

Abbie Lahmers

19 December 2015

Approx. 3,700 words

Knowledge and Secrecy in *Alias Grace*

In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks, who has been prosecuted and sentenced to life in prison for the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, fulfills a variety of different roles as she migrates through different settings and phases of her life. Grace creates performative discourses based around life events that she holds onto throughout her roles as an immigrant in a new world, an employed housekeeper in different homes, an imprisoned murderess, and finally, the unsuspecting role of a peacefully married woman. She uses the discourses of the deaths of her mother and her friend Mary Whitney and also her various encounters with Jeremiah the Peddler to maintain her awareness of herself despite authoritative voices dictating how she should behave. The cultural constructions surrounding Grace, which consist of class differences and the label of "murderess" tarnishing her name, tend to be restrictive and smothering. Her narrative of her past, including the losses she has suffered, keep her grounded, and Jeremiah's performances make her reorient herself in the present by thinking about her life in different ways. Both of these discourses keep her afloat in a society that only wants to diagnose her conditions and sensationalize her story.

Throughout the novel, doctors and investigators constantly try to pigeonhole Grace into labels of guilty or not guilty, sane or insane, and Grace constantly struggles to not let them completely know her or "have her" by carefully crafting her story for Dr. Jordan and acting certain ways depending on where she is. She fights to overcome prescriptive diagnoses. For instance, the Isabella Beeton epigraph defines "hysterics" as: "These fits take place, for the most

part, in young, nervous, unmarried women... Young women, who are subject to these fits, are apt to think they are suffering from ‘all the ills that flesh is heir to’” (Atwood 137). Excerpts such as these and the various accounts of the real, historical character of Grace Marks that prelude each section of the novel “denote a collective eagerness to translate her story into meaningful and articulate terms, although the fragmentary and incoherent result points to the impossibility of doing so” (Lopez 158). The fictional character of Grace that Atwood brings to life is developed in between the lines of the newspaper clippings of her trial and biographical excerpts written by Susanna Moodie. Her actual self exists within the holes the reporters and those who have assumed “authority” over her story are unable to fill in. Grace does not claim to be either guilty or innocent of the crimes she is accused of because her precise relationship to the crime does not define her. This disassociation with definitive labels allows her to exist within these gaps, and “her confession knowingly uses the gaps between event, memory, and story to give persuasive power to her self-representation” (Ober Mannon 554). In other words, it is only through crafting the narrative of her story outside of sensationalist accounts that she can “understand and resist the pressures that marginalize her” through the creation of this “double voice” in her memoir (Ober Mannon 553).

Beeton’s definition of hysterics could have been used by authority figures in Grace’s life to explain her fainting and dissociative behavior, defining Grace by essential qualities—her position in society as a young, single woman—rather than analyzing the historical and cultural influences at work. Her lawyer, Mr. Mackenzie, who believes she is “guilty as sin” (Atwood 378), instructs her on what to say during the trial, creating an illusion of innocence by applying facets of her past—“a poor motherless child” and “very soft and pliable, and easily imposed upon” (Atwood 361)—to paint the picture of a helpless, uneducated girl. Mr. Mackenzie along

with those in the scientific community who have control over her freedom, “intend to turn Grace, who finds herself in a position of marginality, and hence, of lack of power, into a knowable individual to be supervised and controlled” (Lopez 159). These authority figures include the warden, who wants her to remain in prison; Simon, who does not care one way or the other if she is freed but only wants to uncover the truth in order to display his psychiatric prowess; and the committee led by Reverend Verringer who argues for her pardon. None of these figures necessarily care about the truth of her story—they only want to reveal the one thing they set out to reveal about her in order to satisfy their own goals.

These motivations muddle the truth and repress Grace’s voice, but she is aware of their selfish investments in her story and attraction to the sensational side of it, and she reflects this knowledge in relation to McDermott’s hanging when she acknowledges, “they would have watched me hang with the same greedy pleasure” (Atwood 28). She also uses this knowledge to create a form of secrecy about her true self and true events, and through her retelling of her confession to Simon, she “offers herself as knowable by repeatedly invoking her girlishness and feigning compliance with an essentialized girlish identity,” which contributes to her means of exploiting “the gap between speaker and authentic self that is inherent to any personal account” (Ober Mannon 557). By giving authorities more of herself as defined by their own preconceived notions, she is able to retain her actual self, even if this means sacrificing her true voice.

Within these definitions that authorities impose, Grace cannot not be complex without being labeled insane, nor can she be innocent without being subservient. Concerning the trial, she recalls, “there are always those who will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right in your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their wooden doll” (Atwood 295). While Grace is fully

capable of existing autonomously by feigning essentialist notions of women in her position in order to deceive authorities into believing she is a certain way, this also means she must submit to the consequences of being the woman the court and the warden think she is—a criminal. In this respect, her guilt, and later on innocence once she is pardoned “are determined not by what actually happened, since there are no living witnesses, but by discourses and institutions to which Grace has little access” (Siddall 87). Her performative discourses therefore have little influence over the marginalizing forces enacted against her that commit her to the prison and later on to a similar imprisonment of marriage—which, despite the improved condition, it is still not a choice she gets to make for herself. All she can hope to do is find some way of not completely surrendering herself to the restrictive voices that want to label or diagnose her. She does so by adapting to each situation she encounters, and even if she may not possess any real sense of control over the circumstances, she still remains self-possessed and aware of the authoritative forces working against her. Even Simon makes note of her self-possession, although without categorizing it in those terms, when he writes, “Although she converses in what seems a frank enough manner, she manages to tell me as little as possible, or as little as possible about what I want to learn” (Atwood 133).

This sense of control takes different forms in the different roles she plays and the different power structures acting against her. She often carries the decisions she makes with her for a long time because she believes these recurring performative actions to be very influential pieces of her life and the reasons she is being punished later on. A performative discourse “doesn’t name a state of being; it names a being that performs certain acts, who’s recognized and categorized by social categories rather than essential attributes” (Nealon 188). Throughout the novel, Grace cannot separate herself and her position in life from the “sins” she has committed in

End of Sample

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. New York: O.W. Toad, 1996. Print.
- Lopez, Maria J. “‘You Are One Of Us’: Communities Of Marginality, Vulnerability, And Secrecy In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*.” *English Studies In Canada* 38.2 (2012): 157-177. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T., and Susan Searls Giroux. *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. Print.
- Ober Mannon, Bethany. “Fictive Memoir And Girlhood Resistance In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*.” *Critique* 55.5 (2014): 551-566. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.
- Siddall, Gillian. “‘That Is What I Told Dr. Jordan...’: Public Constructions And Private Disruptions In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*.” *Essays On Canadian Writing* 81 (2004): 84-102. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.