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ILLUSION AND REALITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

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Abstract

In the astounding novel based on a notorious double murder in Canada in the 1840's, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* tells the story of a pretty, sixteen year old servant girl who conspired to kill her employer and his mistress and escape with her belongings. She was captured in more than a few days and found guilty of an intentional murder. Grace an innocent young girl who fails to remember the death of her mother, and later her best friend, Mary Whitney. But at the same time, she does not seem too concerned by McDermott's desire to kill Thomas Kinnear, or his mistress Nancy Montgomery. It is a mysterious story of the past century and the basic plot centres on Dr Simon Jordan, a passionate young American doctor who has an attention in the treatment of the mentally ill Grace Marks. This paper mainly focuses the locking truth behind the murder, repulsion of the "celebrated murderess" and her confession.

Key-Words

Insanity, Oppression, Lust and Female Animalism, Self-Identity, True Voice.
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Based on a notorious double murder in Canada in the 1840's the novel *Alias Grace* tells the story of a pretty, sixteen year old servant girl who conspired to kill her employer and his mistress and escape with her belongings. She was captured in more than a few days, and later in a much – publicized trial, found guilty of premeditated murder. She is Grace an innocent young girl who never forgets the death of her mother, and later her best friend, Mary Whitney. But at the same time, she does not seem too bothered by McDermott's desire to kill Thomas Kinnear, or his mistress Nancy Montgomery.

Grace is around thirty years old, being accused of the crimes when she was only sixteen. Grace is in prison where she has been mentally tortured during her rotation from prison to asylum over time. Doctors who wish to 'examine' her frequently visit her. She has a subconscious aversion to these doctors and the world, which she knows. She has become accustomed to being silent and unseen. A young doctor, Dr.Simon Jordan has taken an interest in Grace's case. He has little experience in dealing on a personal basis with the question of sanity of patients, but is intrigued by this fabulously sensationalized murderess. A group that has continuously tried for the pardon of Grace Marks has recruited the doctors with hopes that he will find Grace's sanity and innocence on all counts of murder.

He encourages her to tell of her life before the murders. Simon questions:

Let us begin at the beginning

I say the beginning of what, Sir?
He says the beginning of your life (AG, 114)

Grace begins her story with her family in Scotland. Grace has been left with her abusive father when she was a child after her mother died on the passage to America. A trip taken for necessity rather than need: for her father was in a bit financial trouble in Scotland. Grace is sent out to Canada as a servant. Here is where Grace meets her first true friend, Mary Whitney.

Simon questions,
Who is Mary Whitney...?
I say, Mary Whitney was once a particular friend of mine (AG, 115).

Mary teaches Grace to be her own person. Unfortunately, Mary has a horrible dream due to a bad surgical abortion and Grace is left alone and troubled by the horrifying death of their friend. Grace travels from house to house looking for the right set up or her services. Finally she meets Nancy Montgomery. She takes a job under Nancy and mistakenly believing in her friendship. Soon Nancy is overtaken with Grace in the house; she becomes increasingly jealous of her role with Mr. Kinnear. This leads to the obvious discovery of romantic relationship between Grace and Kinnear. With the proposed dismissal of Grace and the hired hand McDermott, Grace is lead with McDermott into killing the two and robbing them for their own escape. Although, not long after, in a hotel, Grace and McDermott, even though ironically using alias Mary Whitney are arrested, "Grace Marks Alias Mary Whitney" (AG, 115).

In this novel, Grace Marks is a storyteller. Atwood has taken a different approach in this novel. Although fictional, this story has based on reality. Grace Marks, the main character is indeed, on the mid – eighteen hundreds' most famous criminal. She was the celebrated villain of the Kinnear – Montgomery murders. She says, "Murderer is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choice" (AG, 23). The parallel between physical and spiritual confinement is first made during Grace's voyage to Canada in the novel. Months have passed Dr. Jordan becomes even involved with the case and is determined to find out the memory lapses in Grace's story. The group who hired Dr. Jordan has become restless for his slow process to uncovering the truth. Dr. Jerome Dupont enters the medical study of Grace Marks. Although Grace knows Jerome before but as a pedlar and friend named Jeremiah. Much to the dismay of Jordan, Dupont is given the opportunity to put Grace into hypnosis, in full view of her peers. During this momentous scene, Grace is hypnotized into a state of unconscious where she is able to retrieve memories not perceived during consciousness. Grace, after asking many specific questions, uncovers the mystery of the night of the night of the murders.

In fact, the time not remembered by Grace, is of a personality not her own but that of Mary Whitney. Here Mary Whitney declares her guilt, but states that Grace would have no recollection of this time. Such actions, she suggests, would belong to a woman of an unsound mind; something hinted at – but never fully answered – in Jerome DuPont’s séance and by the internal “Mary Whitney” and “Nancy Montgomery” personalities of whom Grace seems to be aware. The group dedicated to Grace’s innocence still argues for her release based on their reasoning on mental insanity of Grace during the murders. Grace is returned to prison for which she is still hopeful for her release on an account of her hypnotic trance – confession. The deepest analysis of Grace’s story, the more it becomes clear that the novel is behind the passionate and ruthless. Faced with the potentially discrimination truth surrounding Mary’s death (she was apparently made pregnant by the son of her employer, and dies from the after effects of an abortion) is treated in Atwood’s novel as a problematic subject: a buried history.

Grace considers her to have multiple personalities, signified by her alias Mary Whitney, and she hates that she is not blessed with the same social standing and wealth that Nancy Montgomery has reached. It is not just a crush for Grace, especially since there are signals that Mr. Kinnear has interested in Grace as well. The easiest solution for her to obtain his love would be to kill Nancy. For her part, Grace’s character in the novel is also cognizant of these issues: “I think ... me, she confides, [...] and I wonder ... different things at once?” (AG, 23).

And so while trying to provide an answer to the question “Who is Grace Marks?” Grace Marks means resurrecting some of Canada’s long forgotten history. Bringing together discussion of criminality, religious heresy, and mental illness, Atwood imagines through Grace’s eyes an unforgiving world of crime and punishment of propriety and hypocrisy; and most importantly here – of holism and disembodiment. This is Lady Macbeth land complete with visual hallucinations. When Mary Whitney has died and Grace goes into some sorts of coma. Grace first assumes of Mary’s identity: She says, “I was very grateful to her, for she was indeed a good and kind friend” (AG, 190). Undoubtedly the death of Mary Whitney has a huge impact on Grace, as reflected in her quote, “And so the happiest time of my life was over and gone.” (AG, 209)

When Mary dies, Grace Marks has fallen to the floor in a dead faint and no one could wake her; she says, “When I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened” (AG, 209) and also says “where Grace had gone ... they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them ... []” (AG, 209). This shows that she realizes that there might actually be something wrong with her. ‘Hysterics’ is defined in the book as “fits” that take place, for the most part, in young, nervous, unmarried woman (AG, 157). Furthermore, characteristics contained in hysterics are said to include “fits of laughter, crying or screaming” (AG, 157).

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A child is the fruit of life, because every person begins as a child. She supports this notion by saying that the heaviness she feels may not be a child at all, but a tumor, like the one that took the life of her mother. But a child can also bring evil and even death into the world, which it did in the cases of Mary Whitney and Nancy. She even says that, “the fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were both the same” (AG, 551). However, Grace decides only to create on tree, because she believes that the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge are one.

Throughout the whole story, Grace does not know who she is. The different accounts make her get out of her feelings. She has a little of each of the characters when she spoke of with Dr.Jordan. The title of the story leads to believe this is her ‘alias’ and she has used tidbits of everyone else’s life because she did not even have an opinion or truly known herself. She may not be mad, but within her soul she has some identity and uses the accounts of other people’s lives to make up her own story to make her feel at ease.

Alias Grace has a style that is thoroughly logical yet complicated. The portrait of her character is simply a terrorized victim and also she is considered to be the cunning female demon. Weaving together sex, violence, the burgeoning science of psychiatry, and a good old – fashioned mystery, Atwood has created a novel – and recreated an era – of mesmerizing power. This novel is rooted in physical reality, on one hand, and floats free of it on the other, as Atwood describes physical things in either organic, raw terms or with otherworldly, more ephemeral images. Superbly evoking a century past, and alive with mesmerizing storytelling, *Alias Grace* is vintage Atwood.

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. Ed. McClelland & Steward. Seal Books: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1997.