

Trinity College Women's Center Newsletter

Volume 11, Issue 1

Fall 2000

The Blind Assassin: A Review

By Abigail Thomas



"I felt confused, and also inadequate: whatever it was he was asking or demanding, it was beyond me. This was the first time a man would expect more from me than I was capable of giving, but it would not be the last." With these words, Iris Chase Griffen, the narrator of Margaret Atwood's latest novel *The Blind Assassin*, describes the feelings that would haunt her throughout her life.

With this book, Atwood reexamines some of the themes she began in the *Handmaid's Tale*. The two central characters - Iris Chase Griffen and her younger sister Laura - are examples of the ways women can be trapped by circumstances and society. *The Blind Assassin* is in no way as dramatic as the science fiction world created in a

Handmaid's Tale, where women are trapped simply by their biology, their reproductive functions. This story is told by an 82 year old Iris who is looking back over her childhood. She tells the story of growing up between World War I and World War II. As the story unfolds, we see that to some extent she is trapped and limited by society, but we also see another side through the perspective of her younger sister Laura. As Laura develops in her years as a teenager, she shows Iris some of the ways in which women allow themselves to be trapped.

Readers familiar with Atwood will also recognize narrative techniques from *Alias Grace*. In *The Blind Assassin*, however, Atwood uses a novel within a novel within a novel to tell the tale. While at times this is effective, it is also slightly confusing. The outer framework is a memoir - Iris' story. The next layer is a novel with the same title - the *Blind Assassin* - written by see BLIND on page five

DANCER IN THE DARK

By Darcy Roake

How can I describe Lars Von Triers brilliant film *Dancer in the Dark*? The most emotionally and physically grating film I have ever seen? Yes. The most beautiful and raw acting and directing I have ever experienced? Yes. Absolute adoration and repulsion for one of the most fascinating films put onto celluloid? Yes. So I suppose it would be fair to call it a jumble of contradictions that left me more confused and yet somehow clearheaded. Now that I've managed to confuse you in discussing it, let me clarify.

The film stars Bjork as a Czechoslovakian immigrant (Selma) working at a factory in America. She see DANCER on page four

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT EATING DISORDERS

AT A DORM, I RECENTLY SHOWED A VIDEO ABOUT HOW MEDIA IMAGES DISTORT OUR VIEWS OF OURSELVES AND HAD A DISCUSSION ABOUT EATING DISORDERS ON CAMPUS. THE ALL FEMALE GROUP SEEMED A BIT TIRED OF THE SUBJECT - THEY SAID THAT THEY'VE HEARD MOST OF THIS BEFORE, AND WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH BEING THIN ANYWAY? NOTHING, DEPENDING ON HOW YOU GOT THERE. COMPULSIVE EXERCISING, SEE KNOW ON PAGE TWO

The VAGINA Monologues

Austin Arts Center
Goodwin Theater

February 12, 2001
8:00 pm

In This Issue:

A Look at the Controversy Over Same Sex Marriages

Womyn's Space: Creativity Inspired and Executed by Women

Maureen's Article

KNOW WHAT YOU CAN DO TO ELIMINATE EATING DISORDERS

STARVING YOURSELF AND THROWING UP AFTER YOU EAT IS DISORDERED AND DANGEROUS. SO IS BINGE EATING/COMPULSIVE OVEREATING. DO YOU KNOW HOW TO HELP A FRIEND?

- LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ABOUT EATING DISORDERS. CONSULT THE WOMEN'S CENTER, THE HEALTH CENTER, THE COUNSELING CENTER OR ORL.
- KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FACTS AND MYTHS ABOUT NUTRITION AND EXERCISE. CONSULT JOYCE O'DEA, TRINITY NUTRITIONIST.
- BE HONEST. TALK OPENLY AND HONESTLY ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS WITH THE PERSON WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH EATING OR BODY IMAGE ISSUES.
- BE CARING, BUT FIRM. CARING ABOUT YOUR FRIEND DOES NOT MEAN BEING MANIPULATED BY HER. YOUR FRIEND MUST BE RESPONSIBLE FOR HER ACTIONS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES. AVOID MAKING "RULES" OR EXPECTATIONS YOU CANNOT UPHOLD.
- TELL SOMEONE. DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE SITUATION IS SO SEVERE THAT YOUR FRIEND'S LIFE IS IN DANGER. CONSIDER TELLING A TRUSTED ADULT AT TRINITY: YOUR RA, MYSELF, DEAN THOMAS, ASSISTANT DEANS CARD AND REUMAN, MARTHA BURKE AT THE HEALTH CENTER, OR RICHARD LEE, CARMEN SANTOS OR LAUREN REITER AT THE COUNSELING CENTER.

YOU CAN ALSO BECOME ACTIVE IN EDUCATING THE CAMPUS ABOUT THESE DANGERS THROUGH JOINING RIBS (REDEFINING IDEAL BEAUTY STANDARDS). TALK TO MEGAN DUBAY (2978) OR MYSELF (2408) TO FIND OUT MORE!

~LAURA LOCKWOOD

A Look at the Controversy Over Same-Sex Marriages

By Maggie Korey

Two men clutch at each other, one is at the edge of life.

'In sickness and in health.'

The other has sold the house to pay the medical bills, changed the hospital sheets himself, sacrificed even beyond the point where assistance could help.

'For richer for poorer.'

They are married to each other in their own eyes, in God's eyes, in the eyes of their church and community -

in every eye but the love's.

'For better for worse.'

And so now, as the doctor unplugs the respirator, as the lovers' duet ends, the love will put the living lover through a hell for which not even his beloved's decay could have prepared his imagination.

'Till death do us part.'

- Richard Mohr

The preceding quote painfully illuminates the high emotional stakes behind the debate over legalizing same-sex marriages. It illustrates, in the opinion of the author, that homosexual couples are capable of embracing the ideals that compose traditional marriage. Mohr is not alone in his belief that same-sex couples should be granted the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. In recent months the State of Vermont passed a bill legalizing the "civil union," or what most would recognize as the equivalent of same-sex marriage. Vermont's Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples are entitled to the same legal rights given to heterosexual couples.

The approved bill grants spousal rights to areas covered by Vermont state laws, such as medical decisions, insurance coverage, inheritance, family-leave benefits, and child custody. In fact, many assert that the civil union is identical to traditional marriage in every aspect but its name. Like heterosexual couples, same-sex couples have to have their union certified by a justice of the peace, judge or clergy member. Failed unions must file for a dissolution. Vermont now stands in the same position that Hawaii did almost four years ago. In 1996, Hawaii's Supreme Court overturned the state's prohibition on same-sex marriage on the grounds that denying the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples was a form of sexual discrimination, clearly forbidden in the state's constitution.

These recent steps to guarantee same-sex couples the same rights that heterosexual couples have taken for granted since the advent of the now-traditional Western form of marriage at the beginning of thirteenth century have, needless to say, been met with both strong support and opposition. The issue of same-sex marriage has been taken up as a political platform, an opportunity for candidates to express their views on the hotly-debated "family values" issue. The civil union bill has provoked politicians, gay-rights activists, religious leaders, and the community at large

see CONTROVERSY on page three

A Look at the Controversy Over Same-Sex Marriages

continued from page two
to defend or contest the role of traditional marriage in contemporary American society. Although historically the Western institution held a woman to be the personal property of her husband, marriage has long ceased to be merely an instrument transferring

ago. Many supporters assert that the dynamics of marriage must shift to accommodate the changes in our society; the next logical step being inclusions of same-sex couples within its rubric. But if the state were to recognize same-sex marriages, opponents of the bill ask, where would

homosexuals love; ergo marriage is for them." In response to those who still view marriage as an institution centered around procreation, gay-rights activists point out that childless mixed-gender couples are entitled by law to the same rights given to couples raising a family. They remind us of the Supreme Court's 1978 ruling that citizens, even "those who have demonstrated that they are inadequate to the task," cannot be denied their fundamental right to marry and argue that if the law guarantees prison inmates this right, same-sex couples should not be excluded.

There are, however, gay-rights activists who oppose Vermont's civil unions bill and same-sex marriages in general. Vermont Democratic state senator Jim Spaulding, for example, feels that extending equivalent rights of traditional marriage to same-sex couples is insufficient; the title of marriage and not merely that of "civil-union" should be extended to the legal recognition of their union. Still other

The other has sold the house to pay the medical bills, changed the hospital sheets himself, sacrificed even beyond the point where assistance could help.

ownership. There is not debate that marriage has evolved as a social institution for as long as history records it. Even in ancient Rome, where romantic love was recognized to play a role in marriage, it was seen as largely as a "hindrance to the establishment of stable households." Marriage was primarily a practical union, a means of linking socially prominent households. Today, however, marriage is viewed as more than simply a recipe for economic stability of the domestic unit or for the civilizing of "wayward and wanton" young men. If the ideal of romantic love at the center of marriage is given greater emphasis now than ever before, in practice the goal of procreation does not necessarily lie at its core. In an era in which contraception and abortion have loosed the ties between sex and procreation, what exactly does marriage mean to us as a society?

Expectably, no consensus view has yet emerged. Supporters of same-sex marriage argue for the continued evolution of the role of marriage in our society. They point out that slavery was once socially

the line of limitation be drawn? Why shouldn't the government legalize polygamy or marriage between children? Gay-rights activists respond that the issues of same-sex marriage and of sanctioning multiple spouses are entirely unrelated. Some activists go so far as to contend that acceptance of same-sex marriage represents a profoundly conservative social direction: after all, the bill seeks to promote monogamy, fidelity, and "the

And so now, as the doctor unplugs the respirator, as the lovers' duet ends, the law will put the living lover through a hell for which not even his beloved's decay could have prepared his imagination.

disciplines of family life." Although perhaps the legalization of same-sex marriage is not Dan Quayle's ideal exemplification of family values, heterosexual and same-sex couples alike hold the idea that marriage is the foundation of a stable society.

Opponents of the same-sex marriage maintain that marriage, by definition, is the union of a man and a woman. Supporters, however, argue

opponents of the bill feel that it is psychologically damaging for same-sex couples to model their own relationships after heterosexual marriages. Frederick Hertz, an attorney specializing in same-sex partnerships, asserts that marriage is designed to cater to dependent spouses, typically a mother staying at home to raise children. The social purpose of the institution, he argues, is to compensate for the economic inequalities between sexes. Hertz believes that the values of marriage as it exists are at odds with those of most same-sex couples.

The public debate on same-sex marriage quickly makes apparent that politicians and policy makers are caught in a difficult dilemma. It is quite impossible to satisfy both the supporters and the opponents of the civil union bill by significant legislative compromise.

see CONTROVERSY on page seven

They are married to each other in their own eyes, in God's eyes, in the eyes of their church and community - in every eye but the law's.

acceptable and that, as recently as 1967, several states didn't recognize mixed-race marriages performed outside the state. They argue that the prohibitions against same-sex marriages will be abolished as were the antisegregation laws barely more than three decades

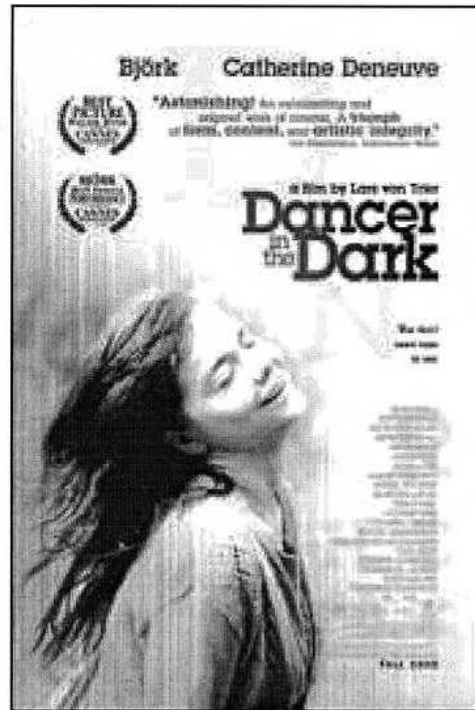
that our society needs to redefine marriage in light of the growing social acceptance of other forms of sexual relationships. Andrew Sullivan, departing editor of *The New Republic*, offers the following syllogism: "Marriage is for people who love;

Dancer in the Dark

continued from page one

is the epitome (to all exteriors) of a tragic figure. She is going blind and yet refuses to reveal her disability in order to keep working so as to save enough money to get her young son an operation that will cure him of the genetic, progressive blindness in their family. One would believe that such a figure would be a tortured soul, and yet, at least in the early part of the film, we see such an amazing light in this woman. What sustains her is the "music" she finds throughout life: both rhythms of those who truly care about her and actual music.

Obsessed with musicals, Selma will find joy in the beats of the factory, of her trailer, of the train that allows her to daydream. In this daydreaming, her life suddenly breaks into a musical number complete with singing and choreographed, 30s musical style dancing. While this may seem strange, I felt it was one of the most powerful parts of the film. The score of the film was composed by Bjork, and you feel as if she was living as the character when she created such amazing music. Just as I could hardly discern the actors from their characters (which I will discuss later), the music was inextricably linked to every single aspect of the film. The silences were even more devastating once you had heard the music in Selma's mind.



Bjork's powerful yet poignant and sweet voice once again added so many dimensions to Selma. At times it was as if Selma was crying out — in pain, love and anger — even amidst her own version of "My Favorite Things" from *Sound of Music*.

There is such an amazing contrast brought out between the beauty that Selma sees in the "musicals in her mind" versus the "darkness" of her everyday life. Von Trier visually does this in his cinematography. The majority of the film is shot in a grainy, almost overexposed light in which the characters look so worn. However, the minute a musical number begins, there is a vibrancy. Vivid oranges emerge; the characters are given a color, a light. The music pounds, those who

would never move their feet leap, and it is in these numbers that we get a true glimpse into the usually guarded character of Selma. It is through this interior mind of hers that we see what a conflicted but an absolutely self-sacrificing, almost angelic creature she is. The most tragic part of the film is that once you return to the stark contrast of actuality, events occur (that I will not mention for the sake of the film) that cast her, to some, as unfeeling and cruel.

At this point one may be scratching their head at what would be particularly profound in what seems to be contrived plot complete with musical numbers. All that I can say is that, first the plot thickens to a tremendous degree, and second, one has to see it to truly understand its brilliance or, in some cases, abhor it. I can write until my fingers turn blue (which I could most likely do) but it is an experience, not just a film, and you HAVE to see it. I'm not a typical reviewer that gives you an option. You will severely regret it if you don't

see such a tremendous film. Even if you come out of the theater in actual pain from so much crying (as I did), it is worth it — this film will forever haunt you. What else is about it, however, that makes it such a heartbreaking film? It is the fact that I wasn't watching actors on a screen as much as watching these characters live.

While there is a controversy over Von Triers directing method, all the actors, but especially Bjork (in what she says is her last acting experience) give such amazing, raw performances. In the case of Bjork, I never felt she was acting — she had become Selma. Her sweet, impish face, lilting voice, and guarded yet open body language blended so beautifully into the film. The character in the film does questionable things but for pure reasons.

Bjork made you literally fall in love with her. Those that surrounded her and truly knew her looked at her in almost awe, and as an audience member I felt that as well. However, despite all that she endures she is imbued with an unparalleled emotional strength and fixed idea about what the point of her life is and is obsessed with achieving that dream, even if it makes her a martyr. Despite the strength we see in her, what was truly difficult to watch in the film was Selma having to endure so much churning, almost

see DANCER on page seven

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

continued from page one

Laura Chase and published posthumously. The third story is a science fiction tale - the paperback, drugstore kind, told by the lover in Laura Chase's novel. These three different layers are woven together but have seemingly very little to do with one another. This adds an element of confusion to an already complicated story. Atwood also employs newspaper clippings, similar to those in *Alias Grace*, to keep the reader abreast of current events surrounding the

thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless that way." From the opening lines, we know that Laura has committed suicide. The book then jumps back in time - back to a time when Iris' parents were just getting married, before she and her sister were born. Atwood uses this opening to draw the readers into the story and to give us an important clue about the two sisters.

Atwood dabbles, to some extent, with the effects of society

their social situation. Atwood creates a scenario where the paternal grandmother of the girls is a true old-time aristocrat in Toronto society. This old family has lost their money, so their grandmother marries their grandfather, an up and coming young man who is making a fortune off his button factory. Here we see a meeting of class and nouveau riche capitalism.

This situation implies something about women's social situation which most of us know was applicable at the time - they were dependent, financially, upon men. What we come to realize, however, is that this is not universally true. The Chase sisters are raised with a mix of backgrounds. Their grandmother's old-world reputation had enough weight to overcome the taint of "factory money." Yet she dies before either of the girls are born, so they are merely left with her legacy. The Chase fortune, however, is a substantial reality in their lives.

They are raised secluded on the family estate. They know the

see BLIND on page seven

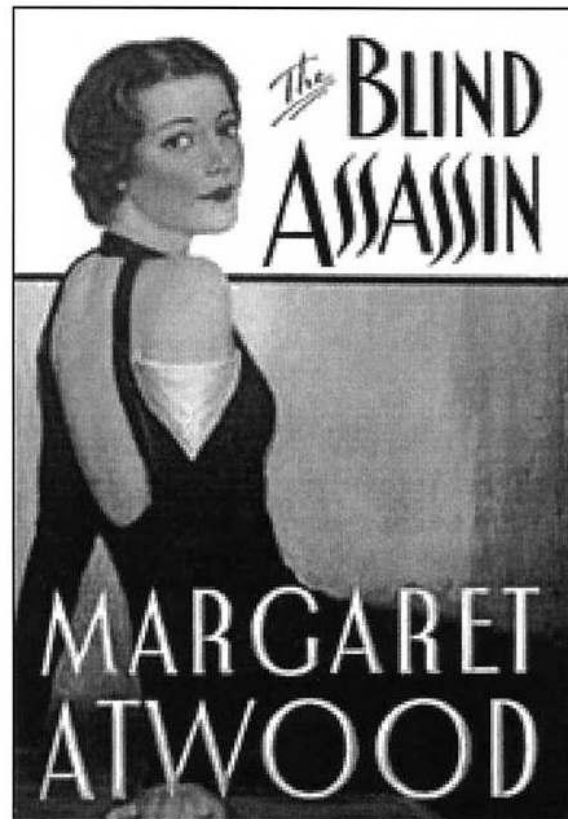
"I felt confused, and also inadequate: whatever it was he was asking or demanding, it was beyond me. This was the first time a man would expect more from me than I was capable of giving, but it would not be the last."

characters' lives.

While the triple layered approach might detract from the story, Atwood's use of time is perfect. The narrator is, in a sense, omniscient, because she is retelling, as an old woman, the story of her childhood and coming-of-age. Therefore she often jumps ahead of herself. These flash forwards are easily overlooked; they give clues and keys that only become important when the whole story is unfolded. At the same time, these forward looking moments allow the reader a greater understanding of how complicated the scenes being described actually are, how complicated life itself can be. Because Atwood does not approach the narrative in a strictly linear fashion, the readers get a much better sense that the story truly deals with peoples lives. It is also an effective way to immerse the reader in the story. As an example, the book begins, "Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge.... It wasn't the brakes, I

on the girls, both as they grow up and as Iris steps into adult responsibilities. Set mainly

between the two wars, historical events such as the Depression, the Red scare, and the organization of Canada's union workers have significant impact on these two lives. However, Atwood does not concentrate on outside events; they are mentioned only in passing. Therefore it is easy to get lost if a reader is not paying attention; these things have bearing on the characters and yet are not really dealt with. What is a p p a r e n t l y significant, both personally for the Chase sisters and for women, we realize, is



Womyn's Space

Penis Envy

I envy men who can yearn
with infinite emptiness
toward the body of a woman,
hoping that the yearning
will make a child,
that the emptiness itself
will fertilize the darkness.
Women have no illusions about this,
being at once
houses, tunnels,
cups & cupbearers,
knowing emptiness as a temporary state
between two fullnesses,
& seeing no romance in it.
If I were a man
doomed to that infinite emptiness
& having no choice in the matter,
I would, like the rest, no doubt,
find a woman
& christen her moonbelly,
madonna, gold-haired goddess
& make her the tent of my longing,
the silk parachute of my lust,
the blue-eyed icon of my sacred sexual itch,
the mother of my hunger.
But since I am a woman,
I must not only inspire the poem
but also type it,
not only conceive the child
but also bear it,
not only bear the child
but also bathe it,
not only bathe the child
but also feed it,
not only feed the child
but also carry it
everywhere, everywhere...
while men write poems
on the mysteries of motherhood.
I envy men who can yearn
with infinite emptiness.

by Erica Jong

He suffered the usual masculine
disillusionment in discovering that a woman
has a brain.

Gone With the Wind

Margaret Mitchell



VARIATIONS ON THE WORD SLEEP

MARGARET ATWOOD

I WOULD LIKE TO WATCH YOU SLEEPING,
WHICH MAY NOT HAPPEN.

I WOULD LIKE TO WATCH YOU,
SLEEPING. I WOULD LIKE TO SLEEP
WITH YOU, TO ENTER
YOUR SLEEP AS ITS SMOOTH DARK WAVE
SLIDES OVER MY HEAD

AND WALK WITH YOU THROUGH THAT LUCENT
WAVERING FOREST OF BLUEGREEN LEAVES
WITH ITS WATERY SUN & THREE MOONS
TOWARDS THE CAVE WHERE YOU MUST DESCEND,
TOWARDS YOUR WORST FEAR.

I WOULD LIKE TO GIVE YOU THE SILVER
BRANCH, THE SMALL WHITE FLOWER, THE ONE
WORD THAT WILL PROTECT YOU
FROM THE GRIEF AT THE CENTER
OF YOUR DREAM, FROM THE GRIEF
AT THE CENTER. I WOULD LIKE TO FOLLOW
YOU UP THE LONG STAIRWAY
AGAIN & BECOME
THE BOAT THAT WOULD ROW YOU BACK
IN TWO CUPPED HANDS
TO WHERE YOUR BODY LIES
BESIDE ME, AND YOU ENTER
IT AS EASILY AS BREATHING IN

I WOULD LIKE TO BE THE AIR
THAT INHABITS YOU FOR A MOMENT
ONLY. I WOULD LIKE TO BE THAT UNNOTICED
& THAT NECESSARY.

DANCER IN THE DARK

continued from page four
sadistic, emotional pain.

Von Trier is brutal in this point. In fact, I came out in some ways hating the director for almost literally forcing the audience into feeling such anguish, but I also felt a deep and utter respect for a filmmaker who is able to make me not just watch but also experience a film.

The only other film I can say that about is Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, but Von Trier is much sharper and darker than Anderson. Von Trier refuses to pull the camera away at the points when most filmmakers would allow the audience's imaginations take hold. He refuses to give us a booming score in the background that, in some ways, tells you what to feel. He does not give us a safe happy ending or a completely tragic one. Von Trier allows the audience to feel on their own. They can turn away if they like, they can convince themselves of what will happen after the movie ends, they can hate or love it, but no individual seeing this film will be ambivalent.

Dancer in the Dark will haunt anyone who is willing to come into it and have all their expectations of what a film "should" be overturned. As Selma explains why she always leaves before the finale of a musical, "that way the movie keeps on going and going — it lives on forever." This is a film that will live on forever in my mind.

Same-Sex Marriage Controversy

continued from page three

In response to several polls showing the majority of Americans to believe that the government and elected leaders should support "traditional family values" (once the sole property of political conservatives), President Clinton embraced them as a central theme in his 1996 reelection campaign, indicating that he would sign the Defense of Marriage Act, a bill outlawing same-sex marriage at the federal level. This relatively "safe" political strategy is surely to be expected in the absence of a judicial challenge. On the other hand, with courts ruling such exclusive boundaries to marriage unconstitutional (as in Hawaii and Vermont), we may anticipate legislative bodies increasingly to be forced to confront this politically uncomfortable issue.

The controversy involved in passing a bill supporting same-sex marriage, or even the close variant of civil union, is exquisitely complex. The dilemma which policy-makers face turns on society's still-conflicting views of marriage and of homosexuality. While many strongly believe that marriage between those of the same sex would destroy the sanctity of this institution, its supporters believe with equal force that withholding the benefits accompanying marriage denies them a most basic human right.

The Blind Assassin: A Review

continued from page five
benefits of having money but have no real basis for comparison. This only becomes a problem when the family fortune begins to disappear as the Depression lingers on.

When it becomes apparent that the family fortune is no more, neither Laura nor Iris can do anything to help their father or themselves. They are not trained to do any work. We begin to understand that money, while it has its privileges, also has its drawbacks, particularly for women. The Chase sister's lives have been more restricted than many because men have always expected to provide for them. No one made any attempts to change this situation — male or female. Thus the only way to save the family is to marry. This is exactly what happens. While it is never said this way during the "negotiations," Iris Chase is sold to a young man — smacking of "new money" — who in exchange provides for her father and sister. Iris, too late, realizes the absolute desperation in the situation, but she feels as if she is absolutely powerless. Laura, on the other hand, is still young, about fifteen, and she feels as if her sister gives in too easily. From the narrative, Atwood demonstrates both what a restricted situation Iris — and women like her — is in and also how, with the proper spirit, she could escape it.

It is up to the

younger sister Laura to demonstrate the "proper spirit." With just as little knowledge of the ways and mores of the world than Iris, Laura is still sickened by the easy way that her older sister gives in to the pressure of men in her life. Laura is constantly testing her boundaries, breaking rules set by the adults in her life and violating social conventions. With no real resources, however, these tactics are almost as ineffective as Iris' choice to passively submit. Tension between the sisters increases, taking us back to the beginning of the book.

While the novel has been narrated throughout by Iris in her old age, we begin to see that the question asked in the beginning of the book is very simply this: did Laura choose to commit suicide or was she pushed over the edge by Iris? This is what, as an old woman, Iris is left with. This question is echoed subtly throughout the book; did Laura find herself in such desperate straits because of the choices Iris made? There is probably never a clear-cut answer to a question like this, but Atwood skillfully weaves the various suggestions and feelings throughout the text. We end the book left with many things; the difficulties of growing old, learning to balance family relationships, a mysterious love story, an other-worldly sci-fi tale, and unanswered questions about men and women and society.