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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 woman, Atwood transfers some of the blame to the oppressive Victorian Era social hierarchy that may lead some women to drastic measures of subversion such as murder. By focusing on the social context in which the murders occurred, Grace becomes, in part, a product of the oppressive Victorian Era rather than an anomalous fiend. While public opinion of Grace is divided, I argue that the elite maintain the Victorian Era hierarchy of gender and class through labeling Grace as criminally insane. In this paper, I use feminist and psychological perspectives to explore the Victorian Era social hierarchy and the use of labels, specifically mental illness labels, in controlling individuals.

Victorian Era Social Hierarchy

In order to explain society's reactions to Grace's questionable culpability, I must first demonstrate how the Victorian Era social hierarchy oppressed women. The Victorian Era is defined by a rigid social structure. Lower-class immigrant women like Grace are at the bottom of this order and have little choice or agency. While Canadians of European descent are at the top

of this hierarchy, journalists of the time make Grace's Irish heritage "sound like a crime" (Atwood, 101). Grace is viewed as inferior because she is an Irish immigrant. Grace is also restricted by her class. She comes from a low-class family and has few assets of her own. As a servant, Grace must be accountable to both her employer and the senior housekeepers, always showing respect for her superiors. While many other factors in addition to ethnicity and class combine to determine an individual's status, I argue that gender is the main factor that dictates an individual's access to power and rank within the social hierarchy. In order to emphasize the oppression that women face in the 1800s Victorian Canada, 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 1800s, 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 Victorian Era 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, Simon Jordan, 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 women in middle to upper class positions became penniless after their financial support was withdrawn. Without her husband’s financial support, Mrs. Humphrey starves to the point of fainting and relies on the charity of Dr. Simon. 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 Victorian Era, 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). Although Dr. Simon reflects upon countless interactions with women who break every social expectation through drinking, swearing, fighting, and prostitution, 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. This assumption that women are virtuous leads women to be held to a high standard and punished when they fail to meet expectations. While murder is abhorrent in general, it is especially shocking for a woman to commit murder as she is expected to be morally superior to men. Women who commit violent crimes or crimes against men are breaking the social order and punished more severely. As a woman in the Victorian Era,

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

The Victorian Era was a period of extreme sexual oppression and rampant prostitution in which women navigated the conflict between sexual advancements 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 Victorian Era hierarchy. However, she must also reject their sexual advancements 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.

During this era, both pregnancy and abortion are extremely risky. Grace emphasizes the dangers of pregnancy in her description of a bed. She tells Dr. Simon, "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 the shame associated with premarital sex. However, the illegal abortion proved lethal as Mary bled to death. Grace explains, "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 advancements of many men throughout the book. Under Thomas Kinnear's roof, Grace attempts to avoid angering her employer while rejecting his advancements. James McDermott, another employee who was also 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. 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 harass Grace but yet maintain that their own mothers are saints (Atwood, 240). 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" (Atwood, 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. Cook and Blais explain that "the year 1830 saw a series of revolts, albeit unsuccessful ones, against the established order in continental Europe" (8). 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 (Cook & Blais, 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. 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). 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. Individuals like Grace who break hierarchy norms are labeled and punished to dissuade others from rebellion and from challenging this social order.

Violence as the Result of Injustice

As the reader becomes aware of the systematic way in which the Victorian Era hierarchy oppresses Grace based on her gender, the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her. Conversely, James does not receive a sympathetic backstory and is easy to dislike and condemn. 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 precipitated the murders. 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 Victorian Era hierarchy.

The Power of Labels

Throughout the novel, society struggles to bridge the rift between the stereotypical view of women with Grace's role in the double homicide. 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 emphasize Grace's role in the murders and demonize her. 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. A murderess cannot exist according to Victorian Era 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. In essence, the ability to control public opinion of Grace’s identity as an innocent bystander rather than an insane criminal is more important than Grace’s responsibility for the murders. I argue that the elite maintain the Victorian Era hierarchy of gender and class through controlling Grace’s label of criminal insanity.

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 Victorian Era Canada, they control definitions of normality and mental illness. Therefore, these definitions may contain the assumption that behaviors conflicting with this 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. Redeemable individuals who repent their crimes or demonstrate the ability to be productive, submissive individuals in a dominant hierarchy are pardoned. The label of criminal insanity is placed on Grace as a way for society to maintain the ideal of the perfect woman and to dissuade others at lower ranks in the Victorian Era hierarchy from challenging their submissive positions.

Hysteria is a common example of a mental illness that is heavily based on gender biases and assumptions of male superiority. The term hysteria, translated from Greek, means uterus. This diagnosis only applies to women and is broad and subjective. Women are typically seen as more emotional than men. For example, 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. This diagnosis might form a self-fulfilling prophesy as 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. 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 is 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 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). This treatment by the staff occasionally created a self-fulfilling prophesy as a few women in the asylum became depressed and mentally ill due to 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 prisoner’s behaviors were misinterpreted as insane, manipulated by the staff, or brought about by self-fulfilling prophecies.

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 demur” (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. Grace rids herself of the mental illness label by convincing Dr. Simon that she experienced lapses in memory while the murder was committed. Dr. Jerome hypnotizes Grace in front of Dr. Simon in order to investigate the truth behind the murder. Together, Dr. Jerome and Grace convince Dr. Simon 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 of the crime. The séance convinced the doctors 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 Victorian Era, she encourages the reader to sympathize with Grace. Grace’s actual role in the murders is secondary to society’s contradicting 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 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 with Grace's culpability in the murders. As the phrase "woman murderer" is an oxymoron under Victorian Era gender stereotypes, 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. 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 emphasizes her ability to be an ideal lower-class woman.

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. While *Alias Grace* critiques Victorian Era 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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