

Margaret Atwood's Grace Marks as an Outcast: Rewriting Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* rewrites Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Both Grace Marks and Hester Prynne epitomize women's oppression by the patriarchal system, and demonstrate how they challenge and defy it. They are both "criminals," outcasts that cannot fit in the ideal of True Womanhood of their times because deviant females were shunned from "respectable society." In the Victorian era, they were denied agency in their transgression, or deemed as monsters. Murderesses inspired fascination and stupor. Hester and Grace gain some empowerment and redemption when they confront their communities, in some measure, through their feminine skills, sewing and quilting.

KEYWORDS

Wrongdoing, crime, sexual abuse, insanity, patriarchal, outcast, quilt.

RESUMEN

La novela *Alias Grace* de Margaret Atwood reescribe *La letra escarlata* de Nathaniel Hawthorne. Tanto Grace Marks como Hester Prynne personifican la opresión de las mujeres por el sistema patriarcal y demuestran cómo éstas lo cuestionan y desafían. Ambas son "criminales," parias que no pueden encajar en el ideal de la "verdadera" feminidad de su época porque las mujeres descarriadas eran excluidas de la "sociedad respetable." En la época victoriana, a ellas se les negaba la agencia de su propia trasgresión, o, cuando en alguna medida se enfrentaban a sus comunidades, se las consideraba monstruos. Las asesinas inspiraban fascinación y estupor. Hester y Grace obtienen cierto grado de poder y redención cuando, en alguna medida, se enfrentan a sus comunidades, a través de sus habilidades femeninas, la costura y la confección de quilts.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Fechoría, crimen, abuso sexual, locura, patriarcal, paria, edredón.



In *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood revisits Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: "the parallels between the two novels are significant (primarily in the construction of the female protagonist as a figure of the artist ostracized, practically for life, by her community)" (Simonson 106-107).¹ Grace Marks, the female protagonist of *Alias Grace*, follows in the footsteps of Hester Prynne. In these novels, Atwood and Hawthorne explore the subjection of the female to patriarchal power and how women develop psychological and social strategies of resistance to man's physical, mental and social oppression. Grace and Hester are the antithesis of the ideal construction of femininity of the societies in which they lived. They are both cast in the role of the "evil woman," outcasts ("criminals"), who in their female condition are repudiated by their patriarchal communities. To some extent, Grace and Hester confront and defy them, as they are capable of self-defining themselves in the face of the discrimination and constraints they undergo as women. Thus, their empowerment as females makes them dazzlingly complex heroines.

These two novels provide a critique of history within the literary conventions of their times. While *The Scarlet Letter* can be seen as a criticism of Puritan beliefs, *Alias Grace* sets up a postmodernist version of a nineteenth-century factual event. It is inspired by a notorious case, the real murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, the former's housekeeper and lover. Both servants in the house, James McDermott and Grace Marks, were convicted of the murders: McDermott was executed and Marks was imprisoned for life, charged with being an accessory before and after the crime (Robinson 97). As María J. López argues, Atwood's narrative "is concerned with disrupting official accounts of national histories, mainly made from a middle-upper-class perspective" (166), a fictional recreation of Canadian history in which lower-class characters – criminals, servants and peddlers – can subvert and escape their definitions.²

Both narratives were written in times when a growing feminist movement was taking place. The first women's rights convention was held at Seneca Falls, N.Y. in 1848, two years before

¹ Patricia Simonson points out how Atwood describes "her own artistic beginnings in terms that powerfully recall Hawthorne's circumstances": "a postcolonial context", "a new generation of writers in charge of founding a national literature", etc. (107). Simonson also speaks of "an ongoing exchange, a kind of cross-cultural discussion about issues that concerned both writers" and "a deliberate transposition, in the later novel [*Alias Grace*], of the central issue of Hawthorne's book to the Canadian context and a twentieth-century woman's perspective" (107).

² In Atwood's conference on historical fiction, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Historical Fiction," she confesses how Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* made her understand the purpose of the historical novel, which is more than capturing the past through fiction: "[B]y taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves", and "that's part of the interest for writers and readers of Canadian historical fiction" (1512).

Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*. Atwood's "career . . . dated from the writing of her first novel in 1965, spans the four decades in which the second-wave feminism has so actively developed and counter-developed . . . she is so evidently a culturally and theoretically-aware writer who both uses and challenges the ideas which permeate her culture" (Tolan 1). Atwood wrote her novel *Alias Grace* in the mid-1990s, when she was dealing with the core questions that arose during second- and third-wave feminist movements. *Alias Grace* focuses on proto-feminist ideas, depicting the social construction of gender and male-female power relations.

Both Grace and Hester are flawed and complex women, reflections on the female role and, consequently, they become the embodiment of deep contradictions. Hester Prynne marries Roger Chillingworth, an old man, and she gets pregnant out of wedlock, when she believes her husband is dead. On the other hand, Grace Marks is a 12-year-old Irish immigrant who flees with her family to Canada in search of a better life. As in Hawthorne's opening scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Alias Grace* starts with Grace Marks as a prisoner: "I've been shut up in here since the age of sixteen" (AG 5). However, during the day, Grace works in the Governor's house as a servant. Like Hester, Grace is also "a talented seamstress and embroider" (Simonson 108).

Grace and Hester share some other important aspects. They are both victims of a patriarchal society, which allows males to abuse females and tries to control women's sexuality. They are representations of the good woman gone bad. The patriarchal society accepted adultery among men, but women's infidelity was considered perverted and unnatural. Hester's affair is a terrible violation of societal norms, even if her husband was possibly dead. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Alias Grace* show how vulnerable females are subjugated and their need to get rid of conventional patriarchal notions of womanhood that identify them as objects for sexual pleasure or as in charge of domestic tasks.

Grace and Hester move ambiguously between a defiant position regarding their communities, breaking communal norms, and the acceptance of the patriarchal rules imposed on them (long after she has carried out her punishment, Hester willingly continues to wear the letter A on her breast). And yet, they show personal growth in their victimized positions. They are survivors of harsh despotic patriarchal systems. Grace and Hester stand as epitomes of female predicaments at the times they lived.

Insanity and "Murderous" Condition

Both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Alias Grace* delve into the guilt or innocence of women accused of sin and crime, who are judged and condemned by their societies and their judicial systems. Hester is an adulteress, and Grace is "apparently" a murderess. Their status as women marks

their histories and is a decisive factor in their crimes. In the 17th and 19th centuries, female wrongdoing was not only judged according to the laws, but also according to societal norms about femininity. The deviation from the social construction of the ideal woman resulted in stigmatization and labeling. Females were defined by their gender role and the family was a stronghold for the “preservation of traditional moral and religious values” (Zedner 12). Fallen women were regarded as a moral threat, as they could “infect” other females. Women were culturally categorized into a moral binary opposition of Madonna/Magdalene, “The Angel in the House” (poem by Coventry Patmore which is quoted in *Alias Grace*) versus the Whore. The female who challenged the ideal of femininity, whether by sexual misconduct, Hester, or by a criminal act, Grace, was viewed as anomalous and monstrous.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood presents murders that caused a stir in 19th-century Canada because they sizzled with illicit sexuality. The Kinnear-Montgomery murders exemplify the stereotyping of women at a time of revolt of low-class servants against upper-class employers. Both females involved in the murders were tainted by their connection to extra-marital relations. In the Victorian era, female criminals, such as Grace Marks, were seen as “doubly deviant – as rare, abnormal female offenders for breaking social rules and as ‘unfeminine and unnatural’ women who have broken out of their conventional roles” (Heidensohn 22).

Atwood unveils the Victorian concept of the female killer. At the time, only males were thought to be capable of the aggressive and violent behavior conducive to murder, while females were denied criminal intentions. In their notion of the feminine condition (weak, simple-minded, submissive, etc.), women were considered incapable of committing atrocities, unless they were induced by a male or suffered from a mental illness, in which case, they were regarded as monsters. As Hilary Allen argues, in their criminal activities, women appear as “not intending the deed, as not knowing or understanding that they are committing it . . . [as just being] swept away, without either volition or responsibility” (84, 85). Atwood exposes how women were objectified and infantilized, their whole humanity rejected, and how the binary oppositions under which they were analyzed (demon/angel, good/bad, etc.) do not represent their multifarious identities.

Grace Marks is regarded as either a demon, whose evil machinations have led her to the murders of her employers, or as an innocent plain girl victim of her circumstances. Grace realizes the contradiction inherent to her public image and she wonders about it:

I am an inhuman demon . . . I am an innocent victim of a blackguard force 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 a judicial murder . . . 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, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot . . . how can I be all these different things at once? (AG 25)

In her thoughts, the qualities attributed to the Victorian conception of a female murderer come into conflict.

Being aware of the stereotyped perception of female criminals, Kenneth MacKenzie, Grace’s lawyer, who is personally convinced of her guilt, tries to defend her by persuading the judges that, as a very young uneducated woman, she was the “innocent victim” of McDermott’s schemes (AG 25). Due to influence of the idealized Victorian image of the woman, judges may be more lenient on murderesses. MacKenzie tells Grace to manipulate other people into believing that she is a wrongly accused victim, and asks her “not to tell the story as [she] truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and had some chance of being believed” (AG 415). The story Grace needs to tell has to respond to the requirements of a patriarchal world in which women are regarded as weak, passive and innocent; in addition, servants must be industrious and experienced, but not very intelligent; they have to know their station and keep their owners’ secrets.

In her first meeting with Dr. Simon Jordan, Grace comments that she has “a good stupid look which [she has] practiced” (AG 43). She knows that Simon is her only hope for freedom and her account of the events that led to the murders only reveals what she wants, a contrived version that exonerates her. However, this also entails that she cannot present her true side of the story, since “[lawyers and judges] seem to know my story better than I do myself” (AG 46). This is how the patriarchal legal system disempowers the destitute and gets control of the truth and knowledge to decide about guilt and innocence. Hence, depriving Grace of her story is a double-edge sword because she learns to lie to manipulate and thus to control her own destiny.

Grace Marks is the ultimate outcast in her “insanity” and “murderous” condition. During the Victorian era, regardless of their crime, female criminals were ostracized and removed from society to avoid the contagion of other women. Female offenders were generally pathologized as insane and institutionalized or sent to prison when they challenged the many restrictions and constraints women had to comply with. Insanity came to explain why females deviated from the Victorian ideal of woman, giving a reason for both bizarre and criminal actions. Husbands and fathers often hired psychiatrists to treat their wives and daughters’ “abnormal” behavior, usually connected to transgressions against traditional feminine norms. Accordingly, the emerging male-ruled institution of psychiatry helped maintain the patriarchal order by exerting control over women.

Nonetheless, is Grace's situation the result of a demonic possession by Mary Whitney's spirit or a medical disorder, split personality? As some critics, such as Coral A. Howells, have claimed, Grace could actually suffer from personality disorder, schizophrenia: "Atwood has found the ideal mode for giving voice to a split feminine subject where the conscious self is shadowed, or displaced, by its dark double in a condition approaching schizophrenia" ("Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*" 35). Deborah M. Horvitz also states that Grace Marks could be "a victim of trauma and multiple personalities" (113). She could have even fabricated Mary out of her own personal ordeal, her misfortunes at the hands of her cruel father and past abuses as a young maid. In fact, there is no real evidence of Mary Whitney's existence, except for Grace's recollections of her. If so, it might be possible that Mary's unrequited love and an abortion may have actually happened to Grace, but she may have blocked out these painful memories.

Nine years into her sentence, Grace Marks was briefly confined to the Provincial Toronto Lunatic Asylum, apparently, because of a psychological problem. Afterwards, she was transferred to Kingston Penitentiary in Ontario, where she served nearly 30 years. Fifteen years after her conviction, Reverend Verringer, who personally believes in Grace's innocence, hires Dr. Simon Jordan who interviews and scrutinizes the accused murderess so he can prove that she is mentally unstable. Verringer describes her sickness as: "[i]t may be that much of what we are accustomed to describe as evil, and evil freely chosen, is instead an illness due to some lesion of nervous system, and that the Devil himself is simply a malformation of the cerebrum" (AG 91-92).

Simon tries to diagnose and categorize Grace Marks, determining what mental disorder she suffers from. He is trying to prove whether, under her apparent split personality, Grace is a true amnesiac, or she is just pretending. Simon, as a young American psychiatrist is a representative of the patriarchal "disciplinary society" that Foucault saw as new in the nineteenth century (*Truth and Juridical Forms* 57). Foucault believes that this modern system of punishment becomes the model for a new control of society, especially of working-classes and women, unveiling the inextricable connection between knowledge and power. The asylum and prison, ultimate examples of disciplinary power, both chastise and correct the behavior of the prisoners, combining judicial and scientific proceedings. They try to re-educate the mad/rebellious woman, using dominating practices so she learns to conform to social gender norms. Hence, Grace is subjected to the examination techniques of the judicial, legal and scientific communities, whose upper-class members reified patients and subjugated "them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 28). They all intend to turn the marginal and vulnerable Grace into a body to conquer by using techniques of power and social control.

Gender Oppression and Sexual Abuse

In his novel, Hawthorne explores gender relations and raises questions about gender roles. As T. Walter Herbert writes, *The Scarlet Letter* "does not work out a solution to the male-on-female sexual abuse that it so pervasively depicts, but in Hester [Hawthorne] dramatizes the struggle of women to disentangle themselves from this enslavement" (119). Gender domination and sexual abuse make Grace Marks's whole life a terrible plight, at the root of which is her impoverished status. Grace is triply discriminated against as an Irish working-class woman. She becomes an outcast as a consequence of the injuries the patriarchal system inflicts on her. Grace represents the predicament of the 19th-century immigrant women, many of whom turned into marginal figures, servants. At the time, fleeing from poverty and with the promise of land, many Irish settlers arrived in Canada. They had to survive on underpaid jobs and suffer a multitude of hardships. When Grace reads in a newspaper that McDermott and herself were Irish "*by their own admission*," she tells Simon that it seems as if being Irish was almost a crime (AG 118, emphasis in original).

Poor working-class women suffer terrible ordeals and injustices from those in a position of power. Grace Marks, who witnesses her mother's death on their journey to America on one of the so-called "coffin ships," undergoes, at an early age, abuses at the hands of an alcoholic father. When Grace first menstruates, her friend Mary Whitney, another servant who works with her in an upper-class Toronto household of the Parkinsons, warns her of the dangers female housemaids are exposed to, especially from their male employers:

The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to anything they want; and when you go out to the privy at night, they're drunk then, they lie in wait for you and then it is snatch and grab, there's no reasoning with them . . . and it is always better to lock your door . . . But any kind of man will try the same; and they'll start promising things, they'll say they will do whatever you want; but you must be very careful what you ask, and you must never do anything for them until they have performed what they had promised. (AG 190)

Thus, Grace starts learning about female helplessness and inequality between men and women in the patriarchal society.

Grace Marks, in her vulnerable position as an Irish woman, servant and convicted murderess, suffers gender and class oppression. She experiences the sexual abuses 19th-century females faced. Non-married women, especially those who belonged to a lower-social class, were expected to conform to high moral standards and be respectful towards socially superior men, especially their masters, while, at the same time, they had to resist

their sexual overtures, if not sexual assaults. Young working-class girls were sacrificed to preserve the virginity of upper- and middle-class women. If a man felt like having sex, he would have it with the servants. Atwood shows society's repression of female sexuality, while disclosing social acceptance and even societal condoning of sexual violence against women. Besides, females endured the terrible consequences of unprotected (and often unwanted) sex, shameful pregnancies and dangerous abortions.

At her various domestic placements, Grace Marks witnesses and undergoes the sexually predatory practices of upper-class males on female servants. Despite her vulnerability, Grace thwarts and fends off sexual harassment and abuse. She rejects the sexual advances of different men in her life, such as Mr. Thomas Kinnear and McDermott. In fact, just before the crimes, during an episode of somnambulism, Grace seems to have been sexually assaulted. She recalls someone, probably Mr. Kinnear, who tells her that he pays "good wages but [he] wants good service in return" (AG 343). After the crimes, McDermott also feels entitled to have sex with her and tries to rape her.

Grace also endures sexual abuses in prison. The prison guards who escort her to the Governor's house make obscene jokes about her. She is also sexually molested by the doctors, representatives of the patriarchal system, who "take care" of her. In one episode, a doctor tells her that he wants to examine her, but instead he touches her breasts. Because she rejects his sexual advances, she is tied up in a strait jacket in a dark room, and she responds by sinking her teeth into his fingers (AG 38). Grace is not just an object of "purely scientific" interest for Simon, who actually sees her as an object in his sexual fantasies, while he satisfies his frustrated sexual drives with his landlady, Rachel Humphrey. As Lynda Hall puts it, "[Simon's] hungers and erotic speculations interweave the literal and symbolic penetration of women's minds and bodies" so, for him, "carnal knowledge and scientific knowledge are inextricable" (29).

As a prisoner, Grace's body withstands disciplinary techniques and deployments of power, whose objective is to produce "docile bodies," easy to be controlled. Inmates never know whether they are observed, so they must behave as if they were always under scrutiny. Isolation becomes a way to break down the prisoners. Each inmate is separated in "cells" and is alien to all the others. Grace's imprisonment makes her lock out all the others: "A prison does not only lock its inmates inside, it keeps all others out. Her strongest prison is of her own construction" (AG 421).

Throughout the novel, Atwood exposes Grace's true invisibility as a human being, while she has been turned into an object of examination and an object of spectacle: "Reminiscent of Hester Prynne's scarlet 'A,' Grace's symbolic 'M' for murderess operates as a Rorschach

inkblot; she exists only as the passive recipient of whatever views are projected upon her" (Horvitz 108). For the most part of society, Grace Marks the famed murderess becomes a social and media attraction (Hester's scarlet letter is also intended to attract the world's scorn). Hence, López states that *Alias Grace* – as also happens in *The Scarlet Letter* – depicts punishment as spectacle (159) which, according to Foucault (*Discipline and Punish* 57), was prevalent in Western societies until the eighteenth century. Many of the stories told about Grace respond to the public's need/appetite for scandal and sensationalism and the fascination with the accounts of illicit carnality and sexual violence. Indeed, Miss Lydia, the Governor's daughter, regards Grace as a romantic figure who might have been abducted by McDermott, and the prison guards view her as a temptress. Grace believes that "They don't care if I killed anyone," "what really interests them – the gentleman and ladies both . . . was [if] I really [was] a paramour, [this] is their chief concern" (AG 30).

Grace Marks, a "Celebrated Murderess," resents being made a spectacle, as in the scrapbook of the governor's wife, which gathers newspaper cuttings on famous murders and murderers (AG 25). Mary S. Hartman argues how gender oppression (females' boredom and frustration over domestic isolation and roles, housekeeping and motherhood) fires up the fascination of 19th-century middle-class women with murderesses. Their lives revealed some of the feminine private areas, their frustrations and terrors, to which many women could relate, and the trials of these female killers become "an opportunity for release of frustrations and for vicarious fulfilment and unrealized desires" (269). The scrapbook unveils upper- and middle-class desire for sensationalism and feminine stereotypes. Grace comes to be their target. The label "Murderess" is attached to her and defines her. Criminals turn into a spectacle and public institutions, like the provincial Penitentiary in Kingston and the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, "were visited like zoos [to] see the star attraction, Grace Marks" (AG 538).

Ostracism Versus Community of the Disenfranchised

In contrast to Hawthorne who shows an ostracized Hester repudiated equally by men and women, Atwood writes both about females' and males' animosity and rejection, but also about solidarity among them. Hester and Grace interact with other women that collude with men, turning against each other, and trying to secure their position around men. In her last domestic placement, Grace hopes to find in Nancy Montgomery someone like her dead friend, Mary. And yet, she realizes that Nancy, who is having an illicit affair with their employer, is moved by jealousy. Nancy is afraid that Thomas Kinnear might replace her with the new servant, Grace.

Unlike Hester, Grace is capable of creating strong bonds of solidarity with other individuals. As López states: “Grace belongs . . . to the marginal communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people, who share strong bonds of solidarity based upon vulnerability and secrecy and who challenge the rigidity of social categories, together with official middle- and upper-class constructions of national identity” (157). Grace and Mary become kindred spirits fast. Mary, who is older than Grace, teaches her how to perform as a maid. In contrast to Grace, Mary is a lively, passionate native-born Canadian and an outspoken strong-minded woman who advocates for the principles of the Mackenzie Revolution: she “had very democratic ideas,” believing that “one person was as good as the next” (AG 183, 182). Nevertheless, she has the dreams of a conventional Victorian woman, to save up to get married and run her own home.

Grace has to live through the ordeal of her unmarried friend, who accepts the advances of her master’s son and then has to suffer the consequences. Mary gets pregnant and dies from a botched abortion, as she would rather die than face the shame of raising a child on her own. After her death, Grace worries that Mary’s soul might not have escaped the room as she had failed to open the window. Mrs. Phelan had told her to do it when her mother died on the ship. The loss of her closest friend leaves a deep wound in Grace’s mind, from which, apparently, she never totally recovers. After her friend’s demise, Grace wakes up next to Mary’s dead body. For about a day, she did not know who she was, and when they told her she was Grace, she would not believe them (AG 208). Ever since Mary’s passing, Grace’s life becomes inextricably linked to her friend’s. At some points in the story, she even seems to adopt Mary’s personality, using her voice to express revolutionary thoughts. Readers wonder if Grace suffers from a mental illness, but also if Mary really exists or is one of Grace’s fabrications.

In addition to Mary Whitney, Grace has a special relationship with Jeremiah, a mysterious Yankee peddler. She also meets him while working at the Parkinson’s. Like Mary, Jeremiah, “a heathenish sort of man,” subverts social conventions (AG 228-9). According to López, in contrast to Simon, Jeremiah disrupts “homogeneous and essentialist constructions of national identity” (167):

Simon’s and Jeremiah’s identities are in fact completely opposite. Whereas Simon lives by social conventions, scientific certainties, and patriotic motivations, Jeremiah is a mobile and metamorphic character that subverts the conventionality and rigidity of social, national, and religious categories, none of which can exclusively contain him, as he has a different identity and profession each time he appears in the novel. (166-7)

When Grace first meets Jeremiah, he reads her fortune and tells her that she will encounter difficulties. Later, he declares, “You are one of us,” and she thought that “he meant that [she] too was homeless, and a wanderer, like the peddlers” (AG 179). However, it seems that he meant to say that they both, like Mary, belong to the community of the marginal individuals who rebel against the constrictions and conventions imposed by the ruling upper class. Jeremiah would eventually ask Grace, unsuccessfully, to go away with him as a medical clairvoyant. She turns him down when she learns that his proposition does not include marriage, which makes her distrust him. After what had happened to Mary, Grace knows that women cannot rely on men.

Jeremiah appears later in the novel as Dr. Jerome DuPont, a practitioner of neuro-hypnotism. He has a key role when he performs Grace’s hypnosis, allegedly revealing that the spirit of Mary Whitney has possessed her. The reader may infer that it was Mary who truly committed the murders, and *Alias Grace*, the title of the novel, may refer to her impersonation. Nonetheless, Jeremiah and Grace may also be in cahoots and deliberately devise her hypnotic trance. Thus, once more, Jeremiah helps her. In his spectacle, the peddler imitates the voice and manners of a gentleman deceiving the high-class individuals, hence, he ridicules and undermines the scientific and religious establishment.

At the end of the novel, Grace writes a letter to Jeremiah from Kingston Penitentiary. She tells him about a “bone button” she had received a few months before, and she wonders if that might have been a message from him (he gave her a similar button back at the Parkinson’s), “as a button is a thing for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them; and you may have been telling me to keep silent, about certain things we both know of” (AG 496). They share a secret that they will never reveal to anyone. As Grace says, servants know a lot about their masters, “There were few secrets they could keep from [them]” (AG 183). In *Alias Grace*, “knowing and keeping secrets become servants’ instrument of power against their masters and mistresses” (López 170-1).

In different ways, Grace and Jeremiah challenge the definitions and constraints imposed by society, consequently, becoming agents of knowledge and power. Grace’s own story empowers her. She successfully conceals her identity and an accurate account of the facts from everyone when she understands that upper-class individuals are not interested in her true self, or the truth. Jeremiah, on the other hand, has special abilities. He had “the air of being able to see more than most could; and I [Grace] could tell he was trying to look into my mind” (AG 308). Grace and Jeremiah’s beliefs go beyond social, political, religious or even gender differences. In *Alias Grace*, the destitute can especially question and subvert socially accepted norms.

Atwood succeeds in creating a strong sense of solidarity among members of the lower classes (liminal and marginalized sectors of society), who belong to what Judith Butler calls a community of vulnerability (31), united in their struggle for survival. Butler describes this community as that in which the victimized are “physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another,” challenging “the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control . . . We’re undone by each other” (27, 23).

Alias Grace discloses the clash between the community of vulnerability and the community of power, contrasting lower-class and marginal individuals, who must stick together, and the disciplinary and violent practices of the dominant upper classes. In fact, the novel finishes with Grace’s freedom and upward mobility, and a quilt pattern that represents constructions of Canadian national identity from the point of view of the marginal communities of immigrants and servants. López argues that Grace “looks forward to a community of common human vulnerability in which the exposure of bodies does not entail violence and oppression but solidarity and equality, with the subsequent dissolution of power relations and of social, national, and religious differences” (175).

Quilting Theme: Resistance through Female Skills

The female condition is at the core of Grace and Hester’s crimes, and yet, ironically, their feminine skills are the main weapon against their victimization. Sewing turns out to be a redemptive act for them. In the first scene of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester defies the authorities’ judgment on the scaffold and shows pride in sin and independence through the embroidered scarlet letter, “[wrought] with wonderful skill of needlework” (*TSL* 24-25), she has been forced to wear.

In *Alias Grace*, the quilt is a key image of the novel (Brink 34) and its unifying metaphor. Each chapter of the narrative has the name of a quilt pattern and its events are associated with it. Hilary Mantel describes how “shudderingly evocative” these names are: “There is peril here: Jagged Edge, Snake Fence. There is woman’s fallibility, woman’s fate: Broken Dishes, Secret Drawer, Rocky Road. There is destruction: Falling Timbers. And woman’s primal guilt: Pandora’s Box” (4). Every voice is reflected in the story, as every cloth scrap is essential in a quilt. Grace Mark’s psyche is also a sort of quilt. She becomes a patchwork in the different interpretations given about her throughout the narrative. Grace has got “accustomed to the appropriation of a multitude of masks,” which she uses “as a defence against a world that seeks to define and limit her” (Tolan 230). Even if Reverend Verringer does not believe that humans are “mere patchworks” (AG 471), Simon realizes “how cunningly spirit and body are knit together. A slip of the knife and you create an idiot. If this

is so, why not the reverse? Could you see and snip, and patch together a genius?” (AG 217). Therefore, Simon, given his profession, is associated with Doctor Frankenstein and Grace the murderess with a monster, which is how she is often seen by most people, but also by herself. The media describes her: “My hair is coming out from under my cap. Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster . . . If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one” (AG 36).

Needlework, a recurring literary theme, is an intrinsic part of the domestic realm as well. It is almost uniquely linked to “women across different backgrounds, social classes, and cultures” (Thomas 14).³ Quilting and patchworks are strong metaphors that stand “for Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival” in the capitalist system, as in *The Scarlet Letter*, and are “celebrated as essentially feminine art forms, modes of nurturance and thrift, and they constitute a women’s language unintelligible to male audiences or readers” (Showalter 146). Females who knit, sew or quilt throughout a novel symbolize control over their lives. As Sharon Wilson states, “quilting is an appropriate vehicle for retelling a nineteenth-century woman’s story” (125). Donna Haraway believes that, by retelling origin stories, central myths of origin of Western culture are subverted (175). Moreover, Grace’s role as a seamstress is an emblem for the working class and social reform (Alexander 37). Grace’s sewing skills allow her some freedom during the day, when she walks out of the prison to the Governor’s house and, as with Hester, provides her with recognition from the upper-class women who respect and admire Grace’s abilities as a needle worker.

Sewing is used by women to withstand adversities. According to Candice Thomas, it comes to be a “paradoxical barrier,” a metaphorical wall, which helps females distance themselves from upsetting or uncomfortable situations, which “they must face against their will” (14). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Penelope is a famous example. By weaving, she detaches herself from her suitors, from whom she must choose one to marry. It becomes “a defense against the invasion by the masculine into the feminine sphere” (Mayers 670). Grace is always sewing or quilting when she is telling Simon her story, and he feels the barrier she has set up between them does not allow him to reach her inner self.

Through the quilt image, Grace stresses her role as a storyteller. As with Hester, “[Grace’s] crime is closely connected in the novel to her activity as a seamstress . . . her narrating of her story is associated with embroidery” (Simonson 108). Focusing on the process rather than in the final product, she presents “alternative forms of thinking about and narrating the past”

³ According to Margaret Rogerson, patchwork-making also functions as a metaphor for both the “literary artifact” (5) and the reading process itself.

(Michael 427) to prove that she owns her story. The fragments of her life are compared with cloth scraps she selects for the quilts she makes: "What should I tell him . . . I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour" (AG 410). She chooses those bits of her story that make it credible and plausible, and best suit her vulnerable situation.⁴ Thus, Grace is likened to a Scheherazade who uses storytelling, a "fabrication, an embroidery, meant to please her listener" (Rose 116), as a way of saving her life, or to Homer's Penelope, who "[u]sing her wit, weaves together the pieces of the story that will construct the precise exterior . . . that will contribute to her eventual release" (Thomas 20).⁵

In fact, it is not just sewing and quilting, Grace knows her way around clothing and textiles. Another of her skills is laundry, which she likes, even if it roughens her hands, because of the clean smell after the wash-out has finished. She knows the treatment of fine linen, "how to get out the stains, even from the blond lace" (AG 74). As a woman that has to deal everyday with the possibility of being tainted, like her friend Mary, Grace relishes the neatness and freedom that she can see in her laundry work: "There is a great deal of pleasure to be had in a wash all clean . . . and the sound of it is like the hands of the Heavenly Hosts applauding . . . And they do say that cleanliness is next to Godliness" (AG 262). Atwood claims that "It [her book] is quite a bit about laundry, but of course, the Bible is about laundry. There's a lot about washing in the Bible and white garments and shining raiment. Clean and dirty is a primary human set of categories, like old/young and dark/light. Very primary" (Miller "Blood and Laundry" n.p.).

In *Alias Grace*, garments and clothing have a crucial role, connecting with femininity and womanhood. They become symbols of identity and social status. Grace's rough hands betray her social status as part of the lower classes. That is why she dreams of "smooth and white" gloves that "would fit without a wrinkle" (AG 23), as those upper-class individuals wear, symbolizing their higher status. She finally receives a pair when she is set free. On the other hand, in the novel, exchanging clothes seems to be equated to trading your actual identity. When Mary Whitney and Grace Marks first meet, they swap clothes. Mary lends Grace her nightgown. Later in the story, for Mary's burial, Grace will dress her with her own nightgown,

4 Atwood emphasizes the binary opposition in narratives, their negative or positive aspects, when Grace Marks describes a patchwork called Attic Windows that can be seen in "two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light" (AG 187). Coral Howells regards this "pattern of light and dark colors as a metaphor for the cultural and racial mixture of Canada's population" (*Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* 39).

5 Hilde Staels, among other critics, indicates how the weblike quality of Grace's narrative "evokes Ariadne's labyrinth and a thread" (433).

as Mary's is covered in blood. These actions hint at the blurring and emergence of their two identities. Wearing somebody else's clothes can also be transgressive, an act of defiance, as when Grace insists on wearing Nancy's clothes and bonnet on the trial, a gesture that can be understood as lack of remorse and/or pretenses of belonging to a higher social class.

Also, Grace compares quilts to flags hung on a line "by an army as it goes to war" (AG 185). Patchworks are not only personal narratives, but also historical ones. Grace seems to see the quilt as a warning, as many dangerous things can happen in a bed: there, we are born, sleep, dream and die; there, men and women have sex; they are associated with love, but also with despair or even indignity. According to Jennifer Murray, for Grace "the meaning of the quilt becomes that of communal experience, under the 'banner' of Woman. As a territorial marker, it also suggests the psychological appropriation of this communal experience by Grace . . . presumably to let other women (future generations) know what dangers they may be exposed to" (73).

Grace cannot tell her true story until the end of the novel, when she is released from prison and Jamie Walsh, a key witness whose testimony helped to convict her, is waiting to marry her. Until that point, Grace can only make quilts for the Governor's wife, as her life does not belong to her, but to the upper-class people on whom her freedom depends. Once free, Grace's last quilt, The Tree of Paradise (Life), she has dreamt of making for so long, finally suits her own ideas. It does not fit the description made by men in the Bible. In her patchwork, Grace finds her own language, a counter-narrative that challenges and defies the patriarchal discourse, the logic of Western scientific knowledge and history.

The Tree of Paradise becomes a reflection/metaphor of Grace's whole life. She includes a border of snakes entwined, which stands for the patriarchal power forces that constrain and repress women so that they accept their socially-sanctioned roles. For the triangles of her Tree, Grace stitches together cloth scraps that stand for the key parts of her biography: a white piece from Mary Whitney's petticoat, one faded yellowish one from her prison nightdress, and the third, a pink and white floral, from Nancy's dress, the one she wore on the first day at Mr. Kinnear's, when Grace was still thinking they could be best friends: "I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together" (AG 534). Thus, Grace's quilt comes to be a symbol of female narrative, as its fabric scraps belong to the key women of the story. It might represent, as Rogerson points out, "an innocent desire to create a memorial to the only female friendships that she [Grace] had ever experienced (21). Through her quilting pattern, Grace Marks shows how she has taken control over her life.

Conclusion

Both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Alias Grace* expose patriarchal constructions of femininity and stereotyping, and the need to change society. These novels reveal the situation of women – marginalized by gender and, especially in Atwood’s novel, by social class and Irish ancestry – in the patriarchal system at different times in history, and how Hester and Grace challenge it. As Hester thinks of womanhood:

[A]s a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit . . . is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position . . . woman cannot take advantage of these . . . reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change. (TSL 113)

These words show how the independent and brave Hester has incredibly progressive feminist ideas for a mid-seventeenth-century New England woman. On the other hand, in Victorian times, Grace, depicted as an ambiguous demonic femme fatale, also defies middle- and upper-class conventional social and gender constructions. She cannot be objectified and, certainly, she cannot be defined.

Hester and Grace are categorized and othered by patriarchal society. Neither of them lives up to societal expectations. Both Hester and Grace are judged by a double-standard resulting from gender polarization. They are fallen angels, deviated from the social construction of the ideal of femininity. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Alias Grace* unveil the gender-based social norms and attitudes towards female wrongdoing, against which women are judged. Females were not always condemned because of the crime itself, but in regards to their compliance with the ideal of True Womanhood of those times. In the Victorian era, strayed women were either denied agency in their transgression, regarded as victims of male domination and seduction, or they were considered as monsters/demons. Female criminals were seen as more depraved and evil than male criminals. The dual view of women, as angel of the house and a demon-possessed female, explained the extremist attitude and fascination with the murderess. Insanity was the medical explanation for their “bizarre and abnormal” behavior.

Whether it was because of sexual misconduct or a “criminal act,” deviant women were shunned from “respectable society,” like Hester, or institutionalized, like Grace. They were removed from their communities to reestablish the social order they had defied and threatened. They suffered stigmatization and ostracism, becoming outcasts. When imprisoned, like Grace, females underwent controlling practices to make them

abide by gender roles. As a result, to resist patriarchal oppression and take their story into their own hands, women learnt to manipulate those around them, and thus, Grace “transgresses the borders of confinement imposed by the ideologies of power and directs the processes of production of meanings” (Silveira 304). *Alias Grace* reveals how gender, but also class and anti-Irish sentiments, influence how society deals with female wrongdoing, and the dynamics that are at work between those who are part of the community of vulnerability and those who are in power. Hester’s complete isolation contrasts to Grace’s sense of belonging to the community of the disenfranchised, whose members stick together.

As a murderess, Grace does not only stand trial in the novel, but also before the readers, who are made judges. Is Grace a perverse murderess or an innocent victim of a terrible crime? Readers have to reflect upon the ethical, social and judicial implications of her situation. They have to pass their judgment on the evidence given by the interplay of the different accounts of the murders. Grace’s own rendition of the facts is compared with the trial documents, and other versions of her story, such as the printed ones. Magali Michael concludes that “One result of the dialogue . . . is a questioning of the validity or truth value of the documented sources themselves” (432).

Sewing and quilting set Hester and Grace on the path for redemption. Art provides them with a means to express themselves and survive their hardships. Atwood’s novel finishes with a hopeful and redeeming ending, with the multi-layered image of the Tree of Paradise quilt and Grace’s marriage to Jim, a middle-class landowner, which allows her upward social mobility. Grace Marks can finally control her narrative and tell her true story through her patchwork, which becomes the symbol of her own journey of self-definition. *Alias Grace*, like *The Scarlet Letter*, disrupts conventional assumptions about femininity. Besides, the story of Grace Marks, a narrative from the point of view of the marginalized, serves as a counterbalance to the National Official Discourse.

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