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Narrative Empathy in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

La empatía narrativa en *The Blind Assassin* de Margaret Atwood

TERESA GIBERT
Institution address: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras, Facultad de Filología, Paseo de Senda del Rey, 7. 28040 Madrid
E-mail: gibert@flog.uned.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-6194-9901
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Abstract: Empathy plays a key role in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a complex novel consisting primarily of the fictional memoir of Iris Chase, its eighty-two-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator. Working within the theoretical framework of Suzanne Keen's research on narrative empathy, the aim of this article is twofold: to examine the representation of empathy in *The Blind Assassin* and to explore the capacity of the novel to encourage readerly empathy towards a character who is frank enough to acknowledge that she has not provided the emotional support expected from her, and bitterly regrets her destructive lack of affective empathy.
Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Blind Assassin*; narrative empathy; affect theory; fictional memoir.

Resumen: La empatía ejerce un papel crucial en *The Blind Assassin* (2000), una compleja novela de Margaret Atwood constituida principalmente por unas memorias de ficción cuya protagonista y narradora es la octogenaria Iris Chase. Este artículo, elaborado dentro del marco teórico de Suzanne Keen sobre la empatía narrativa, tiene un doble objetivo: estudiar la representación de la empatía en *El asesino ciego* y analizar la capacidad de la novela para promover la empatía lectora con un personaje que reconoce con franqueza no haber aportado el apoyo emocional que se esperaba de ella y lamenta amargamente su falta de empatía afectiva.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; *The Blind Assassin*; empatía narrativa; teoría de los afectos; memorias de ficción.
Sumario: Introducción. La representación de la empatía y el desarrollo de la empatía lectora. La búsqueda de consuelo y autoempatía. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

> "Empathy is the grand theme of our time."
> (Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy* 12)

> "The Age of Reason is being eclipsed by the Age of Empathy."
> (Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization* 3)

In the current disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates on empathy, we come across the opposing views of those who eulogize it and those who decry it. Between the two extremes are those who, being in favor of empathy, question some of its often-praised advantages and highlight its shortcomings in a wide range of fields, including that of literary studies. Among the many examples of this matter of controversy, one can mention the arguments propounded in *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (2009) by the celebrated biologist and primate ethologist Frans de Waal, who enthusiastically extols "the role of empathy and social connectedness" (5) together with "emotional engagement" (72). In a similar vein, welcoming the growing awareness of empathy, the American sociologist and economist Jeremy Rifkin contends in *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (2009): "The evidence shows that we are witnessing the greatest surge in empathic extension in all of human history" (452). By contrast, psychologist Paul Bloom wrote the provocative book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016) to persuade his readers "to be against empathy" (3) and to promote instead "rational compassion" as "a better moral guide than empathy" (23), on the ground that the latter is an irrational emotion which makes us prone to bias and distorts our moral judgment. Specifically referring to fiction, Bloom observes: "Our bias shows up when we think about the power of fiction to stir up our empathy" (48). He acknowledges that some novels have been beneficial because they "prompted significant social change by guiding readers to feel the suffering of fictional characters" (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Bleak House*) but, less optimistically, he underscores the negative consequences

of other novels, which have led people in the opposite direction by putting empathy at the service of ignoble causes such as racism (48).

In addition to the antithetical conclusions reached in recent times by different scholars who have explored the role of rhetorical empathy, the long-standing academic prejudice against affective reactions in the interpretation of literary texts and the twentieth century widespread rejection of traditional ethical criticism should be borne in mind. Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz "challenge the concept of empathy and the assumption that empathy is a fundamental element of ethical reading" while they contend that "ethical criticism must extend its scope beyond the ethics of narrative empathy" (199). They illustrate their arguments through a perceptive reading of *Alias Grace*. Their approach can be applied to the analysis of other Atwood's first-person narrators of fictional autobiographical accounts, such as the protagonist of her succeeding novel, *The Blind Assassin*, who shares with Grace the use of "manipulative rhetoric to evoke empathy" (212) among many similar features.[1]

Before embarking on an analysis of the intersection between empathy and one of Margaret Atwood's most famous creative works, it seems appropriate to conduct a brief survey of her views on this topic. Although the literary representation of empathy is not among her favorite subjects of discussion, she has mentioned it several times in her critical writings. For instance, in "Are Humans Necessary?" she comments on John Wyndham's "Compassion Circuit," a 1954 story "in which empathetic robots, designed to react in a caring way to human suffering, cut off a sick woman's head and attach it to a robot body." In the same article, she humorously refers to Susan Swan's "The Man Doll," a short story "in which the female character creates a man robot called 'Manny,' complete with cooking skills and compassion circuits, who's everything a girl could wish for until her best friend steals him, using the robot's own empathy module to do it." More recently, in a post on *The Tale of Two Cities* published in her Substack blog, Atwood explains about a character portrayed by Charles Dickens as "the perfect embodiment of the mid-Victorian ideal": "Lucie Manette cannot be ruthless. She's too susceptible to the suffering of others. Her virtues are empathy, compassion, and pity. And nurturing" ("The Woman Thing").

[1] Several critics have compared Grace (based on the historical Grace Marks) and Iris both as characters and narrators. See Howells, Ingersoll ("Modernism" and "Waiting"), Robinson (347–48), Staels (148), Tolan (*The Fiction* 109–13), and Wilson (73–74).

Much of Atwood's poetry proves that, instead of refraining from the expression of authorial empathy, she is actively engaged in it. For instance, writing the twenty-seven poems ultimately collected in the cohesive volume entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) was for Atwood an intricate literary exercise of authorial empathy with a real human being who was also a writer. Susanna Moodie (1803–1885) was an English emigrant and pioneer in the bush farms of Upper Canada whose prose Atwood deemed disappointing, but whose personality she found so striking that she felt prompted to reconstruct her nineteenth-century experience from a twentieth-century perspective, hypothesizing about her subjectivity ("Afterword" 62). Atwood remarked that she had been impressed by Moodie's voice, "not her conscious voice but the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work" ("Afterword" 63). Despite the obvious differences between the two women writers, Atwood underlined how much they shared, so much that she felt as if each of them could speak on behalf of the other: "I said for her what she couldn't say, and she for me" ("Writing *Susanna*" 75).

Regarding readerly empathy, in Atwood's critical writings there is evidence of her disdain for some sentimental approaches to her fiction and for certain naïve responses to her characters, chiefly on the part of those who expect her to create good "role-models," a term she dislikes ("The Curse of Eve" 217).[2] Nevertheless, such comments about this aspect of the reception of her fiction do not imply that she disapproves of her readers' empathetic engagement, but rather that she objects to certain instances of *empathic inaccuracy*, which "occurs when a reader responds empathetically to a fictional character at cross-purposes with an author's intentions" (Keen, "A Theory" 222). Atwood's reluctance to be perceived as an author whose priority is to reach a wide audience that feels with her characters should not mislead us into thinking that her fiction does not foster narrative empathy. Writers who do not openly call upon their readers' sharing of emotions and sensations of immersion may still provoke empathetic engagement by using, sometimes unintentionally, other empathy-inducing techniques in their fiction.

[2] In "The Curse of Eve" (1978) Atwood declares, "If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have—hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy— without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example" (227).

As I intend to discuss *The Blind Assassin* within the theoretical framework of Suzanne Keen's widely recognized scholarly research on narrative empathy, I will borrow her best-known and highly influential definition of the term as published in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, a rewording she confirmed in her contribution to the volume *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*: "Narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen, "Novel Readers" 21). Keen has clarified her definition as follows:

> Narrative empathy thus involves the authorial empathy of writers in the act of creation, the empathy of the audience(s) on the receiving end, and the textual evidence that bears the traces of strategic empathizing in narrative techniques and representations of fictional worlds. ("Empathetic Hardy" 366)

Although Keen's concept has some detractors (Cuder et al. 2024), the expanding theorizing and scholarly commentary on narrative empathy encourages further investigation within the field. My aim is to combine an analytic with an empathetic reading of Atwood's tenth novel, adopting Keen's assumption that "the two modes are not incompatible," as she claimed in the preface to her book *Empathy and the Novel* (x). Accordingly, I will both examine the representation of empathy in *The Blind Assassin* and ponder the capacity of the novel to encourage the empathy of many of its readers.

1. The Representation of Empathy and the Development of Readerly Empathy

Exploring the empathetic effects produced by Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) entails a detailed analysis of the fictional memoir contained in this award-winning book.[3] Iris Chase is the eighty-two-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator of a multi-layered novel which includes her confessional memoir, an embedded romance novella (entitled "The Blind Assassin"), a futuristic science-fiction story inserted within the

[3] Atwood gave a brief account of her process of writing *The Blind Assassin* in "Margaret Atwood on *The Blind Assassin*" (2013).

novella, and numerous interspersed newspaper clippings.[4] Iris is presented as exercising full control over all the information contained in *The Blind Assassin*, because Atwood makes her both write the main narrative and intercalate a number of pseudo-factual documents purportedly drawn from Canadian newspapers and magazines: brief reports and articles (some of them inspired by real events, but actually of Atwood's contriving), birth announcements and obituaries, except for the protagonist's own obituary, whose authorship is ascribed to Myra Sturgess, one of the characters (519). Another exception is the two excerpts from an article about the *Queen Mary*'s maiden voyage published by J. Herbert Hodgins, the editor of *Mayfair*, in the July 1936 issue of the magazine (347–48). Each of the genres juxtaposed in one of Atwood's most technically sophisticated novels adds to its complexity and contributes to its richness, but it seems preferable to focus firstly on the memoir itself.[5] This is because narrative empathy is mainly derived from this fictional piece of life writing rather than from the other collected textual materials, some of which may even disrupt the reader's attachment and immersion with their distancing or estrangement devices. It is in the memoir that Atwood demonstrates how her involvement with empathy is far from being simplistic, for she thoroughly explores its potential as well as its limits.

Unlike Susanna Moodie, whose emblematic figure Atwood would evoke first in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and many years later in her historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996) together with Grace Marks, a Canadian housemaid convicted for murder in 1843, the protagonist of *The Blind Assassin* is an entirely fictional character. It should be underscored that, in spite of the fact that the real world is continually referenced via the many historiographic elements mixed together in Iris Chase's fragmented memoir (for example, through allusions to the two World Wars, the Depression Years in Canada and the Spanish Civil War), we are dealing

[4] To avoid confusion, most critics refer to the embedded novella as "The Blind Assassin" and to the whole book as *The Blind Assassin*. In her novel Atwood always italicizes the title of the novella-within-the-novel instead of using such quotation marks.

[5] See Dvorak's analysis of "the embedded narratives in Atwood's palimpsestic Booker Prize-winning novel" (59), which "has a profoundly metatextual Russian doll story-within-a-story structure" (65). Stein also uses the "Russian wooden doll" image, emphasizing how the nested stories are "surprisingly similar" ("A Left-Handed Story" 135). Paying attention to the layered narrative structure of *The Blind Assassin*, Michael examines not only how the various "narratives work but also how they can be manipulated to subvert their limits" (88).

with a fictional memoir, rather than a memoir written by an actual person. In *Empathy and the Novel* Suzanne Keen calls attention to the importance of fictionality as a key feature in prompting empathetic readerly responses when she asserts that "the very fictionality of novels licenses our feeling responsiveness because it frees us from responsibility to protect ourselves through skepticism and suspicion. Fiction may invoke empathy in part because it *cannot* make direct demands for action" (106). Applying Keen's observation to the analysis of *The Blind Assassin*, one could argue that the fictionality of Atwood's novel may spark a sense of protective freedom which can lead some readers to emotionally connect with Iris Chase much more easily than they would if they had to carry the burden of responsibility implied by the need to respond effectively to the plight of a true human being. In other words, such readers may feel comfortable when empathizing with Iris precisely because she is a fictional character invented by Atwood rather than a real woman.[6]

Iris Chase's long autobiographical account constitutes the greater part of *The Blind Assassin*, covering almost the entire twentieth century. Born in 1916, Iris goes back two generations to evoke the details of her immediate ancestry, so that her memoir reaches as far back as 1899, which is the year when her family mansion was completed in a small town of southern Ontario. Thus, the memoir is extensive enough to provide time for empathy to develop with an octogenarian who reviews her whole life during what turns out to be her last twelve months, from May 1998 to May 1999. The memoir is interspersed with the much shorter caustic comments which Iris makes about her decaying existence in this final year, so that there is a frequent shift between her past and her present. Both these diary-like entries and the recurrent metanarrative commentary of the memoir itself help Iris to offer the broken fragments of her life in a very moving way, fueled by her conviction that she must hasten on to finish her autobiography before her death, which she anticipates because of her heart condition (222–23).

The contents and the conversational tone of the protagonist's lucid and lively comments about her ongoing deterioration as an old woman intensify the empathetic effects primarily generated by the autobiographical account of her past existence. The fact that

[6] Leah Anderst claims that real autobiographies may have "just as much potential for creating empathetic responses and for arousing strong emotions in readers as do novels and short stories" (273).

autobiography (including fictional autobiography as far as it imitates and adopts many conventions of autobiography in the strict sense of the term) is a self-reflexive genre allows the old Iris to empathize with her former *remembered selves*, that is, the series of non-identical selves she remembers having been in her past life (Gibert, "Haunted" 45, 60; Robinson 349). To be able to empathize with her multiple *remembered selves*, Iris not only needs to undergo a role-taking shift to represent them as separate from her *remembering self* (the author writing the memoir) but must also perceive each of them as distinct from one another, with different interrelated identities. This differentiation, which is clearly outlined throughout the narrative, is an essential requirement for Iris's earlier *remembered selves* to become the target of her present empathy.

Additionally, her thorough account of the tragic events of her shattered life contribute to stimulating genuine empathy with her.[7] Indeed, readers tend to respond feelingly to a character who casts herself as the victim of a long series of misfortunes, including the premature death of her mother, her father's post-traumatic stress disorder as a WWI veteran, her victimization at the hands of a sadistic male tutor, her sister's emotional instability and eventual suicide at the age of twenty-five, her family's bankruptcy, her unhappy marriage, her hapless love affair, and her estrangement from her daughter and granddaughter. In sum, suffering is concomitant with all her life stages, from childhood into adolescence, persisting in her adulthood, and filling her old age. Whereas we do not claim that her memoir elicits universal empathy in all kinds of readers, we can presume that many individuals will be prone to respond empathetically to certain situations of her life, even if they have never undergone the same experiences.[8] Some aspects are likely to arouse strong and effortless character identification with Iris on the part of readers, even though difference may prevail over similarity in many cases. After all, one need not be an orphan to spontaneously empathize with a girl striving to overcome grief after an untimely parental death. Nor does one need to be

[7] In "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" Keen underscores that in empathy "we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others" (208).

[8] Rejecting the hypothesis of universality, in "Narrative Empathy: A Universal Response to Fiction?" Keen clearly answers the question asked in her title: "The proposition that narrative empathy qualifies as a literary universal could have no less likely an advocate than me."

a victim of domestic violence to easily empathize with a woman submitted to psychological and physical abuse by her husband.[9]

Iris refuses to remain inconsolable amid the most devastating episodes she must go through, but her quest is often futile because she goes in the wrong direction when she favors violence over peace and love. Her acts of aggression intended to cause harm may help her temporarily relieve tension, but invariably end up increasing her grief. On most occasions she cannot achieve lasting solace, but just a fleeting sense of comfort. Curiously enough, she gives a straightforward explanation that her search for consolation implies making use of physical or verbal violence whenever her sadness turns into anger. She frankly elucidates her first experience of this phenomenon, which occurred in the earliest stage of her process of mourning for her mother. She recalls how, feeling "desolate, and also grouchy and bloated," she lashed out in anger (97). In her memoir she describes in graphic detail and comments on a crucial scene, an incident which would mark her existence forever by making her relive her childhood frustration again and again. On the day after her mother's funeral, having been allowed by her nursemaid to stuff herself with food left over from the funeral reception held at Avilion, Iris was sent out into the garden with her sister Laura. Still in her black dress, which was too hot for that warm day, Iris was immersed in a sunlight that made her squint. Since her dark state of mind could not bear so much brightness and heat, she directed her fury against "the intense greenness of the leaves, the intense yellowness and redness of the flowers" to the extent of thinking "of beheading them, of laying waste" (96–97). Filled with resentment against "their assurance, the flickering display they were making, as if they had the right," she anthropomorphized the flowers by attributing to them the ability to control their moods. Instead of being consoled by nature, she took offence at it, just as she explicitly rejected the solace of religion and any belief in the afterlife.[10] In the middle of this emotional turmoil, nine-year-old Iris expected six-year-old Laura to understand and share her sadness about their mother's death. But little Laura, who epitomized the lack of cognitive empathy because she suffered from what Atwood called

[9] When an interviewer told Atwood that *The Blind Assassin* had made her cry, the novelist retorted: "Other readers have wept too" (Ross 19).

[10] In his book *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*, the Canadian historian and political theorist Michael Ignatieff reflects on the challenges of the search for solace in an age of unbelief, when the traditional language of consolation has almost vanished from our modern vocabulary.

"a mild form of autism" and could be identified as Asperger's syndrome (Gibert, "Unraveling" 38), was incapable to satisfy Iris by responding to her distress. Skeptical Iris was so vexed at witnessing how Laura, believing that their mother was with God in heaven, "was annoyingly light-hearted, as if she didn't have a care in the world," that she deliberately pushed her sister off the ledge of the lily pond onto the grass to hurt her (97). In her search for consolation, Iris became furious, as her feelings of grief for her mother were converted into feelings of anger which this time she directed at her sister, rather than at the colorful garden flowers.[11] Many years later, recalling how Laura had wailed, the elderly Iris comments in a parenthetical aside: "(I have to admit I was gratified by this. I'd wanted her to suffer too—as much as me. I was tired of her getting away with being so young)" (97). Obviously, such gratification was ephemeral and did not even provide her a few moments of true solace.

Furthermore, later in her memoir Iris records how, on the night before her wedding, she had a strong argument with Laura, who did not want her to get married to Richard. Iris was so angry at hearing the home truths delivered by Laura that she was on the verge of deliberately hurting her sister once again. The words Iris used to conclude her telling of this episode corroborate that she hid the source of her relief because she was ashamed of deriving comfort from her violent reactions against her sister: "I could have hit her. It was, of course, my secret consolation" (237).

The last conversation between the two sisters, just before Laura's death in 1945, took an unexpected turn when Iris, who had assumed she would "be consoling Laura, commiserating with her, hearing a sad tale," ended up instead in the position of being lectured (485). Exasperated by her younger sister's "infuriating iron-clad confidence," Iris "wanted to shake her" (487). Then, she closed her eyes and had a flashback of the garden scene with "the too-hot sun glinting on the rubbery green leaves" (487). This had happened back in 1924, when her "fingers itched with spite" and she felt compelled to push little Laura off onto the grass, a typical aggression of child behavior (488). However, in 1945 their final

[11] Iris emphasizes the connection between grief and rage during a grieving process when she observes that, at the unveiling of the war memorial on Remembrance Day, "Father stood with head bowed, but he was visibly shaking, whether from grief or rage it is hard to say" (149). When rendering an account of one of her shell-shocked father's fits of temper, she notes that she sat in her room holding hands with her sister while "listening to the fury and grief rampaging around" over their heads "like an interior thunderstorm" (204).

conversation was not an innocuous squabble, but a serious quarrel in which Iris committed the worst act of cruelty she could bestow upon her adult sister. She broke down to her two terrible pieces of news about the only man Laura had ever been passionate about and with whom she was still infatuated: firstly, that Alex had been killed in the war, and secondly, that he had been Iris's secret lover "for quite a long time" (487). On this occasion, Iris blindly pushed Laura to suicide, thus becoming one of "the blind assassins" of Atwood's novel.[12]

Time and again Iris demanded Laura to empathize with her, but in fact she did not even try to reciprocate while her vulnerable sister was alive. To start with, she found it difficult to stand in Laura's shoes due to their deep-rooted sibling rivalry, and only achieved empathy with her after she committed suicide, an event about which Iris felt terribly guilty. It was easier for Iris to empathize with people dwelling in the afterworld than with those who were living close to her in the harsh world of reality. For instance, the elderly Iris remembers how, as a teenager, she used to romanticize her late grandmother Adelia, whom she had not met, but whose traces remained in the family mansion of Avilion long after her death of cancer in 1913 (63). At the age of thirteen or fourteen, Iris projected her own youthful longing for a lover into a highly improbable story involving furtive meetings between her elegant grandmother and an imaginary charming lover (60). Many years later, Iris would empathize again with her grandmother when she realized that she had also been "married off" by her father for financial reasons (59).

Iris hated her own marriage of convenience to the wealthy businessman and political conservative Richard Griffen and was likewise convinced that marriage did not suit her at all.[13] In her old age, long after she was widowed, she avowed: "I shouldn't have married anyone" (36). She never loved her despotic husband, but her early lack of affective empathy with him was replaced by an uncommon cognitive aptitude to detect his thoughts and feelings. Despite her initial blindness and passivity, Iris gradually sharpened her sight to comprehend his behavior and ended up sharing with him perspective-taking well enough to manipulate him and even cheat on him without being caught. Subsequently, she used her awareness of his emotional states for the sake of taking revenge on him,

[12] Tolan discusses the depiction of sisterhood in her "gendered analysis of the novel" ("Was I" 78).
[13] Stein analyzes Richard as a twentieth-century Bluebeard figure ("Margaret").

calculating her reactions with the aim to inflict him maximum damage. Her grief and anger at discovering how her dead sister had been sexually abused by Richard triggered her desire for vengeance, which Iris accomplished when she succeeded in breaking him mentally and driving him to suicide (aboard the boat where he first raped Laura) with the publication of "The Blind Assassin" under Laura Chase's name.

Although Iris utterly hated Winifred, the only in-law she mentions in her memoir, her hatred did not prevent or restrain her from understanding her domineering sister-in-law's standpoint with unusual perspicacity and insight from their first to their last encounter. Intuition enabled Iris to devise plans anticipating her sister-in-law's desires with an aim to frustrate them. However, the outcome of her endeavors was often unsatisfactory. Throughout her memoir Iris gives the impression that her cognitive empathy was so high that she was able to predict Winifred's internal states, accurately attribute her some specific emotions, and even figure out the exact words which her sister-in-law would have uttered in a given situation involving both of them.[14] For example, at the beginning of their relationship, Iris visualized herself becoming an object of derision in "a string of funny anecdotes" which Winifred "would retail to her chums" while engaging in conversations that would incorporate disparaging remarks such as "*Dressed like a charity case. Ate as if they'd never fed her. And the shoes!*" (233). Resenting Winifred's sense of superiority and condescension, Iris developed a talent to counteract their noxious effects by ridiculing her arrogant sister-in-law, a mild form of retaliation which proved momentarily soothing.

As for her daughter, Iris explains that she called her Aimee because she "certainly hoped she would be loved, by someone" (431). Iris portrays herself as an unsuitable mother when she records what she had thought about her baby shortly after giving birth: "I had doubts about my own capacity to love her, or to love her as much as she'd need" (431). This premonition came true, as Iris would acknowledge when Aimee died at the age of thirty-eight, after a miserable childhood, a troublesome

[14] Here I am specifically referring to *cognitive empathy*, excluding *affective empathy*. Psychologist C. Daniel Batson notes that the experience of "knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings" is called *empathy* by some researchers and *cognitive empathy* by others (4). According to clinical neurologist Paul J. Eslinger, "empathy refers to the cognitive and emotional processes that bind people together in various kinds of relationships that permit sharing of experiences as well as understanding of others" (193).

adolescence, and a final "lengthy struggle with drug and alcohol addiction" (19). Again, as had happened after her sister's suicide, Iris wished to empathize with and console her daughter when she was no longer on earth. Too late did Iris recognize that Aimee had been traumatized first by the death of her aunt Laura, then by that of Richard, and eventually by her mother and her aunt Winifred fighting over her custody. Retrospectively, Iris enumerated the main adversities which young Aimee had been unable to cope with: "Laura went over the bridge when Aimee was eight, Richard died when she was ten. These events can't help but have affected her. Then, between Winifred and myself, she was pulled to pieces" (432). Iris "kept hoping for a reconciliation," but her hope was in vain (434). Finally, her deep pain was somewhat alleviated when she learned that Aimee had turned against Winifred as well, a shared misfortune "which was some consolation at least" according to Iris (434). Once again, Iris admitted her propensity to look for consolation in discovering that other people were suffering as much as her.

In the last year of her existence, Iris turns to her granddaughter Sabrina, the only member of her family who is still alive. But Sabrina is missing; she might be in a distant country, perhaps in India (191), maybe "on some mission or other—feeding the Third World poor, soothing the dying; expiating the sins of the rest of us" (288). Iris is certain that, although she had been unable to love her daughter, she "would have loved" her granddaughter (435). Unfortunately, Iris had no opportunity to express her feelings directly to Sabrina, because she did not gain custody over her, and was not allowed by her sister-in-law to see the girl. Iris even got back "the cards and letters and birthday presents for Sabrina" with Winifred's *Return to Sender* handwritten notes printed on the envelopes (47). Therefore, right now the only way for Iris to convey her love for her estranged granddaughter is through the pages of her memoir, which she explicitly addresses to her, disclosing that Sabrina's "real grandfather was Alex Thomas," not Richard Griffen (513). Early in her memoir Iris affirms that she is writing it neither for herself, nor for a stranger, but maybe "for no one" (43). However, as the story progresses, not only does she overtly express her desire that her absent granddaughter should empathize with her when she reads her memoir, but also gives signs that she is actively seeking her readers' empathy.

One of the most striking scenes of the memoir is the violent last meeting between Iris and her daughter, three weeks before Aimee's death. Aimee accused Iris of lack of motherly love and of having killed Laura,

whom Aimee mistakenly thought was her real mother. Iris was so upset by her daughter's insults and "threatening manner" that she "got to the front door" of the apartment and fled (436). In her memoir, Iris tells Sabrina how deeply repentant she is for not having consoled Aimee:

> Perhaps I should have stretched out my own arms. I should have hugged her. I should have cried. Then I should have sat down with her and told her this story I'm now telling you. But I didn't do that. I missed the chance, and I regret it bitterly. (436–37)

Iris does not speak about empathy here, but clearly evokes this concept, together with that of compassion, while admitting her failure to share her daughter's perspective, understand her anger and console her.

One may wonder whether readers can possibly empathize with such an unempathetic character as Iris looks like when dealing with her sister and her daughter. Is she worthy of readerly empathy? The increasing scholarly interest in surveying the portrayal of empathy in works of fiction has set off debates in which this kind of issue has been addressed from various critical perspectives within the field of literary studies. The collection of essays entitled *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature* contains several approaches to this matter of discussion. For instance, Suzanne Roszak, while examining the representation of both cognitive empathy and affective empathy in two American novels, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), contends that James Baldwin and Patricia Highsmith "craft protagonists who challenge the reader's impulse to empathize with them by committing acts of betrayal—and, in Highsmith's novel, murder—that position them as fundamentally lacking in empathy themselves" (150). Moreover, in her contribution to the same volume, "Empathy and the Unlikeable Character: On Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*," Rebecca N. Mitchell highlights the role played by a character's likeability in the production of powerful affective responses. Mitchell claims that the protagonists of these two French novels never become loveable characters, and draws attention to Emma Bovary's "exceedingly limited empathic abilities" (122). Although Iris Chase is not as unappealing as Emma Bovary and Thérèse Raquin, and is far from being an evil character such as Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, she is not as likeable or as pleasant as the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with whom it is hard not to empathize. Iris tends to portray herself in an unfavorable or unflattering light in a memoir which is not an apology for

her past life. Indeed, she refrains from embellishing her performance of the roles of wife and mother, and often exposes the objectionable or disturbing aspects of her behavior, including her failure to empathize with her sister and her daughter. Her declarations of self-vindication are fewer than those of self-reproach, which show that she is painfully aware of her shortcomings and mistakes. Rather than simply blaming others for her calamities, she acknowledges her responsibility in the tragic course of events with which she is involved, especially in those concerning the suicide of her sister and the estrangement of her daughter. Paradoxically, this frequent self-disparaging attitude may have a positive impact upon the creation of empathy because it invites readers to engage emotionally with her much more spontaneously than if they had perceived on her part any attempts to depict herself as a model of virtue or as an innocent victim eluding her culpability as a victimizer. But, in fact, one can just conjecture and speculate about Iris's capacity to generate empathy on the part of readers because, as Sneja Gunew observes, "When one embarks on the critical literature of emotions, feelings, and affect, one soon discovers that there are no certainties" (12).

The person with whom Iris manages to establish the longest and strongest empathetic bond is her nursemaid Reenie, a motherly figure who nurtured both girls with more tenderness than their own mother, Liliana. According to Iris, Liliana's "comportment as a mother had always been instructive rather than cherishing. At heart she remained a schoolteacher" (85).[15] Reenie's manner of inculcating values and habits was different, and the exact opposite of the ways in which the girls were taught at home in succession, after their mother's death, by two inadequate tutors. Motherless and emotionally estranged from their wounded father, their only referent for empathy was Reenie.

When Iris receives the shocking news of her sister's alleged car accident, she recalls how Reenie always tried to console her and her sister Laura during their childhood in their mother's absence. She concludes that some people are unable to express their pain and remain inconsolable:

[15] Iris underscores this aspect of her mother's personality with comments such as "She wasn't in the habit of speaking to us about feelings, and especially not about love—her own love or anyone else's, except God's" (102).

> She'd scoop us up and sit us on the white enamel kitchen table, alongside the pie dough she was rolling out or the chicken she was cutting up or the fish she was gutting, and give us a lump of brown sugar to get us to close our mouths. *Tell me where it hurts, she'd say. Stop howling. Just calm down and show me where*.
>
> But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling. (2)

Reenie continued to be a caregiver for both sisters assisting them with extraordinary cognitive and affective empathy until she was compelled to change her attitude towards Iris. In her memoir, the elderly Iris explains that Reenie first blamed her for not having prevented the sexual abuse Laura had suffered from Richard, and later for having driven Laura to suicide. Iris's certainty about Reenie's estrangement is clearly articulated in one of her parenthetical asides: "(Once Laura had gone off the bridge, she forgave me even less. In her view I must have had something to do with it. She was cool to me after that. She died begrudgingly.)" (445).

In contrast to Reenie, her daughter Myra remained loyal to Iris during all her life and after the latter's death, for she wrote the obituary and arranged the private funeral and public memorial service. We may presume that Iris's corpse was found by Myra in the back garden where the deceased had been writing the final pages of her memoir, which she had intended to keep in her steamer trunk until Sabrina's return (520). Supposing that Iris had no time to place the last pages with the rest of her account, Myra would have been the first reader of the memoir and perhaps the one who took charge of its publication. Although Iris formally names Sabrina as her addressee, she includes frequent parenthetical asides directed to Myra, such as "Myra, take note if you're reading this" (184), "Which may be news to you, Myra" (446), and "If you're reading this, Myra" (504). Iris resorts to this rhetorical device of apostrophe in a much more elaborate manner when she writes, "you'll have to excuse me for mentioning it, Myra, but really you shouldn't be reading this, and curiosity killed the cat" (388). This is her communicative strategy to introduce the disclosure of an important secret about Myra's parentage: her suspicion that her father, Norval Chase, instead of Reenie's husband, was also Myra's biological father. If this were true, it would mean that Myra was Iris's half-sister rather than just the "long-time family friend" mentioned in her obituary (519).

Throughout the novel there is no mention of any other friends with whom Iris and Laura could have socialized and established empathetic relations, either as children or in adulthood. In the absence of any other social connections, generous Myra and her devoted husband Walter look after old Iris, who resents being watched over and feels plagued by their warnings and loving reprimands. Decrepit Iris mockingly reflects on her "resistance to confronting an aged self" (Reed 22), having to face an everyday struggle with her "weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities" (311). Iris makes numerous amusing comments about her ailments, knowing that her "crude references to bodily functions usually put a stop to Myra" (373). Despite the frustration caused by her aging body, Iris's humorous, honest and realistic depiction of such indefatigable tending to her diet, laundry and general well-being helps to promote readerly empathy towards her two empathetic caregivers.

Unlike many other of Atwood's novels, *The Blind Assassin* exclusively offers the narrator-protagonist's version of herself and of the story, which is told from her perspective and cannot be corroborated. We see everything with her eyes (the narrative "I" corresponding to the "eye" of the aptly named Iris), even the numerous photographs (phototexts) which add authenticity and verisimilitude to her memoir thanks to their apparent objectivity.[16] With metafictional reflexivity, Iris declares that she will not tell "the truth" expected by the addressee she is apostrophizing, and puts forward her narrative unreliability, for she decides what information to withhold or conceal: "I look back over what I've written and I know it's wrong, not because of what I've set down, but because of what I've omitted" (395).[17] Nathalie Cooke convincingly demonstrated the following "paradox: the more Atwood's narrators admit their unreliability, the more reliable they seem to become" (208). Although in 1995 Cooke could not refer to *The Blind Assassin*, published five years later, this paradox is fit to describe how Iris creates a sense (or an illusion) of narrative reliability despite being "a liar, at least in matters that concerned

[16] On the crucial role of the photographs described in the novel, see Barzilai and Wilson.
[17] Likewise, the protagonist of *Alias Grace* suggests her unreliability when she tells Dr. Jordan, who is pursuing the truth about Grace's guilt or innocence: "Perhaps I will tell you lies" (41). Parkin-Gounelas, in her psychoanalytic reading of *The Blind Assassin*, finds "the experience of deception or duplicity at the center of Atwood's novel" (682). In her review of the novel, Elaine Showalter called its narrator "wildly unreliable" (53). Filtness, Vickroy (257) and other critics have also dealt with the issue of Iris's unreliability.

her dead sister," in Atwood's words ("Margaret Atwood"). For example, Iris gains rather than loses credibility from her readers by stating that she deliberately lied about Laura's notebooks in the threatening farewell letter she wrote to her husband (502). In the same way, we tend to believe that Iris is sincere with us and we empathize with her when she confides that during her honeymoon she "was learning which lies, as a wife," she "was automatically expected to tell" (305), or when she says that she lied to her doctor about drinking coffee (372), or when she makes us aware of her telling of white lies to avoid typical caregiver reprimands from Myra. To a certain extent, the supposed narrative reliability paradoxically deployed by Iris when highlighting her unreliability increases or at least contributes to the potential for readerly empathy with her.

2. The Quest for Consolation and Self-Empathy

The word "empathy" and its cognates are absent from *The Blind Assassin*, and the word designating its closely related concept of "sympathy" appears only once.[18] It is significant that Iris uses this term negatively to reject the idea of receiving sympathy from unfamiliar people, for fear of its potential danger. During her sorrowful honeymoon, a waiter kindly asked her why she was sad, and she answered that she was not sad while she began to cry. By denying the obvious, she tried to avoid becoming the recipient of solace from the waiter. Recalling the scene in her old age, she justifies her need to be wary of certain exercises of compassion with a sharp remark which probably replicates a previously internalized warning: "Sympathy from strangers can be ruinous" (304). Then, she reinforces her suspicion against the waiter's urge to console her by adding that the following day he "propositioned" her, although she admits that her limited knowledge of French might have led her to misunderstand his intentions to relieve the distressed young woman's suffering (304). Whether the waiter's concern for her well-being was genuine or not remains a mystery which Iris cannot or does not want to solve. What is clear, however, is that the elderly Iris regrets having missed the opportunity of being consoled in her youth,

[18] According to consensus, to empathize means "to feel with" (to feel what the other is feeling) whereas to sympathize means to "to feel for" (to feel concern for another's well-being or sorrow for the other). Considering that this important distinction is often overlooked, Coplan warns "scholars outside of psychology who frequently use the terms empathy and sympathy interchangeably" although "they are distinct phenomena" (145). Empathy and sympathy sometimes conflate, but they do not always occur simultaneously.

considering that now she is no longer able to inspire the same kind of emotional response. The octogenarian sums it up as follows, "A sad pretty girl inspires the urge to console, unlike a sad old crone" (304).

When Iris was still young and beautiful, she sought consolation in her clandestine encounters with her lover, the labor activist Alex Thomas, the father of her only child. Iris and Alex became the unnamed protagonists of "The Blind Assassin," whose relationship was poetically depicted as a source of solace for the female partner, the best remedy to heal her emotional wounds by helping her to efface sad souvenirs: "She goes to him for amnesia, for oblivion. She renders herself up, is blotted out; enters the darkness of her own body, forgets her name" (261).[19] While recording her past both in the frame narrative and in the novella-within-the-novel, Iris not only expresses her reluctance to recall some sorrowful episodes, but also declares her willingness to forget certain details of her hard life, hoping that oblivion will heal her emotional wounds. Thus, she explicitly sets forth the advantages of forgetfulness as an exercise of *happy forgetting* to facilitate the erasure of memories which become too painful to bear (Gibert, "Haunted" 56). This kind of forgetfulness is blended with the form of memory loss resulting from the long-term psychological impact of the numerous traumatic experiences she endured throughout her existence.[20]

Since the quest for consolation constitutes a central motif in "The Blind Assassin," the theme of desolation (or disconsolation) receives particular attention in this romance novella. For example, from the distance of a room window of a bachelorette overlooking Allan Gardens in downtown Toronto, the unnamed male partner sees "two disconsolate men" who are picking up "crumpled papers on the grass … with steel-tipped sticks and burlap bags" (249). Later, while sitting at one of the booths of the unstylish Top Hat Grill, the lovers watch how "at the other booths sit lone disconsolate men with the pink, apologetic eyes and the faintly grimy shirts and shiny ties of bookkeepers" (358). These "disconsolate" anonymous men who loom in the background of the novella contribute to heightening the depressive atmosphere of the

[19] Ridout contends about the lovers' encounters, invariably dominated by storytelling rather than by their "sexual activities," which "are usually described in a few short sentences": "What is so striking about the descriptions of Iris's affair with Alex Thomas is that they are far more textual than sexual" (20).

[20] For an interpretation of *The Blind Assassin* as a trauma narrative, see Bouson and Vickroy (270–73).

unattractive spatial settings in which the two lovers surreptitiously meet during the Great Depression.

Desolation also figures prominently in the science-fiction story inside the novella-within-the-novel. When the female lover complains to her partner that he only tells her "sad stories" and suggests that there could be "happy parts in between," he promises "a happy story" and begins to recount the sci-fi story of the Lizard Men of Xenor (349–50). After five pages of narration, she asks him if this is his "idea of a happy story," and he announces that there is more to follow (354). So, he goes on along the same lines until he says he has finished the story of happiness she wanted (356). Her immediate reaction indicates that their definitions of happiness differ, and she gives the impression that her request will never be fully satisfied. Happiness is nonexistent in the Planet of Xenor and does not last long in the Planet of Zycron. As the plot of the romance novella progresses, we learn that the female protagonist of "The Blind Assassin" used to escape from her current situation and take refuge in this imaginary place which is destroyed at the end. "Zycron, she thinks. Beloved planet, land of my heart. Where once, long ago, I was happy. All gone now, all destroyed. She can't bear to look at the flames" (469).

The sci-fi story offers an exploration of the transformative potential of storytelling as a means of escape. Words are so powerful that they can turn desolation into consolation and vice versa, contingent on perspective. The manipulation of language is at its height in this sci-fi story when it comes to labelling a tribe of barbarian invaders: "By their enemies they're called the People of Desolation, but they term themselves the People of Joy" (117). Hence, the same people receive opposite appellations, depending on whether they are negatively designated by their enemies or choose a positive name for themselves. After all, even in outer space, desolation and joy are at odds and can be alternatively applied to the same reality according to one's point of view.

Finally, the male lover of the novella commits part of his sci-fi story to paper and, once the couple is separated, the female lover "haunts the drugstores, the train station, every chance news-stand" hoping to find a piece of his pulp fiction which will prove that he is still alive, "but the next thrilling episode never appears" (402). As a result, the temporary consolation which the female protagonist (Iris) received from the author of this fantasy world (Alex) vanished forever just as the Planet of Zycron had disappeared, leaving her in despair.

By alternating some declarations of self-vindication and many more of self-reproach in her confessional memoir, Iris seems to assuage her feelings of guilt over her failures. In the face of sorrow sometimes she seeks comfort and reassurance from those close to her heart (e.g., her nursemaid Reenie and her lover Alex), and on other occasions she rejects the emotional help she is being offered by those she distrusts (e.g., the French waiter). In the diary-like comments she makes during the last twelve months of her life, Iris balances her seriousness with doses of acid humor as an antidote to dejection. But, above all, in the periods of bereavement or of loneliness generated by grief she tends to search for solace in literature both as a reader (exemplifying the consolatory power of poetry) and as a writer, specifically by authoring the romance novella she publishes under the name of her sister as "a memorial" for her, that is, as "a commemoration of wounds endured … and resented" (508). Additionally, the romance was a memorial for Iris herself and for her lover, since she began writing it as a sort of therapy or cure during her "long evenings alone" while waiting for his return from World War II, and she went on composing it as a self-healing tool after she received the news that he had been killed in action (512). Writing "The Blind Assassin" helped Iris assuage the distress caused by the death of her lover, directing empathy towards herself. At last, when Iris feels her final days approaching, she resorts to one of the best self-empathy acts which a creative artist can perform: she reviews her past in detail through recollection and conveys her existence by means of a life narrative, verbalizing her distress and alternatively choosing what to remember and what to forget.

CONCLUSIONS

Margaret Atwood creates narrative empathy throughout *The Blind Assassin* by resorting to a wide range of techniques designed to reveal the inner thoughts and changing emotional states of her protagonist and extremely self-conscious first-person narrator. Iris Chase is engaged in a complex process of introspection which finally leads her to express regret over her failures and repentance for her destructive lack of affective empathy towards her sister and her daughter. Presenting herself both as victim and victimizer rather than evading responsibility, Iris elicits cognitive and affective empathy from many of her readers. Despite her acknowledged lies, her memoir skillfully conveys a sense of veracity and credibility through a high degree of verisimilitude, the inclusion of

phototexts, realistic characterization, and plausible plot development. The invitation to readerly empathy also arises from the enhancement of mimetic illusion through distance-reducing metanarrative commentary and from the closeness of Iris's apparently reliable and seemingly authentic confessional voice addressing us in a conversational tone. Empathetic reading evolves with ease thanks to the effectiveness of various artistically blended narrative devices. Thanks to them, we are incited to proceed under the impression that we have been allowed full access to Iris's mind and heart to the point that we can adopt her perspective. Some of us may even come to think that we are able to share what we believe to be her intimate feelings and emotions in the numerous vividly portrayed scenes of the novel.

Atwood's dexterous handling of narrative empathy fosters a richer and more nuanced understanding of some aspects of human behavior. Additionally, the successful "sharing of feeling and perspective-taking" achieved while reading *The Blind Assassin* can enhance the impact of the social critique offered by a novel strongly committed to giving a voice to the silenced female victims of domestic violence.

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