Chapter Five: Conclusion

Laura put her arms around her knees. “Unhappy,” she said.

“What on earth do you know about unhappy?” (347)

Throughout all of its images and figures, through its multiple narratives and mythological intertexts beyond it, we can hardly find a happy character in The Blind Assassin. Atwood presents various types of unhappiness very well in this novel—unhappiness penetrates through Iris’s doubtfulness and alienation, Norval’s gloominess and helplessness, Liliana’s sacrificing herself to death and Laura’s obsession with the idea of sacrifice, even Aimee’s self-abandonment. Their unhappiness makes them connect with the tragic figures in the science-fiction allegory, the blind assassin and the sacrificial maiden; and from this connection, they are related to mythical figures that are behind these protagonists in the allegory—behind the sacrificial maiden are the little mermaid, Philomela, Andromeda and Christ, while behind the blind assassin are Procne, Judas, Athena and Medusa. With the connection to mythical figures and their stories, the reason for the characters’ unhappiness is not only limited in that they live in a hard time during wars; instead, their unhappiness can be derived from the problems of human psyche that are repeated again and again with different forms but with the same tragic mode.

Jung confirmed the existence of archetypes after he studied mythology, anthropology and religions, and neo-Jungians follow the same pattern in studying the psyche. Archetypes are constructed as complexes, which reveal their energies through
images or figures that are attached with contradictory emotions. For example, the archetype of the Warrior is a complex, in which exist the contradictions between the enthusiasm to fight for self and the inability to build relationships beyond winning and losing; the Martyr is another complex, which encounters the conflicts between the noble motive to sacrifice life for a greater purpose and the reluctance to face life as it is. There are numerous images or figures belonging to these archetypes, and each of these archetypal images or figures reveals the energy of that archetype in their stories. The mythical story of Athena and Medusa, for instance, shows the dynamic interaction between the slayer and the slain that the archetype of the Warrior is concerned about, while the stories of Andromeda and Jesus Christ repeat the motifs of sacrifice, which the archetype of Martyr deals with.

Neo-Jungians such as Marion Woodman and Carol Pearson study specific archetypes or archetypal images in order to explain psychic factors of human beings. Meanwhile, Atwood creates these two protagonists of the science-fiction allegory, the blind assassin and the sacrificial maiden, revealing their connections with these mythical figures and the archetypes behind them. With the examination of these figures, we can see that they connect themselves with the archetypes of Warrior and Martyr. The blind assassin is an archetypal figure of Warrior, having his life focused on slaying. He not only needs to slay the people he is paid to kill but also needs to slay his own inner emotion so that he can become a skillful assassin with cold and objective calculation. The sacrificial maiden is an archetypal figure of the Martyr, leading her life obsessed by the idea of sacrifice for her people, failing to know the ironic fact that her people hardly treat the ritual of sacrifice seriously.
As the blind assassin and the sacrificial maiden present within themselves the contradictions of these archetypes—both the positive and negative energy, the characters of the novel mirrored by the central allegory reveal their strong connections with these archetypes at the same time. However, too much connection with an archetype, in Jung’s term, inflation, will be harmful for a human being, for the energy of an archetype is too overwhelming for the psyche. Since a healthy state of the psyche should hold in balance between archetypes instead of in strict attachment with only one, the psychic states of the characters of the novel with their unbalanced relationships with archetypes are in the opposite situations to a healthy psyche.

All of these characters have the tendency, more or less, of inflation, over-identifying themselves with the archetypal figures. The symptoms of their psychic problems reflect their addictions such as Liliana’s becoming a workaholic, Norval’s becoming an alcoholic, Iris’s cynicism and Laura’s addiction to “her loony metaphysics” (502). As I find that Liliana and Laura tend to over-identify themselves with the Martyr, an archetype related to femininity, and Iris and Norval with the Warrior, an archetype with masculinity, all of them over-develop a part of their psychic tendencies and neglect other parts of them. Liliana and Laura lack the ability of self-defense of the Warrior so that one of them collapses physically when she gives away all the power she has to others while the other collapses mentally for she carries her belief of self-sacrifice to extreme. Iris and Norval lack the belief in redemption that is attached to the archetype of the Martyr so that both of them suffer a lot as unbelievers—believing nothing except themselves—and both of them experience alienation and solitude with their nihilism and hostility to the world around them. Just
as Carol S. Pearson points out that “The development of warrioring capabilities is essential to a full life, and it is a necessary complement to the virtues associated with the Martyr” (75), all of the characters neglect other important tasks in their life, narrowing their life in an energetic archetype that is too powerful and too partial for the development of humanity.

In the introduction of Addiction to Perfection, Woodman holds a similar viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of being balanced: “What is missing is the balance which would restore the quality of the living. The goal-oriented, rational, perfectionist, masculine principle has to be balanced by the feminine” (13). Masculinity and femininity, Athena and Andromeda, the energies of Warrior and Martyr, are two sides of human nature, and it will be dangerous to neglect either side of them.

The sisters, Iris and Laura, are the realistic versions of these two sides, and Iris reveals her and her sister’s two-sidedness in her memoir. As Iris reveals that she herself is the author of the book published under Laura’s name, and explains why she names Laura as the author as follows:

But on 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. (529-30)

On the one hand, this passage reveals the strong family bond and sisterhood between Iris and Laura; on the other hand, it can be interpreted as Iris’s late realization that she
is chained to Laura just as masculinity and femininity are chained together, and
neither one of them can present a well-rounded humanity so that Iris says that “The
real author was neither one of us”.

At the end of the memoir, Iris writes: “Laura was my left hand, and I was hers.
We wrote the book together. It’s a left-handed book. That’s why one of us is always
out of sight, whichever way you look at it” (530). This symbolic passage parallels not
only Iris’s realization of the strong bond with her sister but also their irreconcilable
conflicts that results in the tragedy between them. The sentence “one of us is always
out of sight” reminds us of the photograph in which they are with Thomas Alex on a
picnic. Laura develops the photograph for both herself and Iris but with different
versions: hers is the version without Iris except for Iris’s hand and vice versa. The
cropped photographs symbolize their repression and reluctance to co-exist with the
other side of human nature their sister presents with her even though both of the
sisters know that the chain between them is very important.

It is important to balance between masculinity and femininity, and it is
dangerous to neglect either side. However, the tragedy in the novel still happens just
the photograph symbolizes—“there’s a hand, cut by the margin, scissored off at the
wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices” (7). Cutting off the
other side of human nature, both of these sisters become the discarded hand to each
other, being left to their own devices that originally should have been whole,
cooperating together.

Iris wrote her memoir for her granddaughter, encouraging her that “You’re free
to reinvent yourself at will” (530). This encouragement, of course, indicates that
Sabrina can free herself from the burdens of patriarchal history; but it also suggests that she can learn the mistakes of her maternal history and can avoid the sufferings of an imbalanced psyche—whether like Laura’s or like Iris’s. Without either over-development or repression of any particular archetypes, she can have a rounded insight of humanity and can deal with her own life with more flexibility that Iris and Laura failed to have.