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„Manipulative Narration and Historiographic Metafiction in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin“

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1 INTRODUCTION

L’histoire, cette vieille dame exaltée et menteuse.
(Guy de Maupassant)

“History, that excitable and unreliable old lady”: this aphorism by de Maupassant is interesting in many respects. Not only does it personify history as a woman (the French word histoire is female in gender); it also attributes the unflattering adjectives “excitable” and “unreliable” to this “old lady”. How can history, a concept which is usually taken for granted, be said to be unreliable at all, and what are the effects of such unreliability when it comes to recording history, particularly in a fictionalised form? These two questions constitute the starting point of this thesis, which explores the relationship between history and narrative in Margaret Atwood’s novels Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin1, paying particular attention to how both history and narrative are (re)produced by female narrator figures whose reliability is compromised.

Although it would be overly simplistic to subsume Atwood’s fiction under the label ‘postmodern’, her repeated concern with issues such as the questionable nature of concepts of ‘truth’, identity fragmentation and ex-centric perspectives in general, all of which are also prominently featured in the two chosen novels, render postmodernist approaches a particularly fitting frame for interpretation. Despite differences in character portrayal and time setting, Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin share a number of extraordinary structural and narrative characteristics which are indicative of postmodernist practices. These include the fractured nature of the two plots, which are split into various strands and genres and delivered by a multitude of often contradictory narrative voices, and the ability of the female protagonists to manipulate and to employ their narrative skills to their desired ends. This manipulative power ties in with de Maupassant’s saying about the “excitable and unreliable old lady”, which, quite aptly, is quoted twice in The Blind Assassin.

1 Hereafter parenthetically referred to as AG and BA respectively
The concept of the ‘unreliable narrator’, introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961 and subject of much scholarly debate up to the present day, proves to be a helpful interpretative frame, as it succeeds in accounting for various causes for unreliability which affect Grace and Iris, e.g. mental illness, memory loss or old age. However, narrative manipulation as a conscious and purposeful act of deluding or even utilising the audience is more than just a by-product of narrative unreliability. If employed in novels which deal with real historical events or, as in the case of Alias Grace, feature a historical person as protagonist, it challenges traditional assumptions about ‘truthful’ representations of history and thus contributes to the postmodern questioning of the mimetic quality of historiography.

Another reason which justifies a postmodernist approach is that both Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin constitute prototypical examples of what Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction”. A thoroughly postmodern concept, this notion refers to fictional re-writings of history which, as the name already suggests, are characterised by a high degree of self-referentiality to their own nature as texts and, most importantly, as fiction. As both novels selected for this thesis constantly draw attention to the process of their own oral or written composition, their obvious correspondence with the concept of historiographic metafiction will be a focal point of the analysis.

The present thesis tries to shed light on the manipulative practices of the two novels’ female protagonists, to investigate potential reasons for these strategies, and to analyse how their employment influences the narrative and its reception. The analysis is comprised of three main parts. First, Alias Grace will be thoroughly examined with regard to questions of identity construction and 19th-century discourses about ‘madness’. Since the novel’s plot is based on true historical incidents, the question of reliability in retelling and the conflation of history, narrative and fiction are all the more interesting.

The second part investigates similar issues in The Blind Assassin. Identity issues and the role of female characters in relationship to the protagonist men in the novel will be a focal point. Furthermore, social transgression and mental instability, both of which are equivalents to the ‘madness’ referred to in Alias Grace, will be discussed. A point which deserves particular attention in The Blind Assassin is the technique of mise-en-abyme, i.e. the nesting of various narrative
levels. Three such levels can be identified in the novel, and their complex interrelation invariably puts forward the question of authorship, voice and genre.

In the third and last part, both analyses will be subsumed under the overarching frame of postmodernist theory, or, more particularly, of historiographic metafiction. This final chapter shall attempt to find answers to a number of questions: How do the two novels in question qualify as historiographic metafiction, what constitutes their metafictional merit, and how are personal blows of fate and 'official' history rewritten/reproduced by the protagonists? What are the narrative means available to two women living in different epochs and under different social circumstances? How does the difference between oral (hi)storytelling and historiography, i.e. the writing of history, manifest itself in the novels; and what other means of representation are effectively employed?

By touching upon a wide range of issues, such as identity construction, narratology, genre, mythological intertexts and visual representation, this thesis shall try to do justice to the complexity and the multifarious quality of Margaret Atwood’s novels.
O wake once more! though scarce my skill command
Some feeble echoing of thine earlier lay:
Though harsh and faint, and soon to die away,
And all unworthy of thy nobler stain,
Yet if one heart throb higher at its sway,
The wizard note has not been touch’d in vain.
Then silent be no more! Enchantress, wake again!

(Sir Walter Scott – The Lady of the Lake)

Alias Grace, Margaret Atwood’s first historical novel, is based on an infamous criminal case in the year 1843 in which sixteen-year-old servant girl Grace Marks and 21-year-old stable boy James McDermott were accused of having murdered their employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper and mistress Nancy Montgomery. Atwood herself remarks in the novel’s afterword that “Grace Marks […] was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s” (AG 537), but also that

[attitudes towards her reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott’s threats and by fear for her own life?” (AG 538)

The novel draws much of its appeal and suspense from exactly this ambiguity. Far from providing an unequivocal statement about Grace’s guilt or innocence, Alias Grace rather serves to sustain the obscurity attached to the infamous story and, if anything, leaves its readers more puzzled than ever about what truly happened in the Kinnear household. However, “questions [about the truth of Grace’s version of the story and about her guilt] are beside the point, either/or forms that overlook the pluralism of both identity and truth.” (Wilson “Quilting” 133) Indeed, as Löschnigg and Löschnigg have suggested, the crime story and its ultimate resolution are not the central focus of the novel, but rather serve “as an occasion to pose further questions about the fictionality of historical facts and about the issue of public identities, and of identity in general” (Löschnigg and Löschnigg 442, my translation). The interpretation of the text is further
complicated by the high degree of unreliability and manipulation attached to Grace’s narrative and by the abundance of additional material complementing the main text.

The following chapter analyses *Alias Grace* with particular regard to issues of identity, drawing upon traditional Victorian gender roles and their transgression, upon the postmodernist notion of a fragmented self and upon 19th-century discourses about madness and criminality. In analysing the text thus, this chapter will also examine manipulative strategies employed in the novel and the implications of this manipulation on the text as a whole.

### 2.1 Questions of identity

#### 2.1.1 Transgression of Victorian roles: The angel and the fallen woman

*Alias Grace* builds strongly upon binaries (angel – fallen woman, sanity – madness, master – servant, truth – lie, empowered – disempowered, etc.), many of which are dismantled and undermined by Atwood’s fractured postmodern narrative. One of the main reasons why Grace is deemed untrustworthy by both her contemporaries and the reader is that she eludes common 19th-century categorisations of femininity. Of course, “Atwood’s Grace is […] a fictive construction”, charged with “Atwood’s late twentieth-century reinterpretation” and “already framed by previous discourses” (Howells 142), the most prominent of which is the Victorian dichotomy of the angelic vs. the demonic woman. Atwood takes up this opposition and rewrites Grace Marks’ story from a 20th-century standpoint. It also needs to be mentioned that theories about Victorian attitudes towards the role of women, although born in the English discourse, can also be applied to 19th century Canadian society. Despite its geographic remoteness, Canada sought to distance itself from the more ‘liberal’ values and morals of its American neighbour and thus reflected a society and culture comparable to that of Victorian England. (See King 72)

The notion of the ‘angel in the house’, the only alternative to which is the debauched fallen woman, forms a frame by which Grace can (or, for lack of
alternatives, has to) be judged by her contemporaries. The sheer inconsistency of public opinion about her illustrates the extremes between which Grace oscillates constantly. There does not seem to be a middle way between the ruthless, cold-hearted murderess and the ingenuous, naïve girl; the choice is 'either-or'. “[S]o deeply does her crime transgress the female ideal that the authorities are still driven either to find her innocent, or to classify her as ‘criminal’, ‘idiot’ or ‘minor’ in order to explain that transgression.” (King 72) Moreover, the short-sighted duality in the perception of women shows a profound lack of role-models available to them in Victorian society. After all, “[i]t is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters.” (Gilbert and Gubar 53) Margaret Atwood presents her protagonist as a polymorphic heroine, devoid of a clear-cut boundary between the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ within her. Rather it seems that Grace has internalised both elements of the dichotomy and that the transition between the two is smooth. In the Governor’s house she assumes the role of the angel in the house: she is obedient, dutiful and, to all intents and purposes, esteemed by her employer, the Governor’s wife. “I come into the room and curtsy and move about, mouth straight, head bent, and I pick up the cups or set them down, depending; and they stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets. The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess.” (AG 24-25) The amalgam of submissive servant and criminal madwoman who, according to the Governor’s wife, “sometimes […] talks to herself and sings out loud in a most peculiar manner” (AG 26), must have seemed bewildering, yet in a morbid way fascinating to the 19th-century bourgeois society. Grace herself is acutely aware of the miscellaneous roles attached to her and possesses the talent to adapt to them in order to fulfil the expectations of others. She muses: “A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster. When they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my face and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one.” (AG 36) Such an extraordinary awareness of social and gender stereotypes in Grace and her almost mocking compliance with some of them must, of course, be attributed to the 20th-century stance from which the novel and its heroine are written. Atwood endows Grace with a pronounced sense of social configurations and restrictions in order to be able to voice them openly and reflect on them critically.
Grace has been subjected to the angel-monster-dichotomy from a very young age. A half-orphan since the age of twelve years, she was forced to assume a mother-like and thus, it could be argued, angel-like function for her younger siblings. However, her innermost thoughts, confessed to Dr. Jordan, seem to confirm the thesis of Gilbert and Gubar, which suggests that “the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within [...] the angel.” (Gilbert and Gubar 29) Once, while she and her siblings are at the dock, hoping to get some fish from the fishermen, Grace thinks about pushing one or two of the smaller children into the water to save herself and her parents the trouble of so many mouths to feed. Despite her frank confession of such a thought, Grace is eager to stress that “it was only a thought, put into my head by the Devil, no doubt.” (AG 124) During the hardship she and her siblings have to endure after their arrival in Toronto, she thinks increasingly often about killing her brutal father. Again, she expresses her awareness of the sinfulness of such thoughts, but does not attempt to mitigate her hateful feelings towards her father: “I did not want to be led into a grave sin of that kind, though I was afraid that the fiery red anger that was in my heart against him would drive me to it.” (AG 149) Whether or not she consciously orchestrates such assertions of her inhibitions and her bad conscience in order to manipulate Simon’s image of her and her motivations remains, like so many parts of her narrative, unclear.

The assumption that Grace is somehow different from other women is reinforced during her stay at the Kinnear household. A shy, submissive servant girl in training, she nevertheless possesses extraordinary traits. The cryptic evaluation of the visiting peddler Jeremiah, “You are one of us” (AG 179), implies that he sees something in Grace which is unusual and sets her apart from her female contemporaries. Another interpretation “is that, like him, she has the ability to escape societal definitions and create her own identity.” (Lovelady 44) Jeremiah, the man without boundaries who crosses borders “like passing through air” (AG 309), is the only man who seems to see abilities in Grace which go beyond her role as a servant. His suggestion that she come away with him to work as a travelling clairvoyant first attracts Grace because it seemingly offers her an opportunity for escape, not only from the confines of the domestic sphere, but also from conventional female life scripts. Still, she ultimately refuses, being too well aware of the dangers such an alliance poses for her: “I remembered
what happened to Mary Whitney; and although Jeremiah seemed kindly, appearances can be deceptive [...]. What if things went wrong, and I was left in the lurch by myself in a strange place?” (AG 311) Instead she chooses to stay at the Kinnear household, seemingly unaware that this decision will render her an object of sexual exploitation. For sexual exploitation is what she is confronted with during the following couple of weeks: the distinction ‘angel – monster’ gradually shifts towards ‘angel – whore’ when Grace is harassed not only by McDermott and his crude remarks, but also by Thomas Kinnear himself, who is said to have “a hankering after the servant-girls, especially those close to home.” (AG 307-308) Grace’s difficult situation is mirrored in the picture of Susannah and the Elders in Kinnear’s room. As King argues, “it suggests that women are always held responsible for male desire, and are liable to be falsely accused, even when they are innocent victims.” (King 78) In the Kinnear household, Grace’s story becomes heavily sexualised, and she herself the target of sexually laden male desires and aggressions.

As has been pointed out, the Victorian woman is strongly outlined and defined by her male surroundings. Denied the power to define herself, she is set against a network of male projections and desires which render her vulnerable and helpless. Grace too is forced into the restrictive role of the frail, passive Victorian woman by the men surrounding her. She, too, is idolised by some to the same extent as she is disparaged by others. In any case, the main agents in construing her and ascribing her roles are always men. Jamie Walsh, testifying against Grace in court, is the first one to blatantly enunciate the angel-monster-duality, stating that “from being an angel in his eyes, and fit to be idolized and worshipped, [Grace] was transformed to a demon” (AG 418). The Reverend Verringer, for his part, seems to be convinced of Grace’s innocence. He is the (fictional) head of “a group of respectable gentleman petitioners […] who pleaded her youth, the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness” (Author’s Afterword, AG 537) in order to release her from prison. Although Verringer’s intentions are benevolent, Simon suspects that he might be in love with Grace and that he pleads her release so fervently because he wants to marry her afterwards. He muses: “She’s still a good-looking woman, and would no doubt be touchingly grateful to her rescuer.” (AG 91) What he initially observes rather ironically in the Reverend Verringer soon reflects upon himself. After all, he is a
Victorian man who unconsciously has internalised received gender concepts, so “the idea of the grateful woman or the wilting, helpless woman is powerfully eroticized for him” (Carroll 223), too. His self-destructive affair with his landlady Rachel Humphrey enables him to act out his repressed desires for Grace. At their first sexual encounter, Simon imagines that he is penetrating Grace, only to wake up and find himself in bed with his landlady. Later on, when she beseeches him not to leave her, he realizes that “[t]his is what he’s wanted Grace to do – this trembling and clinging” (AG 474). That way, Simon fashions Grace as the stereotypical weak, helpless, deranged madwoman who was so alluring to Victorian men. (See Tolan Margaret Atwood 238) The comparison to Shakespeare’s Ophelia as the image of a prototypical madwoman, with wildflowers in her long, flowing hair, is drawn various times in the novel, although, as Tolan has so aptly remarked, “it is the men rather than Grace who tie the flowers to her hair.” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 239)

As a fourth exemplary case, Grace’s lawyer McKenzie also seems to be taken in by the image of the helpless maiden in need of a strong, male hand: “Find a maiden chained to a rock and about to be devoured by a monster, rescue her, then have her yourself.” (AG 439) However, Grace does not helplessly remain in the position of the chained maiden, of the abused servant-girl, of the mysterious madwoman. “What makes her remarkable is her ability to move through these roles, […] to move from madness and sexual scandal and turn these common narrative ends into a mere interludes [sic] in her life, phases she can move beyond.” (Lovelady 53) In this respect, she does indeed resemble Jeremiah the peddler. Like him, she is a transgressor of boundaries and crosses the borders between various identities and roles “like passing through air” (AG 309). She is aware of her public image, but she never judges the designation ‘murderess’. If anything, she is fascinated by it:

Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. […] It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor. Murderer is merely brutal. […] I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices. (AG 25)

Grace is not only conscious of her public role as a ‘murderer’, i.e. a person who has murdered another person, but she also specifies her role as a ‘murderess’, i.e. as an explicitly female murderer. Her synaesthetic description of the term...
‘murderess’, appealing to the olfactory and the auditory sense, is opposed to the blunt term ‘murderer’, with its implications of masculine brutality and beastliness. Thus Grace manages to create an unoccupied niche for herself in which both her femininity and the darker, transgressive forces of her character find a place.

2.1.2 Fragmentation of identity

In her study on fragmentarity in texts by Margaret Atwood and other women writers, Karin Gerig illustrates the shift from a notion of ‘universal’ selfhood, characterised by strong patriarchal influences and “the dichotomisation and hierarchisation of body and mind” (Gerig 23, my translation), to more process-related models. She argues that identity models which build on the assumption of a “stable core of identity” (Gerig 30, my translation) are mere constructs, themselves derived from the fragmentation they seem to deny. After all, the specification of a universal core is ultimately nothing else than the privileged treatment of one particular fragment, leading to the exclusion of certain aspects within the individual and of certain social groups at large. This in turn leads to the denial of the constructedness of identity itself, as “the ontological status of an immutable essence of being offers considerably greater securities than the idea of a construct which can be critically deconstructed” (Gerig 30, my translation). Gerig’s line of argument ties in with the postmodern shift in the perception of identity and individuality. The individual’s self is no longer regarded a stable, unified, unalterable entity, but rather as inconsistent, constructed and shaped by “all the unconscious processes which influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.” (Vevaina 91) Margaret Atwood’s fiction, which has often been placed in a postmodernist tradition, repeatedly concerns itself with the fragmentation of a self which is “comprised entirely of influences and experiences” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 223). With reference to Atwood’s novels Surfacing and Lady Oracle, Rao has observed that “Atwood’s treatment of character and subjectivity presents the ego as inconsistent and in constant process. The novels challenge the notion of a coherent and self-sufficient subjectivity” (Rao xvii). The same holds true for Alias Grace. The tension between the seemingly objective assessment of historical events on the one hand and deeply subjective accounts of such events on the
other hand is consistent with the postmodern idea of multiple truths. The question is: whose truth is disclosed in the novel, who is the subject in question, and how is this subject constituted?

As to the make-up of Grace’s identity, there seems to be a strong (male) urge to define and label this mysterious woman. Simon betrays this desire when in one of his first encounters with her, he asks her: “The question is, Grace, what are you? Fish or flesh or good red herring?” (AG 116) This seemingly joking question in fact portends Simon’s primary motivation in seeking Grace out: to define and categorise her, to find a label to attach to her – be it the stereotypical Victorian madwoman, “[t]he cornered woman; the penitential dress falling straight down, concealing feet that were surely bare” (AG 68), or the “celebrated murderess” (AG 25). At bottom, “[w]hat he wants is certainty, one way or the other, and that is precisely what she’s withholding from him.” (AG 375) However, as mentioned above, Grace eludes clear-cut boundaries and circumscriptions. Hers is a patchwork-identity, made up of various discourses and the impervious myths surrounding her.

According to Fiona Tolan, Grace is “a character that embodies both essentialist and anti-essentialist discourses” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 224). Tolan has introduced two models of identity, both of which can be applied to Grace. The first one is what she calls “the essentialist peach” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 246). While Simon is writing down her story, Grace has “a feeling of being torn open; not like a body of flesh, it is not painful as such, but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting of its own accord. And inside the peach there’s a stone.” (AG 79) According to Tolan, “the inner stone represents a unique and immutable self” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 246), the essentialist truth which can be found after all. The second model is the “postmodern onion” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 246), based on Ingersoll’s analysis of the novel, which suggests a multitude of layers to be peeled away in search for an assumed hidden truth, “only to find ‘nothing’ in the center, since it is the leaves themselves that are the onion’s heart or center.” (Ingersoll “Engendering” 390) This typically postmodern model negates the existence of a central core of the self and instead builds on the assumption that it is exactly the pointlessness in looking for such a core which forms the essence of any understanding of the self. Although the image of the multi-layered onion can certainly be applied to Grace and is also mirrored in
one of Simon’s feverish dreams, where he imagines anatomising a woman hidden under a sheet of cloth, Tolan points out that it is not entirely consistent with Atwood’s approach to Grace’s story: “Whilst the truth may be unknowable, there is a truth.” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 243) Accordingly, Grace is aware of a core; a ‘stone’ comprising the centre of her identity, although the quality of this core remains unknown to the reader and also, it seems, to Grace herself. Nevertheless, she is well aware of the various identities imposed on her from outside:

   I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhumane female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act […], that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, […] that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, […] that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?” (AG 25)

This statement indicates a certain degree of helplessness in the face of a forced fragmentation which is induced from outside, i.e. from society and all the persons passing judgement on Grace. However, Grace herself also makes sure that others, especially Simon, only catch fragmented glimpses of her self. Deliberately withholding or misrepresenting information, not only about facts, but also about her inner life, her dreams and thoughts, she herself becomes an active agent in the very disintegration of her character and the misrepresentation of her public identity which she so often criticises in her inner monologues and in her conversations with Simon.

The inconsistent nature of Grace’s character can also be attributed to her own fluctuating ideas of identity and selfhood. The novel’s title ‘Alias’ Grace foreshadows the problematic nature of her identity. Her assuming an alias, i.e. a pseudonym to conceal her own identity, is a matter of considerable confusion for those trying to elucidate her case. For Grace, however, who easily takes on other women’s names and clothes, it is a most natural and logical act. She explains to Dr. Jordan: “I did not think [Mary Whitney] would mind if I used her name. She sometimes lent me her clothing, too.” (AG 117) Grace takes on Mary’s identity just like putting on a dress. Similarly, she literally puts on dead Nancy’s fancy clothes, which are much more elegant and fashionable than her own. ‘Fine
feathers make fine birds’: clothes and accessories make it easier for Grace to pass for the woman whose identity she is appropriating. Kuhn has shown that “[t]he three women [Grace, Mary and Nancy] are associated by the acts of borrowing or lending clothing” (Kuhn 100), which also shows Grace’s readiness to adopt different identities and to reinforce them by adjusting her visual appearance to the role she is taking on.

The marriage quilt Grace starts working on at the end of her narrative has been interpreted as the final merging of the women whom she has in a way embodied throughout her eventful history. The pattern she chooses is a ‘Tree of Paradise’, the design of which, however, departs from traditional patterns in certain details. Grace intends to use patches from Mary’s petticoat, her own prison nightdress and from Nancy’s dress “so we will all be together” (AG 534). Choosing the technique she has artfully mastered, namely quilting, she sets out to symbolically unite the representatives of various aspects of her identity. “Indeed it seems as if Grace in the end had assumed all important female figures appearing in her story as part of her identity” (Löschnigg and Löschnigg 451, my translation).

2.2 Madness and multiple voices

2.2.1 Mental illness, possession, deception

“[T]he attribution of unreliability to a narrator-persona is often based on the understanding that he or she is ‘abnormal’, ‘insane’, or ‘mad’” (Allrath 126). However, neither such an understanding nor the conception of ‘insane’ or ‘mad’ exist a priori, but are heavily determined by the cultural and historical context in which a text is interpreted. Popular views about madness, its causes and constituents and about the appearance of those said to be mad change from period to period (see Carroll 219), which makes it problematic to sustain the simplifying maxim ‘a mad narrator is an unreliable narrator.’ Still, “a problematic

2 On quilting see also chapter 4.
psychological disposition of the narrator can be, and in fact often is, a signal for unreliable narration” (Allrath 128).

The state of historical Grace Marks’ mental health was a matter of much debate amongst those who followed her case and it is also presented as such in the novel. As to the madness or sanity of fictional Grace Marks, there are three basic explanatory models available. Lovelady has subsumed them under the keywords “mental illness, possession, […] deception” (Lovelady 57), insisting, however, that none of the three possibilities can be said to be dominant over the others due to the novel’s ambiguous and multi-stranded construction. Margaret Atwood herself refrains from passing judgement on the question of Grace’s mental health. In the novel’s afterword she merely refers to the reports of Susanna Moodie, who visited Grace in the Toronto Lunatic Asylum, and states that “Moodie’s first-hand observations are generally trustworthy, so if she reports a shrieking, capering Grace, that is no doubt what she saw.” (AG 538-39) Again, it must be kept in mind that Moodie’s own perception was strongly influenced by contemporary notions of madness; hence her representation of Grace was biased. “[She] saw the kind of madwoman she had been conditioned to see, and presented her accordingly.” (Carroll 220) Moreover, emotional outbursts at the asylum do not necessarily have to be interpreted as madness, as Allrath (127-128) has shown. She points to the ambiguity of the term ‘mad’, the synonyms of which can either be ‘insane’ or ‘angry’, and, in the tradition of predecessors like Gilbert and Gubar or Phyllis Chesler, links this ambiguity to women’s position in society and their restricted ways of expressing their discontent in public, which often leaves the flight into alleged madness as the only alternative to a life of imposed introversion. Furthermore, discourses about madness have traditionally been heavily gendered (see Allrath 126, Carroll 218-19, Tolan Alias Grace 235-36), emphasising above all the specifically gender-related nature of mental diseases such as hysteria. Nineteenth century women were at the mercy of their husbands and mental doctors, who could decide on their institutionalisation more or less haphazardly. (See Carroll 218) Once labelled ‘mad’, the mentally deranged woman was subjected to a number of stereotypes, vividly depicted in an extract from Isabella Beeton’s Beeton’s Book of Household Management from 1859-61, which precedes chapter VI:
**Hysterics** – These fits take place, for the most part, in young, nervous, unmarried women. [...] The fits themselves are mostly preceded by great depression of spirits, shedding of tears, sickness, palpitation of the heart, &c. ... The patient now generally becomes insensible and faints; the body is thrown about in all directions, froth issues from the mouth, incoherent expressions are uttered, and fits of laughter, crying, and screaming take place. [...] (Beeton qtd. in AG 157)

The Victorian woman lapsing into madness is victimised, but at the same time potentially subverts patriarchal power mechanisms with the limited means at her disposal. Grace reports that “a good portion of the women in the asylum were no madder than the Queen of England” (AG 34) and that some of them had themselves locked up in the institution just to escape their violent husbands or to have a warm shelter for the winter. Any display of discontent and anger at the asylum is regarded as further proof of the mental instability of the inmate, so that Grace feels compelled to compose herself and to repress her emotions in order to escape contemporary ‘therapeutic’ methods such as cold baths and the strait-waistcoat. Significantly, she is only declared sane again and allowed to return to the penitentiary after she has “stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma’am and No Ma’am, Yes and No Sir.” (AG 36) This speaks for the above mentioned difficulties women had in voicing any criticism about their social situation and illustrates how the smallest attempt at resistance was nipped in the bud by dismissing it as the expressions of an unsettled mind.

From the beginning, Grace denies having ever been mad. Before being sent to the asylum, she tries to convince the doctors: “I told them I wasn’t mad, that I wasn’t the one, but they wouldn’t listen” (AG 34), and when she overhears them analysing her development she bitterly remarks: “Of course they could not admit for an instance that they had been mistaken when they first put me in.” (AG 36) However, she also gives a very telling explanation of her own definition of madness, which seems to confirm the second explanatory model (i.e. possession): “Gone mad is what they say, and sometimes Run mad, as if mad is a direction, like west [...]. But when you go mad you don’t go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in.” (AG 37) This statement suggests a close familiarity with madness and with a split in personality, which might of course be attributed to Grace’s experiences during her stay at the asylum. However, it “sound[s] very like a first-hand experience of schizophrenia”
(Howells 146) and thus can also be read as a subtle confession of her own temporary madness, or rather of her possession by Mary Whitney’s spirit. After Mary’s death, Grace fancies hearing her voice, saying “Let me in” (AG 207). However, according to a superstitious belief explained to her by a fellow passenger on the ship to Canada, the deceased’s soul would actually want to be let out of the death chamber, so Grace assumes having misunderstood the voice. (See Lovelady 55) This incident might be interpreted as Mary’s spirit our soul ‘entering’ Grace, who faints soon afterwards. After waking up again, she has lost her memory of the past few hours in which she is reported by the others to have been “[trying] to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her.” (AG 208)

There is a third possibility which offers a different explanation altogether: Grace might have feigned madness in order to achieve leniency before court. In a letter to Simon, Dr. Bannerling, who was working at the asylum where Grace was stationed, claims that “her madness was a fraud and an imposture, adopted by her in order that she might indulge herself and be indulged, the strict regimen of the Penitentiary […] not having been to her liking. She is an accomplished actress and a most practised liar.” (AG 81) He then proceeds to accuse her of putting on a mere performance of madness (based on popular stereotypes of madness as specified by Isabella Beeton): “[S]he amused herself with a number of supposed fits, hallucinations, caperings, warblings and the like, nothing being lacking to the impersonation but Ophelia’s wildflowers entwined in her hair” (AG 81). Grace herself reports that her lawyer McKenzie advised her accordingly and “told them [the court members] I was next door to an idiot […] and I should not appear to be too intelligent.” (AG 26) There are several passages in the novel which seem to confirm the assumption that Grace has just been pretending. She repeatedly hints at her talent as an actress who knows how to play her part. For instance, she mentions that “Miss Lydia tells me I am a romantic figure […]. But if I laughed out loud […] it would spoil their romantic notion of me. Romantic people are not supposed to laugh.” (AG 27) To Dr. Jordan, she reports: “I had now been a servant for three years, and could act the part well enough by that time.” (AG 261) After having been granted a pardon and released from prison, Grace remarks that “now I must act like someone who has been rescued. […] It calls for a different arrangement of the face” (AG 513). The lawyer McKenzie suggests
that she might have acted according to the image that was constructed of her in the newspapers: “How did you check her facts? In the newspapers, I suppose […] Has it occurred to you that she may have derived her corroborative details from the same source? […]” (AG 434) Thus, it does not seem at all unlikely that Grace might merely have put on a performance of madness in order to delude her environment.

Although some critics, like Niederhoff, have taken it for granted that Grace, during the phases of her ‘possession’ by Mary Whitney’s spirit, has instigated the murder of Nancy and Thomas Kinnear, the question about Grace’s mental health ultimately remains unanswered in the novel. Just like the reader, Simon asks himself whether Grace has told him “nothing but the pure, entire, and unblemished truth” or whether he “is […] the victim of a cunning imposture” (AG 374). Either way, it is not so much the question whether or not Grace is or ever has been insane which is of importance, but rather how discourses of madness are reproduced in her story and how these contribute to the all-pervasive theme of fragmentation.

2.2.1.1 “Madwoman or bad woman?” Sexuality, insanity, criminality

Jeannette King centres her analysis of Alias Grace around the question whether Grace is a criminal or a psychiatric case: “[I]s she bad or mad?” (King 72) Indeed, the distinction between the two possibilities was not always as clear-cut as it is today. King shows how in Victorian times sexuality, hysteria/insanity and criminality were intricately interwoven, and how all three were used to submit women who failed to conform to societal expectations to rigid surveillance and various forms of punishment. (See King 70) The etymology of the term hysteria (stemming from Greek ‘hystera’ for uterus) clearly shows that it was the female sexualised body which “rendered [women] always potentially deviant and unstable, if not legally criminal or insane” (King 68). Does it follow that Grace is stigmatised as ‘mad’ simply because she is a woman, and a woman associated with sexual scandal at that?
Surely “sexuality is both the magnet that attracts others to [her] and the crime that requires such intensive scrutiny and punishment” (King 71). In her study on Madness and Sexual Politics in works of Margaret Atwood and other female authors, Rigney observes that “[t]he disaster […] inevitably lies in the encounter with the male authority figure, whether lover, husband, father, or psychiatrist, who decides the question of sanity and who then assumes the power to incarcerate and to destroy.” (Rigney Madness 11) It could further be argued that this male authority figure not only decides the question of the woman’s mental health, but also the question of her moral status. It is the man who attaches the label ‘angel’ or ‘whore’ to the woman; and whichever one he chooses, it will invariably entrap the woman in precast schemata. “If women are seduced and abandoned they’re supposed to go mad, but if they survive, and seduce in their turn, then they were mad to begin with” (AG 349) Dr. Jordan summarises a common 19th-century belief, at the same time expressing his doubts about such a “dubious piece of reasoning” (AG 349) which, once again, establishes a direct link between female sexuality and insanity. Not without reason does Dr. DuPont, an alleged scientist of his time, “tend to place prostitution in the same class as the homicidal and religious manias” (AG 349), which further adds the notion of criminality.

The hypnosis session conducted by DuPont alias Jeremiah and also attended by Dr. Jordan finally reveals what has long been insinuated. When Simon demands to know whether Grace “has ever had relations with James McDermott” (AG 464), which is as close to an overt mentioning of sexual intercourse as he ever comes, he is himself surprised to realise that the question of Grace’s sexual life interests him even more than her involvement in the murders. Grace, for her part, immediately finds him out: “I’d let him kiss me, and touch me as well, all over, Doctor, the same places you’d like to touch me, because I can always tell, I know what you’re thinking when you sit in that stuffy little sewing room with me.” (AG 465) Instead of allowing Simon to classify her either as a cunning seductress or a helpless victim of sexual assaults, she turns the tables on him and manages to reverse the roles of ‘psychiatrist’ and ‘patient’. Dr. Jordan, who has expected “a series of compelled and somnolent responses to his own firm demands” (AG 464), is increasingly unsettled by Grace’s straightforward, uninhibited behaviour which does not at all comply with his
former notion of her as a prudish, reticent woman. “He must seize the initiative, or at least try to seize it; he must keep Grace from reading his mind.” (AG 465)

Her sharp insight into the hypocritical goings-on in the bourgeois society around her renders mere insanity an implausible explanation for her behaviour, while at the same time her claim to ‘have been’ Mary Whitney when the murders happened attenuates any accusation of sheer criminal brutality on Grace’s part. King concludes that “Grace Marks […] implicitly reject[s] the terms by which Victorian gender discourse attempts to categorise [her], and undermine[s] the certainties of the processes of detection and judgment central to nineteenth-century fiction.” (King 72)

2.2.1.2 The madwoman in the cellar

The novel’s section IV, “Young Man’s Fancy”, begins with an epigraph which is a poem by Emily Dickinson:

One need not be a chamber – to be Haunted –
One need not be a House –
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing –
Material Place –
…

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
Should startle most –
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be horror’s least. …
(AG 52)

This poem sets up a compelling parallel between the human psyche and a house with all its hidden chambers, nooks and corridors. In their seminal work The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar state that “[w]omen […] have often, of course been described or imagined as houses.” (Gilbert and Gubar 88) They argue that the preoccupation with spatial confinement and with themes of entrapment, enclosure and escape in female literature was a prevalent phenomenon in Victorian times, when “almost all […] women were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses [and] [f]iguratively […] locked into male texts” (Gilbert and Gubar 83), and that this concern was passed on as a legacy to 20th-
century women writers. Indeed, spatial imagery and especially allusions to the	house as such play a subliminal, yet important role in Alias Grace. The house,
after all, was considered to be the quintessentially female sphere in Victorian
times. On the one hand it was perceived as such because it was supposed to
shelter women from an outside world which was said to be threatening to their
sensitivity and virtue. On the other hand, however, the house reinforced women’s
confinement and more often than not literally functioned as a prison. (See Gilbert
and Gubar 85) Grace herself spends the larger part of her life in close connection
with houses, be it the lodgings of Mrs. Burt after the family’s arrival in Toronto,
the Alderman Parkinson residence, the Kinnear household or the home of the
Governor. As Lovelady has noted, “[s]he does […] understand from a very early
age that the domestic sphere, whether in her own home or those of others, is her
realm, never questioning this fate or even wishing it could be otherwise.”
(Lovelady 49) The only times when she is able to escape the constrictions of
the house are the passage from Ireland to Canada, although the ship itself presents
just another form of spatial confinement,3 and her flight with McDermott to the
United States, both of which, in accordance with the Victorian stereotype, are
perceived as burdensome and threatening.

Gilbert and Gubar have further pointed to “the tension between parlor and
attic, the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic
who rebels.” (Gilbert and Gubar 86) Grace, too, is subordinated to this dichotomy.
While working at the Alderman Parkinson’s, she shares a room in the attic with
Mary Whitney where the two girls can be carefree and mock and laugh about
their employers. Gilbert’s and Gubar’s ‘madwoman in the attic’ is almost literally
referred to when Mary, caring for Grace during her menarche, wraps her up in a
sheet in their garret, saying “I [Grace] looked very comical, just like a
madwoman.” (AG 175) In the parlour, however, they are obliged to be submissive
and take orders. In addition, there is the cellar with its connotations of the sub-
or unconscious (a chain of meaning ironically hinted at by Simon’s – unfruitful –
attempts to stimulate Grace’s associative memory by putting vegetables which
grow under the earth or are stored in cellars in front of her). The Kinnear cellar is
the place where Nancy is killed and her corpse is hidden. It is also the place

3 With reference to Nina Auerbach, Lovelady has noted that the ship is only another symbol of
“immigrants’ entrapment in poverty.” (Lovelady 43)
where Grace, after seeing dead Nancy with her “bloodshot eyes” (AG 436) loses consciousness. Carrying the house-metaphor to an extreme, a tripartite allocation can be suggested. The attic symbolises freedom from contemporary social roles; the parlour is a place where submission and traditional hierarchies prevail; and the cellar represents the depths of the (sub-)conscious, the place of the murder and loss of control.

The house of Thomas Kinnear exerts a special fascination on Grace. Telling Dr. Jordan about her arrival at the new employer's place, she recapitulates: “When I close my eyes I can remember every detail of that house as clear as a picture […] and I could walk every room of it blindfolded” (AG 243). While setting off for her flight with McDermott, Grace looks back one last time and describes what she sees: “I looked behind me, and saw the house standing there all peaceful and lighted up by the moonlight, as if it was gently glowing. And I thought, who would guess from looking at it what lies within.” (AG 389) Read metaphorically, this description establishes a crucial parallel between the house and the depths of Grace’s own psyche. Dressed up in Nancy's fancy garments, in order to pass for a woman of higher social status on her flight, Grace, too, attempts to disguise the uncanny, dark secret she is leaving behind by outward appearances. She trusts that just from looking at her, nobody will conjecture what it is she is fleeing from. This awareness of the discrepancy between appearance and truth surfaces time and again in her narration. Like in the initial summary of how she was represented in the newspapers (AG 25, see also 2.1.2.), “Grace uses irony […] to expose the failure of physical appearance and ‘the appearance of things’” (Sigrist 229). In her conversations with Dr. Jordan she manages to sustain a similar impression of ‘peacefulness’ and ‘gentle glowing’, like the Kinnear house, as he repeatedly remarks: “She ‘sits on a cushion and sews fine seam’, cool as a cucumber and with her mouth primmed up like a governess’s” (AG 153); “outwardly cool as a marble Madonna” (AG 421). If Grace’s psyche is equated to a house, i.e. a stereotypical Victorian symbol of female entrapment, but also of psychic disintegration, she manages to reclaim her own space and her autonomy to a certain extent by refusing Simon ‘entrance’. This refusal collides with his urgent wish to penetrate Grace, both in a figural and in a literal sense. (See King 74) On the one hand he desperately wishes to reach the bottom of Grace’s unconscious and her memory, on the other hand his interest for her
becomes increasingly sexual in nature: “He wants to ‘know’ Grace in the biblical sense.” (King 74) The sexually charged imagery which haunts Simon in dreams and which he also uses to describe his wish to enter Grace’s mind has been commented upon by a number of critics. For instance, King points out that “[h]is language is characterised by images of penetration” (King 74), referring to Simon’s letter to his friend Edward, in which he concedes that he wants to “approach her mind as if it is a locked box, to which I must find the right key” (AG 153) and that he is “trying in vain to open her up like an oyster.” (AG 153) Oysters, boxes, houses: all figure the woman as entrapped and the man as possessing the power to enter the space of her confinement whenever he wishes to do so. It is all the more disconcerting for Simon to realise that this time he is literally locked out. Thus, the house with its different levels stands not only for the depths of Grace’s psyche, but also for the constant threat of male (sexual) trespassing.

2.2.2 “And my true voice could not get out”: Grace’s multiple voices

The question of voice is central to the analysis and interpretation of Alias Grace. Questions like ‘Who is allowed to speak?’, ‘Whose voice is heard?’, and ‘How do those traditionally denied a voice of their own still assert their viewpoints?’ are raised and dealt with in the context of a society in which the dominant public discourse was equivalent to male and of a respectable social standing, but surely not to female, poor, not to mention criminal or insane. First and foremost, Grace’s is a female and thus marginalised voice, but “[w]omen’s voices may tell alternative versions of traditional stories or reveal hidden, dangerous knowledge.” (Stein “Talking Back” 156) The ex-centric female voice, talking from the periphery of society, is put into the centre of attention by Margaret Atwood.

How is Grace, despite her marginalisation [which “is threefold, due to her femininity, her criminality, and her possible insanity” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 227)], enabled to speak? Usually, Victorian women were denied a voice of their own; they were silenced subjects ‘created’ and defined by authoritative male discourses. Accordingly, Tolan argues that in Alias Grace “it is […] the masculine
speaking subject, Simon Jordan, [who creates] the silenced female object, Grace" (Tolan Margaret Atwood 227), but that in this particular case the 'silenced object' does raise her voice to talk back. Significantly, though, it is a man who offers Grace the opportunity to speak for herself and who quasi functions as a 'voice-giver'. He is the first one who claims to be interested in her true story, not in salacious details, like the newspaper men, or in “a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed” (AG 415) like her lawyer McKenzie, who is interested in "plausibility, rather than what [Grace] could actually recall." (AG 415) In her exchange with Simon “Grace finds an opportunity to participate in shaping her own representation, power [she] lacks in court or in the press.” (Lovelady 35) The question remains whether there is such a thing as an “authoritative and unified voice” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 239) to be detected beneath the multiple layers of Grace’s discourse. One reason why it is so hard to clearly answer this question is the multiplicity of voices Grace uses in telling her story. A brief narratological analysis of those voices provides a useful framework and gives insight into the astounding complexity with which Atwood has crafted this novel. Löschnigg and Löschnigg have provided a comprehensive scale of (narratological) voices Grace uses:

a) intradiegetic 1st-person narration, past tense, communicative situation clearly defined (narrator – listener); the story Grace tells Dr. Jordan  
b) intradiegetic 1st-person narration, past tense, communicative situation open; no indicators for an addressee or hypothetical listener, e.g. Grace’s imaginary letter to Dr. Jordan (see AG 488ff.)  
c) 1st-person narrative, present tense, simultaneous to the narrated incidents, communicative situation open (no addressee)  
d) contextualised inner monologue, mainly in the conversation passages; Grace responds to the reader’s expectations, e.g. “I should not speak to him so freely” (AG 186)  
e) non-contextualised ('autonomous') inner monologue  
(See Löschnigg and Löschnigg 444-45, my translation)

The frequent changes between these narrative voices contribute not only to the fragmentation and ambiguity of the text; they also undermine the assumption of any kind of unified voice. But Grace’s discourse is split in more than a merely
narratological sense. She literally assumes a variety of voices, changes her tone and vocabulary, shifts between private and public discourse (see Lovelady), mixes facts and fantasy, misleads Dr. Jordan and the reader and thus creates a potpourri of discourses which makes it impossible to discern her true voice. “[M]y true voice could not get out” (AG 342) she complains, remembering her trial. However, she never makes any revelation as to what this ‘true’ voice is supposed to be and what it would have to tell. According to Tolan, “Grace uses multiplicity as a defence against a world that seeks to define and limit her” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 230). She also uses different voices to bypass social constrictions in the discourse of women. The main facilitator for expressing the unheard-of is the figure of Mary Whitney. Even many years after the trial, Grace sometimes reverts to ‘being Mary’, albeit in a well-disguised way. Her discourse with Simon is characterised by frequent statements like “What Mary Whitney used to say was [...]” (AG 36) or “as Mary Whitney used to say” (AG 276), followed by unorthodox or even coarse expressions which Grace could not use in an unmediated way. Thus, “Mary becomes a crutch to say what Grace cannot while Simon is listening.” (Lovelady 40) Appropriating Mary’s voice allows Grace to voice social criticism and anger about the precarious situation of women in inferior positions. According to Grace, “Mary was a person of democratic views” (AG 39), “[b]ut towards her elders and betters her manner was respectful and demure” (AG 173). Also, having seen where her democratic views brought Mary Whitney (who died from a botched abortion after being made pregnant by the son of the Parkinsons), Grace is careful not to speak her mind too openly and to express critical opinions in a carefully mediated way. Lovelady has further noted that “[i]nternalizing Simon […] changes Grace’s speaking voice” (Lovelady 39) and that she adapts her speech once she has him in mind as a potential listener. Even after he has left Kingston she addresses him, maintaining “[t]he carefully modulated voice she uses to speak to him” (Lovelady 39). This voice at times has a literally hypnotic effect on Simon: “[T]oday, listening to her low, candid voice – like the voice of a childhood nurse reciting a well-loved story – he almost goes to sleep […]. For a moment he thinks he’s gone deaf […]: he can see her lips moving, but he can’t interpret any of the words.” (AG 338)

A literal multiplicity of voices erupting from one individual becomes apparent during Grace’s hypnosis by Dr. DuPont alias Jeremiah the peddler. This
is one of the novel's most ambiguous scenes. After being put into a “neuro-
hypnotic sleep” by DuPont and upon being asked by Dr. Jordan if she has had
relations with McDermott, Grace answers in a voice which “is thin, wavering,
watery; but fully present, fully alert.” (AG 464) Her tone is one of sharp mockery,
quite different from the calm, assiduous way of talking Simon is used to from their
previous conversations. Taken aback, he feels tempted to think that “[t]his voice
cannot be Grace’s; yet in that case, whose voice is it?” (AG 465)

Apparently it is Mary speaking through Grace, or so the voice makes the
present party believe: “‘You’ve deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew
nothing about it!’” (AG 467) Once again, Mary Whitney functions as a
spokeswoman for everything Grace cannot articulate with her own voice. She
expresses her anger about Simon’s increasingly unprofessional, sexually
charged way of dealing with her case, but also about the difficulties faced by
women who try to raise their voices, but who are not heard in a misogynist
society. The only place where such ex-centric voices denouncing male
misconduct can speak openly is the asylum. Perfidiously, this is also the place
where the voice is least likely to be heard, much less to be taken seriously. Thus
Mary Whitney’s voice, purportedly speaking through Grace, complains: “I liked it
there [at the asylum] at first, I could talk out loud there. I could laugh. I could tell
what happened. But no one listened to me. [… ] I was not heard.” (AG 468)

Representative of many ill-treated women of their time, Mary, the abused
servant-girl, speaks through Grace: “‘You’re the same, you won’t listen to me, you
don’t believe me, you want it your own way, you won’t hear. …’” (AG 468) “Mary’s
desire to be heard reinforces the fact that voice is an instrument of power.” (Kuhn
109) Just like Mary and her democratic views were not heard, Grace, too, feels
that her voice drowns in an overwhelming chorus of male discourses. Her
reproach is also directly addressed to Simon, who, although initially claiming to
be interested in whatever she might choose to tell him, also tries to push her
narrative in a certain direction and charge it with a particular meaning.

Lovelady has analysed the polarity between private and public voice,
which is of course closely linked to the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres (i.e.
the belief that the public was the male sphere, whereas women were restricted to
the private sphere). She argues that the 1st-person and 3rd-person narrative
voices, used to introduce Grace and Simon respectively, appear to uphold the
private/public, female/male dichotomy, but she also detects irregularities in this pattern, for instance at the very beginning of her narrative, when the addressee of her words is yet unknown, so that her story could also be aimed at a public audience. (See Lovelady 38) In general, however, Grace desires someone in whom she can confide and who will listen to her, so she “[internalizes] Simon as an audience” (Lovelady 39), even years after he has left Kingston, upholding the fundamentally private nature of her narration; the private narration of a woman who lacks possibilities of speaking to a larger public.

2.2.3 The novel’s multiple voices

The multiplicity of voices in the novel also includes perspectives other than Grace’s. Atwood creates a complex polyphony of voices, consisting of 1st- and 3rd-person narration, inner monologue, dialogue, letters and various paratexts (as defined by Genette, see 2.2.3.2.), which contributes to the fragmentation of the narrative and seems to make it impossible to ever arrive at a final conclusion or interpretation of Grace’s story.

2.2.3.1 Other characters

As Howell has noted, Alias Grace “is a woman’s narrative, and it eludes the attempts of male authority figures – from the church, and the legal and medical professions – to get at the truth of what happened” (Howells Margaret Atwood 141). Still, such male authority figures are given a voice in the novel. Simon Jordan, “one of the dark trio – the doctor, the judge, the executioner – [who] shares with them the powers of life and death” (AG 94) serves as the second central focaliser of Grace’s story. Mental health professionals such as Dr. Joseph Workman and Dr. Bannerling are empowered to express their view on Grace’s case in letters to him. The Reverend Verringer, who wants to set up a petition for Grace’s release, and her lawyer, Kenneth McKenzie, both provide Simon with elaborate analyses of what they believe to be Grace’s secret. Thus Grace’s own version of her story is set against a powerful multiplicity of male evaluations and judgements.
The 3rd-person narrative focussing on Dr. Jordan is the second-strongest voice in the novel. The reader mainly gets to know Grace through the passages about his encounters with her and witnesses how in the course of his stay he gradually develops from a young ambitious doctor with some new, refreshing ideas to a deeply sceptical and unsettled man, whose beliefs are shaken to the core. Apart from Grace, the manipulative enchantress, he serves as the main focaliser for the reader. The doubts which gradually surge in him become the reader’s doubts, and at the same time his impression of Grace, framed by contemporary discourses and prejudices as it might be, serves to enlarge the reader’s impression of this enigmatic woman. According to Lovelady, he gradually also begins to unconsciously exert influence on the shape of Grace’s narration. When she expresses her feeling that Simon “is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me – drawing on my skin” (AG 79), Grace “imagines him writing on her body in a vivid demonstration of his shared authorship in the story he is allegedly merely recording.” (Lovelady 38) Simon becomes a figure who not only helps the reader to make sense of Grace’s narration, but who also gives sense to the act of narrating it. He is the first person to visit Grace with the chief objective of listening to her, and thus becomes the main addressee of her story. However, at their first encounter Grace remarks: “He’s using a kind voice, kind on the surface, but with other desires hidden beneath it.” (AG 46) Intuitively she senses that Simon, too, comes to her with a precast image in his mind. However, while he, as a prototypical Victorian scientist, tries to enter the depths of her mind in order to find a single objective truth beneath the layers of her memory, the only thing Grace can (or is willing to) offer him are postmodern, fragmented, multiple truths. Trying in vain to reach the core of her narration, “he often wants a thing to mean more than it does.” (AG 282) This side remark by Grace suggests that she sees through his clumsy attempts of stimulating her memory by association.

Although Simon is in the privileged position to judge the mental state of others, he is not without psychological shallows either. For instance, he is haunted by oppressive dreams and violent sexual fantasies about his landlady. As a man of respectable social standing, he, too, has to repress his darkest desires. Simon with his analytical predisposition is aware of the fine line he is walking: “The difference between a civilized man and a barbarous fiend – a madman, say – lies, perhaps, merely in a thin veneer of willed self-restraint.” (AG
163) As the story progresses, he increasingly disintegrates, coming close to criminality himself when he considers carrying out Rachel Humphrey’s request to kill her husband. However, he possesses the required self-restraint and leaves Kingston before it is too late. After his precipitous flight, he confesses in a letter to a friend “[having] come very close to nervous exhaustion over [the] matter.” (AG 490) “Not to know – to snatch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalizing whispers” (AG 490) leaves his brain sore and his ambitions almost shattered. Ironically, in the end it is Simon who suffers from shell-shock and from memory loss due to a battlefield injury. He does not remember his time in Kingston, yet constantly calls his fiancée Faith by the name of ‘Grace’. With this artifice, Atwood turns common role-allocations upside down. While Grace, the former alleged madwoman, is granted a pardon and released into freedom, Simon ends up bedridden and mentally deranged, his voice having lost (although perhaps only temporarily) its former authority.

2.2.3.2 Paratexts

The term ‘paratext’ was coined by Gérard Genette, who defined it as any “verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations” (Genette 1), epigraphs, dedications, etc. which accompany a text and which can widen and influence the reader’s interpretation and evaluation of a text. The original title of Genette’s book, Seuils (French for ‘thresholds’), marks Genette’s understanding of his concept as “an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)” (Genette 2). For reasons of conciseness and relevance, in this section I will focus on the analysis of epigraphs, i.e. material preceding each of the novel’s fifteen chapters, and refrain from looking at the variety of other paratexts as listed by Genette.

*Alias Grace* is interspersed with epigraphs of various kinds, which can roughly be divided into two main categories: authentic historical material, such as excerpts from the confessions of Grace Marks and James McDermott, extracts from the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book and from 19th-century
household management books; and other, unrelated fictional material, mainly extracts from poetry and prose by 19th-century authors. These multitudinous complementary materials “both function as corroborative evidence and, in their frequent contradictions, ironically move to undermine the belief in a verifiable truth.” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 223) In the concrete case of Alias Grace, these complementary texts are not indispensable for the understanding and interpretation of the story, but they do form a frame which both deepens the reader’s insight into the main text and contributes to its fragmentation.

The most prominent, yet most problematic paratextual voice supplementing Grace’s narrative is the voice of Susanna Moodie, a British-born pioneer who wrote about her experiences in the colony and met historical Grace Marks personally on two occasions, both in the Kingston Penitentiary and in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. Parts of her report of those encounters, which was published in her memoir Life in the Clearings (1853), precede the single chapters of AG, thus producing an interesting and unusual mixture of historical record and fictional narrative. Although it is an authentic historical document, the trustworthiness of Moodie’s account is repeatedly challenged by her contemporaries in the novel (e.g. Simon and McKenzie), and by Atwood herself and other literary critics. In her afterword to the 1989 edition of Life in the Clearings, Carol Shields remarks that “[Susanna Moodie’s] voice is discursive, euphemistic, overblown” (Shields 338) and that “she vacillates, she contradicts herself.” (Shields 339) Atwood, for her part, emphasises that Moodie’s account of the Kinnear murders is only third-hand, that “Moodie can’t resist the potential for literary melodrama” (Author’s Afterword, AG 538) and that obviously she was strongly influenced by one of her favourite novels, Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist, an issue which is also broached by the Reverend Verringer and McKenzie in the novel. Why, then, does Atwood choose her debatable report as a paratext? What is it about Susanna Moodie’s voice that makes it worth being heard and that even makes it eligible as a supplement of Grace’s fictionalised story? Shields argues that

[w]hen we speak of the voice of a period, we most often mean a voice of authority and munificence, the far-ranging voice of the lavishly gifted or the arbitrarily powerful. In the past that voice frequently was both aristocratic and male, securely located, rich with certitude and learning, a voice either
self-anointed or baptized by the circumstantial unfolding of a literary tradition. (Shields 338).

Thus Moodie, being neither aristocratic nor male or “rich with certitude and learning”, could not qualify as a significant voice portraying her period, i.e. the mid-19th century. However, Shields grants Moodie’s voice another merit which the above mentioned privileged voices do not necessarily possess, namely authenticity. Other than “a voice of authority and munificence”, the authentic voice does not essentially build on the verifiable truth of historical facts (or what is conventionally agreed upon to be ‘the truth’). Rather, it owes its value to its capacity “to reveal the configuration of a society and how it invests itself with meaning.” (Shields 338) Hence, the merit of Susanna Moodie’s voice consists exactly of the fact that it does not tell a fully matter-of-fact, objective story, but that its deficiencies, its biases and flaws help to illustrate the categorisations and social prejudices a woman like the historical Grace Marks was destined to encounter, as will be analysed in the following.

Atwood, who also published a collection of poetry dedicated to the life and work of Susanna Moodie (The Journals of Susanna Moodie, publ. 1970), chooses mainly extracts in which Moodie describes Grace’s appearance and demeanour in the asylum. The very first passage chosen as an epigraph reads:

At the time of my visit, there were only forty women in the Penitentiary. This speaks much for the superior moral training of the feebler sex. My chief object in visiting their department was to look at the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from the public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon trial […] (Moodie qtd. in AG 3)

As literary evidence, this passage is highly problematic. As Carroll has noted, it “tells us next to nothing about Grace’s case but rather more about Mrs. Moodie’s own Victorian beliefs (concerning women) and her dependence on journalism and chit-chat.” (Carroll 210) Moodie’s wording underpins Victorian notions of the innate refinement and sensitivity of women, which are reinforced by the epigraph for chapter II, an extract from a contemporary newspaper article. (See Carroll 208) This article reports about the public hanging of McDermott, posing the question what might have been the motivation for so many women to witness “the horrid spectacle” and conjecturing that “they were not very delicate or refined.” (Toronto Mirror, November 23rd, 1843, qtd. in AG 11) In addition to reinforcing
stereotypical Victorian views of women, Moodie also states her explicit intention to look at Grace Marks. Obviously, she did not consider it worthwhile taking the trouble to talk to her and hear her case. Instead she relies on newspaper reports and what Grace’s lawyer has told her. Considering that in the 19th century prisons and asylums were visited by middle and upper class members for the sake of entertainment (see Carroll 218), such an approach to the “celebrated murderess” does not surprise. It ties in with the then common practice of phrenology, i.e. the measuring of people’s skulls in order to determine their character and whether they were potential criminals. The focus on physiognomic features in the evaluation of criminals is further reinforced by the epigraph opening chapter III: “Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong, stealthy look; her eye never meets yours, and after a furtive regard, it invariably bends its gaze upon the ground. She looks like a person rather above her humble station. …” (Moodie qtd. in AG 21) This descriptive passage is contrasted with a poem by Emily Brontë, ‘The Prisoner’, in which an unnamed female captive’s face is described as “soft and mild / As sculptured marble saint; or slumbering unweaned child; / […] so sweet and fair” (Brontë qtd. in AG 21). Once again reinforcing the privileged position of visual impression, these two passages create a field of conflict between what the idealised Victorian captive should look like (NB the implications of purity, frailty and innocence so desirable in Victorian women) and Moodie’s biased representation of the actual criminal woman who so outrageously transgresses prescribed roles.

Another paratext worth touching upon is the “Voluntary Confession of Grace Marks”, published in the Toronto Star and Transcript in 1843 and in which “she denied ever having laid a finger on Nancy Montgomery” (AG 89), and the words put into Grace’s mouth by Susanna Moodie, which “[amount] to a confession by Grace, of having actually done the deed” (AG 89). The problematic nature of Grace’s confession is an open secret. At one point in the novel, Simon Jordan sums up the dilemma: “Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after her death sentence had been commuted, yet a third.” (AG 89) By contrasting one of Grace’s versions with Susanna Moodie’s renarration, Atwood makes explicit the discrepancies inherent in the public representation of women. Carroll has pointed out that passages allegedly told by Grace Marks and rewritten by Susanna Moodie are “so
artificially literary in tone, metaphor, and expression” (Carroll 222) that it is nearly impossible to believe in their authenticity. In conclusion, it can be said that the paratexts chosen by Atwood, in particular those taken from Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings*, undermine the coherence and the reliability of Grace’s narrative, at the same time raising questions as to their own trustworthiness.

2.3 Manipulative narration

Combining all of the above mentioned aspects results in a complex, strongly fragmented, mosaic-like picture, a literal patchwork of voices, perspectives and narrative strands. Ilona Sigrist has argued that “the novel’s disparate narrative strands are covertly linked by a unicity of tone, procedure and critical vision that betrays the presence of an overarching narrative voice” (Sigrist 226-227), thus continuously undermining the reader’s certitude as to Grace’s guilt or innocence. If Grace’s story is a symbolic quilt made up of different patches of ‘narrative fabrics’, what is it that holds these ‘patches’ together? Is it really the “overarching narrative voice” cited by Sigrist, which, after all, is repeatedly undermined by the various voices discussed in the previous chapter?

There is another overarching principle encompassing the narration, namely the manipulation of both the presumed audience within the book, and the reader. Cognitive approaches to literary texts, such as schema theory as devised by Stockwell in his *Cognitive Poetics*, and Nünning’s concept of frames of reference (“Referenzrahmen”) provide a useful frame for the interpretation of the manipulative effects employed in *Alias Grace*.

2.3.1 Distorted frames of reference and disrupted schemata

In his comprehensive study on unreliable narration in Anglophone literature, Ansgar Nünning introduces the concept of “frames of reference”. He takes up Culler’s concept of naturalisation of a text [“i.e. to bring it in line with culturally pre-established models or schemata” (Nünning 29, my translation)] which is one possibility of resolving textual discrepancies, and establishes two basic groups of
frameworks. There are those extratextual frames which refer to “real-life experiences and models of reality dominant in a society” (Nünning 29, my translation). The second big group of frames is specifically literary, i.e. it consists of frames to be applied within the text itself. This theory builds on the assumption “that the textual world is compatible with the real world.” (Nünning 29, my translation) According to Nünning, signals which might suggest a narrator’s unreliability are often only perceived as such because they are connected with the above mentioned contextual frames of reference. (See Nünning 30)

Stockwell’s schema theory can be seen as a further development of Nünning’s frames of reference. He too builds his theory on the assumption that readers of literary texts approach these texts with certain pre-existing frames of interpretation, “derived from previously encountered experiences.” (Stockwell 77) Stockwell calls such frames ‘schemata’ and argues that “[l]iterary genres, fictional episodes, imagined characters in narrated situations can all be understood as part of schematised knowledge negotiation.” (Stockwell 79) Such schemata are culture- and, with regard to literature, genre-specific. The reader, endowed with a set of schemata, which she has acquired from her life and/or reading experience, will most likely expect a given literary text to develop according to the outlines of the respective schema. As Rubik has shown with regard to the short fiction of Peter Carey, “the schemata tentatively instantiated to make sense of the story may have to be refined, or, if they are disconfirmed, discarded and replaced by new hypotheses in the course of reading.” (Rubik 171) If the presupposed schema is disrupted unexpectedly and anticipations are radically overthrown, this has a deeply destabilising effect on the reader. (See Rubik 171)

In *Alias Grace*, the reader is lured into applying the ‘crime story’ script to Grace’s narration. This script conventionally requires a crime committed by a perpetrator, one or more persons trying to identify the criminal, a certain degree of suspense, and that the crime ultimately be solved. This schema is drastically disrupted at various points in the story. Most importantly, the true course of events is never resolved. Margaret Atwood has remarked on this: “It is not a murder mystery, it is a mystery about murder. […] You can’t just end [a murder mystery] by saying, ‘Well, I don’t know.’” (Atwood interview in Basbanes, 2001, qtd. in Wisker 25) Likewise, there are several other scripts which are disrupted by unexpected twists. A possibly expected love story between Dr. Jordan and Grace
is superseded by the former’s secret affair with his landlady. The schema ‘psychological motivation for a crime’ is disrupted by the mysterious hypnosis session and the contrary script of ‘possession by a ghost’, including strange rattling in the room and the protagonist’s talking in strange voices. The script ‘confession of a criminal’ is undermined by Grace’s reluctance to disclose her actual involvement in the Kinnear murders. Thus, as a first conclusion, it can be argued that the reader of the novel is manipulated inasmuch as she is tempted to presuppose the pursuit of certain literary schemata which are then drastically overthrown, leaving the reader baffled and disconcerted.

### 2.3.2 Concealing instead of revealing: The manipulative art of Grace Marks

Manipulation does not only happen on the level of references to the world outside the text. It is also actively employed by the protagonists in the text itself, the main manipulative agent being, of course, Grace. As Dr. Jordan aptly observes, “[a]nyone in her position would select and rearrange, to give a positive impression.” (AG 374)

While discourse is conventionally used to transmit and reveal a story, the opposite is the case in *Alias Grace*: the protagonist uses her carefully employed, manipulated and manipulative discourse in order to conceal the true facts from her listeners, to mask her identity and to blur traces which might lead them towards the secret she keeps. No matter whether or not this is done consciously, Grace, not unfittingly named “Our Lady of the Silences” by her lawyer McKenzie (AG 433), has mastered the art of concealing instead of revealing. It is the gaps in her story which contain what Simon supposes to be the truth and which thus trouble him most. At the beginning of his acquaintance with Grace, Dr. Jordan states in a letter to a friend: “Although she converses in what seems to be a frank enough manner, she manages to tell me as little as possible, or as little as possible of what I want to learn” (AG 153). Shortly before his departure from Kingston, he is not any wiser than he was at his arrival, and recapitulates: “She’s told him a great deal; but she’s told him only what she’s chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell; what she chooses perhaps not even to know.”
While insisting that she is unable to remember the murder, Grace at times almost frivolously refers to the general untrustworthiness of her narrative. While Dr. Jordan has gone off to Toronto for a couple of days, she ponders: “What should I tell him, when he comes back? [...] 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 [...]. I could say this [...]” (AG 410). She also makes it clear that she trades her artfully woven story, which she tries to make as colourful as possible, for the possibility of freedom. After all she is aware that Dr. Jordan is in the position to write a report in favour of her release from prison: “I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him” (AG 286). Another, perhaps related motive of hers seems to be the wish to please Simon: “It does my heart good to feel I can bring a little pleasure into a fellow-being’s life” (AG 328). Grace, the enchantress, can thus be placed in a tradition of female trickster- and transgressor figures. (See Lovelady 50)

In Allrath’s study on the interrelation of gender and unreliable narration she points to the importance of taking into consideration a narrator’s social identity, which also includes “sex, [...] gender role and gender identity”, in order to determine “the degree of reliability readers will attribute to him/her.” (Allrath 97) She argues that “[e]ven while the devaluation of female speech is no longer as obvious as it was in former centuries, more subtle mechanisms of depreciating female speakers and, hence, by implication, narrators, prevail.” (Allrath 97) Such gendered prejudice can also be detected in AG, where women, it seems, are a priori deemed to be unreliable or at least less reliable than men in their accounts. The Reverend Verringer insinuates that Susanna Moodie’s report about Grace might not be completely reliable as she “is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to [...] [e]mbroider” (AG 223). Simon, too, seems to be taken in by the stereotype of the untrustworthiness of the female voice. While he tentatively suggests that McDermott, despite his reputation as a notorious liar, might just as well have told the truth claiming that Grace strangled Nancy “[j]ust because a man is known to lie, it does not follow that he always does so” (AG 438), he expresses his “suspicion that, in some way I cannot put my finger on, [Grace] is lying to me.” (AG 438) Despite her assertions that he is the first person to whom she is giving a truthful account
about everything she remembers, Simon cannot shake off the suspicion that he is nothing more than a pawn in Grace’s obscure game:

Somewhere within herself – he’s seen it, if only for a moment, that conscious, even cunning look in the corner of her eye – she knows she’s concealing something from him. As she stitches away at her sewing, outwardly calm as a marble Madonna, she is all the while exerting her passive stubborn strength against him. (AG 421)

The association of mythological women such as Scheherazade and Pandora with Grace as a narrator reinforce the stereotype of the cunning, manipulative woman who beguiles those around her in order to achieve her goal. Dr. Bannerling, for instance, warns Simon against the suggestive, enchanting powers of Grace’s discourse: “Many older and wiser heads have been enmeshed in her toils, and you would do well to stop your ears with wax, as Ulysses made his sailors do, to escape the Sirens.” (AG 82) However, Allrath has also argued that, although the deployment of a female unreliable narrator can be done in ways detrimental to feminist ideas, “unreliable narratives may also be critical and subversive of dominant gender ideology” because “narratorial unreliability […] is often a means of illustrating the effects that situations or events have on the narrator’s perceptions, evaluations, and, ultimately, perspective without, however, easily assigning guilt or responsibility to the narrator.” (Allrath 124) In fact, Grace is the only woman amongst a number of positivist male scientists whom the text enables to talk and to present her own version of events. Her selecting and presumed rearranging on the one hand thwart stereotypical notions about women’s narrative being motivated by impulse rather than by reason. At the same time, it serves as a means of defence against male discursive authority, because “narrative as an act of power is what is at stake in the novel.” (Sigrist 232) Grace is aware of Simon’s desperate wish to reach the bottom of her secret, and it is this awareness which gives her “the power to resist his authority by lying or by selecting which pieces of her story she will tell him, and so impose her own pattern on her narrative.” (Howells 144) Her attempts also aim at “crea[t]ing a space for herself within the claustrophobic glare of Simon’s attentions” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 233) and to free herself from the projections he unconsciously casts on her. Hence, Grace not only manipulates in order to achieve the goal of
recognition and freedom, but also in order to assert her power against patriarchal oppression and to gain autonomy in the representation of her version of history.
3 THE BLIND ASSASSIN

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanish’d hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break
At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

(Lord Alfred Tennyson – Break, break, break)

_The Blind Assassin_, published in 2000 and winner of the Booker Prize in the same year, is a complex work of panoramic scope which has won large critical acclaim. Told from the point of view of octogenarian Iris Chase Griffen, widow of a prosperous industrialist, the novel narrates the downfall of two successful business families and tells about the unusual relationship between two sisters and their secret shared love for a young Communist activist. The novel’s action covers a timespan of almost a century, features various socio-political upheavals, such as wars and financial crises, and could be considered a traditional family saga, were it not for the text’s multiple fragmentations, which create a complex array of ‘fiction-within-fiction’.

The first narrative layer, Iris’s main narrative, is interspersed with extracts of another novel, a highly successful modernist work also bearing the title _The Blind Assassin_ and, purportedly, written by Iris’s sister Laura.⁴ (Only at the very end of Iris’s narrative is it finally revealed that she has actually written the novel herself.) This novel, which constitutes the second narrative layer, tells the story of the illicit love affair between a nameless young woman of high social standing and a political activist hiding from persecution. Nested within this novel-within-the-novel is the third narrative layer: during their surreptitious meetings, the man invents science fiction stories for his lover, the most elaborate of which tells the story about a planet called Zycron, on which an aristocratic, misogynist society

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⁴ To avoid confusion, I shall henceforth refer to the main novel as _The Blind Assassin_ and to the novel-within-the novel as _The Blind Assassin 2_.

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sacrifices young, mutilated virgins to the Goddess of Silence. The story about Iris and Laura, their shared love for Alex Thomas and their sacrifice to the villainous Richard Griffen and his malicious sister are mirrored and reproduced both in the novel-within-the-novel and in the pulp science fiction story. In addition, obituaries and (fictional) clippings from newspapers and society magazines complement the narrative.

In order to establish parallels and differences between *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*, the following chapter features a thorough examination of the former novel in terms of identity, transgression, fragmentation and voice. Like *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* also features a female narrator whose reliability is thoroughly questionable. Apart from ‘natural’ inadequacies in her narrative, which can be attributed to her advanced age and resulting memory gaps and misrepresentations, Iris Griffen also deliberately employs manipulative devices. Touching upon the more general topics of female authorship, genre and schema theory, which has already been introduced in the previous chapter, the analysis of these manipulative mechanisms will be another focal point of this chapter.

### 3.1 Identity issues

#### 3.1.1 “I is for Iris”: Self-representation, self-effacement and social myths

*The Blind Assassin* is composed of three main narrative strands which are set in ‘different dimensions of time’ and which pertain to different genres. However, each of the three strands centres Iris as main protagonist: once as the young woman who she once was and whom she now, half a century later, portrays; once doubly fictionalised as the protagonist of her own novel; and once triply fictionalised as the mute, tongueless girl in the science fiction story. All these strands and representations of herself are held together by Iris the octogenarian,

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5 Karen F. Stein has compared the novel’s intricate composition to a Russian doll: just like the Matryoshka contains several miniature versions of herself, *The Blind Assassin* can be split up into various nested story levels, which, at bottom, strongly resemble each other (see Stein “Left-Handed Story” 135).
who, like a puppet player, pulls the strings and lets the puppets, i.e. different ‘versions’ of herself, dance according to her will. Iris’s manuscript, it has to be added, is first and foremost an autobiography. It might be an unusual example of this genre, considering its multifarious structure, but an autobiography it undeniably is – a writing of her own life, a writing of her self.\(^6\) This represented self, however, is far from being unified. On the contrary, it is repeatedly fragmented, not only by the constant shift between ‘past’ and ‘present’ Iris, but also by the numerous textual intermissions, i.e. interspersed chapters of *The Blind Assassin* and science fiction stories, which focus on the nameless ‘She’ in *The Blind Assassin* 2 and on the fate of the mutilated girl on the planet Zycron respectively. These women could be regarded as both substitutes for and extensions of the actual Iris, and they are linked by the red thread of their subjugation under a patriarchal system which hampers, or indeed obliterates, any development towards autonomy and a self-determined identity.

Like Grace Marks, Iris is confronted with conventional female identity schemas which have already been laid out for her. In Howells’ words, “Iris’s identity is defined by her gender, her class and her role as ‘good sister to Laura’” (Howells 159). Such preconceived schemas leave hardly any room for the development of an individual identity, and Iris’s narrative leaves little doubt as to the fact that, for the larger part of her life, she passively submitted to social expectations cast on her.

The impression of her own insignificance, together with a vague feeling of being replaceable, develops in Iris at a very young age. While, as a child, Laura’s favourite letter in her alphabet book is L, “because it was her own letter, the one that began her name, *L is for Laura*” (BA 110), Iris does not like ‘her’ letter – “*I is for Iris* – because *I* was everybody’s letter.” (BA 110) Iris also draws attention to the mechanics of, repeatedly put into practice by herself and her sister, who, in Tolan’s words, “in life are little more than characters in the plots of others.” (Tolan *Margaret Atwood* 263) Laura seems to be aware of the successive erasure of her sister’s identity through her marriage to Richard and tries to alert her to the fact by bleaching her face in the wedding picture. (See Sigrist 241) This heightened sagacity concerning her sister’s fate, however, does not prevent Laura from

\(^6\) On autobiographical writing in *The Blind Assassin* see also chapter 4.2.1.2.
falling into the very same trap. She, who, as a young girl, “developed the ability to subtract herself in the blink of an eye” (BA 200), blots out her self by impetuously sacrificing this self to others: “She left herself open, she entrusted herself, she gave herself over, she put herself at the mercy.” (BA 203) The self-abandonment she displays is not only disinterested altruism; it literally is an abandonment of her individual self to something she tragically misconceives as a higher cause.

Iris’s and Laura’s difficulties in constructing a genuine self apart from rigid social expectations are rooted in the lack of role models available to them. They have to navigate their cumbersome way through a nearly impenetrable thicket of conventions and fixed social norms. “[T]he role-models, scenarios, and discursive paradigms available to an upper-class woman in English Canada” (Robinson 350) encage them rather than providing them with possible role models for identification. In their immutable universality (for universal these standards are, at least within a certain class in the early twentieth century) they indeed represent reconfigured versions of archetypal myths which, as Tolan has shown, circumscribe and entrap women.7 She argues that “[m]yths in The Blind Assassin work as stereotypes or patterns of feminine behaviour that, in their repetition, invoke a false authority and entrap women within certain models or images.” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 261) In her reading, however, Iris is not completely innocent in the constant reproduction of such typecasts, as it is her “who creates and recreates the stereotypes she applies to the women of her narrative.” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 262) In the following, two such well-established social myths which are of particular influence on female identity construction will be examined.

3.1.1.1 Victorian ideology

Victorian ideology, so prominent in Alias Grace, also constitutes a strong undercurrent in The Blind Assassin. The women in the Chase family invariably fall victim to the implications of an ideology which idealises the weakness, vulnerability and passivity of women. Iris’s family narrative begins in the late 19th

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7 According to Margaret Atwood, myths can, through their continuous repetition, leave the realm of the fictional and become accepted doctrines in a society: “Myths mean stories, and traditional myths mean traditional stories that have been repeated frequently. […] But some get repeated so often in the society that they become definitive, i.e. myths of that society.” (Hammond 114)
century, with her grandfather Benjamin Chase, who built the family button factory, and her grandmother Adelia, who is portrayed as an accomplished, sophisticated and socially dexterous woman. Her sophistication, however, does not save her from being married off for mercenary reasons. Although Iris and Laura never got to know their grandmother personally, her influence and her idealised societal notions still reach them: “Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren’t.” (BA 78)

Liliana, the girls’ mother, is an angel in the house par excellence: “morally superior, self-sacrificing, but physically frail and weak” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 140), which is exactly how Victorian men idealised and preferred their women. Completely selfless and going to the limits of her capacities, Liliana devotes herself to the care of her traumatised husband once he returns from the war: “He was broken, and needed mending: therefore, she could still be useful. She would create around him an atmosphere of calm, she would indulge him, she would coddle him, she would put flowers on his breakfast table and arrange his favourite dinners.” (BA 96) Reenie, the housekeeper, adores Liliana for those virtues. After Liliana’s death, Reenie takes over the main responsibility for Iris’s and Laura’s upbringing and becomes the main advocate of Victorian values. Thus, the girls are inculcated with her ‘angel in the house’-ideal, which stipulates “that women should be […] dependent, selfless, pure, and devoted to family” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 140), from a very young age. Reenie’s conception of women is deeply dichotomised and presents them either as delicate and fragile, or as sexually cunning and thus despicable. This angel-whore-binary is mechanically internalised by Iris and Laura. Instead of educating the motherless girls in matters of sexuality, Reenie promotes a chaste, sexless ideal of women. She does her best to shield the girls from the depraving influence of men and despises women who are too unreserved and dress too frivolously: “[S]he would say: Curtain’s up, where’s the show? Or, Might as well hang out a sign. Or, more balefully, She’s asking for it, she’ll get what’s coming to her, or, in the worst cases, She’s an accident waiting to happen.” (BA 218)

Iris, who imbibes this rigid set of Victorian values, unquestioningly appropriates them, which strongly influences her relationships with men. She lets herself be appropriated, shaped and moulded by her possessive husband, and
even her extramarital love affair is a reinforcement of traditional role allocations in which the man can be sovereign and demanding, while the woman is tender, quiet and devoted. This can be deduced from the characterisation of the heroine in *The Blind Assassin* and her subservient behaviour towards her lover. She provides him with food, drink and cashes cheques for him, worries that he might not eat enough and thus plays an almost motherly role. However, she stubbornly clings to traditional patterns: “She doesn’t want to feel he is in any way vulnerable. Only she is allowed to be that.” (BA 137) ‘She’, i.e. Iris, assumes the role of the vulnerable, sensitive girl after all, thus supporting Tolan’s aforementioned argument that Iris herself reproduces the stereotypes which are responsible for her and her sister’s constant victimisation.

3.1.1.2 Gothic identity construction

*The Blind Assassin* also pertains to a genre which has been described as ‘Southern Ontario Gothic'. According to the *Concise Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, this particular genre “celebrate[s] life, while exhuming the deadening and deforming forces beneath genteel surfaces” (*Concise Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* 456). It takes its name from its similarity to traditional plots of Gothic fiction, the main features of which have been summarised by Stein as follows:

> The Gothic plot is based on hiding and revealing, on secrecy and stealth, and similarly the narrative tends to be convoluted and mysterious. Typically the heroine is a motherless young woman struggling to find her way through the mazes of a hostile patriarchal society. She encounters secrets and solves mysteries as she seeks to escape from a series of perils, particularly from threatening older men. (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 137)

The Gothic heroine is furthermore characterised by an extreme degree of passivity and lack of agency. Forsaken, friendless and unable to fend for herself, she depends on the male Gothic hero for salvation, thus reinforcing stereotypical
role allocations. As both threat and salvation originate from exclusively masculine sources, the Gothic heroine's identity is solely defined by men.  

The stereotypical story of a woman in the Gothic context is “a tale of leaving the parental home, the father’s space, and learning to mute her self, to lose her subjectivity, to turn inward and focus on her feelings, to suppress her ego in the service of others, especially of a male authority figure, be he lover or husband.” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 138) While this storyline indeed represents a rough outline of Iris’s life history, and some stock Gothic elements, such as entrapment, the Gothic mansion and the threatening, powerful male villain, are artfully incorporated into Atwood’s novel, other stereotypes are overthrown and subverted in the course of the narrative.

Iris, unresistingly married off to Richard Griffen at a very young age and immediately taken under Winifred’s wings, epitomises a 20th-century-version of the Gothic heroine. Trapped in perilous, maze-like surroundings – represented not only by her father’s Gothic family mansion, but later also by a male-dominated society which continuously poses threats and restraints – and under constant surveillance by her husband and her sister-in-law, she feels that it is beyond her possibilities to break away from the social restraints that encage her. Her passivity partly stems from Reenie’s peculiar indoctrination, which stipulates that men are “sexually demanding and dangerous” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 140), while women, struck with terror, passively await their destiny:

In Reenie’s descriptions the girl or woman would always be inert, but with many handholds on her, like a jungle gym. She would be magically deprived of the ability to scream or move. She would be transfixed, she would be paralysed – with shock, or outrage, or shame. She would have no recourse. (BA 245)

This dumb perplexity indeed characterises Iris’s first intimate encounters with men (both with Alex Thomas, who kisses her in the attic, and with Richard during their wedding night). The terror she senses in anticipation of her upcoming marriage expresses not only her stealthy sense of doom, but also her complete

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8 Sidonie Smith has linked the issues of female self-determination and passivity to “[d]iscourses of embodiment” (Smith 12), pointing out that historically women have been “identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny.” (Smith 12-13) Such socio-biological identifications preclude the possibility of adopting individual identity schemes which are detached from precast social templates. She argues that “[s]ince the cultural construction of pregnancy made the womb a receptacle awaiting the activation of the sperm, [the woman’s] very body passively awaited its destiny.” (Smith 13)
stupefaction in the face of an impending menace: “I knew I was directionless; I knew I was lost. I would be discovered here years later by some intrepid team – fallen in my tracks, one arm outflung as if grasping at straws, my features desiccated, my fingers gnawed by wolves.” (BA 279)

Laura, on the other hand, defies Gothic role allocations. Like Iris, she is forced into passivity, but she makes attempts at escaping the literal and figural confinements which bind her. Indeed, her act of hiding Alex Thomas in the attic of the family mansion has been identified as “a reversal of a typical Gothic plot device” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 142), namely that of the helpless, dependent woman held captive by an older, villainous man. When this unorthodox “reversal” is finally again reversed and Laura is ‘imprisoned’ in Richard’s home, she runs away and works at an amusement park, trying to fend for herself and thus assuming the agency which Iris is lacking. Although Laura is retrieved and restored to her baleful environments, which shows that she ultimately lacks the means for escape, she does not yield to her oppressive guardians and constantly defies Richard’s authority. If she passively and silently endures sexual abuse at his hands, it is because she regards it as a ‘deal’, which, if only she keeps her “end of the bargain” (BA 594), will save Alex. Pain and suffering notwithstanding, she regards it as a pragmatic business. This might also be attributable to Laura’s “uncanny resistance to physical pain.” (BA 106) According to Iris’s evaluation, “[Laura] had no thought of playing the doomed romantic heroine. She became that only later, in the frame of her own outcome and thus in the minds of her admirers.” (BA 509) These projections of the sensitive ‘romantic heroine’, cast on Laura in retrospective, correspond to stereotypical Gothic projections on the female sex in general and illustrate the limited range of roles ascribed on women, even in the late 20th century.

3.1.2 Passive women, predatory men

Analysing issues of the female protagonist’s identity formation without paying regard to the men surrounding her would be an imperfect undertaking, as “Iris is, of course, a product of both a masculine culture and of a strictly enforced patriarchal family” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 262). Although there are only three
men who play a significant role in Iris’s and Laura’s life – their father, Richard, and Alex Thomas -, they all have drastic influence on the sisters’ identity development and their self-conception. Both sisters exist, as it were, only in relationship to men, and these men form the base on which their identities are constructed. If Iris and Laura are the novel’s involuntary tragic heroines, Norval Chase, Richard Griffen and Alex Thomas represent the patriarchal triad of ‘father – husband – lover’; three male archetypes between which the sisters are slowly but steadily crushed.

Norval Chase, the girls’ father, is their first male attachment figure, both awe-inspiring and unattainable. As a small child, Laura goes so far as to believe that his uneven footsteps, which are due to his wooden leg, are the steps of God.9 “‘Listen, that’s him,’ Laura would say. The light footstep, the heavy footstep. ‘That’s not God. It’s only Father. He’s in the turret.’” (BA 168) Norval, traumatised, bitter and early widowed, does not know how to handle his quirky daughters. Iris assumes that “[h]e wanted the lacy, frilly, somewhat murky edges trimmed off us as if we were lettuces, leaving a plain, sound core. […] He wanted us turned into the semblances of boys, one way or another.” (BA 196) Accordingly, he tries to train Iris for the family business, an enterprise which, however, results in an outright failure. Iris has no talent for business and recalls the awkward situation: “This was the first time a man would expect more from me than I was capable of giving, but it would not be the last.” (BA 126) Later, after she has turned thirteen, her father begins to mould her according to his ideals: “I should not sprawl, chew gum, fidget, or chatter. The values he required were those of the army: neatness, obedience, silence, and no evident sexuality. Sexuality, although it was never spoken of, was to be nipped in the bud. He had let me run wild for too long. It was time for me to be taken in hand.” (BA 193)

After Norval Chase’s death, Richard Griffen takes on a fatherly role for both his young wife and his sister-in-law. “[T]he most diabolic of the novel’s three men” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 142) indeed embodies a ruthless villain par excellence, completely devoid of empathy and moral standards. Just like Norval, he neglects the young women emotionally, but expects that they conform to

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9 Notably, ‘God’ for Laura is an exclusively male concept. Iris’s statement that “Alex was the only man Laura had ever shown any interest in – besides Father, that is, and God” (BA 593, emphasis added) puts God in one line with authoritative male influences in Laura’s life.
social conventions. He conveys his young bride to the care of his sister Winifred, who is expected to mould Iris into a presentable society lady, and sends Laura to a respectable school, ignoring her reluctance and her provocative behaviour. His influence over Iris is so profound that she feels he is 'designing' her: "I [...] was taking shape – the shape intended for me, by him. Each time I looked in the mirror a little more of me had been coloured in." (BA 370) Just like Grace Marks feels that Simon Jordan is “drawing on me – drawing on my skin” (AG 79), Iris feels Richard ‘inscribing’ himself on her: “I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over.” (BA 455) Laura, according to Iris, represents a bigger obstacle to his possessive ambitions:

[H]e’d come to regard Laura as a puzzle, one that it was now his business to solve. [...] He wanted to get Laura under his thumb, he wanted her neck under his foot, however lightly placed. But Laura didn’t have that kind of neck. So after each of his attempts he was left standing with one leg in the air, like a bear-hunter posing in a picture from which the slain bear had vanished. (BA 467)

Although Laura defies his attempts at subduing her, she ultimately stands no chance against his cruelty: raped, made pregnant and forced to secretly abort the child in a dubious clinic, she, like Iris, is appropriated and victimised by Richard.

Alex Thomas, finally, marks the big enigma in Iris’s and Laura’s lives. The secret passion he kindles in both sisters will irrevocably determine their relationship, make them allies and rivals at the same time and ultimately seal Laura’s fate and Iris’s guilt, which will haunt her for decades. Their relationship to him while they keep him in the attic of Avilion is described by Iris in the following words:

He was our guilty secret, and also our virtuous project – one we could finally share. [...] We were Mary and Martha, ministering to – well, not Jesus, even Laura did not go that far, but it was obvious which of us she had cast in these roles. I was to be Martha, keeping busy with household chores in the background; she was to be Mary, laying pure devotion at Alex’s feet. (BA 264)

The binaries she establishes in this brief description – “guilty” versus “virtuous”, “Mary” versus “Martha”, “household chores” versus “devotion” – illustrate not only the ambivalence between a conventional, respectable life and the unorthodox, passionate adventure embodied by Alex, but also the disparities between the pragmatic Iris and her otherworldly sister. While Laura contents herself with
worshipping Alex and waiting for his return, Iris seizes the opportunity and, “[b]lind but sure-footed” (BA 394), begins a passionate affair with him. This affair, however, is diametrically opposed to independence and liberty. Indeed, she slithers from one dependency into the next, as is revealed in The Blind Assassin 2: “Such extreme pleasure is also a humiliation. It’s like being hauled along by a shameful rope, a leash around the neck. She resents it, her lack of freedom” (BA 318). Indeed, her affair with Alex often casts her in the role of a suppliant – for sex, for tenderness, for affection: “If she wants avowals, she has to get them beforehand – make sure of them first, like a whore and her money. Meagre though they may be.” (BA 320) Just like her father and Richard, Alex, too, contributes to the effacement of her individuality, even though this time, Iris consciously surrenders to the annihilation of her self: “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.” (BA 319) Again, she is inscribed by a man, as in Alex's company she is “[b]lank paper, on which – just discernible – there’s the colourless imprint of a signature, not hers.” (BA 499)

3.1.3 The Split Self: Fragmentation, doubling, mirroring

So far, the analysis has focussed on how female identities are constructed and shaped by fixed social myths and by patriarchal surroundings in the novel. It has to be stressed, though, that these identity constructs do not represent one determinable self, but rather contribute to the multiple facets by which the protagonists' identities are created. The issue of the fragmented self and the ambivalence between essentialist and anti-essentialist identity models, which constitutes a keystone in the interpretation of Alias Grace, also surfaces in The Blind Assassin. Again, Margaret Atwood presents the reader with a protagonist and narrator figure who thwarts notions of a unified self. Three main types of identity split can be distinguished and will be discussed in turn: the split between the past and the present self, the split/doubleness of the writer, and the split between oneself and others.
First of all, Iris is split within herself. By this I refer to the division between her past and her present self, two ‘versions’ of herself which she experiences as disconnected: “I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person”, she muses, contemplating her wedding picture. “I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember.” (BA 292) Although, as she acknowledges, her past and present self are mutually constitutive, she does not feel them to be unified. Somewhere in her history there is a rupture, a point at which her self splits up into ‘she who I was’ and ‘I who am now’. When Iris refers to her former self, she frequently uses subjunctive constructions, such as “Out of love, I should have lied” (BA 595), or: “I could have turned away. That would have been wise. But such wisdom was not available to me then” (BA 393), as if trying to exculpate her ignorant younger self by asserting that her present self now does possess the knowledge of what would have been right. At the same time she acknowledges: “Should is a futile word. It’s about what didn’t happen. It belongs in a parallel universe. It belongs in another dimension of space.” (BA 523) It seems that by writing down her memoir, Iris also tries to come to terms with the guileless woman she once was, to understand her better in hindsight; indeed, that her autobiographic project is also a search for the self which has been determined by others for so long. However, she is aware of the difficulties of such an undertaking:

You can never see yourself the way you are to someone else – to a man looking at you, from behind, when you don’t know – because in a mirror your own head is always cranked around over your shoulder. A coy, inviting pose. You can hold up another mirror to see the back view, but then what you see is what so many painters have loved to paint – Woman Looking In Mirror, said to be an allegory of vanity. Though it is unlikely to be vanity, but the reverse: a search for flaws. What is it about me? can so easily be construed as What is wrong with me? (BA 390)

Gilbert and Gubar have termed this female obsession with one’s own reflection “mirror madness” (Gilbert and Gubar 34). They argue that “[t]o be caught and trapped in a mirror […] is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self.” (Gilbert and Gubar 37) Thus, the mirror symbolises Iris’s tenacious quest for such a viable self and, at the same time, the impossibility of ever fulfilling this quest.
Secondly, being a writer for Iris invariably also means being split in two. Margaret Atwood observes that “[t]here has been a widespread suspicion among writers […] that there are two of him [sic!] sharing the same body, with a hard-to-predict and difficult-to-pinpoint moment during which the one turns into the other.” (Atwood Negotiating 37) She is concerned with the forces which induce a person to set down a given story, thus becoming a writer: “A hand must hold the pen […], but who is in control of that hand at the moment of writing?” (Atwood Negotiating 45) This question insinuates that it might possibly not always be only the writer herself who is responsible for the textual outcome she produces, but that other hidden creative forces might be involved.

As Howells has aptly observed, The Blind Assassin “is full of references to handwriting and to writing hands – often surrealistically disembodied like the one in the Labour Day Picnic photo – and to moving fingers which endlessly trace out the lines of the past.” (Howells 166) Indeed Iris’s frequent allusions to the activity of her hand, by which she draws emphasis on the physical act of writing, give the impression that, no matter how immersed she might get in writing, a feeling of inner detachment from what her hand produces always remains:

[S]ometimes it seems to me that it’s only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me […] Certainly it’s been writing down a number of things it wouldn’t be allowed to if subject to my better judgment. (BA 457)

The impulse which presses her to write down her memoir in painstaking detail seems to be conflicting with the restraints which reason would dictate her. She explains why she nevertheless pursues her project:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. […] 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. (BA 345)

Her right hand gliding over the writing pad, recording her history, in a pars-pro-toto-fashion becomes metonymical for Iris herself, while the gaps in her narrative are attributed to Laura as an invisible double, represented by the left hand erasing what Iris has just written down. Finally, Iris explicitly envisages Laura as her left hand and vice versa: “Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It’s a left-handed book.” (BA 627) Thus she acknowledges
Laura’s indirect involvement in the production of the novel, at the same time establishing Laura as her alter ego, both as her ‘writer self’ and as the eraser to whom gaps and insufficiencies must be attributed. That the ‘writer self’ might be an altogether different concept from the ‘real’, everyday person has been summarised thus by Atwood: “The author is the name on the books. I’m the other one.” (Atwood Negotiating 37) Similarly, Iris, on beholding a weeping fan at Laura’s grave, remarks: “Laura touches people. I do not.” (BA 234) This observation can be interpreted thus: the persona who wrote The Blind Assassin 2, i.e. Iris’s ‘writer self’, camouflaged under the alias of her sister’s name, touches people, while her ‘everyday self’ has become an insignificant old woman, “Laura’s odd, extra hand, attached to no body – the hand that passed her on, to the world” (BA 350-51).

Thirdly and lastly, Iris is also split between herself and others. This split is marked by a complex relationship of duplicity, inversion and mirroring between Iris, Laura and Alex Thomas, the latter two of whom (as has been argued) represent suppressed, unconscious or sublimated aspects of herself. According to Staels, the novel’s main characters “are interrelated, mirrored or doubled” (Staels 149), and it is this intricate interrelation between them which again serves to illustrate the multifaceted nature of Iris’s identity. Howells states: “The sibling relationship between Iris and Laura literalises the familiar Atwoodian construction of split feminine subjectivity as well as the doubleness of the writer.”10 (Howells 163) Like many critics, she has pointed out “the doubleness and duplicity inherent in the sisters’ relationship”, claiming that Laura is Iris’s “own ‘slippery double’, both like and unlike her” (Howells 162). It is indeed possible to view the two sisters as doubles in two different ways, namely as counterparts and as complements, as Atwood has differentiated in an interview: “Your counterpart is someone who is the mirror reflection of yourself, and your complement is someone who supplies those elements that are lacking in you.” (Kaminski 31-32) On the one hand, Laura seems to be Iris’s complement, her ‘negative’, to speak in photographic terms; an embodiment of all the possibilities which are inherent in Iris, but which she cannot or refuses to act out. Laura is the one who runs away while Iris stays at home and surrenders to the fate chosen for her, although she

10 The role of the woman as a writer will be discussed more extensively in chapter 3.3.1.
knows that her marriage with Richard is unhappy and purely mercenary. Laura dares to challenge social expectations, while Iris remains complacent and submissive. On the other hand, however, she is her sister’s counterpart, a mirror reflection not only in terms of looks. Despite all their character differences, which are also expressed in the different colours which Laura applies to them in the photograph, Iris and Laura are interlinked very closely. Having spent their entire childhood isolated from any other children their age, each of the sisters plays a pivotal role in the life of the other, as there are no other female attachment figures available to them for many years. Iris recalls Laura’s disrespect for territories: “What was mine was hers: my fountain pen, my cologne, my summer dress, my hat, my hairbrush.” (BA 538) Their doubled existences are literally illustrated in Elwood Murray’s button factory picnic photograph “in which the sisters [appear] as mirror images of each other on either side of Alex.” (Robinson “Alias Laura” 355)

As regards Alex Thomas, it has been suggested that he is Iris’s double who appeals to her repressed desires, kindles creative energy and articulates aspects of her life which are unmentionable for her: (See Staels 156) However, according to Atwood’s above-mentioned differentiation, this would make him Iris’s complement, and not her counterpart. If Alex has a counterpart in the novel, a mirror reflection which resembles him, it is Laura, to whom he seems connected in a more abstract, spiritual way. During the dinner party after the button factory picnic, he mostly talks to Laura, evoking Iris’s jealousy, and even later, he and Laura meet and stroll through town together, spending their time with “serious discussion” (BA 243). Laura tries to save Alex’s soul by converting him to religion, while Alex inculcates her with his Bolshevik ideas. However, they are not only connected on such an explicit intellectual level. Another crucial aspect they have in common is their shared role as messengers for Iris. “They see with the inner eye and articulate their deeper insights” (Staels 156); Alex through his science fiction stories, which mirror Iris’s situation as a sacrificial society-bride, and Laura through her cryptic visual messages, which, for a long time, are incomprehensible to Iris. This shared prophetic quality is expressed by Laura, and once again by means of a hand-tinted photograph: in her print of the button factory picture, she has coloured both herself and Alex Thomas yellow.
3.2 Looking beyond the mirror: Transgression and multiple voices

3.2.1 Transgression of social roles

The previous chapter has established the interconnection between identity construction and fixed social roles which are eligible for and thus automatically imposed on women. The analysis will now turn to transgressions of such social roles, a transition which also necessitates a shift of focus from Iris to Laura as the ‘slippery double’ on the other side of the mirror. While the issue of madness is prominently highlighted in *Alias Grace*, it is only subtly hinted at in *The Blind Assassin*. 19th-century discourses and prototypical representations of ‘the madwoman’ are replaced by a concern with both overt and camouflaged transgressions of social conventions. That these transgressions, particularly in Laura’s case, are so unheard of that they are almost instinctively associated with mental instability by the dominant society shows that, despite the considerable time gap between the plot settings of *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, the problematic equation of social divergence with madness is still upheld.

While Iris exercises herself in compliance and submissiveness, Laura is constantly strolling along the margin of what is socially acceptable and thus considered ‘normal’. From the very beginning it is made clear that she is a very peculiar character whose conduct is bewildering and often incomprehensible to others. In Reenie’s view, “Laura was different. Different meant strange, I [Iris] knew that, but I would pester Reenie. ‘What do you mean, different?’ ‘Not the same as other people’, Reenie would say.” (BA 110) This almost tautological explanation gives insight into the assumed nature of Laura’s ‘different-ness’: because she does not fall into her society’s standardised categories of proper child-like behaviour, she is labelled “strange” and “odd”, assignations which remain affixed to her until her early death.

Laura’s eccentricity gives her a special status in the family, while Iris is constantly summoned to take care of her little sister and to be considerate of her odd mannerisms. To a certain extent, Laura is exonerated for any misconduct, as
she is considered to be “an odd child anyway” (BA 174). At the same time, this casts her in the role of a wayward eccentric in constant need of special care and protection, much to her sister’s dismay: “I was tired of keeping an eye on Laura, who didn’t appreciate it. I was tired of being held accountable for her lapses, her failures to comply.” (BA 211) Iris finds herself increasingly annoyed by Laura’s quirks, partly because she does not comprehend them, and partly, it seems, because she is jealous of the jester’s licence Laura enjoys, while Iris herself has to bear responsibility for her younger sister. She particularly resents Laura’s unorthodox attitude towards religion and the ‘deals’ she makes with God. Iris, who is presented as more practical and down-to-earth than her sister, cannot comprehend Laura’s “conviction that everything was all right really and the angels were on her side, because she’d made some secret, dotty pact with God.” (BA 595)

As she gets older, Laura, constantly eluding contemporary social conventions of how a young woman should behave, is increasingly often assumed to be bordering on insanity, particularly by Richard and Winifred. Unable to mould and intimidate her, like she manages to do with Iris, Winifred’s exasperation with Laura’s strange conduct increases. The only explanation available to her in order to account for Laura’s transgressions is madness. When Laura runs away from home to work in an amusement park, Winifred attributes this to “a state of delayed shock” after her father’s death and to Laura’s “nervous temperament” in general, and commands that “she must be given a strong sedative and carted off to the doctor.” (BA 397) Years later, when she is fighting with Iris over the custody of Aimee, she still tries to disclaim Laura’s version of the abuse and abortion by declaring her insane and questioning her credibility: “’Laura was crazy as a coot. I don’t know how you could ever have believed a word she said [...]. Nobody in their right mind would have!’” (BA 453)

Richard, enmeshed in his above-mentioned futile attempt at ‘solving’ Laura like a riddle, soon resorts to discursive affronts which suggest Laura’s mental instability. He declares her attempts at emancipation and her plans of getting a job “hysterical nonsense” and threatens to “put her into a Home for Wayward Girls along with all the other moral delinquents, and if that didn’t do the trick there was always a clinic. A private clinic, with bars on the windows” (BA 406). Cynically, he ultimately puts this threat into action when Laura gets pregnant after
his repeated sexual abuse. According to his and Winifred’s distorted version of events, Laura has “gone out of control” and is “suffering from delusions” (BA 523). Iris learns that “Laura had been declared a danger to herself and to others, and unfortunately Richard had been forced to commit her to the care of an institution.” (BA 523) Trying to placate his wife, he assures that “it wasn’t a standard institution – not a Victorian norm.” (BA 524) This hurried assertion suggests that Laura must consider herself grateful to have ended up in a private clinic, instead of a “Victorian norm” – the latter is pointedly left unspecified with all its terrifying connotations. A letter from Dr. Witherspoon, director of the clinic, to Richard gives more insight into the treatments applied in the institution: he mentions “[s]everal new treatments” (BA 496), including electro-shock therapy and insulin treatment, besides the forced isolation from all her social contacts which is apparently imposed on Laura. In her last encounter with Iris, one day before her alleged suicide, she refers to any ‘therapeutic’ procedures going on at BellaVista besides the abortions as “mumbo-jumbo, […] the pills and machines.” (BA 593) She further explains the procedures going on at the clinic: “‘They conk you out with ether, like the dentist. Then they take out the babies. Then they tell you you’ve made the whole thing up. Then when you accuse them of it, they say you’re a danger to yourself and others.’” (BA 593) Such a report evokes the impression of a Kafkaesque madhouse rather than of an idyllic private clinic. Furthermore, Winifred’s declaration that “‘[o]f course she was hysterical […] Of course she was raving’” (BA 525) contribute to the carefully stylised image of Laura as a mentally deranged hysteric, which Richard and Winifred are eager to convey and which strongly resembles the stereotypical Victorian madwoman, i.e. a frail creature prone to irrational raving fits. An ambiguous and easily applied concept of ‘madness’ serves as a weapon which disposes of troublesome women, silences them and effectively undermines their credibility.11

Although Iris has “a hard time believing that Laura had suddenly fallen to pieces” (BA 524) and despite her intuitive doubts about Laura’s imaginary pregnancy “[I couldn’t quite picture Laura making up such a thing, out of whole

11 Shortly after Laura’s death, Iris makes this experience herself. After her separation from Richard, she learns that “rumours had been floated: that I was mentally unstable; that Richard was maintaining me financially, despite my wackiness; that Richard was a saint. No harm in a mad wife, if properly handled: it does make the spouses of the powerful so much more sympathetic to one’s cause.” (BA 620)
cloth” (BA 524)], she is unsettled and feels tempted to believe Richard’s and Winifred’s version: “It would have been easy for me to have overlooked the slippage – the telltale signs of mental frailty, whatever they might have been.” (BA 524-25) Indeed, she does not fully trust in Laura’s sanity until the very end, when Laura’s attempt at explaining her ‘sacrifice’ to Richard in order to save Alex Thomas results in a fatal misunderstanding between the sisters because Iris, unable or unwilling to grasp the awful truth, assumes Laura to be “back in the realm of her loony metaphysics.” (BA 594)

Herself a doubting Thomas until the very end, when she has palpable proof of Laura’s sincerity and sanity, Iris understands how tempting it might be for Laura’s fans to romanticise her as a slightly aberrant romantic heroine: “In a painting she’d be gathering wildflowers” (BA 509), she ironically muses. These wildflowers, of course, immediately bring to mind the wildflowers entwined in the hair of Ophelia, the prototypical madwoman who is also conjured up in Alias Grace. But there is no painting to eternalise Laura in the trivial role of the ethereal eccentric, and Iris admits that, although the myths posthumously constructed around her would call for a wildflower-picking Laura, “in real life she rarely did anything of the kind.” (BA 509) Only in hindsight does Iris realise that “perhaps Laura wasn’t very different from other people after all. Perhaps she was the same – the same as some odd, skewed element in them that most people keep hidden but that Laura did not, and this is why she frightened them” (BA 110-11)

3.2.2 Voice

The Blind Assassin consists of a polyphony of voices, and it takes the reader considerable time to find out that all of these voices (with one exception, as will be shown) ultimately emanate from one source, namely Iris. At first it seems that Iris’s voice, i.e. the voice narrating the personal memoir and family history, alternates with Laura’s voice, which tells the fictionalised account of a love story and also contains a third decisive voice, namely that of Alex Thomas, telling science fiction stories. However, when the true authorship of The Blind Assassin 2 is finally revealed, it turns out that Iris’s voice is also discernible beneath all
these narrative layers. Thus, the reader has been profoundly misdirected once again.

Iris “take[s] up the burden of [her] tale” (BA 167) not only in order to alleviate her conscience, but also because “her stories […] are a means of finding her voice, speaking out after long silence.” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 147) This voice, however, is not unified and immutable, but is actually constituted by an appropriation of various other voices. Thus it can be argued that, in accordance with Iris’s above-mentioned identity split, her voice, and with it the overarching voice of the novel, is fragmented, as will be discussed in the following.

3.2.2.1 Mediated/unmediated voices

One of the idiosyncrasies of _The Blind Assassin_ is that many of the ‘secondary voices’ (by these I refer to voices belonging to characters other than Iris) are not really independent voices in their own right. Rather, the persons to whom these voices belong enter the text in a mediated way; Iris functions as their narrative representative. What can be regarded as a standard feature in first person narrations, where characters other than the narrator are represented through the narrator’s eyes, has further implications in Margaret Atwood’s novel. In fact, in her function as narrator of the main narrative, Iris is the only character who can truly speak for herself. Hers is the only unmediated and thus authentic voice in the text. As to other characters, mainly Laura and Alex Thomas, they are dead at the time of the narration, as is every other family member of the Chase-Griffen clan. As Strolz has remarked, “[i]t seems as if Iris had been spared to tell her story.” (Strolz 288) However, she also wants to tell Laura’s story and recount her own passionate affair with Alex Thomas, so she has to appropriate their voices in order to represent them. Such an undertaking, of course, entails the danger of inaccuracy and manipulation.

According to Sigrist, “Iris (or the author working through Iris) has used her narrative to ‘manipulate’ the reader so that the reader experiences this revelation at the same time and through the same events as Iris.” (Sigrist 238) Such a form of manipulation necessitates a delay of the crucial revelation detected in Laura’s old school notebooks. For Laura never really voices her trials in the literal sense
of the word. Her voice is not a speaking, but a silent one: she makes hints, insinuates and leaves codes to be deciphered by Iris, who then reproduces these clues and codes, at the same time taking pains to stress that they were incomprehensible to her back then.

However, Iris appropriates Laura’s and Alex’s voices not only through literal renditions of statements, dialogues and messages. She also grants them the roles of story-tellers by representing Laura as the author of *The Blind Assassin 2* and Alex as the creator of science fiction stories. Their voices are, so to say, doubly mediated, while Iris seemingly steps back from the act of fictional narration. This truce of delegated authorship has three main effects: it allows Iris to impute delicate topics to Laura and Alex and thus to ‘hide’ behind their voices (see also 3.3.1), it further allows her to postpone the revelation that it was actually her who had a secret affair with Alex Thomas, and it raises the reader’s doubts as to the actual origin of the two embedded texts. Staels has pointed out that as readers “we are […] uncertain about the original authorial voice of the science fiction stories, for the tales are, after all, Iris’s reconstructions of Alex’s parables.” (Staels 149) Similarly, Robinson has raised the hypothetical assumption that Laura could indeed be the true author of *The Blind Assassin 2* and that Iris’s claim of authorship “is the last stage of her sibling rivalry, motivated by jealousy of the affair with Alex which Laura’s novel records.” (Robinson “Alias Laura” 355) Although he rightly dismisses this far-fetched hypothesis as improbable, it still shows the many possible interpretations allowed by this play with authorial voices.

Iris, as has been shown, is the only character with the privilege to use her voice autonomously and in an unmediated way, and as she “can see the end, to ‘set things in order’” (BA 608), which for her also means to reveal the true authorship of *The Blind Assassin 2*. By doing so, “Iris reclaims her subjectivity – her I – from her sister’s text” (Tolan “Feminisms” 86), at the same time, however, displacing Laura from the realm of authorship and denying her the very subjectivity she herself is trying to attain. “Determined to speak and to be heard, the elderly Iris sacrifices her sister once again.” (Tolan “Feminisms” 86)
3.2.2.2 ‘Fake paratexts’

In the chapters containing extracts from *The Blind Assassin* 2, every section alternates with supplementary textual material, such as obituary notices, newspaper articles, short articles from society magazines and one letter from the director of the BellaVista clinic. These, it has to be stressed, are fictional, i.e. unlike the confessional reports and extracts from books in *Alias Grace*, they do not possess historical authenticity outside the novel, but, like the main story, are inventions by Margaret Atwood. Neither are they placed ‘outside’ the text (i.e. they do not function as epigraphs, like the paratexts in *Alias Grace*), but they are genuine chapter content. I shall therefore refer to these supplements as ‘fake paratexts’, as in their function they technically fulfil Genette’s definition of paratext, but, in their nature of “pseudo-documents” (Staels 151), cannot be included in the original concept.

The various supplements serve the already mentioned purpose of broadening and influencing the reader’s interpretation of the main text. According to Strozl, the structure, which alternately presents personal writing and newspaper articles, illustrates “that private/individual memory is to be compared and contrasted with public/collective memory” (Strozl 291). Indeed, many of the articles foreshadow events which are yet to be explained in the narrative, like the before-mentioned letter from the BellaVista clinic, or a newspaper article dealing with Laura’s week-long disappearance (representing it as a mere misunderstanding and dispelling rumours about her elopement to an amusement park as baseless), long before Iris’s explanation of the exact details is given in a subsequent chapter.

Curiously, the fake paratexts can be located both within and outside of the narrative: on the one hand, they are embedded within the novel and, as Robinson has observed, their arrangement may not be arbitrary, but rather provide an important clue for the interpretation of the relationship between *The Blind Assassin* and the novel-within-the-novel. (See Robinson “Alias Laura” 355) On the other hand, however, they constitute the only voices which come from outside the network of the novel’s protagonists, which gives them an appearance of heightened veracity and credibility. This credibility, however, is repeatedly
undermined by the main narrative, which exposes the deceitful nature of many of the texts. As Strolz has remarked, the paratexts “present the official version of Canadian history and the personal history of the Chase family […] from an outside but not necessarily objective point of view” (Strolz 291), because many of them, above all the stories conveyed in the newspaper articles, are particularly designed by Richard for the press so as not to encumber his political career. In another supplement, the aforementioned letter from the BellaVista clinic, this hypocrisy is carried to extremes.

The continuous juxtaposition of “hard news” and “soft news” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 100), i.e. of serious newspaper articles reporting about uprisings among the labouring classes and the outbreak of wars with gossip from society magazines, which primarily concern themselves with minute descriptions of social festivities and dresses, is another striking feature. This glaring contrast serves to illustrate a society which desperately tries to maintain an appearance of refinement and glamour, despite the agitation brewing beneath its polished surface. It also “implicitly calls into question the objectivity and truth value of both kinds of stories.” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 101)

Iris sometimes makes direct reference to the paratexts, e.g. when she comments on the lack of plausibility of some of the stories concocted for the newspapers. In their curiously ambivalent nature as seemingly authentic, yet highly questionable documents, the fake paratexts both aid and trick the reader. They provide the reader with hints for interpreting both the main narrative and the novel-within-the-novel and help to establish a link between the two, while, at the same time, they guide expectations towards surmises which are then effectively overthrown by Iris’s narrative.

3.3 Iris’s manipulative art

Although Iris’s narrative is not always fully reliable due to her old age and resulting gaps in her memory, one might be tempted to dismiss any suspicion of conscious narrative manipulation on her part. After all, as Iris herself stresses several times, her main objective is to give testimony. She sees herself as a relentless messenger of truth, however painful this truth may be. However,
“[m]emoir pretends to assert the truth, but it can only recount a selection of one person’s memories long after the fact.” (Stein “Left-Handed Story” 148) Thus, it would be rash to assume that, just because Iris is grappling with the task of revealing long-hidden family secrets to her granddaughter, she automatically presents Sabrina – and indeed any other possible reader – with the plain, straightforward truth. Instead, her truth-claim is frequently contradicted by herself. She acknowledges her own process of selecting and re-arranging, sometimes quite boldly drawing attention to her manipulative practices: “[I]s what I remember the same thing as what actually happened? It is now: I am the only survivor” (BA 266), she provocingly states. Like Grace Marks, Iris, too, engages in a subtle play of alternately concealing and revealing information (see Stein “Left-Handed Story” 138).

In order to analyse Iris’s manipulative narrative practices, a brief examination of her general role as a female author proves to be of interest, as the artful multiplicity of her narrative is not least due to her restraints as a woman writer in the first half of the 20th century. As Margaret Atwood has pointed out in Negotiating with the Dead, “[b]eing a writer” is a “socially acknowledged role”, a “figure in society”, a “status” (Atwood Negotiating 4-5). Thus, Iris, in setting down her autobiography, is more than just an elderly lady writing a memoir. She becomes charged with the implications of the socially acknowledged role of being, most notably, a female writer. Although “[i]t is not always a particularly blissful or fortunate role […], it can lend a certain kind of power to those who assume the costume.” (Atwood Negotiating 5)

Magali Cornier Michael places Iris in a rich tradition of women writers who adapt and usurp “established narrative practices”, thus “mak[ing] them their own”, and points out how “her [Iris’s] careful orchestration of the different narratives she uses also underscores how narratives can be manipulated to subvert their limits” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 89). In the following, Iris’s adaptations of the role of the writer as well as the means she deploys in order to utilise established narrative practices to her own ends will be analysed.

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12 ‘Truth’, in the context of historical representation, is a problematic term. Postmodernism questions the notion of one singular verifiable truth and builds upon the premise of a complex network of multiple ‘truths’ instead. For a more detailed discussion of representation and truth in the context of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, see chapter 4.
3.3.1 Dropping the veil: Female authorship in *The Blind Assassin*

As Ingersoll has remarked, “Iris is not only a ‘character’/narrator in [the novel] but also an ‘author’, albeit an unacknowledged one.” (Ingersoll “Waiting” 546) His distinction between narrator and author is essential, as the former carries connotations of orality and story-telling, “the ‘story with a moral’, the memory and re-memory of collective history, in line with […] myths and folklore” (Curti 37), whereas the role of an ‘author’, with all its implications of originality and creative power, for a long time excluded women.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar explore the transgression which was long assumed to be inherent in a female author’s activity as a writer. They illustrate the centuries-old assumption which equated creativity with paternity, thus denying women any “reproductive or generative literary power” of their own. This can be lead back to the formerly common belief that “when such creative energy appears in a woman it may be anomalous, freakish, because as a ‘male’ characteristic it is essentially ‘unfeminine.’” (Gilbert and Gubar 10) This misogynistic, yet vigorously maintained opinion marks the equation of the female author, who dares to seize the pen, with a degenerate ‘monster’, wilfully defying idealised notions of femininity as being tantamount to purity, submissiveness and selflessness. (see Gilbert and Gubar 10-36)\(^\text{13}\)

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood takes up this influential line of argumentation and spins it further. She argues that for a long time, a female artist’s life was indissolubly conflated with and defined by her art, so that she literally had no choice except consecrating her whole life to her art, which inevitably also meant a deviation from conventional female life scripts and, as a consequence, social ostracism:

If sacrifice was demanded of the male artist, how much more so of the women? What leads us to suspect that the fancifully embroidered scarlet letter on the breast of the punished and reviled Hester Prynne, in Hawthorne’s novel of the same name, stands not only for Adulteress, but for Artist, or even Author? (Atwood *Negotiating* 83)

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\(^\text{13}\) In an interview, Margaret Atwood has expressed her personal experience with such gender-based discrimination: “I’ve been reviewed in the most viciously sexist ways […] I’ve been called a Medusa, an Octopus, etc. The attack being: here is a woman who doesn’t use words in a soft, compliant way; therefore, she is an evil witch.” (Hammond 118)
Like Gilbert and Gubar, she also envisages the biblical character Salomé, who enchants Herod with her seductive dance and, when offered a reward of her choice, demands to be served the head of John the Baptist on a platter, as an exemplary female figure "in whom the fatal woman and the female artist are combined" (Atwood Negotiating 87). According to Atwood, Salomé is masterful in her art (i.e. dancing), but this very virtuosity makes her dangerous to the men who are besotted with her performance. Atwood concludes her line of argumentation with the pointed statement: “It’s a vaguely Freudian position, I suppose: women who are too active or too smart cause men to shed their body parts at the drop of a veil.” (Atwood Negotiating 87)14 Indeed, when Iris, the storyteller, the blind dancer, finally drops her veil and reveals her knowledge of Richard’s abominable behaviour, she ultimately ‘beheads’ him, if only socially. Richard’s downfall is the ‘reward’ which her novel earns her.

Another crucial term coined by Gilbert and Gubar is the female “anxiety of authorship”. This anxiety, they explain, is a result of the insufficiency of female role-models. Instead, the female writer encounters an overwhelming majority of male precursors who, for her as a woman, “symbolize authority” and at the same time “fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer.” Thus faced with the impossibility of becoming a precursor herself, the female writer fears that “the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.” (Gilbert and Gubar 49) She can only endeavour to take up the struggle for recognition and against male definitions “by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.” (Gilbert and Gubar 49) In Iris’s case, the unconscious search for a female precursor is complex and involves a subtle play with pretence and truth, with the living and the dead. For, as can be argued, it is her dead sister Laura who is retrospectively set up as a precursor by Iris. She, too, experiences “anxiety of authorship”, and tries to come to terms with it by hiding behind her sister’s doom-ridden identity. “You might decide that it was cowardice that inspired me [to name Laura as the author of the book],” Iris addresses her reader, “or a failure of nerve – I’ve never been fond of

14 For a more detailed discussion of mythological women associated with storytelling and writing, see chapter 4.3.2.
spotsights.” (BA 626) She rather wants to retire “[b]ack into obscurity. Back into the long shadow cast by Laura. Out of harm’s way.” (BA 51) Iris needs to stylise Laura as her own vanguard rewarded with outstanding literary success in order to undertake another attempt at writing. *The Blind Assassin 2* constitutes a precondition for Iris’s memoir, as it has acquainted her with writing as a cathartic activity. However, Iris also has another reason for publishing her novel under Laura’s name: the “long shadow” of Laura’s authorship allows her to voice both intimate details and criticism unimpededly by making use of genres and narrative forms which, for a woman of her time, were off-limits. (See Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 89) The memorial she wants to create needs to remain within certain traditional standards in order to be accepted and taken seriously. Thus, Iris has to hide behind “the double shield of romance fiction and displaced authorship.” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 95) The need for such double protection can be attributed to the fact that Iris has been profoundly silenced throughout most of her life.

### 3.3.1.1 Muteness/wordlessness

Although *The Blind Assassin* mainly engages with the deficiency of being blind in a variety of ways, it appears that Iris, for the larger part of her life, is also mute. She repeatedly alludes to her own silence, her lack of words, but also to being silenced by her surroundings. Already as a young child, she experiences that she will be rewarded for being silent: “I soon found that if I could keep quiet, without clamouring for attention, and above all, if I could be helpful [...] I would be permitted to remain in the same room with my mother. If not, I would be sent away. So that was the accommodation I made: silence, helpfulness.” (BA 105) Looking back, she regrets her ready acceptance of such an accommodation: “I should have screamed. I should have thrown tantrums. It’s the squeaky wheel that gets the grease, as Reenie used to say.” (BA 105)

During the subsequent years, her secretive disposition develops further. Remarks like “I did this wordlessly” (BA 266, about her precipitous flight from Alex Thomas in the attic), “I did not talk much. I smiled and agreed, and did not listen” (BA 296, about her ‘conversations’ with Richard on their honeymoon), and “My
job was to open my legs and shut my mouth” (BA 407, about the role intended for
her by her husband) also underscore how it is the men in her life to whom she
makes the sacrifice of silence.

Indeed, in her prolonged ‘muteness’, i.e. her inability to articulate her own
standpoint, Iris finds herself in a situation mirroring that of Grace Marks, albeit
inverted. While Grace, instead of producing a manuscript, delivers an extensive
oral report, supplemented, as it were, with the ‘coded’ textual fabrics of her quilts
(see chapter 4), Iris finally finds an outlet in writing her life history. The novel she
produces can thus be argued to be an outcry and an assertion of power of a
woman who has been voiceless and powerless for the largest part of her life.

*The Blind Assassin* 2 portrays a female protagonist who shares the same
social fate as Iris (her real-life alter ego). Through its fictional form, however, it
allows Iris to finally express details of her personal life which, due to their social
inappropriateness and the danger they might have posed to her marriage and her
social position, she had to conceal. The nameless ‘She’ in the nested novel
banters her lover, sometimes uses coarse language and, in short, serves to
illustrate aspects of Iris’s behaviour which go unmentioned in the ‘direct’ account
she, as a first-person narrator, gives of her constricted life as a demure society
wife. However, these outbreaks of straightforwardness notwithstanding, ‘She’ is
also confronted with a man who wishes her to be anything but clamorous and
outspoken. Alex, i.e. ‘He’ in *The Blind Assassin* 2, despite providing Iris with a
refuge in which she can speak more unreservedly, ultimately also silences his
lover. According to Staels, he “wants to wake Iris up by making her see that her
female condition within bourgeois society is one of ‘wordlessness’.” (Staels 156)
A man with a pronounced social awareness, Alex certainly tries to open Iris’s
eyes to her own reality by transforming it into a pulp science fiction story infused
with coded criticism and warnings against her imprisonment in a disastrous
marriage. However, he can hardly be said to be an instigator of a combat against
her wordlessness. He frequently interrupts her and cuts her short, and when Iris
suggests a happy ending for his love story about the ‘blind assassin’ and the
mute girl, he not only belittles her for having ideas of her own, but also dismisses
her version for its lack of verisimilitude and for being “sentimental drivel.” (BA
423) Being utterly chauvinist himself at times, he, too, ultimately contributes to
Iris’s muteness.
3.3.1.2 Victimisation and the Bluebeard-Tale

As has already been pointed out, Iris’s relationship with men is thoroughly characterised by power inequalities. She and Laura are cast in the role of victims who fall prey to various physical and psychical assaults at the hands of callous or even downright villainous men. Both sisters seem to accept their cast lot as victims more or less compliantly. Iris sometimes even seems to perversely enjoy it: “I felt so virtuous, and at the same time so hard done by, I almost wept” (BA 290), she recalls her feelings after her engagement with Richard. However, there is one reading of *The Blind Assassin* which stresses Iris’s role as an active agent in her ultimate liberation from the social prison into which she has been thrown, and also in the avengement of her sister. The basis for such a reading can once again be traced back to the realm of myths and fairy tales: it is the tale about the wife-slaughtering nobleman Bluebeard, who is eventually outmanoeuvred by his young bride.

Karen Stein has identified the Bluebeard-motif as a central subtext running through several of Margaret Atwood’s texts. “In these tales of betrayal and murder, an evil man murders a series of young women until the clever heroine outwits him, saves herself, and brings about his death.” (Stein “Talking Back” 157-58) Stein, making particular reference to “The Robber Bridegroom”, one of the many versions of the Bluebeard tale, in which the heroine reveals her knowledge about her husband’s horrible deeds by disguising it as the retelling of a dream, further argues that this type of tale “illustrates the sexual politics of victimization and indicates how victims may use storytelling to gain power and become what Atwood terms ‘creative non-victims’.” (Stein “Talking Back” 157)

The essence of the Bluebeard-tale can also be detected in *The Blind Assassin*. Richard is a prototypical ‘Bluebeard’ character who ruthlessly pursues his dubious goals. Not only does he lock his young wife up in a social ‘golden cage’; he also psychically ‘murders’ both Iris and Laura by nipping whatever resistance he might encounter in the bud. What distinguishes Iris from the heroine in the original tale of Bluebeard is that she is not so much driven by curiosity, but finds out about the abysmal secret of Richard’s abuse by coincidence. The bloody key of the fairy tale is substituted by Laura’s notebooks,
which finally provide Iris with the key to the dark family secret. Subsequently, Iris outwits ‘Bluebeard’ Richard by securing Laura’s evidence of his abuse, saves herself (if only seemingly) by blackmailing him into providing financially for herself and her daughter, and ultimately brings about his death by publishing the scandalous novel purportedly written by Laura.

Does Iris thus become a ‘creative non-victim’? Composing her modernist novel, which tells a true story in the disguise of fiction, certainly links her to the heroine of “The Robber Bridegroom” and allows her to assert her own (creative) power against social and patriarchal oppression. Her novel becomes an important weapon in her struggle for liberation and retribution. As Stein has remarked, “[t]he successful storyteller saves herself and turns the tables on the victimizer.” (Stein “Talking Back 158) Thus reversing the roles of culprit and victim, Iris manages to achieve a number of benefits for herself, not least financial advantages. However, the very same strategy ultimately results in the loss of her daughter and her granddaughter, thus placing her again in the power of Richard and Winifred.

Laura, who in many aspects is more daring than her sister, remains a victim throughout the novel, despite her attempts at escape (see above). Her inclination towards self-abandonment and self-sacrifice manifests itself in various acts of (often wrongly understood) altruism and charity. A “saint in training” (BA 258), she not only fiercely believes in self-immolation, but is also victimised from her early youth onwards, beginning with the pederast Mr. Erskine, and culminating in the sexual abuse by Richard. Unlike Iris, Laura cannot ‘talk back’ to her Bluebeardish brother-in-law. The only form of resistance available to her is silence: “I never say anything to him […] because I have nothing to say.” (BA 483)

3.3.2 “What isn’t there has a presence”: Gaps and missing links

At one point in her story, Iris reflects on what she has written down so far, and plainly states that “it’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light.” (BA 484). This statement uncloses a central problematic point of her narrative: it is full
of gaps and missing links, “absences, zeros, and nothings” (Parkin-Gounelas 690), voids which are partly deliberately left open by Iris and partly unavoidable due to the fact that she is not and cannot be an omniscient narrator. Clearly, Iris, from her exclusively 1st-person perspective, is unable to provide the reader with an all-embracing version of the story. Other crucial characters, primarily Laura and Alex Thomas, are presented to the reader through her lens. As both of them are long dead at the time of Iris’s initial writing impulse, their representation in the novel remains dubious. Paradoxically, they are protagonists who play a crucial role in the narrative, yet whose most striking characteristic is their absence. Iris’s artful play with such gaps and absences marks an essential feature of the manipulative nature of her narrative. After describing a statue of a famous veteran of the American Revolution erected in Port Ticonderoga, she adds: “No one knows what Colonel Parkman really looked like, since he left no pictorial evidence of himself and the statue wasn’t erected until 1885, but he looks like this now. Such is the tyranny of Art.” (BA 176) Such, it resonates in this statement, is also the tyranny of posthumous manipulation, because, as Vevaina has pointed out, “[w]ith the dead in the hands of the living, any amount of conscious or unconscious manipulation is possible.” (Vevaina 87) To deal and negotiate with the dead will be inevitable in a narrative in which “so many characters first enter the text through their obituary notices” (Jones qtd. in Howells 157).

Laura, one of the novel’s most central characters, also marks the most blatant gap. She “is a kind of missing person in the text, existing somewhere between the realms of social realism and cultural myth” (Bouson 252), and thus also represents stereotypical configurations of women as the mysterious Other, “the round O, the zero at the bone.” (BA 501) When talking about Laura, Iris frequently uses language denoting absence and emptiness, for instance when she describes a photograph of her sister printed in the newspaper: “The face looks deaf: it has that vacant, posed imperviousness of all well-brought-up girls of the time. A tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on.” (BA 57) After many years, Iris finally does write on this tabula rasa, although she is aware of the difficulties she is facing in her attempt to evoke her dead sister once again. She tries to recreate Laura by writing down her life story, an undertaking which necessarily contains inadequacies. Iris is unable to fill in the whole picture, as “there are many blank spaces in Laura’s life history that remain unaccounted for”
In cases where Iris is thrown back on conjectures and speculations about her sister’s fate, the danger of misrepresentation and manipulation increases. During Laura’s prolonged stay at the BellaVista clinic, Iris, trying to work out what might truly have happened to her sister, has to admit:

She had become unknown to me, as unknown as the inside of your own glove is unknown when your hand is inside it. She was with me all the time, but I couldn’t look at her. I could only feel the shape of her presence: a hollow shape, filled with my own imaginings.” (BA 539)

It is this shape of a presence which poses the greatest challenge in her undertaking. Contemplating the hole of a doughnut which she bought in a coffee shop, Iris ponders the paradox of a present absence: “A minus quantity; nothing, rendered edible. […] Does naming a sphere of nothingness transmute it into being?” (BA 379-80)

Margaret Atwood has expressed her belief that “all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.” (Atwood Negotiating 156) In trying to name the “sphere of nothingness” which now surrounds Laura, Iris has to engage in her own negotiations with the dead. Howells has argued that “Laura initiates a dialogue across the frontiers between life and death” (Howells 161), and indeed Iris has to cross the threshold of death by her writing in order to conjure Laura back up and to rectify the story which shall be passed on to Sabrina: “Since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you’re no longer who you think you are, either.” (BA 627)

Iris faces the same problem with Alex Thomas. Parkin-Gounelas has pointed out that “[h]e’s always specifically what’s ‘not there’” (Parkin-Gounelas 696), a vacancy to be filled with desires and projections. After her encounter with him in Port Ticonderoga which, as the reader learns in hindsight, sparked off their affair, he is only once or twice casually mentioned between the two sisters. For the largest part, however, he remains absent from Iris’s main autobiographical narrative. Often, however, he is also literally absent from Iris’s life, as he has to change his quarters frequently and also leaves to fight in the Second World War. Thus unable to ‘fix’ him, Iris has to convert his absence into something palpable. She is forced, and at the same time free, to reinvent him, and does so in the
fictional form of her romance novel, where she lets her fictional alter ego muse about the absence of her lover and about her memory, which is broken into fragments:

But her mind can’t hold him, she can’t fix the memory of what he looks like. It’s as if a breeze blows over the water and he’s dispersed, into broken colours, into ripples; then he reforms elsewhere, past the next pillar, taking on his familiar body. Around him is a shimmering. The shimmering is his absence, but it appears to her as light. (BA 505)

3.3.3 Spoiling consistency: Gender, genre and textual (un)reliability

Recapitulating the various aspects discussed in this chapter sheds light on the manipulative nature of Iris’s narrative. Her main manipulative practice, however, is her repeated deception of the reader. This is not so much done by overtly telling falsehoods, but rather by a relentless play with expectations. Iris deliberately misleads her reader by raising such expectations and guiding them into a certain direction, only to then demolish them abruptly. In her artful play with genres and schemata, she is no less astute than Atwood’s Grace Marks. She repeatedly disrupts literary schemata, mixes genres and withholds crucial information until the very end, which is nothing less than an act of deliberate manipulation.

The overarching narrative, i.e. Iris’s memoir, is disrupted by frequent and quite abrupt changes of genre and the reader, accustomed to generic consistency, constantly has to readjust her interpretative standards. Personal reflection changes to memoir changes to modernist romance changes to pulp science fiction: upon first reading, this multitude of genres and styles is highly confusing and unsettling, as it is unclear what to expect of such a fractured narrative. It is also difficult to identify the narrating voice behind the various styles. Only a second or even third reading of The Blind Assassin reveals the relationship between the several genres in all its profundity.

Magali Cornier Michael has remarked that “Iris can only represent her life in a fractured way; no single narrative exists that can include all the crucial aspects of her life.” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity 88) The gist of this point, however, is that “some established narratives remain unavailable to Iris because
of her position as an upper-class woman.” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 89) She further argues that the use of multiple genres in *The Blind Assassin* is particularly interesting since it also reflects how narrative is influenced by factors such as social class and gender. Literary genres and their production have traditionally been heavily gendered. After all, “[b]etween genre and gender there is only the difference of a ‘d’.” (Curti 31) Although science fiction in the course of time was also appropriated by women (see Curti 40), it “was an exclusively male genre [in the nineteen thirties]” (Staels 149). Hence, in reproducing Alex’s pulp stories, Iris makes use of a genre which would have been taboo for her as a writer, had she not embedded it into a romance novel. This second narrative layer self-referentially alludes to the science fiction level it contains: the male protagonist’s novel “Lizard Men of Xenor” is described as “a story of the kind bums read on boxcars, or school-age boys by the light of a flashlight” (BA 490), and Alex Thomas himself refers to the science fiction novel as a “piece of tripe” (BA 562). Although such repeated emphasis on the poor quality of the story seems to be intended to downplay its significance, the sheer amount of space given to it in the novel puts it into one line with the more ‘serious’ genres of modernist romance and memoir. After all, the love story between the ‘blind assassin’ and the mute girl (significantly omitted in the published version “Lizard Men of Xenor”) also contains significant references to Iris’s life reality and thus undermines the popular classification of science fiction stories as trashy, escapist and implausible.

Although romance has been a more acceptable genre for female writers than science fiction, the frequent allusions to sex, particularly to “female sexual passion” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 95), and the unheard-of provocation of a young girl having an extra-marital love affair with a man provoked a scandal around *The Blind Assassin* at the time of its publication. While publishing the novel grants Iris the liberty “to represent her sexual passion through the female protagonist’s affair” (Michael “Narrative Multiplicity” 95), its reception – a ban from public libraries, hate-mail addressed to Iris accusing her of publishing such a “piece of filth” (BA 49) – also illustrates how entrapped women were in rigid moral standards.

Iris ponders about the expectations cast on the novel by the audience: “What did they want from it? Lechery, smut, confirmation of their worst
suspicions. But perhaps some of them wanted, despite themselves, to be seduced. Perhaps they were looking for passion; [...] something they’d always longed for but couldn’t ever grasp.” (BA 49) Just like the science fiction stories, the romance novel seems to provoke two conflicting impulses in the reader: on the one hand, the urge to condemn and to set oneself off from such shabby standards, and on the other hand a secret fascination with the basal experiences depicted in them; experiences such as love, (sexual) passion, jealousy, persecution. Iris seems to be well aware of these conflicting emotions, and despite her declared goal to reveal the truth, she increases inconsistencies in the reception of her narrative by fracturing it into three different layers, but also by disrupting each of the various genres within itself. Just as Iris’s memoir does not content itself with being only that – a memoir, her novel is more than just a conventional romance, but also a parable about insuperable class differences, and the pulp science fiction stories cannot be dismissed as pure narrative horseplay. Instead, “the various interludes into science fiction force the reader to readdress accepted norms of textual reliability, and also to consider the truths encoded in myth and legend” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 259), while The Blind Assassin 2 draws attention to the problem of reference and the attribution of authorial voice.

While trying to bring all these different strands together, Iris finds herself caught in an increasingly desperate race against time, which will necessarily put an end to her narrative. Despite, or perhaps as a result of this pressure, she is fiercely determined to conclude her autobiographical project and to reveal, if not the truth, at least her truth. A short poem which she devises in one of her visits to a public restroom best expresses this determination:

The Moving Finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears blot out a Word of it.
(BA 512)
4 WOMEN, HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

The true story lies among the other stories;
a mess of colors, like jumbled clothing,
thrown off or away,

like hearts on marble, like syllables
like butchers’ discards.

The true story is vicious
and multiple. and untrue
after all.

Why do you need it?
Don’t ever
ask for the true story.

(Margaret Atwood – True Stories)

“Margaret Atwood’s writing has shown an ever-increasing engagement with the problematic of history and its representation.” (Murray 65) In her Charles R. Bronfman lecture, delivered in 1996, Atwood remarked: “What does the past tell us? In and of itself, it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word; and even so, listening means telling, and then re-telling.” (Atwood In Search 37) This statement epitomises what has come to be understood as a basic tenet in contemporary theories about history and historiography, namely the inseparable conjunction of history and narrative. The historian Hayden White has argued that “the techniques or strategies [both historians and imaginative writers] use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts.” (White 121) The “notion of a mimetic connection between art and reality” (Engler 14) has been dismantled by postmodern theories, which largely refute the understanding of art as a means of representing “a given and intelligible reality” (Engler 15), based on the understanding that ‘reality’ as such can only be approached and understood through “pre-existing explanatory schemes and cultural texts” (Engler 15). Nevertheless, the importance of
narrative structures in historical representation has been widely acknowledged and strongly influenced theories and discourses about historiography.

The following chapter looks at the complex interrelation between history and narrative and at the methods employed in the re-telling of history. After an exploration of how postmodern schools of thought paved the way for the concept of ‘historiographic metafiction’ as defined by Linda Hutcheon, both Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin will be examined as to their correspondence to this concept. With regard to these two particular novels, which deal with highly personal retellings of the past, it must be taken into account that to renarrate historical facts and personal experiences usually also leads to a narrative reshaping of those events and thus produces accounts which are deficient and not fully reliable. (See Wisker 34) If those accounts are further obfuscated by narrators who are not entirely trustworthy in the first place, as in the case of Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, questions about the accuracy of historical representation and the role of the author necessarily arise.

4.1 History and fiction in postmodern terms: Historiographic metafiction

4.1.1 Towards a postmodern understanding of history

(The basic ideas as well as the brief summary of historical developments in this section are taken from Bernd Engler’s essay “The Dismemberment of Clio: Fictionality, Narrativity, and the Construction of Historical Reality in Historiographic Metafiction”.)

At the core of every discussion about the correlation between historiography and fiction is Aristotle’s distinction between the historian and the poet. His differentiation that “the [former] relates actual events, [whereas the poet relates] the kind of things that might occur” (Aristotle 59) is not so much about the elevation of the historian over the poet. Rather, it tends to suggest that these two figures represent different sides of the same coin. The crucial difference is that
“poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars.” (Aristotle 59) This corresponds to Atwood’s own statement that “fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; […] through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves.” (Atwood Second Words 346)

The critical engagement with the epistemological status of history and the movement away from a conception of historical representation as objective and authentic began in the 19th century. A group of historians and philosophers began to question the common belief that history was tantamount to natural science and instead “emphasized the role of the historians’ individuality and subjectivity.” (Engler 20) The belief in a single essential historical truth which “could be discovered or reconstituted by methods similar to those employed by scientists” (Engler 19) was critically questioned and ultimately rejected. Such tendencies further developed and were radicalised in the 20th century, when it gradually came to be understood that historical facts are actually constituted as such and charged with meaning by the historian through his act of selecting and interpreting. In Hutcheon’s words, “[postmodernism obsessively foregrounds the] difference between events (which have no meaning in themselves) and facts (which are given meaning)” (Hutcheon 122). In addition, the reader’s ability to comprehend and to interpret both historical records and historiographies relies on frames of knowledge which she applies to the account; frames which enable her to derive meaning from it. Such postmodernist theories also strongly emphasise the importance of the arrangement of historical facts according to what Engler calls “culturally transmitted strategies of narrativization.” (Engler 32) Such “strategies of narrativization” are indispensable in the representation of history because, as Fludernik has noted, historical events are always conceptualised as such by historiographic discourses. (See Fludernik 90) Linda Hutcheon concludes that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past […]. In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’. This is […] an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs. (Hutcheon 89)
This understanding, which emphasises the ‘constructedness’ of both history and its representation in works of fiction, paves the way for new ways of representing history in narrative form, most notably for what has become known as historiographic metafiction.

4.1.2 Historiographic metafiction

The term ‘historiographic metafiction’ was coined by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). According to her definition, the label historiographic metafiction can be attached to narrative texts which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. [...] It is theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. (Hutcheon 5).

Thus, in works of historiographic metafiction history is rewritten in forms of fiction which are characterised by a very high awareness of “their own constructing, ordering and selecting processes” (Hutcheon 92). The author of such works does no longer necessarily remain an éminence gris in the shadowy background of a text, but can also step forward and self-referentially draw attention to “the processes by which we construct both the phenomenal world around us and its alleged representations in the work of art.” (Engler 14) Hutcheon conceptualises historiographic metafiction as a typically postmodern literary phenomenon, building strongly upon postmodernist notions such as “discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization” (Hutcheon 3). Additionally, it frequently contributes to the subversion of formerly universally acknowledged (historical) master narratives, thus revealing “that official histories only endorse the ‘truths’ of the dominant power groups” (Vervaina 86) and at the same time working towards the deconstruction of such hegemonic ‘truths’ by including voices of the ex-centric, e.g. women, racial minorities or other marginalised groups. This “shift away from macro-history to micro-history where the story is told by marginalized voices” (Vervaina 86) broadens the scope of representation and serves as an extension of official historical records.
Historiographic metafiction is grounded in the belief “that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted.” (Hutcheon 122) In other words, the past can only be known through texts, whichever form these texts may take. Another problematic aspect in the fictionalisation of history is the ontological status of history, and thus of human reality in general. In postmodernism, the notion that “[h]uman reality, for both sexes, is a construct” (Hutcheon 159) prevails. Hence, the subject is not “an autonomous, coherent free agent”, but rather is inseparably connected to “cultural systems” (Hutcheon 159). Such a constructionist view challenges traditional understandings of history, because “[t]o reinsert the subject into a framework of […] its signifying activities […] within an historical and social context is to begin a force a redefinition [sic!] not only of the subject but of history as well.” (Hutcheon 159). This entails the question of how the concept of ‘history’ can be subjected to a meaningful analysis if the construction of its subjects depends on shifting social and cultural circumstances and how fictional representations of history can reflect such discontinuities adequately. Postmodern (meta-)fictions incorporate this problematic because postmodern theory considers the knowledge of pre-established cultural contexts and conventions a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting both reality and its representations in literature and art in general. Furthermore, historiographic metafiction demonstrates that neither history nor novels “[represent] […] a coherent and motivated inscription of a unified subjectivity” (Hutcheon 160).

4.2 Writing and fictionalising history

The boundaries between factual and fictional representation – between history and poetry – are not at all clear-cut or stable. According to Hayden White, “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation.”

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15 Margaret Atwood has also acknowledged that the above-mentioned cultural systems, which often surface in works of fiction, pre-exist literary creation rather than being inventions by the respective author. (See Oates 72-73) Müller has argued that Margaret Atwood’s fiction is influenced by and often contains constructionist approaches to reality, which, for instance, manifest themselves in the rewritings of biographies and re-constructions of myths. (See Müller 230-249)
Thus, history and fiction, instead of being two separate categories, are close to being mutually constitutive. White further argues that

"we cannot easily distinguish between [histories and novels] on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality". (White 122)"

The difference, he claims, lies merely in the means by which the respective writer tries to achieve this verbal image: while the historian produces "a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extratextual domain of occurrence" (White 122), the writer of fiction represents reality "indirectly, that is to say by figurative techniques" (White 122).

Apart from the shared aim of the historian and the novelist, White has identified another connective element which joins history and fiction, namely myth. Going back to the theory of Northrop Frye, who identified myths as pregeneric plots which give meaning and structure to (fictional) narratives, he has dismantled the traditional opposition of history (i.e. fact) and myth (i.e. imagination/fiction), arguing that such plot structures are not only at the core of fictional stories, but that their employment also effectively influences the way historiographies are configured, endowed with certain meanings and structured along comprehensible lines. (See White 82-85) It follows that the production of both fiction and historiography (if the two can be so neatly separated at all) strongly builds upon narrative patterns, and that myth forms a central building block for both. Fludernik has also argued that the changing conceptualisation of history gives way to the implementation of alternative ways of representation and to "the reinvention of myth as a viable attitude in relation to the past." (Fludernik 94) She argues that "[i]f history is no longer experienced as a rational process, then the competing genres of oral storytelling, of the tall tale, of family history retailed in ever more fabulous shape, or of the accounts of otherworldly experiences, seep in to replace, restructure and rewrite historical consciousness." (Fludernik 94)

The process of fictionalising history can be problematic inasmuch as it might result in a blurred perception of where recorded historical facts and the imaginations of fiction blend. (This is particularly difficult when the fictional
narrative is delivered in first-person narrative, as this intensifies the reader’s identification with the narrator and might result in an uncritical acceptance of his or her version of history.) In his essay “Fictionalizing History”, Cushing Strout discusses Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (publ. 2000), in which the author mixes historical events and people (in this particular case, Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer and his eponymous painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*) with fantasy and invention (the fictional maid to Vermeer who, in the novel, posed for this particular painting), concluding that “[t]he novel does not aim to fill a gap in the historical record[,] [but rather] enhances our response to Vermeer’s portrait.” (Strout 95) Just as Strout argues that this sophisticated employment of poetic licence is justifiable because it embellishes historical facts without distorting them, Atwood’s *Alias Grace* can be said to enhance the reader’s perception and understanding of the case and its cultural and social circumstances rather than providing yet another fruitless attempt at reconstructing what happened in Thomas Kinnear’s house in 1843.

It must be kept in mind that although historical facts might be artfully incorporated into fictional narratives, and historiographies by definition contain a considerable amount of narrative elements, “novels and histories have after all remained different genres even if they cross-fertilized one another.” (Fludernik 91) The historical novel is probably the most popular interface of history and fiction. There are two basic possibilities of how such an amalgam can be achieved: “[T]he actual can be transposed into the fictional by a novelist whose imagination has been stimulated by real events and persons, or the fictional can be transposed into the actual by a historical novelist, writing about a particular time and place.” (Strout 93) The two chosen novels by Margaret Atwood are indicative of both of these possibilities. While the plot of *Alias Grace* is predicated on true historical incidents, which are extended and fictionalised by Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* is purely fictional, but with a prominent background of historical events, which also influence the course of events and the protagonists’ fates in the novel. * Alias Grace* broaches issues such as Irish immigration to Canada and pioneer life and the rebellion of 1837, while *The Blind Assassin* is set against the backdrop of influential socio-political developments such as the Great Depression and the two World Wars. The intricate conflation of personal history on the one hand and larger national (and international) historical events on the other hand
creates an intriguing tension between ‘official’ historical records and individual representation, thus undermining male-dominated official master narratives and foregrounding female perspectives. (See Tolan Margaret Atwood 156) The variety of textual material supplementing both novels (ballads, newspaper clippings, extracts from society magazines, witness reports, obituaries, etc.) further contributes to the postmodern fragmentation of historical representation and the creation of multiple ‘truths’. Margaret Atwood deconstructs the notion that any single one version of history can be taken for granted and rewrites ‘official’ history through her ex-centric protagonists’ eyes.

The following sections focus mainly on representations of the protagonists’ personal history, although, in order to arrive at a meaningful analysis of it, larger historical events and their rewriting in the novels cannot be disregarded completely.

4.2.1 Confession and autobiography

In the following, two of the two narrative modes which are employed in the two novels in question, and which help to build the protagonists’ personal histories and give them narrative shape, will be examined. Both confession and autobiography provide a particularly fitting frame of interpretation, as they are highly individual, personalised genres, bound up with issues of history and truth. Rather than easily falling into the category of one particular fixed genre, both novels can be read in a variety of ways, and confessional and autobiographical elements, far from being neatly distinguishable, often overlap.

4.2.1.1 Confessional narrative

Both Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin can be read as a confession of their main protagonists. The difference is that while Iris Griffen finally acknowledges her guilt in the death of her sister, a guilt which has haunted her for decades, Grace Marks’s forced confession does not culminate in the admission of her
culpability, as both Dr. Jordan and the reader expect at the beginning of the novel. It is, as it were, a confession without avowal.

In her article “The Politics of Ventriloquism: Margaret Atwood’s Fictive Confessions”, Nathalie Cooke has examined the application and implications of the confessional mode in Margaret Atwood’s narratives. She points to the distinction between real confession, the “central characteristic [of which is] a truth claim” (Cooke 209), and confessional poetry, which “deals with experience that is deeply painful to bring into public, not because it is disgusting, nor because it is sinful, but because it is intensely private.” (Lerner 64, qtd. in Cooke 209). The extreme contrast between the public and the private in the lives of Grace and Iris, which has already been discussed in the respective chapters, contributes to the painfulness of the experience of confession. Natalie Cooke has composed a tripartite set of signals which indicate a confessional mode:

(a) First, the speaker communicates details that are intimate in nature and, in some way, shameful. […]
(b) Second, the speaker creates a context of intimacy for the communication […] [which] provides an invitation for the listener. […]
(c) Third, the intimate tone […], linked with intimacy of detail, activates a kind of power dynamic since the narrator appears to make herself vulnerable. Often the confession is a kind of admission of powerlessness. […]
(Cooke 209-211)

All of these signals can be observed in both Grace’s and Iris’ narrative.

4.2.1.1.1 Confession in Alias Grace

According to King, Alias Grace “is dominated by confession, since Grace’s first person narrative is structured around the efforts of the representatives of state power – legal, religious and medical – to extract a confession from her.” (King 73) The urgency to confess is imposed on her from outside, thus rendering her narrative, which is supposed to meet a multitude of expectations, equivocal.

The nature of the ‘intimate detail’ to be confessed by Grace is not easy to pin down, as she does not reveal the particular detail her ‘confessor’ Simon is most interested in. Although she remains silent about her involvement in the murders (under the pretence of memory loss), she hints at other intimate details which must seem equally awkward to any other man of Simon’s social standing:
Grace’s first menstrual bleeding, sexual encounters with Thomas Kinnear and James McDermott (which are only very subtly hinted at), secret abortions, but also domestic chores, like how to clean a slop pail, are more or less explicitly mentioned by Grace, although, as Dr. Jordan observes, “[she] has a strong dash of prude in her.” (AG 358) However, the young doctor, who “is under no illusions as to the innate refinement of women” (AG 100), can easily deal with such private information, because officially the only intimate detail which truly interests him is whether or not Grace helped to kill Nancy and Kinnear.

The second condition according to Cooke, viz. a context of intimacy, is created by Grace’s private encounters with Simon in the Governor’s sewing room, where the two of them are undisturbed and unobserved by others. Lastly, the activation of a power dynamic in the course of the conversations between Grace and Simon is obvious, although it is far less clear who ultimately is in power and who is not. Grace indeed appears to make herself vulnerable by exposing her innermost thoughts, dreams and secrets (as she makes Simon and the reader believe). Besides, the power over Grace’s future fate, i.e. a possible release from prison, is also partly in Simon’s hands. On the other hand, as has already been pointed out, he increasingly seems like a helpless, powerless pawn in Grace’s highly manipulative narrative game, while Grace herself takes on the superior role: “It’s as if she’s drawing his energy out of him – using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances.” (AG 338) During the hypnosis session, she furthermore publicly embarrasses Simon by harshly pointing to his flirtatious behaviour with the Governor’s daughter Lydia. Hence, Grace manages to subtly reverse the roles cast for her and her counterpart, as ultimately it is Simon who is exposed as vulnerable and helpless.

In Grace’s particular case, confession does not only mean revealing guilt or innocence. It also plays a very pragmatic role and “is presented to her as the only route to freedom”, as “[i]n legal terms, she cannot be pardoned until she admits her guilt” (King 73). Thus, Grace is urged to confess her supposed crime, but at the same time she is already condemned a priori. “Confess, confess. Let me forgive and pity. Let me get up a Petition for you. Tell me all” (AG 39), she bitterly mocks the Chaplain who is sent for every time she allegedly loses control and “start[s] feeling sorry for [her]self” (AG 39).
The relationship between Grace as the ‘penitent’ and Simon as the ‘confessor’ is particularly interesting. Gilmore has noted that “[t]he confession must be regarded [...] as relational: neither penitent nor confessor is the ‘source’ of truth production. Instead, their relationship forms the locus from which confession is generated.” (Gilmore 112) Grace cannot generate any verifiable truth because she claims to have forgotten the crucial event; Simon, despite his medical authority over her, cannot unearth the ‘truth’ he is longing for because his attitude towards Grace becomes increasingly biased and because she refuses him access to the hidden depths of her memory. Instead, their conversations serve to create a new version of history which can be added to the ones already in existence, but not replace them. The belief in one singular truth is once again undermined.

4.2.1.1.2 Confession in The Blind Assassin

The case is somewhat different with Iris. What she has to confess is not only her own share of guilt in her sister’s death, but also long-hidden family secrets, like the circumstances of her sister’s death and the identity of her daughter’s biological father, who is also the grandfather of Sabrina, her supposed reader. Those hitherto unrevealed details qualify as intimate, shameful and intensely private. Unlike Grace, Iris sets out her ‘family history project’ with the declared goal of ultimately lifting the veil which has kept those secrets hidden for so many decades. She admits having a daydream highly reminiscent of the Cinderella fairy tale, in which she imagines herself appearing at Sabrina’s cradle as “the uninvited black-sheep godmother” (BA 536) who bestows upon the girl the gift of truth: “I’m the last who can. It’s the only thing in this room that will still be here in the morning.” (BA 536)

Iris begins her manuscript with the sentence: “Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge.” (BA 3) This opening sentence, blunt as it is, already suggests that Iris will finally reveal the “intimate details” connected to Laura’s death. The context of intimacy is problematic to analyse. Who is the listener for whom she creates this context? Is it the reader of the novel, her granddaughter, or only herself? At the beginning, Iris herself seems to be unsure: “For whom am I writing this?” she wonders. “For myself? I think not.
Perhaps I write for no one. Perhaps for the same person children are writing for, when they scrawl their names in the snow.” (BA 53) But the urge to write, to make herself heard in some way, is too strong for her to resist it. “I’ve written nothing for the past week. I lost the heart of it. Why set down such melancholy events? But I’ve begun again, I notice.” (BA 119) It seems as if the act of writing, and thus the act of confessing, is a compulsion which, despite her reluctance, she simply cannot resist.

Unlike Grace, Iris confesses voluntarily, hoping for absolution from her lost granddaughter. However, by absolution she does not mean exoneration from her ‘sins’ in the traditional sense. Imagining an encounter with Sabrina towards the end of her life, she muses: “What is it that I’ll want from you? Not love: that would be too much to ask. Not forgiveness, which isn’t ours to bestow. Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me.” (BA 637) Iris confesses in order to assert her identity: “Grandmother, you will say; and through that one word I will no longer be disowned.” (BA 636) An old woman in her eighties exposes the malfunctions and afflictions of her aged body, thus creating a maximum of vulnerability. Relentlessly pointing to her “insufficiencies, [her] stains and smells” (BA 448), she puts herself in an inferior position, allowing her reader to scrutinise and judge her. In passages which border on self-vindication, Iris tries to explain the powerlessness she experienced as a young woman and which, as she tries to stress, influenced the decisions she has taken:

I’m on trial here. I know it. I know what you’ll soon be thinking. It will be much the same as what I myself am thinking. Should I have behaved differently? You’ll no doubt believe so, but did I have any other choices? I’d have such choices now, but now is not then. Should I have been able to read Laura’s mind? Should I have known what was going on? Should I have seen what was coming next? Was I my sister’s keeper? (BA 523)

The ‘admission of powerlessness’ thus becomes an excuse for failing her sister. However, Iris does not want to pass on a whitewashed, extenuated version of the past. She, who used to romanticise her own grandmother Adelia as a teenage girl, is well aware of the temptation a romanticised reading of her story might pose for a young woman, and warns Sabrina: “Don’t prettify me though, whatever else you do: I have no wish to be a decorated skull” (BA 637), to then finally conclude: “I leave myself in your hands.” (BA 637)
Fludernik has argued that “(auto)biography is precisely that subgenre of history which most closely resembles the experientiality of narrative presentation.” (Fludernik 91) Gilmore has argued that “autobiography wraps up the interrupted and fragmentary discourses and identity” (Gilmore 17), but also that it traditionally offers representations of “the overrepresented Western white male [who] identifies his perspective with a God’s-eye view and, from that divine height, sums up his life” (Gilmore 17). Thus, a rather limited (and very male-centred) canon of autobiographic works worthy of attention is produced. (See Gilmore 17)

Autobiographical writing poses various problems of reference, which have been a matter of much scholarly debate. One of the central questions is whether autobiography refers to any kind of truth outside its textual configuration, and if so, how reliably such a truth can be represented. The matter becomes even more complicated when, as in Atwood’s novels, a fictional character is writing (or, in Grace’s case, telling) her autobiography. The pseudo-realistic touch of these fictional autobiographies, further intensified by the supplementation with ‘story-extrinsic’/paratextual material, makes it hard to distinguish between references to a supposed ‘truth’ which lies outside the autobiography, but still within the fictional realm of the novel, and references to ‘truths’ in the ‘real’ world outside the novel. If one looks at the interrelation of autobiography, historical fact and fiction, questions about the ‘truthful’ narrative representation of historical events inevitably surface again. Especially Gilmore has analysed (female) autobiographical writing with regard to truth production and confession, two processes she suggests are intricately connected:

The confession’s persistence in self-representation and the meaning attributed to that persistence largely structure authority in autobiography. As a mode of truth production the confession in both its oral and written form grants the autobiographer a kind of authority derived from the confessor’s proximity to ‘truth’. (Gilmore 108)

She further argues that “[w]hat we have come to call truth or what a culture determines to be truth in autobiography, among other discourses, is largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorization.” (Gilmore 107)
process of authorisation for a long time a priori excluded female (auto)biographies from a historical record, as their lives and memories were considered to be too circumstantial to be of historical interest. Thus, “a more comprehensive and expansive conception of truth” (Freeman 32) is called for. Indeed it seems that *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, both fictional autobiographies, refute the notion of a singular, male-authorised truth and attempt to establish multiplicity and fragmentation as new keystones. Thus, the question whether or not the novels transmit a truth outside the autobiographical text, is difficult to answer, because “if we think of ‘truth’ in this context only in terms of its faithful correspondence to what was, then autobiographical texts must indeed be deemed illusory and fictional” (Freeman 32). In terms of ‘faithful correspondence to what was’, Grace clearly fails to transmit any truth with her narrative. Necessarily precluding the possibility of objectivity, her narrative instead is a re-telling of her (impaired) memory, which becomes ever more fractured as it approaches the big ‘gap’, i.e. the day of the murders. Artfully casting her memory into (oral) narrative, delivered, for the larger part, in chronological order, Grace produces a ‘text’ which derives much of its fragile authority not from its proximity to truth (which, in any case, can only be speculated about), but rather from the fact that she is the only person who can still give testimony about what happened on the fatal day in 1843.

Freeman has emphasised the importance of what he calls a “life history” (Freeman 28) for the constitution of a conception of an individual self, and suggests that “the self [...] is constituted, defined, and articulated through its history.” (Freeman 29) As mentioned in chapter 2, Grace is almost exclusively defined by discourses about her. Thus Dr. Jordan, who meets her as a prisoner, ponders: “Her story is over. The main story, that is; the thing that has defined her.” (AG 105) It is debatable whether Grace herself has any genuine sense of a ‘self’ at all, or whether she has lost this sense. The autobiography she offers Simon raises the hope (both in him and the reader) that it might after all be possible to discern the ‘true’ Grace beneath all those discursive layers and, by examining her life history, to spot at least glimpses of how her identity is constituted. At the same time, however, this hope is continuously undermined by Grace’s refusal to reveal the mysterious ‘core’ of her story. Instead, she hides behind minute descriptions of everyday life, which serve as an excellent
distraction. As Magali Cornier Michael has pointed out, the sheer abundance of
detail with which Grace adorns her autobiographical narrative “is apt to lull
readers into a passive acceptance of the narrative as a [sic!] accurate reflection
of Grace’s life.” (Michael “Rethinking History” 435)

Looking at the interrelation between history, fiction and interpretation,
Freeman argues that inasmuch as the ‘text’ of a life history, just like any other
text, needs to be interpreted in order to derive meaning from it, and “that virtually
all interpretations are fictions” (Freeman 30), life histories, i.e. autobiographies,
can also be classified “as a fiction, an imaginative – even imaginary – story we
weave out of those tangled threads we believe to be responsible for the texture of
our lives” (Freeman 30).16 If we apply his argument to the autobiographies in
Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin, which, being novels, are fictional anyway, it
soon becomes clear that reflecting on their past from a fictional present, the two
female protagonists create the meaning of their respective histories at the same
time as they try to detect it themselves in the stories they spin. Put in Freeman’s
words, “the meanings [they arrive] at are in some sense as much made as found”
(Freeman 30). The meaning of Grace’s life history is not something inherent in
her story. Instead, an interpretative framework, as aimed at by Dr. Jordan, is
required to fill her narrative, but also the gaps left open, with meaning. Ironically,
he fails at this task, mostly because, according to Grace, he fails at correctly
interpreting what she is telling him:

[S]ometimes I imagine that whatever he is writing down, it cannot possibly
be anything that has come out of my mouth, as he does not understand
much of what I say, although I try to put things as clearly as I can. It’s as if
he is deaf, and has not yet learned to read lips. (AG 281-82)

What she conceals, however, is that she herself also wears him out by
sometimes downright maliciously withholding crucial information from him. Her
claim to “put things as clearly as I can” seems almost cynical. At the same time
she complains that “he [Dr. Jordan] often wants a thing to mean more than it
does” (AG 282), implying that he sometimes reads too much hidden meaning into
what she says.

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16 Interestingly, Freeman also uses the weaving metaphor which is so prominent in Alias Grace,
equating narratives with textures and its various components with threads.
Iris Griffen, too, provides an extreme example for the constitution of the self through its history. Deprived of any individuality and rendered little more than a decorative doll whose only task is to adorn her ambitious husband, it takes Iris more than fifty years to reclaim her identity by writing down her life history. Yet, she goes about this enterprise in a more conventional way than Grace. First of all, she produces a manuscript, a palpable document. By writing down her autobiography, Iris produces a kind of memorial, her legacy to be passed on to her granddaughter. In hindsight, she recognises the wish for this memorial as the prime motivation for writing her memoir: “What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind.” (BA 621) However, she is aware of the problematic nature of such a memorial: “But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. […] Lest we forget. Remember me. To you from failing hands we throw. Cries of the thirsty ghosts.” (BA 621)

Like Grace, Iris also grapples with the issue of truth, and like Grace she is aware of the problems such a notion poses: “You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn’t necessarily get you the truth.” (BA 485) This statement is not only an open acknowledgement of her failure to convey the ‘truth’; it also points at the difficulty, if not impossibility, of construing such a ‘truth’ in the first place. As autobiography remains a deeply subjective genre and the reader continues to exist outside the author’s realm of experience, truth is unattainable through the text. Or rather, any possible truth ultimately remains “more indeterminate than readers might otherwise desire.” (Ingersoll “Waiting” 555) Having survived all of the protagonists in her story after all also empowers her to present her very own, individual truth: “[I]s what I remember the same thing as what actually happened? It is now: I am the only survivor.” (BA 266)

4.2.2 “I will cause the war to end”: Rewritings of historical events

As both novels are historical novels dealing with times and events past, it is interesting to look at how this past is represented and rewritten by the central
characters. Although the protagonists’ personal histories are in the focus of their narrations, socio-political developments also influence the action and are thus also broached by the narrator herself or by other characters in the novel.

The re-writing of national and international history is most notably done by Iris Griffen in *The Blind Assassin*. According to Tolan, the novel “could be considered as a general inquiry into the way that history is remembered and recorded.” (Tolan *Margaret Atwood* 155) Iris has a very personal relationship to history, which for her has a painful resonance. “My bones have been aching again […]. They ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain” (BA 70), she wearily states as an octogenarian. In Iris’ case, the big historical events in the agitated first half of the 20th century have immediate influence on her personal life history: the financial decline of her father’s factory due to the Great Depression in the early 1930s leads to her mercenary marriage with Richard; her lover and the father of her daughter, Alex Thomas, is killed in the Spanish Civil War, fighting in the International Brigades. Writing her family history for Iris literally also means ‘writing history’, and she is well aware of the role she herself plays in the representation of historical events in her manuscript (and thus in the novel): “I turn back the page: the war is still raging. […] But on this page, a fresh, clean page, I will cause the war to end – I alone, with a stroke of my black plastic pen.” (BA 93) Thus it is made explicit that history is literally re-created by Iris, who, as the author of her panoramic family saga, has the power to include and exclude, to emphasise and to shorten at will. Looking back at her agitated life, she picks out those events which she considers worth mentioning and never loses herself in lengthy historical details. Rather, her selection sometimes seems random; Iris almost carelessly mentions influential events in passing:

> The spring of 1936. That was the year everything began to fall apart. […] King Edward abdicated in that year […]. That’s the event people remember. And the Civil War began, in Spain. But those things didn’t happen until months later. What was March known for? Something. (BA 451)

When writing about the beginning of World War II, she suddenly interrupts herself in her writing: “The [war] to which I’m referring began in early September of 1939, and went on until … Well, it’s in the history books. You can look it up.” (BA 583)
Noticing that she is on the verge of lapsing into the style of a pure factual chronicle, she pauses for a moment, draws a clear distinction between her story and the history books and then continues with her personal history.

Iris reports about major historical events in the same way she seems to have experienced them as a young woman: casually and distractedly she paints a rudimentary picture of things going on at the periphery of her perception; big events with far-reaching consequences are crammed into a few casual sentences. Iris admits to not caring very much about contemporary political developments and remembers that when she read in Richard’s morning newspaper that Hitler had marched into the Rhineland and Richard gave a speech about Hitler being “a smart fellow” (BA 452), she “agreed, but did not listen” (BA 452), because, as she insinuates, she was distracted by thoughts about Alex Thomas. Ilona Sigrist attests Iris blindness “on both personal and historical levels” (Sigrist 237), as “during the honeymoon, she encounters the Germany of the years preceding the Second World War but fails to recognize a culture whose structures will allow the murder of millions of people; she sees only what concerns herself.” (Sigrist 237) This judgement seems harsh, considering that Iris was only very basically educated at home by two rather unsuccessful teachers, but it does point to Iris’s tendency to scan only the surface of things. Remembering her and Richard’s stay in Rome, she ponders:

I suppose I ought to have seen Mussolini’s Fascist troops in their black uniforms, marching around and roughing people up […] but I did not see them. That sort of thing tends to be invisible at the time unless you yourself happen to be the object of it. Otherwise you see it only later, in newsreels, or else in films made long after the event.” (BA 372)

However, there are hints which betray that she most likely did show interest in political events, particularly in the Spanish Civil War, because she knows her lover is fighting in it. One of these sparse hints can be found in the novel-within-the-novel: “She goes to the newsreels, in the movie theatres. She reads the papers. She knows herself to be at the mercy of events, and she knows by now that events have no mercy.” (BA 566)

Iris is not the only one whose views on historical events are reproduced in the novel. Many political developments are also presented ‘indirectly’; be it through the stories told by the nameless ‘He’ in the novel-within-the-novel (i.e. a
fictionalised version of the communist Alex Thomas), or through the comments of those who have power over Iris, mainly Richard and Winifred. Iris herself, who comes from a very sheltered background and probably did not have any well-defined opinion of her own on these events at the time, does not even attempt to recompense her lack of political knowledge in hindsight, but rather reproduces Richard’s often dubitable opinions which she once swallowed without questioning them: “‘We could use a good war’, said Richard. ‘Maybe it will pep things up – put paid to the depression. I know a few folks who are counting on it. Some folks are going to make a lot of money.’” (BA 478-79) In The Blind Assassin 2, however, Alex Thomas’s Bolshevik view of the war is discernible. The novel’s nameless male protagonist (i.e. Alex) frequently accuses his lover (i.e. Iris) of being naïve, due to her protected lifestyle and her husband’s influence, and provides a much cruder, dismal picture of contemporary incidents. For instance, he comments on World War II: “‘What they’re hoping for is that Uncle Joe and Adolf will tear each other to pieces, and get rid of the Jews for them into the bargain, while they sit on their bums and make money.’” (BA 564) What is more, some of the science fiction stories told by the nameless protagonist in The Blind Assassin 2 are strongly influenced by contemporary real-life events, of which Alex Thomas, the supposed ‘real’ teller of those stories, naturally must have known in detail. For instance, in one scene the Spanish Civil War and the deployment of the International Brigades is alluded to:

The sudden invasion changes things for the Zycronians. Barbarians and urbanites, incumbents and rebels, masters and slaves – all forget their differences and make common cause. Class barriers dissolve – the Snifiards discard their ancient titles along with their face masks, and roll up their sleeves, manning the barricades alongside the Ygniroids. All salute to each other by the name of tristok, which means [...] comrade or brother. (BA 491)

Thus, long before sitting down to write her manuscript as an old woman, Iris has already rewritten history, albeit in ‘coded’ form.

The plot of Alias Grace does not comprise as large a timespan as The Blind Assassin. Historical developments are not made as explicit; neither do they have such immediate influence on Grace’s life as they have on Iris’s. The only exception is the Rebellion of 1837, in which Canadian settlers rose against the
British colonial government. Grace, who has no political knowledge whatsoever, is informed about the background of the rebellion by Mary Whitney:

I knew nothing about the Rebellion, not having been in the country at the time, so Mary Whitney told me. It was against the gentry, who ran everything, and kept all the money and land for themselves; and it was led by Mr. William Lyon Mackenzie, who was a radical, and after the Rebellion failed he escaped through ice and snow in women’s clothing, and over the Lake to the States, and he could have been betrayed many times over but was not, because he was a fine man who always stood up for the ordinary farmers […] (AG 171)

Thus, history as it were is doubly mediated: first, the anecdote is told by Mary, a young girl “of democratic views” (AG 39) and with “[little] respect for degree” (AG 173); then it is reproduced by Grace, who, it seems, does acquire political consciousness of some sort over the years. During her journey to Kinnear’s house, Grace is shown the burnt down ruins of a building by a fellow traveller and told the anecdote that

it was the celebrated Montgomery’s Tavern, which was where Mackenzie and his band of ragtags held their seditious meetings, and set out to march down Yonge Street, during the Rebellion. A man was shot in front of it, going to warn the Government troops […]. They hanged some of those traitors, but not enough, said the dealer [i.e. Grace’s fellow traveller], and that cowardly rascal Mackenzie should be dragged back from the States, which was where he ran off to, leaving his friends to swing at the rope’s end for him. (AG 238)

This, of course, is the fictive dealer’s version of events. Grace’s observation that “when they are in that state [i.e. drunk] it is just as well not to provoke them; and so I said nothing” (AG 238) insinuates that, if voiced, her view on the issue might have been different, and perhaps rather more sympathetic. This incident also anticipates the conflict between supporters and opponents of Mackenzie’s cause, which is brought up again in Dr. Jordan’s conversation with Grace’s lawyer McKenzie, who, although not related to the rebel William Lyon Mackenzie, “would almost rather claim kin than not” (AG 432). He insinuates that split public attitudes towards the rebellion also influenced his client’s case: “[T]hose which supported Mr. Mackenzie and his cause were the only ones to say a good word for Grace. The others were all for hanging her, and William Lyon Mackenzie as well, and anyone else thought to harbour republican sentiments.” (AG 432) His claim is rooted in the historically evident fact that Grace’s case was strongly
influenced by political conflicts. At the beginning of the novel, the Reverend Verringer states that "'[t]he tories appear to have confused Grace with the Irish Question [...] and to consider the murder of a single Tory gentleman [...] to be the same thing as the insurrection of an entire race."") (AG 91) ‘The Irish Question’ refers to the controversy about Irish independence from Great Britain, which was a matter of much debate and conflict in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Verringer’s statement illustrates the political dimension of the case, as it was unheard of that a poor immigrant servant girl should have murdered an upper-class Tory gentleman. Thus, rather than directly commenting on historical events and presenting the protagonist’s individual experience of them, as it is done in The Blind Assassin, Alias Grace features a subtle rewriting of social and political conflicts in 19th century Canada.

4.2.3 Needles and pens: Two different modes of textualising history

Gilbert and Gubar open their book The Madwoman in the Attic with the provocative question: “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?” (Gilbert and Gubar 7) Building on the argument that the phallic pen is an intrinsically male instrument for text production, which is traditionally unavailable for women, they set out to explore alternative means which permit women to contest patriarchal (creative) authority and to devise their own texts. Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin exemplify the ‘male’ and the ‘female’ mode of textualising history respectively. Simplifying, it could be argued that while Grace as a Victorian woman reverts to literally and figuratively weaving her story, a quintessentially female activity, Iris assumes the ‘phallic’ pen, producing a handwritten manuscript. However, the distinction is not always neat and clear-cut.

Rigney has noted that “in all literatures, particularly those written by women and particularly those written by Atwood, the image of the woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider, becomes one with the image of tale-teller, writer.” (Rigney 158) Indeed, these images repeatedly recur both in Alias Grace and in The Blind Assassin. The image of the seamstress as a symbolic
impersonation of the woman writer can be traced back to ancient mythology (see also 4.3.2.). It places the act of writing, or more precisely, of transmitting (hi)stories, within the domestic, i.e. the traditionally female realm, but at the same time stresses the subversive power of female storytelling in that quilt-making as a quintessentially female ‘discourse’ allows women “to speak in a language not universally accessible” (Wisker 33).

*Alias Grace* in particular is replete with allusions to stitching, sewing, patchworking and quilting. The parallel to the act of writing and producing texts is established very early in the novel (and in the protagonist’s life), when Grace reports having stitched her first letters “with leftover thread” (AG 30). Her attitude towards actual writing is deeply sceptical: “Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God’s truth” (AG 299), she scolds Dr. Jordan when he confronts her with dubious details from McDermott’s printed confession. Similarly, towards the end of her narrative, she reflects: “The way I understand things, the Bible may have been thought out by God, but it was written down by men. And like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong.” (AG 533) So profoundly does she distrust the written word that she does not even want to fully acknowledge the authority of the Bible. Hence, it is logical that Grace reverts to her area of expertise, namely sewing. Thus, she does not only produce a ‘text’ in the literal sense, but also a cultural text, as the quilts she so assiduously produces were important domestic objects in 19th century Canada, which also had further reaching implications - for instance Grace explains the importance for a girl to have three self-made quilts before she marries. (See AG 185) Grace’s meetings with Dr. Jordan take place in the sewing room, and her act of narrating her life history is frequently paralleled with descriptions of her sewing activity: “[Dr. Jordan] wants me to begin talking, so I say, Today I will finish the last block for this quilt, after this the blocks will all be sewn together and it will be quilted” (AG 112); “he does not seem to know quite how to begin. So I continue with my sewing until he’s had time to gather himself together” (AG 168); “Grace continues her stitching” (AG 357). Sewing allows Grace to express herself, even if she cannot or does not want to talk. Feeling provoked by one of Dr. Jordan’s questions, she thinks to herself: “I should not speak to him so freely and decide I will not, if that is the tone he is going to take. […] I keep silent, and continue to
Another incident illustrates how narrating and sewing are aligned in the novel. One day Dr. Jordan asks Grace what she wants him to bring to their next meeting, apparently hoping for some hint which will allow him to draw conclusions as to her involvement in the murders. Quite disappointingly for him, Grace only expresses the mundane wish for a radish with a little salt, because “it would be a rare treat” (AG 282), thus shattering his expectations. After he has left, she takes up her unfinished quilt blocks and continues to sew. Grace’s refusal to talk, or rather to communicate the particular information Dr. Jordan desires, is often contrasted with an increased eagerness in sewing, as if to stress that she has alternative means of configuring her narrative; methods from which Dr. Jordan as a rational male scientist, however, is excluded.

Iris Griffen, by contrast, is a writer in the literal sense. In the late 20th century, she still uses the ‘old-fashioned’ method of handwriting instead of using a word processor, although she is “not as swift as [she] was […] [Her] fingers are stiff and clumsy, the pen wavers and rambles, it takes [her] a long time to form the words.” (BA 53) Unlike Grace, she relies on the written word and intends to pass it on to her granddaughter. What she keeps in her old steamer trunk are exclusively written documents: “There were all of the notebooks with their cheap cardboard covers […]. Also the typescript, held together by a crisscross of ancient kitchen string. Also the letters to the publishers […]. Also five copies of the first edition” (BA 348). At times, her relationship to words is ambivalent: “In the beginning was the word, we once believed. Did God know what a flimsy thing the word might be? How tenuous, how casually erased?” (BA 598) The frequently changing scribblings in the public toilet cubicle, which Iris observes with so much interest, seem to illustrate her point. Pondering on her sister’s death, she suspects that the realisation of the unreliability of words might have added to her impulse to kill herself:

The words she had relied on, building her house of cards on them, believing them solid, had flipped over and shown her their hollow centres, and then skittered away from her like so much waste paper.” (BA 598)

Iris herself realises that “[t]hings written down can cause a great deal of harm. All too often, people don’t consider that.” (BA 350) Still, her identification with what she has written down is so strong that when she reaches the end of her memoir,
she herself and the manuscript seem to have become one: “I leave myself in your hands. [...] By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be.” (BA 637)

However, there are also references and hints to the fabric-like nature of her narrative. First of all, her method of disentangling her family history resembles the unravelling of a reel of yarn. She starts out with a strong opening sentence, which already anticipates the climax of the story, and then proceeds to gradually disentangle the strands of her narrative, at the same time artfully interweaving fact and fiction, first-person memoir and third-person prose.17 This procedure links her to Grace’s patchwork method and reveals her text to be a ‘fabric’, the pattern of which is arranged according to her ideas. Ingersoll has further noted that the “seemingly unintentional troping of [Iris’] writing as a ‘line’ [...] contributes to the textuality of this narrative” (Ingersoll “Waiting” 548). Indeed, whenever Iris reflects on her writing, images of lines and threads abound: “[M]y black scrawl [...] unwinds in a long dark thread of ink across the page, tangled but legible” (BA 118); “my line, this black thread I’m spinning across the page” (BA 345); “The only thing between us is this black line: a thread thrown onto the empty page, into the empty air.” (BA 578) Thus, the image of the seamstress, or rather of the weaver, also partly applies to The Blind Assassin. However, while for Grace sewing is also a form of evasion and a refuge from male discourse and the coercion to confess, Iris narrates and writes with fierce determination. The act of writing her memoir for her is an expression of the deeply human wish to “memorialise” oneself, as Iris puts it: “[W]e monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It’s all the same impulse. [...] At the very last we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down.” (BA 118) Furthermore, she wants to create “a memorial [...] [f]or Alex, but also for [herself]” (BA 626). In fact, this

17 This method of unravelling also brings to mind Atwood’s definition of history in another successful novel of hers, The Robber Bride (publ. 1993). In it, Tony, a historian fascinated with military history, begins one of her lectures with the statement: “Pick any strand and snip, and history becomes unravelled.” (Atwood Robber Bride 3) With regard to this image, Murray poses the question: “Is it that, in the process of unravelling, the method of fabrication and the manner of its assembly is revealed in plain and accessible terms? Or does it ‘unravel’ [...] to the point where the initial object, once undone, ceases to exist as such? Is it a laying bare or is it an undoing?” (Murray 69) With this question, she also points to the conflict between an essentialist view, which regards “history [...] as possessing an attainable centre that we might reach” (Murray 69) and the anti-essentialist opposite “that views history through its constructedness within language, and recognizes its potential multiplicity of meaning and interpretation.” (Murray 69)
wish constitutes her initial impulse for writing the novel-within-the-novel, which
becomes a fictionalised extension of Iris’s autobiography, filling the gaps she
deliberately left open.

4.3 Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin as
historiographic metafiction

According to Vevaina, “[i]n all her works, Atwood reveals a distinctly postmodern
engagement with history.” (Vevaina 87) Accordingly, both of the novels discussed
in this paper have repeatedly been placed into a context of historiographic
metafiction as discussed above.

According to Hutcheon’s definition, works of historiographic metafiction
undermine “the stability of point of view” (Hutcheon 160), which can be done in
two essential ways: “On the one hand, we find overt, deliberately manipulative
narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not
completely localizable in the textual universe.” (Hutcheon 160) Deviating from
traditional conventions, such as the unity of voice and the presupposition of a
clearly identifiable, unified narrator figure, postmodern authors, and particularly
those engaged with the writing of historiographic metafiction, employ new devices
of fragmentation which serve to deconstruct the assumption of an overarching
unity of a text and its narrator, which is no longer taken for granted. According to
Palumbo, this strategy of fragmentation is a characteristic trait of Atwood’s prose:
“Atwood has made constant use of the double voice […] Through […] alterations
in narrative point of view, […] Atwood shows the way in which the self is
constructed from contradictory impulses” (Palumbo 73).

Another crucial factor which establishes a close connection to
historiographic metafiction is the incorporation of an abundance of paratextual
material and/or material which might be fictional, but does not actually form a part
of the main narrative, such as the newspaper clippings in The Blind Assassin.
This artifice raises questions about the usage of historical documentary material
in fictional texts and

how those documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively,
neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with
narrativization? The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past. (Hutcheon 122)

In the case of Alias Grace, authentic historical materials (extracts from Susanna Moodie’s journal, Grace’s and McDermott’s printed confessions, newspaper reports about the case, etc.) is deliberately juxtaposed with Grace Marks’ and Dr. Jordan’s fictional accounts. The possibility of the objective, neutral representation of historical events by means of such authentic material is thus effectively disrupted. The Blind Assassin features ‘pseudo-realistic’ supplements, mainly articles from local newspapers and society magazines, which do not qualify as documentary sources in the traditional sense, but still serve the purpose of providing the reader with extended equipment for interpretation, as the protagonist’s narrative itself in fact constitutes only one fraction of the overall story. As historiographic metafictions par excellence, both novels feature various strategies of fragmentation, an array of self-reflexive elements and suggestive imagery, which will be analysed in the following section.

4.3.1 Storytelling against imprisonment

In her article “Talking Back to Bluebeard: Atwood’s Fictional Storytellers”, Stein has pointed out that many of Atwood’s “novels focus on the telling rather than the action. We may suspect that the narrative process is as important as the stories.” (Stein “Talking Back” 155) She argues that “[b]y telling her story, a person composes and inscribes her social self” (Stein “Talking Back” 154) and therefore links the act of telling one’s story with an assertion of power and identity, but also stresses the cunning strategies many of the female ‘trickster’ narrators employ in order to manipulate and/or to achieve their desired goal. Storytelling as a prime motif in Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin points again to the above-mentioned semiotic transmission which, in postmodern thinking, is the only way to access the past. (See Michael “Rethinking History” 425). The centuries-old oral tradition of storytelling and the problems posed by this orality are made explicit in Alias Grace, which, through its juxtaposition of factual and fictional information, of official documents and personal accounts, highlights the discrepancy between
“[published] texts that western culture traditionally has authorized […] and those it has devalued (such as oral tales).” (Michael “Rethinking History” 425) In contrast, the oral tradition is overthrown in *The Blind Assassin*, where storytelling also enters the written realm, particularly through the novel-within-the-novel.

According to Wisker, *Alias Grace* is “about ways in which all methods of recording and retelling history and experience are themselves flawed and fictive.” (Wisker 31-32) Grace herself comments on the dual experience of the storyteller:

> When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood […] It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (AG 345-46)

The impossibility of constituting a (hi)story as such while events are still in progress results in a retrospective act of ordering and shaping, which can never be as immediate as the ‘real’ event, but which through its regulative practices also leads to a coherence which might frequently be missing in the original experience. With its complex structure, *The Blind Assassin* reflects this idea, as the story’s multiple layers are connected in such a way as to eventually result in an overall, comprehensive structure. Ingersoll has further noted about *The Blind Assassin* that “[t]he narrative becomes metafictional not only in the mise-en-abyme effect of its novel-within-a-novel construction, but also in its masquerading as a novel being generated before the reader’s eyes.” (Ingersoll “Waiting” 546)

As already mentioned, historiographic metafiction is characterised by a strong tendency to bestow a voice upon traditionally silent, marginalised groups. Deprived of the notion of a centre, which “used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half” (Hutcheon 62), postmodern literature opens up to ex-centric groups which had formerly been denied a voice of their own. Both Grace Marks and Iris Griffen are ex-centric to quite a high degree. Their chief marginalisation is due to their being women, but they also occupy other ex-centric niches, such as ‘madwoman’, ‘criminal’, ‘adulteress’ and, particularly in Iris’s case, ‘old woman’. They each, however, seize the opportunity to ‘write back’, thus creating a wider space for themselves in which they may write against their – literal and figural – imprisonment.

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from
them they must escape just those male texts which [...] deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen. (Gilbert and Gubar 13)

Writing and storytelling become weapons of liberation, both from self-made and from societal confinements. Dr. Jordan reflects on Grace’s situation as a prisoner: “[S]he knows she’s concealing something from him [...] [a]s she stitches away at her sewing [...]. A prison does not only lock its inmates inside, it keeps all others out. Her strongest prison is of her own construction.” (AG 421) While he pictures her as ‘confined’ because she seemingly cannot entrust her secret to him, which would ‘release’ her, he is unable to comprehend that it is precisely this act of sewing, previously associated with narrating, which allows Grace to break her real confinement, namely the patriarchal discourses which threaten to obliterate her voice.

The subversive power of writing becomes most evident in The Blind Assassin. The publication of Laura’s/Iris’s modernist novel triggers a scandal which ultimately results in Richard having to terminate his political career. This explains his agitation when the scandalous novel is published: “He was enraged, and also frantic. […] I’d done this on purpose, he said, to ruin him. […] ‘That book!’ he said. ‘You sabotaged me! How much did you have to pay them, to get it published? I can’t believe Laura wrote that filthy – that piece of garbage!’” (BA 623) By publishing the novel, Iris avenges not only herself, but posthumously also her abused sister.

4.3.2 Weaving women, spinning stories

Margaret Atwood’s novels and stories are famous for their abundance of mythological allusions and intertexts. She interweaves her narratives with explicit or implicit references to elements from fairy- and folk tales, Greek and Christian mythology, “not only to provide mythic resonance and polyphonic melody, but to parody or undercut narrative authority in a postmodern way.” (Wilson “Mythological Intertexts” 215) The significance of myths for the conjunction of history and narrative, but also for matters of identity construction has already been discussed in previous chapters (see 4.2 and 3.1.1 respectively). Mythical
women figures associated with the creation of narratives are of particular interest for an analysis of *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* in terms of historiographic metafiction.

As a counterpart to the male “dark trio” (AG 94) in *Alias Grace*, Rigney has suggested a female equivalent, “a dark trio of women” consisting of “Arachne, the weaver, […] Circe, the Siren [sic!], […] [and] Scheherazade” (Rigney “Alias Atwood” 159), the masterful story-teller. Each of these three mythological women is associated with the act of fabricating illusions and fantasies and of arousing desires. Arachne and Scheherazade are also connected to the telling of stories and thus, in a wider sense, of writing. All three women share a pronounced manipulative talent, and each is in her own way godmother to Grace and Iris, who struggle to give their narrative an adequate form and who avail themselves of the methods exemplified by this notorious ‘female dark trio’.

Arachne enraged the goddess Pallas Athena by masterfully weaving the scandalous transgressions of the gods into tapestry and was turned into a spider by her mighty rival. Circe is in fact not a siren, as Rigney has misleadingly claimed, but a mighty sorceress, who is described as sitting at a grand loom and who possesses a great seductive talent. She turns men into animals and lures Odysseus, who stays on her island for one year. Scheherazade, the third in the trio, is a figure from Persian mythology. She is a beautiful, erudite woman who saves her life by telling the Sultan enchanting stories night after night, thus delaying and finally averting her death sentence.

The (male) insinuation that Grace, like Circe, might possess great suggestive powers has already been mentioned in chapter 2.3.2. It is even possible to argue that she, too, turns Simon into an ‘animal’, a wild ‘beast’, as during the time he spends examining her case, his long suppressed dark desires arise and find an outlet in his intense sexual affair with his landlady. However, the most prominent parallel established in the novels is between Grace and Scheherazade, the masterful storyteller of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Grace and her powerful storytelling, mysterious and manipulative as it is, are compared to Scheherazade and her tales by her lawyer McKenzie. He draws Simon’s attention to the difficulty of detecting truth or lies in Grace’s story: „[D]id Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falseness. They belong in
another realm altogether.” (AG 438) In order “[t]o keep the Sultan amused” (AG 438), Grace spins her stories, furnishing them with astounding attention to details. Unlike Scheherazade, who knows that she can win time by prolonging her complex narrative and postponing the closure, Grace is aware that Dr. Jordan sooner or later expects a clarification from her, the nature of which, she believes, will determine whether or not he will write a report in her favour. A great number of critics have followed this strand of interpretation, highlighting obvious parallels between the two storytelling women.18

Dr. Jordan’s enchantment with Grace’s story is best exemplified in his ambivalent attitude towards needlework. He is filled with dread when imagining a possible marriage to

Miss Faith Cartwright and her endless and infernal needlework [...] Does his mother really believe that he can be charmed by such a vision of himself – married to Faith Cartwright and imprisoned in an armchair by the fire, frozen in a kind of paralyzed stupor, with his dear wife winding him up gradually in coloured silk threads like a cocoon, or like a fly snarled in the web of a spider? (AG 340)

The archetypal image of the weaving woman posing a threat to his rational powers is rooted in him too. It changes, however, when he fantasises about marrying Grace: “He pictures her sitting in a chair in the parlour, sewing, the lamplight falling on the side of her face.” (AG 452) This image of the sewing woman is much more tranquil and peaceful than the horrid vision of Faith Cartwright as a cocoon-spinning spider. In Grace, needlework becomes a desirable merit for Simon: “She is also an excellent needlewoman, and could doubtless crochet rings around Miss Faith Cartwright. His mother would have no complaints on that score.” (AG 452) Thus, Grace’s ‘Scheharazade-strategy’, which is once more extended to the act of sewing, seems to be fruitful for the largest part of the novel. Ultimately, however, Simon manages to break away from Grace, whom he increasingly experiences as a siren-like being, wielding unsettling power over him and luring him towards the abyss of his own unconscious: “He has gone to the threshold of the unconscious, and has looked

18 Löschnigg and Löschnigg have also identified Grace as an Ariadne figure, whose thread, however, leads Dr. Jordan (who, by analogy, represents Theseus) deeper and deeper into the intricate ‘maze’ of her narration instead of guiding him out of it. (See Löschnigg and Löschnigg 45)
across; or rather he has looked down. He could have fallen. He could have fallen in. He could have drowned." (AG 479)

Iris Griffen, rather than being a Scheherazade who devises a complicate net of stories in order to save her life, has her equivalent in Arachne, the ‘spider-woman’, whose “myth tells how her final work narrated in thread the scandals of the gods.” (Bloomberg 1) The black ball-pen line of Iris’s writing has also been interpreted as the threads of a net spun out by her, just like Arachne’s web, to trap the readers. (see Ingersoll “Waiting” 548) In fact, Iris herself alludes to her activity as a ‘weaver of words’: “I pay out my line, I pay out my line, this black thread I’m spinning across the page.” (BA 345) Like Arachne, who enraged the gods by revealing their transgressions, “Iris […] exposes her husband’s treachery through her storytelling.” (Stein “Talking Back” 163) Bloomberg argues that “Arachne is a powerful metaphor for the study of women writers who […] think up new worlds in the stories that they spin, and who, like Arachne, dare to challenge the establishment by comparing themselves to it.” (Bloomberg 3) Albeit very late, Iris dares to challenge the ‘establishment’, i.e. the misogynistic, patriarchal, upper class society which entrapped her as a young woman and which ruined her sister. By incorporating Alex’ pulp science fiction stories, she also thinks up new worlds, which, however, are strongly modelled on the very real world in which she struggles.

By means of the parallels between the three cunning women from Greek and Persian mythology, Grace’s and Iris’s manipulative talent, but also their excellence in fabricating stories are highlighted. The “mythic intertexts structure the characters imaginative or ‘magical’ release from externally imposed patterns” (Wilson “Mythological Intertexts” 226) and present the novel’s heroines as powerful storytellers who try to actively shape their fates.

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19 While Staels goes so far as to describe Alex Thomas as “a male Scheherazade who tells SF stories to keep the heroine at his side” (Staels 150), Sigrist has argued that Iris can be seen as a Scheherazade figure, “narrating against time to save [herself] from […] death” (Sigrist 226). This argument, however, is not convincing, as Iris, an elderly, heart-sick woman, will sooner or later die anyway. The hope for liberation, which partly motivates Grace’s narrative, in her case can only be read as the hope for liberation from the ghosts of the past. This liberation, however, does not depend on any ‘Sultan’ whom she has to keep amused with her story, but rather on herself.
4.3.3 The quilting metaphor

Margaret Atwood also employs another method in order to reinforce the meta-narrative nature of her texts, namely the quilting metaphor, which is particularly prominent in *Alias Grace*. “In this novel […] Atwood uses the unique image of quilting to represent the piecing together of different stories into a new pattern, in this case a pattern that questions master patterns and, by implication, all patterns.” (Wilson “Quilting” 123) Sewing, quilting and patchworking thus become associated with the fabrication of narrative, but also with ways in which both traditional historical and narrative patterns are challenged and, ultimately, overthrown by alternative means of representation. Furthermore, as Magali Cornier Michael has pointed out, the patchwork-text functions “as an ‘other’ means of representing historical events and persons that rejects the mono-vision of traditional histories and highlights the process of framing and arranging pieces in particular juxtapositions.” (Michael “Rethinking History” 421)

The novel’s structure itself resembles a quilt, and the act of interpreting it demands of the reader to patch together the various bits and pieces of fictive and factual information, i.e. Grace’s own (fictive) first person recollections, her ‘official’ confession printed in the newspaper, Simon’s third person narrative, various paratextual material, etc. (See Wisker 33)

The subtle importance of this metaphor is already indicated in the overall structure: each of the novel’s fifteen sections is named after one particular quilt pattern, the name of which often also turns out to bear a relation to the action in the respective section. (See Löschnigg and Löschnigg 455, Wilson “Quilting” 127 ff.) These sections, bearing telling titles such as ‘Jagged Edge’, ‘Young Man’s Fancy’, ‘Pandora’s Box’ or ‘The Tree of Paradise’, are further subdivided into chapters and, when recombined, constitute the broader ‘meta-quilt’ of the novel.

Wilson explains that, as traditional quilts were sewn together from patches of fabrics used in everyday life, they “are literally pieces of lives” (Wilson “Quilting” 124). In Grace’s interpretation, the quilt, a ‘female war flag’, becomes a symbol for a whole life story:

Why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in a room. And then I have thought, it’s for a warning. […] [T]here are many
dangerous things that may take place in a bed. It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last. And it is the place where the act takes place between men and women [...]. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die. (AG 185-86)

She explicitly links quilts to women’s lives, which is not surprising, considering that the art of quilting was not only traditionally done by women, but also carried out in the domestic, i.e. the traditionally female sphere. Quilts have thus been “doubly marginalized – from the public and the aesthetic realms.” (Michael “Rethinking History” 426) The comparison of the colourful quilts to flags and the association of the bed with danger further emphasises the quilt’s symbolical importance for women.

Quilting is also linked to the representation of history: as mentioned in chapter 2, Grace at the end of her narrative intends to sew her history into her marriage quilt, a ‘Tree of Paradise’ which, by including patches of fabric from Mary’s and Nancy’s dresses, will also materialise her fragmented identity. This is Grace’s method of recording: instead of the keepsake album she earlier intended to create, it is now the quilt which becomes her ‘chronicle’, a chronicle in which she “[creates] a nonchronological, spatial representation of her life” (Michael “Rethinking History” 439). Her intention of “changing the [traditional] pattern a little to suit [her] own ideas” (AG 533) suggests that she also presumes the right to adapt the representation of her life history ‘to suit her own ideas’. Parts of her history become interchangeable like the different patches used for quilts: “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.” (AG 410) The seeming arbitrariness with which Grace makes her choice suggests that for her, multiple versions of history are possible. Accordingly, she states: “that [it] is the same with all quilts, you can see them two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light.” (AG 187)

Tolan has argued that “[b]y placing the traditionally masculine practises of historical and psychological investigation [...] within an undervalued domestic craftwork sphere, the novel disrupts established notions of textual authority. History is placed within the realm of storytelling” (Tolan Margaret Atwood 225). Hence, the art of quilting also becomes a symbol for the act of narrating;
narrating by sewing quilts as a subversive female act becomes associated with untraditional ways of representing (personal) history. “Where other arts have been unavailable to subordinated women […], quilting has been a vehicle for breaking silence and speaking.” (Wilson Quilting 125) Accordingly, the fragmentation emblematised by the quilt is unsettling for male authorities. When confronted with the possibility of a ‘split personality’ after Grace’s hypnosis, the Reverend Verringer, deeply disturbed by the idea of a fragmentation of the soul, exclaims: “We cannot be mere patchworks! It is a horrifying thought” (AG 471). His choice of metaphor and his pejorative use of the term ‘patchwork’ stress not only the depreciation of fragmentation and multiplicity. They also illustrate male fears in the face of patchworking as a female subversive activity.

Quilting as an activity plays no role in The Blind Assassin. However, as to the novel’s structure, the quilting metaphor applies just as well. With regard to Alias Grace, Wisker notes: “What is quilted and patched together? History and fantasy, but the boundaries are unclear.” (Wisker 75) The same can be said about The Blind Assassin. Although the comparatively chronological structure of the ‘main’ narrative (i.e. Iris’s memoir) resembles a patchwork much less than Alias Grace does, the novel as a whole still is a complex texture fabricated from history and fantasy. ‘Real-life’ recollections alternate with chapters from The Blind Assassin 2. How much of this novel is a one-to-one record of what Iris and Alex Thomas actually experienced, and how much is invention on her part, artful details added by a yearning loving woman, can only be guessed by the reader. Iris keeps the secret until near the end of her life-memoir, when she admits: “[I was] just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth.” (BA 626)

Sigrist has noted that “[t]he patchwork quilt as a created pattern of meaningful symbols and icons not only postulates the narrative and the historical moment it reconstructs as a fabrication of pieces of lives; it also points to the narrative as a pragmatic as well as an aesthetic construct” (Sigrist 227). Hence, the quilting metaphor, which can be applied to both novels, reveals the patchwork-like nature of history as represented in fiction, but also the role of the narrator as an active metafictional constructor.
4.3.4 “The picture is of happiness, the story not”: Visuals and manipulation

“The plural nature of both external reality and the human self make the word, whether written or spoken, seem completely unreliable. Can the visual image be trusted more than the word?” (Vevaina 94-95) By posing this question, Vevaina points to an aspect of representation which is crucial, yet easily overlooked in both novels. The past is not only represented verbally, but also by means of visuals. While this, as already discussed in the respective chapter, is done quite overtly in The Blind Assassin, such visual representations are subtly hidden in Alias Grace.

Hutcheon has emphasised the importance of “cultural representations” which allow and reinforce our understanding of reality and sets forth that “[i]n historiographic metafictions, these are often not simple verbal representations, for ekphrases (or verbal representations of visual representations) often have central representational functions.” (Hutcheon 121) Such ekphrases can be found in both novels. They further enrich narratives’ complex texture and illustrate the importance of visuals and seeing. In Alias Grace two basic forms of ekphrases can be distinguished: first, the description of quilts, their patterns and meanings, which have already been discussed in the previous section, and second, the descriptions of two paintings in Thomas Kinnear’s house:

[I]n the bedchamber [there was] a picture of a woman without any clothes on, on a sofa, seen from the back and looking over her shoulder, with a sort of turban on her head and holding a peacock-feather fan. Peacock feathers inside the house are bad luck, as everyone knows. These were only in a picture, but I would never have allowed them in any house of mine. There was another picture, also of a naked woman taking a bath, but I did not have the chance to examine it. I was a little taken aback at Mr. Kinnear having two naked women in his bedchamber […]. (AG 248)

What makes the incorporation of those two paintings into the novel so remarkable is their “reading by a badly educated servant girl” (Carroll 215), which emphasises the divergence between ‘high’ culture associated with the classical paintings and the limited cultural knowledge of an uneducated young woman, most of which she has acquired by reading her bible. The analysis of the painting of Susannah and the Elders by Thomas Kinnear is one of the crucial scenes
between Grace and Nancy and has been analysed by Carroll as a possible explanation for “the later killing of Nancy out of jealousy” (Carroll 215). In Kinnear’s interpretation, the heavily sexualised picture of Susannah, “who had been falsely accused of sinning with a young man” (AG 259), transmits the message that one only needs a clever lawyer to be saved - a stunning foreboding of Grace’s fate. (See Carroll 217)

_The Blind Assassin’s_ preoccupation with the issues of seeing and blindness is already indicated in the novel’s title, and indeed it is perhaps no coincidence that its protagonist is named Iris – a name which is associated not only with “a goddess in the Greek pantheon, a messenger and the bearer of speech from the gods” (Sigrist 235), but also with a part of the anatomical make-up of the eye. For it is Iris who is ‘blind’ and whose eyes are opened in a very painful way through her discovery of her sister’s abuse by her own husband. In the course of her lifetime, she also gains deeper insights into overall political and social contexts, which, as she herself admits, were incomprehensible to her as a young woman. Thus, “_The Blind Assassin_ is structured to enact […] Iris’s experience of her life and era as a movement through blindness to revelation.” (Sigrist 236)

With regard to _The Blind Assassin_, Carroll’s question whether or not the image is more trustworthy than the word is particularly interesting, and in this case, seems unlikely. Just like verbal representation, photography is used not only to document, but also to manipulate history. “In _The Blind Assassin_, photographs are often described as not being true to life.” (Vevaina 95) After describing her wedding picture not in the first, but in the third person, Iris explains:

I say ‘her’ because I don’t recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. […] I [i.e. old Iris] have the better view – I can see her [i.e. young Iris] clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can’t see me at all. (BA 292)

This lack of ‘visual competence’ in the young Iris is frequently alluded to: “I lacked the talent for overviews”, Iris admits, “it was as if my eyes were right up against whatever I was supposed to be looking at, and I would come only away with textures” (BA 369). This inability of hers to grasp overviews possibly also explains (at least in part) why she failed to read the signs and to realise the abuse which
was going on right before her eyes. Accordingly, when she finally finds out, she is perplexed: “How could I have been so blind?” (BA 611) However, some of the reflections in the novel-within-the-novel betray that at times she quite deliberately chose not to open her eyes or not to look too closely, in order to preserve a romantic image of her affair with Alex Thomas: “Romance means leaving things out: where life grunts and snuffles, romance only sighs. […] The danger would come from looking too closely and seeing too much – from having him dwindle, and herself along with him.” (BA 320) Similarly, she might have chosen to ‘keep her eyes closed’ in the face of her sister’s unheard-of abuse, but finally there is no way left for her but to face the truth: “We’ll choose knowledge no matter what, we’ll maim ourselves in the process, we’ll stick our hands into the flames for it if necessary. Curiosity is not our only motive: love or grief or despair or hatred is what drives us on.” (BA 603)

In chapter 3 Iris has been identified as a manipulative agent, consciously guiding her readers’ expectations along certain lines, just to finally shatter them with unexpected twists and, finally, with the surprising climax of her story. However, Laura, too, manipulates history and its representation by hand-tinting and cutting up photographs. In her understanding, these photographs are only deficient representations of reality – a reality which for Laura, unlike for her sister, reaches beyond the realm of the physically visible. When Iris, after finding out that Laura has coloured old family photographs, complains: “They look bizarre […] Nobody’s face is green! Or mauve” (BA 237), Laura retorts: “It’s the colours of their souls […] It’s the colours they ought to have been.” (BA 237) According to Barzilai, Laura’s manipulation of the photographs “also constitute[s] a form of resistance and subversive activism within the rigid sociocultural parameters of the 1930s.” (Barzilai 115) In hindsight, her colour-code appears obvious and glaringly unambiguous: “Richard’s face had been painted grey, such a dark grey that the features were all but obliterated. The hands were red, as were the flames that shot up from around and somehow from inside the head” (BA 551). Laura uses “these mute yet telling images” (Barzilai 117) because they are her way of expressing the unmentionable. Although Iris is bewildered at the sight of these “bizarre” images, she does only understand the clue once she has obtained ‘written’ evidence in the form of Laura’s old notebooks.
The aspect of fragmentation, repeatedly discussed in the context of postmodernist writing, is made explicit with regard to visuals in *The Blind Assassin* when Laura reproduces two photographic prints of a picture showing Alex Thomas framed by Iris and herself, and then cuts the pictures so that in each of the copies one sister is missing, except for her respective hand. By thus manipulating the picture, Laura also manipulates the reality it is supposed to present for each of the sisters: “[T]hat’s what you want to remember” (BA 269), she tells the baffled Iris after presenting her with her version of the print, from which she has cut herself out. The connection Laura establishes between photography and history/reality becomes evident when, after Laura’s death, Iris goes through the notebooks her sister has left behind: “*History* was blank, except for the photograph Laura had glued into it – herself and Alex Thomas at the button factory picnic” (BA 610). Although Iris refers to the school notebook intended for history lessons, the innuendo is obvious: for Laura, in contrast to her ‘blind’ older sister, history is primarily understood in terms of visuals, which, however, need not necessarily be realistic representations of the past. The deceptive nature of visuals is at the same time a remedy and painful mockery. At the end of her narrative, Iris plainly states: “The picture is of happiness, the story not. […] In Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys. It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road.” (BA 632)
5 CONCLUSION

*Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* are two novels of extraordinary complexity and finesse. They effectively overthrow traditional theories which tended to view history and fiction as mutually exclusive and to dismiss the latter from the realm of historiography altogether. Both novels conform to postmodernist ideas which reject uniformity and stress diversity and multiplicity instead. This results in notions of ‘identities’, ‘truths’ and ‘histories’ (as opposed to ‘identity’, ‘history’ and ‘truth’ as unitary given facts). Accordingly, fragmentation constitutes a crucial element in both novels, and the splits in the respective protagonist’s identity are mirrored in the fragmentation of the narrative as a whole. Furthermore, the two novels feature highly complex female protagonists who undertake the complex process of self-representation – a telling of their own histories which acts as a power struggle, but is not free from ulterior motives. Both Grace and Iris can be said to be manipulative narrators who manoeuvre their way through their narratives while always trying to convince others of the validity of their particular version of history.

Margaret Atwood portrays Grace Marks as a profoundly enigmatic woman with a fragmented identity which is hard to classify. Her split personality is allegedly due to a mental illness, but it is shown to result also from Victorian binaries such as ‘angel’ and ‘monster’, which were said to be mutually exclusive, but which are artfully united in the complex character of this fictional Grace Marks. Furthermore, Margaret Atwood uses the historically evident debate about Grace’s mental health to illustrate power politics and the subjection of women to hegemonic male discourses about ‘madness’, but also to draw attention to Grace’s shrewdness and unreliability. After all, it remains unclear if she suffers from schizophrenia and has been possessed by Mary Whitney’s spirit, as she claimed, or if she merely puts on a show in order to disclaim accountability. The employment of various narrative voices in the novel, including paratexts according to Genette’s definition, further undermines the reader’s certainty as to Grace’s reliability. The suspicion that she might adapt her behaviour and her narrative to any given circumstance in order to bias her audience in her favour can never be fully excluded.
The Blind Assassin is set in a different period of time and in different social circumstances. Unlike the poor 19th-century servant girl Grace Marks, Iris Griffen grows up in a sheltered upper-class household in the early 20th century. However, the problems and restrictions she encounters in the development of her identity are similar to Grace’s. Victorian values are still important in Iris’s family, and women’s identities are mainly defined in relation to men. The issue of madness is not as prominent as in Alias Grace. However, mental instability as a badge of shame does play a role when it comes to socially punishing women for transgressive behaviour. Thus, the eccentric Laura is repeatedly said to be crazy and hysterical, and Iris’s mental stability is questioned when she separates from her husband and publishes her scandalous novel under her sister’s name. Unlike with Grace, Iris’s identity is not so much split into different personalities as into past and present ‘versions’ of herself, which, jumbled together by her autobiographical narrative and the novel-within-the-novel, constitute the ‘fragmented whole’ of her identity. By assuming the role of a female author, Iris tries to literally come to terms with her past and to step out of her role as a silenced victim, but also to ensure that her truth will be placed amongst official versions of events, outlive her, and be passed on to her granddaughter. In what seems like an attempt to justify her behaviour, the actions she took and, more importantly, the actions she failed to take, Iris, too, gives proof of her manipulative talent, which manifests itself in the ingenious way in which she spreads hints and clues, orchestrate reader expectations and makes her story culminate in a final, unexpected twist which overturns everything built up previously.

Placed within a postmodern analytical context, Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin share one essential denominator, namely their subversive engagement with history. Their emphasis on fictionalised representations of history, which are delivered from ex-centric perspectives and thus contest historical master narratives, renders them prototypical examples of historiographic metafiction. The frames of confessional narrative and autobiography serve to represent Grace’s and Iris’s personal histories, but ‘real’ historical events are also referred to and viewed through the protagonists’ eyes. Furthermore, both novels contain a strong self-reflexive element, and the processes of storytelling and writing are constantly foregrounded and critically reflected on. Telling one’s own story (be it in oral or
written form) and thus asserting one’s own voice and making oneself heard is portrayed as a very liberating force which also endows Grace and Iris with the power to oppose social and discursive patriarchal constriction. However, this form of (hi)storytelling is not restricted to oral tales and writings. In addition, alternative means of representation, above all sewing, are employed. While the act of sewing is literally employed by Grace, who, as a masterful seamstress, uses the art of quilt-making to record and materialise her agitated history, the association of Iris’s narrative with sewing and fabrics happens on a more figurative level. Although she uses Gilbert’s and Gubar’s “phallic pen” instead of a needle to record her story, she repeatedly refers to her writing as a black line or a black thread, thus also placing it into the realm of sewing and of female subversion. The patchwork quilt becomes a significant metaphor for the necessarily fragmented nature of historical representation. At the same time it highlights the role of the creator, i.e. the author, in (arbitrarily) selecting and arranging pieces of history which are ‘patched together’, thus creating a highly individualised, heterogeneous version of history which opposes traditional ideas of unity. The narrative ‘patches’ artfully arranged in order to underscore that there is no single version of history which succeeds in presenting a truthful, ‘objective’ account of the past, but that just like a complex quilt the past offers a multitude of possible readings, which can also be contradictory. Thus, Grace and Iris may employ manipulative strategies in their representations of their histories, but this does not necessarily imply that these representations are wrong. Rather, they illustrate the futility of adamantly promoting one single version of history and accepting it as ‘the truth’.

According to Hutcheon, “[p]ostmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological.” (Hutcheon 110) Both *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin* illustrate this point excellently. As has been pointed out, the aim of a novel like *Alias Grace* is not to answer the question whether or not the actual Grace Marks was guilty of murder, but rather to provide a view of the case from various angles, while at the same time recognising the impossibility of ever reconstructing an ‘objective’ truth beneath all those layers. Similarly, *The Blind Assassin* proffers a socio-political panorama of
the first half of the 20th century which draws its appeal from its ex-centric female perspective rather than from historical novelties.

Ultimately the reader has to accept that certain gaps in the narrative will not be filled and some mysteries may not be solved. What might be disappointing and unsatisfying with regard to prevalent cognitive and literary schemata, however, serves to emphasise the impossibility, and indeed the pointlessness of bringing history, or rather histories, to a final conclusion. It seems as if Margaret Atwood wants to show that Guy de Maupassant was right after all, and that history remains what it always has been: a highly changeable, excitable and unreliable old lady.
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The present paper deals with two novels by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Framed around the question of the extent to which Grace Marks and Iris Griffen are manipulative narrators and what consequences this might have on their representations of individual and official history, both novels will be analysed in detail. For this purpose, postmodern interpretative approaches will be applied, as they are particularly fitting for a comprehensive analysis of the two deeply fragmented texts.

The paper consists of three parts. The first chapter investigates aspects of identity construction and the application of stereotypical Victorian discourses about (female) madness in *Alias Grace* and connects them to the manipulative practices of Grace Marks. The second chapter discusses identity models, eccentricity and the victimisation of the female protagonists in *The Blind Assassin*. Particular attention is paid to Iris’s role as a female author and her astute play with omissions, gaps and various genres, as these facets repeatedly undermine her narrative reliability. In the third and last chapter, the aspect of manipulative narration will be integrated into the overarching context of postmodernist narrative techniques; above all the concept of historiographic metafiction as defined by Linda Hutcheon. As both novels deal with official history and individual “histories”, it will be examined how such histories are represented and re-written from an ex-centric female perspective and which alternative modes of representation, e.g. quilting and photography, are employed in the process.

In conclusion, the thesis highlights parallels and differences between the two novels and confirms the initially posed assumption that both protagonists intentionally manipulate both their text-immanent and their text-extrinsic audiences by distorting cognitive and literary schemata and raising deceptive expectations. It is further confirmed that in both novels a unitary concept of history is dismissed in favour of postmodern multiple ‘histories’, to which the protagonists’ individual versions of history do also contribute.


Abschließend werden Parallelen und Differenzen zwischen den beiden Romanen aufgezeigt und die These untermauert, dass beide Protagonistinnen sowohl ihr textimmanentes als auch ihr text-extrinisches Publikum bewusst manipulieren indem gängige kognitive und literarische Schemata verzerrt und falsche Erwartungen geweckt werden. Es zeigt sich, dass in beiden Romanen ein einheitliches Konzept von Historie zugunsten eines postmodern-multiplen...
Geschichtsbegriffes abgelehnt wird und dass auch die jeweils individuellen Geschichts-Versionen der Protagonistinnen zu solch einem Begriff beitragen.
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Deutsch  Muttersprache
Englisch  fließend in Wort und Schrift
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Französisch  Maturaniveau
ÖGS  Grundkenntnisse