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**BACHELOR THESIS**

Victimization in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*  
Viktimizace v románu Margaret Atwoodové *The Blind Assassin*

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I have written this bachelor thesis exclusively by myself under the supervision of PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, PhD. and that in the process, I have used only the sources cited. I declare herewith that I have not used this thesis to gain any other degree.

Prague, 13th July 2016

Michaela Tomanová

Signature: .....

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theme of victimization in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Blind Assassin*. The theoretical part of the work presents two theories elaborating on this topic. The first Atwood outlined herself in *Survival*, her influential book about Canadian literature. The second one is *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman, which highlights the role of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of abuse, often in the victim's childhood. In the practical part, Atwood's widely acclaimed 2000 novel, *The Blind Assassin*, is interpreted through the prism of these two theories.

**KEY WORDS:** Victimization; Margaret Atwood; *The Blind Assassin*; Canadian literature; Judith Herman

## **ABSTRAKT**

Bakalářská práce zkoumá téma viktimizace v díle kanadské spisovatelky Margaret Atwoodové, *The Blind Assassin*. Teoretická část se věnuje dvěma teoriím, které více osvětlují toto téma. Jedna pochází z pera samotné Margaret Atwoodové a je vyložena v její knize o kanadské literatuře, *Survival*. Druhá teorie je prezentována v knize *Trauma and Recovery* od Judith Hermanové, lékařky, která se celý svůj život věnuje práci s oběťmi post-traumatické stresové poruchy. Tato je často výsledkem násilí páchaném na obětech v raných fázích jejich života. V praktické části práce využívá románu *The Blind Assassin* pro ilustraci a interpretaci pojmů a myšlenek předložených v předchozí části.

**KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:** Viktimizace; Margaret Atwoodová; *The Blind Assassin*; Kanadská literatura; Judith Hermanová

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# 1 Introduction

There they were again, those animals on the run, most of them in human clothing this time [...]; here was the slight mistake that led to disaster, here was the fatal accident; this was a world of frozen corpses, dead gophers, snow, dead children, and the ever-present feeling of menace, not from an enemy set over against you but from everything surrounding you. The familiar peril lurked behind every bush, and *I knew the names of the bushes.* (Atwood, *Survival* 39)

Margaret Atwood's work abounds in the motif of pursuit, either metaphorical or even literal depiction of hunt, threat or falling prey to somebody. The prey's struggle to survive is conditioned by compliance with the rules of the environment. Danger is lurking underneath the surface, waiting to spring up from somewhere if they let their guard down, resulting in grim consequences. Atwood applies this naturalistic vision on human society, claiming that the "wolf will arrive sooner or later no matter what you do," as Atwood said in an interview with Evan Solomon. Victims and victimization were the subjects of her first ground-breaking book *Survival* with the motifs being studied on the background of the Canadian literary tradition. In the case of Canada, the menacing force used to be Nature, itself, for it can kill people and on the whole make their lives harder than necessary. Then, the roles were reversed and people learnt to exploit it. Gradually, this exploitation takes place between two people fighting for power, shifting to a purely human sphere. Those involved might even know each other, nevertheless the struggle for power is always there and sometimes even "your best friend can be your worst enemy" (Viner).

Since the publication of *Survival*, Margaret Atwood's works have continued to develop a similar idea. This thesis would like to examine both the theme of victims and victimization in her novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000). It can be defined by holding, in a way, a specific position in Atwood's bibliography. *The Blind Assassin* is her tenth novel, written on the cusp of the new millennium. It finally brought Atwood the prestigious Man Booker Prize after being previously nominated for it three times. *The Blind Assassin* has a very complicated narrative structure with several levels of narration, incorporating complex themes and motifs. The plot spans across generations

of two families, combining private and world events against the backdrop of a large part of the twentieth century.

In the novel, the main characters are women and there are numerous feminist interpretations of Atwood's books presenting the main characters as victims of men. However, this seems to be a rather minimalistic interpretation, in other words an obvious one. The characters can definitely be seen as victims of society, the wider social background, or their upbringing. It is not gender politics but the process of exercising power in all areas of human lives, including human relationships, which preoccupies Margaret Atwood the most. People (and countries) fall victim to each other depending on the relationships between each other which are in turn based on economic principles: who profits from having the power, "who eats what" (Somacarrera 51) and "who" can be both woman and man. Moreover, in the plots the roles of the victim and the persecutor are not always represented by a typical pattern of a woman and a man, very often the couple consists of two females, or a person against greater forces such as Nature or Fate.

The women of *The Blind Assassin* are made victims for different reasons, but the common denominator of their victimisation<sup>1</sup> is the society which they are part of. Atwood herself proposes to apply her theory of pursuit and survival to individuals. However, at the same time, she realizes that it would invite a much more complex analysis than *Survival* can offer, and she sticks to the realms of literature (Atwood, *Survival* 51). For that reason, this thesis will further rely on Judith Herman's theory of victims, namely of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of abusive relationships which Herman summed up in her book founded on extensive studies, *Trauma and Recovery*. Judith L. Herman is a member of Cambridge Health Alliance. Her field of study is psychiatry, more precisely PTSD. She developed a theory of Complex PTSD which distinguishes in bigger detail the victims of various traumatic experiences with regard to the kind of abuse and its prevailing symptoms. Herman's perspective focuses mainly on childhood victimization being the most devastating one since its consequences persist until adulthood and influence greatly the lives of victims. The victim's basic positions as presented in Atwood's *Survival* are complemented by Herman's outlining of the process of victimization and recovery. The general structure

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis examines works with the concept of victimization understood as a process of becoming a victim not as being victimized by somebody.

of the four stages of victimization outlined in *Survival* is concretized through Herman's study of the lives of victims.

This thesis would like to focus on the victimization of the characters in their childhood through harmful treatment from the parents or the wider family circle. The adults seem to take advantage of their role as authorities when they tend to use their power inappropriately. It leaves the offspring damaged, with issues that persist into the future and influence their adult life and the process of creating new social connections, possibly engaging once again in abusive relationships.

The thesis is, typically, divided into two parts – a theoretical and practical one. The theoretical part presents Margaret Atwood, her place in the canon of Canadian literature and the importance of her Canadian heritage for her writing. Atwood's theory of the victimization is further supported by Judith Herman's concept of the victimization. The last part of the theoretical section elaborates the two prevailing coping strategies that are somewhat common to both authors.

The practical part uses a chosen novel by Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, for illustrations and interpretation of the ideas as outlined in the theoretical part. It focuses on the two main characters, Iris and Laura, and their childhood experience of abuse which affects their adult life.



## 2 Theoretical part

### 2.1 The place of *Survival* within Margaret Atwood's work

Margaret Atwood's career spans (so far) over fifty years. During this time she has managed to become one of the most respectable writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Not only is she known for her poetry and novels but also for her literary criticism, for her political, environmental, and social activism, for giving lectures on the nature of the writing process and the role of the writer in it, and last but not least, for her skills as an illustrator. Thanks to this broad spectrum of work and the variety of topics, Margaret Atwood is hugely popular among readers, as everyone can find something according to their preferences. For her popularity, intelligence, and poise, she holds a very special place in the canons of Canadian and world literature.

Atwood started to write during the 1960s, arriving on the scene with a collection of poems called *Double Persephone*. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969. Yet, the most significant work which brought her popularity was *Survival* from 1972. Subtitled "a thematic guide to Canadian literature" (Atwood, *Survival* iii), Atwood's publication offered a concise overview of Canadian literature. Until that time, Canadian literary tradition had not been regarded as a distinctive one at all. Atwood herself noted that when growing up there were only two options if one wanted to read a story written by a Canadian writer – animal stories or *Anne of Green Gables* (Ross and Davies 154). At the time she began to write, some authors imitated either American or English tradition, and some authors left Canada to get recognition and to distance themselves from this insignificant literary milieu (Klemesrud). The only specifically Canadian literary production was poetry; the novel genre was basically in development during Atwood's beginnings. Actually, the question stood whether Canada had its own, original literature. Atwood took on the task of unearthing the national tradition through recurring themes, motifs and symbols.

Originally, *Survival* was considered a volume of minor importance for readers deeply interested in Canadian literature. Ultimately, its publication was extremely influential as well as popular. The main impetus for its writing was Atwood's meeting hundreds of people during her book tours who asked her about the Canadian literary tradition. Did it exist? Was it not just a copy of English or American literature?

Atwood's answers to these questions were "yes" and "no" respectively. After careful reading of available Canadian literary production up to that point, with the help of her colleagues from *House of Anansi Press*, she came up, with "persistent cultural obsession [...] survival" (Atwood, *Survival* 8). She chose the contemporary writers from the Anansi group as a source of examples. The leitmotif of the narratives seemed to be survival – personal, political, or the most obvious one, survival in hostile nature. Trying to preserve one's own self had so far permeated all areas of Canadian experience – it was a specific feature of Canadian literature. *Survival* provided a point of reference, something thanks to which the authors could be deemed to be as different from English or American literature.

After the publication of *Survival*, both Atwood's literary career and popularity soared. She started to be considered a guru of Canadian literature and at the same time, she was criticised for raising questions concerning the state and the acknowledgment of the existence of Canadian literature:

The few dedicated academic souls who had cultivated this neglected pumpkin patch [...] were affronted [...], and those who had taken a [...] stand on the non-existence of Canadian literature were affronted [...], I began to feel like the mechanical duck at the fun-fair [...], though nobody won the oversized panda (Atwood, *Survival* 4).

Over time, she stopped paying attention to the critics. She learned that they would always find something to support their (twisted) arguments and she decided to let people interpret (and misinterpret) her works for themselves (Hancock 209). These misinterpretations very often stemmed from people's identifying Atwood with her characters, to which she responds: "[...] you can't, obviously, be all of the narrators in all of your books, or else you'd be a very strange person indeed" (Viner). Being the smart woman she is, Atwood uses her indignation to her advantage and likes to play games with her readers.

Since *Survival*, Margaret Atwood has been steadily publishing a book every two or three years, the number nearing forty now. Her *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, *Cat's Eye* or *Oryx and Crake* are considered classics now, their status affirmed by a

nomination for the Man Booker Prize. Despite the difference in their focus, her books share features owing to her involvement in all kinds of social activism, most notably Amnesty International. It is indeed the “power politics”, social relationships, and the condition of society Atwood so often mentions when asked about what preoccupies her when writing. She feels it is imperative for writers to describe the real world and the events whether or not they might seem too bleak and dreary: “it’s not something that’s in my head, [...] it’s in the world” (Viner). Considering that she has visited places struck by atrocities of totalitarian regimes and her interest in people who suffered torture and oppressions (Potts), Margaret Atwood’s depiction is an authentic one.

## **2.2 The feminist question and power politics**

Atwood’s works are very often interpreted through the prism of the feminist perspective. Whenever Margaret Atwood is asked about this, she refuses to identify herself as a feminist writer just because her novels and poetry feature women as the main characters. The fact that most of her main protagonists/antagonists happen to be women is simply because she looks at the world from the position of a woman. “Maybe it’s because I am a woman and therefore find it easier to write as one. Few male writers write all their books from the female point of view” (Hancock 195). In answer to the question demanding the reason why then the female characters seem only to suffer, Margaret Atwood matter-of-factly states it is simply the experience of women she has met. For her, the feminists have not drawn attention to a new phenomenon, “those areas of conflict were always there” (Kaminski 32). What they do not understand is that Canada was for a long time under the rule of another country and Canadians had to fight for independence as a whole. First, they had to shed the inferiority complex caused by colonisation, and only then could they point out the differences between each other. The lack of the feminist question at the beginning of the 1970s is actually what helped Margaret Atwood to become a writer in the first place: “we ha[d] too many problems just as Canadians. We *ha[d]* to work with men” (Fitz Gerald and Crabbe 139). An open mind enabled her to write *Survival* which helped to formulate the ground on which Canadian literature is founded. The feminist interpretation of Atwood’s books omits important factors and is too exclusive and narrow. Atwood sees herself rather as a chronicler of the events that occur around her and of the things that happen to people

she meets and talks to. For her the novels are a means of reflecting society because novelists eventually have to draw from things that are real and come from their experience.

She sticks to her proclamations by repeatedly drawing from what she knows and has studied for so long – Canada and its history as a colony of England. Atwood considers the issue of Canada a universal one – the issue of exercising power is present in every moment of our lives and nobody wants to be in an inferior position. Everyone wants to be the one with the most power, which is understandable – no one wants to be in a subjugated position. Atwood translates power politics as “who gets to do what to whom,” “who inflicts violence on whom,” “who eats what” (Somacarrera 44). Power is continually being distributed and redistributed within social structures, creating hierarchies, and of course those develop between men and women but also in male-male relationships. By the law of nature, only the strongest can survive, and society needs both genders to keep humankind going. Hence, her main concern is then not showing women being crushed under the rule of patriarchal society. She prefers to show people being crushed by society as such, and even more precisely, by the power that governs relationships.

The possible reason why men fighting for power is more visible than women might be what Atwood describes as women’s continuing “connection to their bodies and [...] their role” while men have to find a way to stop feeling like “machines” and “[blaming] that on other people” (Gibson 17). Since women still manage to fulfil their feminine role and can be relatively happy with marriage and having babies, men feel humiliated by the abilities of women. Men find themselves deprived of power to change their position and displace their anger onto others (in this case: women) in a manner of “Man kicks Child, Child kicks Dog” (Atwood, *Survival* 49). It is one of the central interests of Atwood’s books to examine “power politics governing the lives of women” (Bouson 67) and at the same time keep the distance to be able to “see [...] humanity whole” (Tolan 76), for sexual politics functions as a miniature model of the external political reality.

### 2.3 *Survival* and the “victim” theme

The traces of interaction between the public and private spheres can be found in *Survival* as well. Here, Canadians are in the beginning influenced by a greater force – Nature that tries to defeat them. Then the source of oppression becomes human. First, there were the English as colonizers, later people in general. They fight against each other to prove which of them is stronger or more in the right than the other. Everyone is trying to survive by bringing together what they want and what the others want. Margaret Atwood reinforced the idea of surviving by putting the two opposing forces into a victor/victim relationship. Victims find themselves in four basic positions, similar to the five stages of grief and the like, depending on their ties to one another. These four positions are defined as followed:

1. To deny the fact that you are a victim.
2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.
3. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.
4. To be a creative non-victim (Atwood, *Survival* 46-49).

Supposing that an observing writer takes his inspiration from real life and that *Survival* is illustrated by taking examples from Canadian literature, the victim’s positions should be applicable to everyday life as well. And Atwood’s novels and poetry are perfect examples; this is not surprising. First, she has repeatedly asserted belonging to Canadian tradition; secondly, she herself has pointed out that Canada’s condition as presented in *Survival* is a universal one, stating it is just another variation of a “general human rights interest” (Fitz Gerald and Crabbe 139). The general explanation of the respective positions stated above should provide background to see how she does so.

Position One and Position Two appear to blend together in certain aspects. Position One equals deliberate ignorance and denial of the victim’s condition, whereas

in Position Two, the victims are aware of their crummy circumstances yet feel that these are the result of something that cannot be changed; thus, they refuse to act. The victims present their position as being inevitable and withdraw from improving their state of affairs whatsoever. Claiming that there is nothing to be done about the situation, they lash out at fellow victims who share their conditions, or turn their anger on one another. If they find themselves in one of these positions, they can only aim to survive as they necessarily suffer from lack of free will. Unfortunately, the outlook for the future seems very gloomy in such cases. The victims find themselves trapped, incapable of moving on and eventually may choose to perish.

The transition to Position Three comes when they refuse to view their state as unchangeable. It means they have gained enough self-respect to start deciding on their own. The energy, strength, and courage to leave the harmful relationship stem from the negative emotions towards the oppressor (Atwood, *Survival* 48). The resulting condition is Position Four: the position of a creative non-victim – someone who comes to terms with their experience as a victim, and productively makes use of the energy acquired in Position Three that was previously suppressed (Position One), or misplaced (Position Two).

For Margaret Atwood, the most important creative process is writing since it stands for an “expression of the self” (Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* 52). In Canada it was through writing poetry at first; novels followed shortly after. The poet/novelist functions as an articulator. He/she stands for those who are silenced in the position of disempowerment. The author usually chooses to write from Position Four about Position One/Two/Three, for being able to be aware of the condition is the starting point for its change. People who are willing to listen to the writers can have hope in becoming as they are – “creativity can be [...] a light in no light time” (Potts). Instead of servitude, they can recover a form of freedom (Atwood, *Survival* 289).

Very frequently the victims featured in Atwood’s novels and poems are women succumbing to men. For one, it is a consequence of the usual female approach to being a victim (Gibson 13); two, in Canadian literature, women often suffer from the “Rapunzel syndrome,” meaning they internalize the values and stereotypes of the society around them, so they become trapped inside their minds and bodies (Atwood, *Survival* 250). Still, there are also reversed roles of women conquering men or women

secretly pitting themselves against each other. We might propose wife/husband, sister/sister, sister/husband, wife/lover, or sister/lover relationships just to illustrate the variety of possible combinations between the characters in Atwood's books. Each member of these couples experiences different positions, even contradictory ones or a combination of them, in connection to the respective relationships with one another.

## **2.4 Judith Herman's conception of victimization**

The trauma Herman describes is one of a physical nature – battering, or rape. She draws from the history of Freud's observations of hysterical women at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This hysteria was identified as a result of "one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience" (Herman 13), implying that the imprints were not only the ones visible on various body parts, but there were also those left on the mind of the victim. They lurked under the surface ready to erupt when the victim reached adulthood and manifested themselves as all kinds of neurological disorders such as spasms or paralyses (Herman 11). In the present time, Herman recognizes this as examples of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), pointing out cases of war veterans who often suffer from similar symptoms. If the roots of PTSD lie mostly in childhood, it is understandable that Herman focuses on child abuse. Although she mainly talks about victims of violation of the body, she is aware that there are certain events in the life of a child that have a damaging influence on the psyche, and are not connected to physical violence (Herman 54).

According to Herman, traumatic events that occur during childhood or adolescence are much more damaging than those during adulthood. Children are naturally without any great power. They are incapable of reacting properly (if they can react at all, that is), and as a consequence the usual processes in their psychological development are disrupted. Their mental faculties are not fully developed, making the young person much more vulnerable to any extreme situation, be it positive or negative. It does not matter at which age the abuse is happening, as the person always passes through the three basic stages of becoming a fully formed adult in some way or another. The traumatic experience alters all of these: the formation of identity, the gradual separation from the family, and the exploration of a wider social circle (Herman 61).

If children suffer from abuse, it usually occurs at home in the narrow family circle. We talk about “domestic captivity” (Herman 74); they are kept as if in a castle closed off from the outer world though not physically chained to a wall. The violator relies on their dependency, subordinating them through coercive control. They have to prove to him they are loyal to him in order to avoid beating or psychological abuse. The unpredictable nature of the violence, not knowing what might set off the attack is described as the worst feeling. Even when the victims try their best “to be good”, it very often proves insufficient and the terror continues. Then they have to find a way to preserve at least some part of their identity, of sense of independence – they slowly adopt coping techniques to deal somewhat with their situation.

Most frequently it is what Herman calls “doublethink” (Herman 101) recalling the term from Orwell’s *1984*<sup>2</sup>. Since the children cannot escape from the abusive relationship with one of their parents and the other parent is unable to rescue them, or provide a shelter of some kind at least, they are forced to accept the double nature of the familial relationships. On the one hand, the parent is, well, a parent, someone who brought us into this world and is supposed to love them and care for them. On the other hand, there is a parent who represents the abusive force, making their life unbearable. The victim starts to pretend that nothing serious is happening. They create an alternative reality by repressing memories of the abuse and the denial provokes dissociation of the self (Herman 102). It does not have to manifest right away; it is usually repressed for decades and resurfaces later in life. The double self is a convenient coping mechanism in childhood but everyone has a breaking point and in the course of time, the defence structure crumbles down (Herman 114). The three most frequent diagnoses of survivors of childhood abuse are “somatization disorder, borderline personality disorder, or multiple personality disorder” (Herman 124); they do not exclude each other and the victim/patient usually suffers from a combination of these. The symptoms include, for example, hallucinations, developing an alter ego, extreme swings in emotions towards people with whom they are in relationships, and many others (Herman 124-125).

Another way of approaching their situation would be placing the cause of the abuse onto themselves: it is not the fault of the abuser because it is not in his nature. There must be something in them, some internal cause that provokes him and makes

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<sup>2</sup> “Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them” (Orwell 270).



him violent towards them and possibly other people as well. They excuse the perpetrator and start to think they are the ones who are inherently bad. These feelings can be further intensified by their reactions to the violence, by commentaries coming from the abuser, or the society in which they confide. Victims try to redeem themselves by behaving in a more orderly manner and by projecting all the shame and evil of their oppressor onto their personality. They self-loathe themselves sometimes to extreme degrees when they perceive themselves as a non-human, a disgusting person (Herman 105). In an attempt to please their abuser, they themselves may engage in abusive activities towards their co-sufferers or complete strangers chosen by the abuser. Again, all this often culminates in the dissociation of one's own self, and the participation in the abusive acts provokes feelings of guilt leading to attempts for redemption.

Lastly, there is the idea of being chosen, usually on the grounds of religious reading. Victims think they have been selected to suffer for other people and save them through their ordeal. In this case, their condition translates as the sacrifice or martyrdom of a saint (Herman 106). They voluntarily succumb to the violator for by enduring the blows and pain, they believe that they are helping others and protecting them. What they fail to recognize is that they may lose themselves in the process, partially or completely, both physically and mentally.

When a person is traumatized, the two prevailing experiences are disempowerment and disconnection from the outer world. They are forced to remain silent and obey the orders of their abuser. In order to heal, they must get enough space and time to start speaking. They can heal through "vocalization" in the manner of women deemed hysterical in the past centuries (Herman 137). Nowadays it usually means the victims go to therapy where the therapist represents a rescuer who lets the survivors restore the control and power over their life. They need to feel safe, come to terms with what happened and accept it as a part of their story, and return to the ordinary life. During the moments of reliving the painful moments, victims often demand revenge in order to show the perpetrator what it felt like. They can also express anger at real or symbolic bystanders (such as family members) and to wish for some kind of compensation (Herman 191). It is important for them to realize these are effects of their experience as a victim. To process these feelings is just another stage of their

recovery. They must recognize whatever had happened is over with and accept the responsibility for their life as it is now.

At times, memories of the abuse may come back as victims possibly meet with their abuser in the wider family circle or they are reminded of his person in conversation. Feelings of terror and guilt, flashbacks can also be triggered by a “significant reminder[s] of the trauma” (Herman 174) such as anniversaries or events that change their life circumstances. The victim may feel the need to retell their story to further assert their sense of power. “The hardest form of power to acquire is power over oneself,” said Atwood (Somacarrera 55) and it is true. In this case, the repetition is a necessary practice (Herman 234). For through repeating the coping strategies as often and as much as possible, the painful experience loses its significance. It will become common, an integrated part of the victim’s history that has been dealt with and nevermore will hold power over their life. The power is now in their hands only.

Despite her statement that the four positions of a victim are universal thus applicable to human life experience, Margaret Atwood stays within the domain of literature, for this application would be too complex. That is the reason why this thesis explores the theory of Judith Herman about trauma and recovery. It offers an explanation of the process of victimization and its influence on the victim through examples given from authentic cases of women suffering abuse from their environment. Each step of the course of healing can be connected to the respective positions of Margaret Atwood’s interpretation. The two concepts also agree also on the way of how to get out of the harmful relationship: to use the power acquired for creativity of some kind. Most often this means sharing the experience in order to raise awareness within the society. Furthermore, the two meet in what Herman calls dissociation, only Atwood translates it through images connected to mirrors and reflections.

## **2.5 Coping strategies**

The two prevailing coping strategies for victims according to Herman are: “vocalization”, speaking about the experience, and dissociation, which comes about during the traumatic experience and manifests as various forms of separation, out-of-body experiences. Atwood’s Position Four describes a creative non-victim; the

creativity finds its release through writing which is basically a written form of speech. Herman's disconnection from one's own self or feeling of detachment is parallel to the writer's recurrent theme of reflection and mirror images that illustrate the character's peculiar feelings about their life situation. These methods are a means of dealing with the victim's condition and provide an insight into the situation, thanks to which they may be able to liberate themselves.

This thesis will now explore these two approaches in order to see in more detail what it involves to become free for sometimes it may be quite a distressing path.

### **2.5.1 “Trying to articulate the mute”**

The aim of absolute power is to silence *the voice* [...], so that the only voice and words left are those of the ones in power [...] (Somacarrera 51)

The ideal means of acquiring freedom for a victim is to become a creative non-victim. It means that they move from Position One to Position Four. The process does not happen overnight or in one jump: I am a victim, now I am not. The acceptance of the victim position and the decision to actually do something about it is gradual and presents a turning point in the way towards the possibility of liberating themselves from the ties of their oppressor. It usually happens when the source of the abuse is removed, yet this is not the most desirable situation since it makes it harder for both parties to sever the relationship between them.

If they are to become a non-victim, they must find themselves in Position Two or Three. Position One means they do not realize they are victims, or they do but refuse to look at their situation from a different point of view in order to face the truth and move forward. Still, the sole admittance of being a victim is not enough to get out of the harmful relationship. The victim must be strong enough to accept the fact that the result of their revolt against the established order will mean they have to function as an independent unit. The connection between the persecutor and the victim is one of dependency – the persecutor needs the victim in order to execute his power, whereas the victim needs her persecutor to first, lose free will, and second, to identify themselves as a victim. By getting rid of the leash binding the victim to their oppressor, they accept the “full responsibility of action, of power” (Gibson 15). Indeed, of power as well: when

the balance of the persecutor/victim relationship is tipped, it means the victim will gradually acquire more power and will use this power to their benefit. This of course provokes reaction on the side of the subjugator and may result in the victim's retreating back to the lower position.

The changing dynamics in the distribution of power could explain why people sometimes consciously choose to stay in the passive, non-active state as it is easier to let yourself be handled by others, to be free from the burden of responsibility: "if you define yourself as innocent then nothing is ever your fault" (Gibson 13). Secondly, if the victimization happens on a larger scale (i.e. not just between two people but, for example, between groups or in the society as a whole), and there is only one person that is capable of recognizing the detrimental situation, it is harder for them to act against it. People tend to ostracize those who are different (just think of a black sheep in a herd of white ones), or the ones who point out something unpleasant which the majority cannot figure out. The conspicuous victim thus worsens their situation – now they are suffering not only under the tyrant but also among their joint sufferers. People around are ignoring them, not believing they are saying something of importance. They are silenced, forced to be mute with regard to the problems. They are guilty of addressing the issue, of calling the condition by its real name. They are punished for upsetting the order of the society and sadly remain paralysed.

Therefore, the "articulation of the mute" requires a great deal of courage as in the beginning, it suggests being separated from the crowd (Herman 62). It is very important for the active victim to do this in spite of everybody else. The victim needs to "hear [their] own voices" (Atwood, *Survival* 12). Their state is like a disease or an addiction – the first step towards healing and breaking free from whatever is poisoning them is saying out loud what and where the problem actually is (Herman 156). Only then are they capable of starting to do something. If they do not realize they are ill, how can they determine what kind of cure is necessary? To speak out does not mean telling the others what they should do but what is happening right here, now, in front of them and to prompt them to reflect upon the situation. Making the rest of the group acknowledge the problem facilitates the process of restoring the original, pre-victimized state because the people will tend to unite and support each other (Herman 29).

However, if the attempts to speak out fail, and the victim remains mute, the possible results are bleak. With no help provided, they are doomed to suffering. They are left to their own devices, merely surviving, withering slowly away. They may ease their pain through the means of substance abuse, intentional alterations of reality, possibly choosing suicide if the situation becomes too unbearable. Unfortunately, the others do not realize that they will meet the same end eventually: “repetition is the mute language” (Herman 110).

In the cases where the victim gets to Position Four not actively but somewhat passively through the removal of their oppressor, it is still important that they tell their story. For in such instances, the account of their suffering serves as a testimony for future generations as a way of preventing it from happening again (Herman 206).

### **2.5.2 Reflection – doubles and mirrors**

Double nature, opposites, or duality of a character frequently appear in Margaret Atwood’s literary productions: “I’m interested in mirror images, counterparts and complements” (Kaminski 31-32). It once again stems from the victim’s position and its basic relationship: that of the victimizer and the victim. It reflects how they cannot be without one another: one needs the other to be complete. This duality manifests itself in couples (sisters, partners, best friends and many others) and in the positions they respectively represent. They complement each other: one usually possesses the qualities that the other one does not have. Through her characters, Atwood takes the opportunity to show the opposing forces of the society, the difference between private and public, inside and outside views of their respective situations. Thus, the presence of the other person different from the main character can help to solve the issues they are having. They provide judgement and offer the possibility of different insight; they represent the situation that would have happened should the main character adopt their way of coping, or at least if they voiced it out loud. The other person in the role of a complement blends, at times, into that of counterpart, a “mirror of [one]self” (Kaminski 31). It is usually involuntarily, yet it is possible to interpret it as Position Four’s creative force of the other person.

Another example of mirror image that Atwood likes to use is in connection to Position Four where the creative process comes to produce a piece of writing. The writer observes what happens around him but also draws from his experience as a

victim and puts it into words. The product functions as a mirror which is held up by the author for the audience. The others can see their situation reflected in it in one sense, and reflect upon it in another. Through the voicing of the writer, they “become visible to [them]sel[ves]” (Atwood, *Survival* 222) and gain the opportunity to change the situation. In Herman’s interpretation, writing becomes telling – confiding in the counsellor or other survivors of abuse. Sometimes victims may record their experience in words if they wish to caution others against the possible outcomes of ignorance. For despite the fact many of them did just that and do still, the past keeps repeating itself.

The last instance of the dual nature of the main characters emerges from further exploration of Herman’s theory about the dissociation of a person suffering in an abusive relationship. It is the case when “dissociation [becomes] not merely defensive adaptation but fundamental principle of personality organization” (Herman 102). In moments of stress and terror, the victim can experience odd sensations such as leaving their body, observing the attack in a position of third person, or seeing people that do not exist, thus taking to another level the idea of counterparts and complements as proposed by Atwood in the first paragraph of this section. Hallucinations of hearing voices, projecting the suppressed feelings into non-existing entities are examples of the close connection between the body and the mind in terms of dissociation. The alternative realities function as mirrors for the victim: seeing what is, or could be may incite changes in their attitude towards the situation.

The border between sanity and insanity, real world and distorted reality is fuzzy in Atwood’s books. And Atwood sees this as typical of Canadian society: “‘the national mental illness of Canada was schizophrenia’ – bilingual, always threatening to split in two” (Viner). The personal turns into political and vice versa again. People are not only dissociating their minds, also their lives. There is always the inside and the outside. The double oppositions are a means of putting against each other incongruent realities and letting people deal with them. To live without reflection is to live without the self (Sage 166).

In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood lays out an impressive interpretation of the motifs in Canadian literature and explains them through excerpts from contemporary Canadian books. She draws on the “persistent cultural obsession [...] survival” (Atwood, *Survival*

8) and introduces a theme of the victim trying to do just that – survive. In spite of being applicable to her novels as well, *Survival*'s interpretation is too specific. It does not offer examples from life that could be seen as models for characters. Judith Herman's theory of the victimization process provides genuine cases that may be connected to what people in the novels are going through. In both proposals, the victim is presented as a silent individual who must achieve at least partial independence to be able to start speaking. Through this articulation, the female character acquires power and starts to function as a self-sufficient unit. During this period of vocalization, the previously adopted coping techniques, most frequently dissociative methods, start to disintegrate and may provoke unpleasant experiences resulting in the split of the personality. Interpreted through Position Four from Atwood's *Survival* as a product of the creative force of the unconscious, suppressed part of the mind, they offer a means of reflecting on the situation of the victim and eventually culminate in full recovery. The movement from Position One to Position Four is gradual and on the way towards the latter, the starting point is to "recogni[ze] the situation you find yourself in, [...], and then look back to see how you got there" (Atwood, *Survival* 18). This happens through mirror-like images of doubles, or listening to a fellow victim who is further on in the process of obtaining power.

This thesis shall now look at the books chosen for interpretation and try to demonstrate the herein presented theories.

### 3 Practical part

The practical part shall now look at concrete examples of victimization in the chosen book – *The Blind Assassin*<sup>3</sup>. The main subjects of the interpretation will be the main female characters, Laura and Iris Chase. In the theoretical part the thesis presented the state of victimization as a process originating in childhood and continuing up to adulthood. The practical part will try to find such patterns in the plot and interpret them through the prism of the proposed theories. It will look at the women as victims, the forms of coping with their situation, and finally, the outcomes and consequences of the characters' attempting to escape from these toxic relationships.

#### 3.1 *The Blind Assassin*

Laura and I were brought up by [Adelia]. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't. As she was dead by then, we couldn't argue (*BA* 62).

*The Blind Assassin* consists of several intertwined narratives that are all connected with the life of Iris Griffen (née Chase), the only surviving member of the once famous Chase family of Port Ticonderoga. She takes us through the family history by means of a retrospective narrative beginning with her grandparents Adelia and Benjamin Chase's story. The main part of the story spreads over first fifty years of the twentieth century, interspersed with several crucial events that affected Iris's life. These are deaths of Iris's close relatives – her mother, sister, and husband. Iris's cupboard hiding the skeleton of her past takes the form of a blue steamer trunk that the true story of her life. She wishes to make a clean breast of her secret before her impending death because there is still one member of her family who is alive but lost: her granddaughter Sabrina. Iris wants her to know the truth, for only then the vicious circle will be broken. The vicious circle that had started long time ago with Sabrina's great-grandmother, Adelia, afflicted three generations of the Chase family.

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<sup>3</sup> Atwood, Margaret Eleanor. *The Blind Assassin*. New York: Anchor Books, 2001. Print. [Subsequent page references preceded by *BA* are given in parentheses in the text]



### 3.1.1 Familial roots

Iris and Laura are sisters coming from an old-money family brought to life and glory by Adelia. Her side of the family coming from England, she had a very clear idea what it means to belong to such kind of family – how it should present itself in public and how it operates in privacy. The first and foremost duty was the one to the family. It often meant to suppress one’s needs and wants and put on a show for the public. No matter how unwell one might feel, the others could not have an impression of disagreement in the family. The private sphere was represented by Avilion, the castle-like house with a garden and a flock of servants. Adelia oversaw the construction and decoration of Avilion to ensure it is as imposing as the Chase family should be. It was to be a symbol of progress and a “moral authority” (BA 59). After she died, it became her “true monument” (BA 62) and her aureole hovered over the household and continued to influence the people who lived there. The consequent generations of the Chase family were affected by her legacy to such a degree that her concept of keeping appearances became second nature to all its members. Without knowing it, the ever-present expectations became engraved in their minds and continued to affect their actions.

And still, there seemed to be hope. Iris’s parents, Norval and Liliana, were not the couple Adelia would approve of. Liliana was of lower class than Norval, she was not a debutante with money. Liliana was a solid, no nonsense woman. Thus she could have provided a different perspective and approach to life in Avilion and she had at first. Unfortunately, the atrocities of the First World War maimed Norval forever and caused him to act in a way that was damaging to the lives of his family. After Norval’s return from Europe, Liliana very soon “understood she was supposed to understand” (BA 77) and she forgave him for everything he might have done wrong during the war. She did not utter a word of complaint, as was her duty, and set to the work of fixing her husband. However, her diligent ignorance and pious selflessness became a burden to Norval as he could not process his experience properly. He blamed the war that made him commit crimes and how could one “blame the hurricane” (BA 76)? They could not blame each other either for there really was nothing they did wrong. Even when he took to alcohol and loose women, no one in town said a word; he was respected because of his father. Norval felt remorse for outliving his brothers. His “tomcatting” (BA 79) was

to be a way of release of his frustration and at the same time, something to be held guilty for. Nobody understood why he should feel remorseful of surviving the war. He was simply absolved of everything because he was in the war – everybody saw him as a hero. In the end, both Liliana and Norval chose not to fight and instead, they became paralysed in their positions. This paralysis began to slowly stultify them, Liliana withering away more quickly because of the births of Iris and Laura.

### **3.1.2 Iris's childhood**

Since Iris was born in 1914 and Laura in 1919, Iris as the older child, was expected to be the reasonable one and to help with her sister for Liliana was losing strength. Iris “accommodated with silence and helpfulness” (BA 85) losing her voice very early on. It was natural: as Avilion was full of nothing but silence, she did not even have to get used to it. Iris sacrificed her voice for love and reassurance; she wanted to be loved by her mother. However, she got nothing in return. No matter how hard she tried, it was always Laura who was the subject of everyone's interest and worries. It was paradoxical: while Iris tried to be quiet and obedient, Laura, the “squeaky wheel” (BA 85) received all the attention and love from Liliana and the others. Gradually, Iris started to hate her mother for it, since Liliana was supposed to provide her children equally with care and tenderness as all parents should. The parental love Iris longed for was a burden on her, an “iron chain around [her] neck” (BA 102) keeping her down, influencing her decisions. She was willing to do anything though she did not have enough power to fulfil the wishes of her parents. She was aware of her inadequacy and yet she kept trying to please her parents to receive approval. What she got was a “badge of goodness” (BA 94) from Liliana, thus adding to the weight of the tethers pulling her down. Iris felt like a victim of her mother and she was. She became one by acquiescing to her role as a surrogate mother to Laura. Iris “had no words of retaliation” (BA 94): by dying early, her mother deprived her of the opportunity to refuse everything that had been imposed on her earlier on in the course of a teenager's resentment. The usual development of a parent-child relationship was disrupted. Iris, silent and silenced, was the one left to deal with the consequences. She lost the possibility of renouncing her role as her sister's keeper for good.

The remaining half of the parental couple – Father – was like God: not directly present, yet always there. Iris feared him and worshipped him. He too asked her to take

care of Laura, should something happen, thus doubling the burden of Mother's legacy. Iris was overwhelmed by the responsibility. The true motivation of Norval's request was to rid himself of the responsibility. She did not dare to disapprove; the threat of a violent outburst was enough to keep her quiet. Iris became stuck in her position – she was a victim of the expectations of her parents, just as Norval had been a victim of those of his parents, Adelia and Benjamin. Iris agrees to his demands since, as her father and the only living parent, he was the ultimate authority. Disagreement would only provoke punishment and what is more, Iris was still eager to please and keen on receiving parental affection and respect. In return for the chance of getting at least a small slice of the “cake” (BA 93) of love, she once again kept silent and accepted her role as Laura's caretaker. Thus, she lost her individuality: from now on there would always be the other one in tow. As a result of the frustration and of the loss of freedom, Iris displaced her anger on other people close to her, people somewhat sharing her suffering. Reenie, their servant, was one of them. “You're not my mother,” (BA 176) Iris often retorts, both rejecting Reenie's reprimands and secretly wishing her to be Liliana. In which case, Reenie would then be able to fix things and liberate Iris from her misery.

Reenie looked after Iris and Laura throughout their childhood. She was a help, cook and nanny in one person. Rennie was a part of Avilion's inventory – she spent her teen years there and knew the ropes. Coming from a lower class family outside of Avilion, Reenie was able to preserve somewhat her voice. She was thirteen when she came to Avilion and still communicated with the outside world. She dared to comment on affairs of the Chase family and was able to address things with their real names. However, as a servant, she had no word in the doings of her master. Reenie was guilty of silently complying with whichever decision the girls' father made. She had to be loyal to him and her sincere opinions were voiced in private only, behind closed doors. Responding to Iris's anger, Reenie in return displaced her guilt and frustration from impotence onto Iris. Therefore, Reenie learned to distance herself, creating different personae to deal with the people in her life. She was one person with the girls, another with her friend Mrs Hillicote and another one in front of Mr Chase. She rarely broke the vow of remaining silent in front of Norval and only when it was absolutely necessary, as in the case of Mr Erskine. He was abusing the girls and in possession of compromising

pictures – it could have harmed the family’s public image. At other times, she remained silent, accepting her role as a subordinate employee.

### **3.1.3 Mr Erskine**

Not only does Iris’s father increase the strain on Iris by stressing the importance of taking care of Laura as was Liliana’s task, but he also aggravated the development of Iris’s personality, one already upset by the death of her mother. When Iris entered the pubescent age and her body started developing, Norval suddenly realized she was not a boy and that he would not have a son after all. Iris would so be punished for being a girl. Her Father needed an heir, and he was desperate not to let his parents down and to ensure the continuation of the Chase family. If he could not have a son, he would make himself one. Laura was out of the question. She was odd, behaved and was treated basically like a lunatic. It was up to Iris again to try to live up to the expectations of her parent and prove she was worthy. Avilion became a prison to her, which she acknowledged by the choice of her clothes which resembled a uniform. She was not able to loiter around freely like Laura, who could do whatever she wanted. If something happened to her, whether she was present or not, it was Iris’s fault – she was the one who was supposed to have “at least half a wit between them two” (*BA* 151). This alleged obtuseness was to be cured by the means of a proper education, which was supposed to be instilled by an Englishman, Mr Erskine. His English origins were supposed to serve as those of Adelia’s English cousins and thus provide something that was deemed correct and appropriate for such a noble family.

Norval ignored the obvious emotional inaptness of Mr Erskine and possibly even sexual deviation – the teacher was discharged from his school for being “unhealthy” (*BA* 161). It was especially his methods and his crude mind which were particularly unwholesome about Mr Erskine. Over the months that he taught in Avilion, he abused both girls emotionally and physically verging on molestation. He called them names and smacked them with a ruler whenever he considered it necessary. In spite of being considered strange, Laura was the one who recognized this as harmful. Iris behaved as she was used to – trying not to provoke outbursts of violence, in order to avoid anything that would cause annoyance in Mr Erskine and consequent punishment. She excused him, disapproved of her sister’s accusations of his liking of little girls and “want[ing] to put his hand up [Laura’s] blouse” (*BA* 164). Iris claimed that Mr Erskine was under

Father's orders and there was nothing they could do about it. Surely Father could not ignore Mr Erskine's behaviour and if Father did not disapprove, everything should be alright. Iris once again chose silent resistance in the form of dissociation – she learned how to make her face “blank and stiff” (BA 164), distancing herself from reality on cue. Laura perfected this method, “subtract[ing] herself in the blink of an eye” (BA 164). Yet this submission was only illusory. Laura was waiting to speak out at the right moment. Finally, after one instance of especially violent attack when Mr Erskine nearly strangled her, she told Reenie, and she made sure Mr Erskine would be discharged.

The situation with Mr Erskine is the first time that the contrast between the two sisters manifests. Iris thinks of Laura as someone who is a bit too slow on the uptake as she was always spoken about as such. Iris had to take care of Laura, who was supposedly not able to fend for herself. However, Laura, thanks to her oddness and her devoutness to God, grew up outside of the consideration of the adults. Iris was the focus of everyone's scrutiny, forced to live up to expectations as she was older and “normal”. In the meantime, Laura preserved her voice, she was not afraid to say or ask anything. She inferred the truth from half-answered questions, overheard conversations and her own observations of how things worked. Thanks to her singularity she saw underneath the surface and noticed things people only brushed over. Laura did not need to please her parents – Liliana loved her and instead of Father, Laura had God who had plenty of love for whoever asked for it. On the other hand, her relationship with God was problematic. Laura may have been free from real-life tyrants but she herself made God tyrannous as well, only “farther away” (BA 166). By looking for a shelter from the unexpected violence she feared so much from her father and Mr Erskine, Laura unwittingly enabled God to have power over her. She made all sorts of deals with God: in the belief of bringing her mother back, Laura almost drowned herself, endured pain of violent acts and later, during World War II, almost stopped eating altogether. She intended to pay for the “sins of fathers” (BA 23), like Jesus did, by sacrificing herself. Despite Iris's exasperation with Laura, she tried to warn her against overt piousness. Iris had lost her faith because she was sure that “God [did] not care like Father did not” (BA 205) and that selflessness was what killed Mother. Laura's belief remained unshaken – she is persuaded that the truth will be shown only after death. However, the subsequent events would show how erroneous her adamant belief was.

### 3.1.4 The marriage

Iris's ultimate sacrifice to her father, not wanted but performed anyway in the manner of a "weary soldier," (BA 144) was to marry Richard Griffen. Iris failed in her role of the oldest son to carry on with the family business. The factories were failing and Norval desperately wanted to save them so as not to let down his father and brothers. He decided to give Iris a chance for the last time. Having exhausted her potential, Iris's father no longer saw it convenient to have her in Avilion. So she was to ensure it would continue under the management of someone else at least. Richard Griffen was a perfect candidate, because he had his own thriving business. In the traditional fashion, Iris was married off for money, not love, it was a "falling in love business," a "contract" (BA 256, 424). The arrangement was merely a hand-over, "like a parcel" (BA 234), of Iris to the Griffens in order to obtain money for the Chase and Sons concern. It was not a question of choice. Although she had been seemingly given one, Iris had no alternative. She could not refuse and so she kept silent. Her wordless consent removed whatever remained of her own self. She became invisible to her father. At that moment, Iris was nothing more than a wall to lean on in the last moment of need. To comfort her, her father describes Richard as being "sound, underneath it all," (BA 227) which reminds Iris of Liliana's claim that "underneath it all, your father loves you" (BA 102). In case of Norval, that is true, he tries to be the best for his daughters. But for Richard, his hidden soundness, as Iris learned later on, included not only competence and money but also sound violence.

The last person who could save Iris by imploring her to express her disapproval was Laura, who provided her with a possible scenario: she would not marry Richard. They would run away and start earning money themselves without having to rely on Father. Norval could let the bankrupt factories go, and everything would be sorted out again. Iris and Laura sit together in a bathroom surrounded by plenty of reflective surface. However, when Iris looks into a mirror, it provides her only with a faulty and incomplete image, she feels "featureless, erased" (BA 235). With her mind blank, Iris could not hear Laura out. She had lost her personality and could not recognize herself and therefore did not care about the impending menace. Laura could see what Richard intended, what was the real purpose of the marriage – to obtain a trophy wife who would satisfy his whims and to expand his enterprise. Iris, in turn, thought Laura was

jealous of her because she was the one who got the attention and the love of both men, Father and Richard. Yet, she realized her marrying Richard was not how it was supposed to be. She felt “virtuous, and at the same time so hard done by” (BA 237), but giving away her true emotions would be to betray her father, and she had to remain loyal to him. Iris denied her position as a victim to Laura, claiming it would not be so bad – she (and Laura) would at least keep their high position in society and “have nice clothes” (BA 237). Clothes which were part of her trousseau, something that was supposed to keep her tied down to a place from which she could not get out.

Iris mentally withdrew herself from the events of the wedding. Her eyes were open but unseeing, she was not really present. The out-of-body experience is reflected in the way she talks about the day as an old woman: “I say ‘her,’ I don’t recall having been present [...]. I and the girl [...] has ceased to be the same person” (BA 239). Iris reached the point where she utterly surrendered to what the others wanted from her. Iris’s personality was lost completely, the blank space ready to be filled in according to her new family’s fantasies, wants and needs. She was to be moulded into “shape intended for [her], by [Richard]” (BA 303), to follow the instructions and rules of her husband and sister-in-law, Winifred. It was Winifred who made sure, already before the marriage, that Iris would be obedient to the Griffens: “She patted my arm. ‘I’ll take you in hand.’ I could feel my will seeping out of me – any power I might have left, over my own actions (BA 234).”

Iris felt like a child again, with new parents whose expectations must be fulfilled. On the evenings when she was summoned and judged by Richard, the ever-present feeling of anxiety and fear of what the verdict would be seeped in slowly, and paralysed her. Richard represented a “gigantic tangle of string” (BA 297) for Iris, impossible to undo. The more she tried, the worse it was. The attempts to “be sleek [...], a surface the hands would glide over” (BA 303) were in vain. She kept disappointing Richard, and as the number of let-downs grew, so grew Richard’s resentment and the intensity of subsequent abuse. It would not be seen on the outside though, the “heavy, brutal shoe tapping out the rhythm” of Iris’s life struck in the dark: “there were bruises [...]. He favoured thighs, where it wouldn’t [...] get in the way of his ambitions” (BA 371).

To survive, Iris learned to live a double life – one inside the walls of the “castle of the tigers” (BA 328) and one in “another dimension of space” (BA 465) with Alex Thomas, a man whom she knew already from her teenage years back in Avilion. Iris used the opinions of Winifred and Richard to her advantage. She created a means of escaping, if even a little, from her captivity. She met Alex by accident in town on one of her aimless wanderings. She began seeing him and eventually embarked on a love affair. Iris built a small universe of her own to be able to cope with snide remarks of Richard’s sister Winifred and his abusive behaviour. Unfortunately, the affair with Alex proved to be just another impasse. She fled from her home to Alex for “immolation [...], however briefly” (BA 261) but the thrill of being free became just another way of placing a “leash around [her] neck” (BA 261). She could not run away with him because she was too afraid to leave Richard. Iris and Alex could only continue with their romance, hoping that something would happen that would release them from this plight. Iris was paralysed in both positions – with Alex and with the Griffens. At home, Iris thought only about Alex, about the life she might have with him one day. She withdrew from the happenings in the house; she lived in a parallel reality much more pleasant than the other one, and she did not care. To her involuntary silence as a victim of her “parents”, she chose to be blind and deaf as well: “I agreed but did not listen. Not listening was the only way I had during those months, of keeping my balance. [...] like a tightrope walker crossing Niagara Falls, I could not afford to look around, for fear of slipping” (BA 369). It was easier for Iris to comply with everything the Griffens said and planned because she was not willing to think. To lead two lives was exhausting and she sustained her energy by letting them decide. Try as she might, Iris never got the chance to have her say anyway. The matters to be resolved also included Laura who arrived to Toronto after Norval’s death. Inadvertently, Iris handed her sister over, a “mouse to the tigers” (BA 328), and let them both literally and also metaphorically play with her.

Laura was to be properly educated and introduced into the society by means of a *début*. This would ensure she would be ready to replace Iris if necessary. The Griffens got “two for one” (BA 505), Laura coming as part of the “bargain,” (BA 505) and they had decided to make the most of it. However, Laura refused to be moulded according to the Griffens’ standards. She hated Richard for indirectly killing her father and did



everything to spite him. Laura wanted to lead a normal, ordinary life of “other people” (BA 327) but as Iris observed: “she never could” (BA 327). Ironically, Laura considered Iris to the obstacle that prevented her from leaving: “‘I promised Father I’d take care of you,’ I said stiffly. ‘And Mother too.’ ‘Stupid of you. [...] Other people’s promises aren’t my fault. [...] But they’re both dead, so it’s all right. I absolve you.’ (BA 378) The absolution from Laura herself was not enough. It did not matter. Iris was determined not to break the promise to her parents. Laura became a victim to Iris but she was not to be silenced. So she resorted to extreme action. When she heard of Alex Thomas’s return to Toronto, Laura came up with a plan to get out. To save Alex from being imprisoned, she yielded to Richard who had been pursuing her for some time. In exchange for Alex’s safety, Laura let Richard molest her whenever he felt like it. She gave herself to Richard willingly in an act of selflessness – by losing herself, she could rescue Alex who would save her later on when he would return from Europe. Iris suspected something had changed about Laura but being distracted by “many things on [her] mind” (BA 425), the affair with Alex being one of them, she could not see that Laura had become a victim to Richard’s abuse: “‘I never say anything to him,’ said Laura, ‘because I have nothing to say’” (BA 394).

### **3.1.5 Alex Thomas**

The character of Alex Thomas was significant for both sisters and he would eventually be the reason of the ultimate rupture between them. The girls first met Alex Thomas at the Button Factory Picnic a few months before Iris got married to Richard who was at the event as well. Both Iris and Laura took an interest in him, Iris usurping him for herself from the beginning. She could not bear that Laura would be the one getting all the attention again. Even unintentionally, Laura was the object of everyone else’s concern. She always got the love Iris longed for and Alex was an opportunity to change this. Moreover, as Alex belonged to a lower class, he represented its relative freedom. He was not bound by the dos and don’ts of higher classes and he embodied the a possible distraction, or even a way out for both Laura and Iris.

Iris embarked on a relationship with Alex very early on after the picnic. With Mr Erskine being discharged, not having to study anymore, Iris had a lot of time on her hands and begun to meet with Alex around the town. What she did not know was that Laura did the same thing or so it seemed. She brought Alex to Avilion one evening and

hid him in the cellar. Alex was a part of the communist movement and considered a subversive force by both Norval and Richard because of he was influencing workers in their factories. Alex was wanted by a police for alleged attempt to burn down the factory of girls' father and murder of the night-watchman. Iris immediately reprimanded Laura for doing so and took charge of the situation, thus preventing Laura from becoming closer to him than Iris would. Iris decided to move Alex into the attic and often went to see him. Upon visiting him, she managed to discover more about his life. Alex was an orphan by war and had been beaten by his adoptive parents. However, he had refused to be a victim of his fate and had run away from home. He had decided to make a difference in the world, joining the ranks of the communists. Alex knew what war did to people and how the poor had to fend for themselves. Finding himself in the Position Four of Atwood's Basic Victim Positions, he wrote pulp fiction as a creative non-victim. It was his way of warning people against the atrocities of military conflicts for he often used stories of old civilizations brought to doom by wars. This was only a part of his experience as a victim though. He never fully vocalized what had happened to him in the family and remained stuck somewhat, halfway through the healing process.

The real importance of Alex is presented indirectly, through the "The Blind Assassin," the novella embedded in Iris's first-person narrative. He was the mysterious lover to whom the heroine, Iris in fact, had gone for "amnesia, for oblivion" (BA 261). The secret affair was a way of release from the confines of her life and later of the marriage with Richard. To ensure she would come back, Alex tells her a story in instalments, the plot being an allegory of Iris's situation. The tale is supposed to function as a mirror, one that she refused to look into. Or rather, she looked but she knew that there was no point in trying to change her life: "I wouldn't have any money [...]. Where would I live? [...] I'd better stay put" (BA 361). Alex could not provide her with a stable life. He too was maimed; he too was a victim, even though he refused to admit it. But his anger, of which Iris was the target, gave away the truth hidden underneath the façade. It was his past of an orphan who had been left without past and beaten (maybe even worse) by his adoptive parents. He had issues that made him vulnerable and she did not want to notice, as she wanted him strong so as to be able to turn to him for comfort. Iris enjoyed the moments with him as they came and did not

think about what could be, if only... They were closed in their private paradise, but “paradise [you] can’t get out of [...] is hell” (BA 355). In the end, their situation was somewhat resolved by World War II: Alex died in combat and Iris was deprived of her possible happy ending with Alex. She was left behind, bereft, with a void instead of her heart.

In the meantime, Laura had been taken to a clinic because of her alleged nervous breakdown. That was Richard’s version. The truth was Laura had gotten pregnant with Richard and he forced her to undergo an abortion. When Laura returned from the *BellaVista* Clinic, Iris discovered she had been meeting with Alex before and planned to live with him after his return. It appeared that Alex had had a parallel relationship with Laura at the same time as with Iris. Laura concealed it from Iris and Iris from Laura, none of them wanting to share the relationship that had such a special significance to them. Laura understood her ordeal with Richard as a way of saving Alex from being imprisoned. She endured the raping and pain, sacrificed herself so that Alex could escape. Laura thought of herself as a martyr, reviving her overt childhood devotion. In the same manner of trying to bring back Liliana, Laura made a deal with God to save Alex and possibly Iris too. If Richard focused all his attention on Laura, Iris and Alex would be saved from his punishment. And after Alex would come back from Europe, he would take her away, saving her and feeling grateful to her.

Iris was furious. Once again, Laura had managed to snatch her life away from her. She gave hers for Laura so that she would fulfil her parents’ expectations and wishes and be a good daughter to them. No matter what she had done to please them, it was not enough. Laura was always there and instead of being silent, she spoke and cried, and so she received all the attention. As many times before, Laura’s words and actions acted as a mirror to Iris, a possible scenario of what would have happened if she had chosen to leave with Alex. It would appear that Iris was snapped out of her sleep and for the first time fully understood her position as a victim. She realized she was utterly powerless in her marriage with Richard and she had missed her chance with Alex. Laura was planning to live the future Alex had proposed to Iris, and which Iris had refused, because she was not brave enough to sever her relationship with Richard. Such a strong reality check made her do what she had wanted to do for so long – to get

rid of her burden of being the keeper of her sister. Out of spite, Iris “pushed her off” (BA 488) and confessed to her affair with Alex.

Iris’s revelation completely shattered Laura’s life. Up to that point she thought herself as being like a saint, a martyr who would sacrifice herself for the others. Like Mary to Christ, she was devoted to Alex (BA 216), to her idea of saving him through her ordeal. The possibility of leaving with Alex had been the “light in no light time,” she did not consider her submission to be a real one. Laura could have refused Richard but decided to choose to suffer for someone whom she loved. Now her strategy of coping with Richard’s abuse proved futile – all her voluntary suffering had been for nothing. She lost everyone she had ever sacrificed herself for – Mother, Alex, and Iris. Her selflessness killed her like Liliana. Laura lost herself completely in the process, she thought only of others and when her plan fell apart, she did not know what to do. She was silenced, “the light around her faded” (BA 488). There was no one to talk to as Alex was dead and Iris was now the enemy – she had put a “knife in [Laura’s] back” (BA 488). Laura became a victim of her own concoction that would prove to be her “fatal [...] bargain” (BA 2). The shock and the disruption between her expectations and reality were too much. She could not understand how this could have been true. God could not possibly have left her, she “kept [her] part of the bargain” (BA 487). The only way to find out was “after” (BA 205), meaning after she were dead. She could not survive on earth and so she chose not to.

### 3.1.6 “The Blind Assassin” novella<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the book we are made to believe that one of the threads of the narrative, the novel within a novel, “The Blind Assassin,” was written by Laura representing another side of her, an independent, sensual one. However, it is revealed it was actually written by Iris. She had several reasons for concealing the truth, one of which being the possibility of losing Aimee, her daughter, which happened anyway. Though, the most important thing is not the authorship, but the act of writing itself. By producing a piece of writing, Iris finally found her voice. She took the position of self-expression for so long reserved for a man and fully embraced its power. Iris overturned

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<sup>4</sup> Here, the name of the novel, which makes up one of the levels of the narrative, is put into quotation marks and left without italics in order to make a distinction from the name of the actual novel, i.e. *The Blind Assassin*.

her position as a silent victim that she had been stuck in for so long and became a creative non-victim. “The Blind Assassin” was to be an act of revenge but also an act of building a memorial for Iris’s loved ones – Laura and Alex.

The impulse for creating the novella had been Laura’s suicide. Or rather the message from Laura that Iris found back in Avilion. After all, Richard could not silence Laura. She had been a creative non-victim the whole time – Laura wrote in old school notebooks about everything that had happened to her during her short life. She put it down in codes that only Iris understood, and thanks to Laura, Iris realized everything that she had caused to her sister over the years and what she had been concealing from herself as well. By choosing to be silent, blind, and deaf to the happenings in the house, Iris unconsciously consented to Laura’s abuse. She turned a blind eye, convincing herself that everything was alright. She could not help but be jealous of Laura, as she had always been, for being loved by people Iris cared about; first Mother, then Father, and Reenie. She did not want to let Laura take Alex too, the only island of hope Iris had during the horrendous times of her marriage. The possibility of him being with Laura finally prompted what had almost happened twice before – Iris “pushed [Laura] off” (*BA* 488). The first time Iris chose to speak out loud caused her sister to commit a suicide.

Laura’s notebooks were a wake-up call for Iris. To her horror, she realized she was guilty of silently complying with Richard and Winifred’s actions thus becoming one of them in Laura’s eyes. She understood she should have done something even if it had meant to lose her life as an upper class wife. Laura actually sacrificed everything for those she loved; she refused to be a victim of her circumstances and acted on her own. She preserved a sense of autonomy in the face of hardship and succumbed to Richard in the good faith of doing it for her loved ones, “gods will justify anything” (*BA* 27). God would be the one to reward her.

As an act of repentance, Iris ascribed the authorship of “The Blind Assassin” to Laura. She wanted her to have the voice she had lost while being molested by Richard and make up for what she had done to Laura by keeping her silence throughout the years. Richard loved Laura more than Iris and thinking of Laura being with someone else killed him, when he learnt about Laura’s alleged betrayal, he committed suicide. Yet, Iris forgot that revenge is a “dish best served cold” (*BA* 167). By acting hastily,

asking for compensation for what Richard had done to them both, she broke the rule of healthy recovery from abuse. Iris could not accept what had happened. She felt angry with Richard and with herself as well – she did not take care of Laura as she had promised to her parents. Iris becomes a victim again and her silence returns. The implication that the heroine of the novel had had a baby with her lover prompts Iris's daughter Aimee to renounce Iris as her mother, thinking it was Laura. Iris cannot tell the truth and has to remain silent. As Winnifred is still alive, she can snatch away Iris's granddaughter Sabrina (which eventually happens).

The story of *Blind Assassin* as such is an account of the affair Iris had with Alex Thomas during the 1930s and 1940s. To put it down in words meant to build a monument to their love and to Alex who died in the Second World War. It was also a reflection of Iris's life back then – the pulp story narrated by the lover is an allegory of the lives of all the girls from upper-class families of that time. They were illiterate virgins with their tongues cut out, sacrificed to the gods so that the chiefs would have more money, more to eat. Alex wanted to demonstrate how harmful Iris's relationships with her father and Richard were and thus persuade her to leave. She refused to discuss it with him for the relationship with Alex was a refuge to her, an opportunity to live peacefully in the present. With him, she was at least partially free. If she had her own life, she would not know what to do with it. Iris had been locked up for too long, she could not imagine leaving. Besides, Alex himself was not faultless either – he too had his quirks and issues stemming from his childhood. In the end, Alex died and Iris was left with only memories. Therefore, she decided to write them down in order to make sure she did not forget.

Iris was not the only one who should not forget – the others as well and especially Sabrina. In fact, the novella, “The Blind Assassin,” is a product of the fourth position of a victim – a vocalization of the experience. It provides an absolution for Iris from the feelings of guilt of not acting in defence of Laura. It is also a tool for Sabrina, her granddaughter, to “reinvent [her]self at will” (BA 513). Iris plans to hide both her stories in a steamer trunk, a part of her trousseau – something that was supposed to keep her tied up – now intended to undo the damage. By the trunk's falling into Sabrina's possession, the true story of her family would be discovered. “There's not a speck of Griffen in you at all,” (BA 513) Iris affirms. Sabrina would not be burdened by the evils

of Richard or Winnifred like Aimee was. She would not be expected to achieve the expectations of her alleged heritage as an heir of the Griffens' and Chases' history. She would be free to choose to do whatever she wanted. If Sabrina decided to listen and be a witness to the true account of the events, the novella and Iris's story would fulfil their purpose – the pattern would not be repeated and there would be no more victims.

### **3.1.7 Iris's guilt**

In the course of telling the story of her family, Iris also talks about the present time. Very often she uses the images of monsters, wolves, and other supernatural creatures such as that of a witch. It is an indication of what Judith Herman sees as a dissociation of personality resulting from intense feelings of guilt. Iris's self-loathing is an example of what happens if a victim of abuse cannot speak and cannot articulate the problem. She denied her position as a victim. She was not able to identify the problem. She refused to do something about it in spite of the warnings from her sister. Iris became guilty by "simply [being] present at [the crime]" (BA 144). Now, on the threshold of her death, realizing she has only little time left, Iris sits down to write the story of her life. She hopes for a witness, "only a listener perhaps" (BA 521) who would share her burden.

With everyone from her family dead, left alone with her memories, Iris can finally "take care of [her]self and Laura as [she] solemnly promised to do" (BA 368). Without people threatening to make her life more miserable than it already is, she does not shy away from describing anything. Stories are true to life and "there must be wolves" (BA 344). In this particular one, it is Iris and also her father who were at the very beginning of all the troubles. He was the ghost of Avilion, raging inside the turret full of fury and hatred. He eventually destroyed everything he had; he could no longer survive in his position as a victim. Iris, on the contrary, managed to continue with her life but a life that was full of remorse and pretence. She ended up hating herself, thinking of herself as a monster, projecting it onto people who tried to reach out to her after they had read Laura's book. She was (and still is) haunted both during the day and at night: she dreams of being an animal. Her death is near and the wall of defence she built is not necessary anymore. She can face the truth and admit her role in Laura's death as a silent bystander. She wants everyone to see who she really was.

By reliving her memories, she is able to accept all that happened as a part of her life. There were many girls like Iris and Laura, only these two were not lucky enough. The circumstances were simply unfavourable. In reconciliation, Iris realizes that “it’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward” (BA 518), there cannot be only happiness. To write her story means that she can properly see and understand all the reasons and pretexts for the actions of the people around her that had shared her experience. She understands that it was not only her fault. There were many other little things that gradually amounted to her and Laura’s tragedy. It is not only important to put down the account of her life to provide Sabrina with a key to the past of her family. For Iris, it is also a means to cast off all the bitterness, anger, and most importantly the guilt. After so many times that she had failed to liberate herself, Iris finally removes her manacles. She is no longer tainted and it is significant that just a little afterward, she dies peacefully.



## 4 Conclusion

[...] unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So can biting your tongue. [...] Nothing is more difficult than to understand the dead, I've found; but nothing is more dangerous than to ignore them (*BA* 508).

This thesis has explored the theme of victimization and victims in a novel by the Canadian author, Margaret Atwood – *The Blind Assassin* – relying on two theories connected to this topic. The theoretical background of this thesis was taken from *Survival*, a book by Margaret Atwood herself. It is devoted to Canadian literature, which is abundant with victims and underscored by the need to survive. The second theory is by Judith Herman, a psychologist, who studied post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in victims of abuse as a result of their victimization. She presented her findings in the study, *Trauma and Recovery*. The practical part interprets *The Blind Assassin* from the perspective of these two theories.

The theoretical part first presented Margaret Atwood – her motivation for the initiation of her writing career, her formative influences and motivational factors behind her writing, as well as highlighting the importance of her Canadian background for her literary career. Canada had been a victim of English colonizers for decades and the remnants of this condition still remain in the Canadian culture. The feeling of being a victim permeates the writing of Canadian authors and surviving in this position is a recurrent theme in both Canadian prose and poetry. Atwood established the Canadian literary tradition through the theme of survival in the eponymous book, *Survival*. There, the theory is supported by an outline of the Basic Victim Positions and illustrated by examples from contemporary Canadian literature. The most significant one of these positions is the fourth one – the position of a creative non-victim, which represents the freedom and power to control one's own life.

The second part of the theoretical section focuses on Judith Herman's view of victimization. In *Trauma and Recovery*, she describes in detail the origins of this state, the results, consequences and coping strategies. The victims are stricken by many problems which prevents them from healing properly, such as dissociation of personality stemming from feelings of disempowerment and guilt. Therapy in the form

of counselling and open dialogue aims to remove the burden and lead the victims towards embracing the experience as a part of their life that no longer has any relevance to the person they are now.

Herman converges at certain points with Atwood and provides a more detailed explanation of the condition and concrete real-life examples. Both Atwood and Herman name disempowerment and isolation as the two prevailing feelings of victims, of which the inability to control their own life, to be in connection with someone and to speak about their experience, are the worst. Where Atwood talks about the creative non-victim as the ultimate stage of the process of liberation, Herman presents the method of vocalization of the experience of being victimized through therapy or talking to other survivors. It is important for both the victims and the society to hear the accounts of the victimization, for it helps in coming to terms with the abuse; it prevents its repetition and warns against ignorance. Furthermore, Herman's observations of dissociation resemble Atwood's images of mirrors, doubles, and couples. The split of personality as well as the mirrors provide a means of reflection upon the victim's situation and can help them to take action. In extreme cases, these can translate as a sign of delusion, hallucinations, or a mental illness.

The practical part illustrated what had been suggested in the theoretical chapters by means of descriptions and excerpts from the primary source – *The Blind Assassin*. Pointing out the turning points, or the points of reference in the lives of the characters important for both the narration and the females themselves, it interpreted on the grounds of the ideas laid out in the theoretical part. Iris and Laura of *The Blind Assassin* are illustrative examples of how certain terrifying events, such as the death of one's close relation or abuse, be it of the physical or mental kind, can influence people long into the future.

Constantly denying her position as a victim, Iris carried her silent suffering from one stage of her life to another and each time it got worse. Unable to speak about her frustration and anger, she was disempowered in her position. She focused on her survival and did not notice what was happening to Laura. The guilt of not taking care of her sister as she had promised to her parents resulted in a "contaminated identity" (Herman 94). Up until her eighties, Iris felt hatred towards herself. Hatred that turned into a monster eating her up alive from within. It was the realization of her approaching

death (the important life-changing event according to Herman) that made her finally speak up. She decided to go through her life story once again and relive the moments of pain in order to accept her part in the events. Putting into words the long concealed truths provided a catharsis for Iris. She embraced the fact that for a long time she had been a victim of the people in her life, namely her family and later Richard and Winifred, who embodied another set of parents to Iris. The parental authority and expectations imposed on her paralysed Iris throughout her life, and she carried the influence and expectancies on in the same manner, which in turn destroyed her daughter. By repudiating her position as a victim, she could finally move into Position Four of a creative non-victim. The product of Position Four, her personal story, translates as the last stage of recovery of Judith Herman's theory – it is to refuse to ascribe any significance to the experience and to warn others against the risks of not speaking up, of “closing up in a burrow” (Gibson 15). The failure to recognize them leads to further victimization, possibly even the death of the victim/s, and the necessity of repeating the past and the experience of abuse.

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