Chapter One: Introduction

Unveiling the Mystery of The Blind Assassin

Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin, winner of the Booker Prize and the International Association of Crime Writers Dashiell Hammett Award, is a mysterious novel. By the word “mysterious” I mean it is not a straightforward novel—it is not narrated chronologically, nor is it limited to one setting. It is a novel with multiple narratives and multiple plots which jump between different times and spaces, between the imaginary world of fantasy and the realistic world of contemporary time. The novel contains a series of stories within stories, including three narratives and the reports of newspapers, while each narrative hides and reveals some parts of the truth. It is not until all of the narratives explain each other that the whole view of the novel can be revealed.

The first narrative is a memoir of eighty-two-year-old Iris Chase Griffen, who outlives her family except her alienated granddaughter, Sabrina. In this memoir, Iris Chase Griffen reveals her present situation as an eighty-two-year old woman on the one hand and the history of her family on the other. As an old woman, she carries a cynical attitude not only toward her surroundings, a provincial home town, Port Ticonderoga, from where she once wants to escape but finally returns to, but also toward herself, an alienated and dying woman, waiting nothing but a granddaughter, whom she hardly met before. Meanwhile, she writes down the history of her family, including the story of her grandparents and her parents. Her grandfather, Benjamin Chase, ran the industry of a button factory well and became rich by that, however, his inheritor does not possess his luck. When Iris’s father, Norval Chase, takes
charge of the family industry, he is seriously wounded after his joining the First World War where his two brothers die, and the factory is seriously influenced later by the Depression. In this kind of environment, Iris and her sister, Laura, are the witnesses of a wealthy and honorable family collapsing in the shadow of war. As the factory goes from bad to worse and his state of health goes the same way, Norval marries his older daughter, Iris, to the rich manufacturer, Richard Griffen, in order to keep his two would-be-orphaned daughters in a fine and sound place. Nevertheless, his plan is later revealed to be a serious mistake after his death. Richard Griffen is not a kind man as he appears to be: he never tries to save the factory of the Chase family, and he keeps Iris in an isolated situation and makes her his sexual plaything; furthermore, he forces Laura, his sister in-law, to have sex with him and compels her to have an abortion after her pregnancy. In the age of eighty-two, Iris writes down the series of misfortunes that happened to her family.

The second narrative is a novel also called “The Blind Assassin”, which is supposedly written by Laura Chase. She drives off a bridge when she is 25 and Iris publishes the novel after Laura’s death. The novel within the novel depicts a love affair between a woman and a fugitive young man. Although the names of these two characters are never clearly stated, readers tend to believe that the identities of “she” and “he” are Laura herself and Alex Thomas, an orphaned leftist, whom Iris and Laura helped during his hard time. Readers in Port Ticonderoga hold an ambiguous attitude toward the book—on the one hand, they are proud that there is a writer in their town; on the other hand, they hate the book for its sexually-hinted descriptions and the “bad” reputation coming with it.
And the third narrative is woven within the novel under Laura’s name. During the time of the lovers’ affairs, the young man tells a science-fiction story about a blind assassin and a sacrificial maiden in another dimension of the universe—in a city called Sakiel-Norn on the planet of Zycron. The aristocrats of Sakiel-Norn, called the Snifards, become rich by exploiting child slaves and the children usually become blind after the excessive work of weaving. These blind children have only two ways to survive—being sexual slaves in brothels or being hired assassins. The protagonist in the story chooses the latter. The other protagonist, the sacrificial maiden, on the other hand, is a slave girl who is adopted by the aristocrats especially for the ritual of sacrifice. When the blind assassin is paid to kill the sacrificial girl for a political conspiracy, he falls in love with the girl. Instead of killing her, he helps her to escape and tries to live a new life with her. However, this story within a story is often interrupted by the arguments between the lovers, so it is never completed.

In addition to these three narratives, newspaper reports appear between chapters from time to time. These reports mark the time as well as the attitude and the viewpoint with which the town views the series of events that happen to the Chase family. However, it is ironic that the public reporters who wrote about the Chase family always jumped to over-simplified conclusions while the truth of the family is so complicated and gloomy.

Including the narrative of newspaper-reports, there are four different narratives in this novel. These four narratives are not independent from one another, they are woven together. Karen F. Stein analyzes the structure of The Blind Assassin, pointing out that it is “Constructed like a Russian wooden doll” (135)—one narrative
is hidden within another “until it is opened to reveal another one surprisingly similar to it” (135). The most “external” narrative of these several layers of narratives is the reports of newspapers. It seems to be an authoritative version about what has happened; however, the truth is always blocked out from the reports. Iris’s memoir is the second layer of the series of stories. It unveils the unreported truth of her family. And the novel published under the name of Laura is the next layer, for it reveals some facts that are hidden in the memoir of Iris, and makes up the blank space in Iris’s memoir. And the most internal narrative of these layers is the science-fiction story told by the unnamed young man. This science-fiction story is the most important allegory in the novel and it unfolds the central symbol that runs through all these narratives—the blind assassin and the tongueless girl for sacrifice.

This story itself is not only an important allegory in the novel but also a crucial key that can solve the mysteries in other narratives. Each of these narratives contains at least one mysterious event: Iris’s memoir begins with Laura’s mysterious death—she drives off the bridge. Is it a suicide or an accident? If it is a suicide, who should be responsible for Laura’s death? A newspaper article titled “Griffen Found in Sailboat” arouses the suspicion about the death of Iris’s husband, Richard Griffen. Although the police claim that he died from a cerebral hemorrhage, the cause of his death is still associated with some kind of mysterious shock. What kind of shock is it? Meanwhile, the novel published under Laura’s name is a mystery, too. Its readers doubt its authenticity. Is it a fiction or a true story of the author? As the readers believe it is a true story, they begin to wonder about the identities of the lovers within the story. Although most of the readers tend to identify the girl as Laura
herself, her identity remains a mystery. Furthermore, there is no evidence that shows that the novel is definitely written by Laura herself—the identity of the author is also a mystery. Beyond these mysteries, the most bewildering one is whom the symbol of the blind assassin refers to. Who is the blind assassin in The Blind Assassin?

Atwood does not give us the answers to those mysteries until the end of the book. Some of the answers are explicit while some of them are hinted at. The identity of the novel’s author published under Laura’s name is revealed to be Iris, who composed the novel by revealing every detail of her own secret meetings with Alex Thomas. Meanwhile, the child Laura is forced to abort is fathered by Richard Griffen, Iris’s husband, who makes Laura believe that having sex with him can save the life of Alex Thomas. In addition to these definite answers, there are some answers that are not directly given such as the cause of both Richard Griffen’s and Laura’s death. It is hinted that Richard Griffen is shocked to death by the novel under the name of Laura, for he cannot believe Laura has another sexual partner except himself; and Laura commits suicide, for her fantasy of sacrificing herself to save Alex is broken.

In discussing this novel, many critics such as J. Brook Bouson, Karen F. Stein and Elaine Showalter, put their emphasis on the gender issue in the novel, claiming that Atwood means to criticize the restriction of women in patriarchal society by presenting characters who limit themselves in gender stereotypes. Bouson interprets Atwood’s description of women trapped in the ideal of self-sacrifice as a criticism toward the exploitation of women in patriarchal culture, saying:

Atwood also underscores the damage that can result from the cultural
and literary idealization of female self-sacrifice as she illustrates not only the historical oppression of women in a patriarchal system but also women’s cultural blindness to, and thus collusion with, their own victimization as well as the victimization of other women. (251)

Elaine Showalter holds a similar viewpoint, pointing out that “Atwood's tone of hostility towards men and marriage, her elaborate, tricky plot and her languorous meditations on language have irritated some of her critics” (53). Showalter views the novel itself as an aggressive means to criticize the unbalanced interaction between men and women.

As the interpretation of the novel as a criticism of patriarchal society goes, most of critics agree that Iris, the narrator, is the one who can transcend the restriction set for both genders and liberate herself from the control of patriarchal society. Stein says that “Iris herself participates in both the fire and ice imagery” (143) and Showalter notices that “Iris's astonishing dreams reveal both her aggression and her submissiveness” (53) while aggression is always attached to men and submissiveness to women. Viewing Iris as a feminist liberator, Bouson interprets Iris’s revealing the fact to her granddaughter, Sabrina, that her grandfather is the orphaned Alex Thomas as her attempt “to free her granddaughter from the burden of her family history” (268). Confirming the intention of Iris, as well as Atwood, to liberate women, Bouson writes:

she proffers readers a hopeful postmodernist message in the closure by

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1 Stein analyzes the characters of *The Blind Assassin* and separates them according to their genders, pointing out that women fit into the imagery of ice and angel while men fit into the imagery of fire and devil. However, she finds Iris fits into both of them (143).
suggesting that Sabrina may be able to reinvent herself and thus escape entrapment in the dangerous literary and cultural constructs—particularly those of the self-sacrificial woman and victim of sexual trauma—that have traditionally defined and confined femininity. (268)

Although most critics argue that the characters of the novel follow the patterns of stereotypes and see Iris as a character who intends to help women out from their dilemma, Sharon Rose Wilson has a more complicated viewpoint. On the one hand, she does agree that the characters of the novel show the ideology of patriarchal society, claiming that “If many of the men are Bluebeard assassins ‘on fire’, many of the women, passive Sleeping Beauties, have been symbolically dismembered as well as kissed by these patriarchal assassins” (“The Blind Assassin”); on the other hand, she never view Atwood’s characters as simple as stereotypes—“Margaret Atwood texts are never simple. If Iris is a victim, she is also an assassin, just as Alex, Laura, and, by implication, all people are both” (“The Blind Assassin”). In reading The Blind Assassin, Wilson has paid attention to Atwood’s characters that are as complicated as her narrative strategy.

Indeed, just as Hilde Staels explains the Atwood’s use of multiple narratives in “Atwood’s Specular Narrative: The Blind Assassin” that the meanings of characters are deepened as these narratives are interrelated (149), the characters can hardly remain simple as they are reflecting and reflected in these multiple narratives. As these narratives explain one another, the characters reveal more aspects that are hidden in previous narratives.

The main focus of my thesis will be on the characters of The Blind Assassin,
especially the main characters, including Iris, the narrator, her sister, Laura, and their parents, Liliana and Norval. In order to get an overall view of these characters, I will not only examine the details of Iris’s memoir but also other narratives that explore more about the nature of these characters. Atwood’s novels are always rich with allusion to myths and fairy-tales, and The Blind Assassin follows this style. However, what makes The Blind Assassin more complicated than Atwood’s other novels is that the novel not only indicates mythical and fairy-tales allusions outside the text but also provides an allusion inside the text—the science-fiction allegory. The allegory provides not only the invented city, Sakiel-Norn as a reflection to “the class-stratified world of Canadian society” (Bouson 260) but also two figures, the blind assassin and the sacrificial maiden, as symbols that mirror the personalities and the fates of the Chase family.

In Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, Sharon R. Wilson writes that “Margaret Atwood’s plots, images, themes, motifs, and structures draw very heavily on fairy tales and their mythic and biblical associations” (7) and affirms Atwood’s intentions of drawing intertexts in her works as follows:

1) to indicate the quality and nature of her characters’ cultural contexts; 2) to signify her characters’—and readers’—entrapment in pre-existing patterns; 3) to comment self-consciously on these patterns—including the embedded fairy tales, myths, and related popular traditional stories—often by deconstructing constricting literary, folkloric, and cultural plots with “transgressive” language and filling in the gaps of female narratives; […] . (34)
Therefore, Atwood intends to find the motifs and elements in our culture through these intertexts on the one hand; and tries to re-examine and re-construct them with a new insight. The central allegory of The Blind Assassin demonstrates Atwood’s re-creation of mythology in the form of science-fiction, bringing the motifs such as blindness, assassination, silence and self-sacrifice in focus.

Chapter Two will begin with an introduction to C.G. Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious and its relation with archetypes. Although Jung’s psychology is not so popular among nowadays academics, Jungian and neo-Jungian theories do help a lot in the field of analytical psychology, providing tests of psychological assessments or personality types with theoretical background. The MBTI or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is an example, helping people to understand the multiple aspects within their personalities and their differences from others.

Furthermore, Jungian and neo-Jungian theories share the same focus with modernists and postmodernists—deconstruction and decentering. Jung’s conception of archetypes suggests that the human psyche does not operate around an unified sense of self but around multiple factors. Differences and contraries, whether between multiple tendencies within a psyche or between different people, will always exist. As Jungian theories specify these multiple factors with the conception of archetypes, the sense of center, claiming one force more important than others, collapses; instead, the multiplicity of the psyche is revealed and specifically discussed.

I choose Jungian theory to discuss the characters of the novel not only because Jung affirms the multiplicity of human psyche but also because Jung’s conception of archetypes focuses on the discussion of mythical figures and images and their
connections and influences upon the human psyche, which is appropriate for
discussion of the novel that is rich with such images and figures. In contrast to
Jacques Lacan, who emphasizes that the unconscious is constructed like a language;
Jung keeps his focus on the unconscious’ operation with a series of images and
figures. Jung deepens Freud’s idea of the unconscious and develops his conception
of the collective unconscious from Freud’s point. According to Jung, the conception
of the unconscious not only contains the repressed memory of personal experiences
but also the psychic energy shared by the whole human race—the collective
unconscious, which operates through the patterns of psychic perception common to
humanity—archetypes. Archetypes influence the psyche through archetypal images
or figures, for certain emotions or complexes will come with certain archetypal
images/figures. Archetypal images/figures often appear in “mythology,
anthropological material, religious systems, and ancient art” (Hopcke 14), and

2 In “The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud”, Lacan claims that “what the
psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language” (Ecrits 147).
Inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic study, Lacan finds that the unconscious shares the same
structure with that of linguistic phenomenon that is involved with a series of substitutions between
signifiers and signifieds (148-9).

3 Robert H. Hopcke explains in A Guided Tour of the Collected Works of C. G. Jung that Jung
develops the conception of archetypes through empirical observation. He writes:

Jung came to posit the existence of such common modes of apprehension by way of
empirical observation. His broad knowledge of mythology, anthropological material,
religious systems, and ancient art allowed him to see that the symbols and figures that
continually appeared in many of his patients’ dreams were identical to symbols and figures
that had appeared and reappeared over thousands of years in myths and religions all over
the world. (14)

With this observation, Jung comes to realize beyond the personal unconscious, the collective
unconscious does exist, sharing the universal symbols and figures with each individual.
through the images/figures the repeated motifs of the human race as well as the emotional complexes common to humanity are presented.

In the latter part of this chapter, I will discuss certain specific archetypes and archetypal figures that have close connections with the characters of *The Blind Assassin* through, mainly, the studies of two of Jungian scholars, Marion Woodman⁴ and Carol S. Pearson⁵. In discussing the archetypes of the Warrior and the Martyr, which Pearson finds that while men and women are easily trapped under the influence of patriarchal society, still it is easy to find that archetypes are much more complex and richer than stereotypes. Although the aspects of the Warrior such as daring and self-defense and the aspects of the Martyr such as self-sacrifice resemble the characteristics of gender stereotypes, the images of these archetypes are full of contradictory energy that the over-simplified stereotypes fail to reveal. Behind aggressiveness and self-defense of the Warrior is the difficulty of dealing with things beyond the situation of battles and the fear of facing the situation of loss. The Martyr, on the one hand, shows the side of self-devotedness and nobility; on the other hand, it reveals the dark side that the Martyr uses self-sacrifice only as a mean to be superior or as an escape from facing life.

Pearson points out not only that each archetype has both positive and negative

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⁴ Marion Woodman, a Jungian Analyst graduated from the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich, brings women’s psychic problems in focus. Her book *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride* is considered as one of the most important studies on the spiritual and psychological roots of addiction in women.

⁵ Carol S. Pearson, the co-author of *Who Am I This Time? And The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, studies the archetypal stories, values, strengths with which she offers training in personal and professional growth.
energy but also that being trapped in just one archetype will result in a problematic psychic situation, for the energy of each archetype is very partial for humanity and being trapped in an archetype leads a psyche away from full development. Woodman holds a very similar view as she focuses on women’s psychic problems. Woodman’s treatment of the archetypal figure, Athena, as a masculine figure and Andromeda a feminine one corresponds with Pearson’s research of the Warrior and the Martyr. As Woodman observes those women who identify themselves only with Athena, a Warrior, or only with Andromeda, a Martyr, she finds out that neither of them can be really happy, for both of their ideal figures are only works of art that have no room for complicated humanity (152). Over-identifying with the energy of an archetype, in Jung’s term, is called “inflation”. An inflated ego is far away from a healthy state of psyche according to Woodman’s observation: “the ego, caught in a massive inflation, is denying the inner Reality” (Addiction to Perfection 188). What Woodman means by “inner Reality” is humanity that requires flexibility instead of precise perfection.

After discussions of these archetypes and archetypal figures in Chapter Two, I will turn to examine the characters in the science-fiction allegory of the novel with the conception of archetypes in mind. Chapter Three will begin with a defense that Atwood’s characters such as Liliana and Norval are more than stereotypical figures. Instead of just laying bare the stereotypes and having themselves criticized, Atwood’s treatment of these characters reveals a hinted connection to archetypes, which shows not only a problematic ideology but also a problematic psychic situation. Just as the central allegory reveals, the tragedy of the blind assassin and the sacrificial maiden results from both of the class-stratified society and their own
problematic personalities. The blind assassin becomes so merciless that when he is paid to kill an innocent girl, he is indifferent to her suffering; while the sacrificial maiden indulges so much in the fantasy of sacrifice that she becomes the only one who believes in the ritual. Their over-sided personalities suggest that they are partly trapped in the negative energies of the archetype of Warrior and Martyr.

While I refer to these two protagonists of the allegory as archetypal figures, I will examine other mythical and fairy-tale figures that repeat the motifs of these archetypes. Two of the most distinguished characteristics of the sacrificial maiden are her silence and sacrifice. Her silence follows the patterns of the little mermaid and Philomela—one is the heroine in Hans Anderson’s fairy tale and the other is the tragic figure in Greek mythology who has been mutilated under the abnormal desire of her brother-in-law; and her sacrifice resembles the noble behaviors of Andromeda, the princess who is willing to sacrifice herself for her people in Greek mythology, and Jesus Christ, one of the most famous sacrifices in history, who sacrifices himself for the whole human race. On the other hand, I make a connection between the blind assassin, a figure that possesses more of the negative energy of the Warrior than its positiveness, and other mythical figures such as Procne, Athena, Medusa and Judas. The blind assassin resembles Judas’s cold calculation on his own benefits and Procne’s merciless killing—she decides to kill even when the victim is her son; and he matches with Woodman’s description about Athena and Medusa, who seem to be the very opposite to each other—the self-disciplined goddess and the hideous monster overwhelmed by anger and agony—but actually are two sides of the coin. As Woodman views Athena as a representative of masculinity, a Warrior who slays
everything that is inappropriate for masculine principles, Medusa is viewed as the embodiment of the inner side that has been slain and repressed within Athena herself (10). The image of the blind assassin mixes these two sides of a Warrior, for he is not only goal-oriented as a rational goddess but also repressed as the tragic Medusa.

After the examination of the archetypes and the mythical figures that are related to these two figures of the central allegory, I will go to examine the relationship between these allegorical figures and the main characters of the novel in Chapter Four. With the textual analysis, I identify Liliana and Laura as the realistic version of the sacrificial maiden, a figure of Martyr, and Norval and Iris as the blind assassin, a figure of Warrior. According to their personalities presented in the novel, all of them suffer from inflation, for they identify themselves with the archetypes more than healthy people should. However, the extent of their sufferings from inflation is different. Laura and Norval seem to suffer more from inflation than Liliana and Iris, for both Laura and Norval have suicidal tendencies as they face the problems in life. Laura’s tendency to go to extremes has narrowed her view of life while Norval’s trapping himself in gloominess and indulging in alcohol has definitely killed his vitality. Losing the flexibility that is needed both for humanity and for healthy psychological growth, they lead their life into a tragic mode.

The Blind Assassin is a novel full of narratives and intertexts and full of images and figures, and through which the characters are carefully shaped. With the Jungian conception of archetypes, the connection between various images and figures derived from a series of narratives and intertexts is made. In discussing the characters with the conception of archetypes in mind, I find that these images and
figures reflect the complicated psychic experiences of the characters and reveal their psychic depth as well as their psychic problems. Atwood’s texts and the characters within the texts are never simple, neither are the archetypes behind them.