

Wandering, Haunting and Hysteria: Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood

Abstract

As Atwood herself explains, *Alias Grace* lifts up questions about “the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story”. Precisely because *Alias Grace* is an historical novel, the text displays the degree to which current notions concerning allegedly normal and pathological memory are consequent from fiction. With the publication of her first novel, *Surfacing*, which tabled the psychic and physical journey of a woman wandering in the wilderness, haunted by an abortion that she remembers only in traumatic fragments, Atwood initiated her readers into her ongoing explorations of the relationship between haunting and hysteria, a disease that since antiquity has been associated with the notion of wandering. *Alias Grace* self-consciously takes this exploration in new and important directions by rooting it in an historical context when anxieties emerged large about hysteria and about women wandering beyond the confines of class boundaries and patriarchy’s tight control. Based on historical events, this text serves as a particularly useful tool to examine the connections between haunting, hysteria, and fears associated with gender and class mobility.

Keywords: Hysteria; Haunting; Class mobility; Wanderings, Anxiety; Psychic; Patriarchy, Disease.

Introduction

By describing hysteria as a feminine discourse, feminists such as Showalter, Felman, Gilbert and Gubar describe a specifically “feminine” voice which is inevitably articulated through madness because it exists outside of the rational patriarchal discourse. Felman argues that “what the narcissistic economy of the masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate, under the label ‘madness’, is nothing other than *feminine difference*” For Felman, this difference, not coming under masculine law, is a threat to male authority and as such must be diminished by the label “madness”, which can then be cured or destroyed.

Early second-wave feminists were concerned with creating a history and a voice for a silenced feminine experience. Attempting, in 1970, to construct a history of American women, Connie Brown and Jane Seitz wrote: “the difficulty of learning about the history of women in America is that, for the most part, it is an unwritten history of millions of lives.”⁽²⁾ *Alias Grace* seemingly enters into this same project of recovering lost female histories and giving voice to the silenced woman of the past. But Atwood also moves far beyond early feminist reconstructions of forgotten or muted feminine experience, and challenges, not just the assumption that there is a stable subject to be recovered from the historical record, but also the systems of power and desire that can be unwittingly exposed in the attempted construction of another person’s identity.

Margaret Atwood, author of such novels as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Cat’s Eye*, is back with a vengeance. Atwood publishes nearly a book a year, so she’s never really left, but she writes in so many different genres that her novels—for which she’s best known—only come out every three or four years.

Alias Grace is the fictionalized description of Grace Marks, a tarnished nineteenth-century Canadian woman condemned as a partner in the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper / mistress, Nancy Montgomery. Kinnear’s manservant, James McDermott, eventually is hanged for the felony, but nobody knew what treatment should be specified to Grace. Shuttled back and forth between jail and the insane asylum, Grace becomes a mystery to the authorities. They just can’t get a handle on her sanity, and none of the doctors, lawyers, or clergy drawn into the case can definitively tell whether she’s a cold-blooded slaughterer or just a victim of circumstance.

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In *Alias Grace*, Atwood appropriates miscellaneous factual and fictional documents into her narrative in a manner quite unique from her other novels. These both function as corroborative evidence and, in their frequent contradictions, ironically move to undermine the belief in a verifiable truth. At the same time, the debate between an essentialist belief in a knowable and unified self, and a more postmodern concept of an inessential self comprised entirely of influences and experiences reappears in Atwood's concerns. By juxtaposing the examination of historical accuracy with the novel's attempted psychoanalytical exposition of Grace's true self, Atwood is able to draw parallels between both projects. In his 1995 text, *Rewriting the Soul*, Ian Hacking discusses the manner in which the self, or the soul, as he refers to it, is affected by the construction and retention of memory, and how, correspondingly, the concept of a unified self is shaken by instances of memory loss or, more particularly, by manifestations of multiple personality. Hacking describes a process of "making up ourselves by reworking our memories". He explains that "new meanings change the past. It is reinterpreted, yes, but more than that, it is reorganized, repopulated." (Hacking 6) This portrayal of how the character rebuilds memory through reinterpretation bears a prominent resemblance to Hayden White's understanding of the structure of the historical record. White suggests that: First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a "spectacle" or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle and end (Metahistory 5) Just as White explains that history is shaped to form a cohesive narrative, so, according to Hacking, the memories that supply a sense of the self are similarly manipulated to provide a suitable narrative. By this understanding, "the soul that we are constantly constructing we construct according to an explanatory model of how we came to be the way we are". (5) In *Alias Grace*, the past is reconstructed through Grace's memories, and the possible existence of an unambiguous and demonstrable historical account comes to represent the belief in Grace's essential self.

The story of the novel is sensational. In an interview Atwood says that there are certain reasons behind the sensational story, "One," Atwood says, "you have a household. They're getting along fine. A Gentleman in easy circumstances, probably a remittance man, younger son doubtless sent to the Colonies because of his soft and loose ways by the older, who has inherited property and who wishes to cut a respectable figure. If [Kinneer's] having an affair with his housekeeper in Canada, he's probably done similar things before. ... Probably unbeknownst to him Nancy is pregnant. He feels he needed more servant help. They have hired a manservant, James McDermott. And right after that, along comes Grace Marks. These two people are only in the household for three weeks when, bang, there's a double murder. What on earth went on among those four people?

"Number two—opinion on Grace was very divided, as it usually is when there's a violent crime involving both a man and a woman. Usually opinion is undivided about the man—he dunnit—and divided about the woman. Was she the demon instigator? Was she playing Bonnie to his Clyde? Or was she a terrorized bystander only peripherally involved, fleeing out of terror for her own life?" (The Minnesota Daily's A & E Magazine 23 Jan. 1997 David Wilsey).

Although Grace was the O.J. Simpson of her age, time has neglected her, leaving only shadows on the cultural record. "I came across [the story] first in a book by a person of the time called Susanna Moodie, who spent seven horrible years in the woods, because her family had emigrated," Atwood says. "She wrote a book called 'Roughing it in the Bush', which was directed to other English gentlepeople telling them not to do it. She visited the Kingston Penitentiary, as you could in those days, sort of like a zoo tour. And there she asked to see Grace Marks, because Grace Marks was notorious in her day. And she saw Grace Marks, and then she wrote up what she remembered of the case. She wrote it from memory. Her memory wasn't good. And then [later] she went on to visit the Toronto Lunatic Asylum, and there was Grace in that place, because she had meanwhile been transferred. Susanna Moodie's eyewitness accounts said she was absolutely screaming out of her mind—says Susanna Moodie. But people faked those things. Especially convicts did, because it was nicer in the asylum. And Susanna Moodie ends her account of the whole thing by saying possibly Grace was deranged at the time of the crime and that accounts for it all, and therefore she will be forgiven in the afterlife." (David Wilsey)

Skewed legacy of Grace was not ample for Atwood, so she dug deeper. What she found was a story so distorted, so stalled in nineteenth-century misogyny, that she had to tell her own version. "Susanna Moodie [also] has a little Victorian play," Atwood says. "Grace is the villain. James McDermott is the dupe. She got him into it, led him on, instigated the whole thing, because she was jealous of Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper and mistress, and in love with Thomas Kinneer, the gentleman master. So all she wants killed is Nancy, and she doesn't really think he's going to do it, and when he does, she [is shocked], and he says, 'Now we have to kill Thomas Kinneer.' She says, 'No, no. That wasn't part of the plan,' and he says, 'Ah ha, now I see it all, and now I realize what your real motive was when you promised me you in return for killing Nancy, and now you've got to deliver, and now I'm going to kill [Kinneer],' and so he does. And then everything else follows along from that. And Moodie tells the whole thing from the point of view of McDermott. She tells it through his persona and ends with him sort of screaming and raving about how it was really Grace. There's a little bit of grounds for her story, because right before he was hanged he did say that Grace was the instigator of the whole thing and that she had helped him strangle Nancy. But he was known to be a liar. Who are you going to credit? "So that's the Moodie story, and that's the only story I knew for quite a long time. And I did write a

little television play based on it, although I never did believe her statement that they had cut Nancy up into four quarters before putting her into the washtub. Somebody suggested that I try turning it into a play, and I did try, but I'm not really a playwright, and it didn't really work out. I was still just using Moodie's version. Time went by, lots of time went by, and I started working on the current novel, and at that point I went back to the historical record, such as it was, and found out that Susanna Moodie in fact had not remembered very accurately" (Wilsey)

When Atwood recovered more of Grace's story, she found that there were in fact three Graces: the murderer, the clueless ingénue, and the hidden Grace that nobody could discern. The disparity between the accounts fascinated her, and she wanted to explore how a public persona gets created.

"Here you have this divided opinion," Atwood says, "and then you get people writing about her, projecting onto her all of the received opinions about women, about criminality, about servants, about insanity, sexuality. All of these things just get projected onto her. So I was interested in that. I was interested in the process of public opinion and how it's formed, how people read into situations their own concerns. How each person, even people who are witnesses, has their own version?" (Wilsey) With such an elusive main character, Atwood had to completely invent a persona for Grace. Part of how she does this is by introducing Simon Jordan into the fray. Jordan, an upstart in the nascent field of mental health care, becomes interested in Grace's dilemma, and he visits her at the penitentiary in the hopes of drawing out the real Grace. Despite Jordan's amiable incompetence, he partly succeeds, and Grace tells him as much about her life as she thinks he can handle. Atwood writes much of the novel from Grace's point of view, and the reader gets to see into the parts of Grace that Jordan doesn't. The reader, then, and not Simon Jordan, discovers Grace Marks' story. And as in so many of Atwood's novels, the story is astonishing. Atwood imagines Grace so full of humanity, so rich in life—and in contradiction—that even as she opens up to the reader, she still recedes. Even as she tells you point-blank what happened to her, she just becomes more of a puzzle.

Like Atwood's other novels, *Alias Grace* offers a nearly encyclopedic portrayal of the characters' world. There's seemingly nothing that Atwood doesn't know about nineteenth-century life, and in researching for the novel, Atwood found herself becoming an expert on everything from Spiritualism to popular psychology to quilting. By finding out what people did every day, Atwood was able to give the novel both fullness and form. As a domestic servant, one of Grace's only pleasures is quilting, and Atwood uses this motif to divide the novel into its various sections. She names each chapter after a different type of quilt, and in looking at this vast novel as a whole; the reader gets the sense of a larger pattern. "It got bigger than I intended it to be," Atwood says. "I think originally there were only nine quilt-pattern titles, and then I just needed more. I needed to have more to cover the actual story as it unfolded." What unfolds

ultimately is that no one will ever know Grace. Writers, doctors, and lawyers can take aspects of her and exploit them to support their theories, but Atwood challenges the reader to not take sides, to not simply work toward a guilty or not-guilty verdict. "The fullness is the point of Grace," Atwood says. "And the other point is that there are some things that, although there is an answer to them, it's not an answer that we will ever know. We will never know the true story of the John Kennedy assassination, because even if Mr. X emerges and says, 'Well, it was me all along,' the waters have been so muddied that we're not going to believe him." So despite Atwood's crystal-clear vision, she leaves the story as muddy as history itself. There's no way to recover Grace Marks fully, and with *Alias Grace* Atwood has done her the greatest service a novelist could do: She's left her intact and in peace. Throughout the novel, Grace speaks through the voices of others, and the other significant voice that she appropriates is that of madness, or hysteria. The politics of hysterical discourse has been a theme running through Atwood's work right from *The Edible Woman*, in which Marian's hysterical refusal of food was eventually acknowledged as an alternative, repressed, but nonetheless valid logic. In *Alias Grace*, Grace's defense against murder is her hysteria-induced amnesia, and possibly hysterical actions during the actual hours of the crime. The question of Grace's madness remains unanswered. Atwood quotes Susanna Moodie's recollection of seeing Grace in an insane asylum: "no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment" (51), although Moodie's reliability is frequently questioned in the novel.

Conclusion

Grace's apparent insanity is dismissed by Dr Bannerling, the previous Superintendent of the Asylum, who informs Simon that "her madness was a fraud and an imposture, adopted by her in order that she might indulge herself and be indulged" (81). Resulting in her temporary removal from the penitentiary, madness does indeed serve Grace as a tool of escape, seemingly supporting Dr Bannerling's reading. Grace, however, intimates that rather than seeking to be indulged, it is she who indulges her spectators:

References

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