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Female Insanity: The Portrayal of a Murderess in *Alias Grace*

Margaret Atwood's biographical novel *Alias Grace* is based on the life of Grace Marks, a servant who was convicted but subsequently pardoned of murdering her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Writing more than a century after the 1843 crimes occurred, Atwood does not focus on Grace's actual responsibility in the murders but instead critiques the society that produces and then condemns Grace. I argue that, by humanizing Grace and emphasizing her lack of power as a lower-class immigrant woman, Atwood transfers some of the blame to the oppressive 19th century social hierarchy in Canada that may have led some women to drastic measures of rebellion such as murder. By focusing on the social context in which the murders occurred, Atwood demonstrates that Grace becomes a product of the oppressive era rather than an anomalous fiend. While public opinion of Grace is divided, I argue that the elite maintain the hierarchy of gender and class through labeling Grace as criminally insane. In this paper, I use feminist and psychological perspectives to explore the 1800s social hierarchy in the novel and the use of labels, specifically mental illness labels, in controlling individuals.

19th Century Canadian Social Hierarchy According to Atwood

In order to explain society's reactions to Grace's questionable culpability, I must first demonstrate how the 1800s social hierarchy within the novel oppressed women. It is important to note that I am not attempting to capture the historical accuracy of this era but rather describe the

19th century social structure according to Atwood. While Atwood brilliantly depicts this era, her biographical fiction serves a larger purpose of illuminating specific societal problems, such as gender oppression, through artistic presentation of the era. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to view Atwood's novel as a complete representation of the 1800s. For example, although Atwood occasionally discusses racial oppression, she does not focus on the severe oppression that indigenous individuals in Canada faced during this era. Grace experienced privilege that others, particularly Indigenous individuals, were not able to access. However, Atwood narrows her approach in order to emphasize the rampant gender inequality of the era.

According to Atwood, Canada in the 1800s was defined by a rigid social structure. At the time, Canada was heavily influenced by the Victorian Era etiquette and morals of the United Kingdom. Lower-class immigrant women like Grace are towards the bottom of this order and have little choice or agency. Historically, race, ethnicity, class, and gender all intersect in complex ways and these effects are difficult to untangle from each other. Atwood occasionally discusses the role of these different identities in Grace's life. For example, while Canadians of English and French descent are at the top of this hierarchy, journalists of the time make Grace's Irish heritage "sound like a crime" (Atwood 101). Many Canadians view Grace as inferior because she is an Irish immigrant. Grace is also restricted by class. She comes from a poor, low-class family and has few possessions of her own. As a servant, Grace must be accountable to both her employer and the senior housekeepers by always showing respect for her superiors. Although both class and ethnicity are important factors that intersect to determine an individual's access to power and privilege throughout the novel, Atwood often isolates the role of gender in dictating an individual's rank and power within society. Therefore, to limit the scope of this paper, I will mainly focus on the role of gender as an oppressive agent in Grace's life. In order to

emphasize the oppression that women face in 1800s, I will explain how women are often financially dependent on men, held to high moral standards, expected to be chaste yet submissive, and are restricted to domestic roles.

In the 19th century, women were often financially subordinate to men, both male relatives and spouses, as women were paid less and had little claim over the family's finances. For example, Grace's mother is financially at the mercy of Grace's father throughout their marriage. Men are typically the breadwinners of the family as "it was a matter of pride for a man to support his own family" (Atwood 109). However, Grace's father used the family income to fund his alcohol addiction. According to 19th century morals, it is inappropriate for Grace's mother to confront or leave her husband. Grace's mother was "too wise a woman" to challenge her husband and so she had to support her children by selling handmade shirts (Atwood 109). Both Grace and her mother have the responsibility of caring for the children and supporting the family financially as the father squanders the family's money. Mrs. Humphrey, the landlady of Grace's doctor, is also financially controlled by men. After Mrs. Humphrey's husband abruptly leaves her, she cannot support herself and resorts to selling her personal items (Atwood 143). Mr. Humphrey socially isolates his wife and controls the money, leaving her completely dependent on him for survival (Atwood 143). As a respectable woman, she does not have any means to support herself once he leaves. She explains, "Women like me have few skills they can sell" (Atwood 145). Women who do not have the financial support of a man typically become servants or resort to prostitution. Even upper-class women became penniless after their financial support was withdrawn; gender oppression was pervasive across all classes. Without her husband's financial support, Mrs. Humphrey starves to the point of fainting and relies on the charity of Dr. Simon, Grace's doctor. As Mrs. Humphrey and Dr. Simon begin a sexual

relationship with one another, her financial security depends on Dr. Simon's satisfaction with her and his continued monetary support.

Although both men and women were expected to have refined morals in the 1800s, women were held to a higher moral standard than men. In a discussion about public hangings, Dr. Simon argues that women should not watch executions as they have "refined natures" (Atwood 87). Dr. Simon reflects upon countless interactions with women who break every social expectation through drinking, swearing, fighting, and prostitution, but he concludes that it is best for society to expect women to be delicate and moral; this will "safeguard the purity of those still pure" and "one must present what ought to be true" (Atwood 87). Women are expected to be chaste, patient, kind, and nurturing to the point of self-sacrifice. Dr. Simon often censors his conversations when women are around him, refraining from discussing prostitution or other immoral topics.

While on the surface, expecting women to have refined morals may seem like a complement to the characterization of women, it is actually a form of control. This assumption that women are virtuous leads women to be held to a high standard and punished severely when they fail to meet expectations. Murder is abhorrent in general but it is especially shocking for a woman to commit murder as she is expected to be morally superior to men. Therefore, women are either held to an impossibly high standard of sainthood or they are vilified and demonized when they fall short of these standards. The dichotomy of female portrayal as saints or demons is evident in the prison workers who justify harassing Grace but yet maintain that their own mothers are saints (Atwood 240). Atwood mainly focuses on the male desire for female moral perfection but the negative reaction towards Grace and toward other women, such as prostitutes, demonstrates that women are also often maligned. As a woman in 19th century Canada, Grace

was punished for the murders which contrast with the expectations that she should be moral and pure.

The 1800s was a period of extreme sexual oppression and rampant prostitution in which women navigated the conflict between sexual advances from men and societal pressure to be chaste. Throughout Atwood's novel, Grace must be respectful towards men as they are superior to her in the social hierarchy. However, she must also reject their sexual advances for her own safety. While some women, like Nancy, use their sexuality in order to secure resources from men, in the 1800s sex had the potential to be very harmful to women. Unwed mothers are spurned by society because they break the gender norm of purity. Prostitutes are also scorned but are in high demand. In addition, both pregnancy and abortion are extremely risky. Grace describes the dangers of pregnancy during an interview with Dr. Simon. She tells him, "you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir… But it isn't so for everyone… It is where we are born, and that is our first peril in life; and it is where the women give birth, which is often their last" (Atwood 161). Many women died giving birth. Abortions are also dangerous. After becoming pregnant out of wedlock, Grace's friend Mary decided that an abortion was better than raising a child and dealing with the shame associated with premarital sex. However, the illegal abortion proved lethal as Mary bled to death. Grace explains that she was taught to be silent about the shame of abortion as her superiors exclaim, "we will not say what Mary died of… That will be best for all" (Atwood 178). Mary's death from complications of an abortion is kept secret because of the shame surrounding sex.

Although there are serious physical and social risks of having sex for women, men repeatedly pressure women into sexual relationships. When Grace first menstruates, Mary explains that she is now a target for men, warning that "you must be careful what you ask, and

you must never do anything for them until they have performed what they had promised" (Atwood 165). Grace thwarts the sexual advances of many men throughout the book. Under Thomas Kinnear's roof, Grace attempts to avoid angering her employer while rejecting his advances. James McDermott, another employee who was charged with the murders of Thomas and Nancy, also felt entitled to Grace's body. The public questions Grace and James' relationship as they escape together after the murders. Grace repeatedly rejects James and voices her disdain for him. Grace also experiences sexual harassment after she is imprisoned. The prison escorts who bring her out of the asylum jeer at her with crude sexual jokes. They sexualize Grace, saying,

> We're the lucky boys ourselves, with such a morsel on our arms. What do you say Grace… let's just nip up a side alley, into a back stable, down on the hay, it won't take long if you lie still... the only thing of use in [women] is below the waist… and best not to waste God's gifts to us, speaking of which Grace, you're ripe enough to be picked. (Atwood 240)

These prison workers sexually harass Grace and demonstrate that, according to Atwood, men felt entitled to women's bodies. Men throughout *Alias Grace* embrace the hypocritical stereotypes that women should be pure and chaste yet sexually obedient to them.

The imbalance in power between men and women is also evident in the separation of female and male roles. For example, when Simon goes to the market to get groceries for his landlady, he feels out of place among servants and poor or working class women. Atwood writes, "He doesn't really know how to go about this… this is a universe he has never explored" (144). Whenever Dr. Simon has to perform a typically female task such as shopping, he feels out of place. When he takes care of Mrs. Humphrey, he remarks, "Women help each other; caring for

the afflicted is in their sphere" (Atwood 143). This quote emphasizes that, while men are expected to earn the family's finances, women are placed in domestic roles involving housekeeping, taking care of others, grocery shopping, and quilting. Grace remarks that, "Men such as him do not have to clean up the messes they make, but we have to clean up our own messes, and theirs in the bargain" (Atwood 214). Dr. Simon is unaware of the ways in which women have cared for him throughout his life and often takes them for granted. Women are prohibited from venturing beyond their domestic spheres.

Political Unrest Threatens the Hierarchy

Society's response to Grace's role in the double homicide is especially volatile since these murders occurred during a period of political unrest in which this hierarchy, which includes assumptions of male superiority over women, is threatened. Historians Terry Cook and Gabrielle Blais explain in "The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada," that "the year 1830 saw a series of revolts, albeit unsuccessful ones, against the established order in continental Europe" (8). They argue that these revolts heavily affected Canadians who were experiencing a range of distress including failed crops, general economic downturn, political discontent, and an influx of immigrants, mainly American immigrants (10-11). Individuals without power, especially lower-class workers, began to fight against the dominant hierarchy of class, race, and gender.

The changing sentiment of the working class is captured in *Alias Grace* through the character of Grace's friend Mary. For example, Mary explains the significant revolt of 1837 to Grace, saying that "It was against the gentry, who ran everything" (148). When Grace becomes anxious about making a mistake and angering her employer, Mary reassures Grace saying, "we were not slaves, and being a servant was not a thing we were born to, nor would we be forced to continue at it forever; it was just a job of work" (Atwood 157). Mary plants the idea of upward

mobility in Grace's mind. Oppression is omnipresent throughout the 1800s. However, during this time, the working class began to fight for a system in which individuals are able to rise in society based on work efficacy alone. Mary also explains that individuals are not necessarily held back by their ancestry anymore as "on this side of the ocean folks rose in the world by hard work, not by who their grandfather was, and that was the way it should be" (Atwood 158). Mary's perspective captures the hopefulness of those whose who no longer wish to be held back by family and class restrains. Although Mary keeps her fervor for democracy hidden from her employers and the individual rebellions were quickly stopped, the upper-class was especially fearful of maintaining their power.

Violence as the Result of Injustice

As the reader becomes aware of the systematic way in which the social hierarchy oppresses Grace based on her identity as a female Irish immigrant, the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her. Grace is a flawed character but each time she considers violence, her outrage is justified. For example, Grace contemplates harming her father but her anger stems from her father's disregard for his family. Grace describes the rage she had towards her father saying,

> I had begun to have thoughts about the iron cooking pot, and how heavy it was; and if it should happen to drop on him while he was asleep, it could smash his skull open, and kill him dead, and I would say it was an accident; and I did not want to be led into a grave sin of that kind, though I was afraid the fiery red anger that was in my heart against him would drive me to it. (Atwood 129)

Although Grace describes the gruesome way in which she fantasizes about killing her father, her anger is the direct result of her father's abuse and mistreatment. The reader can easily understand

and sympathize with Grace's anger. Atwood does not justify murder but instead makes the reader acknowledge the environmental factors that generated a murderous rage with an oppressed individual. The reader becomes sympathetic as Grace describes the horrendous boat ride to Canada, losing her mother, raising her siblings, her father's alcoholism, her friend Mary's death, rejecting sexually aggressive males, and general life as a servant. The personal details of the multiple hardships in Grace's life humanize her and are intrinsically tied to her lower position in society. The reader is primed to view Grace as a victim and question the ways in which society could have driven Grace to murder. Instead of questioning whether or not Grace committed the murders, the reader may question if Grace had many peaceful options of survival available to her within the 1800s hierarchy.

The Power of Labels

Throughout the novel, society struggles to bridge the rift between the stereotypical view of women and a female murderer. Public opinion of Grace's role in the murders is divided. Some individuals believe that James is the true murderer who either enchanted a love-struck Grace or stole Grace away after the murders. James' execution reveals that the public accepted that he played a role in the murders. Other individuals blame and demonize Grace. Grace contemplates this dichotomy in her public image saying,

> I am an inhuman female demon… 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 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 of these different things at once? (Atwood 23)

This description emphasizes the conflict between the commonly accepted traits of a murderer and the ideal traits of a woman. While murderers are viewed as cunning and devious demons, women are expected to be innocent, ignorant, and pliable victims (Atwood 23). As explained earlier, women were also described as morally refined, pure, and nurturing. The term "murderess" is intriguing to the Governess and her friends because a murderess cannot exist according to Atwood's depiction of 1800s gender stereotypes. Grace becomes a sort of celebrity among the Governess and her friends as the conflict between the identities "murderer" and "woman" draws curiosity. If Grace committed the murders, she is a threat to a society that would like to believe that women are innocent, pure, passive, and dull-witted. In order to be pardoned of the crimes, Grace must disassociate herself from the label of insane murderer and convince society that she maintains the qualities of the ideal woman. The ability to control public opinion of Grace's identity as an innocent bystander rather versus an insane criminal is a more important factor in determining Grace's future than her actual responsibility for the murderers. I argue that, by labeling Grace as criminally insane, the elite maintain the hierarchy of gender and class.

With power comes the ability to control definitions of normality and abnormality. As Caucasian men with wealth are at the top of the social ladder in 19th century Canada, they control definitions of normality and mental illness. Therefore, these definitions may contain the assumption that behaviors conflicting with women's ideal identity are abnormal. Perry Linton, in *Culture and Mental Disorders*, argues that classification of mental disorders stems from the "socially deviant, nonconforming, unpredictable nature of mental illness which, translated politically, ultimately threatens the power structure of society" (33). Individuals who break their role in the hierarchy are viewed as mentally ill or criminal under these definitions. As men control definitions of abnormality, many women, especially women who break the preferred

societal expectations, are pathologized and either committed to mental hospitals or jailed. Under this view, mental illness labels are not based on helping the individual recover and find happiness in life, but rather from the desire to suppress deviant behavior which is in conflict with the current hierarchy of power.

Although hysteria is not considered a mental illness diagnosis today, it was a common mental illness diagnoses of the 1800s and is heavily based on gender biases. This diagnosis only applies to women as the term "hysteria" is translated from the Greek word for uterus. The term is so broad and subjective that the physician's personal opinions of the client determines diagnosis. Since men are typically the physicians, this diagnosis often perpetuates stereotypes against women. For example, the term "hysteria" perpetuates the belief that women are more emotional than men. In *Alias Grace*, a senior housekeeper allows the servants of Kinnear's household to cry, exclaiming that "young girls were often weepy" but they should not let it get out of control (Atwood 163). Grace and Mrs. Humphrey both experience fainting spells which is a common symptom of hysteria. Women who are repeatedly told they are weak may conform to the expectation that they are fragile. Hysteria perpetuates the belief that women are not as emotionally, intellectually, or physically strong as men.

Although I have just covered hysteria, there are many other past and current diagnoses that have strong gender biases such as histrionic personality disorder which is over-diagnosed in women who are attention seeking and extremely emotional and premenstrual dysphoric disorder which pathologizes extreme irritability that accompanies menstruation. Throughout history, there have been multiple mental diagnoses that target women and perpetuate the belief that women are mentally inferior to men. Karen Eriksen and Victoria Kress explain in "Feminist Challenges to DSM Diagnosis" that the ideal individual is assertive, individualistic, and self-sufficient.

However, the ideal woman is best described as feminine, quiet, submissive, and delicate. Therefore, the ideal woman does not have the qualities of a healthy human being or, conversely, a healthy human being cannot be a proper female.

So far, I have demonstrated that labels of criminality and mental illness are often created by those in power and perpetuate the cultural ideal of the era. Now, I will demonstrate the power of these labels to affect the branded individual's life. Labels of insanity and criminality have a tendency to harm an individual for life. David Rosenhan's 1973 article "On Being Sane in Insane Places" illustrates the tendency to pathologize normal behavior when it is committed by an individual previously labeled by society. In this study, pseudo-patients entered a mental hospital in order to assess the staff's ability to distinguish their normal behavior from the other patients. Once admitted, the participants resumed their average, everyday behaviors. However, none of the staff were able to recognize these changes in behavior and instead interpreted the participant's behaviors as symptoms of mental illness.

While Grace was in an asylum, her actions were often attributed to mental illness. She lost all credibility to her name (Atwood 239). For example, her laughter and her fear of doctors are interpreted as a part of her mental instability. However, Atwood explains that the staff and doctors "wouldn't know mad when they saw it in any case, because a good portion of the women in the asylum were no madder than the Queen of England" (Atwood 31). Many of the women were there because they abused alcohol, were avoiding an abusive husband, or had dramatically broken gender roles. The insanity did not stem from within these women but rather came from their insane environment. Although many of the women in the asylum with Grace are sane and simply had temporary mental ailments, the atmosphere of the jail heavily influenced their subsequent mental stability. For example, Grace often went without food and human contact for

long periods of time. The inmates were often mistreated with cruel techniques such as cold baths, strait jackets, isolation, and sexual or physical abuse (Atwood 30-35). While the staff assumed that their patients were insane or were indifferent towards their patients, many of their patients became mentally unstable because of the poor treatment. The staff of the asylum manipulated the patients, as Grace relates, "The matrons at the asylum… wanted to show how dangerous we were, but also how well they could control us, as it made them appear more valuable and skilled" (Atwood 32). Although some of the women in the asylum were mentally ill criminals, many of the prisoners' behaviors were misinterpreted as insane or brought about from the poor treatment.

Grace's Guise as an Innocent Victim of a Temporary Illness

As mentioned previously, in order to be pardoned of the crimes, Grace must disassociate herself from the label of insane murderer and convince society that she maintains the qualities of the ideal woman. People at the bottom of the social ranking are not able to directly control their own labels and so they must either adapt to the labels placed upon them or influence the viewpoint of their superiors. The success of people at the bottom of the hierarchy depends on their attention to those above them. Although Grace is ignorant at the beginning of the novel, her friend Mary helps her learn the tricks of being a good but rebellious servant. Grace describes her amazement at Mary's dual nature to be a "fun-loving" and "mischievous" girl in person but "towards her elders and betters her manner was respectful and demure" (Atwood 150). Susan Fisk, in "Controlling Other People," explains that individuals who are oppressed must be attentive to those above them in order to succeed. Fiske argues that stereotypes reinforce an individual's power by limiting the stereotyped individual's options. The individual must conform to the person in power's stereotypes because their future well-being depends on the views of the individual in power.

Although Grace is systematically oppressed throughout her life, she is eventually pardoned of her crime and freed, in part, due to her ability to conform to her role as a woman. For example, Dr. Simon seeks to reconcile society's demonization of Grace with the quiet, gentle woman he meets. After being allowed to leave the asylum, Grace is quiet, feminine, and often feigns ignorance. Grace explains that some people see her as "a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me… that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot" (Atwood 23). This view of Grace allows her to seem redeemable to society. Grace also states, "I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble… If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go" (Atwood 5). If Grace convinces society that she will conform to the stereotypes of an ideal woman and assume a female role, she may be freed.

As Grace's credibility is diminished while some individuals label her a mentally unstable criminal, she must rely on the help of Jeremiah the peddler, alias Dr. Jerome DuPont, in order to be pardoned. As Grace's case is reconsidered by the committee, Grace and Jeremiah must convince the panel that Grace's mental illness was temporary. Grace rids herself of the mental illness label by convincing them that she was possessed. Jeremiah hypnotizes Grace in front of the committee in order to investigate the truth behind the murder. Together, Jeremiah and Grace convince the panel that Grace was possessed by her dead friend Mary during the murders. Grace appears to be once again possessed by Mary who confesses to the crime, absolving Grace. The readers are never given the satisfaction of knowing Grace's actual role in the murders or Dr. Simon's final verdict. Atwood describes Dr. Simon's confusion about the event, writing, "He knows what he saw and heard, but he may have been shown an illusion… 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" (407). While Dr. Simon is not entirely convinced, his description

of individuals with double personalities and Grace and Jeremiah's performance convince the committee of Grace's alleged innocence. Grace is pardoned only after she demonstrates her commitment to her class and gender roles and after her insanity is revealed to be temporary. Grace no longer poses a direct threat to the hierarchy.

Conclusion

In *Alias Grace,* Atwood focuses on the societal factors that precipitate the murders of Thomas and Nancy. As Atwood emphasizes the oppression women faced in the 19th century, she encourages the reader to sympathize with Grace. Grace's sanity and criminality are secondary to society's tyrannical expectations of women. This was a period of both extreme sexual oppression and the assumption that males are entitled to female bodies. The healthy human being is assertive, individualistic, and self-sufficient but the ideal woman is feminine, quiet, and delicate. Women were assumed to be inferior to men, were often financially dependent, held to impossibly high moral standards, and were restricted to domestic roles. Due to the oppression of women, the reader is primed to view Grace as a victim. Women were expected to be submissive to men so the idea of a murderess is threatening to male dominance. Society's reaction is exacerbated by the rebellions of the 1830s that threatened the hierarchy in place.

Throughout the novel, society struggles to bridge the rift between the stereotypical view of women and Grace's culpability in the murders. If Grace committed the murders, she is a threat to a society that would like to believe that women are innocent, submissive, and dull-witted. Society labels Grace as mentally unstable and criminal in order to maintain the ideal of the perfect woman and to dissuade others of low social ranking from challenging their submissive positions. Grace is demonized and locked away. Men have power in determining these definitions of normality and sanity. Men have the power to pardon her. While calling a murderer

a dangerous criminal is logical, Atwood places some of the blame on the oppressive Victorian Era hierarchy and illustrates that society often demonizes individuals whose only crime is threatening the hierarchy. Grace is pardoned of the crimes only when she demonstrates that she no longer poses a threat to the hierarchy by attributing the murders to temporary possession and emphasizing her ability to be an ideal lower-class woman who is safely married off at the end of the novel.

It is important to note that Atwood does not justify murder or state that Grace lacks volition entirely. Instead, she places Grace in the appropriate social context in order to demonstrate that demonizing and punishing Grace will not solve the greater, underlying issue of gender oppression that served as a catalyst. Although Atwood often isolates the role of gender oppression in her novel, her critical lens can be used to explore other factors in depth such as race, ethnicity, or class. While *Alias Grace* critiques 19th century gender oppression, Atwood's emphasis on the wider, social context and dimensions of power and persecution is an enriching lens to use when approaching any text across cultures and time periods.

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