

# The Model Prisoner

## Reading Confinement in *Alias Grace*

**B**ased upon the actual 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper/mistress Nancy Montgomery on a farm outside Toronto, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) gives a detailed first-person voice to Grace Marks, the Irish serving maid accused, along with fellow servant James McDermott, of the murders. This sensational case continues to garner public fascination, particularly after the publication of Atwood's meticulously researched novel. Grace's role in the murders remains unclear to this day, but Atwood's multi-layered text opens up space for readings that consider the class, ethnic, and gender dynamics at play in the murder and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> But what has yet to be explored by scholars is the complex physical and psychological space and place<sup>2</sup> of the prison in Atwood's psychodrama. After all, Grace narrates her story to the young psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan in the Governor's parlour at the Kingston Penitentiary, and sixteen years after she has been convicted of murder, the penal system continues to dominate her imagination and her daily reality. In *Alias Grace*, the prison, through a series of metonymical associations, takes on representational significance as the most literal and obvious site of confinement in a series of limiting enclosures that come to define Grace's identity and her narrative style. Although Grace's story may be fractured and incomplete, her telling represents, in the tradition of prison narratives, the power to transcend these various confinements through the act of storytelling. Thus *Alias Grace* may be read as a type of prison narrative, but one in which the conventions of this emerging genre—such as the trope of mental freedom, proclamations of unjust imprisonment, a complex

relationship to the outside world, generic multiplicity, creating sympathy with the reader, and a polemical edge—are undermined even as Grace deploys them for her own purposes. She strategically employs her narrative as a means of self-therapy (thus denying her psychologist the authority of performing therapy *on* her) and as a tool to secure her release. However, her challenges to the cathartic power of narrative can be read as a means of exploring the epistemological limits of prison narration. Traditionally prison literature foregrounds the ways in which knowledge is intertwined with power, and since the prisoner represents some of the most disempowered in society, she or he lacks access to much of the cultural authority associated with narration. Yet Grace confronts these presumptions through the telling of her story—and how she chooses to relay it is crucial.

It is difficult to discuss textual representations of the prison without considering the influential work of Michel Foucault. In his groundbreaking study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault traces the development of the modern prison system, detailing how, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the focus in prison theory shifted from corporeal punishment to mental refashioning—hence the *Penitentiary*. Although psychological manipulation is ostensibly more humane than physical discipline, Foucault argues that it too is part of a larger system of power and control. Foucault posits a theory of “the carceral” as part of an intertwined system of dominance that controls bodies in settings as varied as the hospital, the school, the monastery, and the factory. In them, docile subjects are produced who help maintain existing power structures. Foucault explains that “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (136). This transformation occurs in a variety of ways, through “a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origins and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, coverage, and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method” (Foucault 138). Sandra Kumamoto Stanley has rightly noted that in Atwood’s novel “Grace is perceived as that recalcitrant body that must be defined, categorized, contained” (374), but her focus is on Grace’s class and gender transgressions rather than her fraught identity as a prisoner. The methods by which Grace is shaped into a carceral subject are many and insidious. Grace is subject to routine inspections, arbitrary regulations, and constant surveillance, not to mention the power plays and petty rivalries of her fellow prisoners: “There is no place like prison for small jealousies,

and I've seen some come to blows, and even close to murder, over nothing more than a piece of cheese" (281). In a world in which all relationships are condensed and individuals are forced to operate in such close proximity, small details and minor intrigues take on unwarranted significance. Prison is the pinnacle of total discipline; it is "uninterrupted" (Foucault 236) because the subject is literally contained within the prison's walls. Yet this process of containment is not wholly complete because "[a]ny structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" (Douglas 121). In the Kingston Penitentiary, Grace makes clear that prisoners quietly contravene rules and carry out acts of revenge on one another:

One ought to bear all patiently, as part of the correction we are subject to; unless a way can be found, of tripping up your enemy without detection. Hair pulling is not advisable, as the racket brings the keepers, and then both sides are punished for creating a disturbance. Dirt slipped into the food by means of the sleeve, as with magicians, may be accomplished without much fuss, and may bring some satisfaction. (282)

Rejecting their official position at the bottom of a top-down system, the prisoners harm one another in an attempt to alter the relations of power inside the prison. In this way, prisoners are able to refigure their identities as victims (even though they may be victimized by one another) and redistribute some of the power circulating in the prison system. Following Foucault, the prison in *Alias Grace* is articulated as a series of power struggles, in which the prisoner and others vie for any tiny degree of control, all within the context of state-controlled authority.

Foucault has had an immense influence on the emerging genre of prison literature. His notion of a subject who comes into being through incarceration has informed the ways in which writers have represented the prison in literary texts, and his conceptualization of discipline as a multifaceted process articulates the many restraints the prisoner finds him or herself subject to. Yet prison writing, both non-fictional and fictional, remains a relatively small and largely under-theorized area of inquiry. A major barrier for both the reader and the critic is that prison literature challenges accepted ideas about reading. It is difficult to grasp the full significance of writing produced under the conditions of confinement without having experienced imprisonment. Perhaps this is why critical examination of prison writing often analyzes it as a kind of resistance literature that has the potential to enact change at a broader societal level. Barbara Harlow, for instance, has traced the development of prison writing and examined its effectiveness outside the

prison walls, while Ioan Davies has raised theoretical and practical issues around the writing of incarcerated authors. Both Davies and Harlow attempt to understand the effect incarceration has on the imagination and on the physical state of the prisoner. Harlow rightly notes that prison literature is inescapably political, not only because it so forcefully makes visible mechanisms of power, but also because it frequently exists as a means of challenging various structures, which she identifies as both state-controlled and literary. Davies suggests that the metaphor and reality of incarceration have influenced the Western imagination and the way we understand such concepts as margin and centre; in an implicitly masculine-focused analysis, he puts violence at the centre of his ideas as he characterizes writing as a struggle. Other writers such as H. Bruce Franklin and Deena Rymhs have examined the role of the doubly marginalized (African Americans and Aboriginal people in Canada, respectively) in literary endeavours, noting the continuity between such oppressive institutions as slavery and the residential school and the modern prison system.

Atwood's novel adds to a body of prison literature developed in both Canada and around the world that aims to fictionalize and give voice to historical subjects for a variety of representational goals. Like George Elliot Clarke's *George and Rue* (2005), *Alias Grace* falls into the tradition of English-Canadian novels that examine the life of a subject (often based on a historical person) leading up to his or her incarceration. In the process, these textual representations reveal the social and economic impediments that cause the subject to become involved in the criminal justice system. *George and Rue*, for instance, details the systemic racism, violence, and crippling poverty that lead the two title characters—a pair of African Canadian brothers—to brutally murder a Fredericton taxi driver in 1949. Likewise, *Alias Grace* imaginatively reconstructs the entire life of Grace Marks, from her impoverished beginnings in Ireland with an abusive father and victimized mother, to their hellish journey across the Atlantic ocean to Canada, to the difficulties she faces as a young woman who becomes a domestic servant at the age of thirteen. Grace's personal history of oppression frames her supposed crime and inclines the reader to be sympathetic to her plight, a common effect of prison literature. Prison literature explores the relationship between the penal institution and the wider society through the individual's experience inside a prison. It confines itself to no one style; instead, its hybridized forms consider various subjects and serve different goals. Generally, however, prison literature has a mimetic

function in that it aims to provide a realistic portrayal of what prison is like, usually creating sympathy for the imprisoned. To be inside the prison, according to Mary Douglas, is to be permanently outside the social system, and the imprisoned subject remains perpetually marginalized (97). Yet prison literature reveals the links between the supposedly oppositional categories of inside and outside. As Foucault has shown, the prison acts as a synecdoche for other means of social control. But while Foucault skilfully describes how bodies are disciplined through such methods as surveillance, homogenization, and record-keeping, he does not consider how different social categories operate in institutional settings. Grace's gender, class, and Irishness taint her as guilty before she has been convicted of any crime. Grace is clearly aware of the deviancy associated with her ethnicity when she wryly notes, "I did indeed come from the North of Ireland; though I thought it was very unjust when they wrote down that *both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*. That made it sound like a crime, and I don't know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such" (116). The potential of prejudice to create a carcereal subject before any crime is actually committed is also evident in the novel's references to phrenology, the dubious nineteenth-century "science" of measuring head size and shape in an attempt to predict deviant behaviour. Again, Grace subtly mocks such practices in a way that reveals their true motives: "And then they could lock those people up before they had a chance to commit any crimes, and think how that would improve the world" (29). By referring to such ideological prisons that interpellate subjects as criminals, Atwood is able to demonstrate that the prison is not actually a space apart from the larger social world from which subjects are put "away," but is instead a mirror reflection of the inequalities that already exist. In this way, Atwood removes Grace from her fixation in the temporal space of the day of the murders and contextualizes her responses to the limiting circumstances of her life.

Not only do these circumstances serve to humanize Grace, but they also reflect a pattern of confinement that culminates in Grace's imprisonment. The prison is not an aberration in Grace's life, but just one of a series of oppressive spaces that includes her unhappy childhood home, the houses in which she works, and finally, the Kingston Penitentiary, where she narrates her life story to the young and eager psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan. The premise of the novel requires that Grace be a prisoner. Several commentators have noted the "Scheherazade" trope of the imprisoned Grace weaving tales to interest and detain her audience (specifically Dr. Jordan and more

generally the reader).<sup>3</sup> But Grace's imprisonment is more than a narrative convention. The novel is defined by its portrayal of small, confining spaces: tiny attic bedrooms, suffocating ships' holds, stuffy and sexually charged parlours, and cramped stairways, not to mention the small prison cell where Grace spends her days. And she has plenty of days to spend: she has received a life sentence for her role in the murders. The novel's prison setting reflects Foucault's insights, elucidated in "Of Other Spaces," that certain spaces can be characterized as "heterotopias of deviation," where "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). These spaces help collapse such binaries as private/public and leisure/work (23) because their spatial qualities are not clearly defined. In Grace's case, she is as much an unpaid domestic servant for the Governor, performing the familiar tasks of sewing, washing, and cooking, as she is a conventional prisoner. These spaces of deviation also contest standard conceptions of temporality. Deprived of nearly everything else, prisoners have plenty of time. At one point, Dr. Jordan wonders how Grace is supposed to fill the rest of her time now that "the main story . . . the thing that has defined her" (104) is over. *Alias Grace* partially answers this question by depicting Grace's life as a prisoner.

*Alias Grace's* prison setting serves to emphasize the significance of literal spaces in creating and maintaining discursive spaces, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> While speaking to Dr. Jordan as he attempts to make a name for himself in the newly developed field of psychotherapy, all meaning for Grace is shaped by the ideological and physical space of the prison. As Atwood has noted, Dr. Jordan already has an "edge" over Grace not only because he is educated, but also because he is a man ("In Search" 1515). Moreover, he is free and Grace is not. These inequalities lead to misunderstandings and frustration on both sides. During Dr. Jordan's word association games, Grace does not make his expected and neatly connotative connection of "Beet—Root Cellar—Corpses . . . or even Turnip—Underground—Grave" (103). Instead, Grace produces "a series of cookery methods" (103). The distance between these two discourses creates a humorous effect. Moreover, Grace's materially-grounded responses reflect her status as a working-class woman who has been taught practical skills rather than the type of abstract thinking that Dr. Jordan values. Fresh produce signifies to the incarcerated Grace freedom outside the prison walls.<sup>5</sup> At the first touch of an apple, Grace thinks "It has such an odour of outdoors on it I want to cry" (43). Later, when Dr. Jordan brings Grace the radish she requests, she muses on the ways in which imprisonment severs

connection with the natural world: “I ask him how he came by it; and he says it is from the market; though he has it in mind to make a small kitchen garden himself at the house where he lodges, as there is the place for it, and he has already begun the digging. Now that is a thing I envy” (291). Although Dr. Jordan has the power to bring highly meaningful objects from the outside world, giving him considerable authority in her eyes, the power dynamics existing between them are fundamentally unstable. By the time Dr. Jordan presents Grace with the radish, their relationship is quite different from their first encounter in which Grace will not engage in Dr. Jordan’s guessing game and thus refuses to submit to his rules. Instead, Grace imposes her own rules upon him. When he pleases her, such as when he brings the requested radish, she tailors her narrative in such a way to entertain him: “Because he was so thoughtful as to bring me a radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves another” (291). Conversely, Grace consciously punishes Dr. Jordan when his simplistic interpretations insult her intelligence, such as when he fails to understand her nuanced analysis of quilts as warning flags for women: “I should not speak to him so freely, and decide I will not, if that is the tone he is going to take” (187). Grace has clearly internalized the prison’s rigid system of rewards and punishments, and she inflicts a similar framework on Dr. Jordan. In so doing, she shifts the prison’s dynamics of power in her favour.

Just as Grace is confined within the penitentiary, we as readers are confined within the novel’s intensely interior world. *Alias Grace* may not be as claustrophobic as Anne Hebert’s *Kamouraska* (1970), another Canadian psychodrama that gives first-person voice to a woman accused of murder, but its obsessive foregrounding of Grace’s perspective makes it a deeply intimate and psychological text. Most of the novel is narrated by Grace in the first person, though Dr. Jordan narrates chapters from his perspective and Atwood includes many textual scraps, such as newspaper articles, literary extracts, and letters. Even when the point of view shifts, the narrative remains confined to Grace’s unsettled mind because the plot is filtered through her incomplete account of her life. Grace can only tell her story at specified intervals—her scheduled interviews with Dr. Jordan in the parlour—and she can only tell what she remembers (or claims to remember). The prison setting provides Grace with a great deal of time to think, and her narrative style reflects her stream of thoughts. The novel’s powerfully interior

narrative voice is shaped by the prison setting of strict confinement; the two types of confinement mirror one another.

Grace's imprisonment is the most obvious and visible mode of containment, but it is not the only repression the novel illustrates. Discipline, for Foucault, is not simply the function of a single institution or the authority wielded by those at the top of the social hierarchy, but is "a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets" (*Discipline* 215). Implied in these disciplinary techniques are gender codes. The prison in *Alias Grace* is metonymically connected to gender regulation through Grace's heavily connotative diction. The prison is immediately established as both a physical and psychological space, and although Grace does not explicitly read her performance of femininity as a means of coping with incarceration, her choice of language reveals such connections:

I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble. That's what the Governor's wife says, I have overheard her saying it. I'm skilled at overhearing. If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go; but it's not easy being quiet and good, it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when you've already fallen over; you don't seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength. (5-6)

Grace's syntactical construction is notable because it begins a pattern in which she makes what seem like straightforward statements about herself ("I am a model prisoner"), and then undermines them by ascribing them to someone else ("That's what the Governor's wife says"). This discursive play gestures toward the complexities of negotiating a subject position for the incarcerated writer, particularly when she is a woman. It is noteworthy that performing femininity has taught Grace how to be the best possible prisoner. As Gillian Siddall has argued, Grace's incarceration can be read as a metaphor for "repressive aspects of nineteenth-century ideologies" (85) such as those relating to gender and sexuality. Contrary to the essentialist notion that femininity is something that women do naturally, Grace's analysis reveals the struggle inherent in acting the socially prescribed role of the "model" woman, which is as strenuous and imprisoning as being a "model" prisoner. Moreover, although this passage demonstrates how Grace has been constructed by other people, we also see that she uses this construction strategically as a survival mechanism. Rather than identifying with fellow prisoners and forming some kind of collective unit, Grace categorizes herself as different and somewhat superior to her fellow inmates



(“a model prisoner”), capitulating, in Foucault’s model, to the “individual and individualizing” (*Discipline* 236) effects of the prison.

The prison in *Alias Grace* metaphorically represents gender regulation, but it also has multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings. The prison punishes its inmates, but it also provides a spectacle for visitors like Susanna Moodie who visit for entertainment. For the most part, the novel explores issues familiar to Atwood’s readers: power (*The Handmaid’s Tale*), imprisonment (*Bodily Harm*), multiple identities (*Lady Oracle*, *Surfacing*), relationship dynamics (*Life Before Man*), and deception (*The Robber Bride*). All of these motifs converge in *Alias Grace* in the prison as a space of competing desires. Grace astutely sums up this theme when she comments, “[n]o one comes to see me here unless they want something” (41). Grace’s own desires are ambiguous, yet everyone else wants something from or for her. The Governor’s wife wants Grace exonerated and released; she also wants Dr. Jordan to marry her daughter Lydia. Reverend Verringer, the man who heads the committee working to secure Grace’s release, wants Grace’s freedom, but he wants Lydia (and eventually gets her when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock by a soldier) even as he yearns for Grace. All of the men associated with the prison desire Grace in one way or another. Dr. Jordan notes that Grace is the only woman he wishes to marry, and after losing his memory during the Civil War, he refers to his wife Faith as Grace. Dr. Jordan also has the most at stake during his prison interactions with Grace. He is a “collector” (45); he wants Grace’s story for both personal and professional reasons. His official justification for his curiosity is the interest of science; by solving the mystery behind Grace’s memory loss, he hopes to build enough of a reputation to eventually open a private asylum in the United States. On a broader level, there is also power in knowing what no one else (perhaps not even Grace) knows. Adding to these relations of power, Dr. Jordan wants Grace’s body, most obviously when he dreams about having sex with her while actually having sex with his landlady. Grace is as imprisoned by these desires, fantasies, and clichéd scripts as she is by the prison’s walls.

Because it is impossible for Grace to escape the stories various people tell about her, she begins to tell her own stories. It is fitting that Grace uses narrative to reconstruct her identity given that her existence has been shaped by narrative. As Jennifer Murray rightly points out, we already know “what happened” by the time we finish reading the popular ballad in the novel’s first few pages. Therefore the remainder of the novel is concerned with “the question of how things get told, to whom, to what end or effect” (Murray

315). Endless stories are told about Grace, for as Paul Gready has observed, “to be a prisoner is to be variously written” (quoted in Rymhs 14). Her incarceration is based on one story of illicit desire and murderous jealousy; her release is based on another of unjust imprisonment and penitent reformation. Grace wryly observes, “it calls for a different arrangement of the face; but I suppose it will become easier in time” (529). By presenting her newfound freedom in this way, Grace not only foregrounds how contradictory different narratives about the same subject can be, but she also demonstrates that they are ideologically malleable. The stories that define and confine Grace may have material effects, most obviously her physical containment, but they are not necessarily permanent.

During the course of the novel, Grace only leaves the grounds of the Penitentiary twice: first in 1852 when she is transferred to the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, and then again in 1872 when she is pardoned. Clearly the prison is a space of stasis and confinement that physically restricts her movement. Yet Atwood paradoxically represents the prison as a fluid, porous space in which prisoners sometimes achieve some kind of release. Grace is able to leave the prison area to do fine sewing work in the Governor’s parlour and to work in the kitchen; her value as a domestic worker is deemed higher than any potential threat she might pose as a convict. Ironically, the escorted journey from prison to parlour is the most perilous part of her day; she faces continuous harassment from her guards as she physically leaves the prison’s walls. In addition to being physically permeable, the prison is also imaginatively permeable. Roxanne Rimstead has astutely noted that “in several instances Grace’s inner imaginings collapse the confined space of her prison cell or her lonely life in service into wild, red peonies or colourful quilt patterns to suggest that she is somewhat empowered through these imaginings (along with hauntings, fainting, lying, alternate identities, and so on)” (61). The prison fails in its goal of total psychological and imaginative containment; instead, it often blends with other settings, particularly in Grace’s dreams. The very first scene in the novel illustrates this process when Grace describes the red peonies growing out of the gravel in the prison yard. First they are “like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear’s” (5), and then suddenly Grace is taken back to the day of the murders and the horrible vision of Nancy on her knees, covered in blood. The vision scatters into red “patches of colour” (6), and Grace despairingly says “I know I will never get out” (6). Her statement perfectly encapsulates the multiple levels of imprisonment she is subject to: imaginative, literal, and figurative.

She believes she will never physically leave prison, and she is continually incarcerated by the memories that haunt her. Yet paradoxically, her visions and memories do offer her a kind of escape through recollection. Although being transported back to the day of the murders at the Kinnear farm is not the kind of escape she yearns for, it still is a way to breach the prison's walls.

Grace's imagination and hallucinations allow her some form of freedom, but her most effective means of escape is her use of narrative. Grace is the most literally confined character in all of Atwood's novels, yet Grace is Atwood's most resourceful storyteller—and a highly skilled editor. Using narrative as a means of escape from incarceration allows Grace a great deal more agency than her uninvited memories, yet like her imaginative escapes, the outcome of this process is not always predictable. In her stories about Mary Whitney, for instance, Grace is temporarily transported back to “a happier part of [her] story” (169) and “the happiest Christmas that [she] ever spent” (197), but her potential for catharsis is reduced as her narrative approaches the climactic murder scene. At this point, her mental incarceration is foregrounded: her memory becomes less sharp, her telling more chaotic, and her memories dream-like. At the end of the first chapter, it becomes clear that Grace intentionally orders her fractured narrative about the day of the murders in a way that will appeal to her audience: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (6). The “we” implies a collaborative effort between narrator and listener, yet the “I” who chooses what, how, and how much she will tell suggests that the telling is not a simple recounting of events, but instead is one involving a complex negotiation of power and a reclamation of Grace's own story. This power negotiation includes struggles that occur within Grace as an individual, a process poetically expressed in Grace's duplicitous description of a sunrise:

Today when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire.

...

In fact I have no idea what kind of sunrise there was. In prison they make the windows high up, so you cannot climb out of them I suppose, but also so you cannot see out of them either, or a least not onto the outside world . . . And so this morning I saw only the usual form of light, a light without shape, coming in through the high-up and dirty grey windows, as if cast by no sun and no moon and no lamp or candle. Just a swathe of daylight the same all the way though, like lard. (279)

Interestingly, the captivity of prison seems to inspire Grace to creatively reinvent her world. Prison forces her to take “a light without shape” and

mould it into an evocative description because the alternative is to submit to a drab and hopeless existence that offers no possibility of agency.

Although Grace benefits from her rhetorical skills, storytelling is not necessarily a form of renewal or a way for her to foster her creativity. Monika Fludernik has convincingly argued that the trope of mental freedom in prison—that is, prison as a place of meditation, peace, and refuge so popular in the nineteenth century—is actually deeply rooted in class privilege. Similarly, Mark E. Kann suggests that “[p]enitence was for the privileged” (31) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, and Angela Y. Davis argues that the idea of repentance has historically been targeted at white middle-class men. In other words, going to prison in the nineteenth century was only a welcome escape from the harsh world for those who had the means and education to use it as an opportunity for writing and quiet reflection. Although working-class and female, Grace shrewdly appropriates this self-improving role by using her incarceration as an opportunity to improve her education. She criticizes Mary Whitney’s poor grammar and ironically notes “I used to speak that way as well, but I have learned better manners in prison” (35). Her proclamation points to class-based values that underlie the prison structure, but it also suggests that prisoners like Grace are able to appropriate some of the cultural capital associated with proper speech and use it for their own ends.

Grace strategically performs her class transformation much as she deliberately employs various tropes frequently associated with prison literature. At various points, she performs the part of the innocent criminal, defending herself against unjust imprisonment. While she never explicitly claims innocence, she never admits guilt either. Instead she utilizes the generic trope of the falsely accused, unjustly imprisoned because of a patronizing lawyer and a rejected young admirer seeking revenge for being hurt in love. When Jamie Walsh divulges to the courtroom that Grace is wearing the dead Nancy’s clothes, she knows she is “doomed” (434), not because of what she may or may not have done, but because of the narrative the jury will construct from this revelation. She positions herself as powerless against such discursive inevitability, conveniently eliding the possibility that she is “doomed” because she participated in Nancy and Thomas’ murders.

Given that Grace so astutely comprehends the flexible and potentially empowering nature of narrative, it is not surprising that although it is Dr. Jordan who attempts to transform Grace through his therapy, it is Grace who enlists narrative as a tool of self-help. The novel gestures towards and then

refuses the classic Freudian narrative in which a patient reveals repressed memories after an extensive period of psychoanalysis. For Dr. Jordan, an early practitioner of the “talking cure,” therapy is based upon a clearly defined power relationship: Dr. Jordan asks questions; Grace responds; Dr. Jordan records information and draws conclusions from it. This practice depends upon a certain degree of objectification: Grace becomes a “case” for Dr. Jordan to study using his medical knowledge, and his gaze fixes her in place as he attempts to transform her from an enigma to a knowable patient.<sup>6</sup> The analyst is supposed to move the patient from a state of amnesia to traumatic revelation.<sup>7</sup> However, Grace is an unruly subject. Rather than giving Dr. Jordan the “true crime” narrative he wishes to hear, Grace instead produces a socially conscious autobiography that focuses on the ill treatment of the working class. Atwood humorously subverts the therapy paradigm through this reversed power play, diminishing the privileged doctor-patient relationship and producing a nuanced social critique.

What Grace provides is not a simple counter-narrative to the many stories circulated about her, but something rather more complex. Because of the restrictions of both the actual prison and of prison writing, her story becomes a meditation on the nature and forms that narrative can take under conditions of confinement. Grace cannot offer unadulterated truth not only because her amnesia prevents access to it, but also because her position as a prisoner affects her perceived reliability. More than once in the novel, physical evidence is valorized as the ultimate yardstick of truth. When Grace considers revealing to Dr. Jordan that she fainted and fell on a railing of pointed spikes when her guilty verdict was read to the courtroom, she offers, “I could show him the scar” (434). Physical proof is offered as a badge of authenticity to counter the prisoner’s dubious credibility. Atwood suggests that Grace’s literal confinement—even after her release, given that her marriage to Jamie Walsh does not leave her unambiguously free—is inextricably linked to the discursive confinement that dictates what is sayable or plausible in the prison atmosphere. Her narrative is not simply one story replacing another, but is instead a complex conglomeration of narrative styles and conventions that at times accepts and at other times challenges her assorted representations. The kind of narrative Grace produces represents the fraught position of the incarcerated author who frequently borrows from multiple narrative modes in order to most accurately represent the various discourses that have constructed her or him. Much prison literature, such as Leonard Peltier’s hybridized *Prison Writings*, is defined by its generic

diversity, and *Alias Grace* is notable because it reflects the heterogeneity that characterizes many prisoners' non-fiction productions. More specifically, what *Alias Grace* makes explicit is that the prisoner's epistemological position is unstable because it is determined by social relations that extend beyond the prison's walls. In other words, the prisoner finds him or herself in a catch-22: although he or she is only able to create a position as a knowing subject by writing out of prison (a setting that denies his or her subjectivity), his or her knowledge will always be considered suspect by those outside. In this way, Atwood is drawing on the philosophic tradition of standpoint epistemology. "A standpoint in the everyday world," explains Dorothy Smith, "is the fundamental grounding of modes of knowing developed in a ruling apparatus" (230). Because it exists outside of the everyday world, the prison is subject to its own epistemological limits, compounded by the fact that many of its inhabitants are already labelled as "other." Moreover, feminist scholars have argued that women have a standpoint "as one situated outside textually mediated discourses in the actualities of our everyday lives" (Smith 34). As both a woman and a prisoner, Grace is doubly excluded from the creation of cultural and intellectual discourse. Like Grace's truth claims, prison knowledge in general is always suspect because it exists on the margins. By showing Grace as unwilling and even unable to reveal all her secrets, Atwood is making visible the epistemological limits placed on her as a knowing subject and broadening the range of lines of inquiry in an ever-expanding genre.

*Alias Grace* is critical for the rethinking of prison literature in Canada because it not only foregrounds the roles of gender, class, and ethnicity in such literature, but it also redeploys several conventions of the genre in order to present the possibility of using narrative as a tool of self-therapy, thereby reclaiming a small degree of power. Atwood demonstrates that agency in prison is created and maintained through small acts, such as telling one's own story, as fragmented and chaotic as it may be. As Jason Haslam has argued, "prison serves to reconstruct and reconstitute the identities of those under its control" (12), and therefore to consciously take part in one's own identity construction is a means of asserting oneself in a homogenizing environment. For Grace Marks, prison represents the pinnacle of a series of confining spaces and ideologies. Although prison is clearly a form of discipline in Foucault's understanding, it is also revealed to be a space of competing desires and negotiated power dynamics, where top-down authority is sometimes disturbed. One way Grace does this is through

narrative, in which she reclaims the power of telling previously given to others and instead utilizes the authority granted to the teller. Narrative may allow Grace to resist imprisonment, but it also creates its own problems, particularly when she is expected to reveal certain parts of her story. Despite the limits placed on Grace as a knowing subject and the limits that prison narration places on her ability to tell her story, the novel can be read as a challenge to the prison's authority over Grace's identity.

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#### NOTES

- 1 For a thorough examination of the complex class dynamics at play in *Alias Grace*, see Roxanne Rimstead and Sandra Kumamoto Stanley. For more on the ways in which Grace's Irish ethnicity impacts how she is interpreted, see Stephanie Lovelady. Grace's gender identity has been explored in several excellent articles, including those by Coral Ann Howells, Stephanie Lovelady, and Gillian Siddall.
- 2 Both of these terms have a rich history and are the subject of much theoretical debate. Politicized by Michel Foucault and Marxist geographers like Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s, "space" and "place" have come to be associated with a variety of academic disciplines, most notably cultural studies and human geography. Doreen Massey understands "space" as a dynamic area of intersecting social relations and "place" as a point "where localities can in a sense be present in one another" (7). I am using "space" and "place" to refer to a dimensional way of thinking or positionality and a physical particularity, respectively.
- 3 Scheherazade is the narrator in *Arabian Nights* who keeps herself alive by reciting stories to the murderous King Shahryar. Stephanie Lovelady characterizes Grace as a "trickster figure" (50), noting that she is compared to Eve, Pandora, and Scheherazade as a way to underscore her status as a transgressor of norms. Coral Ann Howells argues that Grace "is a Scheherazade figure, a woman who is telling stories to save her life" ("Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*" 32), while Heidi Darroch suggests that the novel "presents an image of Grace as Scheherazade, offering up seductive stories to forestall [Dr. Jordan's] departure and his loss of interest in her 'case'" (117).
- 4 Although Atwood devotes a great deal of attention to describing the material conditions of the prison based on extensive archival research, a thorough examination of the material space of the prison is beyond the scope of this article. See Stanley for information about Atwood's research and its impact on the novel's representation of class politics (373). Material objects such as quilts, food, and clothes are also important in the novel. For insightful analysis of the quilt motif in *Alias Grace*, see articles by Sharon Rose Wilson, Margaret Rogerson, and Gillian Siddall.

- 5 For a detailed discussion of the rich significance of objects in *Alias Grace*, see Cristie March.
- 6 See Laura Mulvey's work on the objectifying power of the male gaze in the context of cinematic representations and John Berger's analysis of the gendered power relations inherent in seeing and being seen.
- 7 Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead, among others, have examined how trauma affects fictional narratives. The word "trauma," derived from Greek, literally means "wound," and it is generally understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind—a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4). According to Whitehead, trauma fiction relies on literary techniques such as intertextuality, repetition, and fragmented narrative voice because they formally mirror the effects of trauma (84). The rich possibilities for reading *Alias Grace* as a trauma narrative are beyond the scope of this paper, but see Heidi Darroch for one examination of Grace's traumatic testimony.

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