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## “If you look long enough, eventually you will see me”: The Power of the Elusive in Atwood's *Alias Grace*

**Alaa Alghamdi**

Associate Professor of English Literature, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia

Dr. Alaa Alghamdi is an associate professor of English literature at Taibah University, Saudi Arabia. Educated in Saudi Arabia, UK, and USA, Alghamdi is a researcher in modern & contemporary British & American literature and culture.

### **Abstract**

Throughout her long career, Canadian poet, novelist and critic Margaret Atwood has known for her incisive depictions of the patriarchal subjugation of women. Atwood's acclaimed novel *Alias Grace*, based on this historical Grace Marks, a young servant accused of murder in the mid 1800s, employs a particular technique also seen in her poetry and short stories, particularly “Death by Landscape” in the *Wilderness Tips* collection. In each, a female character is elusive, and knowledge of her is necessarily fragmentary. In “Death by Landscape”, a young girl disappears in the woods yet is deemed to be “fully alive” in landscapes paintings that call to mind the setting in which she vanished. In “Isis in Darkness”, a story in the same collection, a young man becomes reconciled to his role in the life of the woman he loved, acting as an 'archaeologist' and putting together fragments of her life. Knowing or even seeing the whole woman is impossible, but this offers power, protection and immortality to these subjects, who thus avoid the societal gaze. *Alias Grace* represents Atwood's fullest depiction of this elusive female.

### **Keywords**

Atwood, Grace Marks, male gaze, fragmentary persona

## Introduction

For five decades, the name Margaret Atwood has been almost synonymous with women's writing in Canada. Her body of work and her perspective on our world, real and imagined, is remarkable for the risks that she is willing to take regarding both subject matter and structure. A poet and playwright as well as a novelist, Atwood has reached far and near for her subject matter - from futuristic settings and narratives to the ordinary, to her own personal and cultural/national history. All subject matter, whether realistic for far-fetched, dystopian or historical, becomes the recipient of what may be called the Atwood gaze - perspective that is always slightly askew, and as a result considerably more acute than what an average person might see. Atwood's readers are of course the beneficiaries of this unique view, and it may be what has lent such popularity to her works. Atwood seems to see beyond the tropes of society, patriarchy and heteronormative experience, and then expose what is beyond. A very short Atwood poem illustrates this ability:

You fit into me  
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook  
an open eye<sup>1</sup>

Underneath the seemingly hackneyed phrase lurks a kind of violence. And behind that violence is a message about inequality, victimization, and the perverse and altered forms of interaction that inevitably result from it, and that are, in and of themselves, patriarchy's most damning pieces of evidence.

*Alias Grace* and *The Handmaids Tale*, both older Atwood novels dating from the 1990s, have received renewed interest owing to recent televised renditions of their compelling narratives. *Alias Grace*, the subject of this analysis, has received critical attention due to its unique structure and its position within the genre of historical storytelling. *Alias Grace* is inspired by and tells the story of the historical Grace Marks, a young Ontario woman who in 1842 was tried and convicted as an accessory to the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear. Kinnear's housekeeper and lover, Nancy Montgomery, was also murdered, and although Grace never stood trial for this killing it was suspected that she played a role (Katz). The involvement and guilt of the historical Grace Marks has been in question ever since that time, and one might say that Atwood does little to resolve the matter. Her revealing of Grace's history is always ambiguous, calling into question how much of the narrative is crafted for the benefit of a particular listener. In this way, Atwood reminds us that one is never without a listener, and never without a context that seeks to frame and define one – and, crucially, that this is particularly the case for a young, marginalized woman. And yet Atwood is not an apologist for Grace Marks. Theories about guilt and motivation are presented and seamlessly discarded – in the end, revealing only the parameters of a persistent enigma.

*Alias Grace* is an important novel. Its structure, in particular, is quietly and powerfully innovative, inviting analyses on the basis of its metafictional and postmodern

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1 From Atwood, *Power Politics*, 1971

elements. The device of the patchwork quilt is often invoked; this is a unifying thread throughout the book, a patterned quilt, such as Grace herself may have made, introducing each chapter/section - and it is thought that the patchwork nature of the quilt echoes the pieces that come together regarding Grace's own story. Like the quilt that Grace makes for herself at the end, elements are embedded and hidden in plain view. Another powerful idea is that there is no absolutely correct version of events. All are provisional, even as they seemingly allow a woman from the past to step forward. We are compelled by the author, rather than merely invited, to question what we are witnessing. Is it Grace, or a projection of our own thoughts, ideas and preconceptions?

While questions of meta narrative and the postmodernist perspective are relevant to our understanding of Atwood's work, the underlying similarities between *Alias Grace* and other works in their depiction of a half-hidden female subject have not thus far been discussed, though Lovelady (1999) alludes to the “broader cultural fascination [with]... splintered identities and childhood trauma” that marked literature in the 1990s (Lovelady 103). She also acknowledges the role of the postmodern perspective and the possibility it presents of a “both-and” rather than “either-or” assessment of guilt or innocence. Carrera, in her examination of protagonists in successive volumes of Atwood's short stories, observes an evolution and “gradual amplification” of the young female subject, though defined against the persona of her male counterpart (230 – 231). That is, though originally fragmented and obscured, the characters in these stories according to Carrera grow with regard to their substance, agency and autonomy. I would argue, however, that *Alias Grace* (written later than the short story volumes Carrera examines) is in fact the culmination of a longer exploration of the half-hidden, elusive female.

Atwood's depiction of the hidden female is a constant in her work, a kind of leitmotif. Atwood's rendition of Grace Marks represents just one incarnation of this figure that haunts history and landscape in Atwood's work; Grace is, arguably, the fullest incarnation of this figure, as Atwood creates, from historical and fictional material, a sort of metaphorical quilt for Grace to live within. However, this literary accomplishment echoes and fulfils earlier ones, and seeks to both raise and resolve important questions – questions that span literary and social concerns. Namely:

Why do the women hide?

What does it mean for one to be hidden? What are the connotations of hiding, the motivations, and the results?

What does it mean that the one thus hidden be typically a woman, often young, sometimes victimized or vulnerable?

Hiding carries with it the connotation of fleeing, of escape, but within Atwood works it can also involve trickery or shape shifting, which, unlike other uses of hiding, affords the subject a degree of power. On the other hand, selective hiding of parts of one's persona may also occur because there is no room for the totality, suggesting a more vulnerable position for the subject. However, totality – a whole, coherent, verifiable picture – may be merely withheld rather than obliterated. The Atwood *oeuvre* invites us to consider the various meanings and connotations of being hidden.

As a servant in a wealthy home, a woman such as Grace Marks may have been hidden in plain sight. Servants in the 1800s played a well-defined role in the household.

Clad in dark uniforms and trained to be unobtrusive, they had presence and a role but no individuality. Later, as a prisoner, Grace Marks is, of course, similarly anonymous – dressed as other prisoners and confined to their ranks. However, as a “celebrated murderess”, the opposite is also true of her – she is prominent and noticed (AG 22). Because of this, someone singles her out and seeks to learn what is underneath that surface. Grace, however, hides even as she is revealed. Her ample self-expression and her subjection to a male, medical and legal gaze and scrutiny yields further pieces of her that, just like her physical being, may be contextualized sorted and filed away by a viewer. It is perhaps to avoid this 'filing away' that Grace contrives to hide in plain sight.

### **This is a Photograph of Me**

In a haunting poem<sup>2</sup>, Atwood gives voice to a drowned subject speaking from within the landscape in which she died, and which, therefore, always contains her. The poem speaks to what is lost and what persists; in this case, the loss of the person amounts to a sort of expansion of what is her. The 'photograph of me' entails a whole scene, not merely the photo of a person; at the same time, it obscures the subject. One has to 'look closely' to see her, though close scrutiny in the general sense will not be sufficient. Instead, the viewer has to radically shift his or her vision or whole mode of seeing, in order to discern the drowned girl (somehow, though this is not specified, one feels it is a girl or young woman).

The unexpected aspect of the poem - where one anticipates a simple description of a "photograph of me", one gets a voice from beyond the grave, an eerie mystery - echoes and enacts the 'twist' that is present in many Atwood poems and stories. Things are not what they seem, and what was thought to be ordinary takes on a slightly sinister aspect. All of our most basic presumptions are called into question: the person is not an entity distinct from the landscape, death is not death, and the boundaries of the individual do not end with the parameters of her body or her lifetime. She is, therefore, powerful - yet at the same time, to access this power, she is obscured, hidden, nearly forgotten, indistinct.

As we shall see, these very qualities characterize Atwood's 'hidden' heroines, including her rendition of Grace Marks. The radical uncertainty that is produced when Atwood calls into question such basic assumptions about life, death, the individual and the world may be identified with or at least compared to the concept of the 'uncanny' or “unheimlich” as discussed by Freud. Not surprising to anyone familiar with or critical of Freudian theory, Freud traced the root of humankind's fear of the uncanny to a fear of castration<sup>3</sup>. However, even if we do not accept that association, the uncanny in and of itself is a fascinating idea. We are made uncomfortable, Freud says, by uncertainty - specifically, the uncertainty regarding whether or not something is alive. The “uncanny”

2 Originally published in *The Circle Game*, 1998

3 Freud states: “Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves —all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove able to move of themselves in addition. As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its association with the castration-complex” (Freud 14). One may question this assumption, as much of Freud's focus on the sexual has been called into question, while still accepting the concept he describes as uncanny – the uncertainty over whether something is living or animate.

is defined as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 1-2). Freud cites Jentsch as follows: “The essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness is intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is” (Freud 3). More specifically, Jentsch, according to Freud, cites as examples of the uncanny one's

....doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate”; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons. (Jentsch) adds to this class the uncanny effect of epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation. (Freud 5)

Certainly, Atwood's poem, cited above, and her short story “Death by Landscape”, in which the trace of a disappeared young girl is absorbed into landscape paintings resembling the place where she disappeared, fulfil that description of the uncanny. What we think to be an inert landscape actually contains a presence - but one we can never be sure of. Yet I would argue that this element of the hidden and uncanny is a feature of other Atwood heroines as well, including Grace Marks.

**This is a Photograph of me**

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.  
I am in the lake, in the center  
of the picture, just under the surface.  
It is difficult to say where  
precisely, or to say  
how large or small I am:  
the effect of water on light  
is a distortion  
but if you look long enough,  
eventually  
you will be able to see me.)

The supernatural, paranormal, or uncanny aspect of the poem is hidden behind the innocuous, ordinary sounding first three stanzas which describe a familiar, rural scene with a small house, “gentle” slope, and low hills - all the opposite, seemingly, of a Gothic landscape. Then, in between parentheses that perhaps reflect her hidden state, the subject herself is revealed, in the same simple, matter of fact language. The very realism and familiarity lend credence to the last lines: “... if you look long enough, eventually you will be able to see me.”

That calm assertion is the same as that expressed in the ending of Atwood's short story “Death by Landscape”.<sup>4</sup> It is a story about a young girl, Lucy - a friend of the story's protagonist, Lois - who disappears, suddenly and mysteriously, in a forest landscape. In

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4 From *Wilderness Tips*, 1991

response, Lois, for decades afterward, collects landscape paintings that are reminiscent of the scene within which Lucy disappeared. These paintings are, for Lois, pictures of Lucy herself, and more than that – they are where Lucy still *is*:

In the picture of the cliff she is hidden by the clutch of fallen rocks towards the bottom, in the one of the river shore she is crouching beneath the overturned canoe. In the yellow autumn woods she's behind the tree that cannot be seen because of the other trees, over beside the blue sliver of pond; but if you walked into the picture and found the tree, it would be the wrong one, because the right one would be further on.

She is here. She is entirely alive. (*Wilderness Tips* 118)

As in the poem, the juxtaposition of realism and this subtle supernatural presence, the persistence of identity in the place where a death occurred, comes without the normal fanfare of the supernatural, and thus is insidious. Reading it, we doubt what we knew as reality, and begin to look for extra dimensions in things that appeared familiar. Atwood succeeds in convincing us that, just beyond or at the edge of our perception, the dead, hidden girl is still waiting. Eventually, we will be able to see her. Like the “self that survives theoretical odds” in Atwood's stories, which Carrera discusses, both story and poem demonstrate that a sense of the individual may survive and transcend seeming annihilation and obscuring.

It is my purpose to shed light on the similarity between the intend to demonstrate the similarity between the depictions of a dead or lost girl hidden in a landscape, as exemplified by “This is a Photograph of Me” and “Death by Landscape”, and the depictions of fragmented heroines whose reality is hidden inside their own multifarious, kaleidoscopic nature. Renditions of the fragmented heroine will be used to shed light on the resurrected character of Grace Marks, the aspects of her hidden inside Atwood's novel, and, indeed, the other girl that she may hides - that may live inside of her.

### **“Always... some marvel to reveal”: The Changeable Heroine**

In “Death by Landscape”, Atwood does not offer suggestions or definite clues as to the cause of Lucy's disappearance. The reader may have theories, but these are deliberately unsubstantiated; the whole point is that Lucy has well and truly vanished. However, Lucy's fate is predicated upon her personality, which is slippery, changeable, and kaleidoscopic. First, Lois only sees Lucy in the summers, guaranteeing that her view of Lucy is fragmented. And Lucy, who, being American is different from the start, is also different every summer. Her identity is unstable. It is also established that “Lucy had such large eyes, and was such an accomplished liar” (*Wilderness Tips* 106). Every year, Lucy has “a surprise or two, something to show, some marvel to reveal” (105). Though familiar and well known to Lois, she is, also, always slightly unknowable, and vaguely transgressive. The summer that Lucy disappears, something of her life force seems to be diminishing from the start. Indeed, there is a suggestion that she is headed for a crisis point:

She is pensive, and hard to wake in the mornings. She doesn't like her stepfather, but she doesn't want to live with her real father either, who has a new wife. She thinks her mother may be having an affair with a doctor;

she doesn't know for sure, but she's seen them smooching in his car, out in the driveway, when her stepfather wasn't there. It serves him right. She hates her private school. She has a boyfriend, who is sixteen and works as a gardener's assistant. This is how she met him: in the garden. She describes to Lois what it is like when he kisses her: rubbery at first, but then your knees go limp. She has been forbidden to see him and threatened with boarding school. She wants to run away from home. (Wilderness Tips 106)

In the preceding passage, there are several elements that suggest (but never confirm) a critical vulnerability in this young girl: the unstable family, possible depression, wanting to run away, and the exposure to sexuality for the first time. That Lucy is "hard to wake in the mornings" is ostensibly nothing more than an adolescent tendency to sleep in, but Atwood contrives to make it sound foreboding, evoking anxiousness for Lucy - *will* she wake? There are suggestions of helplessness, being overcome by sexuality - "but then your knees go limp". Thus, Lucy's pensiveness, her lethargy, her desire to run away, coalesce with both her familial disruption and the 'threat' of further separation, and the emergence of her sexuality. Ultimately, these changes presage Lucy's passage into another state, where she disappears beyond anyone's reach - her disappearance and presumable death. The narrative hints at, without giving strong evidence of, reasons for the disappearance - has she run away, as she wished? Has she committed suicide, or has she been the victim of foul play? All are possible, but nothing is confirmed. The impression, though, is that adolescence is a dangerous time.

There *is* one theory proposed regarding Lucy's disappearance - that Lois had a hand in it, had pushed Lucy as they were alone on the edge of a cliff. Yet this idea is proposed by the camp's owner, Cappie, who herself has a lot to lose, who is a figure portrayed as alternately powerful and vaguely pathetic. Cappie is looking for an explanation for this event, which has marred the integrity of the camp, perhaps irrevocably. "Sometimes we are angry without knowing it", Cappie says to Lois, but if this is the explanation, Lois's mind is as closed to us as that of the perhaps-guilty Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*. Perhaps Lois's subsequent, obsessive collecting of landscape paintings that show woodland scenes similar to that of Lucy's disappearance is damning. But then again, it is at least as likely that Lois, as protagonist, is sincere - that she misses her friend, and has done so all her life, and the paintings are, to her, paintings of Lucy. They show nothing, but they are the closest one can come to a semblance of Lucy - or, indeed, to Lucy herself.

What happened to Lucy? She disappeared from view. In the process, she passed from an entity with a body and a finite timeline and location, to one that is indistinct, elusive, hidden, invisible, and in pieces - and yet, as long as there are those to see and remember her, one who is still "completely alive". Perhaps this is the safest thing: being hidden in pieces, within something as eternal as art of landscape. It is certainly an indictment of the world we live in if the safest place for a vulnerable, mercurial young girl is in disappearance or obscurity - in pieces or even in death. In such a form, a vulnerable girl may resist definition, destruction, and paradoxically death. It is, of course, a problematic message for women and girls - that the safest place to be is hidden,

vanished, and in pieces. Lucy's death – if it is that – is remarkably devoid of violence in the narrative, yet her abrupt absence in and of itself does violence to the social and perceptual world that she inhabits and in the aftermath of that violence Lucy herself is safe. There is a salvation or a salvaging of the young heroine in these Atwood narratives, even at the expense of her physical life.

### Revealing Grace

The narrative structure of *Alias Grace* seems designed to both reveal and hide the title character, a historical figure whose involvement in a double murder has never been proven or disproven. In this way, *Alias Grace* is a monumental achievement, a sort of literary Trojan Horse in which Grace strongly asserts her presence while persistently obscuring any finite or authentic identity. Indeed, her identity lies in her changeable and obscure nature, much like that of the heroines previously discussed. In *Alias Grace*, the notion of the heroine hidden in pieces in plain view (and thus resurrected) reaches fruition.

The novel is largely structured around Grace's sessions with Dr. Simon Jordan, seemingly (based on his methods) an early psychoanalyst<sup>5</sup>. Dr. Jordan, summoned by a committee dedicated to building a case to pardon Grace, wishes to access lost parts of her memory and thus prove her innocence or guilt – for Grace, though convicted of being an accessory to murder and having confessed as much, professes not to remember the double murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear, or any role she may have played in such. A portion of the narrative is in third person, observing the actions of Dr. Jordan and, at times, his thoughts. These are further disclosed in a number of letters from Dr. Jordan to others, disclosing details of the case. The other 'voice' that inhabits the narrative is that of Grace herself, principally in the form of monologues to Dr. Jordan, and thoughts regarding these narratives. Although Grace's piece is presented in first person, we are never confident that we are accessing all of her thoughts – in fact, she suggests the contrary<sup>6</sup>. The fact that her own narrative is predicated upon this device – her communication to Dr. Jordan – is significant, as it means that she is conscious of an external gaze, even when seemingly alone with her own thoughts. Of course, the device closely echoes the actual situation – Grace is, indeed, being observed, and her knowledge of such must influence what she is willing to reveal. This is particularly true since she is disclosing her story to one who is meant to be arguing for her release; it provides an obvious motivation for her to edit her story so that it reflects favourably on her.

Also significant is the fact that Dr. Jordan is attracted to Grace, romantically and sexually, as well as being intrigued by mystery surrounding her. On an obvious level, this makes him a biased listener, though not always in her favour. Later in the narrative, particularly when Grace is describing her dealings with James McDermott, Dr. Jordan appears to grow jealous, impatient and unsympathetic. Beyond this personal level and

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5 Although Dr. Jordan's methods – namely, the analysis of dreams, free association using words and objects to access the unconscious and repressed memories, are clearly psychoanalytical, this is a break with historical chronology; at the time Dr. Jordan would have been treating Grace, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was still a young boy

6 “Though I suppose it isn't the first lie I've told” (AG 458)

how it may affect the outcome of the story, however, is the fact that Dr. Jordan's attitude and feelings toward Grace closely represent that of an archetypal male of his time, place and society toward a young woman who is attractive, mysterious, transgressive, and lower in social rank. There is a great tendency and seeming desire on the part of Dr. Jordan to categorize Grace and to rescue her; there is a fascination that is illicit in that it wanders far beyond his professional interest. These elements exist and are tangible in the story despite the fact that Dr. Jordan is presented, on the whole, as a positive character, sympathetic, principled and sincere. His methods are advanced and humane, and he appears determined to view Grace as a whole person, rather than falling prey to the stereotyping that defines her. However, it is clear that Dr. Jordan comes to objectify Grace, demonstrating how strong the tendency is.

Dr. Jordan plays a role in some ways similar to that of Richard in “Isis in Darkness”; he seeks to be Grace's archaeologist, uncovering the pieces of her and putting them together in a coherent order, knowing that he cannot be what he wishes to be, her lover, but must be content with this role instead. Like Selena, Grace does not merely “define herself against the male” (Carerra 231). But perhaps because Grace, unlike Selena, remains alive, present, and inaccessible, Simon Jordan is defeated by his task and its subject. The more he delves into the conundrum of Grace, the more he uncovers a collection of disparate parts and questionable facts. Seeking to confirm aspects of her story – for example, by visiting her lawyer, and seeking out the graves of Nancy Montgomery, Thomas Kinnear and Mary Whitney – he comes up against his own ubiquitous doubt:

Conviction leaps in him like a flame – her story is true, then – but it dies just as quickly. ... this stone is only that, a stone. For one thing, it has no dates on it, and the Mary Whitney buried beneath it may not have any connection with Grace Marks at all. She could just be a name, a name on a stone, seen here by Grace and used by her in the spinning of her story... Nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved, either. (AG 387 – 388)

It is evident, by this point that Jordan's attitude has shifted. He is frustrated, emotional, bordering on desperate, pressured by the Committee who hired him and his own inability to produce answers, suggesting the failure of his methods. Upon meeting Grace, his intention is as follows: “I must stick to observation. I must proceed with caution. A valid experiment must have verifiable results” (AG 60). His observation, however, may have been flawed from the start; the quote above is a cautioning of himself, following his first, disparate, impression of Grace: “But then Grace stepped forward, out of the light, and the woman he'd seen the instant before was suddenly no longer there. Instead, there was a different woman...” (AG 59).

Following the climax of the story, in which Grace, under hypnosis, seemingly takes on the persona of Mary Whitney, Jordan declares himself defeated. He declines to present a report to the committee to pardon Grace:

There's no way he can write the report Verringer desires without perjuring himself. The safest thing would be to write nothing at all, but Verringer would hardly let him off the hook so easily. However, the fact is that he

can't state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him. She glides ahead of him, just out of his grasp, turning her head to see if he's following.

Brusquely he dismisses her, and returns to thoughts of Rachel. She at least is something he can grapple with, take hold of. She will not slip through his fingers. (AG 408)

As Jordan cannot define Grace, categorize her, or even find her, he turns away, abandoning not only her but also his professional interest in her. However, the remainder of that sentence is also significant. It gives us a clearer idea of what Grace has escaped through her elusiveness. Rachel is Dr. Jordan's landlady, and has been abandoned by her husband and left destitute. Jordan rescues her, briefly pursues a sexual relationship with her, and then abruptly and cruelly abandons her; by the end of the story, many years later, she is still pursuing him through letters. Perhaps, for Rachel, Jordan is an elusive figure and perhaps this is another way in which his eventual state – suffering from memory loss and haunted by the past - reflects that of Grace. It is also true; however, that Rachel is objectified, used and abandoned by a man of higher social rank - a fate she shares with Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery, though Rachel manages to survive it. Somacarerra writes of the “barometer couple” in Atwood's works, wherein the male and female “constitute an inseparable dyand who inflict pain on each other while they are... dependent”. This is, according to Somacarerra, a subtle undermining of prevailing gender myths rather than an account of the victimization of the female. Certainly, in the dialectics between Jordan and Grace, and even Jordan and Rachel, there is no one clear victim. It is the unknowable, unattainable quality of the other, however, that is the best defence against objectification and possession.

In eluding both Jordan's summation of her and the full extent of the law, it may also be that Grace has had help, in the form of a character whom Atwood invents and who acts as a sort of very ambiguous *deus ex machina*.

Early in the story, when Grace is still a young girl employed by Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, a figure enters the story who is as enigmatic as Grace herself becomes, though more in control of the situation. This is the peddler Jeremiah, who is almost a magical figure. He reads her palm, accurately, and tells her, upon their initial meeting, “You are one of us” (AG 155). Later, he re-emerges, changed; he presents himself as Dr. Jerome Dupont, a hypnotist, and proceeds to put Grace into a trance, where she assumes the persona of Mary Whitney and, as such, confesses her role in the murder of Nancy Montgomery, providing one possible resolution to the story and to the question of her guilt. However, this resolution is far from definitive: just as Dr. Jerome Dupont has a fraudulent, assumed persona, there is a nagging possibility that the interaction between him and Grace is staged. Years before, when Grace is employed at Thomas Kinnear's, Jeremiah invites her to travel with him and take part in a traveling performance of hypnotism he is planning:

You could travel with me, he said. You could be a medical clairvoyant. I would teach you how, and instruct you in what to say, and put you into the trances. I know by your hand that you have a talent for it; and with your hair down you would have the right look. (AG 268)

Atwood gives no indication at all that, when Dr. Jerome Dupont hypnotizes Grace years later in front of Dr. Jordan and the assembled committee, they are acting upon this proposed plan from a different time and a different reality. However, she does make it clear that Dupont and Grace have had time alone together prior to the hypnotism; moreover, there is Grace's reaction upon first encountering her old friend, so many years later:

As for me, I could have laughed with glee, for Jeremiah had done a conjuring trick, as surely as if he'd pulled a coin from my ear... and just as he used to do such tricks in full view, with everyone looking but unable to detect him, he had done the same here, and made a pact with me under their very eyes, and they were none the wiser. (AG 306)

Jeremiah / Dr. Dupont appears startled and shaken at the outcome of Grace's hypnosis – but is his reaction genuine? Is Grace following a plan they concocted together, or does she deviate wildly and involuntarily from it? Is the notion of the supernatural, and the possibility of spirits inhabiting a human body, endorsed within the reality of the story? Does the hypnosis episode help or hinder her case, and does it support her innocence or guilt? None of these questions can be answered within the context of the narrative. All are suggested, but none has more evidence than others. In the words of Dr. Jordan, “nothing is proved... but nothing is disproved either” (AG 388). The importance of Jeremiah and his role in Grace's story, however, is confirmed by her own interpretation of his early statement to her, “You are one of us” (AG 155).

After I had mulled it over, I decided he meant I too was homeless, a wanderer, like the peddlers and those who worked in fairs; for I couldn't imagine what else he might have in mind. (AG 155)

Later, in a letter to Jeremiah (who by this time is Geraldo Ponti), Grace confirms this: “You said once we were of the same sort, and I have often pondered over that” (AG 428). Grace, like Jeremiah, has a shifting and unstable identity; as such, she is never truly knowable, much to the frustration of Dr. Jordan and other well-meaning patrons, who end up polarized as to the question of her guilt or innocence. Her elusiveness and complexity has defeated the uniformity of their intentions and ideas, just as it defeated Jordan's aspiration in her regard. Like Jeremiah, who periodically changes his name and identity by sticks to a version of the same (Jeremiah, Jerome, Geraldo), Grace's story may be any combination of lies and truth. Like Selena, she defies the objectification that, as a young and vulnerable female, is almost inevitably her lot. Like Lois, she may be cunning, and she may be capable of cruelty, though one would hardly believe it of her. And like Lucy, we cannot, in truth, 'find' her – we can only, as Atwood does here, present and portray landscapes which may contain her.

Furthermore, just as Jeremiah's propensity to shift identities is to his advantage, so, I believe, is it an advantage for Atwood's Grace. Though she certainly experiences trauma and hardship, she ultimately lives to create something positive, a version of events that exists on her own terms. Thus there is creation, as something new is made out of the pieces of the old, by Grace's own hand. In this aspect, the story is like a quilt, patched together of disparate pieces – quilts being a recurring motif in the story:

Like the quilt patterns that adorn the title pages of each of its fifteen

sections, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* presents an intricate patchwork of texts as an "other" means of representing historical events and persons that rejects the mono-vision of traditional histories and highlights the processes of framing and arranging pieces in particular juxtapositions. This mode of representation undermines linearity and the cause-and-effect logic that derives from it (Michael 421).

Equally valid is the notion that a quilt may also be a symbolic representation of Grace herself. Throughout her life, Grace makes, washes and mends many quilts, but at the end, pardoned and settled in her own home, she makes one for herself – a tree of paradise, complete with snakes. She incorporates pieces of clothing belonging to Mary and Nancy, as well as her own prison nightgown, stating, touchingly, “and so we will all be together” (AG 460). This is the last line of the novel.

It is clear that, although, as Grace says, I would not wish any here to learn my true name (AG 456), her identity is tied up with that of the two girls who have been “done to death” as a result of their youth, beauty, fertility, and the attraction of a man of a higher rank. Grace alone is able to survive (though we have seen through her how difficult this feat is) and to provide, symbolically, a context in which they can all exist together, disparate parts made into one whole, and to have a home. There is also a suggestion that Grace herself *is* such a home to another – a landscape which hides and ultimately reveals another girl who lost her life too early. After all, she carries the memories of her own former self and of those who have died, and is able to recreate them, at last, without any of the horror of former events. Because Grace survives, so do those she figuratively carries with her.

## Mary

Mary Whitney is the wild card in this story, an element that suggests the uncanny, and a possible explanation for Grace's deed, if, indeed, Grace did commit the deed. The persona of Mary Whitney hides inside of Grace like a dead girl in a landscape, or a body beneath the surface of the lake. Supposedly long dead, she emerges and even appears to speak when Grace is under hypnosis. The anger that Mary harbours regarding her own fate and the supremacy of the upper classes provides what is perhaps a plausible explanation for the act Grace has been accused of. The words that Grace hears - “let me in” - while regarding the dead body of her friend, and the fact that Grace delays opening the window to let Mary's soul out (if, indeed, Grace's testimony to the doctor is accurate) provides a coherent narrative fit for a Gothic story - possession, and a vengeful spirit acting out, compelling the innocent Grace to commit, or appear to commit, a heinous act. In this way, Mary, too, like the 'barometer' protagonists Somacarerra describes, defies victimization within the male/female dynamic.

Of course, this is only one possible narrative that can be put together out of the same set of facts. We know, for example, that Grace is traumatized by the loss of her friend, which compounds the earlier loss of her mother; later, seeing Nancy Montgomery murdered - 'done to death', like Mary, and likewise pregnant with her master's child - reactivates the same traumatic response, which, we know, involves dissociation. Grace experiences her first fugue episode immediately after Mary's death; she retains a fear of

doctors with knives after Mary's fatal experience of an illegal abortion<sup>7</sup>. From the gaze of the modern day, it is clear enough that Grace's use of Mary Whitney's name and, perhaps, her fixation with her dead friend, is the result of trauma. This version of the story does not, however, prove or disprove her guilt, though it may exonerate her of responsibility. Yet these are not the only two stories that can be told about Mary Whitney and her role in Grace's life. Dr. Jordan, for example, feels it necessary to verify Mary's existence, but once he does so, he realizes that this is not sufficient. Mary Whitney could be an invention of Grace's, a story she tells to attempt to exonerate herself, or an alternative persona she creates to exact the vengeance she feels in her unconscious, but cannot directly access. If so, she is a symptom of a kind of madness in Grace, one that is potentially damning.

Alternatively, the story that Grace tells regarding Mary could, of course, be Grace's own story, but one that she is suppressing - except for its conclusion of death. For, despite the grave that Dr. Jordan discovers, there can be no direct verification of Mary's existence as the girl Grace describes. The evidence of how Mary died is destroyed and sanitized at the order of the mistress of the house, with no possible record remaining. As a young serving girl with no living family, Mary has almost surely been forgotten. A powerful figure with deep convictions, as described by Grace, Mary, too, has been well hidden - by history, by socio-cultural circumstances and by propriety. Yet, like the drowned speaker in the poem, there is the possibility that she never left, but lurks within the mundane, just out of sight. If so, she is a particularly successful example of a 'hidden' Atwood heroine – a vulnerable girl, vindicated, changeable, transgressive, and concealed so well that we never quite know that the narrative is actually about her.

### **Different Things at Once**

Close to the point at which we first meet her, Atwood's Grace Marks puts forward a question:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome and have a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I have a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious,

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<sup>7</sup> It is possible to surmise that Atwood's introduction of psychoanalytic concepts, although these are slightly anachronistic for the historical setting of the story, has the effect of pointing the reader in the direction of psychologically based explanation for Grace's actions. In the 1840s – 60s, such notions would not have been understood, but Atwood inserts them, and implicitly allows us to examine Grace and the evidence surrounding her case in this light.

that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (AG 23)

The sentiment Grace expresses here is familiar, surely, but grabs the reader's attention because of how unusually long the list of perceptions of the woman are, and how well they reflect both the narrative that is to come and the various external or secondary accounts of Grace's case that intersperse the chapters. It is familiar because in many ways it is an extension of the idea of the gaze that permeates and defines women's experience of the world. Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock discusses the impossibility of a nineteenth century woman's being a *flâneur*, an observer of society who moves freely through its various spaces, without being, in turn, observed. The moment a woman enters certain public realms, Pollock argues, she is both observed and sexualized. Her presence is categorized and explained, although, of course, such explanations may have limited viability, from the woman's own view. This occurs, according to Pollock, when a woman crosses a line which "... demarcates ...the frontier of the spaces of femininity. Below this line lies the realm of the sexualized and modified bodies of women, where nature is ended, where class, capital and masculine power invade and interlock" (Pollock 259).

A woman, in other words, is only safe from sexualized 'modification' if she stays strictly within certain zones, domestic and class -based; however, Atwood demonstrates, this is not always possible, let alone desirable. Grace's early life is marked by danger of exploitation – by her abusive father, and by the attentions of higher-born men. The attentions of Thomas Kinear, for example, can easily cost Grace her position (which, if she is dismissed without references, is tantamount to destitution); similarly, the attentions of the son of the household cost Mary Whitney her life. In the end, of course, not even Atwood can conceptualize a benign ending for Grace that does not involve the attention of a man, but she makes this as benign as possible, the man in question being one whom Grace knew as a boy, and who is bent on earning her forgiveness. Even in this scenario, Grace finds it necessary to tell lies.

Lies, perhaps, are still the key. By the end of the story, we know only as much as history does: that although Grace Marks was pardoned, the question of her innocence or guilt is still an open one. And that, of course, as she states in the outset, she cannot be all of those things at once. The historical, real, living, now long dead Grace Marks is revealed and concealed - revealed, perhaps, in and by her very concealment. The particulars of her life, turned into art, become the landscape that Grace herself inhabits, somewhere - we cannot say where, precisely - and within which she is fully alive. The author is concerned not so much with bringing us a definitive Grace, because that is impossible, but with providing the pieces, the context that holds her, the quilt made out of the known fragments of her life. Within these she can both hide and live. Within these, also, she is protected: the singular truth about her obfuscated and neutralized by its juxtaposition with other truths. Thus, she, like Atwood's other hidden women, is concealed in plain view and protected from the ultimate violation, the drive to assess, encapsulate and define her.

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