

FROM broadside ballads to Newgate novels to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, "true crime" has been a successful subject-matter for popular as well as, recently, more respectable literature, affording readers the double thrill of enjoying an embroidered story while imagining that it is truthful. In this text, Margaret Atwood seems to revisit this tradition from an oblique angle, that of twentieth-century writers setting out to vindicate the viewpoints and voices of marginalised and silenced people, which also allows her to revisit another frequently fictionalised figure: the unruly woman.

The narrator is a young woman who is serving a prison sentence for murder in the mid-nineteenth century and working as a servant for the wife of the prison's governor. In her first-person narrative, she describes her current life, portrays the governor's wife, reports how she reads and hears herself described, and relates her experience with the lawyer who defended her at her trial. The text is puzzling in the way it showcases the narrator's privilege to tell her own version of her story while not seizing the opportunity to oppose a self-portrait to others' visions of her, among others not saying whether she is guilty or not.

The text thus uses the narrative voice of a young working-class criminal woman, which exercises its privilege in paradoxical ways, as a lens through which to look at the way personal and social identity, social class, and crime and punishment are defined by relationships of conflict and inseparability.

This commentary will first present the text as a double indirect portrait of the narrator and the Governor's wife achieved through polyphony within the monophonic narrative. It will then argue that the text reflects society as a theatre of fabricated and imposed identities and a network of violent, crippling relationships. Finally, it will examine the paradoxical ways in which this society treats guilt and links it to writing.

THE TEXT consists mostly in a double indirect portrait of two characters seen through others' eyes: the narrator portrays the wife of the governor of the prison where she is incarcerated, and portrays herself as described in the press and talked about in the prison. The most striking symptom of this borrowing of viewpoint is probably the polyphonic writing of the text, especially its copious use of free indirect speech, through which other characters' voices are embedded in, and contaminate, the narrator's own.

The indirectness of the narrator's writing echoes the indirectness of relationships and communication: the guests of the Governor's wife "stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets" (l. 11-12); when the narrator reports what they say, she reports words spoken about her, but not to her; and in a key passage the Governor's wife confronts the narrator with journalistic representations of her (l. 70). The narrator reports what these characters say using their own personal pronouns, not exactly using free indirect speech but direct speech without any quotation marks, writing about herself in the third person, as in "You let that woman walk around loose in the house" (l. 46). Actually, when she writes

about herself, the focalisation hardly seems internal, with few exceptions which provide the reader with scant information but rather emphasise the elusiveness of the narrator's inner thoughts: "I wonder," she writes twice, at lines 34 and 44; "I've learnt to keep my face still" (l. 71). On the other hand, she claims to meticulously describe and analyse the thoughts of the Governor's wife: "She does not like being the Governor's wife, she would prefer..." (l. 5), "she likes to horrify her acquaintances" (l. 69). This creates a chiasmic relationship between the narrator and the Governor's wife, which, however, indicates a similarity between them since it means that they are both appropriated by others' narratives: the narrator by the media's and the Governor's wife's and her friends'; the Governor's wife by the narrator's.

The narrator points out the discrepancy between the public image and reality of all three characters in the text: she highlights the contradictions between her various descriptions in the media (l. 24-34) and concludes "a lot of it is lies" (l. 75), debunks the Governor's wife's social persona (l. 5-7), and balances the lawyer's heroic media portrayal against his no-holds-barred tactics (l. 41-43).

Constructed images actually obliterate authentic selves. Although the narrator claims access to the private thoughts of the Governor's wife, she describes the Governor's wife as no more than that: a nameless, interchangeable ("it is not always the same wife," l. 3) dummy defined through reference to someone else who is equally nameless (the Governor), so that she is doubly deprived of a personal identity. Indeed this double privation is specifically female: the Governor's person is hidden by his social role but not someone else's social role, as his wife's is. Similarly, the narrator writes as much about herself as about portrayals of her: she portrays herself as a spectator of the portraits that others make of her. With only one exception ("A lot of it is lies. They said in the newspaper that I was illiterate, but I could read some even then," l. 75), she does not comment on the descriptions of her which she repeats, even though their contradictions imply that they cannot all be true, as though her intrinsic identity were crushed by these representations of her. Although "Or that is what has been written down" (l. 13-14) points explicitly to a distinction between narrative and truth, the narrator's position concerning the imposed identities she is saddled with is actually ambiguous: "And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (l. 34) conveys her irony about the humbug that fill the papers' pages, but it may also be read more literally as a pathetic expression of her failure to recognise herself in these imposed identities. The narrator's repeating the word "murderess" (l. 18) to herself and her looking at herself in the mirror (l. 22) also testify at least to her interest in how others see her, and possibly to her measuring herself against those images of her, or even trying to identify with them.

In fact, the narrator appears not only estranged from others (she finds herself unable to communicate even with her only defender: on the one hand "I wonder if he ever believed a word I said," l. 44; on the

other “I could not make head nor tail of much of what he said,” l. 40) but also alienated from herself (as noted above, she writes about herself in the third person). Absent a positive self-portrayal in the text, the contradictions between the imposed images of the narrator construct a fragmented identity for her: after listing the conflicting reports of her in the papers (which may include a textual reference to Emma Bovary’s famously many-hued eyes, possibly as an example of a fiction writer subjecting an unruly woman to his wild imagination), she asks, “how can I be all of these different things at once?” (l. 34). She “[has words] attached to [her]” (l. 16), she says in a grammatical construction which emphasises her lack of agency in the way she is written and talked about, which echoes her self-description as “an object” (l. 9). In her own way, the Governor’s wife is also alienated: since she is no more than the Governor’s wife and governors are interchangeable, the very parlour seems to have more permanence than she does. “It has always been the Governor’s wife’s parlour although it is not always the same wife” (l. 3) suggests almost exactly the opposite of what it says explicitly: that the Governor’s wife belongs to the parlour rather than the other way round. Once again, being defined by the parlour highlights the Governor’s wife’s specifically female social role. Furthermore, while the narrator is “an object,” she also points out the Governor’s wife’s pawn-like status when she writes “they change [governors and their wives] around according to the politics” (l. 4).

Actually, the narrator may have more in common with the Governor’s wife than either of them cares to admit: “we are virtually prisoners ourselves” (l. 48) highlights their being brought together by their opposite situations as prisoner and wife of the prison’s Governor, all the more so since those words are reported in direct speech without quotation marks so that they are spoken by both characters in the narrative as such. Conversely, “So here she is, and she must make the most of her social position” (l. 8) is a remark made by the narrator about the governor’s wife which holds a mirror to the narrator; indeed it is echoed by “if those are the only choices” (l. 21), as the mention of the Governor’s wife’s “accomplishments” (l. 8 and 10) are echoed by “she is [...] accomplished” (l. 50-51). Here too, the two voices are merged as this sentence is spoken by the Governor’s wife’s about the narrator, in direct speech without quotation marks, so that the narrator mimics the Governor’s wife speaking about her (the narrator). The narrator either pretends to be the Governor’s wife (who is a bit like her) or looks at herself through the Governor’s wife’s eyes, which is precisely what she does with a mirror which belongs to the Governor’s wife, thus producing an iconic image of the relationship between them. This intertwinement is corroborated by the *dispositio* of the text, which, by repeatedly moving back and forth between the two characters, weaves the two portraits together and makes them interdependent: the portrayal of one character is performed through the portrayal of the other. At the end of the day the paradoxical relationship which ties the two characters together may shed light on the chiasmic polyphonic texture of the narrative: while the Governor’s wife imprisons the narrator, literally in the

prison and metaphorically in her representations of her, the narrator retaliates by capturing the Governor's wife in her narrative which claims access to her inner and even secret thoughts although she also, perhaps unconsciously, recognises herself in her, which raises the question of the web of relationships between characters.

INDEED, while the narrator is imprisoned in others' images of her and in a real prison, the text is fashioned by a tangle of relationships, and the narrator makes it (the text) work as a net to capture those who imprison her.

The text begins with a description of a nameless character who plays a social role which obliterates her individuality, while the narrator does not assert her true self but mentions the roles that she is made to play: at her trial she was shown as a manipulated girl; in prison she enacts a combination of the repentant criminal and the submissive servant. The emphasis is laid on role-playing: "I come into the room and curtsy and move about, mouth straight, head bent" (l. 10) reads like a stage direction, while "I've learnt to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat" (l. 71-72) makes the reader privy to her acting tricks. The latter extract, where the Governor's wife tries to trap the narrator, illustrates how the narrator uses both acting and narratorial privilege to escape the Governor's wife's trap and ultimately to capture the Governor's wife in the narrative. It also lucidly connects role-playing with the issues discussed above, in a three-step scenario: first the Governor's wife communicates indirectly with the narrator (through the mediation of her scrapbook), confronting her with an image of her seen by others; the narrator responds first by concealing her true self ("keep my face still"), and finally by enacting a role.

On the whole, society appears not as a group of real human beings but as a theatre of roles, many of them stock characters, played by actors whose authentic identity is either crushed (the Governor's wife?) or disguised (the narrator's?). This involves a generalised disregard for the truth: the narrator reports her lawyer saying "whatever the truth of the matter" (l. 38) and she claims that "a lot of [what is printed in papers] is lies" (l. 75).

Role-playing is conditioned by the limited options available to the characters in precarious or constrained situations, which force them to compromise themselves by compromising. They both try to turn bad situations into good ones, or at least less bad, or pretend that they are not as bad as they think they are: a position that consists neither in choosing nor in adapting but can be seen as a combination or a half-way point between them. Additionally, there is no mistaking the fact that these constraints are largely related to their gender and their social class. The narrator insists that the Governor's wife is not much of a social success and emphasises the frustrating in-betweenness of her situation: her husband is a governor, but a prison's governor because his social connections were only that good; he and she are

kept at the threshold of the ruling classes where they may be considered tainted by a slightly dishonourable job. This unpalatable position is exacerbated by the fact that the governor may be “change[d] around” for political convenience by authorities: they have authority over prisoners but they are not the authorities. The Governor’s wife’s attempts to imitate upper-class women in her social rituals, occupations and “accomplishments”, and also in the obsequious style she imposes on her servant (“I [...] curtsy and move about, mouth straight, head bent”), are explained by the fact that “she must make the most of her social position”. Despite the narrator’s sneering tone at the Governor’s wife’s humiliation, this description makes the Governor’s wife a mirror image of the narrator, as noted above: playing the role of the submissive maid and repentant criminal is a way of optimising her own predicament in which she has virtually no options; serving the Governor’s wife and going back to her cell at night is marginally better than being an ordinary prisoner. Similarly, being described as stupid at her trial was demeaning but it may have saved her life. In the narrator’s assessment that “it must have been good pleading” (l. 40-41), the epistemic modal “must” bears witness to how finely, and uncertainly, pros and cons need to be weighed. The theme of choice is explicitly addressed in a revealing way: “I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices,” a wording which stresses the idea of limited choice, and this choice is not even a real one as the narrator cannot actually choose between being a murderer and a murderess. It may even be argued that the problem of coping with risk underpins the text’s whole narrative strategy, as described earlier: these linguistic contortions are indeed suggestive of a narrator writhing to accommodate herself to a cramped situation. The narrator’s options, and the Governor’s wife’s, are of course limited by social rules and relationships, so that they raise the question of the power dynamics at play in the text.

The text stages the relationship between a prisoner and the prison’s Governor’s wife, a relationship predicated on power dynamics. The pattern of a servant using his or her paradoxically privileged, inside viewpoint, to sarcastically debunk the pretensions of their master, is a time-honored device to address reversible social-class relationships. It is remarkable that the Governor’s wife is both the narrator’s jailer (at least symbolically, by proxy) and her employer, so that the unequal relationship between her and the narrator conflates judicial and social-class dimensions. Moreover, the relationship between them is dramatised and used by the Governor’s wife, in her relationships with other women: by staging the narrator before her visitors, she displays both her power over the prisoner-servant in order to impress her guests, and a contrast between their social positions which set hers off (whereas the Governor’s wife thinks her own position on the threshold of the ruling class is not good enough for *her*, she claims that being a “milliner’s *assistant*” [emphasis mine] would have been quite an achievement for the narrator, showing how she has different standards and expectations for herself and a woman in a social situation inferior to hers). The narrator herself points out how the Governor’s wife turns her into

a social asset in her strategy to “make the most of her social position and accomplishments”: “I am also one of the accomplishments” (l. 9-10). She thus appears as a lady whose status is enhanced by contrast with a reverential, submissive maid (“I come into the room and curtsy,” l. 10: the more subservient and decorous the servant, the more exalted the master or mistress), a tamer (“You let that woman walk around loos in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it,” l. 46-47) of a dangerous beast (“a leopard,” l. 60, “you never know when they may get carried away again,” l. 56-57), a pious Christian (“one must feel pity,” l. 49, “no one could say you have not done your duty,” l. 60-61) whose “charity” (l. 9) is turned to her own advantage, and she flaunts the economic value she can squeeze out of the narrator (“she is a wonderful seamstress, quite deft and accomplished, she is a great help,” l. 50-51).

Still the relationship between the narrator and the Governor’s wife is not exactly one-sided: serving the Governor’s wife is probably a slightly improved condition for a prisoner (perhaps not unlike that of a house slave compared to a field hand in the American Southern slave states), so that while the Governor’s wife exploits her power relationship with the narrator for the sake of other relationships in a frustrating social situation, the narrator, whose situation is no less frustrating, also derives what little profit she can from the Governor’s wife’s exploiting her and her relationship with her. The narrator’s relationship with her lawyer is similarly ambivalent: although he is cast as her defender, he defends her in a way that carries a price for her (the humiliation of pleading stupidity) and is beneficial to the lawyer himself: the newspapers’ panegyric can be expected to make the narrator’s case a great career opportunity for him.

It is actually remarkable that the two apparently opposed figures of the Governor’s wife (the narrator’s jailer and exploiter) and the lawyer (her defender) stand in a chiasmic or symmetrical relationship, greatly abating the contrast between them: the Governor’s wife claims her “pity” (l. 49) for the narrator, which echoes the lawyer’s “kind[ness]” (l. 39) and the prison authorities, perhaps including the Governor’s wife, claim their interest in saving the prisoners’ souls (l. 78), while the lawyer can be expected (and no doubt expects) to benefit from his performance. In both cases, punishment and/or exploitation wears the mask of salvation and the narrator’s interests are liable to be brandished only as a cover for others’ interests. More generally, “religion and thrashing are the only remedies for a depraved nature and our immortal souls must be considered” (l. 77-79) shows that social institutions mix punishment and benevolence. Caught between a defender who may only want to use her case and a jailer who claims she wants to save her, the narrator may find the distinction between friends and enemies unclear, and she is once more seen in a risky and uncertain situation where choices are cripplingly limited and risky.

The Governor’s wife’s parlour in the prison, where the narrator describes herself in the frame

narrative, and where she interacts with the Governor's wife and her visitors, appears as a highly symbolical microcosm, an idea confirmed by the Governor's wife's pointing out that she and her husband "are virtually prisoners [them]selves." Thus the prison appears as a synecdoche of society as a whole, with ambiguous implications: the Governor's wife is (symbolically) there to punish criminals, but her being there to punish them makes her look like one of them, which raises the question of what they are in prison for, that is to say of guilt and punishment.

IN A NUTSHELL, the prison stands for a punitive society so that the question of the narrator's guilt or innocence of the specific crime she was condemned for may be engulfed and made irrelevant by a neo-Augustinian conception of original sin encapsulated by the remark that "a leopard cannot change its spots" (l. 60). Furthermore, "religion and thrashing are the only remedies for a depraved nature and our immortal souls must be considered" (l. 77-79), while highlighting punishment, raises the question of the remedy's efficiency: can a "nature" be "remedied"?

On the other hand, the lawyer pledges to defend the narrator "to the utmost of his ability" (l. 37) "whatever the truth of the matter" (l. 38): he is determined to save her from being punished, even if she is guilty. Yet he seems to have already found her guilty if his words are read closely: the sentence "whatever the truth of the matter [...], he supposed it came down to free will and whether or not one held with it" (l. 38-39) contains an inconsistency since the first part implies that he thinks she may be guilty or innocent, whereas the latter part, by restricting the question to whether or not she should be considered responsible for what she did, takes it for granted that she has done it. Besides, the lawyer's paradoxical principled stance leads to a distinctly roguish tactic: "he was not pleading but trying to make all of the witnesses appear immoral or malicious, or else mistaken" (l. 42-43). Since the lawyer appears ready to behave immorally for the sake of a morality (defending the narrator) which protects immorality (if she is guilty), his attitude seems to abolish the difference between the white knight championing a wrongly accused damsel in distress and a criminal's accomplice.

The juxtaposition of these two attitudes towards guilt (general punishment on the one hand, boundless advocacy on the other—the latter of which additionally muddies the distinction between right and wrong) makes society a murky place as a whole. The narrator voices her disapproval of society's moral standards: "what is there to celebrate about murder?", she asks at lines 14-15, puzzled by her own social identity encapsulated by the oxymoron "Celebrated Murderess"; "it is shocking how many crimes the Bible contains," she comments at line 79, sarcastically pointing at the similarity between this supposedly redeeming reading material and pulp journalism, a similarity which epitomises the moral contradictions of the society that punishes her.

Another proof of that society's dubious morals lies in its fascination with crime and criminals (of

which the Governor's wife and her friends provide glaring examples), which grants the sensationalistic press endless opportunities for commercial exploitation. This pulp journalism has less to do with reality ("a lot of it is lies") than with the appeal of the storytelling itself: in other words, writing about crime aestheticises crime. Indeed, in the Governor's wife's scrapbook, crimes take the place of flowers (l. 68), just as the "Celebrated Murderess," is equivalent to an artist (l. 14-15). Although the narrator voices her disapproval of celebrating murder (this paradoxical narrator combines two opposite working-class stereotypes: the transgressive and the prudish) and implicitly conveys her indignation at the Governor's wife's apparent indifference to the distinction between crimes and flowers, she herself aestheticises her vision of it when she plays with the word "murderess," focusing on the signifier and the sensations it evokes to her (l. 16-21). This behaviour is ambiguous since her focusing on the signifier might be a way of either ignoring the signified, or approaching the signified through the signifier, letting the sound of the word influence her perception of its meaning. Either way aestheticisation is at work in how the narrator writes about her being a criminal, which takes us to the question of her relationship to writing and to crime.

It is remarkable that the only time the narrator opposes her own version of facts to others' is to assert her literacy. This detail serves to characterise the proud working-class girl, but it may also play an even more strategic role in a first-person narrative which enacts the character's ability to write her own story.

Indeed, the contrast between the two female characters in their relationship to writing about crime affords the narrator the most remarkable way to subvert the power relationship between them: while the Governor's wife positions herself as a fashionable lady through scrapbooking, that is to say through consuming crime narratives, the narrator, as such, exercises her ability to produce, not just consume, a narrative. Even though by cutting the stories out and pasting them the Governor's wife may be trying to transform her passive role into an active one, it only has the opposite effect, that of highlighting her being on the receiving end, and the fact that this is told by the narrator performatively proves that, in this respect at least, she has the upper hand on the Governor's wife. The moment when the Governor's wife shows the narrator her scrapbook is highly symbolical: she tries to place the narrator in the position of a reader, which is her own position. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the narrator slips out of the Governor's wife's control by hiding her real feelings and putting on a show. Yet she also evades the reader's curiosity: because its narrator is the young woman herself, the text dangles before the reader's eyes the prospect of a confidence about her guilt or innocence to the reader, if not to the Governor's wife, a curiosity which is frustrated. One possible key to this puzzle may lie in the overall power dynamics which reduces choices, shapes behaviours and forces characters into coping tactics, as described in the second part of this commentary: by conforming to the expectation that she act mechanically and silently like an automaton, the narrator finds a shelter and an outlet in the very

silencing that is imposed on her. On top of being a defence strategy chosen for her by the lawyer, silence is at once the annihilation to which she is consigned and, for that very reason, the secret space where she can exist, protected by the façade of the roles she plays, including that of the automaton. Her narrative voice, itself a fictional instrument crafted by a novelist to reclaim her from silence, features its own silencing as both a constraint and a resource in its use of reported speech, implicit expression and secrecy.

THIS COMMENTARY has returned to the paradox with which it began: the fact that the narrator does not exercise her narratorial privilege to explicitly produce her own self-portrait.

All in all, the narrator appears neither as an assertively disruptive rebel, nor as a mere victim of social injustice and determinism, but first and foremost as a working-class woman whose whole life has made her familiar with social rules which are slanted against her and with having to tread carefully on a narrow and winding path through a minefield of limited choices. She knows that keeping silent is often the least dangerous option, but she is also used to making her points implicitly, through enunciation as much as through utterance.

What is more, the fact that the narrator keeps her secret may also signal a compromise between narratorial and authorial privileges: the author can only be true to her attempt to vindicate the narrator's self by refraining from imposing her own imagination on her, while the narrator's voice picks a way through social rules to make itself heard and preserve a sense of self and integrity.