

## One Story and a Thousand and One Threads: Rediscovering History, Creating Stories in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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### Abstract

This work analyzes Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* in order to discuss the strategies employed to intersect and articulate elements related to history and story, which are used to create a text that, by giving voice to a female character, re-writes an episode of Canadian history and questions the traditional discourses of the nineteenth century.

Key words: Postmodernism. Genre. Gender. Female madness.

The title of this essay — "One Story and a Thousand and One Threads: Rediscovering History, Creating Stories in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*" — suggests an attempt to follow the threads that re-create histories and fabricate other stories and the need to ask: Why do we need stories? Why do we read the same stories over and over? What are the limits between history and fiction? In this study, I analyze Atwood's *Alias Grace*, focusing on how this postmodern narrative is overtly concerned with the instability of discourses and with the possibility of re-writing history from a woman's point of view. I am interested in examining the use of the metaphor of quilting, which serves as a special pattern to the construction of this multilayered narrative form that raises questions of gender. I also investigate how the text manipulates the issue of the double as a means of disrupting the traditional binary oppositions of western discourse, such as fiction and non-fiction, truth and falsehood and sanity and insanity.

*Alias Grace*, a revisionist narrative composed of historical and literary intertexts, is one of the contemporary Canadian novels that challenges the ontological status of the discourses of the nineteenth century and gives voice to a silenced woman. In fact, Atwood is strongly interested in the history of the country, its literary legacy and in her famous literary ancestor, Susanna Moodie (1803-1885), whose references in her novels are employed as the basis for the development of *Alias Grace*. The works of the English Susanna Moodie and her sister Catherine Parr Traill (1802-1899), who emigrated to Canada during the pioneer settlement, "are now classics that have become the subject of much critical discussion and resurrection," especially by Atwood (Herk 144). Both sisters are strongly concerned with recording the difficulties of their pioneer experience and the hardships of wilderness life in the backwoods of the new country in the nineteenth century. Besides, they are also considered two founders of a

contemporary tradition of women writers, placing Canada in a distinctive position in western literary history (Herk 144).

*Alias Grace* re-writes history and tells the story of Grace Marks, an Irish immigrant who lived in Canada in the nineteenth century and spent about twenty-nine years locked up for the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his governess and lover, Nancy Montgomery. According to the documents on the case, Grace gave three differing versions of Nancy Montgomery's murder and McDermott gave two, but the supposed truth about the facts remains a mystery to this day. Actually, at that time, the governess's murder was not even considered a court case and, therefore, it was not completely investigated (Atwood 5). Grace Marks, who was then sixteen years old, and James McDermott were both condemned to death for the murder of Thomas Kinnear. However, due to the work of her lawyer and some sympathetic petitioners of her innocence, Grace's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, while her alleged accomplice, James McDermott, was hanged on November 21, 1843. After serving her sentence, Grace Marks was granted pardon, went to the United States and was never heard of again.

These are the facts with which Atwood plays to develop her postmodern fictional story, in which the multiplicity of intertextual elements are crafted into an ingenious narrative that constantly subverts monologic concepts of meaning and negates closure at many levels. I am, therefore, interested in the study of *Alias Grace* in order to analyze how the narrative intersects and articulates elements related to the official history, the narrative of a nineteenth-century infamous woman and fictitious elements. I am also interested in the way the female characters are given voice in the text. My contention is that, by writing the novel as a "mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva 66), Atwood creates a plural text that questions conventions and challenges stereotypical presuppositions, such as those of discursive categories of gender and genre, while subverting traditional modes of perception. In other words, the rewriting of stories in *Alias Grace* is a means of questioning historical and literary myths and of challenging conventional discourses. In this process, the readers are also invited to play an active role as they approach the multiple possibilities of the text, finding no definite answers and literal meanings to the issues raised in the novel.

Overall, each piece, each aspect of Atwood's story, such as the title, epigraphs, quotations and the structure of the novel, indicates the way the narrative will play with notions of fiction and reality. The novel is constructed in such a way as to place the readers on a "jagged edge" (the title of the first chapter), on a borderline from where they are supposed to negotiate the meanings of the text, the representations and conventions about language, fiction, literature and history. *Alias Grace* resembles not only a "Pandora's Box" (another chapter name), but also a patchwork, in which the author weaves disparate texts together, such as literary and scientific references, a detective story, an epistolary novel, a Gothic romance, an autobiography, as well as historical facts, episodes from newspaper clippings and portrayals of Victorian society. The novel appears also as a sample of a nineteenth century fashionable scrapbook, with photographs, newspaper articles, medical records and literary pieces fastened to it. Such an intertextual and metafictional strategy can be equally found in the titles of every section, which are specifically chosen according to the names of famous quilt patterns that are graphically illustrated as well.

In Atwood's kaleidoscopic narrative, the constant instability that permeates the whole novel is also continuously reinforced by the development of a character that challenges traditional discourses and uses it to create her own subversive text. Also,

through the extensive and paradoxical use of intertextuality, especially the paratexts, the novel transgresses the margins that impose fixed conventions of representations. As a sample of "historiographic metafiction" — a mode in which, according to Linda Hutcheon (11), a complicitous critique legitimizes and subverts the ideologies of the dominant culture — *Alias Grace* is both a fictional creation and a revisionist account of the past. The entire narrative can, thus, be read as a postmodern feminist work, which is concerned with breaking the limits of the fixed categories of gender and genre, while unveiling the possibility of giving voice to the ones that have been traditionally silenced.

The main narrator in the novel, Grace Marks, as Scheherazade in her endless task of creating illusion, displays her own version of her life: the family's travel from Ireland to Canada, her mother's death and burial among the icebergs, a hypothetical sexual harassment by her father, the period spent with Mary Whitney and the time at the Kinnears' house. In fact, the discussion of Grace's character is an issue as complex and plural as the creation of Atwood's novel, which suggests the need to approach the past from a revisionist point of view. The author has produced a text that not only echoes the structure of a quilt pattern, but also presents the protagonist as a talented weaver. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood constructs her texture as a patchwork that provides no closure, but rather multifarious meanings.

It is also important to point out the way the narrative addresses gender issues, especially the portrayal of women as speaking subjects, and the connection between women and madness, which are themes addressed not only by Victorian literature but also, more recently, by many postmodern texts. While giving voice to the enigmatic figure of Grace Marks, Atwood opens up Grace's secret box and unravels her tale in a kind of narrative that also resembles the structure of a Chinese box, with a puzzle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. The result is one story and a thousand and one threads, which lead the reader toward numerous paths that are transformed and reshaped by the way the narrative challenges stereotypes and literary categories. In other words, since the story, as the several historical facts related to the incident, is a web of versions, the readers must follow the blurred lines that emerge from this kaleidoscopic text, facing the impossibility of attaining any kind of certainty, while dealing with the contradictions that surround such a complex and enigmatic character as Grace Marks.

Creating a novel that resembles a patchwork, in which mixed voices and faded scraps need to be deciphered, exposes the fictional nature of discourses. According to Cecilia Macheski (2), "through the metaphor of the quilt, the writers ask us to go beyond merely recognizing the artistic beauty of the designs; they insist we read the whole fabric to find the thread's of women's history stitching the shapes together". Following her theorization I would also argue that such is the process of construction of *Alias Grace*, which self-consciously re-arranges fragments of the past to suggest the creation of a new pattern that brings to the fore the unwritten story of an infamous woman. By attempting to reconstruct the past, the novel also endorses the notion that the "official" history and the personal stories are human constructions. They are both part of a similar process and are equally capable of producing subjective re-creations of the past. Within this process, the self-reflexive and intertextual characteristics of the narrative determine the fabrication of a text that is interested in blurring the fixed categories of gender and genre. Actually, for Sharon Rose Wilson (122), "feminist intertextual revisions" are frequently concerned not only with the analyses of gender, as a concept culturally produced, as well as with the act of revealing "the codes of

fiction, how they have been constructed, and how they can be changed". Such is also the connection between the narrative form and the issues related to women as speaking and writing subjects in the production of *Alias Grace*.

The rewriting of narratives in *Alias Grace*, as well as the juxtaposition of quilt patterns, is a means of questioning historical and literary myths and challenging traditional narratives, giving, however, no definite answers to the issues raised in the novel. Following Elaine Showalter's theorization (175), about American women's writing, I would argue that *Alias Grace* is also a good example, although a Canadian one, of the "exploding, multi-cultural, contradictory and dispersed" tradition of women's writing that explores the need to rethink the hegemonic literary maps of western culture. By mingling genres and rewriting stories, Atwood, thus, disrupts certainties and creates a challenging kaleidoscopic text, which directs the readers through the blurred lines of its multiple possibilities.

The concept of madness is also a crucial point in the development of Margaret Atwood's narrative. At the beginning of the novel, the main character Grace Marks has a supposedly hysterical fit, which raises a series of questions about the nineteenth century notion of irrationality. Questioning Grace's mental state, the narrative, consequently, plays with the gendered construction of a concept that tends to reinforce the exclusion of the discourses of the oppressed, especially women, from the social spheres of life. What is at stake is, thus, the possibility of challenging the portrayals of the stereotypical madwoman, which helped to reinforce several myths of femininity, through the disruptive voice of a historical outcast, Grace Marks. The subversive appropriation of the conventional role of madness is thereby one of the major elements used by Grace to transgress the discourse of the period on the subject.

I also believe that both the narrative and the protagonist's representation are constructed to disrupt the pervasive image of the Victorian madwoman that has dominated not only the artistic as well as the scientific discourses of the nineteenth century (Showalter 90). In the novel, Grace Marks creates her own narrative and refuses being manipulated by the doctor's scientific discourse. Her character also exposes the idea that truth is a fractured concept that cannot be totally captured. In addition to that, the relationships established between Grace and her two double figures, Mary Whitney and Dr. Simon Jordan, equally explore and undermine the narrow definition of madness, especially in terms of gender construct. The scientific rationality of the doctor's character, for example, neither exposes the identity of the criminal nor brings order into the narrative. Mary Whitney's marginal presence, on the other hand, becomes the subversive link to an extensive history of female oppression and madness that was especially influential in the nineteenth century. I believe that the relationships established between Grace Marks and these two characters, Simon Jordan and Mary Whitney, have been developed as a means of questioning the concepts of madness as a natural and biological status, as well as the clichés of gender that predominate in Victorian society. In this multilayered text, neither the narrative nor the main character, Grace Marks, can be reduced to a single identifiable interpretation. Such a narrative implies that the focus of the reading should lie not in the search for the so-called whole truth, but rather in the inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities that compose any form of representation.

The issue of the double — much present in Canadian literature and history through the concept of Canada as a country of "two solitudes"<sup>1</sup> — is, in effect, continuously approached in the structure and the context of the narrative, as it questions the dichotomous ideology of the nineteenth century. The critical

appropriation of binary oppositions and of the issue of the double, at different levels, is, therefore, constantly employed as a means of challenging the literary and historical myths of femininity in a patriarchal society. In *Alias Grace*, it is the paradoxical figure of a supposed madwoman, Grace Marks, who transgresses the borders of confinement imposed by the ideologies of power and directs the processes of production of meanings, as she takes the narrative of her story in her own hand. Hutcheon's definition (61-77) of postmodernism — as an intricate and duplicitous term that is, nonetheless, concerned with challenging the master discourses of Western culture — is, thus, at the basis of *Alias Grace's* appropriation of historical facts, which are subversively re-interpreted through the voice of a traditionally marginalized figure represented by the female protagonist. In this sense, I also argue that the unconventional and kaleidoscopic links, which blend apparently contradictory elements in Atwood's novel, uncover the idea of history as a fictional construction and subverts conventions of literary and cultural discourses.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term "two solitudes," also derived from the imperialist division of the country into the French and the English portions, became culturally consolidated with the publication of the eponymous novel written, in 1945, by Hugh MacLennan (1907-1990), who was determined to interpret the two antagonistic identities that formed Canada. MacLennan's work excludes the first nations and the other sets of immigrants that populated the country in order to focus on the analysis of the evolution of the French and English groups, in Quebec and Ontario, while pointing towards a possible cordial unification of the two sides (Besner 1-5).

#### Resumo

O trabalho analisa o romance *Alias Grace*, de Margaret Atwood, com o objetivo de discutir as estratégias narrativas que interconectam os conceitos de história e ficção e criam um texto que, ao dar voz a uma personagem feminina, reescreve um episódio da história canadense e questiona os discursos tradicionais do século XIX.

Palavras-chave: Pós-modernismo. Gêneros textuais e sexuais. Loucura feminina.

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