

**The Latest Area of Play:
Postmodern Hats for Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride***

by

MATTHIAS KÜHNERT

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Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* by focussing on the novel's construction of postmodern centres. Informed by the postmodern theories of Linda Hutcheon and Jean-François Lyotard, the thesis defines "centre" as the combined value-systems of a particular society or individual. Postmodernism and modernism can be described as different reactions to the same cultural crisis: "the loss of the centre," the break-down of these established systems of belief. While modernist artists try to resolve the crisis by searching for the centre elsewhere, postmodernism gives up the belief in a single centre and recognizes that the world is multicentric. If modernism reacted with angst towards the lost centre, postmodernism celebrates the new multicentricity. *The Robber Bride* is a postmodern novel embracing this new polyphony.

Chapter 1 constructs a definition of postmodernism from a general, philosophical point of view. Using Lyotard's work on postmodernism and Hutcheon's theories and criticism as guides, it shows how these general definitions of postmodernism can be applied to the study of literature. This introduction serves as theoretical groundwork for a narratological analysis of the novel's discourse and its structure in chapter 2. This narratological analysis prepares for the character study of chapter 3, a close reading of the novel's three protagonists, each of whom, through her own narrative, learns to develop a postmodern *Weltanschauung*. Chapter 4 concludes the thesis by showing how the novel validates each protagonist as an independent centre and how this validation, in turn, confirms the reading of *The Robber Bride* as a postmodernist fiction. The appendix of the thesis is an interview with Atwood.

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*Art is dead. There's nothing left to say.
Style is exhausted and content is
pointless. Art has no purpose. All
that's left is commodity marketing.
Consequently, I am signing this
landscape, and you can own it for a
million dollars.*

CALVIN AND HOBBS

Chapter 1

“This kinky little postmodern hat”

The purpose of this thesis is to explore postmodern traits in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride*. This undertaking can be difficult as the term “post-modernism” has often been misused and has come to mean very different things, if only because it has been very fashionable for a time. Atwood herself even says she knew postmodernism “was pretty much finished as a theoretical cutting edge when [she] saw it applied to a hat” (Appendix 97). On the other hand, postmodernist critics argue that it is in the very nature of post-modernism to elude attempts at defining it, as it negates totalitarian thinking as a whole. So the best I can do is to construct a working definition of postmodernism that takes into account its most distinctive traits, and to identify these traits in *The Robber Bride*. I acknowledge that I am merely fitting a “postmodern hat” to a novel that might be made to wear many different hats, including feminist and even postfeminist ones. However, I will also show that the hats that have been made for the novel so far are quite patchy and can hardly be said to be satisfactory.

Before I go on to define postmodernism and differentiate it from mod-

ernism by using the concept of "centres," I acknowledge that I have to simplify issues. Postmodernism and modernism are not opposites but allies against traditional realist fiction. However, in order to prove that postmodernism is at work in *The Robber Bride*, I need to contrast the two. There may be art works that do not fit the pattern, but, on the positive side, the metaphor of the "centre" provides a meaningful and effective distinction between literary styles and eras. In the case of *The Robber Bride*, the concept serves to differentiate between predominant features of modern and postmodern mindsets.

I will base the definition of postmodernism on Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Canadian Postmodern*. Lyotard's work is one of the key texts on postmodernism as a cultural event in general, and Hutcheon's books are essential in respect to the literary appearances of postmodernism especially in the Canadian context. First, let us place postmodernism in a temporal framework. As with all cultural phenomena, its origins are difficult to locate. Any specific date can only serve as a mental signpost rather than as fact. In general, then, the beginnings of postmodernism can be located between the end of the Second World War (1945) and the beginning of the Cold War (about 1960). But not every work of art produced in the postmodern age is necessarily postmodern. Indeed, many popular contemporary authors write traditional realist fiction. Clearly, postmodernism is not merely a literary period. It is also a set of stylistic features that can be identified in many texts, as my survey of Hutcheon's work on the subject will show.

When one tries to define postmodernism, one thing alone is clear: the very term *postmodernism* suggests that it is a reaction to the cultural event that precedes it, modernism. The "post" prefix works as a tag to both associate

postmodernism with and differentiate it from the modernist era. Significantly, both modernism and postmodernism can be defined as different reactions to the same cultural crisis: the condition that Hans Sedlmayr calls "the loss of the centre."¹

The "centre" here means collective Western assumptions about the role of humankind in the universe. The *Weltanschauung*, a particular philosophy or view of life, of Victorian English society, for instance, was generally based on assumptions that there was a loving God; that some people (aristocrats) were better than others (the working classes) and, therefore, had the right to rule; or that women were some higher form of animal and, therefore, had to be governed. All those assumptions contributed to a clearly defined social hierarchy that was seen as absolute.

However, this hierarchy was shaken and eventually toppled by significant cultural and historical developments that resulted in the loss of a coherent world view and an alienation from the traditional "centres" — nature, society, and religion. Humanity found itself decentred. One such development was Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), which deprived humankind of their special status in the hierarchy of the universe and put them on the same level as animals. Karl Marx also attacked the social order in his *Capital* (3 volumes, 1867, 1885, 1894) and predicted the inevitable break-down of the capitalist system. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis opened up a new, troubling vision of the human mind with its theses about the unconscious. Worshipped as a god in the Victorian Age and praised as the culmination of human excellence and even as the solution to

¹"The loss of the centre" is the English translation of the title of Sedlmayr's study on modern architecture, *Verlust der Mitte*. In this work, he shows "the loss of the centre" in architecture as a "symptom" of the modernist condition.

all problems, technology proved as fallible and insufficient as everything else. Landmarks for this break-down were the sinking of the "unsinkable" *Titanic* in 1912 and the First World War (1914–1918), which, unexpected from all sides, turned out to be the bloodiest carnage ever seen.

All of those events are helpful if we are to picture the shaken, self-conscious state in which humankind found itself at the end of the century. Modernism and postmodernism both are marked by attempts to cope with this crisis, which Milan Kundera describes through an apt question and answer: "If God is gone and man is no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void without any master" (*Art of the Novel* 41).

According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, the resulting anxiety is reflected in the arts in all major Western cultures. Often, it led to a fragmentation of the arts themselves: there were no longer particular artistic styles dominating in a certain culture (23).² Instead, artistic circles established themselves, each according to their own æsthetic ideals, all of them rejecting traditional — in Britain's case, Victorian — realism, with its consoling belief that the world can be known. However, these circles did not agree on *how* to replace the old æsthetics, and this failure to agree led to such diverse artistic styles as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and the drama of the absurd (Bradbury and McFarlane 23). Modernity, then, has by no means led to a unified movement in the arts, but to "a new consciousness, a fresh condition of the human mind" (22). For all these different movements were in-

²Sedlmayr analyzes this competition of styles in European architecture, referring to a "chaos of styles" (60). An example of this chaos would be the mock Gothicism of St. Pancras Station in London in contrast to the 'glass and steel' modernity of the Crystal Palace built for the Great Exhibition. These contradictory tastes can be seen as a "symptom" (Sedlmayr) of the fragmentation of the modernist world.

terdisciplinary, that is, not only active in the field of literature but also in the other arts, such as music and painting.

The Bloomsbury Group in London, for example, with its members ranging from Virginia Woolf to her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, and to the economist John Maynard Keynes, established their own aestheticism. Member and art critic Roger Fry caused an uproar when he organised the first British exhibition of postimpressionist — a term of his coinage ("Fry, Roger [Eliot]) — painters like Cézanne, Seurat, van Gogh, and others. The exhibition was dubbed the "artquake," and, as Woolf would write in her famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "on or about December 1910, human character changed" (5). The essay is mainly a critique of traditional novelists like Arnold Bennett, who failed, in Woolf's mind, to accurately portray a character. Using the devices of literary realism, Bennett would minutely describe every detail of the fictional Mrs. Brown's outward appearance, but he would fail to relate her thoughts and her perceptions.

Woolf's criticism of the Victorian novel is representative of the modernist approach to aesthetics. Traditional, positivistic world views became inadequate for a time when nothing could be taken for granted anymore. If very few definitive statements can be made about reality or the psychology of a person, omniscient narrators become obsolete. They are replaced by the stream of consciousness narration often employed in modernist texts.

In trying to find different, "truer" ways of narration, many modernist artists became experimental. For example, in her novel *Jacob's Room*, Woolf characterises her protagonist not by describing him from the outside, but by the rooms in which he has lived. These artists often also discard traditional plots, replacing them with different structures. In *Ulysses*, for example, James

Joyce creates patterns of colours and themes underlying the narrative: each chapter is built on specific symbols.³ In such novels, the structures that hold the narrative world together, however, are hardly perceptible: they lie below the surface of the text.

In a word, modernist artists reacted to the loss of the centre by trying various alternatives, often strategies of imposing æsthetic order as opposed to moral order. They still believed in the possibility of a transcendental signifier, something that explains the world and holds it together. They believed that an alternative centre could, perhaps, be discovered. Accordingly, at the end of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the painter Lily Briscoe finishes her painting of Mrs Ramsey by a stroke right in the *middle* (Bradbury and McFarlane 25).

Postmodernism is a reaction to the same crisis that modernism faced. It also is an attempt to overcome the loss of the centre. However, if modernist artists, hoping to find a unifying centre, tried various approaches to replace the lost one, postmodernist artists wholly disbelieve in the existence of *one* unifying centre. "The centre" is replaced by a multitude of different centres, each with its own value scheme. In a postmodern world, Catholic and Marxist centres exist side by side, even in the same space, because neither has an exclusive claim to truth, and neither is mutually exclusive except through a violent essentialism. And if, according to Lyotard, modernism nostalgically bemoans the lost centre ("Answering" 81), postmodernism celebrates the new, multicentric universe. Accordingly, postmodernism is a positive notion, a liberation from the constraints of a single dominating "master narrative," to use Lyotard's term.

The postmodern acceptance of multiple, valid centres creates a new poly-

³Harry Blamires has written an ingenuous "Guide through *Ulysses*" that helps in recognizing and decoding the underlying symbolism of the novel.

phony:⁴ several views of the world coexist. If modernism still sustains the hope for a unifying truth, even if it lies out of reach, postmodernism favours no particular version over another. Margaret Atwood expresses this postmodern spirit in *The Robber Bride*, where she offers three distinct female protagonists — Tony, the historian; Charis, the new-age mystic; and Roz, the business woman — each of whom presents different, often conflicting, views of the same events. The novel is truly postmodern in that no one character's perspective is ever validated as more right or truthful than any other.

One of the key texts of postmodernist theory that will help with the study of *The Robber Bride* is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. He wrote it as "a report on knowledge" and delivered it originally to the *Conseil des Universités* of the government of Quebec (xxv). Thus, it is not primarily concerned with the arts, but deals mainly with knowledge as information, capital, and power. Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, originates in the "breaking up of the grand Narratives," the over-arching systems of belief shared by society (15). To simplify, he defines postmodernism itself as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Since these "grand Narratives" are used to legitimate power — in particular, power over knowledge — the institutions empowered by them lose their credibility as well.

Scientific research is, perhaps, the most powerful of metanarratives to have been challenged by postmodern thought. According to Lyotard, a substantial self-consciousness has changed the ways of creating scientific knowledge. Many areas in science — for instance, quantum mechanics — merely offer models to help explain natural processes. They make no pretence to describe fact.

⁴Using a concept from musical theory, Mikhail M. Bakhtin defines literary polyphony as the achievement of an author to create multiple characters who are ideologically different from himself (20).

In this specific field, scientists have discovered that electromagnetic radiation takes different forms, quanta or photons (waves or particles), depending on the tools of measurement. This means that the way of measuring influences the results ("Physical Sciences"). If you measure photons, the result is photons; if you measure quanta, the result is quanta.⁵ Lyotard concludes:

Postmodern science — by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, "*fracta*," catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes — is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown.⁶ (60)

Lyotard also sees postmodernism celebrating the loss of the centre rather than mourning it like modernism does. He sees in the latter an elegiac nostalgia towards the loss of a coherent world view: "Modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one" ("Answering" 81). Maintaining that "the mourning process is complete," he argues: "That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost

⁵In fact, June Deery tries to find parallels between quantum mechanics and the view of history present in *The Robber Bride*, in particular the idea that "what one discovers as a historian depends on one's viewpoint in time and space." She bases her observations on "some kinship between this view of history and essential features of modern physics: relativity's foregrounding of viewpoint and the quantum mechanical notion that the observer affects and is part of the observation." However, Deery admits that Atwood does not "make these analogies explicit" (479).

⁶Interestingly, many postmodern works of literature produce the unknown, too. Historiographic metafiction, fiction dealing with the writing of historical fiction, by reflecting on its own status as text, draws attention to the constructed nature of both history and the novelistic form. By subverting novelistic traditions such as closed endings or authoritative narrations, these novels point at discontinuities in the cultural process.

narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction" (*Postmodern* 41). According to Lyotard, then, postmodernism encourages people to create their own narratives of cultural values.

According to Lyotard, the postmodern age is an era of true plurality that legitimizes minorities that failed to comply with the dominant standards and were formerly suppressed. These minorities can now create their own standards, and postmodernism as a global cultural event encompasses all of the standards of all minorities as coexisting centres. We will see how important this empowerment of minorities is for the postmodern world presented by *The Robber Bride*.

In moving from Lyotard's general theories of postmodernism to its specific manifestations in literary form, I wish to draw on Canadian critic Hutcheon's invaluable observations. She is particularly appropriate not only because she is one of the eminent theorists on postmodernism but also because she is an expert on Canadian writing. Hutcheon seems to pick up Lyotard's threads, also drawing attention to the multitude of centres afforded by this "current cultural phenomenon" (ix): "The local and the regional are stressed in the face of mass culture and a kind of vast global informational village that McLuhan could only have dreamt of. Culture (with a capital C and in the singular) has become cultures (uncapitalized and plural), as documented at length by our social scientists" (12). Seconding Lyotard, Hutcheon acknowledges that all the existing cultural systems of beliefs and values were constructed by humanity. But she argues that this fact is not only their limitation but also their legitimation (43).

Hutcheon makes a comprehensive survey of attempts to define the postmodern — including those offered by Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, and Terry Eagleton — and finds all of them insufficient. She maintains that postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (4), and quotes the title of an 1980 exhibition organized by the Venice Biennale,⁷ “The Presence of the Past,” as an important inherent concept of it. For her, postmodern writing is “fundamentally self-reflexive” (*Canadian Postmodern* 1) and self-conscious, and it uses parody extensively to signal that “literature is made . . . out of other literature.”

In differentiating between modernism and postmodernism, Hutcheon associates the former with a “search for order in the face of moral and social chaos” and the latter with an “urge to trouble, to question . . . any such desire for order and truth.” In order to succeed in this enterprise, postmodernism “both sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art.” She argues that postmodernism rethinks “modernism’s purist break with history,” but does not perform the “nostalgic return” to the past that Lyotard identifies with modernism (2).

Instead, she detects an ironic, “critical reworking” of the past, a feature she develops into the stylistic concept of “postmodern parody.” Discussing Umberto Eco’s theoretical writing and his novel *The Name of the Rose* with its ironic, intentionally anachronistic quotations, Hutcheon states:

In fact irony may be the only way we *can* be serious today. There is no innocence in our world, he suggests. We cannot ignore the

⁷An important art festival held biannually in Venice, Italy; hence the name. Hutcheon remarks that the postmodern designs presented at this exhibition showed “how architecture has been rethinking modernism’s purist break with history. This is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (4).

discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact. The "already-said" must be reconsidered and can be reconsidered only in an ironic way (in Rosso 1983, 2–5).
(*Poetics* 39)

Hutcheon's point is that parody is not merely a "ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit" but a "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). Postmodernist art's use of "parody and play" does not necessarily result in a lack of "seriousness and purpose" (27). Parody is so important to Hutcheon because it "both asserts and undercuts that which it contests," and this is why so many postmodern texts engage with "canonical texts," such as the Bible (*Canadian Postmodern* 7).

Indeed, the concept of parody is important for Hutcheon's reading of Margaret Atwood, who often parodies the Bible in Hutcheon's sense. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also in *Alias Grace*, several characters question the grand narratives the Bible encodes. In the former, a dystopian society is built upon various accounts of the Bible, but the resulting system contradicts Christian doctrine. Hutcheon points out how, in addition to Atwood's use of parody, she makes use of postmodern irony: irony that refuses to resolve contraries, such as body / mind, nature / culture, instinct / reason, time / space, female / male, lyric poetry / prose narrative (*Canadian Postmodern* 4). Enlarging Stan Fogel's observation of Atwood's obsession with "character formation and the difficulty of maintaining ontological security" in contemporary women's writing in general, Hutcheon remarks that before they can question it, women must first assert their subjectivity in the terms they have been denied

by the liberal humanist tradition (5–6). The result is a postmodern “double act of (literally) ‘inscribing’ and challenging subjectivity” (6).

This play of irony and parody, of assertion and questioning, of construction and deconstruction, is also at work when it comes to the question of whether artists’ political commitments prevent them from writing postmodern texts. One might argue that artists devoted to a particular cause cannot free themselves sufficiently to create open and self-reflexive postmodern texts that allow for multicentricity in the worlds they create. One political cause often associated with Atwood is feminism. True, Atwood’s writings are very much concerned with the role of women and their rights, but she never oversimplifies the subject. For example, in the dystopia created in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the men are victims too; in this system, all of the characters are trapped, and none of them are satisfied with their lives. In *The Robber Bride*, the women are the strong and interesting characters, but they have to cope with their own insufficiencies, and their nemesis is a woman herself, Zenia. Atwood enters new feminist territory by creating a female villain. She herself explains:

I was sitting around one day thinking to myself, Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone? Gone to Ophelias, every one, leaving the devilish tour-de-force parts to be played by bass-baritones. Or, to put it another way: If all women are well behaved by nature—or if we aren’t allowed to say otherwise for fear of being accused of antifemaleism—then they are deprived of moral choice, and there isn’t much left for them to do in books except run away a lot. Or, to put it another way: *Equality* means equally bad as well as equally good. (Shannon Hengen 276)

Atwood has no interest to produce stereotypic characters or to propagate partic-

ular role models. Her writing does not come out of a simplistic political agenda, and her allegiance to certain critical schools of thought must not prevent the reader from overlooking the postmodern nature of her work. Yes, she deals with feminist issues, but her writing is dialectical, and it problematizes rather than judges. As Shannon Hengen puts it, *The Robber Bride* is postfeminist in the sense that it addresses not only feminist issues but also postmodern and postcolonial issues (276).

Most critical readings of *The Robber Bride*, however, fail to recognize its multicentricity and the consequent relativity of all statements made in the novel: no statement is backed by the voice of an omniscient narrator, for instance. These readings fail because they do not take into account narratological and postmodern concepts significant to the construction of the text. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, for instance, is not equipped with the narratological sophistication necessary to understand how the text works. She identifies an "anonymous narrator" that "plunges into the past to relate episodes from each protagonist's childhood" (165). She does not take focalization and perspective into account at all (see page 19). Coral Ann Howells disregards the novel's ambiguity when she takes for granted that Zenia committed suicide. She also bases her interpretation of the novel mostly on statements from Tony's account, and therefore neglects the interplay of voices in the novel. Thus she does not see Tony, Charis, and Roz as the three distinct centres they really are. J. Brooks Bouson provides a helpful reading of *The Robber Bride* by studying it through the paradigm of "victim feminism." Bouson investigates the custom-tailored stories Zenia delivers to the protagonists and the way Zenia mirrors the unfulfilled sides of their personalities, all to show how the novel deconstructs the validity of victim feminism. Hilde Staels offers a valuable close

study of the novel and appreciates its "indeterminacy" (205) but does not go further in identifying its multicentricity in the postmodern context.

Many critics and reviewers search for a representative, legitimized voice for the novel. Some of them still commit the fatal blunder of identifying the voice they find as that of the author, making bold statements like "[i]n Miss Atwood's bleak world, the only good man is a gay man" (Maggie Gallagher). But even after replacing "Miss Atwood" with "the narrator," the problem remains the same. There is no central agent in *The Robber Bride* who would validate such a statement. Reviewers like Gallagher have not realized that the matter of what makes a "good man" very much depends on the point of view, and *The Robber Bride* offers several of those, none of them more valid than the others. What is more, these individual view points are not at all reliable but limited and problematic, as a closer look will disclose. Again, there is no omniscient narrator in the novel to validate any such essentializing claims.

There is no representative voice in the novel because, like many other successful novelists, Atwood avoids giving answers and asks questions instead. In many interviews she says, if she had a particular message to convey, she would be writing "how to" guides instead of novels. *The Robber Bride's* polyphony, so important to the postmodern, may even be a result of Atwood's attempt not to generalize women. She has always resisted pigeon-holing of her writing as "feminist" by saying that "[t]here is no single, simple, static 'women's point of view.' Let's just say that good writing of any kind by anyone is surprising, intricate, strong, sinuous" (Earl E. Ingersoll 242). As this study will demonstrate through a postmodern reading, Atwood's novel successfully fulfils these criteria and resists essentialist, simplifying readings.

Having established a working definition of the postmodern for the pur-

poses of this study, I will now proceed in chapter 2 to examine the structure of *The Robber Bride* and the narrative devices that make it postmodern. This is a preparation for chapter 3, which has a threefold purpose. First, it examines the novel's polyphony. Secondly, it shows how the characters themselves are caught between modernist and postmodernist impulses, searching for meaningful centres in their lives. And thirdly, it deals with Zenia, the elusive focal point of the protagonists' failed searches for the centre. The chapter will show her as the point of postmodern indeterminacy. Chapter 4 provides a conclusion for the thesis. As an appendix to the thesis, I add an interview with Margaret Atwood that I had the chance to conduct when she came to Wolfville for a reading in May 1999.

*Though this be madness, yet there is
method in't. Will you walk out of the
air, my lord?*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

Chapter 2

Narrative Techniques and Structure

To discern some postmodern features of *The Robber Bride*, this chapter will deal with the way the novel works from a narratological point of view. It will analyze the use of stream of consciousness, focalization, and structure in *The Robber Bride*. The structure will be investigated in three ways: first, by looking at the novel's regular division in parts and chapters, then, at the frame narratives used to tell the story, and, lastly, at the time scheme.

An important difference between pre-modernist, modernist, and post-modernist writing is novelistic structure: traditional realist fiction is most frequently highly structured in terms of chronology, plot, and character development, whereas modernist and postmodernist texts are less structured in these terms. Traditional novels often follow cause-effect relationships and arrange time in a logical manner. On the one hand, modernist and postmodernist novels try to be truer to time: by this I mean they are more concerned with the effect of time on the characters, and, as a result, time seems to be an irrational and illogical force.¹ When one thinks of the fragmented world of mod-

¹Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a good example of a novel that deconstructs this notion of seeing time as linear. The novel consists of three parts, part 1 and part 3, almost equally

ernism, this challenging of traditional structure is not surprising. On the other hand, postmodernism often parodies traditional writing by using its devices to demonstrate their limitations. This is one area where postmodern parody, in Hutcheon's sense, is at work.

Modernist writers introduced many literary devices that postmodernist writers continue to use for different purposes. Therefore, the mere fact that a particular literary text uses those devices does not make it either modernist or postmodernist but sets it apart from pre-modernist writing. Such narrative techniques would be open-endedness, polyphony, unreliable narrators, and the stream of consciousness technique (concepts described by Wayne C. Booth, Gérard Genette, and others). All these devices set modernist and postmodernist texts apart from traditional texts that tend to use traditional first person and omniscient third person narrators who are for the most part reliable.

The most innovative of these devices is, perhaps, the use of stream of consciousness, a presentation of a character's mental processes such as thoughts, memories, or impressions. The stream of consciousness technique enables a writer to give deeper *inside views*, to use Booth's term (163),² of a character's mind than possible by a non-psychological approach. Booth cites critic Robert Humphreys, who "summarizes the purpose of all stream-of-consciousness writers as the effort to reveal 'the psychic being of the characters,' an attempt to 'analyze human nature,' to present 'character more accurately and more realistically'" (54). The effect of this technique is usually

long, making up most of the text. The two parts each narrate a time span of a few months. Part 2 is placed right in the middle of novel, narrating a time span of ten years on only about a dozen pages. In this novel, Woolf opposes the realist convention of having a linear flow of time by only relating the events she considers important to the characters. She also violates the notion that a part of a book should be of a certain length to reflect its status.

²Booth does not define the opposite of an inside view. For the purpose of this study I will use "outside view" in an analogous manner.

an immediacy in the narration. Stream of consciousness also helps in the creation of literary polyphony. Polyphony here means a 'plurality of voices' in a text: it enables writers to create different consciousnesses and have them compete with each other. Compared to monodic texts, texts mediated by a single narrator, polyphonic texts using *inside views* can create effects otherwise only possible in drama. Only in the theatre can characters speak their minds in soliloquies, seemingly free of any mediation. Hence, drama is a truly polyphonic medium. In prose writing, polyphony can be emulated and extended by multiple inside views. Of course, traditional novels feature different voices as well, but they are likely to be mediated by a single narrator. What is more, many traditional novels are not interested in the psychology of minor characters, but only use them to develop the plot further.³

The particular stream of consciousness technique used to portray inside views in *The Robber Bride* is *free indirect discourse*. It combines third-person and first-person narrative point of view. A character's thoughts are presented indirectly, but almost literally in his or her diction; typical features of the character's direct speech or thought, such as diction and syntax, are combined with characteristics of the narrator's indirect report, such as third person form and tenses. Thus, free indirect discourse most frequently takes the form of the third person singular, uses the past tense, and rarely includes *discourse tags* ("he thought"). As a result, there is little or no authorial intrusion. Compared to other stream of consciousness techniques like interior monologue, free indirect discourse is normally less grammatically idiosyncratic. The following is a comparison between direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse:

³E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* defines "flat" versus "round" characters serving this particular purpose. An example of a monodic novel in the above sense is *Moll Flanders*, which hardly develops any characters besides Moll.

Direct discourse: She thought, 'I will stay here
tomorrow.'

Indirect discourse: She thought that she would stay
there the following day.

Free indirect discourse: She would stay here tomorrow.

The Robber Bride is narrated mostly in the third style, reproducing the character's grammatical idiosyncrasies. A typical example is found when Roz, the protagonist most concerned with social standing, recalls her first date with her upper-class future husband, Mitch: "Once they'd made it past the door it turned out that Mitch didn't have a car, and what was the etiquette? Was she supposed to offer hers, or what?" (310). Adjust the personal pronouns to the first person, and you can almost hear Roz speak. Narratorial comment is almost totally absent: the reader never knows if the characters' assertions are right or wrong because the narrator does not intervene to assert truth in the narrative. Instead, we have Tony's own voice set against Charis's and Roz's, and, *vice versa*, creating a true postmodern polyphony. We shall see how distinct these three voices are in chapter 3.

A crucial distinction in narrative discourse is the one between the narrator, who tells, and the *focalizer*, who sees. More precisely, the focalizer is the viewpoint character, and the grammatical subject of the verbs of perception: "JOHN *saw* her come out of the building, but somehow she *looked* different to *him* today." Genette distinguishes three kinds of focalization: zero focalisation if the story is told by an omniscient narrator who does not participate in the story, external focalization if there is no narration of mental processes (outside view), and internal focalization if there is narration of mental processes (inside

view).⁴ Genette subdivides internal focalization further, as either variable or multiple. It is variable if there are several focal characters relating different events. In the other case, "the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several . . . characters" (*Narrative Discourse* 190), which Genette refers to as *multiple focalization*.⁵

In *The Robber Bride*, The different episodes are seen through the eyes of either Tony, Charis, or Roz. Tony tells about life in McClung hall, Charis about life on the island, and Roz about her business. Some specific events, however, are presented by each of the women at different points in the narrative, revealing their different perceptions. Take, for example, Zenia's first memorial service, which Tony, Charis, and Roz locate in time differently. On the day Zenia returns, we learn from Tony that "Zenia's memorial service was five years ago, or four and a half. It was in March. Tony can recall the day perfectly, a wet grey day that turned into sleet later" (10). She then gives a detailed depiction of the event. Since Tony's account dates from October 1990, the service must have been in March 1986. However, when Charis recounts Zenia's service in bits and pieces, she states that Zenia "had been dead for five years" (47). Her memory may not be as exact as Tony's, and she is not, in general, so much concerned with accuracy as Tony is. Consequently, one may be tempted to trust Tony's version. However, Roz's account calls Tony's further into question. Roz chronologically recounts the time before and after Zenia's fake death, and the reader learns that she let Zenia into her world in 1983. Zenia and Mitch's affair lasts "several months" before Zenia escapes to London and Mitch follows her.

⁴According to Genette, a canonical example of the former is Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," and of the latter, Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, where "everything passes through Strether" (*Narrative Discourse* 190).

⁵As prime examples of this type, he cites epistolary novels, in which "the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several letter-writing characters."

He does not find her (or so he says) and comes back around Valentine's Day the following year. "Then, in drizzly March, Zenia dies. Is killed in Lebanon, blown up by a bomb; comes back in a tin can, and is buried" (383). If Roz's memory is accurate, Zenia had her service in March 1984; she dates the funeral two years earlier than does Tony (see page 30). Nowhere in the novel is this discrepancy resolved. And what we have here is an example of one way in which multiple focalization can be used to fracture and interrogate conventional narrative time lines.

Clearly, the novel uses both variable and multiple focalization. The effect is to create three distinct world views. Each of the women sees herself as Zenia's prime target, and the novel conveys this sense by letting them speak for themselves. Any comment or value judgment in the discourse, then, is made by the particular character, and reflects her personal view with all its preoccupations and limitations, resulting from the character's position in time and space, and from her personal agenda. For instance, think about Tony's observation that her husband West is only "on loan" from Zenia, that he is "rightfully hers" (190, 193). This view clashes with what Tony learns from West after seeing Zenia dead: about one week later, when she confronts him with renewed suspicions about him and Zenia, West shoves them away lightly and tells her "I like it that you're jealous . . . but you don't need to be. She's nothing, any more" (449). If one chooses to believe West, and there is no evidence of his insincerity, Tony has simply misjudged his character. West's version of the story would sound quite different, probably. Because there is so little intervention of authorial comment in the novel, constructing the characters' opinions first and then de-constructing them later becomes a game *The Robber Bride* plays with the reader.

As a rule, postmodernist texts are far less structured than realist or even modernist texts. The very nature of postmodernism with its emphasis on indeterminacy demands a rejection of structure. However, Hutcheon identifies a counter-current, at least in the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction:

In the wake of recent assaults by literary and philosophical theory on modernist formalist closure, postmodern fiction has certainly sought to open itself up to history, to what Edward Said (1983) calls the "world." But it seems to have found that it can no longer do so in any remotely innocent way, and so those uninnocent paradoxical historiographic metafictions situate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction. . . . The textual incorporation of these intertextual pasts as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of history — both literary and "worldly." (*Poetics* 124)

Thus, extending the point beyond historiographic metafiction to fiction in general, postmodernist artists seem to feel that as much as they wish to free themselves from the established structures of story-telling, they have to deal with them nevertheless. This logic results in postmodern parody in Hutcheon's sense. By parodying novelistic tradition, a highly structured narrative calls attention to its fictitious nature.

How does this concern with general structure apply to Atwood's novel? *The Robber Bride* is almost symmetrically divided into parts and chapters: the "Onset," consisting of one chapter, opens up the story using Tony's voice. The first "Toxique" section, containing fifteen chapters or five chapters per protag-

onist, tells the events of the day when Tony, Charis, and Roz learn that Zenia is still alive from each point of view. This section thus introduces the order of narration — Tony, Charis, Roz — that is followed almost throughout the book. Then the three main narratives follow, containing eleven chapters per character. Tony's section, "Black Enamel," is about her student life in McClung Hall and how she meets her future husband West and Zenia. In this part of the novel, Tony recounts her childhood story to Zenia. The section also describes how Tony wins West, loses him to Zenia, and wins him again. Charis's section is entitled "Weasel Nights" and relates how Charis allows Zenia to stay with her and Charis's boyfriend Billy. Zenia's presence lets Charis's suppressed childhood come to the surface before Zenia leaves Charis together with Billy. Roz's section, "The Robber Bride," narrates how Zenia managed to enter Roz's life. Again, Zenia provides a hook for the novel to disclose Roz's childhood as a displaced person. Furthermore, this part of the book depicts Zenia's fake and Roz's husband Mitch's real death. The second "Toxique" section, containing six chapters, deals with events up to the discovery of Zenia's dead body. The first chapter of this section tells a dream of each protagonist. The following three chapters narrate how, in turn, Tony, Charis, and Roz confront Zenia at the hotel. The fifth chapter relates how the women discover Zenia's dead body. The sixth and last chapter in this part narrates how Tony, Charis, and Roz get home and are able to dismiss some of Zenia's lies. Finally, the "Outcome" consists of two chapters, one about Tony's reflections on Zenia's elusiveness and one about Zenia's memorial service.

One could argue that in the last chapter of the novel the extensive patterning weakens in several ways: first, it breaks the symmetry of the one chapter "Onset" and the two chapter "Outcome." Secondly, while Tony is able to

open up the story of *The Robber Bride* single-handedly, she needs Charis's and Roz's voices to intermingle with hers to close it. Or, one could argue, Charis and Roz intrude as focalizers into the last chapter that rightfully belongs to Tony. The polyphony in this chapter demonstrates by its structure that Tony cannot finish her undertaking, telling Zenia's story, alone. Thirdly, this last chapter disrupts the sequence of narration to which the novel has accustomed the reader. In all the preceding sections each chapter features a single focalizer; in the last chapter, however, the focalization shifts between characters from paragraph to paragraph. The order in this chapter is: Tony (paragraphs 1–3), Charis (4), Roz (5), Tony (6), Roz (7), Charis (8), Roz (9), Tony with a brief reflection of Charis in between (10–11). The quick shift of focalization from one character to another and the disruption of sequence deconstruct the sense of control established by the regular pattern before. The increasing instability of narration calls attention to the indeterminacy of the protagonists' accounts, thereby marking the insufficiencies of structure imposed on the events.

A number of phrases in the text derived from traditional story-telling both strengthen the structure of the novel as well as subvert it by their clichéd nature. Some of those phrases are repeated and varied, and thus become signposts to the reader, signalling which part of the story is currently being told. The phrases remind readers that they are reading fiction rather than fact. The following are examples of these phrases: "The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began" (3), "[t]he history of Charis and Zenia began. . ." (201), and "[t]he story of Roz and Zenia began. . ." (296). The first phrase is the first sentence of the novel. It does not fulfil its promise because Tony starts thinking about when Zenia's story begins and gives up because she does not know. In Charis's and Roz's case, the phrases begin new chapters, going back in time to

when they have met Zenia. The phrases cut off the previous narratives unexpectedly. One may gather the impression that Charis and Roz have reached a point in their stories where they can no longer ignore Zenia's role in their lives and have to fill in details. They seem to delve into their stories with Zenia *reluctantly*, and the structure of the novel forces them on. Another of the structural markers is the cliché opening phrase "once upon a time," which occurs twice (268, 318). In the first case, it is merely used rhetorically but in the second, it works like the examples above. I will look at it more closely in the section on Roz (see page 67).

The Robber Bride uses a rigid structure and clichéd phrases from storytelling to point out its own nature as a history shaped by a human brain. We can say the narrator of *The Robber Bride* imposes the rigid structure on the events rather than that the events demand the structure. We can identify this awareness as part of the fictional self-consciousness which Hutcheon distinguishes as a feature of postmodernist writing.

Since *The Robber Bride* makes use of a number of different levels of narration, a definition and discussion of narrative levels or frame narratives is useful for a postmodern analysis. Genette defines narrative levels in relation to the *diegesis*, the fictional world created by the narrative, by saying that "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed" (228, his italics). In other words, a story is placed one level higher than its narrator. Genette further distinguishes narrative levels by dividing them in two, *extradiegetic* and *intradiegetic* levels of narrative.⁶ *Extradiegetic* narrators tell a story with-

⁶Genette also differentiates between *homodiegetic* and *heterodiegetic* narrators. Homodiegetic narrators take part in the story they tell, whereas heterodiegetic narrators tell a story without being part of it. This distinction is one of "relationship to the story," however, and not

out being characters in the diegesis of the story they tell. They are on the same level as the narratee (the reader), situated outside of the diegesis. *Intradiegetic narrators*, on the other hand, are a fictional part of the diegesis; they are characters in the story told by the extradiegetic narrator (see figure 2.1 on the following page). In other words, an intradiegetic narrator is telling an embedded narrative while participating in the primary narrative.⁷ Important to the discussion of frame narratives is that embedded narratives can embed other narratives, and these count as narrative levels in the above sense. To illustrate how embedded narratives work, Genette uses *The Thousand and One Nights*. In the primary narrative, the extradiegetic narrator tells the story of Scheherazade, who, in turn, becomes an intradiegetic narrator and tells the story of Sinbad.

The framework above can be used to analyze the intricate layers of frame narratives in *The Robber Bride* (see figure 2.2 on the next page). Tony's short "Onset" and "Outcome" sections, with her perspective from November 1991 are the outer frame narrative. Then, we have the three accounts of the "Toxique" section which narrate the events of the day Zenia returns from the dead in October 1990 and which are told practically in present tense, without using frame narratives, except for the occasional flashback (for instance, to Zenia's memorial service). After that there are the three main sections, Tony's "Black Enamel," Charis's "Weasel Nights," and Roz's "The Robber Bride." These sections are told from the perspective of that same day in 1990 following the pro-

one of narrative level (248). Importantly, characters can have different functions: they can tell their own stories (making them homodiegetic narrators) and yet be extradiegetic narrators, because as narrators they exist on the same level as the reader, outside the diegesis.

⁷Genette refers to embedded narratives as "metanarratives," but because critic Mieke Bal inverts the term and uses it to designate the primary narrative, I avoid confusion and speak consistently of primary and embedded narratives.

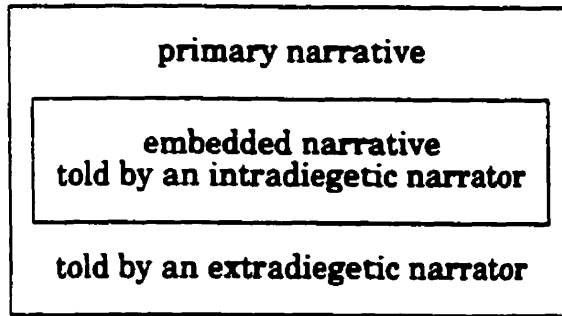


Figure 2.1: Intradiegetic vs. extradiegetic narrator

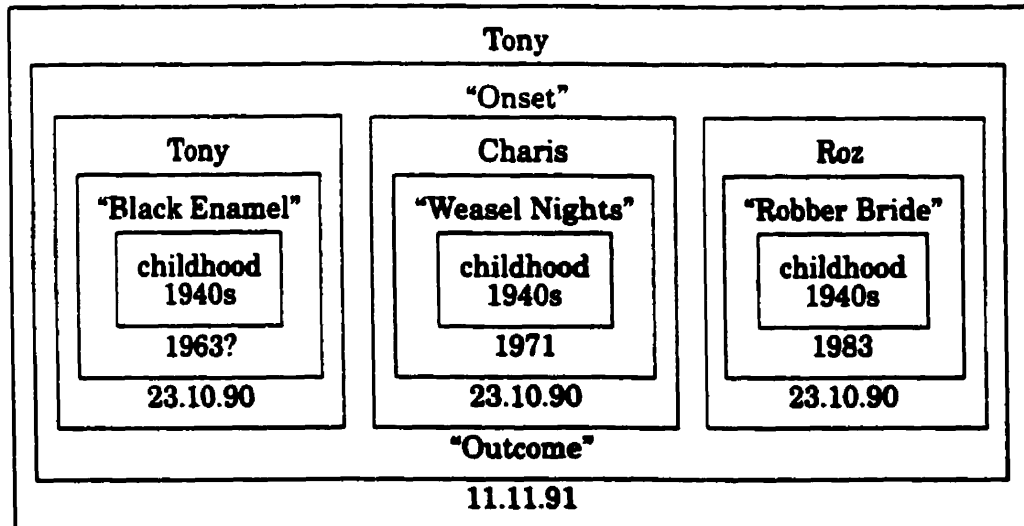


Figure 2.2: Frame narratives

tagonists' encounter with Zenia.

"Black Enamel" takes the reader back to the early Sixties, to the time when Tony, Charis, and Roz used to live in McClung Hall. There, in a coffeshop, Tony tells Zenia about her childhood in the 1940s. The same thing happens in Charis's and Roz's sections: Charis's suppressed childhood as Karen emerges while Zenia is staying with her and Billy in 1971, and Roz's childhood emerges while she is browsing through her children's old books in 1983. In other words, the story of a protagonist's childhood is embedded in the story of her young adult life, which is embedded in the story of how she reacts to Zenia's reappearance, which is embedded in Tony's "Onset" and "Outcome" wrappers. Constructed like a Russian doll, *The Robber Bride* makes use of no less than four such levels.

The differences in narrative level open up interesting questions about the *narrative distance* in these stories, which is defined as the amount of time between the narrating and the experiencing character, or the *focaliser*. Can Tony reliably remember and narrate how she *remembers telling Zenia* of events that had happened up to fifty years before? She herself, the one of the three who is "daunted by the impossibility of accurate reconstruction" (461), wonders at times if she is telling the story as it happened or out of a retrospective "overcomplication" (130). But the others also catch themselves sometimes at shaping their stories. Roz's and Zenia's story

began on a lovely day in May, in 1983, when the sun was shining and the birds were singing and Roz was feeling terrific.

Well, not quite terrific. Baggy, to tell the truth. . . .

Also: the story of Roz and Zenia had actually begun some time before, inside Zenia's head, but Roz had no idea. (296)

Starting off with a pure cliché, Roz realizes that her memory is playing tricks on her and that she is telling a different story than the one she wants to tell. So, she corrects herself. She acknowledges right away that substantial parts of the story are unknown to her and, consequently, that she has to do some guess work in telling it. To summarize, one has to be aware that all of the accounts are coloured by the narrating character's situation, and since there is no omniscient intrusion on the narrative, the whole text of *The Robber Bride* is ultimately unreliable.

As well as having a complex structure and multilayered frame narratives, there is a similarly complex time scheme in the novel. Figure 2.3 on the following page shows the chapters and subdivisions, and the dates in which they are set.⁸ The first thing one notices is the fragmentary nature of the narrative: it could hardly move further away from a strictly chronological sequence of, say, a classic *Bildungsroman* that begins at birth and ends with the character's fulfilment of their destiny.

The form alone stresses the narratological playfulness of *The Robber Bride*. Such playfulness in form is typical of modernist and postmodernist texts directed against the nineteenth-century realist novel, which often features a voice telling what happened from beginning to end. The flashback technique that *The Robber Bride* employs is much closer to human consciousness than pure chronology: stories are told from memory, and memories are often triggered by certain events in the present. The most obvious example of the flashback technique centres on Zenia, whose return triggers memories in every protagonist. And because so much of the story is related by memory,

⁸Since the date references are often vague in *The Robber Bride*, I had to approximate many of them. This should make no difference, however. Also, in order to retain legibility, I had to ignore some of the minor flashbacks in the novel.

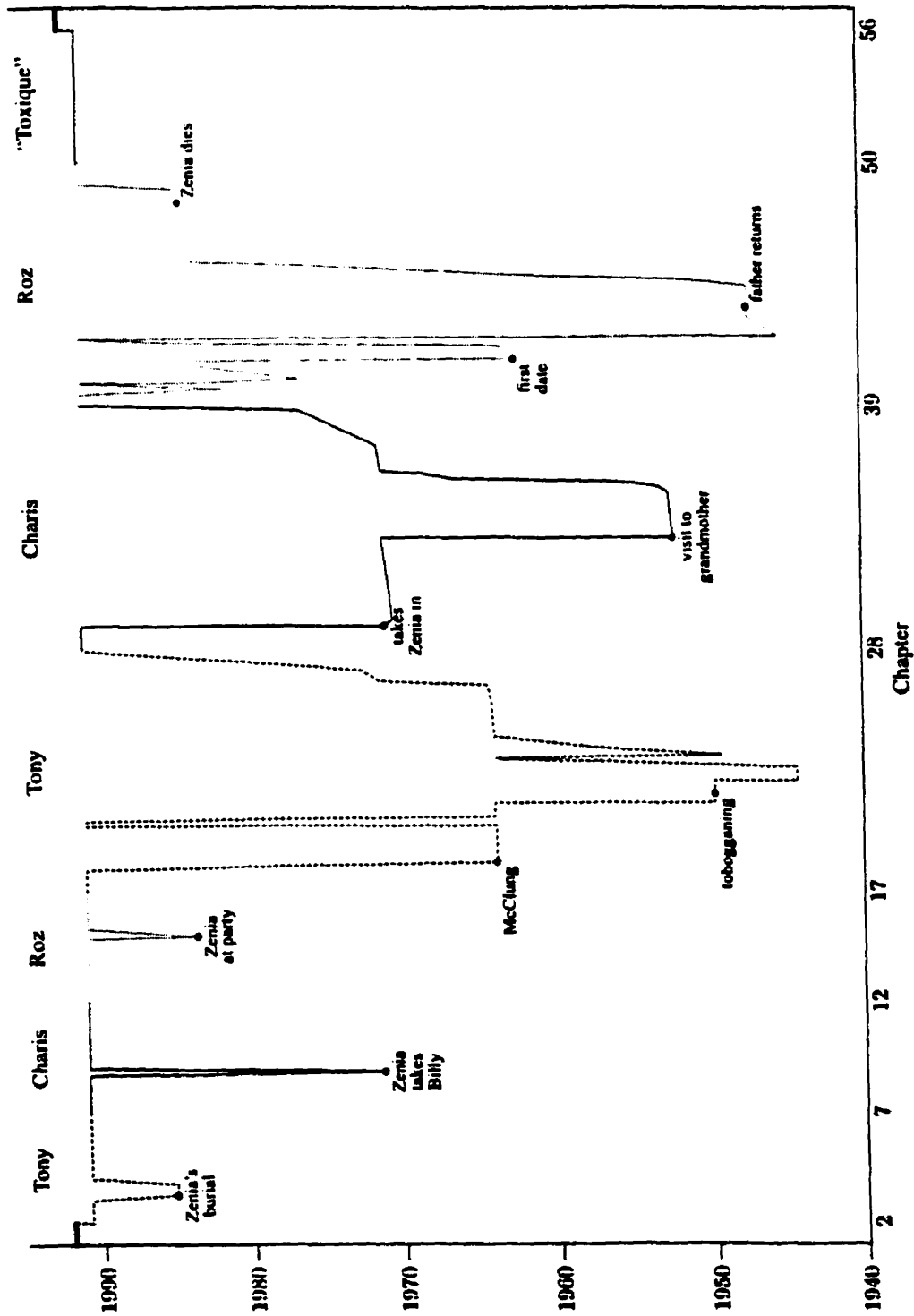


Figure 2.3: The time structure of *The Robber Bride*

most of the time references remain vague. Time is not absolute but a construct that helps the human consciousness to create patterns and hence to navigate the world. While the omniscient narrator in a pre-modern novel can provide the reader with exact temporal references, here, the narrator only provides the reader with pieces of the respective focalizer's memory.

The fragmentary nature of a character's memory is revealed in vague versus precise references. Tony, Charis, and Roz seldom remember the dates of particular episodes, tying them to more vague temporal markers, such as holidays or how old their children were at the time. The protagonists' chronological references become more exact as they grow older presumably because time management becomes more important to them as adults. They remember events from their childhood only vaguely, let them blur into each other, and fail to assign specific dates to these events. Unlike childhood and adolescent experiences, the characters' adult experiences are frequently precisely located. Certain events are hard-wired with particular dates in the focalizers' minds. Tony explicitly chooses Remembrance Day for Zenia's second memorial service, and thus places an arbitrary marker in her construction of time. The text thus acknowledges in a way consistent with its postmodern agenda that time is not merely there, but constructed by the human mind. The text's constant shifts between present and past narrative tense disclose how the characters experience the past and how far they manage to distance themselves from it.

The diagram shows that a large part of the novel narrates events between Zenia's reappearance and her death about one week later, which is a very short period when compared with the overall temporal scope. The abrupt flashbacks, represented in the diagram by (nearly) vertical lines, point out their arbitrariness and thus the degree to which characters mentally manipulate

time. For instance, we can assume that Tony would be telling a very different story if she had fleshed out her happy but presumably uneventful marriage with West, which lasted for many years before Zenia's return. As it is, she deals with this time in merely a few paragraphs with the effect that, in her story, she seems to stumble from disaster to disaster, thanks to Zenia.

Thus, the novel points out how important point of view is to any history, and that a character's experience of time is not at all as objective as the traditional concepts of time suggest. *The Robber Bride* uses focalization and different narrative levels and speeds to present its readers with fragmented and arbitrarily organized time.

The fragmentation of the story represents the fragmentation of the post-modern world. Simple systems of order like chronology do not apply anymore. Postmodernism exposes such systems as constructed and shows how easily they can come apart. If Lyotard speaks of postmodernism as "the breakdown of the grand narratives," *The Robber Bride* makes the same point: first, one protagonist constructs her story as a "grand narrative" with vigour and conviction, and then the next section, told from a different vantage point, deconstructs the status of its predecessor by opening up a totally different view. In the end, there is no "grand narrative" in *The Robber Bride*, only three competing narratives.

*Champagne for my real friends,
and real pain for my sham friends.*

TOM WAITS

Chapter 3

Tony, Charis, and Roz as Postmodern Centres

3.1 A multicentric universe

The narratological analysis in the preceding chapter serves as groundwork for the focus on Tony, Charis, and Roz in this chapter. In the postmodern spirit, the novel discards chronology and instead tells the story by numerous flashbacks and flashforwards on multiple levels. The use of multiple and variable focalization permits the non-intrusive narrator to create the protagonists as three distinct voices or centres in the text. By centre I mean a character's *Weltanschauung*, her value-system; in other words, the universe she creates in her account. The accounts of Tony, Charis, and Roz are balanced in the sense that the narrator does not favour any one in particular. *The Robber Bride* creates a multicentric universe opposed to the monocentric universes of pre-postmodernist novels.

This chapter will provide a close reading of the main protagonists in *The Robber Bride* to discover how each constructs her own version of the truth. A closer look at how the protagonists create themselves in their stories will

demonstrate how far they are from being “omniscient,” how they are restricted in their views by their personal histories, and how they are at times overwhelmed by their situations. The three accounts do not add up to a coherent whole, nor do they totally contradict each other. None of the three characters is able to claim the whole truth for herself.

When speaking about the protagonists’ discourses as postmodern centres, one must recognize a problem in the form of Zenia. Doubtless, Zenia occupies a central position in the novel; is she, therefore, not the novel’s secret *modernist* centre that lies out of reach, as the searchers for it have to discover? Is *The Robber Bride* just a modernist work after all? The answer is no: Zenia is not the centre, but the protagonists try to construct her as such. Each of them sees Zenia as the lost centre of her world, her personal nemesis. Margaret Atwood herself comments that Zenia “gets the projections of the others’ psychic material. That’s what happens with charismatic people. They do attract other people’s psychic material” (Donna Seaman 899). Thus, instead of looking at the real Zenia, the protagonists each create their own version by projecting parts of their unconscious onto her. What is more, in death, Zenia escapes any further attempt for others to understand her significance.

All three of the protagonists are typical modernist figures in the beginning. They are on a quest for the truth. Tony, for a start, wishes that Zenia were “a knot”: “if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone involved, and for herself as well” (3). Charis has exactly the same longing. She wants to find Zenia and ask her the one question that dominates her thinking: “*What did they do with Billy?* ... She is the only one who *knows*” (50, my emphasis).

Roz’s case is different: her account deals mostly with how she experi-

ences the loss of the centre of her life, literally, when Zenia elopes with her husband Mitch, an act that eventually leads to his death. She even describes her lost centre metaphorically, as “[t]he blank; the empty man-shaped outline left by Mitch” (390). Like a modernist quester, Roz tries a number of different ways to cope with the loss of the centre and hopes to substitute it with something else. At first, she hires the private detective Harriet to bring the truth to light while playing down her urge to know the truth as just giving in “to her gnawing hunger for dirt” (372). However, when Roz receives the results of Harriet’s work, she comes to realize that “[k]nowing about the flimsiness of Zenia’s façade is no help to [her] at all” (373). Subsequently, to overcome her crisis, Roz calls experts in different fields for help: first, she searches for help from a psychiatrist. Second, she hopes for help from a doctor: to combat her sleeplessness, she gets a general practitioner to prescribe her sleeping pills and, because she takes an overdose, she is treated in hospital. Third, she allows Charis to practice her spiritualist powers of healing on her. Fourth, she benefits from the powers of friendship by having Tony stay with her. And lastly, she longs nostalgically for pre-modern times, considering the benefits of “arranged marriages” (390).

All of the protagonists’ attempts at finding the key to their problems are unsuccessful in the end. Tony does not find the “loose end” that unravels it all. Charis never learns for certain what happened to Billy. And Roz never finds a way to cope with the “blank” in her life. However, all three of them benefit in some way from Zenia’s death: Tony can at least impose some closure on Zenia’s story, given her limited knowledge. Charis is finally able to accept her *alter ego*, Karen, as a part of herself. And Roz, without being able to explain it, can finally feel like “a widow” and “something more, something beyond that”

(467). In addition to gaining some relief, Tony, Charis, and Roz all seem to have progressed from the modernist to the postmodernist state of mind. They start out on the modernist quest for their own truth and come to learn that this kind of truth does not exist.

To summarize, *The Robber Bride* creates three modernist characters at the beginning, who function as the novel's centres. Each of the characters believes she has the key to understanding the world in which she lives. *The Robber Bride* as a postmodern text works in two ways: firstly, the totalizing centres of Tony, Charis, and Roz are deconstructed when set against each other. The resulting contradictions point out the limitations and indeterminacies of each approach. Yet one cannot discard any account as a whole. By presenting the characters' formation as personages, i.e. their childhoods, *The Robber Bride* legitimizes each account. Their personal histories do not only limit their views but also justify them: Tony's physical weakness legitimizes her attempt to explore the physical world in theoretical ways. Charis's childhood experiences of violence legitimize her desire to shun any form of violence in adult life. Roz's upbringing as a "displaced person" legitimizes her desire to read the world in terms of alienation. As Hutcheon says, the constructed nature of cultural systems is not only their limitation but also their legitimation (*Poetics* 43). The novel shows *how* Tony, Charis, and Roz think and *why* they think this way. Then, it places the three stories side by side as multiple centres in a postmodern world.

The second way *The Robber Bride* works as a postmodern text is by having Tony, Charis, and Roz come to realize how their essentializing convictions about the world and their (modernist) Gnosticism — that is, their positivistic belief in transcendental knowledge — fail to explain the world. They learn this

through Zenia, who thwarts their expectations and never answers their questions. The protagonists realize that there is no truth to be learned and that they have to create their own versions of reality out of available pieces of truth.

Hence, this study of postmodernism in *The Robber Bride* involves a closer character study of Tony, Charis, and Roz, firstly to point out how their construction as multiple centres works, and secondly to show how their quest for meaning is frustrated. We will see just how differently Tony, Charis, and Roz think when we look at themes predominant in each of their accounts. These are, in particular, how they experience their bodies and how they use language.

The human, or female, body plays a crucial role in the novel, as it does in postmodernism. Postmodernism, in fact, tries to escape physical identity by foregrounding the social norms that are inscribed on it. Alluquere Rosanne Stone argues that our bodies are already mediated in everyday life as a site for the inscription of social / cultural rules, beliefs, and norms. She calls this socially-created body the legible body:

The legible body is the social, rather than the physical, body; the legible body displays the social meaning of "body" on its surface, presenting a set of cultural codes that organize the ways the body is apprehended and that determine the range of socially appropriate responses. (41)

Most significant is the shift from the physical to the social body in cyberspace, for instance in internet chat rooms. In computer-mediated space, the physical side of the self disappears and the self creates a new legible body to interact with the virtual world. The need for a virtual body derives from the feeling that the real body is an inaccurate reflection of the self. However, in postmodernism

the real body constantly challenges the self's attempts to escape it.

We will see that in *The Robber Bride*, the protagonists try to create new bodies for themselves in the above sense. However, because their physical natures intervene, they have to negotiate the way they experience themselves as physical entities. We shall see how they use these entities to interact with the world. Specifically, we shall see that Tony neglects her body in favour of her illusionary *alter ego*, Tnomerf Ynot. Charis places significant emphasis on her body when she thinks it is the only thing in the world she is able to change. She too experiences her body as a hindrance because she bumps into things and tries to make it "lighter" (216). Roz takes a totally different view: despite her power in business, she cannot overcome the traditional notion that the female body serves first of all to attract men. Accordingly, she is the one most bothered by Zenia's unfading beauty. Admittedly, these three approaches are not postmodern in themselves. However, the novel's representation of such contradictory perspectives on the body is consistent with its postmodern designs, its construction of multiple centres.

The other theme this chapter will investigate for each protagonist is her language. With the advent of structuralism and its successors, language and its limitations have attracted substantial attention. With postmodernism came an unparalleled consciousness of the arbitrary and unstable relationship between meaning and words. A novel itself, one might argue, is a language game. And, after all, all the accounts in *The Robber Bride* are built on language. As we shall see, the conception of her body even influences how each protagonist uses language. We will see that Tony's language is precise, unemotional, and full of military expressions. She sees and negotiates life through historical and historiographical glasses. Charis's language will prove to be vague. Her belief

in the supernatural is verbalized in her descriptions of “auras” and visions. Finally, Roz’s language is bitingly sarcastic and expresses all the frustration she suffered and continues to suffer as a “displaced person.”

Then, there are themes that only occur in one particular account, for instance, Tony’s preoccupation with history, Charis’s preoccupation with new age spiritualism, or Roz’s quarrels with religion. We will notice that these beliefs often contradict each other. Tony and Roz do not know how to treat Charis’s visions, for example, and wish they could discard them as nonsense. However, Charis’s premonitions prove disturbingly accurate — both for the other protagonists and, perhaps even more so, for the reader.

3.2 Tony

Tony is probably the character with the most contradictory qualities. On the one hand, she is a military history professor, aware of the problems contemporary historians face, most importantly that in postmodern times, they can no longer claim to convey pure, objective fact.¹ The character of the historian inevitably influences the history he or she tells and, therefore, reduces its value considerably. On the other hand, Tony cannot apply this rational, critical consciousness to her private life, where she is fragile, partly because of her painful experiences with her parents. This conflict between profession and person is made manifest in her dealings with Zenia. By consistently pointing her finger at the things Tony wishes to forget, Zenia forces Tony to negotiate the contra-

¹In “The Loneliness of the Military Historian,” a poem published two years after *The Robber Bride*, Atwood picks up the theme of the female historiographer. The speaker tells “what [she] hopes will pass as truth,” and she “writes things down the way they happened, / as near can be remembered” (l. 34, 41–42). Like Tony, she picks “a flower or two” at each battle-field she visits (l. 98).

dictory views and impulses that determine her actions.

One of the fundamental conflicts is that between Tony's powerful mind and her powerless body, and the manifestation of the conflict is Tony's illusionary self, "Tnomerf Ynot." Tiny Tony, while physically small and powerless, is fascinated by violence. As a child, she deals with her diminutive size and her lack of power by creating her other self, "Tnomerf Ynot," who is "taller, stronger, more daring" than she is (137). One of the functions of this *alter ego* is to shield her from her drinking and raving father, permitting her to escape into a fantasy world of barbarian tribes battling each other. The model of this fantasy world is not only distinctly *pre-postmodern* but its rules are as simple as they can be: kill or die. Tony escapes the complications of her own time, the postmodern age, by swinging right to the opposite.

In her fantasies, Tony recreates herself with a new body and new physical powers, yet her real body forces her to negotiate between fantasy and reality. And yet she turns out to live as her *alter ego* much more than as the person attached to her real body. For instance, for much of her life she remains unconcerned with her appearance and keeps wearing "her clothes from high school, because they still fit" (124). Then, Zenia "redesigns" Tony:

She had different clothes now, too, because Zenia has redesigned her. . . . The pageboy with the velvet hairband is gone; instead, Tony's hair is cut short and tousled on top, with artful wisps coming out of it. Some days Tony thinks she looks a little like Audrey Hepburn; other days, like an electrocuted mop. Much more sophisticated, Zenia has pronounced. (133)

Zenia makes Tony her artistic playground, but even when Tony totally submits her body to Zenia's care, in the end the enterprise seems to have no effect

on Tony. Tony does not care about what she looks like, be it Hepburn or a mop. The opposition of these two images shows that she does not have a stable impression of her physical self.

Tony's failure to unify her fantastical and physical existence is her weakness, as we see when she plans to kill Zenia in her room at the Arnold Garden hotel. Zenia takes Tony by surprise, manages to rouse the latter's interest, and makes her sympathetic. But when, in the end, Tony refuses what Zenia asks of her, Zenia starts hurling insults at her. Tellingly, she experiences Zenia's verbal assaults as "blunt objects whizzing past her head, the ground dissolving under her feet" (414): thoughts take a physical shape in Tony's mind. When she finally leaves, she feels dizzy, "as if drunk," and "the visual world looks jumbled" (415). Her body fails her in this battle. This analysis will be important when we compare Tony's self-perception to Charis's and Roz's to show that the three characters create their own, distinct postmodern centres in the novel.

Unlike the body theme, which is present in all three accounts in the novel, the history theme is a unique feature of Tony's account. History is one of the academic disciplines that changed with the advent of postmodernism. The most important change is the emphasis on the relative point of view of the historian. *The Robber Bride* shows the importance of looking not only at history but also at the person that shapes it. The novel emphasizes this by creating Tony as a historian whose work is very much determined by her personal background.

As Brenda Hudgens points out, we can see Tony's personal background influencing her approach to history when she uses domestic items to memorialize historical events (50). Tony may be interested in combining the two because it reflects ironically her status as a woman working in a field dom-

inated by men. By this unconventional combination, Tony introduces a new point of view in that discipline. The most striking example is Tony's habit of picking flowers and buying domestic souvenirs like kitchen items at the historic battle-sites she visits. She also picks a flower in the lobby of the Arnold Garden hotel when she dizzily leaves Zenia's room, and again, right at the end, after the three protagonists dump Zenia's ashes into Lake Ontario. To her, this act seems to memorialize a battle. Tony also shows her unusual approach to history when she uses kitchen spices instead of miniature figures to represent armies for the table-top battle-field in her cellar.

This rather unconventional mixture of domesticity and history carries over to Tony's academic work as well because it influences the way she presents history:

Pick any strand and snip, and history becomes unravelled. This is how Tony begins one of her more convoluted lectures, the one on the dynamics of spontaneous massacres. The metaphor is of weaving or else of knitting, and of sewing scissors. She likes using it: she likes the faint shock on the face of her listeners. It's the mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed that does it to them. . .

(3)

Thus, on the novel's opening page, Tony establishes this paradoxical mixture of domesticity and war. The passage also points out that Tony as a historian always sees herself as a performer and a presenter of history to someone. She sees herself as a story-teller. For although she is not a first-person narrator, she points out she is telling a story throughout, right from the beginning when she promises "[t]he story of Zenia." Clearly, Tony's reflections concern both students and readers. She employs a metaphorical language for effect, and

thus subverts the traditional belief that historians deal with ‘facts’ and nothing else. Instead, Tony makes clear that she is a performer and that she pays attention to the way she presents history. She knows she is appealing to her listeners’ pagan interests in “mass bloodshed.” Far from claiming objectivity, Tony wraps history up in her personal agenda and creates the story she likes to tell. *The Robber Bride* thus deconstructs the traditional view of history as objective truth, told by a “great voice.”²

Tony does not merely deal with war or the history of it, but also, being a member of the “Society of Military Historiographers” (109), with the way this history is constructed. Since she takes a critical approach to history, which she partly constructs within the novel, her account reflects many of the dilemmas in which postmodern historians find themselves. For a start, she warns her students of the fact that history does not simply exist but is created by humans: “History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time” (4). Of course, whenever Tony is talking about history in general, the reader should be alert, for Tony is automatically commenting on her own narrative at the same time. Tony herself stresses the arbitrariness of the beginning and the ending of her story. She calls her chosen beginning “[a]n arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment” (4), and the ending “[a]n ending, then,” equally arbitrary (465). Tony seems reluctant to pick the right “definitive moments.” She only picks them because a story needs a beginning and an end; otherwise, there is no story. In this matter, Tony’s thoughts coincide with the analysis of the structure of *The Robber Bride* as a product of postmod-

²A term Atwood uses in the interview (Appendix 98).

ernism. Yes, the novel's strict, symmetrical structure seems to contradict the openness postmodernism requires, but at the same time, the best it can do is problematize structure as a need of the human consciousness. Hence, Tony's attitude parallels the postmodern "fictional self-consciousness": the narrator's persistent awareness that he or she is "just" telling a story.

Elsewhere, Tony is particularly concerned that history is told in flashbacks:

All history is written backwards, writes Tony, writing backwards. We choose a significant event and examine its causes and its consequences, but who decides whether the event is significant? ...

Yet history is not a true palindrome, thinks Tony. We can't really run it backwards and end up at a clean start. Too many of the pieces have gone missing; also we know too much, we know the outcome. (109)

Again, Tony's remarks can be applied to the fictional history of *The Robber Bride*. Using multiple layers of frame narratives, the novel is told almost solely with flashbacks. Occasionally, there are flashforwards to the present narrative situation: the stories from the past are interrupted by Tony sitting in the cellar at her battle-field or Roz in her orange bathrobe, also sitting in the cellar, digging out the old children's books. These interruptions serve as reminders that the current story is not told from the present perspective, but from the perspective of someone shaken by the discovery that Zenia is in fact not yet dead. What is more, none of the characters is able to find a "clean start" for her history. Instead, the more they dig into the past, the more vague and blurred their memories become.

Thus, the problems Tony identifies with capital-H History in the post-modern age in general are juxtaposed effectively with the fictional history of the novel: Tony wonders about how to tell Zenia's story after her enemy's death. She realizes that Zenia "will only be history if Tony chooses to shape her into history" (461). Tony even has to discard the hope of telling "the truth about her" right from the start, because "it lies out of reach." Tony knows truth is "a quixotic notion," but she "is daunted by the impossibility of accurate reconstruction" nevertheless. She comes to a bleak conclusion about her chosen field of study and "its futility": "History . . . is looking less and less like a temple and more like a pile of rubble. . . . But do the stories of history really teach anything at all? In a general sense, thinks Tony, possibly not. Despite this she still plods on. . ." (461). Tony has decided to tell Zenia's story, despite the fact that there is no truth about her to be told. Her task as the postmodern historian is not a grand and glorious one. She can merely search the piles of rubble to piece a story together.

When Tony puts the rubble together, she needs to impose a structure on it too because a history — like a Master's Thesis in English, even one about postmodernism— requires structure. Tony needs to connect the dots for her readers to have her work make sense. With these considerations in mind, I want to show how Tony brings the beginning and the end of the story together. At the end of the story, she wonders about its beginning, and how she constructs it. She also remarks that "*The end of any history is a lie in which we all agree to conspire*" (465). Again, this assertion takes into account the post-modern awareness of the unreliability of human memory and the slipperiness of language. In postmodernism, a historian is nothing but a story-teller. However, there are even more troublesome agendas buried in Tony's account for

those who like to think of history as reliable and objective fact. For Tony considerably alters the story of her final confrontation with Zenia when telling it to Roz and Charis, as she admits herself:

She leaves out the part about the term paper, although she conscientiously includes all the other bad things Zenia said about her. She includes the gun, which has a certain serious weight, but leaves out the cordless drill, which does not. She includes her own ignominious retreat. At the end of her account she produces the purple branch, as evidence. (416)

We are back at the flower picking again. Tony is evidently too much caught up in her own story to be sufficiently objective, and she lies to herself about the motives behind her censoring. For “the part about the term paper” is not merely another “bad thing Zenia said” but it is a clear moral failure on her part, a sore spot. As to the “evidence” of the purple branch, one wonders what it proves. Tony could have picked the flower anywhere, any time. Still, she uses it to support her account, by attaching a physical artifact to her story, as it were. However, it has no value. There is an analogy here between the flower and the picture Zenia shows to Roz. When Zenia tells Roz about her atrocious past, she produces a family picture as evidence of her story’s veracity. However, Roz’s private detective, Harriet, will point out to her that “[p]ictures are a dime a dozen” (372). Pictures themselves have no meaning; meaning is created by the human consciousness.

There are similar problems with the account of Tony’s childhood as told to Zenia: “This is the story Tony tells to Zenia. . . . It seems a bleak story, as she tells it — starker and more dire than when it was actually happening to her. Possibly because she believes it, by now” (152). In the first place, Tony

is aware that she has told *a* story about her childhood, not the one and only story. She realizes the deficiencies of memory and perspective, but she conceals these observations from her primary listener, Zenia. It is to the reader that she discloses her self-consciousness as narrator of her own history. The effect of her attitude may be twofold: it may strengthen the reader's credulity towards Tony because of her frankness. But for the same reason, the reader may wonder what parts of the story Tony has left out in the end, whether she was sufficiently conscientious in her telling. If you decide to pull any further on this thread, the whole may come apart. The doubt hovering over this question is, after all, a key feature of postmodern fiction. "But this may be just overcomplication, intellectual web-spinning," as Tony likes to say (130).

The investigation of Tony as a postmodern centre of *The Robber Bride* would be incomplete without an analysis of her language. Like the other two protagonists, Tony has developed her language as a means of coping with the postmodern condition. Her language is dominated by her obsession with 'raw / war' and her cool rationality. Because Tony thinks in the terms of military jargon virtually all the time, her discourse is plastered with those expressions. Part of her explicit discussions of history and anecdotes, this vocabulary has also become Tony's idiolect. A few examples will suffice as evidence of Tony's attempt to fight through life in postmodern times: when she follows Charis one night, presuming she is sleepwalking, she contrasts Charis with the other girls, who are "known quantities." Tony sees other people as variables in the strategic game of life. Also, Tony refers to the moment that Zenia decides she likes her as "the decisive moment. Rubicon!" (130). Following a discussion of Caesar's crossing the river Rubicon as a decisive moment, Tony draws an analogy between life and a battle. In the same vein, she talks about Zenia

“upping her strike capability” (354). Tony seems to think of other people merely in strategic terms, as when she regards West as some kind of treasure she has to protect from Zenia.

Tony’s military language is a tell-tale sign of her lack of self-confidence. Life to her is dangerous whenever she encounters “unknown quantities.” She is caught between her postmodern awareness that the secrets of the world cannot be known, and her Gnostic longing for the answers. As a result, she tries to live through history, which she can construct according to her whim and which enables her to glorify other people’s deeds and participate in their “daring.”

Tony’s idiosyncrasy of speaking and writing backwards expresses her refusal to accept the demands of the world, as it symbolizes where she directs her gaze. As she herself points out, “history is written backwards,” too (19). Clearly, the special gift that she discovered in childhood is linked to her studies. Tony uses the strange, dark sounds of words spoken backwards as an entrance to her underworld of barbarians and bloody battles, and as access to the unfulfilled side of herself, “Tnomerf Ynot.”

Often, the phrases that she writes backwards could not be more banal, but occasionally they refer to painful things Tony tries to suppress, for instance, her problematic relationship to her mother Anthea. Tony thinks that “[i]f you said a word backwards, the meaning emptied out and then the word was vacant. Ready for a new meaning to flow in. *Anthea. Aehtna*. Like *dead*, it was almost the same thing, backwards or forward” (154). The “new meaning” relates in most cases to Tony’s fantasy world of looting barbarians, such as “[*b*]ulc *egdirb*. . . . It’s a battle cry” (148) and “[*o*]tamot. . . . A stone war hammer used by an ancient tribe” (154). Note, again, the link here between the domestic and the military. When she thinks about the ballad she used to sing for the

McClung students, "Oh My Darling Clementine" (116), she explains the fascination of her language: "this was her language; so its rules and irregularities were at her mercy." Thus, Tony creates a fantasy world of her own, one built on her own use of language. She creates a world where she can escape her passivity as a child and her domesticity as a wife.

As we have seen, Tony is up-to-date with postmodern historical theories on the one hand, but she is incapable of applying these theories in private life on the other. As a gullible student, she falls for Zenia's tall tales, and she is unaware of the irony in her own story about the Byzantine empress Theophano, who "started life as a concubine and worked her way to the top." She had her husband, emperor Nicephorus Phocas, killed when he "became too old and ugly for her" (169). One night, she woke her husband before her lover "split his head open with a sword" (170). Tony pictures the scene:

Theophano is smiling, but Tony doesn't see it as a sinister smile. Instead it's gleeful: the smile of a child about to put its hands over someone's eyes from behind. *Guess who?*

... What is an ambush, really, but a kind of military practical joke? ...

Maybe Theophano woke up Nicephorus because she wanted him to appreciate the cleverness before he died.... She wanted him to get the joke. (170)

The parallels between Theophano and Zenia are ironic. One is tempted to see Zenia smiling as she plays practical jokes on Tony, Charis, and Roz, waking them finally to make sure they get the jokes as well. Roz finds it especially hard to believe how stupid she herself was. That clever Tony fails to see the parallels here is even more ironic and shows that she is too close to the matter

to maintain her intellectual and objectifying distance.

3.3 Charis

Charis, the spiritualist, is probably the most problematic character from the postmodern perspective. Her belief in new age spiritualism is one of the new centres that became available with the postmodern introduction of multiple centres. Charis's spiritualism is a valid voice creating its own centre in the world of *The Robber Bride*, but one that clashes with the competing voices of Tony and Roz. As we shall see, Charis uses spiritualism to transcend the problems associated with her body, which is also an important theme for her.

Like Tony and Roz, Charis is a modernist quester for the centre. When she is living with Billy, her world is complete but she has some doubt about how real this completeness is: "[S]he knows that Billy is an unwilling voyager. She suspects . . . that she herself is a sort of way station for him, a temporary convenience. . . . This is painful" (211). Charis chooses to ignore these doubts (in the same way the Victorian Age had ignored what did not "fit" its *Weltanschauung*). Then, her world falls to pieces when her pregnancy with Augusta causes Zenia and Billy to leave. All of Charis's assumptions about her life, that Billy loves her, her hope that he will stay with her forever, suddenly become invalid. When Billy is torn away from her life, Charis experiences "the loss of the centre." The dubious nature of his disappearance and the realization that she has been tricked by Zenia for six months causes Charis to search for her lost centre: "The worst thing is not knowing" (280).

It seems *The Robber Bride* deliberately plays with Charis: sometimes she seems a nitwit; at other times, a sage. But for the most part, Charis is

depicted as naïve and gullible. Not even her boyfriend Billy seems to have a lot of faith in her rational capabilities; hence he treats her like a child:

Billy has explained all this to her; also that the Mounties are not really the Mounties of Charis's childhood, not the picturesque men on horseback, in red uniforms, upright and true, who always get their man. Instead they are devious and cunning and in cahoots with the U. S. government and if they put their finger on Billy he's a dead duck. . . (211)

The passage reads like Charis's rendition of what Billy actually said to her. To explain his situation to Charis, he uses clichés about the "Mounties" she has learnt as a child. Moreover, his use of the slang phrases and clichés "in cahoots with," "put their finger on," and "dead duck" implies that he has to simplify things for her. And the reader may pick up Billy's condescension towards Charis because, although this is her report, she does not react against his treatment of her as a child.

In fact, the novel takes this image of Charis further. When she follows Zenia and Roz's son Larry after they leave the restaurant, "The Toxique," she has the hotdog vendor, a cab driver, and a bicycle courier swear at her for her clumsiness, furthering the impression of her as a "nitwit" (Roz's term). To Charis, hamburgers are an emotion (46), and she seems to have subscribed to every new-age healthiness dogma there is, from not wearing bras to refusing to eat meat and consulting pendulums and other "junk," as her daughter Augusta likes to call it (54). She is also extremely self-conscious and thinks that whenever something she says seems to amaze Tony, it is not amazement that "is really going on in that delicate head of Tony's," but at least Tony "never laughs at her, not up front" (48). This side of Charis is strengthened further by Tony's

and Roz's patronizing views of her. For example, right at the beginning Tony remarks on Charis's "mewing noises about redoing Tony's front lawn for her," and she ironically describes the aftermath of Roz giving in "to similar pleas" (18).

Like Tony, Charis tries to escape the physical world by splitting in two. While Tony splits into a physical and a fantastical entity, Charis splits into a physical and a spiritual entity. She does not create her own fantasy world, but she longs to transcend her body. Charis develops this wish as a girl when her uncle Vern rapes her and Karen becomes Charis: "he falls on top of Karen and puts his slabby hand over her mouth, and splits her in two. He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air. There's no pain in it at all" (262). Charis can only cope with what is happening to her by negating her physical presence, pretending she has no body, and hence no feelings. Thus, as with Tony, Charis's powerlessness causes the split of her self into two. When she is finally old enough to leave her uncle and aunt's house, Charis tries to make the transcendence from Karen to Charis final:

Karen was a leather bag, a grey one. Charis collected everything she didn't want and shoved it into this name. . . . She threw away as many of the old wounds and poisons as she could. . . .

She did all this inside her head, because the events there are just as real as the events anywhere else. Still inside her head, she walked to the shore of Lake Ontario and sank the leather bag into the water. (265)

Charis uses her new identity to suppress all of her bad memories. Because most of those memories are associated with the body, she likes to ignore her

physical side. This attitude shows when Charis has trouble finding out “where the edges of her body ended and the rest of the world began” (63), and she keeps bumping into things. In general, she perceives her body as the prison of her soul. And yet, one cannot say she does not deal with it:

Charis feels that the only thing she herself can change is her own body, and through it her spirit. She wishes to free her spirit She wants to rearrange her body, get rid of the heaviness hidden deep within it . . . ; she wants to make her body lighter and lighter, release it so that she’s almost floating. (216)

Charis’s whole account is pervaded by considerations of what is good for the body and how she can improve it, using methods ranging from Yoga to vegetarianism. And indeed, Zenia uses a broken body to make Charis let her into her life.

From then on, Zenia, acting as a postmodern agent, forces Charis to renegotiate her repressed childhood self, Karen. Zenia brings back old memories, such as Karen’s name, but she also gives Charis new ideas about the body: according to Perrakis, at Augusta’s conception, “Charis’s physical sense of self has been transformed into a stronger, more capable, Zenia-like physical self which can now acknowledge its sexual feelings” (162). Charis thought she had got rid of those dangerous ideas together with Karen. In the end, Charis realizes: “Karen is coming back, Charis can’t keep her away anymore” (*Robber Bride* 266).

Although the text might tempt the reader at times to dismiss Charis as a “flake,” at other times her insights and the upsetting accuracy of her premonitions make her an unconventional yet strong voice, creating a centre in the universe of the novel. Charis’s discourse is so distinct from the others because

it defies the tradition of enlightenment with its emphasis on pure reason. This tradition is nothing but one of the “grand Narratives” that have broken up and opened up space for alternative ways of perceiving the world (Lyotard, *Post-modern* 15). Thus, the supernatural elements in Charis’s story are a challenge to the reader because they are inexplicable in the traditional rational ways of thought. When Charis foresees the exact moment and circumstances of Zenia’s death, the reader may not only feel shocked at Charis’s perceptiveness but also teased by this clearly unconvincing example of new age spiritualism in action. It troubles Tony and Roz but they, as characters caught in the same narrative world as Charis, have to believe the evidence as foretold and as it happens. If readers choose this view, they can only choke on Atwood’s audacity.

Charis is often able to see “auras” surrounding people, and by those means she judges their well-being, because, as opposed to words, “auras don’t lie” (62). For instance, she is able to see her grandmother’s power of healing. When Charis is staying at the farm at the age of seven, she notices a “faint pale blue light” around her grandmother’s head (242). On the other end of the scale, Karen sees the “grey smoke of life” rising from the dying body of an animal (252).

Charis even bases her judgment of people on their auras. As Karen, she notices a “thick like jelly, sticky, brown-green luminescence around [her uncle] Vern’s hands” long before he sexually abuses her (257). At the “Toxique,” Charis pictures Roz in a nativity school play, where she would be one of the three kings, with her “golden, many-coloured, spicy aura” (63). Ironically, Roz actually had to play the chief angel in a nativity play at school once, while she wanted to be the Virgin Mary. Here, Charis’s idealistic view does not match the real world because she sees the things as she feels they should be rather than as they are.

In addition to auras, which are visible extensions in Charis's perception of the personal experience commonly referred to as reality, she has numerous visions and foresights in the course of the story. When she gets up on the day Zenia returns from the dead, Charis asks her pendulum whether this will be a good day. At first, the pendulum cannot make up its mind, which is "normal," as Charis states. But then "it gives a sort of jump, and stops," which Charis has "never seen it do . . . before" (44)³ When she asks Shanita, her employer at a new age shop called "Radiance," for an interpretation, the latter says it means "something real sudden, something you weren't looking for" (59). She then decides to read Tarot for Charis:

"The Tower," says Shanita. "Sudden, like I said. The Priestess. An opening, something hidden is revealed. The Knight of Swords — well, that could be interesting! The Knights all bring messages. Now, the Empress. A strong woman! Not you, though. Somebody else. But I wouldn't say this is Augusta, no. The Empress is not a young girl."

"Maybe it's you," Charis says, and Shanita laughs and says, "Strong! I am a broken reed!" She puts down another card. "Death," she says. "A change. Could be renewal." She crosses that card again. "Oh. The Moon."

The Moon, with its baying dogs, its pool, its lurking scorpion. . . .

The Moon, [Charis] thinks. Illusion. (60)

An uncritical reading of the passage, from the vantage point of someone knowing the outcome, would acknowledge its accuracy in retrospect. This reading

³The phrase "sort of" is a verbal example of the vagueness of Charis's world.

would identify "The Tower" as the Arnold Garden hotel from the upper floors of which Zenia will fall into the pool. The revelation is the surprising news that Zenia is not dead, while "The Empress" means, obviously, Zenia. However, this passage about interpretation is more problematic than it appears. Since the links that make meaning can only be drawn in retrospect, Shanita's reading is useless really because Charis cannot prepare for the "something" that is going to happen any way. Thus her statements connect with Tony's about history, that a history can only be "written backwards," while the agents in that situation do not know the significance of the moment but are walking in an obscuring mist. The problem of this past, retrospective interpretation is intensified when one acknowledges its inconsistencies. If one wants to interpret the "Empress" as Zenia, the attribute "strong" seems at first to make sense. However, when one comes to realize that Zenia has ovarian cancer and a life expectancy of six months, one is forced to acknowledge the contingency of such an interpretation.

After all, most of Charis's visions seem accurate at first but do not withstand a deeper interpretation. At Zenia's first memorial service, when looking at the canister of Zenia's ashes, Charis knew that "Zenia was not in that canister" (50). But while Charis suspects that Zenia's soul is "loose in the air but tethered to the world of appearances," in search of the light, in reality Zenia is happily pillaging and wreaking havoc in somebody else's life. As with all of Charis's visions, they can be related to reality, but they rarely hit the nail squarely on the head. Charis herself is perfectly aware of the limitations of her extra-sensual perceptions, to use the parapsychological term: "She often has these feelings, but since nothing ever comes of half of them they aren't dependable" (50).

Charis's vague language is undoubtedly an inheritance of her particular *Weltanschauung*. When she says something, she rarely clearly defines what she means, and she is not obsessed with explaining the world in the way Tony is. Charis simply accepts the vagueness of language in the same way she accepts the ambiguity of her "intuitions." Her language works the same way. She wonders at length about what constitutes "the essence of hen-ness," "Billy-ness," or "Zenia-ness," without ever trying to define them clearly (206). Charis strives constantly towards harmony and talks about "peace." Indeed, when the three women get together for Zenia's memorial service, Charis describes the dead Zenia as "peaceful."

To conclude this consideration of Charis as one of the novel's postmodern centres, we should note that her account in its simplicity and even naïvety contrasts ironically with Tony's academic, intellectual discourse complete with learned historical anecdotes. However, Charis expresses modern scientific ideas as well, in her vague way: when she has a vision of her mother's death three weeks before it actually happens, she remarks that sometimes "there is a fold in time, like the way you fold the top bedsheet down to make a border, and if you stick a pin through at any spot, then the two pinholes are aligned, and that's the way it is when you forsee the future" (258). Deery places the quotation in the context of a number of instances in Atwood's novels where characters deal with space and time. In this case, Charis describes the idea of "folds" in time contradicting current knowledge, but the concept of curved time and space is used in mathematical topology. That Charis is not the character one might think of as up to date with modern science shows that *The Robber Bride* refuses to resolve all issues with the characters. The novel's indeterminacy in this respect is further proof that *The Robber Bride* refuses a simplistic

construction of its characters and therefore of the world it describes.

3.4 Roz

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Roz is the character who suffers most from the loss of the centre itself, which in her case is represented by Mitch. However, long before that she had trouble finding a suitable centre, first of all, because she has never fit well in any social group she belonged to. At first, when her parents pretended she was Catholic and her name was "Rosalind Greenwood," Roz realized that for some reason she was not Catholic enough. After her father's return from Europe, he made her aware of her Jewish background, told Roz her real name, "Roz Grunwald," and sent her to a Jewish school and Jewish summer camps. There she discovered that she was not Jewish enough. Although Roz is, strictly speaking, no "displaced person," as refugees from Europe were often called, she comes to feel like one all her life. Later on, when she joins and helps the women's movement, she has to discover that, once again, she is not 'as equal' as the others, because, unlike the others, she is rich. In that sense, she remains a "displaced person."

Her desire to fit in and her willingness to please define her relationships with men. As it turns out, Roz believes in outer appearances, much more than Tony or Charis. Therefore, she frequently records the looks of the persons she thinks about, and uses them to interpret their states of mind. She falls for Zenia's fantastic stories about her journalistic career because of Zenia's visible reactions such as her crying. The human body, in general, plays a key role for Roz's impression of others.

Because the body, to Roz, represents the person, she often runs into

problems when she has to realize that her assumptions prove false. Of the three protagonists, she is the most conscious of what she is wearing, and she is the one most troubled with the artificiality that only she seems to notice in Zenia: "You're in love with two sacks of silicone gel," she tells Mitch disconcertedly (80). However, Mitch never tells Roz why he falls for Zenia. Since he has numerous affairs with pretty women that leave no deeper impression on him, Zenia's attraction must be of a different nature. As Roz's statement suggests, she tries to play down whatever Zenia has and Roz has not. Instead, she chooses to believe that the female body serves to attract men first of all. Accordingly, she is constantly wondering whether she is still attractive.

Roz's predominant concern with the body also shows when Zenia becomes editor of the magazine owned by Roz, "WiseWomanWorld." The men on the board say admiringly that Zenia has balls and "a great figure too, causing Roz to go home and frown at her dimpling grapefruit-peel leg skin in the mirror, and then reproach herself for making odious comparisons" (368). But the equation between beauty and attracting men haunts her. Accordingly, she is surprised that "Tony's the only one of them who actually ended up with a man. Roz can't quite figure it out: tiny Tony, with her baby-bird eyes and her acidulated little smile, and, you'd think, the sex appeal of a fire hydrant" (391). Roz's *Weltanschauung* makes her think about physical attraction in a relationship first. She is really taken by surprise that this rule is not valid for everyone. Appropriately, when she first meets Mitch, she is impressed with how "gorgeous" he is, and tells herself he would never be interested in her: "Dream on, babe. Slobber on your own pillow. This is not for you" (308). She is willing to do anything for him because he is "simply too good-looking" (309), and even years later, when he is having affairs, she still admires him for being "distinguished

as heck” (297). Fittingly, Roz’s spontaneous reaction to Zenia’s return from the dead at the “Toxique,” is “[o]h shit. It’s her. In the flesh” (101). If Charis thinks at first that she is seeing Zenia’s ghost, Roz is aware of her physical presence right away.

Clearly, Roz is the protagonist who is most concerned with her appearance. A comparison of Tony, Charis, and Roz’s attitudes towards the body shows that they really are different centres with different value-systems. One striking example of their differences in attitude is their way of looking at a mirror. Charis, who is concerned with her body in terms of health, sees her mirror as a practical tool, one in which she “does her breast self-examination” (44). Roz, who sees in the mirror a reflection of her essence and power, invokes the fantasy world of the fairy tale as a way of contending with what she sees in it: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most beautiful of us all?” (290). Tellingly, the only mirrors described in Tony’s account are the mirror blackened with paint in West’s and Zenia’s apartment and the metaphorical one Tony attributes to Zenia’s chest of magical tricks. Tony is simply not much bothered by her appearance.

As we have seen, the body holds substantial power in Roz’s *Weltanschauung*, and power of various kinds is essential to her character. Zenia’s statement about Mitch, that he was a “control freak” (439), can also be applied to Roz. In fact, her belief in power and control is what makes her a pre-modernist mind originally, for the belief that the world is known and can be controlled is typically Victorian. As a postmodernist text, *The Robber Bride* deconstructs the positivistic belief that humankind is master on earth. Roz’s positivist outlook is severely shaken when Zenia steals Mitch away from her.

We can see Roz’s desire for control in her world in several ways. She is

concerned with traditional symbols of power. For instance, the location of her office from which she 'reigns' over her empire has symbolic significance. Her "office is a corner office, naturally, and on the top floor."

From here Roz can see the lake, and the future marina they're building out of termite-riddled landfill, and the Island, where Charis has her tiny, falling-apart mouse nest of a house; and, from the other window, the CN Tower — tallest lightning rod in the world. . . . there's the university with its trees, golden at this time of year, and hidden behind it, Tony's red-brick Gothic folly. Perfect for Tony though, what with the turret. She can hole herself up in there and pretend she's invulnerable. (289–90)

Although Roz refers to this location as a mere "status thing" (289), it does, even if merely symbolically, afford her some sense of control over Toronto, and even over Charis and Tony. In allowing her to see what is going on around her, her higher perspective gives her insight (not available to the other protagonists) into the surrounding city. Traditionally, a higher perspective also means higher status and more power. For this reason, monarchs used to sit higher than the rest of the court, and churches and castles used to be the tallest buildings in towns.

Yet, the passage deconstructs the power associated with perspective. The CN Tower is still higher than Roz's office, so she has to sneer at it. Both Charis's and Tony's houses are hidden, so Roz can only include them in the picture by imagining them. And while Roz is aware of the reference to the palaces of kings and queens, she seems to know that this reference is merely postmodern parody, by saying that: "[A]nyone who walks into Roz's office gets the message at once. *Let's have a little respect around here! Harrumph, har-*

rumph! Monarch of all she surveys. Like shit. Nobody is monarch of anything any more. It's all out of control" (289). What Roz is expressing is nothing but the classic modernist catastrophe: "the loss of the centre." Virtually all modernist artists describe it similarly: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"); the world has become "a heap of broken images" (T. S. Eliot, *The Waste-Land*); "that is what we hear all round us . . . , the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction" (Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 24). The quotation from Yeats actually occurs twice in Roz's account as part of the literary quotations she and her personal assistant Boyce trade with each other.⁴ Clearly, Roz must have abandoned the positivistic idea that the world can be controlled.

There are two more examples of this power and perspective theme. First, Roz thinks of purchasing a "[g]rade A condo, overlooking the lake" (79). Secondly, WASPY Mitch and Zenia "live in a penthouse apartment overlooking the Harbour," as Roz will find out (372). The same connection between power and perspective is at work: Roz and Mitch see themselves as part of the ruling class.

But Roz does not long for control merely in symbolic ways. When it comes to business, she displays the same desire. She does not only invest money, but she herself directs the companies she owns, most prominently when she wants to do something "hands-on" with the "Lookmakers" company (94). No matter whether her personal life or her business career is concerned, Roz likes to have a "controlling interest" (94).

Zenia, acting as postmodern agent here, takes apart Roz's Victorian be-

⁴One may wonder if the name "Boyce" is not a pun of the kind in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Boyce likes to make literary puns like Joyce and is a boy, if a gay one.

lief in power, step by step. Soon after Zenia gets the job with the magazine, “Roz grows increasingly uneasy. There’s something not quite right about the turn things have taken. . .” (369). Zenia changes the magazine substantially, first of all the name: “WiseWomanWorld” becomes simply “Woman.” This little change in itself symbolizes the postmodern experience: the word “world” goes because postmodernism discards the belief in a world that can be controlled by a single centre with a monolithic value-system. And the word “wise” has to go because the world can no longer be known. The remainder of the name, “Woman,” is purely self-reflexive, which is typical of the postmodern as well. After the chain of events that follow, including Mitch’s defection, when Roz thinks about Zenia, she can only admit with consternation: “My own monster. . . I thought I could control her. Then she broke loose” (95).

After the break-down of her nineteenth century beliefs, Roz develops a more modern taste for play. While Tony is the character most concerned with history, Roz is the protagonist most interested in story-telling and the rewriting of stories, a very modern and postmodern gesture. Thus, when her children rewrite the old Grimm brothers’ tale of “The Robber Bridegroom” by replacing all male characters with female ones, Roz takes it even further. In the original story, a mysterious stranger becomes engaged to a girl. When she visits him in his house in the forest, she discovers that he is part of a band of robbers who plan to kill and eat her. In the end, the girl escapes with the help of an old woman and the robber is killed. Tony may not think about the parallels between the Byzantine empress of her story and Zenia, but Roz immediately draws connections between the “robber bride” and Zenia herself:

The Robber Bride, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her

mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia.

No. Too melodramatic for Zenia, who was, after all — who *is* surely nothing more than an up-market slut. The Rubber Broad is more like it — her and those pneumatic tits. (295)

The way Roz tells the story (which mirrors the ending of *The Robber Bride*), it loses its happy ending. In the original, the Robber Bridegroom and his band are executed by the authorities for their crimes. Ironically, the truth about him is brought to light at the wedding banquet, where the bride herself recounts the events as a dream. Roz's version is a good example of postmodern parody, the concept used by Hutcheon. As a postmodern story-teller, Roz does not pretend innocence towards the "already said" but incorporates it in her story in an ironic way. The little story is in accordance with Hutcheon's statement that "[p]ostmodernism signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it" (130). The collected Grimm's fairy-tales certainly belong to the canon Hutcheon refers to. Unlike in the fairy-tale, in Roz's postmodern parody the victims bring no truth to light, and indeed, because of her death Zenia eludes the "authorities" in the shape of "men in overcoats" (456). In *The Robber Bride*, there is no tribunal that finds her guilty.

All of Roz's interpolated tales can be related to the main narrative. Roz's casual update of the story of the Good Samaritan, for instance, is ironically close to Charis's experience with Zenia. For in the twentieth century, what happens to the Samaritan after his good deed?

After he'd rescued the man fallen among thieves, lugged him off the roadside, carted him home, fed him some soup, and tucked him into the guest room overnight? The poor sappy Samaritan

woke up in the morning to find his safe cracked and the dog strangled and the wife raped and the gold candlesticks missing, and a big pile of shit on the carpet, because it was just stick-on wounds and fake blood in the first place. A put-up job. (97)

The story seems to be a travesty of an outdated Bible. Ironically, it is more or less the story of Charis and Zenia, in which Zenia feigns illness to gain Charis's trust and then her virtual servitude. Here, however, as in the revised fairy-tale, the agents are changed from men to women. For "dog" read "chickens," for "wife" read "Billy." For the "stick-on wounds and fake blood," read the menstrual bleeding Zenia uses to fake the symptoms of cancer. Roz's story is accurate enough.

Roz's obsession with stories is carried so far that she ultimately tries to understand her own life by making it fit the contours of a traditional narrative. After Mitch is gone, Roz re-examines the story of her life with the help of a "shrink." "Story," again, is Roz's explicit term for it:

Together the two of them labour over Roz's life as if it's a jigsaw puzzle, a mystery story with a solution at the end.... They are hopeful: if Roz can figure out what story she's in, then they will be able to spot the erroneous turns she took, they can retrace her steps, they can change the ending. They work out a tentative plot. (382–83)

The appeal of this analysis to Roz is clear: it stems from the murder mysteries she has read for a long time, with their logic and reassuring structure. However, this nicely parcelled out plan fails: Roz may be the protagonist of her story, but she is not the author. The "fictional self-consciousness" that Linda Hutcheon identifies as a feature of postmodern narratives is of no use

to Roz, who is desperate to retrieve the lost centre. Significantly, Roz and the “shrink” come up with “a” plot, but not with “the” plot.⁵ Using Roz’s latest experiences, they try to explain the subconscious factors in her decision to marry Mitch. In other words, they use the knowledge about the outcome to impose a narrative structure on Roz’s life, which is the mistake Tony calls “intellectual web-spinning” (130).

Roz is not only a story-teller, though, but because of her fascination with them, she is also drawn in by stories. When Zenia tells Roz her “story,” she casts herself in a similar situation as young Roz, only worse. Zenia thereby uses the same strategy as she did with Tony and Charis. She makes herself like Roz, a “*mischling*” of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother (360). She then recounts how she escaped Nazi Germany as a six year-old with the help of her Aunt after her parents had been “taken” (359). This story is perhaps the most ironic of the three Zenia relates, for she matches Roz’s postmodern self-consciousness as a story-teller: Zenia begins with telling Roz how she visited her parents’ old apartment in Berlin when she went there a few years before, and how suddenly “all of it became real. Before that, it was just a bad story” that had been handed down to her (359). Presumably, “it” is just a “bad story,” as Roz repeats, but in telling it to Roz and the reader, like a good story-teller, Zenia tries to make her story appear authentic by bringing it to life. Then, Zenia produces a family photograph as part of the same strategy to create authenticity. The reader does not see the picture, but Roz’s elaborate reading of it is almost as good. Because the reader’s suspicions regarding Zenia’s stories have been built up carefully in the novel, here, *The Robber Bride* points out how easily we accept something

⁵In the same vein, Julian Barnes wrote *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, a prime example of postmodern fiction, and not “*The History*.”

as real, especially if we want to believe in it.

Not surprisingly given Roz's penchant for story-telling, her idiolect is that of the story-teller. For instance, Roz begins telling the story of her childhood with "[o]nce upon a time, Roz was not Roz" (318). She also uses the word "story" to describe people's lives or her parents' relationship: "They had a history, of course: they had a story" (340). However, Roz's idiolect also incorporates her religious background and her attempts as a "DP" to "bulldoze" into social circles. She often thinks in terms of sins and virtues — mostly concerning "[p]ride, deadliest of the Seven Deadlies" — in trying to be a "lion-tamer" to Zenia, and also in searching for something that would allow her to "be proud of her father" (354). She has frequent, informal conversations with God — "*God, you foxy old joker, you certainly do fool around*" (341) — and at one point she wonders if she should aspire to become "a kind of outsized Mother Teresa" (393). The examples show how Roz's language, and therefore her thinking, are determined by her religious upbringing. Her informality in religious discourse echoes the conflicts she has integrating Catholicism and Judaism. As a modernist character, she has given up the idea of God as a transcendental signifier in the sense that she addresses a God who obscures, who creates riddles instead of meaning.

Roz's desire for power is also present in her language with its violence and sarcasm, because both verbal violence and irony (by playing with meaning) signify the interlocutor's power over language. We find this irony, for instance, when she recalls Mitch's strategy to marry her, consisting of wearing Roz down by continual sexual frustration: "She felt like a big loose floozie, she felt like a puppy being whacked with a newspaper for trying to climb up trouser legs" (312). Roz does not spare herself from her own sarcasm and, more than the

other two women, acknowledges her own mistakes. That she feels “whacked” is one example of the violent terms in which she experiences the world. Significantly, when she learns of Zenia’s (feigned) death, Roz’s word for her is “*kaput*” (11), a German word meaning “destroyed,” a word that is both an echo of her Jewish-German background and that verbalizes the ever-present potential of physical violence in her world view.

In the end, like the others, Roz is haunted by the question of why Zenia did what she did: “What could be crystal-clearer? Zenia is a cold and treacherous bitch. She never loved Mitch. All she wanted was the pleasure of winning, of taking him away from Roz. Also the money. This is obvious for Roz. . .” (376). Like the others, Roz comes up with a version, a hypothesis, and finally discards it. In the end, she gives up her search for the truth when she feels an odd sense of gratitude at Zenia’s second memorial service but does not question it further.

3.5 Zenia

As difficult as the respective problems are that Tony, Charis, and Roz have in interpreting Zenia, *The Robber Bride* leaves the most difficult task to its readers. They have to put Tony’s, Charis’s and Roz’s account together and try to construct a consistent version of the events. And they have to fill in the gaps, to resolve the matters left open in the novel. Therefore, by its contradictions and its indeterminacies, *The Robber Bride* becomes an epistemological game. It plays with the illusion of knowledge by constructing one version of the truth and then setting it next to another version of it. Accordingly, the characters become increasingly uncertain about what they know and even what they *can* possibly know. Epistemology is a vivid “area of play” for postmodernism (Ap-

pendix 99), which is no surprise if one thinks about how different social groups need to legitimize their centres in postmodernism and yet have to accept the fact that there are other centres contradicting their own.

What do the three women know about Zenia in the end? Not much, after all. As Tony observes, “you saw what she wanted you to see; or else you saw what you yourself wanted to see. She did it with mirrors. The mirror was whoever was watching, but there was nothing behind that two-dimensional image but a thin layer of mercury” (461). Accordingly, it is an illusion to think that *The Robber Bride* really tells “the story of Zenia,” as it promises on the first page (3). At best it tells three stories about Zenia, each of which contains different stories by Zenia, but really they are not about Zenia at all, but about the three protagonists. The mirror imagery and the accounts as they go along make clear that Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s conceptions of Zenia are their own projections.⁶ Often they project their ‘unfinished business’ onto Zenia, the other halves of their split personalities. Tony sees Zenia as a realization of Tnomerf Ynot, Charis sees her as Karen, and Roz, after Zenia dumps Mitch, sees her as an avenger of herself. She thinks that Zenia dumping Mitch teaches him how Roz felt when he was having affairs. Here, the postmodern nature of *The Robber Bride* is most striking: the ‘truths’ that are told in each account are neither confirmed nor exposed as ‘false.’ And Tony, Charis, and Roz seem to be troubled by uncertainty far more than they are with the evil of Zenia.

For this discussion of the postmodern openness of the text, I shall look at a number of questions in the novel that are never answered. For instance, who killed Charis’s chickens on the day Zenia leaves with Billy? At first, Charis

⁶This opens up readings of Zenia as a “mirror” in the Jungian sense. Staels discusses this at greater length, supported by an interview with Atwood.

assumes it was a weasel. Then she suspects a neighbour. Upon finding the breadknife, the likely murder weapon, she is suddenly certain it was Zenia. When Charis confronts her in the hotel, Zenia “sounds amused” and claims Billy killed the chickens because really he “hated them” (429). Atwood handles this game very well: the reader is invited to follow Charis’s conviction that Zenia is the murderer, and may be equally taken by surprise at the unexpected accusation of Billy. Of course, Billy could have killed the chickens out of vengeance, but he had, after all, built the henhouse himself, and he was the one who used to eat the eggs and thought that “drunken hens [were] cool” (202). Zenia on the other hand “sounds amused” at the accusation and may have no reason to lie except to hurt Charis. In the end nobody knows.⁷

And who killed Zenia? The same doubt remains. As Roz remarks, “[t]here was enough time for Charis to come back to the hotel. . . . She could have done it. So could Tony, who has been frank about her murderous intentions. So could Roz herself, for that matter. No doubt the fingerprints of the three of them are all over the room” (447). But their “fingerprints” are all over the story as well; that is to say, Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s personal involvement obscures the matter of Zenia’s death. Bouson points out that all three express their murderous intentions before confronting Zenia: Tony “envision[s] herself placing a ‘neat red hole . . . competently in the exact centre of Zenia’s forehead’”; Charis has a vision of Karen “waiting to reenter her body and ‘use it to murder’” and sees her throwing Zenia over the railing; and Roz “imagines killing Zenia and making it ‘look like a sex killing’” (161–62). Apart from the

⁷Lynn Z. Bloom and Veronica Makowsky fall into the trap of neglecting the novel’s polyphony in their reading of Zenia as “a good witch, disguised as a bad witch” (167). They believe Zenia’s claim that it was Billy who killed Charis’s chickens, and identify Zenia as “the never-acknowledged ally of the trio of best friends,” who forces them “to recognize the truth, free themselves, and take charge of their own lives” (170).

possibility that Zenia commits suicide, the most compelling explanation of her death is perhaps the idea that somebody unknown to Tony, Charis, and Roz does away with her. Given the limited vantage points and egocentricities of the protagonists, readers can never solve this riddle.

In this chapter, we have seen how each protagonist constructs a post-modern centre in her account, and how their collective abilities to cope with Zenia mirror their abilities to cope with the postmodern world. 'Coping with Zenia' means accepting the "unknowable," and Zenia herself stands for the postmodern condition. This section will try to shed some light on how she is constructed. But how can we approach the heart of the matter if all of the characters have already failed at that? They failed because they could not free themselves of their ideological baggage and projected their wishes onto Zenia. Tony identifies Zenia with her other self and wants to cheer her on, Charis envisions how her former self Karen and Zenia merge, and Roz admires Zenia's "balls."

In attempting to look behind Zenia's façade, one discovers a number of ironies, especially if one compares Zenia to the three protagonists. Howells has shown how each of them has "split personalities," and how these are reflected in their doubled names, Tony / Ynot, Charis / Karen, and Roz Andrews / Rosalind Grunwald (83). Their two names also reflect their respective desires to free themselves (Tony), to suppress parts of their personalities (Charis), and to negotiate a new identity between exclusive poles like Judaism and Catholicism (Roz). Ironically, just the opposite is true for Zenia. She is the only character who can really claim to have multiple personalities, and yet she uses the same name throughout. But then, as Tony realizes, "Zenia doesn't seem to need a name" (126). If one contrasts the importance of names to the protagonists with

the unimportance of names to Zenia, Zenia shows them that a new name does not really provide a new identity and she seems to be laughing at them once more.

Zenia is not even the superhuman monster the three women want her to be. At times, she makes very human mistakes and miscalculates people's reactions. To begin with, she tells Tony that the purpose of her fake death was to stop Mitch from following her around. She lets Roz know about her death, thinking that "anything Roz knew, Mitch would know too. She'd make sure of that" (411). But Roz did not tell Mitch about the funeral. Zenia clearly miscalculated, and she was lucky that Mitch learned from some other source. And though Zenia is successful at first in trying to persuade Tony to let her stay with her for a few weeks, she commits a fatal blunder when she mentions West, with the effect that "Tony snaps to attention" and refuses her entrance (413).

Zenia also lacks the *grandeur* of an arch villain. She does not have the dignity and solemnity of a Count Dracula, for instance. She is magnificent only in her own, self-constructed theatre. Remove the *façade*, and she becomes small and pathetic. She invariably adopts the role of the poor sufferer who has had incredible injustice done to her: forced into prostitution by her own mother, beaten by West while having cancer, or persecuted by the Nazis. As well, her technique of luring the men away from the women is to play the victim. Instead of carrying out large evil schemes, Zenia merely exploits people's willingness to help each other.

This view of Zenia as a cheap little creature does not occur to Tony, Charis, and Roz, however. One might say the whole does not equal the sum of its parts, but obviously there cannot be a "whole" description of Zenia. *The*

Robber Bride invites readers to deal critically with Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's accounts and, as a text, successfully avoids privileging any of them. Instead, it makes clear that each of the story-tellers is problematic and therefore unreliable.

In *The Robber Bride*, Zenia is difficult to locate. On the one hand, she is clearly placed as the centre of the story by the three protagonists. They think she gives their lives meaning, a theme if you like. They circle around Zenia, yearning for truths, just like moths circle around a flame looking for light in the dark. And of course they get burned. Tony, Charis, and Roz are each on the modern quest for the lost centre, and they believe Zenia is the key to it. But the quest is unsuccessful, the truth is out of reach, and Zenia dies without revealing her secrets.

If there were only one protagonist, *The Robber Bride* might be a thoroughly modernist text. However, the polyphony, the three different voices playing and intermingling with each other, turns the novel into a postmodern "area of play." Zenia is not the centre of the novel, but each character tries to construct Zenia as the centre of their lives. In the end, however, each of them merely creates a version of Zenia so that we have three different Zenias. Compare Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's very different thoughts about her at the memorial service: Tony sees her as a defeated opponent, Charis as a sick spirit brought to peace, and Roz as a "bitch" towards whom she feels some strange gratitude. In an attempt to identify the centres of *The Robber Bride*, figure 3.1 on the next page might be useful. Zenia can hardly be pinned down in it: she is everywhere and nowhere, escaping definition, merely part of the "infinitely receding headspace" (464).

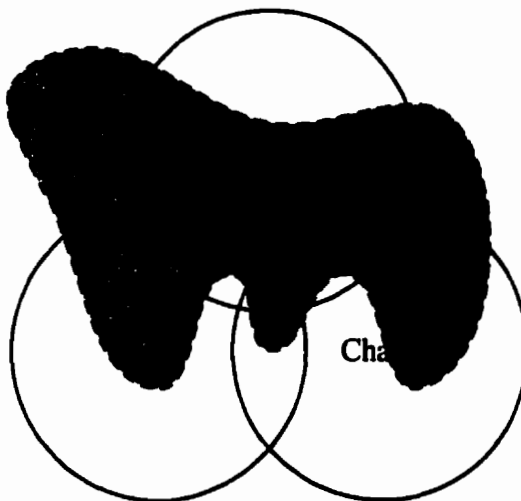


Figure 3.1: The “centres” in *The Robber Bride*

Chapter 4

“And if you read too much of it, of course, your head falls off”

Critics with a different focus on postmodernism might argue that *The Robber Bride* is not experimental enough. It can hardly be said to be overly concerned with metafiction: art that is conscious of itself as art. Other postmodern novels are much more troubled by these issues: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* plays with the concept of an omniscient narrator — à la “Fielding” in *Tom Jones* — who enters the world of the novel occasionally, for instance to observe the protagonist Charles voyeuristically (346; ch. 55). The novel provides the reader not with one, but three different endings, playing extensively with traditional narrative conventions. Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* boasts three very different time-lines for Flaubert's life, exemplifying the multicentric universe of postmodernism where “the story” of a life does not exist.

Because many contemporary novels are experimental in the sense of *Flaubert's Parrot*, many critics associate playfulness and experimentalism with postmodernism. One form of playfulness is “pastiche” (versus parody), which Hutcheon believes is an innovative feature of postmodernism. One novel that makes extensive use of pastiche is Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, in

which the reader finds numerous deliberate anachronisms, for example Bob Dylan quotations in an account supposedly handed down from medieval times. Clearly, many postmodern works refuse to take art too seriously. This refusal can manifest itself in pastiche, metafiction, or the collapsing of the boundaries between "high" and "low" art that Hutcheon also discusses. A striking example is Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning comic book about the Holocaust, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. However, these advocates of 'postmodern play' like Hutcheon tend to forget that playfulness in the novel has existed as long as the novel itself. To prove the point, I would like to mention Kundera's discussions of playfulness, "the appeal of play" in his words, as a distinctive feature of the novel right from its beginnings: in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in the work of Rabelais, and in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (*Art of the Novel, Testaments*).

Despite the fact that it is not an overly experimental novel, *The Robber Bride* shares many features that came along with postmodernism. One of those features is an exploration of epistemology, the ancient discipline of philosophy concerned with the legitimization of knowledge. With the "grand narratives" gone, communities facing the postmodern condition have to be conscious of how they legitimize their "centres" among others. As I have shown, the characters in *The Robber Bride* are aware of the unreliability of human perception and memory, and they are troubled by what can be known for certain, which is not much after all.

The Robber Bride also features subtle manifestations of the postmodern dictum "the world is a text," as the characters often "read" each other. For example, Tony reads West: "She smiles back, scanning his face anxiously. She checks each wrinkle, each lift and inflection. All is as usual, from what she can tell" (38). The fact that the protagonists are in a state of interpretive uncer-

tainty is supported by phrases signalling the doubtful and unprovable veracity of verbal assertions. The text is cluttered with statements like "Boyce assumes, or pretends to assume," or "or so he says" (95, 202).¹

I hope to have presented a useful definition of postmodernism under which I have investigated *The Robber Bride*. Using a narratological scrutiny to open up an extended discussion of the three protagonists enabled me to present them as three distinct centres in the novel. None of these centres could claim an authoritative, let alone omniscient, status. Hence, the stories in the text are all related from a particular vantage point, with a particular agenda. That said, even the characters have no consistent idea of how to evaluate Zenia and what she did to them. They are unable to come to terms with her, either thanking her for being an eye-opener and getting rid of their exploitative men, or condemning her as an exploiter and thief of their happiest times herself.

If one reads the novel as a crime thriller, one will be frustrated because the great riddles surrounding Zenia are never brought to light, and with her death so dies the hope for any resolution. The fascinating adventures in which she claims she has been involved are all dead ends, from her constructed childhoods to her role as messenger in the "Supergun affair." Readers learn nothing for certain but have to piece the different accounts together and judge what comes closest to the truth. They thereby create and add their own centres to the ones in the text. The resulting polyphony, the interplay of voices, allows us

¹In the first editions of *The Robber Bride* there is even one instance (silently corrected in later editions) where the text simply contradicts itself. This correction is unfortunate, because the contradiction can be interpreted not only as a slip of Atwood's but as Tony's, emphasizing the limitations of her point of view. In this sense, the slip may be read as the result of Tony's considerable confusion in that situation, casting doubt on her reliability: at the "bash" at West's and Zenia's apartment, Zenia "opens both beers . . . , flipping the tops off expertly, [and] hands one to Tony" (126). Shortly after, Tony "takes an awkward swallow from the bottle West has given her, and concentrates on not spluttering. Her eyes are stinging, her face reddening, her nose is full of prickles" (127, my emphasis).

to assent that *The Robber Bride* is a postmodernist novel. Or rather, this is the postmodern hat that I have fitted to it. I am sure it is not the only one.

I have mentioned *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and it might be interesting as a final brief word to note some parallels between the postmodernist protagonists Sarah in Fowles's novel and Zenia in Atwood's. It could be argued that Sarah is, in fact, not a protagonist (despite being the "woman" of the title), that indeed she is not even a character in the same way that Charles or anyone else is. She is an elusive, postmodern agent created to be a "test" for Charles. Similarly, Zenia is a postmodern agent created to force the three "real" protagonists to come to terms with the postmodern condition. In a troubling way, Sarah and Zenia are both present and absent in their respective novels.

I think it was great you could talk to that woman (don't remember name, zorry). It will be a good piece of stuff.

A SPANISH FRIEND

Appendix A

An Interview with Margaret Atwood

I had the chance to interview Margaret Atwood when she came to the Atlantic Theatre Festival in Wolfville for a reading of her poetry and *Alias Grace*. I interviewed her at Victoria's Inn in Wolfville on May 27, 1999. Since I do not take an author to be the highest authority about his or her own work and Atwood herself has repeatedly said she thinks it is not her job to interpret her own work, we only touched briefly on my thesis topic. However, I gained a number of inspirations for my project — some of which are reflected in the chapter titles, for instance — and these make the interview a valuable appendix to my thesis.

Kühnert You have mentioned that your parents are from Nova Scotia. Do you feel this is important for your writing?

Atwood To a certain extent. One never knows what kinds of influences these things have. I didn't grow up here. However, my parents always referred — as all Maritimers do — they always referred to the Maritimes as home. So you might say I grew up in exile (laughs). Because wherever I was, it wasn't referred to as *home*. *Home* was here. And when they said, *I'm*

going home, they meant Nova Scotia. Especially during the Depression, but also since, Nova Scotia used to say that its biggest export was brains. Have you heard of the “brain drain”? The “brain drain” has been going on here for a long time. People were forced to emigrate because there were no jobs here. That’s how my family ended up in Ontario. It seems very jolly now when you are visiting here, but Nova Scotia went through some grim times. Halifax was the most important port in Canada before the railroads were built. After the railroads were built, everything just bypassed it and went up to Montreal. And then after the Saint Lawrence Seaway was built, everything just went through the Great Lakes. There have been various different important ports in Eastern Canada. Halifax was one of them, but at Confederation it really lost its status. It became a ‘have-not’ province rather than a ‘have’ province. Any Maritimer will tell you that. That’s one influence that I suppose it had. We could go into, you know, lots of other things but we won’t for this short interview.

Kühnert Hearing you read on Tuesday was a really fascinating experience, mesmerizing even. It shows that you have experience as a reader.

Atwood Yes, but I’m old (laughs). I have been doing it for a long time.

Kühnert I was wondering if that skill developed in parallel to your writing.

Atwood It developed in parallel. For instance, I used to act as a student about your age. How old are you?

Kühnert I’m twenty-four.

Atwood A little bit younger than you. As an undergraduate. We were all in

plays and things like that, even in high-school, etc., etc. They were usually silly things, you know, comedies and stuff like that, so I wasn't a real actor. But students at that time used to participate a lot — they probably still do — in dramatic events of various kinds. And then, when I started publishing in magazines, it was the “coffee house” generation. . . . You have to think back to Beatniks (laughs), *City Lights*,¹ and the usual pattern was that there were coffee houses because you couldn't get a liquor license for them. Liquor licenses were very strongly controlled at that time, and only a few establishments would have them, particularly in Toronto, but also Vancouver. You know, only a very few had them and there were coffee houses and then there were things called “bottle clubs.” You've probably never heard of that?

Kühnert Um, no.

Atwood (Laughs) Well, there were beer parlours and cocktail bars and bottle clubs and coffee houses. Bottle clubs were for a rather rough element. So what you would do — and I was in Vancouver in 1964/5 when we did this — you would go to a locked door, a big door with a little square window in it. The bouncer would look at you out of the window and decide if he was going to let you in. And you brought a bottle in a paper bag. You went into the place, and it would have tables and a shelf under the table, and you put your bottle on the shelf. And it would have a big dance floor, and you had to buy mixer and some awful kind of food. It was obligatory, you had to buy this. And then you put the liquor into the glass and sat there drinking. And every night there was a police raid, whereupon you

¹*City Lights* was a publishing outfit in San Francisco.

put your bottle on the shelf under the table. And they would come along with flashlights and look at the tops of all the tables, and a lot of people also were plastered. Then they'd go out the door — I mean, they were obviously being paid off big time. Those were the bottle houses.

The coffee houses were usually groups of young people who would get some condemned fire trap (laughs), some old warehouse, or some low-rent piece of real estate that was falling apart. And they would paint the walls black, put in some little tables with checkered table-cloths, the Chianti bottle with the candle. That would be the coffee house. In the coffee house you would have different events. The one in Toronto was called *The Bohemian Embassy*. It would have a Jazz evening, it would have a folk song evening. This was the age of folk singing of a serious kind. It was pre-Flower children, pre-Beatles. The Beatles hadn't really started yet; Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were getting going just at that time. Joan Baez had just made her debut. Bob Dylan wasn't known yet. A guy called Phil Ochs was the pre-Bob Dylan.

So you'd have your folk song evening and then your jazz evening, and then you'd have your poetry evening. Sometimes we had a folk singer during the poetry, for musical relief (laughs). And people would sit in the dark, smoking madly, of course — everybody smoked. The air would be blue. And they had an espresso machine. That was the first espresso machine ever seen in Toronto. People thought it was some demigod, they all worshipped this machine. And so you'd get up and you'd do your reading and inevitably, just at your most heartfelt moment, the espresso machine would go off, making that noise. Or, the washroom opened right onto the

room, so somebody would flush the toilet and open the door (laughs). So that was my first experience of reading in public. And after you've done that you can do anything.

Then it went on from there. Those were the early, early days of Leonard Cohen, who hadn't really become a pop-singer star yet; he was known as a poet. The public reading of poetry got going around that time, and that's when you started having poets going to universities to read. Nobody read prose in public. They didn't start reading prose in public until the Seventies. And in fact, in Canada in the Sixties, the well-known writers were poets, mostly. There were a few novelists. Alice Munro hadn't published yet, Margaret Laurence had, but she was still living in England. Mordecai Richler had, he was still living in England. Mostly it was the poets. And the people who would travel back and forth across the country were the poets. So you might give a reading at a university, something like that. All during the Sixties it was poetry, then it started being prose in the Seventies. And the big bookstore readings that you have now didn't really start until the Eighties and Nineties. Or the festivals, you know, like the *Harbourfront International Festival of Authors*, that's coming up to twenty-five years now. What does that make it? Mid-Seventies. That was the first festival like that, I believe — at least in Canada. *Adelaide* pre-dates it, I think. Now there are various ones. The whole infrastructure that you see before you didn't exist. There was nothing at all like it.

Kühnert Hard to imagine.

Atwood Oh, it's easy for me to imagine. The kind of reading thing we do here

and increasingly in England didn't exist in Europe at all at that time. I think it must have existed earlier, in some form or other. But even, for instance, in Italy now — they're not used to it at all. And France, not much. Germany, more is happening. Quite a lot more. We did quite a fun reading in Germany in a beer manufactory that had been converted to a place where you could have events, with big barrels and things like that. That was good.

Kühnert You also mentioned Europe at the reading. Do you think of yourself as an international writer?

Atwood Well, I have an international audience. I don't think there is such a thing really as an international writer — that is, somebody who sets their work in no country. There are books in which people travel around a lot: they are usually spy thrillers. But even so, people have to go from one place to another place. As Northrop Frye said, *All culture is local*, by which I mean, it has local roots — unless you put a character in an airplane and have them circling the globe and never landing anywhere. Let's say you can't have internationalism without nations for it to be "inter-," as it were. You can't have interchange, when there's nothing to exchange.

Kühnert True. How do you feel about your international readership?

Atwood You never know who really reads your books. When I visit other countries, I find a big difference between countries where lots of people understand English — such as Holland, Denmark pretty much, certain German cities but not all — and ones that don't. In the ones that don't, you need a translator. So it's a completely different experience. And peo-

ple understand literature differently in different countries. They have other sets of tastes and criteria. And some things translate very well to certain countries, and not to others. It depends also on your translator: if you don't speak Japanese, for instance, you have no idea. You can only hear from other people whether they think it's a good translation.

Kühnert Is it something you rely on sometimes, feeling that you're known world-wide? I must confess, when I came to Canada you were the only Canadian writer I knew.

Atwood A lot are translated in Germany now, quite a few more than me. Barbara Gowdy has quite an audience there, Anne Michaels, and various people. Do I rely on it? Do I like it? Of course. Who wouldn't? Your harshest critics are always at home, always. It's often quite refreshing to go somewhere else where people aren't on your case all the time. And also you make friends. I now have people that I know here and there, and it's fun to go and visit them. Apart from the business angle, it's just fun to go.

Kühnert Yes, I can see that. How do you explain your international reputation?

Atwood Oh, I can't explain it. You see, you can never ask writers to explain why people like their books. You have to ask the readers. And you'll get different answers, no matter where you go. There are some readerships that are quite specific — they're within a certain age or men interested in business or whatever. I seem to be very trans-border in my readership. I get kids who are twelve, I get people who are eighty-five, men, women. It's not confined, so you never actually know who it might be. You know

the fashion in Germany now: autograph collecting (laughs). Do you know about this?

Kühnert Um...

Atwood People will turn up with six blank cards. They want you to sign them; then they trade them for other autographs that other people have. And they have huge collections of autographs, and you'll get letters in the mail with these cards. And you'll get people who cut your picture out of the paper and laminate it, and they want you to sign it. Some of them just collect writers, others collect anybody famous. But I would say Germany is the country in which this is most prevalent. In fact, when I went to the opening of *The Handmaid's Tale* film in Berlin, I was met at the airport — I don't know *how* they knew I was going to be there — by a group of people who gave me a lovely bouquet and then handed me all these blank cards (laughs); they wanted me to sign them.

Kühnert Is that something you find extremely annoying?

Atwood No, I don't find it annoying at all. Lots of people collect autographs from baseball players and hockey players and people like that, and it's rather nice that there are people who are interested in writers. Being a writer is not the most glamorous thing, although some people think it is; writers are not movie stars, they are not star athletes, they don't have that level of public attention, and they're not princesses or things like that. So mostly they're known through their books.

Kühnert I know a writer who doesn't give readings at all because he simply says, *I don't like signing my own books.*

Atwood There you are — it's a decision you make. And there are people. . . .

For instance, Thomas Pynchon has successfully concealed his identity ever since the beginning of his career, but you have to start at the beginning, otherwise you're cooked. Salinger, for instance, didn't start early enough (laughs). If he'd wanted to be completely anonymous, he should have concealed his identity right from the beginning. But as it was, people knew where he lived. The more you conceal yourself, the more people hide behind the hedge and leap out from behind your mailbox. I confine public appearances to when I am publishing a book. By and large, for the rest of the time I don't do anything public, except for the odd occasion like this. In the Sixties, the days of poetry, readings were the only way to sell anything. Poets went across the country with big boxes of their own books because the bookstores didn't carry them.

Kühnert Well, poetry doesn't sell that well.

Atwood It did then. Because that's what the poets were doing — they were travelling and reading. That's how they sold their books.

Kühnert One thing I am really interested in is that you are so aware of what is happening internationally and still, your characters most often stay in one place, or seem to.

Atwood That depends on the plot of the novel. If you are going to write a book about somebody moving around, then that's the plot. But if you're not, they stay in one place. In something like a John LeCarré novel, characters move around a lot — it's the plot.

Kühnert Are you concerned with the accuracy of translations of your work?

Atwood I can't be too concerned about it unless I know the languages.

Kühnert For the languages you know, do you check?

Atwood I work with the translators. In fact, I work with the translators even if I don't know the language, but of course in that case I don't know what they're missing. They send you a list of questions and you can answer those. Then you think, well, there are probably many other things that they haven't mentioned. You usually hear about them sooner or later from readers. For instance, the latest French translation was very good — everybody said it was very good. The exchange with the translator took place by fax machine, and it was a hard book to translate — *Alias Grace*, which has archaic language in it. The translator strove for the equivalent, and this was hard to do. And same with the German, and I have to say that the German translation was the first book on the market (laughs); it was ahead of the English. The German publisher said, early on, *Oh Margaret, what will we do? There's this poem at the beginning, what can I do, it can't be translated. What sort of language shall we use?* I said, *Go to German history of about 1830–40, you will find this kind of street ballad. It will exist — use that language.* And he went and looked, and it did exist.

Kühnert So, sometimes you know more than. . .

Atwood No, it was a guess. The street ballad tradition was then alive in European countries for people who couldn't read. There were street singers, and they sold broadsheets. They were cheap, and it was like yellow journalism and the newspaper now.

Kühnert How do you think you've developed as a writer?

Atwood Well, if you don't change over thirty years, there's probably something deeply wrong with you. If you're the same at the age of sixty as you were when you were twelve, I have to say this is arrested development. So of course you change. And the only thing I can tell you about that — and write it in your diary, and when you're sixty take it out and look at it — is that old people know more. But they don't always know the same things. They know more about time. But they don't necessarily know more, for instance, about what it's like to be twenty-four *now*. They won't know that unless they talk to a lot of twenty-four year-olds. So you have a larger perspective, but you don't necessarily have the immediate experience of being a young person right now.

Kühnert Well, I personally think you are getting better and better all the time.

Atwood Oh, don't worry. After a while, I'll get worse and worse (laughs).

Kühnert But what I find interesting is that novelists like Hemingway were vexed when they felt their literary powers were waning with age.

Atwood Well, Americans are a special case. Here is the special case that they are, and a number of them have said it, and it happened to Fitzgerald, too. Not so much any more, but at that time — say, the Twenties — you would get very famous very suddenly. And very young, as such things go. And then you'd be just ruined. Fitzgerald spent the rest of his life not only drinking but trying to get back to where he was when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. And Hemingway went up and down, but I think he

had a lot of problems that were caused... well, he was depressive, but also they were caused by the fact that he achieved a kind of a bill-board fame, and if you've any sense at all, of course, you know you're not the bill-board. You know you're not who people think you are. So if you aren't that, then who are you? It's because they base the idea of fame on movie stars. "Being Famous" in America is like being a movie star. Well, movie stars are actors. Writers are not actors. And what then eludes them in the midst of fame is authenticity.

Writers are interesting in this age because it's an age in which we are bombarded with visual images. There's never been an age like this, in which we are hit with so many visual images all the time, most of them from advertising (laughs). This is where the Surrealists are interesting as painters because, essentially, they got their Surrealism from advertising. Magritte worked in advertisement. But writers don't work with visual images, they work with words.

Kühnert Obviously ... hopefully....

Atwood So in a way, they're counter-current. To be a writer is to be counter-current, because you are not working with visual images. Now ask yourself, which would you rather be: blind or deaf?

Kühnert Deaf, probably.

Atwood You can still read, because reading is visual as well as oral.

Kühnert What is it about your approach to writing that allows you to continue to develop? It is not easy. Milan Kundera once said he is afraid an artist has only one great theme that he develops in his work.

Atwood Of course you can do themes and variations. Henry James did it all his life, with some little side-branches. People have areas of interest and they are unlikely to go very far outside them. I'm unlikely to write a "Sword & Sorcery" romance. Although I could, although I could (laughs). Though not necessarily well. But it's unlikely.

Kühnert Maybe this is why you come up with new genres and sometimes even counter expectations?

Atwood Yes, well, that's important to keep yourself awake. You know, you don't want to bore yourself to death.

Kühnert What I found particularly fascinating about your work, especially *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, I must say, is the realistic representation of thoughts and feelings of very different people. I was wondering how far one can go as a writer. This is a fashionable question right now: *Who can represent the other?*

Atwood The best example right now is the forty year-old American man (Arthur Golden) who has written *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Now, you couldn't go much further than that. You go across gender, you go across language, and you go across time. You know, that's quite an act. But, of course, Shakespeare did it all the time. Why should we be surprised? Writers of the past did it as a matter of course. *Madame Bovary*, by Flaubert — he said: *I am Madame Bovary*. If you think of writers as people with certain craft skills, it's not that unusual.

Kühnert I would think it requires a huge amount of imagination.

Atwood That's what they do; this is what writers do. It's their *metier*; it's their trade.

Kühnert Is there anywhere that you draw the line? I think I've read that you wouldn't write from the perspective of a different nationality.

Atwood It would be difficult. It's not that I refuse to. It's not a hands-off type of thing. It's just that it would be too hard. It took that man nine years to write the *Geisha* book. You'd really have to study up. Someone who does it very well is Mavis Gallant, in her Paris stories. So have a look at that. Here's a female Canadian person writing about male French people. Now that's an act. There is no theoretical boundary. There's nothing that says you can't. The thing that limits you is your own ability, not somebody saying *Thou shalt not do this*.

Kühnert So you do not feel any boundaries?

Atwood I don't feel that there should be any boundaries. It's just that I know that I would probably do a bad job of certain things. I wouldn't be very good at writing a male Russian Cossack of 1820. I don't know the mind-set. Well, it could be quite interesting, of course. Anything can be interesting if done well. But I would not do it well, and therefore, I would not set out to do it.

Kühnert This may be a similar area: when writing *Alias Grace*, did you sometimes feel limited by historical fact?

Atwood Well, there weren't many historical facts to depend on (laughs). That's the thing about history: once you get into it on this level it gets

very mushy, and the number of things you could absolutely swear to as being true get smaller and smaller the more you look at them. In fact, I felt fairly unlimited in the large blank areas that existed in the story.

If you were writing “Mary, Queen of Scots,” you would be quite limited because so much is known. So very very much is known. A couple of the key things aren’t known, but we may speculate, and we have speculated, and this is well-covered ground. It doesn’t bother movie makers much. I don’t know whether you saw either *Braveheart* or *Elizabeth*.

Kühnert The latter.

Atwood Well, they were both quite inaccurate historically (laughs). They took the life of Elizabeth and condensed it down to about this (gestures). Some of those things happened, but they happened when she was forty-five, and some of them didn’t happen at all. Not at all.

Kühnert But you didn’t take that kind of freedom with *Alias Grace*?

Atwood If there was a known fact, I stuck to it. There weren’t a lot of known facts, and I tried to base everything in it on something or other that was in the written records. Now the fact that they were in the written records doesn’t mean that they happened, as it turned out, because several of the written records contradicted the other written records. And by the time people were writing about the murder in the 1880s, it had become mythology. In fact it became mythology as soon as they even started writing about it. They mythologized this woman to an enormous extent. People made up their own Grace. As far as I can tell, they even made up her appearance. She was tall, or of medium height, short; red-haired, brown-

haired; blue-eyed, brown-eyed; brilliant complexion, rather dark. It just goes on from there.

Kühnert One thing I am very interested in is the humour. Is comedy essential to what you do?

Atwood I think they have a term for it in France: they call it Anglo-Saxon humour. They say that the darker sort of humour in England probably comes through the Celts: the Irish and the Scots. And I think what they mean is that combination of things which are both funny and not funny at the same time — rather a mordant² quality. I don't know whether you saw a French film called *Malice*.

Kühnert I have missed that one.

Atwood It's quite a wonderful film. But it takes place in the *ancien régime* just before the revolution. In it there is a minor noble who wants to drain the swamps so the peasants won't get malaria. But he can't get the money or the permission to do it, unless he goes to court. So he goes to court, and he finds that the one determining factor in court that advances you or doesn't is if you are witty in the French sense. But wit in the French sense means malice, you know. It means making a joke at somebody else's expense. And there's a scene in which a man who has visited England comes back to this French court, and they say, *In England, do they have any wit?* And he says that no, they don't have any wit, but they have something called humour. And they ask him to give an example. So he does. And they all just look at him (laughs): *Why is that funny?* So, sometimes people have

²Of satiric utterances (hence also of speakers or writers): Caustic, incisive. (OED)

difficulty with “Anglo-Saxon humour” because they don’t know whether something is supposed to be funny or not. Well, in that kind of thing, it’s both, and unless you can keep the idea of both in your mind, you’ll have trouble.

Kühnert This is what I find so remarkable about your characters in literally all your texts, or at least the ones that I know. Even in the most dire situations they come up with a quip.

Atwood That’s probably irony. You find actually quite a bit of it in the Maritimes. This is taking us back to Maritime influences. Yes, if people don’t have that sense — the sense of irony — then they will find it either cruel or frivolous.

Kühnert What I was wondering is that since it can be so sarcastic or even cynical...

Atwood You find it a lot in English writing actually, and in Scottish writing ... a lot.

Kühnert But do you find that this side of you, you can express best in your writing? Because sometimes, if you said some of those lines in real conversations, people might have problems with that.

Atwood Oh, and they do (laughs).

Kühnert So you are still sometimes like Roz [in *The Robber Bride*], for example, or is it something you find in your writing, as a vent?

Atwood Well, it depends what kind of writing you want to do, and I think probably one of the best guides to that would be Northrop Frye’s “modes”

and “levels of discourse.” If you’re doing high diction, if you’re doing *Paradise Lost*, you’re not gonna find a lot of that kind of humour in it, okay? If you’re doing King Lear’s death scene, you know, it’s not a hoot. Because it’s not supposed to be. You’re supposed to feel quite tragic. But if you’re reading, for instance, *Ulysses* — James Joyce, not Homer — you find a lot of it. But it’s not throughout the text, you know. A novel like that will alternate lyrical passages with other passages in which everybody is drunk. So it goes like that, and let us say that I’m not writing romantic tragedy. You know, this is not what I write. Why don’t I write it? I wouldn’t be any good at it. It’s not my thing. It’s not that there aren’t sad parts in my books. Strong men weep (laughs). But it’s not at that level throughout.

Kühnert I find that in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for example: *Pen is envy*. You know, that really in the most dire situations, there is something of the humour of the gallows.

Atwood And you would find if you read accounts, for instance, of the front, either side, in the First World War, you would find a lot of that, people talking about that: *Yeah, my pal’s head was blown off* (laughs), but what could you do? What could you do? It was awful. What do you do next? Or let us have a really good example, *Waiting for Godot*. You know, what could be a more dire play, what could be funnier to watch? *It passed the time*. — *It would have passed anyway*.

Kühnert One of my favourites, actually.

Atwood There was an excellent production at Stratford last year, and the Gate Theatre came from Ireland and did it in New York. I saw both.

They were both very interesting, quite different. It seems really to depend quite a lot on how Pozzo and Lucky are played — how you play those two characters. Anyway, yes, a wonderful play. Now there's an influence: I saw that when I was younger than you. I was twenty when I saw that, imagine. It would have just come out, more or less. It came out in the early Fifties and made its way. It was being played in college theatres by the late Fifties. It became very popular at that time. That and Ionesco³ were very popular. Pirandello⁴ was played a lot at that time. Brecht was played a lot in the late Fifties. Brecht is making a come-back. He then dropped from sight, I would say, in the Seventies and Eighties; he wasn't done much but he's coming back. I saw an excellent *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in London last year — really, really well done.

Kühnert Do you keep up with modern or postmodern thoughts?

Atwood Now which thoughts might those be?

Kühnert Well, evidently there's a lot of modern historical. . .

Atwood Okay, so, we have deconstructionism as a verb. We have postmodern as an adjective which is now applied to fashion items. Actually, I think even that phase has gone. It has now become a general adjective for whatever you like. I knew it was pretty much finished as a theoretical cutting edge when I saw it applied to a hat (laughs). "This kinky little postmodern hat!"

³Eugène Ionesco, Romanian-born French dramatist, author of *Rhinoceros* and *The Bald Soprano*.

⁴Luigi Pirandello, Italian playwright, novelist, and short-story writer, winner of the 1934 Nobel Prize for Literature.

We were supposed to believe for a while that the author didn't exist; I was never very keen on that notion. And anyway it was a *reductio ad absurdum* because the author doesn't exist, only the text exists. And the text doesn't really exist, only the commentary on the text really exists. But the commentary on the text is written by someone, who is therefore an author. And the commentary on the text is a text, but if the text and the author don't exist, then the commentary on the text doesn't exist either. Only the commentary on the commentary on the text really exists. But the commentary on the commentary on the text is also written by somebody, who is therefore an author. And the commentary on the commentary on the text is also a text. But texts and authors don't exist, so the commentary on the commentary on the text doesn't exist either, and nothing exists, and am I paying my university fees to learn *that*? (Laughs.)

In a word now, that seems to have gone away . . . somewhat. And what we are left with is essentially what used to be called close textual analysis, and then it was called "New Criticism," and then got called "deconstructionism," and I don't know what it's called now, but it's basically the same thing: You look at the text (laughs). You look at the text — why not?

Now, what else did you want to talk about in the theory department? History has made a come-back as an idea that can now be pulled apart. And historians are now writing texts about history in which they say, of course, that history in the grand former sense has vanished, but I'm gonna tell you all this stuff anyway (laughs). Yes, they're doing kinds of *montages* of history, and they're saying there is no longer any one great voice, the voice of the historian who will tell us all. There are only those

different voices which may be brought into play — “secret — by me, who have written this book. But I’m hiding behind the curtain and pretending that I don’t exist.” (Laughs).

Yes, I do keep up with it somewhat. But in a way, it’s not my business, you know. It’s my business to write the text. Other people can then go on and play with it if they wish. And indeed they do. They play with it a lot. It’s the latest area of play.

The Handmaid’s Tale was put on the French CAPES and *Aggrégation* as an examination text. Those are the big exams in France. Everybody in a certain field has to pass these hideous exams. And only about ten per cent get through, and those are the people who then get the promotion or whatever it is. It’s a really difficult thing. They put that on, along with Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*.⁵ You can see the exam questions that might result. And usually only dead people get to be put on this — so they said, *Come to France, you’re still alive*. And it was actually lots of fun, except for the poor students. But in conjunction with this, they put out about three different books, all of essays, you know, on *The Handmaid’s Tale* and different aspects of it. Some of them were quite interesting, I have to say. But in a way, none of my business. Not really my business. And if you read too much of this kind of thing, of course, your head falls off. Well, it would be very inhibiting to read too much of it. It would make you too self-conscious about what you’re writing. “How will this be interpreted, and by whom?” And did Charles Dickens bother with any of it? No. Nor did Tolstoy, because it hadn’t been invented then.

⁵More’s book about an ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions. Hence the literary genre of utopias.

Kühnert It just seems to me that *Alias Grace* takes a very modern approach to historical writing. In the sense that the novel doesn't claim to give away the truth.

Atwood Well, in that particular case, nobody ever knew. So it wasn't a choice made by me (laughs). People kept saying, *Well, did she, or didn't she?* And I have to reply, *Nobody ever knew*. The reason they never knew was that there were four people in the house, two of them were murdered, the third one was hanged. And after that, Grace was the only person who had been there. She was the only person who knew, and she never told. Why would she (laughs)? You know, if she was guilty she wouldn't tell, and if she was innocent, which she maintained ... except she had three different stories about it. We found something called her "leaving questions," after I published the book. You probably saw it on the web page. And she had the most perfect answer. One question was, *To what do you attribute your incarceration in this institution?* In other words, how come you're in this prison? And her reply wasn't *Because I had murdered somebody*, it wasn't *Because I was unjustly accused*. None of those. She said, *For having been employed in the same household with a villain*. Now you can take that in many ways. It's absolutely true. If there hadn't been the two of them, nothing would have happened. There was obviously some chemistry going on. We don't know what it was. But she didn't say, *I didn't do it*; she didn't confess to anything really. She just said something that was true, which was, *If this man hadn't been employed in the same household, I wouldn't be in prison*. True enough.

Kühnert That seems to me to go very well with the spirit of the novel.

Atwood Yes, yes, yes. Well, I couldn't say she'd done it or she hadn't done it, because nobody knew. The only person who said she did was McDermott and he only said it right before the hanging out of a kind of *how come she's getting off and not me*.

Kühnert He tried to save his neck.

Atwood No, it wouldn't have saved him at that point. He wanted to take somebody down with him, as far as I can tell. But maybe she did. Maybe she did.

Kühnert Did you receive reports from readers who were disappointed?

Atwood No, no, no, no. What, that I didn't tell? No, because every reader made up his or her own mind. They all have very definite opinions. And even at the stage of the publishers, who were reading the book before it was published — they had great debates within their own publishing companies. One of them said, *Well, it's obvious she's innocent*. Another one, *Well, you could tell right off that she was guilty*. (laughs). The German publisher, Arnulf Conradi, said, *Oh Margaret, you are so devilish!*

Addendum: The Rossetti Story

We were talking about fantasy literature, and Atwood asked me if I knew the Dante Gabriel Rossetti story, which she then related as follows:

Atwood His first wife, Elizabeth Siddal, committed suicide by taking an overdose of laudanum, I think it was. And he felt so guilty and so filled with remorse that he put into her coffin his only manuscript of all his poems.

Two years later, he wished to publish. What could you do? He dug her up (laughs). She wasn't in bad shape. The manuscript was okay. Present at this event was Bram Stoker, who subsequently wrote *Dracula*. And this disinterment of Elizabeth Siddal is said to have influenced the "Lucy in the tomb" scene in *Dracula*.

Kühnert Neat! This is neat.

Atwood Extraordinary! All these things.

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