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**TYPICAL FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY FEMALE  
FICTION WRITTEN IN ENGLISH**

**STORYTELLING AS AN ACT OF SELF-RETRIEVAL IN  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVELS**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci napsala samostatně a řádně uvedla veškeré prameny a literaturu, ze kterých jsem čerpala.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The diploma thesis deals with two novels by Canadian author Margaret Atwood – *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

Firstly, it briefly focuses on Atwood's life and career and on the main literature styles and ideologies that influenced her works (science fiction, postmodernism, feminism).

Then both the novels are analyzed into more details (composition, plot, main characters, main themes).

The last chapter focuses on the feature both the novels have in common – the fact that both the main characters (and at the narrators of the stories at the same time) use the process of storytelling as a way of their self-retrieval.

## INTRODUCTION

I firstly came across with a novel by Margaret Atwood last year while I was studying at Worcester University in Great Britain where I went for the Erasmus University Exchange. One of the modules I studied there was called The Women Writers and it was focused mainly on the identity of writers or narrators of their books in connection with the process of writing itself. One of the works that module focused on was Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Love at the first sight – this is the only expression to describe what I was feeling while reading this novel. I was amazed and excited. *The Handmaid's Tale* captured me from the very beginning till the very end.

The choice of *The Blind Assassin* was much more intended. My mentor, Mrs. Vodičková, suggested that I should to read it and as I was reading through I found out that – even if the story is completely different – it also connects the theme of searching for identity with the act of writing and would be a very convenient piece to complete the thesis.

The decision to choose these two novels which cover more than fifteen years of Atwood's work also provides the opportunity to compare her development, orientation or her attitude towards various issues typical of time. As this is not the subject of the thesis, these entities are mentioned within the diploma thesis only as hints.

Additionally, both the books have special meanings in the context of Margaret Atwood's work - as *The Handmaid Tale* (1985) is the one that brought her fame all around the world, while for *The Blind Assassin* (2000) she finally obtained the Booker Prize – the prestigious award from British journalists, literary critics and publishers.

The topic of this diploma thesis is the act of self-retrieval in Margaret Atwood's novels. The expression 'self-retrieval' seems to be strange or unfamiliar, but during the classes in England, it became essential. And I decided to use it for the title of my thesis as it describes its main aim best as it covers all that I intended to focus on - the act of putting oneself together, searching, finding, recovering, atonement and saving oneself.

This thesis might be divided into three main parts – first two chapters are focused on Margaret Atwood's life and literature styles and theories that influenced her most. Chapters three and four analyze her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* while giving information on their composition, main characters and themes. Chapter five represents the main aim of the thesis - a synthesis of both the novels and while focusing on the topic of the act of self-retrieval, it compares similarities and contrasts differences of the two novels.

The methods used for the thesis can be divided into groups according to the structure of the work – gathering the sources, searching for the relevant background information, analyses of the novels and synthesis of their common features with the focus on the main theme.

Searching for available sources was the most problematic part of the whole work. Those focused on the relevant topics, such as science-fiction literature, feminism and postmodernism were easily accessible, but - as Atwood and her works are unfortunately – still rather 'undiscovered' for Czech readers, and so the amount of information or analyses about Atwood's work is very restricted.

Beside the written studies, the essential sources for the analytical parts of my thesis – especially for the last chapter - were the seminars I studied in Worcester, where the whole topic of my thesis was discussed from various points of view.

I am aware of the fact that I have chosen a very difficult aim - as both the novels as well as the topic itself are very complex with many layers,



overlaps and subtextual meanings that need much deeper view than that one I am able to achieve. But I still hope to fulfill the aim of my thesis the best I can.

## 1. Margaret Atwood: Profile and Career

This chapter is based on information – if there is no other reference listed - from Atwood's profile on the website of The Guardian (Potts, 2010) and The Wikipedia – The free encyclopaedia.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is at present Canada's most renowned novelist and poet. She also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children, her works have been translated into over 30 languages. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books, including *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983) and, with Robert Weaver, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1986).

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, as a middle child of three kids. Her father, Carl Edmund Atwood, was an entomologist, and her mother, Margaret Dorothy Killam, was a former dietician and nutritionist. In her early childhood, the family was moving around in the forests and small settlements of Northern Ontario and Quebec because her father was working in these areas. Later he became a university professor in Toronto and so the family settled there. Atwood started attending school there (until the age of 11 she had not attended school full time) and then continued her studies at Victoria College, University of Toronto. She graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor of Arts in English (honours) and minors in philosophy and French.

Atwood started writing at the age of 6, when she was 16 she decided to become a professional writer. During her studies at the university she was writing and reviewing articles for her college magazine and designing programmes for the drama society.

Atwood graduated from university in 1961 and in the same year she privately published her first book of poems called *Double Persephone* for which she won the E.J. Pratt Medal. She went to the United States to continue her studies – she obtained a graduate fellowship to Radcliffe College, Harvard, where she studied Victorian and American literature.

Atwood got a master's degree here in 1962 and began her PhD thesis on 'The English Metaphysical Romance'. The experience of the United States was a cultural shock for her – there was a big difference between her home place and that metropolitan culture of anonymity. This fact caused that Margaret Atwood moved back to Canada without finishing her doctorate and spent next ten years teaching in university English departments across Canada from Vancouver to Montreal and Toronto. Between 1964 and 1965 she worked as a lecturer in English at University of British Columbia in Vancouver, the next academic year as an instructor in English at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, between 1969 and 1970 at University of Alberta and finally as an assistant professor of English at York University in Toronto (1971-72). During this time she also made her first trip to Europe, got married to Jim Polk and wrote her first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969). Since 1972 she has been a full-time writer.

As Howells (2005, pp. 3-4) describes, the period of 1970s was for Atwood very productive and represents an important time for her establishment as a professional writer. She published three novels, a book of short stories, five books of poetry, a pioneering critical survey of Canadian literature, and a children's book. Her national and international reputation was made during this time - this fact is usually described in connection of the rise of feminism and resurgence of cultural nationalism on Canada's Centennial Year, 1967.

It was also time of great changes in her personal life – she got divorced in 1973 and soon after formed a relationship with fellow novelist Graeme Gibson with whom she has stayed till nowadays.

In 1973 they moved together with his two sons, to a small agricultural community in Alliston, Ontario, north of Toronto and in 1976 their daughter, Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson, was born there. Even if they liked living and the whole life style in Alliston, in 1980 the family returned to Toronto because of Jess's studies. Toronto has become the place where Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson have lived – with only a couple of short breaks - until now.

Between May 1981 and May 1982 Atwood was President of the Writers' Union of Canada to May 1982, and was President of International P.E.N., Canadian Centre (English Speaking) from 1984 - 1986. Atwood is a current Vice-President of PEN International.

An important part of Atwood's life and work is politics. She expresses her ideas in her books and also presents her thoughts in public. She and her partner Graeme Gibson are currently members of the Green Party of Canada and strong supporters of GPC leader Elizabeth May. In the 2008 federal election she attended a meeting for the Bloc Québécois, a Quebec separatist party, because of her support for their position on the arts, and appealed to people to vote for them. The other time, in a *Globe and Mail* editorial, she urged Canadians to vote for any other party to stop a Conservative majority. She also expressed her strong disagreement on a free trade agreement between Canada and the United States during the conference about this topic in 1987, where spoke out and also wrote an essay opposing the agreement.

Atwood is also interested in environmental issues - she suggests that gas-powered leaf blowers and lawn mowers should be banned. To show she takes these problems seriously she - for example – she uses a hybrid

car or has made her home more energy efficient by installing awnings and skylights that open, and by not having air-conditioning.

As a political gesture can be also seen the open-endedness of much of her fiction. Margaret Atwood emphasises moments when people have a choice, and, having suggested the factors involved in such choices she leaves the reader at the moment of decision, he/she has to make the decision himself/herself.

## 2. Key Literature Styles and Ideologies Connected with Atwood's Works

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the dystopian genre, feminism and postmodernism in the context of Atwood's work as these represent important influences on Atwood's novels this thesis deals with and may become necessary sources for further analyses of Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*.

### 2.2 The Development of Dystopian Genre in Connection of Atwood's Work

The survey on the development of dystopian genre as well as the choice of the example pieces of work is based on the study by Baccolini and Moylan (2003) and Roberts (2000).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the genre of dystopian science fiction – so called “the dark side of utopia” - underwent various changes. There were some works that represented the classical form of this genre (Yevgeny Zamiatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).

During the whole century in the mainstream literature there appeared a couple of works closely connected with dystopia – usually their main features were the ambiguity or irony (Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, C. S. Lewis *That Hideous Strenth*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Ben Sinister*, Evelyn Waugh's *Love among the Ruins*, Don De Lillo's *Underworld*).

After the World War II, as the modern culture was developing, more and more writers started writing dystopian literature – Ray Bradbury, Frederick Pohl, C. M. Kornbluth, Judith Merrill, A. F. Van Vogt, John Brunner, J. G. Ballard, Phillip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch, James Tiptree Jr. These authors tried to warn the society that – if the socio-political tendencies of that time continued – the world would become an impossible place to live in.

Against this dystopian tide, in 1960s and 1970 there appeared a new opposite line so called ‘critical utopia’ (‘critical’ in a sense of an Enlightenment ‘critique’ – an attitude of self reflexivity). Its approach was to find better places, to show the idea of a social change. This style was especially shaped by ecological, feminist and New Left thoughts, represented by writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Sally Miller Gearhart, and Suzy McKee Charnas.

In the 1980s this tendency came to a sudden end. “In the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commoditisation, science fiction writers revived reformulated the dystopian genre” (Baccolini, Moylan, 2003, p. 44). This fact was also influenced by the new creative movement of cyberpunk (Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner*, William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*) that work with negative or even nihilistic images of everyday life. By 1984 – the year of the ‘anniversary’ of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – the dystopian tendency started becoming more and more popular. This was the time when Margaret Atwood wrote her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* which is – as Baccolini and Moylan (ibid., p. 47) claim - based on the classical dystopian narrative but also shows new directions for this literal tendency.

The dystopian line was moving on, there was the ‘second wave’ of cyberpunk – works written mainly by women – and “opened the door to a

dystopian narrative that was critical in its poetic and political substance” (ibid., p. 48).

### 2.3 Connections between the Feminist Movement and Atwood’s Work

Atwood is nowadays one of the best known English writing women and is often described as a feminist writer. In her books she deals with the themes traditionally considered as being ‘feministic’ – especially the general problem of the relationship between men and women in which - in her eyes - the power relations are crucial. She expressed her opinion on the whole discussion in 1984 when she said: "I didn't invent feminism and it certainly didn't invent me but I'm naturally sympathetic to it" (Potts, 2010).

The answer for the question about the influence of feminism on her work could be found if we consider the time of her growing up. The period of late 1950s and early 1960s represents the emergence of the second Wave North American feminism and this is what her fiction reflects a lot. This was the time when the issue of women liberation became a political topic. As Howells (2005, p. 10) remarks, since *The Edible Woman* Atwood’s novels “have provided a chronicle and critique of the changing fashions within feminist politics”.

The Women’s Liberation Movement was developing in the USA, but there was also a parallel feminist movement in Canada. In 1960 the Voice of Women, the first Canadian national women’s organization, was founded and two years later the first Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Women was set up. One of the leaders of these activities was Betty Friedan, who was inspired by the work of Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex*. In the introduction to *The Edible Woman* Atwood admits that both these women influenced her thinking at the time of early 1960s.



During the 1970s there appeared a great amount of feminist writing – especially in North America, England and France. The authors wanted to define the positions of women on social and political issues in the context of every discipline (literary criticism, media, history, psychoanalyses, anthropology, science, theology). There were also new, till that time unspoken topics women wanted to write about – female sexuality, desire and body. But there were more new topics being discussed – the women’s experiences of motherhood or darker themes such as male violence against women. In connection with the last one there was analysed the situation of male dominance within the media in the context of male fantasies of aggression and violence. Another new theme of the books that appeared was the female literary tradition.

In her works, Atwood wanted to reflect all of these changes of the cultural climate. But the way she deals with all of it is not only descriptive. Her approach is also critical, doubtful, she tries to examine if all these theories agree with reality. As Howells says (*ibid.*, p.12), Atwood does not reduce feminism to simple views that women are always right, but she analyzes the problem much deeper – the fact that women have rights as all human beings and it should also consider the ways in which they use their power traditionally given and how they enhanced their influences and also look at the effects on women of not having legitimised power and the consequences of it (*ibid.*, p.12).

Atwood is not interested only in the relations between men and women but she explores the relations between mothers and daughters and sisters or on the different age stages – little girls or adult female friends.

#### 2.4 Features of Postmodernism in Margaret Atwood’s Works

The features of postmodernism are often described while analyzing both of the novels. It is mainly connected with Atwood’s experiments

with different styles and her quotes or intertextual references to various literal sources – mainly The Bible, the classic antic tales or Shakespeare.

However, the ‘postmodernistic mix’ of various styles is absolutely obvious within *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in *The Blind Assassin* it is even one of the crucial features of the novel. From this point of view, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is characterized as a “hybrid of two highly popular fictional forms, science fiction and the women’s romance” (Bloom, 2004, p. 88). Moreover, this view is supported mainly by the crucial position of media within the text (the tapes that the narrator uses for recording the story or old issues of fashion magazines as representations of the former culture).

*The Blind Assassin* goes even further while considering its structure – there are four different lines written in different genres (a diary, a romance, a sci-fi), there are novels written within the novel, there are extracts from newspaper articles that complete and comment on the story. Howells (2005, p. 156) describes the whole structure as “the initial challenge for readers is this switching between different genres, for these appear to be competing narratives”.

### 3. The Handmaid's Tale

I wish this story were different. (...) I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even: about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow.

Maybe it is about those things, in a sense; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way. (...)

I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story.

(Atwood, 1996, p. 279)

#### 3.1 Introduction

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was published for the first time in 1985. Since that time it has become Atwood's most popular piece of work, it has won her several prizes and Atwood was given various significant honours. The novel has been translated into more than thirty languages, German director Volker Schlöndorff made its film adaptation (the screen play was written by Harold Pinter) and Danish composer Poul Ruders made the story into opera.

#### 3.2 *The Handmaid's Tale's* Ideological Sources

As the previous chapter says there were many literature influences that served Atwood as sources for her new piece written in the dystopian sci-fi style. As Howells (Howells, 1996, p. 96) describes Atwood's process of preparation for the act of writing, when she started thinking of the topic of her new novel, she kept a file of items from newspapers and magazines with information connected to the theme she was interested in.

This covers articles and pamphlets from Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, reports from Amnesty International about atrocities in Latin America, Iran and The Philippines, information about new technologies, surrogate motherhood, facts about institutionalised birth control from the era of Hitler in Germany to Ceausescu's in Romania. This shows the wide range of interests and sources of the origin of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A very important source for Atwood was also the history of The United States, especially the era of Puritan New England. It is signalled from the very beginning of the book where we can find a dedication of the novel to Mary Webster and Perry Miller. Webster was Atwood's own ancestor who was hanged as a witch in New England (but survived and went free). Miller, a professor of Puritan history, was Atwood's director of American Studies at Harvard. His works and studies represent a great source for Atwood's novel.

This all leads to the important feature of the novel – the tension between a sci-fi style and the fact that the whole story is based on real events that happened or are happening somewhere in our world.

Another important fact is the location of the story – The United States. The places are based on the real settings – Cambridge in Massachusetts as the city where Offred lives and Harvard Campus as the site for the country's secret headquarters. Atwood decided to set the story to The United States and not to Canada because: "The States are more extreme in everything... Canadians don't swing much to the left or to the right, they stay safely in the middle" (ibid., p. 96).

These three points from above (American history, especially the era of Puritans, similar events happening all around the world and her decision to choose USA as the setting of the novel) Atwood explains in the interview for the New York Times:

You could say it's a response to 'it can't happen here.' When they say 'it can't happen here', what they usually mean is Iran can't happen here, Czechoslovakia can't happen here. And they're right, because this isn't there. But what could happen here? It wouldn't be some people saying, 'Hi, folks, we're Communists and we're going to be your new Government.' But if you were going to do it, what would you do? What emotions would you appeal to? What groups would you utilize? How exactly would you go about it? Well something like the way the religious right is doing thing. (...) We're often taught in schools that the Puritans came to America for religious freedom. Nonsense. They came to establish their own regime, where they could persecute people to their heart's content just the way they themselves had been persecuted (Bloom, 2004, pp. 77-78).

And the way she explains the situation directly corresponds with the way she described the act of establishing the regime of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

I was stunned. Everyone was, I know that. It was hard to believe. The entire government, gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen?

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on (Atwood, 1996, p. 183).

### 3.3 The Composition

The novel consists of three parts – the three epigraphs at the beginning of the book (Genesis, Jonathan Swift – *A Modest Proposal* and Sufi proverb), Contents and Historical Notes on *Handmaid's Tale*. The Contents of the book consist of fifteen parts with different headings, seven of them are called “Night”. All these parts are divided into several separated chapters.

As said before, there are three introductory quotations that open the novel. The first, from Genesis is taken from the story about Jacob and Rachel. Jacob promised to work for seven years in exchange for marriage to Rachel but then he was tricked into marrying her elder sister and she bears him two sons. Later Rachel – his second wife he loved the most but could not come with child – makes Jacob bed her handmaid with whom he has two sons too. This biblical story can serve as an inspiration for the system of Gilead and also brings the idea of devaluation of women who cannot become pregnant. The second epigraph comes from a satiric essay *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift, published in 1729. Here, Swift comes with the idea of raising children for sale as food and other articles of trade to solve the problems of the poor families who have more children than they can afford to bring up. This mad idea makes parallel with the fanaticism of Gilead's society. The last epigraph was taken from an Islamic proverb. It suggests that it is not necessary to make laws against what is obvious – as people are not meant to eat stones, travellers in the desert do not need any sign that eating stones is forbidden there.

The story itself is composed of isolated units with blanks between them, there are different time levels – present events stand next to Offred's memories of her past, of her life before. The fragmentary structure presents Offred's stream of consciousness, she often draws our attention to the storytelling process itself, and she explains why she has

to tell the story – to let the future generations or others outside the regime know what the life in Gilead is like. But it is not only the reconstruction of the Gilead's regime, but it is a reconstruction of Offred's own self. She is trying to keep herself as an individuality, which is so difficult in such circumstances. Individuality is the first which the regime tries everyone to get rid of. Again and again Offred emphasizes anything round her that would be somehow connected with herself only - "my own time" (Atwood, 1996, p. 47), "my room" (ibid., p. 60), "my own territory" (ibid., p. 83), "my name" (ibid., p. 94). She knows it is not real truth as the regime rules everything. But you can keep your own self even there – as long as you follow the rules. As long as you do not give up. As said before, several parts of the book are titled as Night, night represents for Offred a very special time: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will as long as I am quiet" (ibid., p. 47).

The whole story is told by the main character – Offred. Because the handmaids are not allowed to write or read it seems the whole story consists of Offred's thoughts. At the end of the novel we can find out that she was recording it all and these tapes were later found and transcribed by professor Piexioto about his lecture on this we can read in the very last part of the book.

Offred's act of the tapes recording (and so telling the story) is her way of rebellion against the state. She does not want anything to be forgotten. But Offred does not tell only her own story, behind it there are stories of many other women with whom she met. Offred's storytelling voice multiplies to become the voices of 'women' rather than voices of a single narrator (Howells, 1996, p. 100).

Offred very often addresses directly her (potential) readers, she warns them she might not be always a reliable narrator. But we – as the readers – have no choice. We have to follow her story, rely on her memory and her point of view and believe all we read is what the situation was like.

From this point of view this novel can be seen as it has little in common with epistolary literature but – as it is transmitted into twenty-first century, the letter is transformed into the tapes (Kaufman, 1989, pp. 221-222). This fact is also once mentioned by Offred herself: “A story is like a letter. *Dear you*, I’ll say. Just you, without a name” (Atwood, 1996, p. 49).

The other problem that is brought into the discussion – connected with this particular media – is that consequently there must be someone to transcribe the story. And therefore there might be also some other changes done and we can never be really sure about the author and about her or his reliability.

### 3.4 The Plot

In the middle of the 1980s near Boston in Massachusetts U. S. president and the members of Congress are murdered by right-wing fundamentalists. Since then there starts a new era, life for all is changing. Firstly, women are not allowed to use their credit cards and it continues with women denied work and education.

Then the state of Gilead<sup>1</sup> is established. It is a country with strict conservative rules – homosexuality, abortions and any religious sects are forbidden. People are divided into particular groups, except Jews, old women and non-white people who are directly sent working to the Colonies – a radioactive territory. Because many areas have been nuclear polluted and there have been some epidemic illnesses the population is decimated and it is facing a problem of high infertility. As the solution of this problem there is made a kind of a caste system – fertile women who

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<sup>1</sup> Gilead in Old Testaments times, a productive Israelite upland region east of the Jordan River and north east of the Dead Sea. It was known for ample flocks of sheep and goats, orchards and vineyards, and plentiful spices.



got involved in illicit liaisons or second marriages are becoming so called Handmaids. To be easily recognized they wear red uniforms and they live in the houses of Commanders. Their only function is to become pregnant by the Commander and then give the birth as many children as possible to keep the nation live on. They are only live breeders – a new kind of slaves, who were got rid of their manes and have become possessions of the Commander – as they are now labelled only with the name of the man who is their ‘owner’ (Offred, Ofglen etc.). Not only have the Handmaids to live and have sex with the Commanders but they also share the house with Commander’s real wife who gets the baby after the Handmaid gives the birth. Wives represent another caste of the society.

A different ‘social class’ is represented by Aunts in khaki uniforms. Their function is to train the women who are supposed to become Handmaids. Their main task is to take away the identity of the prospective Handmaids, to restrict their vision to make them think differently – to make them to forget who they used to be and to focus on their new ‘function’. The Aunts train Handmaids in the Re-Education Centre (Red Centre) – the building surrounded by fences with barbed wires reminding of concentration camp. There all the women share a gymnasium like space.

Offred leaves the centre and after the first unsuccessful attempt to conceive she becomes a Handmaid of Commander Fred, whose previous Handmaid hanged herself in the room where Offred is going to live now. The presence of Offred’s predecessor in the room is reminded by a secret phrase that she scratched on the wall - *Nolite te bastardes carborundoru*. As Offred finds out later it is a botched version of Latin aphorism *Non illegitimi carborundum* (Do not let the bastards wear you down).

I didn’t know what it meant, or even what language it was in. (...)

Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact (...) It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communicating with her, this unknown woman. (...) It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person (Atwood, 1996, p. 62).

This unnamed woman represents to Offred a very special person – Offred feels that subconsciously as she does not know anything about her – and she calls her “my ancestress, my double” (ibid., p. 65). As we find out later, that woman went through the same as Offred and her situation led to her suicide.

Offred's daily routine is to get fresh food at the local markets, to stay in her room, to participate in the public prayers sessions and executions. Once a month she has to attend a pseudo-religious ritual where Bible is read and after that she has to copulate with the Commander in the presence of his wife Serena Joy. Every month she also has to undergo regular medical exam.

As Serena Joy is longing for a baby but Offred still has not become pregnant, Serena arranges for her a secret rendezvous with a family chauffeur Nick and she hopes Offred and Nick will become lovers. Her intentions are fulfilled soon and Offred comes to see Nick more and more often.

Meantime – unknown to Serena – the Commander invites Offred for late-night visits to his room. There is no sexual purpose – except a couple of kisses – they talk together, play Scrabble and Offred is given some presents – fashion magazines, a hand lotion and some information about the world outside. Once Commander gives Offred makeup, high heels and a costume – mainly made of feathers, looking as a dress of a cheap prostitute – and he takes her to an illegal nightclub Jezebel's. Among the

prostitutes who work there, Offred finds Moira – her friend from the old times.

Some time later, Serena Joy finds the dress Offred was wearing that night and accuses her of treachery. Offred does not know what to do – she has not many alternatives – escape, suicide, hide at Nick’s place, ask for mercy from the Commander. But there is a black van arriving – the secret police is coming. Nick enters Offred’s room and hides her in the place of two agents of Mayday – the underground liberation group. Offred’s story ends with an ambiguous scene – the two agents accuse her of violating state secrets, push her into the waiting van and she leaves Commander’s place.

The last part of the whole story is a separate chapter called “Historical notes on the *Handmaid’s Tale*”. It is set on June 25 in 2195 – over two centuries after the formation of Gilead. There is an academic conference and there is just Professor James Darcy Piexieto delivering his speech. Piexieto is an archivist who gives the audience a lecture on Offred’s thirty cassette tapes. He tried to analyse the information given by the speaker and he identifies the Commander as Frederick R. Waterford who was effaced during the Liberian revolution. Piexieto supposes that Offred escaped from Gilead and hid the tapes before departing from Canada or Britain. She then lived there alone to protect her family against potential reprisal attacks.

### 3.5 The Main Characters

#### Offred

Offred is the narrator of the story. We do not know her real name but it might be guessed from the first chapter – five women are secretly

talking together before sleeping in the gym in the Red Centre where they are trained to become good handmaids:

We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June (Atwood, 1996, p. 14).

Offred is her given name with the meaning she is a possession of Gileadian Commander ("of Fred"). As Bloom (2004, p. 16) suggests 'off red' might be a hint – Offred is not as devout as she first appears.

Before the establishment of Gilead, she was married to Luke with whom she had a daughter. When the situation in the country became unbearable and the menace of totality was getting serious, all the family tried to escape to Canada. They were captured and Offred has never seen Luke and her daughter again. Now she has become a Handmaid – a woman whose role in the new society is to work as a reproductive mechanism and to follow all the rules of the new regime.

Offred tries to keep her identity and at least a little freedom which goes directly against the rules of the state. She does things strictly forbidden - she has a love affair with the chauffeur Nick, she comes to visit the Commander in the evenings to speak with him or read in his room. It can be seen as an act of revolt or as the way of self preservation, to forget her previous life for a while or not to become insane or to commit suicide.

#### The Commander

Commander's identity is not clear but at the end of the novel it is indicated by the historians his name was Fred Waterford, one of the most important persons of the regime. In Offred's eyes he is a grey-haired,

impotent man in an unhappy marriage to Serena Joy. He has nobody to talk to and so he invites Offred into his room to spend the time with him. He treats her like a child giving her small presents or playing scrabble with her. He does not agree with all laws of the state as he once tells her the commanded act of sex is 'impersonal'. He represents a person who realized that the world he helped to create is not what he wants. He even asks Offred – an inferior person - about her opinion on the system and asks her for help how to improve it.

Serena Joy (Commander's wife)

Serena Joy represents another person who – even if she belongs to upper class of the new society – does not feel happy living in these circumstances. She shares her home with Offred, who is still there to remind her of her lost youth and also who is there to have sex with her husband during the monthly "Ceremony" according to the state law. She is longing for a baby that represents in Gilead the status symbol within the society, so she arranges the meeting of Offred and Nick. In this situation she shows the real cruelty of her character as she promises Offred to show her a current photo of her daughter if she agrees to meet him.

Nick

Nick is Commander's chauffeur. Offred soon finds out that he does not agree with the strict rules of the regime. He is trying to contact her from the first time they meet each other. They are getting closer and it seems Offred is feeling kind of affection but she still cannot forget her husband Luke and feels like she is betraying him (even it has been more than three years they saw each other for the last time). According to her behaviour (she visits Nick many times, she herself smiles during the days, she starts to feel to be content with her life) the relationship

changes and she falls in love with Nick. At the end of the novel he helps her to escape – even though it presents a great risk to him. At the final conference the historians speculate that at that time she might have been pregnant.

### Moira

Moira is Offred's best friend from college. She represents a lesbian feminist activist, the main 'heroine' of the book and the hero for Offred herself. Moira is the one who is not being afraid of saying her critical ideas against the regime and not afraid of all the consequences of her behaviour in such a way. After the first unsuccessful attempt to leave the Red Centre, she finally escapes and leaves Offred wondering what became of her friend. This act gives Offred hope one day she will run away too.

Moira and Offred meet together later in Commander's club where Moira works as a party girl. She is happy about her current job – the chance to be with other women. Offred is very disappointed - she feels that Moira has given up her fight and resigned and her own hope for better future or any change becomes weaker. They never meet each other again.

### Janine

Janine stands directly in the contrast of Moira. She represents what can happen when one buys into Gilead's regime. At the age of fourteen she was raped and as consequence she became pregnant – she believes it was all her fault. She gets the name Offwarren and becomes secretly pregnant with her doctor during a monthly visit. The baby dies soon after its birth and Janine is transferred to another commander.

Later at the Particicution – a ceremony in which Handmaids can do whatever they want to a man who has – they are told - committed rape and murdered a baby, Janine is seen with a tuft of the man’s hair, smiling. It seems she became insane.

### Ofglen

Ofglen is one of the Handmaids and she is Offred’s shopping partner. At first Ofglen seems to be devout, she follows all the regime rules. After some time, Offred finds out her real identity, Ofglen is a member of a group of people who try to fight secretly against the regime. Ofglen tells her about their “Mayday” code which is used to recognize “the resistors”. Ofglen asks Offred to find out information from her Commander during their evening meetings. Offred is afraid of doing this and so she denies cooperating.

One day a black van comes there – it is the secret state police. As Ofglen knows they have come for her she hangs herself. Ofglen represents – next to Moira – another way of living under this regime and tries to defeat it.

### Luke

Luke is Offred’s husband and we know him only from short flashbacks in her memory. We do not get much information about him but according to Offred’s memories they had a happy marriage and loved each other a lot. She does not know anything about him now but she still believes he escaped successfully during their attempt to run away to Canada.

Because Luke was married when he met Offred and first they had an extra marital affair, Offred became the Handmaid in the strict Gilead’s regime.

### Offred's daughter

She remains nameless – in the same way as her mother – throughout the whole story and in the same way as her father Luke we know her only from Offred's memories. They were separated while the family tried to escape to Canada and Offred does not know anything about her daughter's life. Three years later she sees her once again in a photograph – at the age of eight she is wearing a long white dress. The photo reminds Offred of arranged marriages with soldiers that are very common in Gilead.

Offred is worried about her daughter but she keeps hoping they will meet one day again. The story remains open, we do not know if the family reunites again.

### Offred's mother

As the other members of the family we know her only from Offred's flashbacks. She was a member of the radical women's movement, a 'pronatalist' – she decided to have Offred at the age of thirty-seven and to raise her without any male aid. She takes part in many activities to support fight the for women's equality.

We do not know much about her life in Gilead but Moira tells Offred she saw her mother in the film about women working in Colonies, cleaning up radioactive waste – the worst work people in Gilead can do. "Even though the "women's society" she wanted has, in perverse way, been achieved, she has been marginalized more severely than ever before" (Bloom, 2004, p. 22).

### Cora and Rita

Cora and Rita are Marthas in the house where Offred lives. They differ in their attitudes toward Offred – while Cora hopes Offred will be pregnant soon and it will bring happiness to everyone in the house (she



smiles at Offred, gives her extra sweets etc.), Rita hates Offred and judges her for her choice to become Handmaid over the work in Colonies.

The Marthas show us the situation of women who are not able to have children any more live within the society obsessed with fertility. As Offred sometimes overhears their talks and comments on society and regime we know what they think about it. Offred would like to be a part of the community of Marthas, to have someone to talk to honestly.

### Lydia and Elizabeth

Lydia and Elizabeth are two main Aunts. We know them from Offred's flashbacks. As they are supposed to educate the new handmaids, their speech is always full of slogans and rules – about reading, writing, maternal rule of women. They want Handmaids to become absolutely obedient and follow any rules of Gilead.

As Bloom says, the Aunts represent one of the lowest groups within the society – they are those who will “to harm and sacrifice others for the sake of their own interest” (ibid., p. 23).

The Aunts might be also seen as the main representatives of the Gilead's regime and essential characters for the explanation of the fact the novel is so worrisome and even frightening. Aunts are women with a great power that is physically represented by the electric kettle prods they wear on their leather belts which they can use against women any time they like. Catherine R. Stimpson (2004, p. 81) describes these characters as being “sinister and funny at once” and explains the way Atwood makes Gilead more terrifying – she gives these tools into hands of such ordinary people. Stimpson continues her explanations with the idea that the totalitarianism in Atwood's work becomes domesticated as we can find there such ordinary figures. And in consequences it is so frightening as everything there seems normal and absurd at the same time.

### 3.6 The Main Themes

There are various themes that can be found within the story and it is difficult to say which the main one is. There is a description of living in the dictatorship and ultra-conservative society that can remind us of extreme godliness. But in Gilead the concept of Bible and its values seem to be misunderstood or the society is highly hypocritical as - the role of Bible is rather official. Bible is usually locked by the Commander and it is only used for a short reading before the monthly ceremony.

The society in the fact does not follow anything that is written in Bible. As another example can serve the way the society solves out the problem of its “useless” citizens. All who are not convenient for any position within the society that is absolutely obsessed with the fertility are sent to the Colonies, which equals to be sentenced to death. There is no reason to keep them among those who can serve the purpose of Gilead. There can be seen a parallel with the life in wilderness where only those strong species can survive.

The time before Gilead is sometimes called as chaos. And even the recent regime is purely totalitarianism, it tries to persuade its citizens it is not so. It is only the matter of the point of view: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood, 1996, p. 34).

But the essential thing is that the regime is not originally based on religion but on feminism that – even if hidden underneath - has actually the main role. How this works in the novel describes Barbara Ehrenreich:

We are being warned, in this tale, not only about the theocratic ambitions of the religious right, but about a repressive tendency in feminism itself. Only on the surface is Gilead a fortress of

patriarchy, Old Testament style. It is also, in a thoroughly sinister and distorted way, the utopia of cultural feminism (Ehrenreich, 2004, p. 78).

The society in Gilead is mainly lead by women and there is nothing that could be criticized by feminists as an instrument of humiliation of women or any thing that would represent me as a stronger part of the mankind. Everything that has been traditionally described as instruments that suppress women nature form – make up or other cosmetics, high heels, mini skirts, fashion magazines, pornography – has disappeared. The position of men has been reduced as their only important task is to fertilize assigned women, but they no longer live in normal partnerships with their wives or girlfriends. Women should feel – within this society - absolutely free. And this is also the idea that is given by Aunts to all former Handmaids in the Red Centre.

There can be seen what might happen if any ideology in its extreme form is put into practice – concretely what consequences might bring an extreme variety of feminism. But there is also present another fact that occurs within feminism itself – women – same as men – are guilty for the position of the women within the society. The book supports this fact mainly by the characters of Aunts.

Ehrenreich (ibid., p. 78) describes the whole situation in the context of various historical issues that represent subjection or injustice to women all around the world. She speaks about foot-binding, witch-burning, slavery, organized rape, enforced childbearing or denial of ordinary rights such as speaking out in public or walking down the street alone without fear. From her point of view women have not been only passive victims. To prove this fact is also one of the main aims of Atwood's novel:

This tale is an absorbing novel, as well as an intra-feminist polemic. Still, it does remind us that, century after century, women have been complicit in their own undoing. Like the sadistic Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it was women who bound their granddaughters' feet, women who turned over their little girls for clitoridectomies, and often even women who denounced their neighbours as witches (ibid., p. 80).

Another theme that appears in the story is the way how to survive under these conditions. How to carry on living and not to become insane. How to keep your own personality inside which is the last piece of freedom you have, but the system tries very hard to take it away from you. There are various ways that Offred does to protect herself. She knows she has to keep her name which represents her past and – what is more important - her individuality. And there is the act of telling the story, which is another act of self preservation and self reconstruction. This topic will be discussed in details in the last chapter of the thesis.

## 4. The Blind Assassin

Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It's all the same impulse. What do we hope from it? Applause, envy, respect. Or simply attention, of any kind we can get?

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.

(Atwood, 2000, p. 95)

### 4.1 Introduction

*The Blind Assassin* – the winner of the Booker Prize - was published in 2000. It was one of her the most critically praised works as it was also shortlisted for both the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Orange Prize and The Time Magazine named it the best novel of 2000 and included it in its list of the 100 greatest English-language novels since 1923 (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2010).

### 4.2 The Composition

The novel covers a long time line as it is told by a 82 year old narrator who describes her life while in the background the story illustrates the history of Canada at that time. Howells (2005, p.155) characterizes the novel as “Atwood’s Gothic version of Canadian history in the twentieth

century (...) a memorial to the end of an era as it offers a retrospective view of some of the key national and international events of the past century and of Canada's changing social and political ideologies". Beside this historical background it is also a confession of an old woman who now – at the end of her life – feels she has to disclose her family history and secrets. Her act and the book which is its result can be also explained as a gift for her granddaughter she is not in touch with and her attempt to purge herself of all her mistakes she has done during her life.

The novel is introduced by three quotations – as Cooke (2004, p. 152) suggests they represent its three dominant themes and “set the dark tone of the novel”. First quote is from the book *Shah of Shahs* by Ryszard Kapuściński and brings the theme of mass murder as the novel deals with a story of the city of Kerman, where its governor orders to blind or execute all the citizens. The second one is an inscription on a Carthaginian funerary urn and represents the theme of “death as a kind of escape (...) as it describes a boundless sea and merciless god as the answer to this speaker's prayers” (ibid., p. 152). The last quote is a statement by Canadian writer Sheila Watson: “The word is a flame burning in a dark glass” – taken from her novel *Deep Hollow Creek*. And, as Cooke (ibid., p. 152) finally suggests, it brings the theme of the power of the words.

Howells (2005, p.156) explains how the novel was influenced by Gothic style - she describes its structure as “multidimensional structure, which is complicated as any Gothic romance or Victorian sensational novel”. The story is divided into 15 parts without any headings – marked only with numbers. These parts are divided into many chapters with their own titles. The story consists of three different lines accompanied by short ‘newspaper articles’ that comment on some of the events of the story.

There is Iris's memoir told in present – Iris at the age of 82 - that functions as a frame for other two lines. One of them covers Iris's life from her childhood. Another line – always titled as *The Blind Assassin* – tells in fragments the story of Iris's book *The Blind Assassin*. All of the lines – apparently unrelated – finally lock up together at the end. As said before, the last component of the story is represented by various newspaper news and articles that support important event that happen in the story. These pieces are usually written in a light style of social-events pages.

The parts that cover the storytelling of Iris's life are told in ich-form with Iris as the narrator and the line of the story is chronological. These lines are directly accompanied by the newspaper articles. The extracts from the novel within the novel are written in the er-form. This form keeps readers supposing that the author of the novel is really Laura and it leads to surprising end.

#### 4.3 The Plot

As the novel consists of four lines, consequently we have to reconstruct the plot from these fragments. There is the frame line – Iris's present life that can lead us through the whole story and can serve as a clue for description of the whole plot.

Iris Chase Griffen lives now, at her age of 82, peacefully in Port Ticonderoga, the place where she was born, spent her childhood and where she came back years ago to live again. Her only company is Myra Sturgess and Myra's husband who take care of her.

Iris comes from well-known family of button factory owners but their fortune was ruined in consequences of the World War I and also the Great Depression of the 1930s. At that time the factory was burned down in a riot. But this was not the only tragic moment in her childhood. Her

mother died soon and her father – former war soldier – was devastated because of this experience and consequently became an alcoholic to soften his pain and troubles.

Iris and her younger sister Laura were brought up by housekeeper Reenie, the mother of Myra, in the scruffy Gothic mansion, the house that belonged for generations to their father's ancestors: "This is his home, this besieged castle, he is its werewolf." (Atwood, 2000, p. 102) The relationship between Iris and Laura is one of the crucial entities of the whole story. Even if they were different, there was very intensive closeness among them. As children, they used to live in certain isolation from the outer world - as they never attended school (they were taught by private tutors) they were not in contact with their peers and so had only each other.

Iris's identity and future is defined by her gender, class - her position within the society - and also by her position within her family. She, as the older one and a good sister of Laura, is supposed to marry well to save her penniless family and so take care of Laura's future.

One day in 1934, there is a Chase Factory Picnic, where Laura meets Alex Thomas - a young man of "indeterminate social class" (Howells, 2005, p. 159), the crucial person of the lives of both sisters. Later, Alex turns out to be a Communist agitator escaping the police and the girls shelter him for some time in their father's house. Alex becomes their "guilty secret" (Atwood, 2000, p. 264) but he also becomes the one whom they both fall in love with.

When looking back, the picnic day becomes for Iris the key day of her life. Not only, did she meet Alex there - her former secret lover and father of her daughter, but that day began her relationship with wealthy industrialist Richard Griffen "and prefigures their disastrous marriage, when she sacrifices her life for the interests of her family, a pointless sacrifice as it turns out" (Howells, 2005, p. 159).



Iris marries Richard and soon after Laura has to move to their house and to live with them in Toronto, as her and Iris's father died - only a couple of days after the wedding. Laura is very unhappy to live like this, she tries to avoid Richard's presence as much as possible and she keeps trying to persuade Iris to leave him. The situation culminates by Richard's and Winifred's decision to take Laura to a clinic for the mentally ill. Shortly after this, Iris's daughter Aimee is born. Some time later, Laura escapes the clinic, meets with Iris and tells her the whole truth – but the content of their conversation (Laura, who loved Thomas Alex all her life, in an attempt to help him, has to keep a sexual affair with Richard and now she hopes to meet Alex Thomas again; while Iris tells her, she was Alex Thomas's lover for a long time, but he died in the war some time ago) is cleared up only at the end of the story. The next day Laura commits suicide.

After Laura's death, Iris takes Aimee, leaves Richard and goes back to Port Ticonderoga. Two years later, Laura's (Iris's) novel is published and shortly after this, Richard commits suicide. Iris loses her daughter – as Winifred becomes Aimee's guardiansess - and she has to live her life alone till the end of her life. Even she tries to contact Aimee, who becomes drug and alcohol addicted, they never keep in touch. The only Iris's hope is meeting her granddaughter Sabrina for whom she decides to write down the memoir of her life.

#### 4.4 The Main Characters

##### Iris

Iris is the narrator of the whole story and can be called the main character. As there are more time lines we get to know the whole time of her life and it is difficult to describe her as it seems there are “more Ireses” – a little girl dealing with troubles with her sister, father and

dying mother, a young lady who is supposed to get married to help her family, a married woman from higher society who hates the family she has become a member of and who is cheating on her husband and meanwhile writing a book about this illicit liaison. We get to know her as an older woman who does not know how to fix the relationship with her daughter and then as an old poor lady who tries to get used to her old body and who is desperately longing for seeing her granddaughter once again.

We are meeting Iris at her age of 82 when she starts to tell her story. So it is the story told from certain distance, told with all the experience she has got now. She is very close to her sister Laura even if they are very different. As being the older one from two sisters she had to help to save the penniless family and married someone she did not know and – as she gets to know latter – she could never love. But she was aware of how serious the situation was. This marriage was not happy as it usually happens to couples that got together for certain purpose. It was full of hypocrisy – only pretending being a happy couple, which was far away from reality. Even if the time spent within the Griffen family was not a happy one it presents a very valuable experience to Iris.

Through the time she changes and from a meek and submissive girl she becomes independent, fearless, determined to live her own life. Even if it never really happens.

Looking back to the opening introduction of this chapter, Cooke (2004, p. 152) suggests the mass murder as one of the key themes of the story. As she continuous her analysis, it is Iris who represents the character of the blind assassin – “not only is her hand in each one of the crimes, but also her hand has scripted the way we understand those crimes” (ibid., p. 154).

## Laura

Laura – the younger sister of Iris – represents the mysterious element of the story. As the novel starts with her suicide and we are left to find out the reason why she did it, her character is one of the main elements that makes the tension within the story. In some ways, Laura is an opposite of Iris. She is secretive and not very communicative. She seems to be unbalanced but she can be very strong - she is able to do anything to help her beloved Alex.

As Iris claimed her the author of the novel *Blind Assassin*, she becomes posthumously a cult figure, and Iris – as she says herself – lives in the shadow of her sister. This enlarges Laura’s mysteriousness. This aspect of Laura’s character is cleared up at the very end of the book - as we find out Laura is not the author of the book.

## Richard E. Griffen

Iris’s husband, a very powerful and wealthy man with many important connections, represents evil in all aspects of his character. He is a self-centred person, who concerns his interests only. He never expresses any pleasant emotions or affection. He loves to use his power to control others (e.g. wants Laura to have sex with him as reciprocation for saving Alex) but ironically, he is under total control of his sister. They together try to separate Iris and Laura, they lie to them and play tricks on them.

## Winifred Griffen-Prior

Richard’s sister is another evil element of the story. She seems to be unable to live her own life and so she has to be a part of lives of others – especially of her brother. She thinks about herself as being someone special and she treats others this way – most obviously Iris. It starts with “kind” pieces of advice but turns into strict directing and humiliating. It is quite difficult to understand her intentions as her motivation is not

clear. Her attitude towards Iris and Laura changes into hate. She hopes to get rid of them or – at least - to separate them. She behaves as a completely careless intriguer and nothing can stop her. This proves the fact she was able to steal Laura's daughter.

#### Reenie

Reenie was a nanny of Iris and Laura but after their mother's death she was the person who really brought them up. She represents a tie with their childhood and the time when everything was - at least quite – trouble free. She is a person who always 'offers them a shelter' and her real interest proves also the fact that her daughter – Myra – many years later becomes the only person who looks after Iris in her last years of her life.

#### Aimee

Aimee – daughter of Iris and Richard. After her father's death (she was 10 at that time) her aunt Winifred became her guardianess. But as soon as she got her heritage and could leave the house she did it. From that time she experimented with drugs and had many various partners. After her daughter Sabrina was born, she calmed down but never lived orderly life.

Aimee was very much influenced by the relations within the family. She did not trust anyone, she became paranoid and blamed everyone of telling her lies – she believed she was a child of Laura and the mysterious man from the novel. Because of this she never allowed either Iris or Winifred to be in touch with Sabrina. Aimee died tragically and Iris had never ever had other chance to change their relationship.

Perhaps I should have stretched out my own arms. I should have hugged her. I should have cried. Then I should have sat down with

her and told her this story I'm telling you now. But I didn't do that. I missed the chance and I regret it bitterly. (...) She was my daughter but I have to admit I'd mourned the self she'd been at a much earlier age. I mourned what she could have become; I mourned her possibilities. More than anything, I mourned my own failures (Atwood, 2000 pp. 436-437).

#### Alex Thomas

Alex Thomas is for Iris and Laura a crucial figure and can be called as a 'fatal man'. After they both meet him at their father's party, Laura tries to keep in touch with him and we can presume she is in love with him. Some time later when he comes to ask her for help, she offers him a shelter in her father's house and Iris is involved too. Just before Alex leaves their house, he kisses Iris.

Later, he meets Iris again, they become lovers – keeping their affair for some years. Later, Alex turns to be the father of Iris's daughter and also the mysterious main character of her novel *The Blind Assassin*.

As a Communist activist, Alex keeps trying to escape the police and finally joins the army to fight in Europe. Some time later, Iris gets a letter he was killed in Holland.

#### 4.5 The Main Themes

The fact that the novel covers different styles, different ways of narration and also the act of writing the story within the story (in this case is the phenomenon even doubled), it leads to identifying the storytelling as one of the crucial themes of the novel. It is not the act of writing in the purpose of earning money or becoming a famous person. The writing here is primarily connected with the fact it enables us to write down all we want to remember, what we need and want to say and

explain. Our lives are limited with time, writing is not. It can last for any amount of time we wish. It can leave its author far behind and last forever. But still it carries the trace of its author within.

About her first intention why she started writing, Iris says “I wanted a memorial” (Atwood, 2000, p. 512). She knew the only way to reach it was to write it all down. She did not think about what will happen with her manuscript, even if she finishes it one day. But it was her chance to express herself, it was her only free space.

Iris – in her memoir – is quite sure there will be someone reading her story and so she thinks about herself as about the narrator who wants to tell her story best. She is aware that all her writing is very much influenced by her age and it is all a retrospective, her view back. The concept of memory is one of the crucial points of the whole book. Repeatedly, Iris thinks about her memory and realizes how her view on some situations or events has changed through the time. The combination of writing and the time distance filled with experience enables you to see things differently.

It struck me that Richard had wanted to go out with them not only because he wanted to surround himself with a small coterie of cringers, but because he didn't want to be alone with me. I could scarcely blame him: I had little to say. Nonetheless, he was now – in company – solicitous of me, placing my coat with tenderness over my shoulders, paying me small, cherishing attention, keeping a hand always on me, lightly, somewhere. Every once in a while he'd scan the room, checking over the other men in it to see who is envying him. (Retrospect of course, on my part: at the time I recognized none of this.) (Atwood, 2000, p. 242).

The retrospective point of view can also serve as an instrument of evaluation of our own selves. When old Iris looks at her wedding picture, she describes herself in the form of the third person as she realized that her wedding led to “the erasure of her own identity” (Howells, 2005, 159).

(I say “her” because I don’t recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. 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. I have the better view – I can see her clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can’t see me at all.) (Atwood, 2000, p. 239).

As she can see now, it is only the time and experience that enable her to think this way and to realize the consequences of the decisions she made or she had to make.

As said before, the story of Iris’s life is put into a wider frame of the Canadian history. As Howells (2005, p. 155) adds, from this point of view, the concept of memory can be seen not only as a memory of individuals, but “...from the wider perspective it could be considered as a general inquiry into the way that history is remembered and recorded”. As thinking about it, Iris’s memoir functions in various ways – “...part confession, part historical reconstruction, and part public memorial” (ibid., p. 158).

Another main theme of the story is represented by the relationship between Iris and Laura, whose fates and lives are tied so closely that it actually leads to their destruction. Even if Iris is the main character of the whole story, there is a great focus put on Laura, too. She is – in Iris’s

eyes – described as “a tragic heroine whose story unfolds with dramatic irony” (ibid., 2005, p. 160).

In a painting she'd be gathering wildflowers, though in real life she rarely did anything of the kind. The earth-faced god crouches behind her in the forest shade. Only we can see him. Only we know it will pounce (Atwood, 2000, p. 509).

As Iris writes her memoir and looks back, she realizes parallels of her life, life of Laura and mythic stories – especially at the end when she finds Laura's school translation of the Latin Antic story of Dido and Iris. She reveals in her head the tale and her childhood memory connected with it.

Dido has stabled herself on the burning pyre or altar she's made of all objects connected to her vanished lover, Aeneas, who has sailed away to fulfil his destiny through warfare. Although bleeding like a stuck pig, Dido is having a hard time dying. (...) Then powerful Juno felt sorry for her long-time sufferings and uneasy journey, and sent Iris from Olympus to cut the agonizing soul from the body that still held onto it. This had to be done because Dido was not dying a natural death or one caused by other people, but in despair, driven to it by a crazy impulse (Atwood, 2000, p. 498)

As Iris was asked to, she cut off a golden lock from Dido's head and so released her soul from her body and Dido died.

After translating the story, Iris can remember the dialogue she had with Laura:



“Why did she have to cut off a piece of the hair?” said Laura. “That Iris?”

I had no idea. “It was just a thing she had to do,” I said. “Sort of like an offering.” (...)

“It helped Dido to get out of her body,” said Laura. “She didn’t want to be alive any more. It put her out of her misery, so it was the right thing to do. Wasn’t it?”

“I guess so,” I said (ibid., p. 499)

The similarities of this old tale with the fates of the characters of Atwood’s novel – Iris, Laura and Alex Thomas are – as seen from the retrospective - more than obvious.

But throughout the narrative, in everyday situations, Iris is described as irritated by Laura and not willing to understand her anxiety or sadness. As Iris looks back at the very end of her memoir, there is a mix of her various emotions she feels about her sister and their relationship. It is a combination of guilt for having failed Laura and self-justification and hope she had the right to behave the way she did. “I’m on trial here. I know it... 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” (ibid., p. 522). Consequently, there comes again the theme of watching the acts and decisions throughout the life and contemplating them now, many years later.

The crucial position of Laura within Iris’s life and so within her story is emphasized by the fact, that the memory of Laura’s death is put as a short flashback at the very beginning of the novel and it is replayed once more in the chronological sequence of Iris’s life. This may lead to an idea that the real motivation for Iris’s writing is to clear her consciousness as “...her mind insistently circles around the central trauma in a series of complex displacements” (Howells, 2005, p. 161). But when Iris reaches

the moment of description of her conversation with Laura just before Laura's suicide, she hesitates to do it: "Now I'm coming to a part that still haunts me. Now I should have bitten my tongue, now I should have kept my mouth shut" (Atwood, 2000, p. 595). As Howells (2005, p. 161) continues, Iris has to face now the fact she was the reason why Laura died, as she told her not only about Alex's death but she admitted their long lasting love affair. The fact that Iris could have never coped with her role in Laura's death is emphasized by the way she narrates about that moment. Even if it has been more than fifty years, Iris describes their last conversation with every single detail – culminating with her depiction of the look in Laura's eyes. The uniqueness of the situation is emphasized by Iris's association of this event with her childhood memory – a moment when she saw the exactly same look in Laura's face. It was the day when Laura had deliberately thrown herself into a river and Iris rescued her:

Laura said nothing. She only looked at me. She looked right through me. Lord knows what she saw. A sinking ship, a city in flames, a knife in the back. I recognized the look, however: it was the look she'd had that day she'd almost drowned in the Louveteau River, just as she was going under – terrified, cold, rapturous. Gleaming like steel (Atwood, 2000, p. 488).

The next day Laura leaves a message for Iris "Tell Iris I'll talk to her later" (ibid., p. 489) but they never see each other again. Iris then finds Laura's hidden old notebooks and she reads through them – this, as Howells (2005, p. 161) suggests, might be "the dialogue across the frontiers between life and death, which becomes a major source of Iris's narrative impulse, an impulse confirmed in her later assertion that she and Laura were collaborators in authorship". This 'dialogue' somehow

continues throughout the rest of Iris's life as she reads the messages in the toilets in her favourite café and always thinks about them as messages from Laura for her.

But there is much more that Iris has done to keep her sister alive. It is not clear if it was her real intention or it happened coincidentally, but the fact she claimed Laura the author of her novel *The Blind Assassin* made Laura immortal, the book keeps attracting people and there are new and new editions made. Laura became a cult heroine and Iris is left there to live in her sister's shadow. She has to attend special events dedicated to Laura or to come to take literal prizes in Laura's name. Anytime she comes to visit Laura's grave there were flowers or messages from Laura's fans which Iris was throwing away angrily. This hidden anger that Iris tries to keep inside can indicate her jealousy she feels now.

There are many unanswered questions left after reading the novel. The relationships among the characters are very ambiguous and it is not a key that would lead to 'so called' truth. There are only presumptions left as proves that lives and relations are mostly complicated with many possible explanations from various points of view.

#### 4.6 Science Fiction in *The Blind Assassin*

The science fiction style story can be found only on a few pages within the whole novel – it is a continuing story that mysterious lover (potentially Alex) tells his mistress (potentially Iris) during their secret dates. It is a story about a blind assassin and a tongueless girl from a mysterious city Sakiel-Norn.

These parts of the novel raise up various questions and were mainly criticised and considered as departures from the subject and disturbing from the main story. Howells (2005, p. 164) strongly disagrees with these opinions and explains these parts as another level of "this

multidimensional novel for there is nothing in the science fiction sections which is irrelevant to Iris's narrative. Instead, the different generic perspectives interact to amplify the political resonances of her memoir".

Howells in her interpretation connects the fact that the teller is Alex Thomas – the young Communist – and so his sci-fi story is related to his political ideas. She explains his tale about a caste society where children of the lower classes are variously crippled and the young girls are sacrificed to the upper-class members called Snilfards as a "contemporary social satire" (ibid., p.165) and she claims "it is not difficult to see that story as a savagely Marxist critique of class differences" (ibid., p. 165).

As the story continues, it changes its style and it becomes a romance – a story of love among a virgin and a blind assassin who saved her just before her sacrifice. They decided to run away from Sakiel-Norn but their story does not have a happy ending – as the narrator of the story decides. As Howells remarks, "there is a clash of perspectives between the lovers over the endings they propose for "*The Blind Assassin*" story: she prefers a happy-ever-after ending, but he chooses a tragic ending as more true to life" (ibid, p. 165): "All stories are about wolves, All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel (Atwood, 2000, p. 423).

## 5. OFFRED AND IRIS: STORYTELLING AS AN ACT OF SELF-RETRIEVAL

As explained in the introduction of the thesis, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the common aspect of both of the novels. It should focus on the main female characters of the stories and their attitude towards the act of storytelling. The chapter will deal with an aspect of storytelling as a means of expressing one self, raising question about identity and the process of self reconstruction, the memory processes of interconnection of past, presence and future. It was decided to choose the title of ‘storytelling as an act of self-retrieval’ as the term “self-retrieval” includes and expresses the best these aspects we want to focus on.

The previous chapters that analyze the novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* described the fact that storytelling represents important part of lives of both the heroines, Offred and Iris. It is the essential entity that helps them to come to terms with their fates, it enables them to keep hoping for better future, grace or a kind of immortality...

It also represents the only mode to express themselves as they both have to deal with living circumstances that restrict – or even want to ‘kill’ - their individualities. The act of storytelling gives them an opportunity to think about it all and to get back to their ‘hearts and souls’, but it also gives them the real opportunity to control some part of their lives. It is their stories that give them some kind of power as they can decide about how and what to write or what to omit. The storytelling gives them such an amount of freedom that they can never feel outside of their stories.

Through the storytelling, Offred and Iris can interconnect their past, present and future. They can also see again some moments from their

past but as they think of them with the time distance, they can realize new (maybe real) interpretations of these situations they previously did not or were not able to understand.

To Offred the process of telling the story (she is literally telling it – as she is recording it on the tape) has various meanings that all together participate on her self-retrieval. The storytelling is her rebellion against the regime of Gilead where any kind of taking notes is strictly forbidden and punished. The importance of the act of writing is represented in the situation from one of the first chapters, when Offred finds a hidden message left by her predecessor. She feels this is the real and honest communication that is not possible - within the society she lives now - any more.

There is no explanation in Offred's story about when she decided to start with her storytelling – if there was any particular situation that led her to this decision. We are left without knowing any details.

There might be connection between this hidden message and Offred's own intention to start telling her story as she is longing for the kind of communication it used to be. As there is no one to listen to her, Offred tries to imagine there will be somewhere someone who might be willing to hear or read her story.

A story is like a letter. *Dear you*, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the word of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you*, *you* like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't (Atwood, 1996, pp. 49-50).

Offred needs to feel she is still a living creature, an individual person with her own name, thoughts and memories. The act of storytelling enables her to keep herself sane and prevent her from becoming mad or committing suicide. Her memory can always remind her about her life before Gilead, it can remove her from present to any time in past. On the other hand it still reminds her that her life is not as it used to be anymore.

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways I'm not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me (ibid., p.108).

Offred tries to escape from the life she is living now and telling the story is a kind of release for her. She can think of what she wants and imagine it, she can explore her memory - she can "open" or "close" it anytime. She can choose what she wants to write about and how - she has the control of the chronology of her story. In the fact, the story is – in the perverse world Offred is living in - the only thing she has control of.

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending, to the story, and real life will come after. I can pick up where I left off (ibid., p. 49).

Through the story she gets hope her life might be all right again one day.

Beside this all, as Offred's main aim might be considered her attempt to reconstruct herself. She tries to keep and protect her individuality, her 'self-being' that is the first that the regime endeavours to take away from all of its citizens. The regime treats Handmaids as things, as walking wombs with the only purpose of giving a birth. In her head, Offred keeps reminding herself that it is not so, that she is much more, she is still a human being: "I am alive. I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight" (ibid., p.18). This is also the reason why Offred keeps whispering her name, why she tries to find as many things as possible to call 'my' (my name, my room, my time etc.). As she is officially not allowed to possess anything, she tries – at least – to think about some entities as her own.

The storytelling enables her to keep herself together with her past, her present and her (potential) future. She gives herself hope that her life will not continue as it is forever and there will be again people with whom she will be able to talk and share her ideas and feelings as she used to. If it is so, it means there will also be someone listening to or reading her story. Telling the story keeps her believing.

Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too, if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. By telling you anything at all, I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are (ibid., p. 279).



For Iris, the act of writing her story is also caused by circumstances she lived or even she lives in now. To identify her writing properly, we must differentiate two stories of hers that are put together in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Each of them was written in a different time and different situations and the purposes of these pieces have something in common.

Iris explains her intention of writing the first piece – the novel (within the novel) *The Blind Assassin* – as following:

I didn't think of what I was doing as writing – just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought of myself as recording. A bodiless hand, scrawling across the wall. I wanted a memorial. That was how it began. For Alex, but also for myself" (Atwood, 2000, p. 512).

At that time Iris could not live her life as she wanted to, actually, she was living two lives together – one in an unhappy marriage with a rich and powerful man who with his sister controlled all in her life. And – on the other hand - a secret life of a love affair with a mysterious man whose being was full hiding and escaping for various reasons. To Iris, the act of writing was – similarly as to Offred – a kind of release, escape from the world where she was only a puppet lead by others.

Also, storytelling was her way to remember everything and never forget it – as she admits "I wanted a memorial" (ibid., p. 512). Moreover, it enabled her to interconnect and express all parts of her own herself – her identity with all her ideas, thoughts and dreams. It was her own story she was creating with no one directing her or dictating what to do and how. She could choose what to write, how to organize the chronology, only she knew what was real and what was not.

There are various reasons why Iris did not want to admit she was the author of the book and she had *The Blind Assassin* published with Laura's name as its author. And in the coincidence Laura – posthumously – became a cult figure with many fans who loved her even 50 years after her death and Iris was left there to live long and in the shadow of her famous sister till the end of her time. The fame that the book brought to its “author” can lead - us while thinking about its style and its content – to the description of *The Blind Assassin* as a shocking novel that in a very open way deals with a theme of an illegitimate affair and does not avoid its sexual aspects. And so, the novel fulfilled Iris's aim – creation of a memorial – perfectly. The only problem was the fact she claimed Laura its author. As Iris considers her reasons why she did it, she admits it might be her cowardice or fear to tell the truth. But when she looks back and tries to describe the situation honestly, she confesses it was something different:

But on the second thought it was merely doing justice, because I can't say Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense – what Laura would have called the spiritual sense – you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers (ibid., pp. 512-513).

As writing seems to be for Iris a natural way of expressing herself, her decision to write her memoir looks logical and expected. But the purpose of it – to compare it to her novel – can be described almost as her duty. In some ways, she feels it as a must, in some ways, it leads to her exoneration. Even if it is not directly said within the story, it is likely to suppose she still feels some hidden, subconscious compunctions to Laura, Aimee and Sabrina.

Iris – same as Offred - directly addresses her tale to a reader, who seems to be a general recipient, any reader of the story. At the end of the novel we find out there is one particular person for whom all this story is dedicated – it is Sabrina, the granddaughter of Iris. We can also understand what the purpose of her writing was – as she was not allowed to be in touch with Sabrina, for Iris, this is the only possible way to explain to her all secrets and relationships among the family. She desperately wishes to meet Sabrina before her death, but as it is not very likely to happen, she writes the history of the family to do as much as possible to leave it for Sabrina to enable her to know it all. In addition, we find out Iris presumes there might be some other people who will become familiar with the content of the story. It is mainly Myra to whom Iris speaks directly to in her story (as old Iris is in touch with her mostly, she presumes Myra will find her manuscript and maybe read it too).

But still, the main focus is put on Sabrina, or to be more accurate, Sabrina, Iris and Laura whose fates are interconnected much more than we would anticipate. Iris needs to tell the story of her life from the very beginning till the end to explain her own identity, the identity of Laura and – what is the most important – Sabrina's identity. So then – when Sabrina knows the whole truth – she can get rid of all doubts and finally reconstruct her own self.

When I began this account of Laura's life – of my own life – I had no idea why I was writing it, or who I expected might read it once I'd done. But it's clear to me now. I was writing it for you, dearest Sabrina, because you're the one – the only one – who needs it now. Since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you're no longer who you think you are, either. That can be a shock, but it can also be a relief. (...) Your real grandfather was Alex Thomas, and as to who his own father was, well, the sky's the limit. (...)

Your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation. You're free to reinvent yourself at will (ibid., p. 513).

It is not quite clear how much Iris still believes in meeting with Sabrina one day. Even if she has a very clear image of their meeting in her head, it seems there will be the story waiting for Sabrina – rather than Iris herself. And the final decision, judgement or absolution will be up to her. In such a way Iris ends up her tale:

What is that I'll want from you? Not love, that would be too much to ask. Not forgiveness, which isn't yours to bestow. Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me. Don't prettify me, though, whatever else you do: I have no wish to be a decorated skull.

But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be (ibid, p. 521).

The very ending of *The Blind Assassin* brings us back to Offred and her desperate need of hope there will be sometimes someone reading her story. To Iris it is different as she needs one particular recipient for whom her tale is intended.

But both of the heroines show the way of self retrieval through the act of writing, through their images and memories. They can think about themselves, discover what is hidden underneath and describe it the way they want to. While they suffer from the lack of liberty or occasions for expressing themselves, writing provides them with never ending freedom and – at the same time - it gives them the chance to keep forever all they do not want to forget. It also enables them to communicate with those who are not present and gives them

hope their messages will make it to all of those who are supposed to get them.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis is focused on two Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* with the main focus put on their common feature of the main heroines writing or telling their stories. Their acts of storytelling are in this thesis described as a mode of their self-retrieval as their stories are closely tied with the questions of their identities, individualities and their memories and the storytelling enables them 'not to lose themselves or to find themselves again'.

First two chapters of the thesis are focused on the theoretical background as they give information about Atwood's life to introduce her works and also inform about issues and literature styles she is interested in and influenced by.

Chapters three and four analyze Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*. They firstly give some background information and then focus on the composition of the novels, about their plots, their main characters and their main themes.

The last chapter deals with the feature common for both the novels – as both the main heroines tell their stories. According to their attitude towards the act of storytelling, this chapter is called "storytelling as an act of self-retrieval". In more details it describes what was suggested in the previous analyses of the novels.

The main focus is on the fact the heroines use storytelling as the way of expressing and reconstructing themselves while putting together their memories from past with their present and hopes for the future. They both live under circumstances that do not give them enough freedom to express themselves and even try to suppress their individuality and change their identities. The chapter also describes the main heroines'

purposes to write their stories, the way they write/tell them and the way their self-retrieval is reached by the act of storytelling.

The aim of the thesis is not to compare or to contrast the factual act of storytelling but to suggest its possible explanation in these novels by Atwood and to describe it as a mode of finding or keeping one's own self and identity while the outer life circumstances do not allow women to do so. The fact that the stories are focused on women being somehow oppressed can lead to a question what actually the society is like and what the role of men within it is. Are men those on the other side? Or could they happen to be in the same situation? Atwood's novels do not give the answers but leave us to think about them and suggest them ourselves.

## RÉSUMÉ

Diplomová práce se věnuje dvěma románům kanadské spisovatelky Margaret Atwood - *The Handmaid's Tale* (Příběh služebnice) a *The Blind Assassin* (Slepý vrah).

První část práce poskytuje základní informace o životě autorky a také krátký nástin literárních směrů a ideologií, které její tvorbu – s přihlédnutím ke zvoleným románům – ovlivnily.

Následuje detailnější analýza románů, která stručně popisuje jejich děj a dále rozebírá jejich kompozici, charakterizuje hlavní postavy a stěžejní témata.

Poslední kapitola se zabývá společným rysem obou zvolených děl – skutečností, že hlavní hrdinky a současně vypravěčky příběhu v obou románech, používají proces vyprávění jako prostředek k vlastním sebeuvědomění či sebenalezení.



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