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Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as a Social Chronicle of 20th Century Canada

Abstract. The aim of this article is to demonstrate through Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* the social changes that took place in 20th century Canada. Depicting the fall of a once respected Toronto bourgeois family of Chase, the book covers the period from the early 1900s through World War I, the Depression years, and World War II to the late 1990s. By situating the story of the Chase sisters against the broader backdrop of Canadian history, Atwood presents the transformation from the rigidly divided society of the past into an egalitarian society of the present day Canada. To give *The Blind Assassin* a deeper sense of history the author incorporated into the novel various documents from the past, such as newspaper clippings. Although many of these cuttings are of Atwood's contriving and were merely inspired by actual events, they allow the author, through the use of pastiche, to poke fun at a number of dominant ideologies of the past and highlight how profound and inevitable the social changes of the last century were.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Canada, memory, social change, class division, feminism.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the social changes that took place in 20th century Canada as exemplified in Margaret Atwood's Booker Prize winning novel *The Blind Assassin*. Depicting the fall of the once respected bourgeois Chase family, Atwood covers the period from the early 1900s through World War I, the Depression years, and World War II, to the late 1990s. Situating the action of the novel against the broader backdrop of Canadian history allowed the author to present the transformation from the rigidly divided society of the past into the egalitarian society of contemporary Canada and – what is intrinsically linked with it – the shift in mainstream social values. Apart from class division, the book touches upon such issues as the position of women, parent-child relations, national identity and multiculturalism, among many. As the author herself aptly notes:

fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. ... fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge ourselves. (Atwood in Staines 2006:23)

Before investigating the subject matter of the article it seems essential to respond to the question of why so many Canadian writers turned to the historical novel during the last two decades of the 20th century, a century whose “most characteristic and eerie phenomena (sic)”, according to Hobbyist (in Parr 2001:719), is the “destruction of the past, or rather the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations.”¹ In other words, Canadians' growing fascination with their own history went against the general

¹ The popularity of the historical novel in Canada goes back to the 1970s, although it is in the 1980s and 90s that, as Atwood (2005:167) observes, “the trend intensified”. To support her point she enlists the following authors: Graeme Gibson, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, Brian Moore, Alice Munro, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Jane Urquhart, Carol Shield, and Timothy Findley.

trend of the late 20th century, which, in Atwood's (2005:162) opinion, was "on the whole more interested in forgetting—forgetting as an organic process, and sometimes a willed act." One of the explanations for this peculiar phenomenon has been offered by the author herself, namely, that it is a "part of a worldwide movement that has found writers and readers, especially in ex-colonies, turning towards their own roots, while not rejecting developments in the imperial centres" (Atwood 2005:168). It appears that it is the generation of writers contemporary to Atwood that were the first to recognise the necessity for rediscovering their country's roots in terms of history and literature, or art in general. Not coincidentally, this is also the generation that as students were told there was no such thing as Canadian culture, and were taught European or specifically English history, culture and literature instead. Staines (2006:13) observes that "In the fifties Canada was a country not conversant with its own cultural identity." Looking back at her school days, Atwood (2005:163) wryly reminisces that the Canadian history courses she attended nearly always came down to "the statistics on wheat and the soothing assurances that all was well in the land of the cow and the potato", and complains that she was never taught "who inhabited this space before white Europeans arrived, bearing gifts of firearms and smallpox". Thus, it seemed inevitable that as mature writers in search for their own identity—both individual and national—these authors would resort to history, or more precisely Canadian history, for as Atwood (in Staines 2006: 25-6) elucidates: "Refusing to acknowledge where you come from [...] is an act of amputation: you may become free floating, a citizen of the world [...] but only at the cost of arms, legs or heart. By discovering your place you discover yourself." Therefore, after the critical success of *Alias Grace*, Atwood once more turned to the historical novel genre. However, due to its extremely complex narrative structure, *The Blind Assassin* is not entirely a historical novel, for it features a novel inside the primary text, and science fiction stories inside the inner novel.

Nevertheless, the backbone of *The Blind Assassin* is a memoir written by 82-year-old Iris Chase, in which she spins the story of her life, as well as that of her younger sibling Laura. The sisters were born to an affluent factory owner, Norval Chase, and his Methodist wife in the second decade of the previous century in the fictional town of Port Ticonderoga. Though of the author's contriving, the town is "a composite of three exceptionally pretty southern Ontario towns: Elora, Paris and St. Mary's" (Bemrose 2000:55), and offers a fairly reliable reconstruction of small town life in Canada during World War I and the Depression years. However, since, as has already been outlined, the primary text is a memoir, the family saga is presented from Iris's point of view and is totally dependent on her memory. On a number of occasions the protagonist herself contemplates how selective and fallible memory can be, or how the very same events may be differently interpreted and memorized by individuals. These ponderings on the nature of memory and text, represented here by the memoir, emphasize the fact that the novel is more concerned with the 'act of enunciating' than the enunciation itself. By stressing the relativity of the viewpoint, Iris encourages the reader to ponder upon the fact that her version of events may not necessarily be the only possible version. In fact, she repeatedly makes the reader doubt and wonder "how reliable is memory itself—our individual memory, or our collective memory as a society?" (Atwood 2005:161). But if, as has previously been mentioned, Canadian collective memory was non-existent for such a long time, maybe it is the memory of individuals such as Iris that can facilitate the process of retrieving the common past? Since time immemorial numerous philosophers have argued the importance of the past, understood by the broad term 'memory'. John Locke, for instance, overtly linked the self with memory, and asserted that "selfhood consists entirely in continuity of memory" (Labudova 2005:262): I remember, therefore I am. Analogously, it may be argued then that collective memory is a guarantee of a nation's survival, and Atwood herself seems to ascribe to this point of view in *The Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*: "For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not

a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive” (in Laskowska 2005:291).

However unreliable a narrator Iris may appear to be (all in all, she was a participant in the outlined events), many critics agree that, as Hite (2001: 2) couches it, she “has the gift for slightly distanced, marveling observation that distinguishes all of Atwood’s best protagonists.” But there is certainly one advantage of learning the story from her, namely, her commentary, for although she attempts to be objective in presenting the actual events, she cannot help evaluating them from today’s perspective. Although the portrait of various social classes depicted in *The Blind Assassin* may be marked by Iris’s attitudes towards them, such as sentiments, hostility or pity, some things, namely events, are beyond subjectivity; after all, the events either took place or never happened. Likewise, social changes may have been received and perceived differently depending on the individual, but it is undeniable that they did occur, regardless of people’s attitudes towards them.

To foreground the status of *The Blind Assassin* as a historical novel the author incorporated into the book various documents from the past, such as newspaper clippings. Although many of these cuttings are of Atwood’s contriving and were merely inspired by actual events, they allow the author, through the use of pastiche, to poke fun at a number of dominant ideologies of the past, and to highlight how profound and inevitable the social changes of the last century were. Thus, *The Blind Assassin* is to a large extent “a social commentary on Canada—from its colonial heyday through fully-fledged industrialisation, labour unrest, and the battle of democratic and fascist ideologies” (Davies 2001:1138) or, as Bemrose (2000:55) maintains, the book “is driven at least in part by a desire to dissect social realities.” Atwood herself points out that Canadians “pretend that classes don’t exist in [their] society”, and adds that “it’s time to think about the issue of class again” (Atwood in Bemrose 2000:55). She seems to be particularly critical of the upper class, who, to use her own words, have “a common interest in making conditions better for themselves” (Atwood in Bemrose 2000:55). All these contemplations can be found in the book under consideration, but the true critique of the social system of early 20th century Canada is offered through the science fiction story about the city of Sakiel-Norn.

This sci-fi story, told by the unnamed *he* of the inner novel to his lover, serves “as a mirror-text of the primary narrative” (Staels 2004:160). In the course of the book, however, we learn that the anonymous sci-fi writer is Alex Thomas, a young supporter of the labour movement, or as Richard Griffen describes him “an armchair pinko”, while his secret lover is Iris Chase (Atwood 2000:193). By spinning the tale of the rigidly divided society of the mythical city of Zycron, Alex endeavours to make Iris reject her blindness and finally see her own upper-class complacency as well as her own (self-)victimization. The choice of the science fiction genre may be accounted for by the need for the defamiliarisation of the context. Similarly to Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels*, Atwood makes use of satire to pillory the socio-political order. For that purpose, both narrators – Gulliver and Alex – elucidate the system allegedly alien to their listeners – the horse and Iris respectively – and point out its absurdities or atrocities. Tomashevsky illustrates the function of Swift’s narrator, and correspondingly Atwood’s one as well, in the following way:

Compelled to tell everything with the utmost accuracy, he removes the shell of euphemistic phrases and fictitious traditions which justify such things as war, class strife, parliamentary intrigue and so on. Stripped of their verbal justification and thus defamiliarised, these topics emerge in all their horror. Thus criticism of the political system – nonliterary material – is artistically motivated and fully involved in the narrative. (Tomashevsky in Selden 1989:11)

The society of Sakiel-Norn is comprised of two classes—aristocrats, known as Snilfards, and smallholders, serfs and slaves, referred to as Ygniroids. The upper crust

naturally has all possible privileges and leads a comfortable life, while the life of the lower orders is fraught with suffering and self-denial. From time to time Ygnirods “would stage a revolt, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed”, which most likely is a reference to labour unrest and factory strikes during the Depression years (Atwood 2000:18). The whole economy of the mythical city is based on the exploitation of slaves, whose primary function is carpet weaving until they go blind and are then sold to local brothel owners. If they are lucky and courageous enough to escape, they eventually become blind assassins, hence the title of the novel. The fact that the story of Sakiel-Norn is a parable for pillorying the social system of 1930s and 40s Canada is conspicuous in the following conversation between Alex, the critic, and Iris, the incarnation of the Canadian bourgeoisie:

They [blind assassins] didn't have much choice, did they? They couldn't become the carpet-merchants themselves, or the brothel owners. They didn't have the capital. So they had to take the dirty work. Tough luck for them.

Don't, she says. It's not my fault. (Atwood 2000:25)

Iris also calls Alex a Bolshevik when he announces that upward mobility in the city of Sakiel-Norn is not really a viable option, unlike the reverse situation, for “If a Snilfard should become bankrupt, he might be demoted to an Ygnirod” (Atwood 2000:18). At the very top of the social ladder of Sakiel-Norn is a heartless tyrant bearing a marked resemblance to Iris's husband, Richard Griffen, who is subsequently the embodiment of ruthless capitalism or, as Alex calls him in the primary narrative, “the sweatshop tycoon”.

Nevertheless, the novel's subject matter also revolves around the issue of the social position of women throughout the 20th century, for, as Atwood (in Staines 2006:17) argues, “The goals of feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject”. Once again the aforementioned sci-fi parable provides a number of observations on the topic. As Bouson (2003:251) states:

in *The Blind Assassin* science fiction tale, Atwood, through repetitive retellings of the story of women's sexual victimization, probes the cultural—and historical—repetition of sexual violence against women, showing the link between institutionalized misogyny and the sexual traumatization of women.

Indeed, the tragic fate of the sacrificial tongueless virgins of Sakiel-Norn, who the night before the votive ceremony are raped by the Lord of the Underworld, mirrors the sad plight of the Chase sisters. Although Iris and Laura represent two distinct attitudes towards social expectations and limitations imposed on them by the patriarchal society of early 20th century Canada, both of them fall victim to sexual and mental abuse inflicted by the men surrounding them, and both suffer their lot in silence, like the mute sacrificial virgins from Alex's tale. It takes Iris nearly fifty years to shatter the silence and learn speech again, to tell *her* story of official history (also read as *his* story). As Vevaina (2006:89) observes, “Atwood's interest in the past of the formerly excluded ‘ex-centrics’ (as both off-centre and decentred) leads her to contribute to the body of knowledge which Linda Hutcheon has called ‘archival women history’”, and adds that “By taking us back into the past through her fictive reconstructions of history, Atwood seeks to make readers aware of our present state” (Vevaina 2006:97). In other words, through the sci-fi tale the writer seems to be querying if the contemporary society has truly become an equal one in terms of gender, and to what extent institutionalized misogyny is a thing of the past. It is worth observing that in the city of Sakiel-Norn children were offered to two different gods, depending on their sex:

Boy children were offered to the God of the Three Suns, who was the god of daytime, bright lights, palaces, feasts, furnaces, wars, liquor, entrances, and words; girl children were offered to the Goddess of the Five Moons, patroness of night, mists and shadows, famine, caves, childbirth, exits, and silences. (Atwood 2000:30)

Thus, it may be concluded that from early infancy disparate gendered social roles are ascribed to each sex. Namely, the male domain is public speech and the limelight, while the female realm is reduced to child rearing and keeping a low profile. As has already been noted, the sci-fi story functions as Iris's eye-opener to the social injustices of her world, as through the tale Alex Thomas "fictionalizes the painful facts of Iris's life, thereby holding a distorted mirror reflection up to her private story, a familiar, though repressed one" (Staels 2004:154). When he narrates that a bankrupt Snilfard could avoid being demoted to the lower orders of Ygniroids by selling his wife or children, Alex alludes to Iris's economically-conditioned marriage to Richard, which was meant to save her father's factory from bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, the primary narrative also offers many instances of social changes in other spheres of life. The family saga opens with the description of Iris's grandmother Adelia, from the respected Montfort family, who were affluent once but by the beginning of the 20th century had lost most of their fortune. Thus, at the age of twenty-three, "which was counted over the hill in those days", Adelia was forced to marry money through her union with Benjamin Chase, the local button factory owner (Atwood 2000:62). Brought up in an aristocratic family, she wanted culture above all, and did everything she could to refine the crude button money of her husband by throwing twelve-course dinners for important guests and designing the Chase mansion, Avilion. What is noteworthy, however, above all is her Old Continent complex. She missed the artistic salons which she had a chance to frequent while holidaying in England in the days when her family still prospered. Her obsession with the displays of European culture, be it a garden statute, a family tomb with two Victorian angels, or a Christmas card inscription, made her a laughing stock among the townspeople. Even Iris seems to poke fun at her grandmother's pretenses when commenting on her choice of the motto for a Christmas card: "Tennyson was somewhat out of date, by English standards—Oscar Wilde was in the ascendant then, at least among the younger set—but then, everything in Port Ticonderoga was somewhat out of date" (Atwood 2000:64). Notwithstanding, Iris is not critical of her grandmother as such, but rather envisages her as a romantic heroine trapped in a monotonous, loveless marriage to a well-off manufacturer. Noteworthy then is the fact that her grandma's sentiments for England and European culture seem quaint but alien to the 82-year-old Iris, who seems to have a very strong sense of being Canadian.

Unlike her extravagant mother-in-law, Liliana, Iris's mother, was a down-to-earth thrifty woman, more preoccupied with helping the underprivileged than raising her two daughters. And it must be stressed that among many social phenomena it is the parent-child relationship that has changed the most over the last century. Both Chase sisters are basically brought up by their housemaid Reenie, for their mother dies when Iris and Laura are nine and six years old, respectively. However, during her life Liliana did not really spend much time nurturing her offspring, either. The few scenes describing family life display restraint rather than love and affection between the family members. Iris reminisces: "Her comportment as a mother had always been instructive rather than cherishing. At heart she remained a schoolteacher" (Atwood 2000:88). Liliana must have believed that her primary maternal obligation was to acquaint the girls with social protocol and to teach self-sacrifice, which is respectively mirrored in the mother's constant reminders to "sit up straight and to eat the crusts" (Atwood 2000:90). What is more, neither of their parents told the girls about their affection for them; it was something that was taken for granted—"parents were supposed to love their children", Iris notes (Atwood 2000:105). Later, this inability to express emotions openly, or to even acknowledge them, will place a great strain on Iris's relationship with her own daughter Aimee. Not surprisingly, Iris's ties with her father are not any closer than those with her mother, which is quite salient in the following scene:

He'd begun insisting that Laura and I have breakfast with him, instead of in the kitchen with Reenie, as

before. We sat at one end of the long table, he sat at the other. He rarely spoke to us: he read the paper instead, and we were too in awe of him to interrupt. (We worshiped him, of course. It was either that or hate him. He did not invite the more moderate emotions.) (Atwood 2000:102)

The only interest Norval Chase displays in his older daughter is when he resolves to prepare her for inheriting and subsequently managing the button factory or, more sadly, when he outlines to her the possibility of her saving the factory from collapse by marrying a much older prosperous manufacturer, Richard Griffen. The absence of attachment to a young child could be easily accounted for by the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century “one child in four did not survive infancy” (Morton 2000:25). However, the lack of bonding in the later years of a child’s development is quite difficult both to explain and imagine from today’s perspective.

It may be observed altogether that the familial relationships between the women in the novel are given more prominence than those between men, or men and women. This might be connected with Steenman-Marcusses’s claim that “one way for a Canadian woman to know herself is to read about her predecessors” (Laskowska 2005:289). This may also constitute the ultimate explanation of why Iris herself is writing the memoir, namely, for her long gone granddaughter Sabrina. By providing her grandchild with an allegedly true account of the family saga, including the suffering inflicted on female family members by Richard and his vicious sister Winifred, Iris hopes to free Sabrina from the burden of shame and allegations that befell the family after Richard’s suicide. By disclosing the name of the girl’s real grandfather, that is Alex Thomas, the grandmother allows Sabrina to make a fresh start, to rediscover herself and her own identity.

Notwithstanding, the novel also offers observations on other social transformations, for example the multi-ethnicity of contemporary Canadian society, which is juxtaposed with the fear of outsiders in the 1930s and 40s, as demonstrated through the townspeople’s resentment towards the character Alex Thomas. Some decades later, during an honour student awards event at a local school, to which she was invited as the last surviving member of the Griffen Family, Iris presents a cheque to a girl of apparently foreign background:

She walked towards me, heels clicking across the stage. She was tall; they’re all very tall these days, young girls, it must be something in the food. ... An oval face, a mouth done in cerise lipstick; a slight frown, focused, intent. Skin with a pale-yellow or brown undertint—could she be Indian, or Arabian, or Chinese? Even in Port Ticonderoga such a thing was possible: everyone is everywhere nowadays. (Atwood 2000:43)

At the very same ceremony, when hearing the national anthem, Iris also comments on the birth of national identity in Canada and its separation from British rule. Interestingly, it was not until June 18 1980 that “O Canada!” was officially recognized as the new national anthem, superseding “God Save the Queen”. However, the forthcoming passage further allows Iris to allude to volatile relations between Quebec and English-speaking parts of the country in a typically Atwoodian wry style:

The school orchestra struck up with squeaks and flats, and we sang “O Canada!,” the words to which I can never remember because they keep changing them. Nowadays they do some of it in French, which once would have been unheard of. We sat down, having affirmed our collective pride in something we can’t pronounce. (Atwood 2000:40)

In her recollections Iris also remarks on the sexual revolution, which changed the mentality of even small town people, or depicts the social implications of World War I, both of which, until the 1970s, were of no interest to Canadian historians, but which seem to lie at the very heart of *The Blind Assassin* in its account of the second decade of 20th century Canada. However, the novel also comprises truly hilarious passages that reflect the universal changes in lifestyle; since these changes are often precipitated by the process of globalization

they are familiar to every reader, regardless of their cultural background, be it Canada or Poland, as demonstrated in the following excerpt about Betty's Luncheonette:

chicken pot pies were the speciality once, but they're long gone. There are hamburgers, but Myra says to avoid them. She says they use pre-frozen patties made of meat dust. Meat dust, she says, is what is scraped up off the floor after they've cut up frozen cows with an electric saw. She reads a lot of magazines, at the hairdresser's. (Atwood 2000:47)

The image of women from all over the world flicking through glossy magazines replete with advertisements for the same beauty products and household appliances, or offered cappuccino and tortellini at their local diners makes us acutely aware of the fact that the world is shrinking and cultural differences are progressively being blurred. Perhaps that is yet another reason to attempt to preserve those cultural elements that make a country unique, be they its cuisine or history, and that is partially the role the novel under discussion performs.

To conclude, *The Blind Assassin* is not only an engrossing family saga with a number of skeletons in the cupboard, which could just as well have been entitled "The Fall of the House of Chase", but it is also a close study of the social realities of 20th century Canada, with emphasis put on the 1930s and 40s. If, as Eagleton (1983:185) maintains, any narrative is based on the 'fort-da game' principle, in which an "original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored", *The Blind Assassin* is primarily a novel concerned with retrieving what has either been lost or forgotten. Regaining the past is often a painful process because it makes us realize that something or someone is indeed gone; "'fort' has meaning only in relation to 'da'" (Eagleton 1983:186). By recollecting early 20th century Toronto, Iris Chase highlights the fact that such a place does not exist anymore, except in people's memory and literature. After all, as Atwood (2005:158) points out, "Fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions".

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