suggests, "Suffering from a profound sense of guilt, she admits to her desire to excuse herself in her writing, she acknowledges that 'it is wrong not because of what I've set down but because of what I've omitted.'" (254). Iris acknowledges the constructed nature of her memoir. Like a historian, Iris admits that there is more than one version of her story, the one she tells and the one that is left unwritten. She explains, "what isn't there has a presence, like the absence of light" (498). What is left in the dark is inevitable still present. What she chooses to write and what she leaves out both exist. The history of Iris and her family is interpreted, first by Iris as writer, and then second by the reader, and as a result the "truth" of Iris's story is difficult to pin down. Admittedly, Iris acknowledges the complexity of writing the truth. She declares to her prospective reader: "You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two does not necessarily get you the truth" (498). There are no simple answers and no simple stories. Iris admits that "the only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. ... 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" (357). Although Iris envisions herself doing this, Iris confesses that it is "impossible, of course" (357) and as such the truth of her narration remains uncertain. Additionally, her need to excuse herself shows her acute awareness of her reader. Like Grace, Iris is aware of her reader and becomes increasingly concerned with the audience of her narration. Consequently, Iris may be narrating with her audience in mind, and like Grace, she too may be looking for her narration to set her "free".

After all, the memoir is a grandmother's gift to her granddaughter who wants to explain away her past. According to Karen Stein, "Iris wields her story like a weapon, captivating her readers and gaining justification and revenge against her husband and sister-in-law" (147). Richard continually lies to and betrays Laura and Iris throughout the story. On his honeymoon trip with Iris, he tears up a telegram informing Iris about the death of her father. To cover up the fact that Laura, whom Richard had been sexually abusing, had become pregnant with his child, Winifred and Richard concoct a story that Laura has had a mental breakdown. Finally, Winifred, through years of bullying, positions herself as guardian of Iris's granddaughter after the death of Iris's own daughter. Both Richard and Winifred are villains of "Dickensian proportion" (Stein 145) and Iris does not let the reader forget this. By painting Richard and Winifred as antagonists of the story, Iris not only seeks revenge but also avoids liability. Although Iris admits to playing a part in Laura's downfall, Iris passively questions her role. She writes in her memoir: "Should have I been able to read Laura's mind? Should I have known what was going on? Should have I seen what was coming next? Was I my sister's keeper?" (537). While Iris's memoir, unlike the romance she earlier published in Laura's name, brings light to the soiled stories in Iris's life, Iris makes sure her reader

knows where to point the blame. Iris narrates, “people spill their own beans and also those of other people, they spill every bean they have and even some they don’t have” (562). Iris exposes her own secrets and in doing so exposes the nasty secret lives of those around her. The reliability of Iris as narrator is jeopardised as she vilifies those around her, overshadowing her own confession. As a woman who wants to “come clean”, Iris’s confession is full of hesitations as she dances around the shameful and painful secrets that drive her narrative. As a confessional memoir that is set to detail the lives of Iris and Laura, Iris’s narration does not seem to represent the past “plain”.

Finally, the reliability of Iris’s narrative is further questioned as she narrates her story as an elderly fragile woman. Whether Iris is a deceiver or illusionist, her motivation to tell her story uncertain, Iris’s narration lacks stability as she jumps between present and past, fluent storyteller and ageing woman: “As a very old person, Iris lives in a permanent condition of double vision, where the boundaries between the present and the past are frequently blurred” (Howells 157). The frustration Iris experiences with her failing body, along with the loneliness of an ageing woman, have Iris continually stepping back into the comforts of local history. Taking walks around town, Iris is reminded of her family’s past greatness as well as their great loss. Iris admits that she writes, “What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth” (642). Recollecting on her family’s history she holds on tightly to the past as she establishes her own private and distinctive version of the past. Iris is bitter, cynical, and very much aware that her days are numbered. She narrates, “having long ago whispered I want to die, I now realise that this wish will indeed be fulfilled, and sooner rather than later. No matter that I’ve changed my mind about it” (53). With the end in sight she struggles with

both writing and remembering the past. Iris explains, "I'm not as swift as I was. My fingers are stiff and clumsy, the pen wavers and rambles, it takes me a long time to form the word" (54). She further explains, "the words roll smoothly and soundlessly across the page; it's getting them to flow down the arm, it's squeezing them out through the fingers, that is so difficult" (83). Iris has difficulty putting her history into words. Additionally, as an elderly woman Iris acknowledges the uncertain state of her memory. Iris reflects "but is what I remember the same thing as what actually happened" (274). Iris is unsure of the accuracy of her memory. Consequently, Iris's reliability as historian is debatable due to Iris's failing body and shaky memory. An elderly Iris acknowledges her own unreliability as she recounts the stories once told to her by Reenie, the family housekeeper. She narrates, "...she knew the family histories, or at least something about them. What she would tell me varied in relation to my age, and also in relation to how distracted she was at the time. Nevertheless, in this way I collected enough fragments of the past to make a reconstruction of it, which must have borne as much relation to the real thing as a mosaic portrait would to the original" (84). Iris makes it no secret that to recount the past is simply to give a pieced together version of the years long lost, and the process itself is neither physically nor mentally easy. Overall, Iris's narration represents the uncertainty of history in general and the tireless struggle of reconstructing the past. While the reader is unsure of the truthfulness, motivation and the accuracy of Iris's stories, she is candid in admitting the difficulties of writing and remembering the past.

Clearly, in The Blind Assassin, Atwood once again underscores the contemporary issues surrounding the writing of history as Iris Chase Griffen writes her memoir and uncovers her family history. The blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, the

uncertainty of the “official” news reports and the questionability of Iris’s narration highlight the way in which history is constructed, interpreted and to a large extent unknowable. According to Marta Dvorak, Atwood’s “text is resolutely postmodern in that it values diversity and challenges the notion of a single absolute Truth. Yet its indeterminacy and alternative versions of truth do not seem to signal epistemological failure” (66). Iris’s narrative is a postmodern narrative in which issues of truth and knowability are to remain indeterminate. This is done, not at a cost to the narrative, but to its advantage, as is the case in Alias Grace. In The Blind Assassin, like Alias Grace, Atwood compels the reader to think about the possibility of multiple versions of history and question ideas of neutrality. After all, it is the power of voice, not the power of truth that is at the forefront of both novels. Iris narrates that, “It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road.” (632). However, it is actually the telling of the story that drives it forward and its twists and turns depend on the interpretation of the one who takes on the telling. For neither story nor the past can ever be represented “plain” and Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin are both testimony to that. As Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffen attempt to narrate their story both challenge official versions only to replace them with questionable versions of their own. Through the narratives of Grace and Iris, the difficulty of reconstructing the past becomes as important to the narrative as the stories themselves.

### CHAPTER III:

#### *Unveiling the Past in Alias Grace*

Women's bodies are shaped and marked by the world around them. Textual representation of the body can be seen as a site for feminist identities and concerns. At the same time the female body can reveal certain historical and social elements depicted in fiction as textual bodies interact and are inscribed by the textual world around them. In Alias Grace, there is a turn to the female body as a site of difference and resistance as Atwood explores the productive body, the performative body and the resisting body. In doing so, Atwood also highlights a connection between the body and history. In Alias Grace, the inscribed body of the fictional Grace Marks is a set of codes that depict the historical environment surrounding the real Grace Marks during the nineteenth century. In reconstructing the history of Grace Marks, Atwood recuperates the lost history of women during the mid 1800s. She highlights the way in which gender, ethnicity and class formed the lives of women during the nineteenth century in Ontario, as Grace relives her past through her sessions with Dr. Simon Jordan. Sought out to recover Grace's lost memories of the night of the murders, Dr. Jordan tries to unravel Grace's past. In doing so, Grace details her difficult passage to Canada, her hardships as a domestic worker and other struggles which plagued her young life. However, as Grace

tells her story as much is concealed as is revealed, thus Dr. Jordan and the reader are left piecing Grace's life together. In Alias Grace the female body is used to decode the lost history of Grace Marks, while simultaneously recovering a piece of the lost history of women during this time.

Alias Grace, establishes a dialogue with the past whereby the female body speaks without necessarily talking. The female body is infiltrated with meaning and as such offers messages for interpretation. The productive body is inscribed by the labouring of the body. People are defined by what they do and bodies are marked by the actions and movements of daily work. Women are predominantly defined as reproductive due to their reproductive abilities and men are defined as productive due to their involvement with the public world of work. In North America, up until the late 1900s, it was the woman's role to take care of the home and the man's role to earn a wage. While most women did not enter the world of work until the late twentieth century this was not the case for lower class women. Although still mostly employed in the private sphere, working class women were employed as domestic labourers decades before the women's movement fought to allow women into the workforce. As a domestic servant, Grace's body is a productive body. Unlike the male productive body that produced goods and services outside the home, the female productive body laboured inside the home doing what was considered "women's work". Domestic labour, including housework and childcare, was seen as specifically "women's work", thus domestic labour is explicitly connected to the female body. Grace's productive body offers insight into domestic service as an important part of women's history. Grace's situation as a servant marks her economic status while constructing the social environment of the underprivileged

during the nineteenth century. Grace's productive body is an imprisoned body due to the social constraints that exist as a result of her gender and ethnicity. Grace's productive body signifies women's imprisonment in domestic roles as well as lower class immigrants' entrapment in poverty.

Grace's productive body is an oppressed body that is marked by her immigrant status and her gender. Lorna R. McLean and Marilyn Barber note that "though Grace Marks, and women like her, were white and members of what a hundred years later would be viewed as a 'preferred' immigrant group, in the mid-nineteenth century, their working-class and ethnoreligious identity placed them near the bottom of the social ranks" (154). As a lower class immigrant, Grace is conscious of her position as Other, unable to escape her Irishness and her social situation. McLean and Barber explain that during the nineteenth century there was undoubtedly a "bonding of ethnicity with gender and class in the lives of Irish domestic servants such as Grace Marks" (134). Grace understands the negative connotations of being Irish and protests: "I don't know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such. But of course, our family were Protestants, and that is different" (117). Although Grace stresses that she is in fact Irish Protestant, her disassociation from the Catholics does not make her any less Irish. Grace is noticeably Irish in several ways. In Dr. Jordan's interviews, he notes a "trace of the Northern Irish accent" (152) in her voice. Despite evidence of Grace's Northern Irish heritage, Grace's social class triggers prejudices that were commonly associated with the Irish. Her red hair, the stereotypical hair colour of the Irish, is frequently commented upon and holds negative connotations for those who have it. As described in the newspapers, Grace notes she has the "Red hair of an ogre" (35).



Grace's red hair signals her Otherness as red haired people were often marginalised. When she is interviewed for a position the interviewing housekeeper fears she will be "bad-tempered, as redheaded people frequently were" (147). When she is later in jail, the prison guards assume she will be sexually willing because "a little fire...comes with the redness of the hair" (283). As a result, Grace experiences sexual harassment at the hands of the prison guards, being denied the privilege of respect allotted to the white upper class. Grace is marked as Irish due to the colour of her hair along with her accent. Protestant or not, Grace is tied with the Irish. In fact Stephanie Lovelady points out that, "not only is Grace marked as Celtic by the colour of her hair, in one instance a specifically Catholic identity is attached to her when her lawyer, sympathising with Simon's difficulty in getting to the bottom of Grace's story, nicknames her "Our Lady of the Silence"" (46). And the Irish Catholics, thought to be "superstitious and rebellious Papist who were ruining the country" (147), were definitely looked down upon. Thus, Grace marked as Irish, makes the best of her situation and accepts her lot as a poor Irish immigrant seeking employment as a servant at the age of twelve. After all, "domestic service was the main paid employment for Irish female emigrants... in nineteenth century Ontario" (McLean and Barber 136). Consequently, Grace's Irish immigrant body is inevitably connected to her productive body. As a cultural Other, Grace's gender, ethnicity, and class mark her body and the disadvantages she experiences are characteristic of the nineteenth century.

From a young age, with no money and no space of her own, Grace feels the oppression of being an outsider. As a child in a large poor family she tries to hug herself tight to "to make herself smaller, because there was never enough room for me, at home

or anywhere” (35). Grace’s conflict with her body and space signify Grace’s oppression. Privacy and space is a privilege to which she is not entitled. As a domestic worker, Grace works in the private sphere. However, as it is not her home she lacks private space, leaving her with only public space. At Mr. Kinnear’s, when she spends the afternoon with Jamie Walsh in the meadow picking daisies she becomes angered when she discovers she was being watched by her employer and two other servants. Grace remarks, “I felt as though my afternoon had not been mine at all, and not a kind and private thing, but had been spied upon by every one of them ... exactly as if they’d all been lined up in a row at the door of my chamber, and taking turns at looking through the keyhole” (312). This infringement on Grace’s privacy leaves Grace feeling as though her spectators were “peeping Toms” peering through keyholes looking at women. Consequently, Grace feels physically violated by the male gaze. As a servant Grace has no privacy of her own. The body, which is usually considered private, is instead relegated to the public. Grace’s subordinate role as a poor immigrant servant is further defined by her gender. According to Stephanie Lovelady, as a result of seeing her older sister go into domestic service and her older brother go off to sea, “[Grace] knows and accepts that poor boys leave home to take jobs that may be arduous and ill-paying but at least lead them into the wider world, while poor girls go from their own homes to the houses of others and perform much the same domestic work they have already been carrying out from an early age” (49-50). As a productive body, Grace’s life is shaped by the Victorian concept of public and private spheres belonging to men and to women. Grace’s only option is a public life within the private sphere. Later when Grace is in prison, and works for the Governor, she similarly has no space or privacy of her own.

The Governor's parlour, where she performs domestic work, is literally an extension of prison for her, paralleling the domestic jobs before it. As she works, she is put on display by the Governor's wife and her friends. Grace is trapped as a productive body because of her Irish nationality and female gender, both of which mark her body and influence her existence. Grace's imprisonment represents the lack of freedom and autonomy both lower class immigrants and women faced during the 1800s.

Even though domestic worker is the only viable job available to Grace and is severely limiting, she does it flawlessly, knowing how to "act the part" of a servant. Housekeepers had the responsibility of creating ideals in domesticity and Grace lives up to that responsibility. She comments on the daily chores and nuances of domestic life, which mark her productive body. Grace is an experienced seamstress, and when she speaks of sewing she says, "I watched my needle go in and out, although I believe I could sew in my sleep" (75). Sewing for Grace has become second nature, a programmed act of her productive body. The needle acts as an appendage and sewing a bodily function that has been practiced from a young age. One of Grace's most important duties is as a launderer. The process of laundering marks Grace's productive body. Grace narrates that her hands were "washed as white as snow with soap from the laundry and my fingers all wrinkled from the hot water like someone newly drowned, but red and rough all the same" (74). The process is eating away at Grace's skin indicating the hardship of the domestic chore. Laundering in conjunction with the body is often spoken about in the novel. As Susan Rowland notes, "The novel frequently textualises the imaginal body through the use of imagery concerned with clothing and laundry. At crucial points in the story, laundry animates fantasies and dreams as spectral signs both of absent body of

angels, being without sexed bodies” (252). The feminisation of laundering brings about images of sexless/virgin angels, which was symbolic of the ideal Victorian woman. In fulfilling her duties, Grace notices while hanging laundry that “the nightgowns flapping in the breeze on a sunny day were like large white birds, or angels rejoicing, although without heads” (184). In this case, Grace envisions the angels as headless. According to Cynthia G. Kuhn, “Atwood’s images of dismemberment and amputation are often cited by feminist critics as characterizing the splitting of self in patriarchal world, and Grace’s decapitated ... imagery highlights the situation of Victorian women” (102). The dismemberment/decapitation is the bodily toll that a life of servitude allotted women during this time, a life without freedom and a life without rights. The splitting of self is a reflection of Grace’s split personality which Grace experiences as Mary Whitney and is a consequence of Grace’s harsh reality. Lorna R. McLean and Marilyn Barber suggest that “Grace Marks exemplified the hazards encountered by some Irish immigrant women seeking comfort and independence in the new world” (133). Grace’s Irishness, gender and social status mark her existence, making her productive body, coded with daily duties, commonplace to those similarly marked.

In addition to offering her body for duty as a domestic, the productive female body also must offer her body sexually as well. Ann D. Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle note that “In Victorian culture, class stratification was culturally broadened to divide women into The Good and The Bad. Because the... ideal of femininity was so widely held, even minor deviations from the image, such as dress, carriage, speech, and manners, placed lower class women outside the pale of respectability. ... Working women had only one advantage: they alone retained a right to sexual fulfilment” (291). While, the dichotomy

of Good vs. Bad was a discursive construct used to police the boundaries of respectability, many ambivalences and ambiguities existed at the time. Additionally this “right to sexual freedom” was a double-edged sword. Without birth control and general sexual freedom lower class women became recognised as prime objects of sexual exploitation. Grace says of this exploitation that, “there are some of the masters who think you owe them service twenty-four hours a day, and should do the main work flat on your back” (232). Two households shape Grace’s life as a servant, the Parkinson’s and Kinnear’s. In both of these homes the women closest to Grace are sexually exploited by their employer. Thus, Mary Whitney’s and Nancy Montgomery’s productive bodies are also sexually exploited bodies. Grace learns at an early age the dangers of the sexed body. Grace’s mother, trapped into an abusive marriage by her first illegitimate pregnancy, is “eaten away” by the entrapment of family. Grace notes on remembering one of her mother’s pregnancies; “When I was quite young, six or seven, I put my hand on my mother’s belly...[it was] another mouth to feed... I had a picture of an enormous mouth, on a head like the flying angel heads on the gravestones, but with teeth and all, eating away at my mother from the inside, and I began to cry because I thought it would kill her” (121). Grace’s mother’s pregnant body symbolises the oppressive consequences of reproduction, particularly for those who are impoverished, and she does eventually die, eaten away by a tumour in her uterus during their voyage from Ireland. Grace’s mother’s weakness becomes Grace’s strength and Grace refuses to become vulnerable to sexual advances. Thus, it is through her two friends that Grace is marked by sexual exploitation by male employers. The pregnancies, followed by the deaths of Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery, which are a result of the sexual exploitation both experience, are

extremely traumatic for Grace. At the Parkinsons Grace witnesses Mary's death after suffering from a botched abortion. Mary, who becomes both friend and mother to Grace, initiates lessons on female sexuality, explaining menstruation and warning her about the requests men will make of her. Mary explains that, "you must never do anything for them until they have performed what they promised; and if there's a ring, there must be a parson to go with it" (191). Unfortunately, Mary does not take her own advice and is left impregnated by her employer's son. Unmarried and with child, Mary would have been out on the streets; no longer eligible to work as a servant, prostitution would have been the only option available to her. Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard suggest that many domestics moved into prostitution due to the fact that "some domestics suffered sexual exploitation at the hands of their employer and/or his sons. ...The domestic servant who lost her virginity, or worse, became pregnant, could no longer look forward to the possibility of marriage. If she bore an illegitimate child, she would lose her job and be ostracised by society at large. A woman in these circumstances would have had few qualms about selling her sexuality in order to earn a living" (41). In a desperate attempt to save her future, Mary seeks out an abortion that unfortunately goes fatally wrong. Mary's death is so disturbing to Grace that as she is dealing with Mary's dead body, Grace hears Mary's voice. Grace hopes that Mary's soul will leave and not continue "whispering things into [her] ear" (208); however the voice of Mary continues to affect Grace. Later, when Nancy's affair with their employer, Mr. Kinnear, leads to pregnancy, Grace worries Nancy might suffer the same fate. Despite Grace's mixed feelings about Nancy, when she finds out that Nancy is pregnant, the news is upsetting to Grace. She thinks "Oh no, Oh no...It cannot be" (328), for Nancy's future looks bleak.

Nancy's pregnancy is so distressing that the news affects Grace physically. Grace explains that it felt as if "I'd been kicked in the stomach. ... I felt my heart going hard like a hammer" (328). The exploitation of Mary and Nancy is quite traumatic for Grace. The exploitation of Mary and Nancy both happen in respectable Toronto homes; however Grace makes it no secret as to what happens below the stairs for servant girls. Both Mary's and Nancy's productive bodies symbolise the tragic fate many women experienced during this time. The female productive body is expected to be sexually available, but by no mean is it acceptable for the productive body to be reproductive outside of marriage.

Although lower class women were seen as deviants from Victorian ideals of femininity, standards were set for the "Ideal Woman" regardless of class. In Victorian England and also in Upper Canada standards of femininity were set to regulate behaviour and Good women were expected to conform to the standards. For the productive body, it was necessary to be domestic and perform duties, including cooking and cleaning, laundry and sewing and of course serving. Although sexual expectations also go along with the productive body, for the women in the serving class the body should show no evidence of this behaviour. Sexual relations happened in secrecy and although men from upper-class society might seduce these women there was no chance of marriage. After Grace finds out about Nancy, Grace wonders about her future, believing in fairness she should suffer the same fate as Mary: "I wished Nancy no harm, and did not want her cast out, a waif on the common highway and a prey to wandering scoundrels; but all the same it would not be fair and just that she should end up a respectable married lady with a ring on her finger, and rich into the bargain. It would not be right at all. Mary Whitney had

done the same as her, and had gone to her death. Why should one be rewarded and the other punished, for the same sin?" (329). When Mary becomes pregnant and so does Nancy, both suffer death, exemplifying the consequences of showing sexuality.

Although a botched abortion and murder are very different both amount to the same end. Atwood establishes the mid- nineteenth century as a time when illegitimate births were, more often than not, a death sentence. Both die for the same sin and for stepping out of expected roles of behaviour.

Overall, in order to meet the expectations of the proper woman, the productive woman was to be seen and not heard and follow strict rules of subservience. When Grace first meets with Dr. Jordan she confesses to the reader that she was playing a part expected of her. She narrates, "I have a good stupid look I have practised" (42). She later admits to Dr. Jordan that it is a similar look she gave to Mr. Kinnear, explaining, "I had now been a servant for three years, and could act the part well enough" (264). She learned all about acting the part from her friend Mary who taught her how to be a servant, not only how to do laundry but also "how to be respectful and demure" (264). When the governor's wife shows Grace the scrapbook she has made of Grace, Grace performs as is expected of her. Grace declares, "I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and now a changed person, and would she wish me to remove the tea things now" (27-28). Grace knows how important her actions are and how important it is to keep up her performance. Through years of practice Grace manipulates her body and specifically her face, modelling the behaviour expected of someone in her place. Grace's performing body exemplifies the expectations of women during the nineteenth-century and foregrounds



issues of classism and sexism that existed during this time. Survival depended on how one behaved and Grace is aware of the Victorian standards that define decency.

Along with knowing how to act, dress is also instrumental in performance. Grace understands the importance of dress in achieving a “decent” presentation. In the novel the clothed body not only deepens the understanding of character and theme but also can be seen as a set of codes to be read as an extension of the body itself. According to Cynthia G. Kuhn, “Dress illuminates body and gender within a cultural context and a focus on cultural representations of female body is a significant aspect of Atwood’s fiction. Her protagonists consistently style themselves in response to divisive cultural codes” (1), and *Grace Marks* is not an exception. Examining dress exposes the cultural fabric of the time, the clothed body signalling cultural expectations. Kuhn further argues: “Dress belongs to the social landscape: part communication, part performance and part code. ...[W]hen examining dress closely it is apparent that dress can both document and challenge cultural codes” (3). For example, through appropriate dress Grace is able to cover up her meagre beginnings, blend in with the respectable working class, and even pass as a “lady”. Consequently, clothing adds to the historical detailing of the novel but also draws attention to issues of class, gender and power. Overall, Grace adheres to the rules of dress and realises the necessity of being presentable. Grace reflects that her family, when back in Ireland, stopped attending church because Grace’s mother “said she was not going to have her poor tattered children paraded in front of everyone like scarecrows, with no shoes” (120). Later when Grace gets work as a servant, Grace is called “a ragamuffin” who is “to be made presentable”. Mary, who helps Grace with her appearance, has Grace discard her clothes that “were too small” and “fit only for the

scrap bag” (174). Grace’s tattered dress represents her hard journey to Canada and the severe poverty she and her family experience as new immigrants. However, once Mary makes Grace over, Grace positively remembers, “even Mrs. Honey said what a difference in my appearance, and how trim and respectable I looked, now that I was decently dressed” (180). A “decent” presentation is indicative of decent behaviour and without it one’s entire character was questioned. Grace reinforces this idea by telling Dr. Jordan, “it is very hard, Sir, to be decent, without proper clothes” (120). Additionally, when Grace refers to how she is described by the newspaper during her trial she reiterates “how much appearance counts... and they did say in the newspapers that I was decently dressed” (427). The importance of decent dress is so imperative to Grace that it is suggested by the newspapers that Grace “robbed a dead woman to appear so” (23). Despite the horrible implications, Grace’s actions underscore the length she will go to achieve a proper appearance and, more importantly, the cultural significance of appropriate dress. Proper dress indicated a certain amount of power during the Victorian era as it was a signal of prosperity. Grace herself observes that “[p]eople dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong” (35). A certain authority comes with a certain kind of dress. When she first sees Nancy at the Kinnears she believes her to be the lady of the house as she is a “gracefully dressed lady with a triple flounce...wearing gloves...[and] wearing a bonnet the same pale colour as her dress” (244). She later notices that Nancy is wearing “a very handsome pair of earrings” that she “could tell were real gold” (246). Grace notes that in both cases Nancy’s attire is above her station, leaving Grace and the reader suspicious. After all, clothing was a significant indicator of class during the nineteenth century and Nancy’s clothes were too fine to be that of a

servant's. Throughout the novel Grace provides ample commentary on dress as a reflective of class as well as the necessity of displaying a decent appearance.

In addition to clothing being an indicator of class and the importance of decent dress being highlighted, the restrictive nature of clothing during the mid 1800s is also emphasised in Alias Grace. Women's clothing, as a visual sign of femininity, has long been viewed as inherently oppressive. Atwood underscores the oppressive nature of dress during the mid-nineteenth century. In terms of women's fashion, Grace points out that meeting cultural expectations of dress could be potentially harmful. She tells Nancy that "it did not do to be all skin and bones, and that the young ladies nowadays were starving themselves because of the fashion, which was to be pale and sickly, and they laced their stays in so tight they fainted as soon as looked at" (322). During the Victorian era, upper class women were prone to fainting due to tightly laced corsets; thus fashion expectations were physically dangerous. Women's fashion during this time took a physical toll on the body. The female Victorian body was expected to be covered but also tightly contained. Simon comments on the popular opinion of women during the time "that women are weak-spined and jelly-like by nature, and would slump to the floor like melted cheese if not roped in" (82). The connection between dress/body and containment is noteworthy. Grace speaks of the crinolines in the Governor's wife's wardrobes, commenting that they "are like birdcages...[caging in] the legs of ladies; legs penned in so they cannot get out and go rubbing against the gentlemen's trousers" (22). In fact, in some of Grace's observations on dress, she connects fashion with bodily fragmentation or mutilation, which symbolises the restrained nature of dress. For example, she refers to the upper class women at the governor's house as the "jellyfish

ladies,” who have skirts shaped like “bell[s]” and who seem to move as if without any legs (21-22). Again, Atwood uses the fragmented body as a commentary on the oppressive aspects of fashion expectations during the mid-nineteenth century.

Although the female body is often the site of oppression, it can also be a site of struggle and opposition. The resisting body in Alias Grace challenges the oppressive aspects of the Victorian era through the productive and performing body. Grace’s productive body and performing body are regulated by the cultural expectations of women during the time. However confining and limiting, Grace’s productive body and performing body are also sites of control. Grace’s productive body gives her some freedom within the restrictions of the nineteenth century. When Grace is a young girl of twelve she is able to seek employment as a domestic due to her ability to work hard. She works diligently and sews with the ability of a seamstress. Grace’s productive body enables her to earn money of her own, to buy herself decent clothes and, more importantly, escape the tyranny of her father. For all practical purposes Grace’s productive body is an independent one. Years later, when Grace is in prison her domestic abilities give her a certain amount of freedom again. She spends her days in the Governor’s mansion. Although she doesn’t have the run of the house she works in the kitchen or does laundry. Grace explains, “I always liked doing the laundry” and the regular laundress says, “I am a steady worker and pull my share and don’t waste soap, and I know the treatment of fine linens, I have the way of it, and also how to get out the stains and a good starcher too” (72). Grace’s productive body models the behaviour of a fine laundress. Due to Grace’s ability to model ideals of domesticity, Grace experiences some autonomy despite being in prison. Grace is not forced to be in confinement and she

admits of the food she eats at the Governor's: "It's better food than I'd get on the inside of the walls" (73). Overall, Grace is able to achieve some freedom due to her status as a productive body. Although the productive body was one of oppression, Grace meets the standards of domesticity that existed during the Victorian era, and thus enjoys some freedoms that would not otherwise be available to her.

Like the productive body, the performing body is also a site of resistance in the novel. During the 1800s, presentation was key in establishing decency. While these standards were limiting, particularly for women, with proper performance came liberation. Grace achieves a certain amount of autonomy due to her performance. Grace, although belonging to the lower class, often successfully acts the role of a lady. Mr. Kinnear comments to Nancy that Grace could "pass...for a lady" with "the right clothes," proper carriage, and quiet demeanor (332). Because she is so convincing in her role as a lady, not only does she impress Mr. Kinnear but she also is able to gain control of the sessions between Dr. Jordan and herself. Dr. Jordan observes that Grace has "manifested a composure that a duchess might envy" and he has "never known any woman to be so thoroughly self-contained" (152). Dr. Jordan's frustrations mount as he attempts to get Grace to open up. He writes, "She 'sits on cushion and sews a fine seam,' cool as a cucumber and with her mouth primmed up like a governess's, and I lean my elbow on the table across from her, cudgelling my brains, and trying in vain to open her up like an oyster" (153). As Dr. Jordan attempts to pry Grace open, Grace resists in an attempt to keep some of her story to herself. Grace narrates, "I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself" (114). Grace's lack of compliance is safeguarded in her ability to 'pass' as a

lady. While Grace acts the part of the lady, most of her responses are wrapped up in the discourse of the world of domesticity. According to Sarah Sceats, "By holding fast to the safe details of cooking and cleaning and sewing Grace resists wholesale surrender to the temptation of believing in rescue by Simon Jordan. In the curious echo of Grace's own story, it is Simon himself who falls" (123). As Grace responds to Dr. Jordan's questions, she refuses to engage him on his terms, and thus he becomes obsessed with Grace's story. During her interaction with Dr. Jordan Grace remains steadfast to her angel/maid image instead of succumbing to the criminal/whore/madwoman image that has been painted of her. As Grace manipulates her body, performing the role of angel/maid, she resists Dr. Jordan's definition of her and, more importantly, resists his efforts to control her story. As Edina Szalay notes of Grace, "Her gender, socially inferior position, and criminal status make Grace especially vulnerable a subject to prejudice which, consequently, empowers others to seize control over her story" (175). However, as Grace tells her story to Dr. Jordan, Grace regains control of her story by deciding what to tell him and what to omit, remaining contained, and continuing to act the part of a lady. In fact, during her conversations with Dr. Jordan, Grace sews and mends quilts, thus linking her stories to quilting and women's work and establishing a space for her story. While doing "women's work" Grace tells her story through women's discourse of quilting, laundering, and even dress. Grace's narrative is "a women's resistance narrative" (Howells 32) and through her narrative, coinciding with proper female behaviour, Grace's performing body shows one of the ways in which women were able to maintain autonomy during a highly controlled time.

In addition to acting the lady, Grace also enters into the performative realm as a madwoman and a medium. Grace breaks away from her role as proper Victorian woman in the form of both madwoman and medium. During the nineteenth century there was a turn to Psychiatric Medicine and Spiritualism and Atwood uses this turn as a frame of reference in her novel. In terms of Psychiatric Medicine, Rosario Arias Doblaz notes: “Nineteenth century concepts of female nature and behaviour were inextricably linked to illness, passivity and lack of volition, which, according to the medical profession, made women prone to mental insanity” (89). Mental illness was often linked to women, who were considered naturally weak and feeble minded. Grace uses this common place idea of women to her advantage. Instead of playing the role of lady, Grace manipulates her body to act “mad”, a role that has also been determined by societal expectations, created for those who deviate from the norm. Grace uses madness as a defence for the murders of which she is accused. Grace’s performing body convincingly plays the role of madwoman and in doing so she avoids the death penalty, unlike her male counterpart James McDermott. Grace is sentenced to an asylum where she continues her act until she wishes to be moved to the penitentiary. In addition to madness, Grace suffers from amnesia, or so she claims, the events of her past being so terrible that she does not remember them. Dr. Jordan is enlisted to retrieve Grace’s lost memories. With his blend of science and pseudo- science, Dr. Jordan falls flat as he struggles to unlock Grace’s past. Linda Morra suggests that Dr. Jordan’s “pre-conceived notions about her possible insanity, which are based on categories and expectations associated with madness, affect the image he maintains of Grace” (124). For example when he first sees Grace’s face he comments that her eyes are “enormous in the pale face and dilated with fear, or with mute

pleading – all was as it should be. He'd seen many hysterics ... who'd looked very much like this" (66). However, he later realises that "her eyes were large, it was true, but they were far from insane. Instead they were frankly assessing him. It was if she were contemplating the subject of some unexplained experiment; as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny" (67). As Grace dances around Dr. Jordan's concept of madness, Grace seizes control over the sessions. According to Arias Doblaz, "Grace becomes the doctor, the mesmerist who exerts control over those who listen to her stories, whilst Dr. Jordan becomes the patient, the madman who, ironically, ends up losing his memory altogether" (95). Grace's "refusal" to remember crucial events grants Grace a certain amount of control. Grace's performing body acts the role of madwoman, while blurring the line of what is considered to be madness, and in doing so she experiences a certain amount of agency. Grace's performing body is ambiguous. As Grace embodies nothing and everything she is impossible to contain. In addition to playing around with the concept of madness, Grace simultaneously uses the popular opinion of women at the time, as simple, malleable, and unstable, to influence the trial judge and then later, Dr. Jordan, using the Victorian views of women to her advantage.

Even though Grace does not provide Dr. Jordan with her lost memories she does provide him with her alter- ego Mary Whitney, her other personality. Grace acts the role of Mary in her discussions with Dr. Jordan and embodies Mary as a medium. In conversations with Dr. Jordan, she moves away from conventional conversation and towards the vulgar. Grace sidesteps the rules that regulate proper speech by speaking in the voice of Mary. Grace's performing body exercises a form of control when she speaks in the voice of Mary. Crude and to-the- point dialogue emerges in the guise of Mary's



thoughts or voice, Grace quoting things Mary might say or did say. For example, “lady or lady’s maid, they both piss and it smells the same, and not like lilacs neither, as Mary Whitney used to say” (253). She speaks of being examined by a doctor: “I am here to examine your cerebral configuration, and first I shall measure your heartbeat and respiration, but I knew what he was up to. Take your hands off my tit, you filthy bastard, Mary Whitney would have said” (37). Hilde Steals points out that, “Mary’s discourse is rebellious towards the representatives of the bourgeoisie; it transgresses social codes. Its vulgarity and obscenity defy good manners. Grace’s ‘other voice’ is fierce and unlawful” (441). When she talks to Dr. Jordan about calling for a doctor for her sick mother, she says the doctor did not come and when he finally did, “he was not more use, - if you’ll excuse me, Sir- than tits on a rooster, as Mary Whitney liked to say” (137). Grace manipulates her performing body, speaking openly in the voice of Mary. Grace remains polite and excuses herself as the voice of Mary emerges, giving Grace the power of voice, in a society in which women were not empowered to speak in such frank, off the cuff ways.

Still, Grace’s performing body is not only at work as she habitually quotes Mary throughout her narration and in her dialogue with Dr. Jordan. Grace’s performance is in true form as she becomes Mary during a hypnotic trance. Prior to the hypnotism Grace has a history of embodying Mary Whitney. Clothing plays a key role in Grace’s earlier performances. Early in the novel clothing is traded and borrowed, and by the end of the novel clothing is seen as a metaphor for spiritual possession. Grace wears Mary’s clothes just as she claims to wear Mary’s identity in her alias, or when ‘Mary’ claims to wear her body during the hypnotic trance and possibly during the murders. Susan Rowland

suggests: "The body as the clothing of identity, providing a means of cultural inscription, is a metaphor for the imaginal body's clothing or re-presenting of psychic...identity" (252). Grace similarly dresses in Nancy's clothes, as noted, even after her death, thus clothing becomes a gateway for identity embodiment of the living but also of the dead. After all, Grace lives in a society with strong superstitions where many believed that spirits returned from the dead. As Grace acts the role of Mary, Grace's performing body highlights the atmosphere surrounding the supernatural and scientific world at the time. "Margaret Atwood ....provides readers with a broad picture of mid-nineteenth century Canada, ...respectively, as a nation where scientific discoveries coexisted with a profound interest in the occult- spiritualist activities in table-rapping dark rooms, healing therapies, seers and mesmerism or animal magnetism" (Doblas 88). According to Cynthia G. Kuhn, "the mid-nineteenth century was a period of transition informed by mesmerism and Spiritualism. 'Mesmerism' ...proved to be a site of transformation, straddling the line between faith and science" (105). The increasing interest in both Spiritualism and mesmerism lead to "increasingly dramatic displays of communication with the spirit realm" (106). When an individual was in a trance voices often emerged from the mesmerised individual. Spiritualists believed that the voices were of spirits and psychologists believed these voices to be that of repressed memory or an alternative personality. When Grace becomes a medium and Mary embodies Grace, Grace's performing body exemplifies the supernatural possibilities of the time. The women's Spiritualist Society, which is petitioning for Grace's release, convinces Dr. Jordan that Grace should be hypnotised to retrieve her lost memories, and he concedes due to his lack of success. Dr. Jerome DuPont puts Grace into a hypnotic trance and Mary emerges,

detailing the lost events of the night of the murders. Before the hypnosis begins, Dr. DuPont covers Grace's head with a grey women's veil, so that "there's only a head, with the merest contour of a face behind it" (476). With Grace out of sight, Mary surfaces. Grace as Mary confesses to the murders: "It was my kerchief that strangled her. ... Grace knew nothing about it! ... Grace doesn't know, she's never known! ... She knew nothing! I only borrowed her clothing for a time... Her earthly shell. Her fleshly garment" (480-483). As Mary wears Grace's skin, Grace wears Mary's identity. Grace's body is directed by Mary's possession. As a result, it appears that Mary's spirit is responsible for the murders, leaving a possessed Grace innocent. Through flesh dress Grace appropriates a medium and in doing so establishes her innocence. In her role as Mary, Grace plays on the superstitions of the mid 1800s and manipulates her audience, giving them the details they so desperately want and the details that lead to her freedom. When the reader learns that Dr. Jerome DuPont is actually her old friend Jerimiah, it is unclear whether or not her trance is a contrived act and ambiguity once again surrounds Grace. After all, as Rosario Arias Doblaz notes: "Grace is portrayed as an in-between figure, a fluid body that avoids categorising, that represents a position of both/and, rather than either/or" (92). As a fluid body Grace obtains control, with Mary embodying Grace and Grace embodying the superstitions of the mid- nineteenth century. Additionally, Howells argues that Grace's performing body in the 'voice' of Mary is also a "feminist social protest. Mary's ghostly testimony not only asserts Grace's innocence of murder, but also makes some startling revelations about Victorian hypocrisy, speaking the truth about a servant girl's situation of sexual and social oppression" (35). Importantly, Grace's resisting body performs the role of lady, madwoman and medium and in doing so

exercises some control during the restricted and repressed Victorian era, while simultaneously highlighting the cultural atmosphere of the times.

Overall, it is through the female body that Atwood writes a version of the past. Through the productive, performing and resisting body, Atwood underscores the cultural environment of the mid-nineteenth century. As Grace attempts to narrate her story she turns to her body as a symbol of oppression. Grace felt silenced and entrapped for so long that she admits: "I might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out" (351). Grace's textual body, as a sign to be read, is entrapped both literally and figuratively, first in her life as woman, immigrant and domestic worker and later in prison. Through Grace's sessions with Dr. Jordan, Grace reclaims her voice, detailing the nuances of her life. Although Grace's real past is never uncovered and the mystery behind the fictive Grace Marks continues, larger issues are exposed such as the "limitations of class structures, horrific treatment of prisoners, and [of course] oppression of women" (Kuhn 120). The female body, at the core of Grace's story, is a code to be read, signifying the secret codes of women's lives. The history of women is wrapped up in women's discourse, in what women do, what women wear and how women act. In Alias Grace, the productive body, performing body and resisting female body are marked with the cultural impressions of the mid-nineteenth century and in reading the body, an account of the unaccounted history of women during the Victorian era is brought to light.

## CHAPTER IV:

### *Reading History's Blind Spot in The Blind Assassin*

The time frame of The Blind Assassin spans over much of the twentieth century. Iris is born in 1919 and dies in 1999 and her narrative, while part confessional, is also part historical reconstruction. She experiences the two World Wars and the Depression and witnesses the Spanish Civil War. From her perspective as a daughter of a button-factory owner and later the wife of a Toronto business tycoon, Iris Chase Griffen in The Blind Assassin highlights class conflicts in Ontario during the Depression and the despair that plagued the nation prior to the Second World War. The novel illustrates the struggle between the emerging socialist movement and capitalist Canada and portrays a Canada in which private interests continue to triumph over the public good. More importantly, the oppression of women during this time is emphasised as is the persisting cultural blindness to the oppression. Like Alias Grace, The Blind Assassin puts forward the female body as a site to investigate issues of power and entrapment. Although set in different centuries, both novels are set in Southern Ontario, and more importantly, articulate the oppression of women at particular historical moments. Thus, as The Blind Assassin speaks to the social and political atmosphere of Canadian society in the first half of the twentieth century, it particularly emphasises the role of women. In emphasising

the role of women, as mentioned, Atwood also calls attention to the female body. The body is being continuously created and recreated by and in social interactions. It is the body's involvement with the social that assists Atwood in reconstructing a social history of the early part of twentieth century Canada. In The Blind Assassin Atwood "gives flesh" to her narrative and in doing so creates a window into another time.

There are several narrative strands in The Blind Assassin and each strand acts as a set of codes. As the reader decodes Iris's personal narrative along with the other narratives, he/she also decodes society. Atwood offers a historical perspective to her novel with the social details of early twentieth century Canada woven into the fabric of Iris's memoir. One of the ways in which decoding occurs is through the body as a way of telling. In The Blind Assassin the body is constantly giving meaning and is used as part of textual representation as textual bodies interact with their cultural environment. In Atwood's novel, the body is a site of problems and of power; it provides a site in which particular conflicts can be observed within the discourses of the time, as bodies are the products of historical forces. Characters' bodies are building blocks to whatever "world" is being described. Daniel Pundy explains in Narrative Bodies that "it is impossible to tell a story without taking into account bodies at work within them" (120). The body shapes the plot, characterisation, setting and many other aspects of narrative. The bodies at work in The Blind Assassin provide a framework for the social world and provide a larger image of society as a whole. In particular, the female body and the way it manifests itself in the narrative of The Blind Assassin is encoded and made meaningful. This will be determined in this chapter through examining the commodified body and the body as a possession, the performative body and the resisting body. As the body is made

meaningful it contributes to the telling of Iris's story and, significantly, contributes to Atwood's reconstruction of the past as she depicts the social realities of early twentieth century Canada.

Bodies produce meaning in a variety of ways. As signs to be read, bodies are both powerless and powerful, manipulated and manipulating. The commodified female body can be a site of resistance; however, more often than not the commodified body is objectified and used by men. Female bodies are commodities in the patriarchal world and are marked by their value. Worth is determined by what the body can produce, as is the case for men who dominate the public world of work, and what bodies can potentially reproduce, as is the case for women who are mainly defined by their reproductive ability. In The Blind Assassin, women's bodies can be examined as commodities whose value is reproductive as both Liliana and Iris contribute to the economy of reproduction. At the heart of reproduction is the sexed body. The commodified body is generally valued based on sexual possibility. The sexed body as a commodity leads to sexual sacrifice in Atwood's novel. Additionally, as commodities female bodies are possessions in the male dominated society of the early twentieth century. The portrayal of Liliana's and Laura's bodies as commodities and possessions illustrates the oppression that existed for women during this time. Particularly, Iris's commodified body is a code to be read. She is a commodity possessed, first, by her father and, then, by her husband. As commodities and possessions the Chase women's bodies are marked by the objectification of women that existed during the early twentieth century.

Liliana Chase, who dutifully supports her husband Norval Chase after he returns from fighting in World War I shattered both physically and mentally, clearly exhibits the

classic female selflessness that was so valued during the early twentieth century. During this time, Prentice et al suggest that “the experts [believed] that a women’s time... should be used primarily for the pursuit of an ideal home” (289). In pursuit of an ideal home, Lilitiana tirelessly tends to her husband, who is now missing an eye and has a limp, while she unbegrudgingly forgives him for his sexual misadventures. Lilitiana is required to contribute to the economy of reproduction; as such she is dutiful and pious and risks her body and life to fulfil her reproductive responsibilities. Luce Irigaray notes in This Sex Which Is Not One that “the possession of a woman is certainly indispensable to man for the reproductive value that she represents” (174). As a possession of her husband, Lilitiana does not have a choice whether to have children or not; it is her duty. Lilitiana’s body buckles under the weight of fulfilling her womanly obligations of reproduction; her sacrificed body is testimony to the importance of childbearing during this time. With the birth of Laura she ages, becomes grey and a weaker version of her former self. Iris comments: “After Laura’s birth my mother was more tired than usual. She lost altitude; she lost resilience. Her will faltered; her day took on a quality of trudging” (107). Her bodily response to pregnancy and childbirth is one of deterioration and decay as Atwood highlights the potential hardship of both. She later dies from a miscarriage when several years later she becomes pregnant again despite her doctor’s warnings against it. Reenie, the family housekeeper and caretaker, explains, “some men can never leave well enough alone” (111). Reenie verbalises the gender stereotypes of fragile sexless women and demanding sex-driven men that were common during this time. “In general , ...[it was] believed that a woman’s sex drive was not nearly as strong as a man’s” (Prentice et al 159) and men had difficulty controlling their sexual urges. Thus, Lilitiana contributes to



the economy of the family and fulfils Norval's sexual desires, which result in pregnancy. Performing her duties as wife, Liliana slowly sacrifices her life, with one pregnancy after another. After their mother's death Iris and Laura are left with their mother's "ideal" goodness, quickly learning the deadly responsibility their gender has in their culture. As a possession of her husband, the role of wife is to reproduce and be sexually available.

When Iris's mother is sick, in order to spend time with her, Iris makes the necessary accommodations, "silence and helpfulness" (107), which is the perfect combination of any good daughter. Iris, who is told to be a good sister to Laura by her mother on her deathbed, realises as an adult: "I was about to be left with her idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her" (118). Iris is forced to wear her mother's idea of goodness, her body encoded by her mother's expectations. Additionally, Iris is not only "pinned" down by her mother's idea of goodness but also marked with her father's restrictive expectations as his commodity. Not doing an ideal job protecting Laura, Iris quickly buckles to fulfil her duties as her father's daughter. Modelling the sacrificial good woman, Iris consents to marry an older man with whom she is not in love as part of a business deal made by her father. The eighteen year old Iris agrees to marry Richard, a man twice her age whom she hardly knows, in order to save her father's button factories and ensure financial security for her family during the Depression; Iris sacrifices her happiness for the good of her family. After all, as Irigaray puts forth, "wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men" (172). Richard Griffen taking Iris as his wife represents not only the coming together of two businesses but also of the "old money" Chase family of Port Ticonderoga and the

nouveau riche Griffen family of Toronto. However, when Richard refuses to fulfil his side of the deal and closes down Chase Industries, the deal resembles more of a take-over than a partnership, as is the case with the marriage. Soon after Iris and Richard wed, Richard dominates both Iris and the relationship. J. Brooks Bouson argues: "Atwood's description of the circumstances surrounding Richard's proposal to Iris, who has been raised by her father to act the role of dutiful daughter, is a scathing critique of patriarchal marriage and the historic treatment of women as objects of exchange between men" (257). Irigaray explains that there has been a long history of women as commodities of exchange, "always pass[ing] from one man to another, from one group of men to another ... As 'products' [women] are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone" (170). Iris's body is undoubtedly an object used for exchange and as such she is objectified. Karen F. Stein explains that "when [Iris] is married to him, she loses control of her life and becomes an appurtenance belonging to Richard, a beautifully groomed trophy wife" (142). Irigaray suggests that "as a commodity... woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own" (187). As a commodity of Richard's, Iris slowly loses her autonomy. On several occasions Iris comments how Richard often "took me by the elbow and steered me" (302), aggressively directing her through crowds, and more importantly, through life. Iris is a commodity of her father, and once traded becomes a commodity of her husband and a possession that he is entitled to control. Richard cements sole ownership with the passing of Iris's father and asserts his control by hiding the telegram of his death from Iris. Incidentally, Iris senses Richard's controlling behaviour before they are married. From the night of her engagement Iris rightfully had feelings of dread. Iris narrates, "I knew I was lost. I

would be discovered ...fallen in my tracks, one arm outflung as if grasping at straws, my features desiccated, my fingers gnawed by wolves" (287). Her anticipated physical disembodiment is symbolic of what she later experiences in her marriage. Iris slowly loses pieces of herself as Richard overtakes her. Although her father believed he was leaving his daughters in "good hands" (285), Richard is not a protector but instead an oppressor. After assuming ownership rights over the two sisters, he ends up physically abusing Iris and sexually abusing Laura.

Both Iris and Laura experience bodily harm as commodities of exchange and ultimately as Richard's possessions. The control that Richard has over Iris marks Iris's body from the beginning of their relationship. On their honeymoon she notices how Richard withdraws to a vantage point while she begins to take shape. Iris narrates, but it was "the shape intended for me, by him. Each time I looked in the mirror a little more of me had been coloured in" (382). As Iris is coloured in she loses her own true colours as an object of Richard's. Richard's oppressive behaviour immediately stifles Iris's autonomy. During her initial sexual experiences with Richard, she explains, "I felt I was becoming addled inside, like an egg" (379). Her sexual relationship with Richard never improves and becomes something she endures as opposed to something she enjoys as she continues to feel spoiled inside. Iris's polluted interior, which marks her body, is a consequence of the objectification she experiences as Richard's possession. She becomes acutely aware of her status as sexual object when she returns from her honeymoon and sees the canopy bed. She reflects, "this, then, was where I was to grin and bear it- the bed I hadn't quite made, but now must lie in. And this ceiling I would be staring up at from now on, through the muslin fog, while earthly matters went on below my throat"

(387). Iris verbalises the painful objectification that was so commonly accepted in the patriarchal world of the early twentieth century in which women were viewed as objects for male consumption and sexual pleasure. She hammers this message home when she further explains: "My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth. If that sounds brutal, it was. But it wasn't out of the ordinary" (419). As a commodity of Richard's, Iris has a sexual obligation to fulfil and, more importantly, a reproductive obligation, both obligations no more uncommon than church on Sunday. When Iris tells Richard she is pregnant he expresses conventional joy, kisses her forehead and tells her "good girl". After all, she narrates, "I was only doing what was expected of me" (534). As a commodity of her husband, Iris is expected to produce an heir. As a commodified body Iris contributes to the economy of reproduction. Iris explains "that being the mother of a son and heir or even just an heir, would give me more status... than I'd had so far, a good deal more than I was entitled to" (534). Having a child will increase Iris's worth. Iris notes: "With money in play, I knew where I stood: I was a bearer of a very expensive package, pure and simple" (534). In carrying Richard's child Iris is aware that her value is in her service, for Iris is conscious of her roles and responsibilities as Richard's wife.

Consequently, aware of her place in her marriage, Iris responds indifferently to the duplicity of her life which she describes as "placidity and order and everything in its place, with a decorous and sanctioned violence going on underneath everything, like a heavy, brutal shoe tapping on the rhythm on a carpet floor" (469). To the visible eye her life was calm and organised and appeared to be one that could be envied. However, her life as Richard's possession in actuality was filled with violence and dismay. And, despite her unemotional response to the abuse, Iris is not left unmarked. Richard's

violations “rubbed off all over [her] skin” (468). Richard’s offences taint Iris’s body. When Richard forcefully has Iris fulfil her night-time duties, “Sometimes- increasingly, as time went by- there were bruises, then purple, then yellow. ...I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle” (469). The violence that Iris experiences marks her body and signals Richard’s chronic abuse. As Richard violates her body, Iris’s bruised skin becomes a type of secret code. The decoded message signifies the patriarchal violence that existed in marriages during the early twentieth century and the invisible bars that continued to trap and threaten women into being silent and subdued. Losing so much of her self, Iris narrates, “I was sand, I was snow- written on, rewritten, smoothed over” (469). Madeleine Davies notes: “Here bodily harm is figured in terms of text so that Iris represents herself as a blank space or page encoded by others with no autonomy over her own body” (61). The objectification that Iris experiences voids her of her own identity to the point where only the “space” inside her lungs is “all [her] own” (417). The takeover which Iris experiences is clearly bodily and the oppression she encounters is imprinted on her skin. Iris remembers the four fireplaces in Richard’s house and of the one in the bedroom she recalls the “flames licking on flesh” (288). The flames of the bedroom fireplace are representative of Richard’s abuse that burn at her flesh. Thus, as Iris fulfils her obligations to both her father and husband, not only is her happiness sacrificed, but also her body.

However, Iris is not the only one who is sacrificed in the deal between Norval Chase and Richard Griffen and not the only one who suffers bodily damage. Because Laura has no means of her own, Richard takes ownership over Laura so that he gets two

for the price of one. Originally a possession of her father's, Laura is left in Richard's hands after her father's passing. Laura, who is described as being "different", is immediately aware of the potential danger of Iris marrying Richard. She suggests they run away and get jobs of their own, telling Iris that they "could be waitresses" (298). Laura understands what it means to be a possession. When Laura runs away and is forced to return to Richard's she says to Iris, "How can we ever get out of here? ... Before it's too late" (415). Although Iris is unsure why Laura is so concerned, Laura has good reason. As Richard's sister Winifred put it, "because Laura was the kind of girl who would bite the hand that fed her unless a muzzle was applied" (419), Richard immediately begins to control Laura. The invisible bars that trap Iris are much more literal for Laura. He threatened that if she tried to run away again he would send her to a different city, put her into a Home for Wayward girls or, worse, into a private clinic with bars on the window. There was "no mistake about it, he was the authority, ... he would do exactly as he said" (418). Like Iris, as a possession of Richard Laura has to do what is expected of her. Iris explains that, "[Richard] wanted to get Laura under his thumb, he wanted her neck under his foot" (481). Richard wanted complete control over Laura, to physically dominate her body. When Richard's need to control Laura becomes sexual, Laura becomes a sexual victim of Richard's. Laura's body is violated by Richard's and marked by his victimisation. When Richard's abuse manifests in the form of pregnancy, Richard commits her to a mental hospital where she is both physically and mentally silenced. As the head of the household, Richard imposes his will on Laura's body, which was ultimately his right as the provider of the family.

Unfortunately, when Laura reaches the abusive hands of Richard, she is no stranger to being victimised. Years earlier, Laura had been abused by the girls' teacher, Mr. Erskine, who, is said to be acting under the orders of their father was brutal and controlling. Laura has been shaped by the ill-treatment of their childhood teacher who actively shamed both Iris and Laura for their inferior female traits and reinforced the sacrificial role of women through stories he read to them. J. Brooks Bouson suggests: "Mr. Erskine is an embodiment of the repressive forces of masculinist culture. In a series of scenes deliberately staged by the narrative to make a political point, Mr. Erskine subjects the sisters to various forms of emotional and physical abuse" (256). As he emphasises the unpleasant things done to young women in the stories, he imprints on the girls their cultural role as submissive sexual objects and victimised females. He takes his teachings one step further as he begins to sexually abuse Laura. When Laura learns to dissociate, or rather, "subtract herself" from his abuse "he took to shaking her- to snap her out of it, ....Sometimes he threw her against the wall, or shook her with his hands around her neck. When he shook her she'd close her eyes and go limp, which incensed him further" (205). Laura's bodily response to the abuse is simple withdrawal. Her response to Mr. Erskine's sexual abuse is similar to her response to the abuse she later endures from Richard. Still, despite her withdrawal, Laura does expose her teacher's abuse, which she does not do later with Richard's abuse. However, when she confesses the abuse to Iris, Iris has a hard time believing her sister because she didn't see it with her own eyes. Iris says to her sister, " 'I've never seen him do that...Why would he?'" (206). When Iris questions the plausibility of Laura's accusations of molestation, The Blind Assassin establishes society's blindness to such abuse. Similarly, Iris's later denial of

Richard's abuse reflects the long cultural denial of sexual victimisation. Iris finds a photo of herself where Laura had bleached the face so that "the eyes and the nose and mouth looked fogged over" (566). Iris was in a fog when it came to the abuse Laura suffered. When Laura finally tells Iris of her pregnancy and forced abortion, Iris remains ignorant to the fact that the fetus was Richard's. As Laura confesses her story, Iris believes that "Laura's sanity was crumbling" (611). In fact it is her blindness that leads to Laura's death, making Iris "the blind assassin". Only after Laura commits suicide does Iris finally open her eyes to the history of abuse to which Laura was forced to succumb.

Both Iris and Laura are forced to surrender to the abuse that Richard inflicts on his possessions. Used as objects of exchange and with very few options, their victimisation is intensified as they change hands from their father to Richard. As commodified bodies they both experience sexual objectification as they fulfil their role as sacrificial women. However, Iris's and Laura's objectification is set in motion prior to the exchange. As commodities of their father they are groomed for the male gaze. Each has particular gender expectations that are initiated as young girls, formed as young women and expected to be perfected as society women. As Iris, and to a lesser extent Laura, give in to gender expectations, gender performance comes into play. Through examining the performativity of the female body, I will show that the text highlights how women were controlled and contained by the gender expectation of the early twentieth century.

Over the last decade, it has become common to describe cultural and gender identities as being "practiced" or "performed". The most consistent way that bodies are identified is by gender, and depending on specific performances the body is marked as



either male or female. In Bodies That Matter, Butler argues that sex is not simply a matter of material difference; it is also formed by conditional practices. However, much criticism has surfaced surrounding the restrictive performances that women are required to practice in order to fulfil the ideal of femininity. For example, specific behaviours, dress, and even hairstyles establish femininity. More importantly, these performances are considered to be regulating impositions that must be learned and practiced as opposed to being natural. Butler suggests that the materiality of sex is less a theory of cultural construction and more “a consideration of scenography and topography construction” (28). In other words, sex is compelled into materialisation through certain highly regulated practices that mark the body. In The Blind Assassin, Atwood shows the contrived nature of gender performativity and the effect that regulating practices have on the body as Iris and Laura are coerced into fitting the ideal female mould. Iris’s and Laura’s expectations of performativity are established early in the novel through both Reenie and their father. Although Reenie functions as a mother figure to the girls she is predominately used to pass on and engrave the cultural, feminine and class values of self-restraint and self-sacrifice that were necessary for the woman of value to possess during the early twentieth century. As young girls coming of age, Iris and Laura are marked by heightened expectations as society daughters. Their childhood is littered with examples of what is “right” and “wrong” as Reenie recounts stories about their mother and grandmother, who exhibited strength and courage while bordering on sainthood. She utters the official discourse of the bourgeois culture as she teaches the girls about the dangers of sexual promiscuity and hammers home the social disapproval of women who overtly display their sexuality. Reenie comments on such women: “She’s asking for it.

She'll get what's coming to her. ...She's an accident waiting to happen" (224). Reenie alludes to the dire consequences of defying the social rules of chastity and prudence and instils the fear of social disapproval. According to J. Brooks Bouson, "Atwood emphasises the shaping influences of cultural forces on the sisters and describes the social development of femininity as a kind of formative trauma" (255). As the girls' behaviour is shaped so too is their dress. Reenie's counsel carries over to appropriate dress, as she insists to the girls, "A lady never went out without her hat...[and] gloves" (192). It was up to the elite class to maintain tradition and their role as "ladies" as standards that regulated dress became less restrictive and the role of women began to evolve. Reenie taught Iris and Laura the necessities of being a lady and the importance of being socially acceptable.

Importantly, the girls' father, who also sees the importance of his daughters following the social rules governing femininity, reinforces Reenie's lessons. Norval is mostly uninterested in the girls' behaviour until the year Iris turns thirteen. He then immediately decides that they have been running around too freely and begins establish rules and regulations to limit their freedom. He particularly takes an interest in Iris's posture, speech and deportment. Iris conveys his expectations: "My clothing should be simple and plain, with white blouses and dark pleated skirts, and dark velvet dresses for church...My shoulders should be straight with no slouching. I should not sprawl, chew gum, fidget, or chatter. The values he required were ....neatness, obedience, silence and no evident sexuality" (198). Iris's father's rigid expectations mark Iris's adolescent body and mould her as she becomes a young woman. Overall, it was time for Iris to be contained; as she hits puberty Iris must "be taken in hand" (198) and all signs of sexuality

nipped in the bud. Their father also decides that the girls' education had been neglected and hires Mr. Erskine who is summoned to "work [them] into shape" (202). And shape them he does; Mr. Erskine's sexist views of femininity are imprinted heavily on the girls. According to Iris he lectured, "No one expected us to be geniuses, and it would be conferring no favours if we were, but there surely was a minimum, even for girls; we would be nothing but encumbrances to any man foolish enough to marry unless we were made to pull up our socks" (202). They were made to pull up their socks in a direct and often violent manner. Iris and Laura did learn; they learned Geography, Mathematics and Latin, but most of all, Iris explains, "we also learned how to make our faces blank and stiff, as if they'd been starched" (204). The blank stiff face the girls learn to wear is not unlike the face that Grace Marks learns to wear. Like Grace, Iris and Laura discover that the most respected form of femininity and most important performance is to be prim and proper and to show no emotion.

These life lessons translate clearly for Iris as she becomes a young woman and are further enforced as she embarks on marriage. As Iris is shaped by her marriage and her expectations as proper society wife she feels her independent selfhood fading. Atwood clearly establishes the early twentieth century as a time when marriage threatened women's autonomy. Iris's autonomy is literally stripped away as she is obligated to do away with her old wardrobe and replace it with one picked out by Richard's sister Winifred. Because clothing has a close relationship to the body, being worn next to the skin, clothing can be seen as an extension of the body itself. Thus, the clothed body is important as dress articulates the body in culture. Cynthia G. Kuhn states that "as cultural representations operating within a network of codes, clothed bodies are

inextricably bound up with ideology and power” (20). Iris’s newly tailored clothes are meant to signal her wealth and status. She had tennis skirts, bathing suits and several dancing frocks, which Winifred insisted she wear. Iris narrates, “she said I’d need to dress the part no matter what my deficiencies, which should never be admitted by me”(296). Iris was expected to play whatever part was required and wear the necessary costume. As for deficiencies, Winifred makes sure that Iris was aware there were many. New clothes needed to be purchased but more importantly Iris needed to “learn to wear them in effect.... ‘As if they’re your skin, dear,’ [Iris] said” (293). Iris remembers Winifred’s commentary on her other insufficiencies: “My hair was out of the question—long, unwaved, combed straight back, held with a clip. It was a clear case for a pair of scissors and a cold wave. Then there was the question of my fingernails. Nothing too brash, mind you; I was too young for brashness. ‘You could be charming,’ said Winifred. ‘Absolutely. With a little effort.’ ” (293). If Iris was to fit the role of society wife, changes needed to be made. Iris had to be properly clothed and polished and her body needed to conform flawlessly to standards which had been set for her.

Winifred initiates Iris’s makeover with the pretext of helping her obtain the look appropriate for Richard’s social surroundings. However, in effect, the makeover is Winifred’s way of controlling Iris and the scripted performance that Iris submits to signals Iris’s submission to Winifred and Richard. After all, to Winifred Iris “was a lump of unmoulded clay, and now she would have to roll up her sleeves and get down to moulding [her]” (293). On Iris’s honeymoon Iris “was like wet clay, a surface the hands [of Richard] would glide over” (382) and shape. As both Winifred and Richard shape Iris, Iris is pulled deeper and deeper into her performance as proper society wife. Iris’s

manipulated body is adorned with decorative dress and stripped of anything considered unfeminine. Iris recounts, "I spent a lot of time changing my costumes. Diddling with straps, with buckles, with the tilt of hats, the seams on stockings. Worrying about the appropriateness of this or that, for this or that hour of the day. ... Filing my nails, soaking my feet. Yanking out hairs, or shaving them off: it was necessary to be sleek, devoid of bristles" (382). It was necessary to be devoid of anything that did not meet the requirements for femininity as set by societal norms. However, what Iris is mostly left without is her own identity. As Iris gets caught up in the daily routine of shopping, getting her hair done and changing costumes, her performing body is more facade than real. Iris's performing body, encoded with society's standards of femininity, is fabricated. Consequently, Iris's actual body becomes erased. Iris narrates that, "probing at my face in the mirror I seemed to myself erased, featureless, like an oval of used soap, or the moon on the wane" (296). Feeling herself becoming physically nullified, Iris admits, "How lost to myself I have become" (376). This revelation comes to her when she sees a vision of disembodied legs hanging out of a tree outside her childhood window as an adult returning to her childhood home. The disembodied legs are symbolic of Iris's disembodied self, resulting from her all-encompassing gender performance. As Iris moulds herself into the ideal society woman, her encoded body signifies the control and consumption of male privilege that dominated the social world of the early twentieth century.

Nevertheless, as much as female bodies are controlled as both commodified bodies and performing bodies, female bodies can also be sites of resistance. The encoded body produces meaning through not only the manipulated body, but also through the

manipulating body. The various experiences that mark the female body are not always coercively imposed on individuals, but at times are sought out. As commodified bodies women may use their sexual value for their own reward. As performing bodies, women may subscribe to societal norms only to gain agency within society or subversively defy norms as a form of rebellion. Although still acting under patriarchal power, women's bodies inscribed with their history and existence can simultaneously be resisting bodies. While experiencing oppression, Iris and Laura also experience instances of liberation in which their bodies are in opposition to male dominance. In The Blind Assassin, Atwood establishes the female body as a site of resistance and highlights the possibility of female agency.

Although Iris at first behaves according to stereotypes of femininity that reduce her to passivity, dependence and victimisation, she ultimately is able to resist using the same tool by which she was oppressed, her body. As a commodity of her father, then her husband, Iris adheres to the rules imposed by them. Controlled and sexually objectified by her husband, Iris simply goes through the motions as wife in a passionless haze. Iris experiences no sexual pleasure in fulfilling her role as wife. However, Iris does experience sexual fulfilment after initiating an extramarital affair with Alex Thomas. J. Brooks Bouson suggests Atwood depicts, "Iris's experience of sexual passion as a kind of self-awakening" (259). The self-awakening Iris experiences is sexual liberation. As a possession of her husband, Iris exercises power through rebellion and defiance, by taking another man as her lover. It enhances her pleasure "knowing she's getting away with it" (328). Iris secretly defies her husband, disregarding the rules of marriage. Not only is she sleeping with another man, but one who is a socialist conspirator and falls well below

Iris's social class. The sexual passion that she experiences with Alex gives Iris a sense of autonomy that has been stripped from her by Richard's dominance. As she meets Alex in dirty motels and secret hideaways on the wrong side of town, Iris has control over her own mobility. Iris narrates, "In theory I could go wherever I liked, in practice there were invisible barriers. I [was to keep] to the main streets, the more prosperous areas" (405). As a society wife there are places that were not deemed appropriate for Iris to be seen. Iris's affair with Alex empowers her to break down the invisible barriers of control. Iris admits, "she goes to him for amnesia, for oblivion. She renders herself up, is blotted out; enters the darkness of her own body, forgets her name. Immolation is what she wants, however briefly. To exist without boundaries" (329). Although still controlled by her own sexual desire, it is a type of control that offers freedom, freedom from the life she is living with Richard. And while Iris doesn't entirely escape sexual objectification by Alex, the objectification is mutual. He uses her, but she also uses him. As a mere object of her desire Iris admits "if caught she'd renounce him, before the cock crowed even once" (328). Additionally, Iris seems to have a passive acceptance of Alex's sexual attitudes and callous treatment of her; after all, her power is maintained by whether she chooses to continue the affair. Iris writes of Alex in "The Blind Assassin": "He stares at the streetcar stop, willing her to materialize. Stepping down with a flash of leg, a high-heeled boot, best plush. *Cunt on stilts*. Why does he think like that, when if any other man said that about her he'd hit the bastard?" (348). Iris feels a sense of power in Alex's objectification of her. More importantly, her power exists in the rupture of her sexless marital identity. The sexually liberated Iris who radiates sexuality is contrary to the daughter and wife who is to exhibit no signs of sexuality. Iris's sexually passionate

identity as mistress exemplifies women as sexual beings who experience sexual pleasure and liberation despite frequent objectification.

Similarly, while women were able to experience some liberation as commodified bodies, agency was exercised in realising the power of gender performance. Although an oppressive standard designed by patriarchal power, ideals of femininity if met could command influence. For example as outlined by Winifred, “It’s all right to show boredom, just never show fear. They smell it on you, like sharks, and come in for the kill. ...Never *cringe*. ...Never raise your voice to a waiter, it’s vulgar. Make them bend down... Always look as if you have something better to do, but never show impatience. ... Grace comes from indifference” (296). Winifred offers pointers for Iris’s performance as society wife, which, Iris admits, serve her well. After all, the power of influence is epitomised in Winifred who wears “green alligator shoes” and carries “a reptile purse” (290). Her predatory style indicates her wealth and femininity and establishes her status as no shrinking violet. Although originally dressed by Winifred, as Iris gains some independence in realising her own style she also comes to understand the power she commands finely dressed. Cynthia G. Kuhn notes: “Theorists regularly refer to the ideas of ‘fabricating’ an identity through clothing; dress can be designed to create an intended cultural presentation” (4). When Iris visits the head of Laura’s school to deal with a complaint, she manipulates her costume for her own purpose. She wears a hat with a “dead pheasant on it, or parts of one” and an “impressive” cashmere coat trimmed with wolverine (473). Iris’s intent is to intimidate the administrator with the impression that there were four eyes, rather than two staring at him. Iris also realises the power of dress when she meets with Alex. Alex comments when she arrives wearing a raincoat



that she “might of well have worn a mink” (132). Although he despises the elitist style of her clothes, Iris has no intentions of rushing “out the door looking like a cleaning lady” (132). She recognises he dislikes her look because it symbolises status and power. However, it is for that reason she has no intention of giving it up. While Alex explains that her hair is too blond and makes her stand out, she knows it is what also makes her precious and uncommon, two things which he is not. Iris writes in “The Blind Assassin” that in order to blend in “she ought to look drab and frugal. ...She doesn’t though” (327) but Alex does. Alex is, after all, a man on the run, with no means of his own. Although Atwood uses Iris’s relationship with Alex to highlight the class issues that plagued the early twentieth century, she also uses it to show the autonomy that existed for those who had wealth. Thus, although controlled by the expectations that govern behaviour and dress, Iris also uses gender performance to obtain power and agency that is allotted to those who so ideally fit the mould of upper class society.

However, as Iris aspires to fit the mould, Laura realises the necessity to break it. While Iris is able to find some liberation in the power she obtains from playing the ideal society wife, Laura finds it completely oppressive. As a performing body, the “appropriate” clothes that she wears look “less like something she’d chosen to put on than like something she’d been locked up in” (4). Laura, who lacks concern for social niceties, feels contained by the social conventions that control her. When she sees the outfits that Iris is packing for her honeymoon she sneers at them in disbelief and asks Iris, “You’re going to wear these?” (379). Laura “went in for small, futile economies” (297) and puts little value on material goods. So the clothes that are Iris’s silent pleasure, are nothing to Laura but expensive costumes that are confining and controlling. For Laura,

freedom is sought in dressing in simple clothing and in some cases doing away with articles of clothing altogether. On two separate occasions Iris notes that Laura is barefoot. When Laura comes to Iris to beg her not to marry Richard “her feet were bare” (297). When Iris and Richard arrive at Avilion after their honeymoon Laura is waiting for them barefoot, wearing “no shoes whatsoever” (393). Laura’s lack of footwear signals an obvious disregard for the rules that regulate proper dress. A barefoot Laura indicates an unconventionality and vulnerability in her character, as well as a rebellious nature. Subtly subversive, Laura does not accept the ideals of femininity and uses her body to resist oppression.

As a performing body and commodified body, Laura rebels against the patriarchal forces that control her. Early on in the novel, when Mr. Erskine sexually abuses her she threatens to run away or throw herself out of the window. Iris narrates, “Laura said that unless Mr. Erskine went away, she would go away herself” (203). In an attempt to stop the abuse, Laura threatens to take control of her own body and remove it from his presence. When Laura is later under the control of Richard, in an attempt to resist his oppression she not only threatens to run away but does. After being forced to return to his home she shows Richard resistance through silence and disdain. Later, when Laura reaches marital age, Laura refuses the idea of marriage. Aware that marriage involves an exchange of commodities, Laura opts for love. Laura explains, “Love is giving, marriage is buying and selling. You can’t put love into a contract” (532). Laura has no desire to be married and wants no part of this conventional exchange. Laura’s attempt at love is also a rebellious act as she defiantly gives her heart to Alex Thomas, who is below her class and also a fugitive. She secretly meets with Alex, the man she hid in her attic as

a young girl. Although Iris is not aware of their relationship, Iris observes Laura had “become different lately; she’d become brittle, insouciant, reckless in a new way” (534) around the same time it is supposed that they were together, coinciding with the time Richard was sexually abusing her. Although the depth of Laura and Alex’s relationship is never established, the depth of Laura’s resistance is. Laura concedes to Richard’s sexual abuse because she believes she is saving Alex from being imprisoned. Laura uses her body to secure Alex’s safety. Instead of being merely a victim of Richard’s abuse, Laura uses Richard’s sexual desires to influence his behaviour. At Laura’s request Richard does not help the authorities search for Alex. Later, when she realises that Alex has died in the war and Iris and Alex were lovers, Laura displays her final and most brutal act of resistance. Laura’s final act of rebellion is exhibited when she takes her own life. As a way of gaining autonomy after being controlled and betrayed for so many years, Laura drives herself off a bridge and commits suicide. Laura’s bodily resistance is to release herself from her body and from those who have harmed her, and to subtract herself for good from being victimised. Reminiscent of a story which Iris and Laura studied as young girls, Laura wanted to be released from her body. Laura writes of the tragic heroine: she wanted to “get out of her body...She didn’t want to be alive anymore. It put her out of her misery, so it was the right thing to do” (626). Although suicide seems like a last resort, suicide was a way in which Laura could escape the oppression and hurt that she experienced throughout her life. In escaping her body, Laura is able to escape her gender and the implications of her gender. Wearing “white gloves” (619), one of the many items Laura considered to be “trappings” (566), she drove herself off the bridge. Without the possibility of autonomy, confined by society’s rigid expectations,

suicide offers Laura the agency to escape the oppression and control which existed in the early twentieth century.

Overall, in Atwood's novel the female body, as a possession, commodified and performative, was marked by the oppression and dominance experienced by women in the first half of the twentieth century. The Blind Assassin illustrates the way in which bodies were controlled during this time but also the way in which bodies resisted. There is a long tradition of using the female body to figure social relations during a particular time through novels, as is the case with the "novel of manners" or didactic novels. Those novels, however, are warnings against women who rebel; Atwood's novel shows the necessity of being subversive. Atwood writes women who challenge the norms of the patriarchal world. Iris and Laura attempt to gain autonomy in a world in which women no longer are entirely willing to be dominated. Although The Blind Assassin shows the way in which women were historically controlled and oppressed it also illustrates the way in which women resisted. Iris's final act of resistance is writing her memoir and unveiling the secrets of her past. Mandated to be silent, Iris reclaims her voice and exposes her and Laura's story in a last-chance opportunity to clear the air. In Iris's memoir, the female body tells a story of two sisters; in Atwood's novel, the female body tells the lost history of women during the early twentieth century. As textual bodies are marked and encoded by their experiences, bodies become signs to be read and thus histories to be revealed.

## CHAPTER V:

### *Epilogue*

In writing historical fiction, Margaret Atwood not only writes literature about the past but also writes literature that problematises the writing of the past. As earlier noted, historical fiction simultaneously can be used to give expression to historical events and the impact on people living through them, while also challenging traditional history and ways of knowing. Historical fiction reconstructs the past, disrupting the conventional way in which history is produced. Atwood's historical novels explore aspects of Canadian history, but also at times examine the writing of history and the problems associated with reconstructing the past as is the case in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin.

Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin are historical novels in that their stories are placed against the larger backdrop of Canadian history. As mentioned, Atwood frames Grace Marks's life in Alias Grace with large-scale historical events such as immigration from Ireland, the Rebellion of 1837 and the American Civil War and Iris Chase Griffen's life in The Blind Assassin with World War I, the Depression years, and World War II. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the social history of everyday life enters into the attempt to reconstruct the stories of Grace and Iris. And, while Atwood reconstructs the past bringing to light the social realities of the times, she also addresses several of the concerns surrounding history. For

example, Atwood emphasises that to know the past is impossible as multiple possibilities of the past exist. Atwood admits that the stories she writes are only versions of the past. Atwood comments in “In Search of Alias Grace”: “history and the novel, are selective... each historian picks out the facts he or she chooses to find significant, and every novel, whether historical or not, must limit its own scope” (Curious Pursuits 228). Thus, in writing history as much is being said as is not being said. However, one man or woman’s omission is another man or woman’s story. With both novels’ blend of contradictions and uncertainty, multiple stories surface in the narratives of Grace and Iris as Atwood’s versions are placed against the larger backdrop of official histories. Thus, through the narratives of Grace Marks and Iris Chase Griffen Atwood underscores the possibility of multiple histories, challenging the idea of one official, objective, neutral and clear history. Atwood acknowledges in the writing of Alias Grace that “a different writer, with access to exactly the same historical records, could have – and without a doubt would have – written a very different sort of novel” (228). Atwood recognises that multiple histories exist and the history that is written depends on the one who writes it.

In Atwood’s reconstruction of the past, she concerns herself with the multiple possibilities of the past, but also as mentioned, the daily details of everyday life. Atwood believes that it is the daily experiences that have been omitted and their inclusion is important to history. Atwood writes: “History may intend to provide us with grand patterns and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundation it would collapse. Whoever tells you that history is not about individuals, only about large trends and movements, is lying” (211). Atwood explains of the every day things: “Nobody wrote these things down, because everybody knew them, and considered them too mundane and unimportant to record. ...[if you want] the detailed truth, and nothing but the truth, you’re going to have a thin time of it

if you trust to paper” (225). Thus, instead of Atwood leaving the past to paper, Atwood looks to the body as a site for visiting the past. With Atwood’s concern of what has been left out of history, she knowingly writes the female body into history. Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin can be explored to chronicle the lives of women through textual representations of the female body as one of many ways to uncover women’s history, including the day-to-day history of women.

Although Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin address contemporary issues surrounding the writing of history both novels importantly highlight matters of the past in conjunction with the body. In both novels there is an emergence of Atwood’s “female subjects from a position of powerlessness and silence to becoming duplicitous narrators as they struggle to reconnect ‘body’ with ‘text’” (The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood 5) and also with history. Each novel is about individual women and the way in which each manages the complicated existence of the time in which each lived. As protagonists of a larger story, Grace’s and Iris’s female bodies are sites for exploration of the past but also of feminist identities and concerns. Atwood, who writes women, writes each of these women and their bodily experiences with the past. As Madeleine Davies notes, “Atwood’s fictional female bodies become battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh” (58). For example, in Alias Grace after Grace is released from prison she feels her face changing. Grace narrates: “I felt as if my face was dissolving and turning into someone else’s face” (529). The harsh existence of Grace’s life in prison set upon her face and once released it becomes a face of someone who has been freed. Grace’s face signifies not only her imprisonment, but female entrapment and crimes against the body, including sexual objectification and murder, which she has witnessed throughout her forty years of life. Similarly, in The Blind Assassin patriarchal power also marks

the body. As Iris faces the challenges she experiences in her demanding role as Richard's wife, Iris writes that, "I was spread too thin as it was, I did not think there would be enough of me left over" (541). Iris's body is spread thin, physically affected by her husband's domination.

Wendy Roy maintains that, "Atwood repeatedly poses questions about women's bodily experiences in the various levels of The Blind Assassin in order to interrogate gendered and sexual relationships in mid-twentieth century North America" (362). Atwood's writing is obviously involved with the writing of the female body. And, in Atwood's writing of Iris who while writing her memoirs explains that she "ache's like history" (56), Atwood connects not only the body with writing but also with history.

Iris's retrospective narrative is written with emphasis on women's bodies just as Grace's narrative is written with emphasis on women's bodies. With the recovery of voice, instead of Grace feeling as though Dr. Jordan is "drawing on me- drawing on my skin" (77) and Iris being "written on, rewritten, smoothed over"( 469), both convert themselves from a body that is either drawn on or written on to one that records her version of her own bodily experiences. Through the voice of Grace and Iris female voice is reclaimed as is the personal history of women, as each tells her own story. Unlike traditional history that often speaks for the masses, both novels speak for individuals and although both women originally are defined by the grand male narrative, each recovers her own story. But what Atwood does that is so appealing is that through the telling of Grace's and Iris's story one simple story does not emerge, instead the stories are complex, multiple and refuse one definitive meaning. As Madeleine Davies notes: "Atwood refuse[es] idealising totalities and insist[s] on writing the realities of women operating within a historically specific socio-culture" (60), because again, Atwood emphasises the multiple possibilities that exist in writing of the past. It is the hand that writes and the mouth that speaks as the body



becomes an important tool in recovering the past. After all, the body is a site of oppression and of resistance in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin as the female body so often manipulated and contained experiences power in a variety of ways in both novels. From sexual liberation to spiritual embodiment Atwood's female characters escape the body and use the body as a tool of escape.

But why history and the body; what is Atwood trying to say? It is the lived experiences that create history. It is individual movements in and around historical events and change and individual responses to events that make history. Bodies are marked by the world around them and as such can be read as histories and as records of the past. I believe, Atwood by using the female body in her writing, underscores that it is individuals and specifically individual female bodies that have been left out of history and need to be recuperated. Instead of using paper documents to read the past, the female form with all its curves and flesh give life to the past. As Madeleine Davies suggests: "Atwood's female bodies are socio-cultural documents" (58) and as such the textual bodies of Grace and Iris are records of the past. As Grace and Iris, dominated by the power structures that existed at the time, narrate their story each reclaims the lost history of women during the time in which each lived.

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