

**NEEDLEWORK AND NARRATION:  
THE CASE OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE***

COSTURA Y NARRACIÓN: EL CASO DE *ALIAS GRACE*,  
DE MARGARET ATWOOD

CELIA TORREJÓN-TOBÍO  
Universidad de Granada  
[celiatorrejon@ugr.es](mailto:celiatorrejon@ugr.es)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the main character in Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996) in terms of the semiotics of the textile and its corresponding feminine implications. The main hypotheses enunciated concern, on the one hand, the possibilities of narrativity that this symbol brings about (particularly for dissident discourses) and, on the other hand, the dissipation of the conceptual and representational boundaries of the textual and the textile. Furthermore, this study suggests a revision of the imaginary traditionally associated with the feminine spheres and an approach to these spaces as places of resistance that have arisen in the midst of silencing, captivity, or marginalisation.

KEYWORDS: Margaret Atwood; *Alias Grace*; gender; hermeneutics; narration; textile

## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la figura protagonista de la novela *Alias Grace* (1996) de Margaret Atwood en torno a la semiótica del textil y a sus correspondientes implicaciones femeninas. Las principales hipótesis enunciadas conciernen, por una parte, las posibilidades de narratividad que propicia este símbolo (particularmente para los discursos disidentes) y, por otra, la disipación de las fronteras conceptuales y representacionales de lo textual y lo textil. Asimismo, este estudio sugiere una revisión del imaginario tradicionalmente asociado a las esferas femeninas y una aproximación a estos espacios como lugares de resistencia gestados en el seno del silenciamiento, el cautiverio o la marginación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Margaret Atwood; *Alias Grace*; género; hermenéutica; narración; textil

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Alias Grace* is a novel published in 1996 by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. The narration articulates a story based on true events, set in Ottawa (Ontario) in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It addresses the story of Grace Marks, a domestic servant who, along with her partner in crime, James McDermott, is convicted of the murders of the master of the house, Thomas Kinnear, and his mistress and housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. While James is executed by hanging, Grace is sentenced to life imprisonment on the grounds of her young age at the time of the murders. The court case entails a great scandal for Ontarian society, both because of the sensationalist media coverage and because of the political implications of its specific social context. Faced with the particular impact of the case, the Methodist Church committee considers Grace's episode of amnesia on the day of the crimes and hires an alienist, Dr. Simon Jordan, in order to determine whether she may have suffered an outbreak of hysteria during the course of the events and, consequently, to be able to pardon her sentence.

The interpretative key through which I review the work is precisely articulated in the setting of these private encounters, and it comprises the incessant presence of quilting within the text. While recounting her life as requested by the alienist, the protagonist absent-mindedly quilts, using the technique of patchwork. To begin the discussion of this motif, it should be stressed that the textile world has traditionally been associated with domestic spheres and has therefore tended to be examined from a symbolic dimension of feminine codes, manners and messages (Rogerson, 1998: 5). Even today, despite the evident transformations that this

occupation has undergone through artistic recognition and the growing male involvement in it, it is still considered an activity predominantly exercised by women.

The textile plays a fundamental role in the creation and perpetuation of the construct of femininity, as it brings together conceptual implications closely linked to the home, the nineteenth-century stereotype of the angel in the house, the devoted wife and mother and all her virtues around patience, docility, gentleness, and fidelity. This conceptual link can be easily traced back to Ancient Greece through the numerous deities and fictitious female characters represented in relation to this practice, as in the case of the Moiras, the myth of Penelope, the legend of Arachne, Procne and Philomela, to name but a few (Parker, 2010).

Moving forward to the Renaissance, the segregation of fine arts and crafts unluckily displaced textile practices to an inferior level placed in the domestic-feminine sphere. Moreover, in the seventeenth century, needlework was introduced into the educational environment with the aim of inculcating in girls a behaviour that would later be described as biologically innate (Parker, 2010: 11). It was even common, throughout the following centuries, to introduce this activity in medical areas as occupational therapy for patients, or in prison contexts as part of the social reintegration process (Rogerson, 1998: 6).

In this sense, it was seen as a respectable hobby and occupation and was associated with the idealising harmony of the home. In the context of the novel, I perceive this connotation through the correspondence between Dr. Simon and his mother who, in her attempts to persuade him to marry a family acquaintance, always alludes to her dexterous skills as a needleworker. Likewise, when Simon fantasises about Grace becoming his mistress or wife, he tends to visualise her in the room where she performs her needlework skills (Atwood, 2010: 7).

Furthermore, the discourse of the textile is often studied in literary terms, not only as a reflection of female idiosyncrasies, but also as an analogy for creation and, in particular, for the act of writing itself. In consonance with Kruger, “weaving has long been a metaphor for the creation of something other than cloth, whether a story, a plot, or a world” (2001: 23). Mercado, in turn, points out that writing is like sewing, and the embroidery is like the text (1988: 173). Therefore, it could be possible to approach both processes and their respective products with analogous interpretative tools.

## **2. QUILTING AS A SYMBOL**

Considering these premises, I approach Atwood’s text to emphasise the importance of quilting not only through Grace’s uninterrupted work, but also through the explicit interest in the subject

that the protagonist manifests throughout her interviews with the doctor. Already in one of their first conversations, she describes in great detail the importance of the quilt as an essential part of the women's trousseau, the variability of its pattern depending on its intended use and the meaning she attributes to it (Murray, 2001: 72):

And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then to lay them on the tops of beds? [...] And then I have thought, it's for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir [...] But [...] there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. 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. And it is where the act takes place between men and women that I will not mention to you, Sir, but I suppose you know what it is; and some call it love, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally beds are what we sleep in, and where we dream, and often where we die. (Atwood, 2010: 163)

Through this reflection the reader gains privileged access to Grace's sceptical and suspicious view of life, to her perception of sexuality tinged with negative nuances and, more especially, to the connotations attributable to the deliberate use of the word flag instead of quilt. This word's meaning quickly suggests semantic implications referring to the belonging to a group or the claiming of rights, and it can even be associated with the language of war. For all these reasons, coupled with the fact that she alludes to realities outside her own experience such as childbirth, I consider this introspection as the appropriation of this invisible feminine standard. By embodying and perhaps giving voice to these common adversities and injustices experienced by women of her time, Grace warns future generations of the dangers to which they are vulnerable to (Mercado, 2001: 73).

Therefore, in line with Rogerson's contributions, the discourse of quilting allows Grace to ingeniously articulate interventions that are not universally ostensible. This implies the possibility that the patient may withhold information from Simon who, unfamiliar with the female idiolect of quilting, is unable to grasp the significance of her comments (1998: 6). According to Cixous's thesis on female orality, "her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (1996: 880-881). Indeed, Simon Jordan disregards the constant references to the quilt and instead notes, in keeping with his proto-psychoanalytic pretensions, that Grace is afraid of her own sexuality: "And so, Grace, he says, looking up, you consider a bed to be a dangerous place?" (Atwood, 2010: 163). Additionally, Grace does not only allude to the quilt as a cultural object, but also

carefully considers her own exegesis of traditional designs. Thus, by examining the scraps of quilts she makes as a maid, she traces connections between them and her own history (Rogerson, 1998: 15).

In this way, Grace's evident interest in quilt patterns and her own decoding of them implies an invitation for the reader to become involved in this practice, thus providing a new resource for the hermeneutic construction of the work. To illustrate this idea, based on the conviction that through this motif Grace speaks of herself and the collective female experience, I will devote a few lines to the clearest and most significant pattern in the story: the Tree of Paradise. Although it is mentioned several times throughout the novel, I focus on the final episode, in which Grace makes a quilt for herself for the first time.

Congruently coinciding with the behaviour that we can perceive all over the novel through her role as unreliable narrator, Grace modifies the original design to imprint on it the ultimate articulation of her secrets. To effect this change, according to Rogerson, she employs a remnant of her prison nightgown, as well as patches of garments belonging to the two most important women in her life: Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery (1998: 20).

The first of them is her workmate in the first house she is employed, as well as her protector and only friend. Unfortunately, Mary suddenly dies after secretly becoming pregnant by one of the lord's sons of the house and having an abortion that turns out to be fatal. For the quilt, the protagonist incorporates a remnant of the petticoat she was wearing on the day of her death. The second is the housekeeper of the last house the protagonist enters to serve. Throughout the novel, she establishes an ambivalent bond with Grace that fluctuates between adoration and hatred. Nancy becomes pregnant as well, in this case by her employer, Mr. Kinnear, with whom she has an illicit affair. As indicated earlier, she also passes away as a result of the tragic incidents in which our protagonist ends up being involved. In this case, Grace chooses a piece of the dress that she herself takes from Nancy in her escape after the murders.

But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's [...] I will embroider around each one of them with red featherstitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (Atwood, 2010: 447)

Although the presence of biblical references permeates the entire work, in this case their significance becomes greater. In addition to alluding directly to the Garden of Eden and its

forbidden fruit, Grace's decision to readjust the pattern endows the quilt with a powerful symbolic dimension referring to the Christian intertext of the Trinity (this time a female version). Indeed, the protagonist constructs the representation of herself necessarily from the identities of these two other women.

In this sense, it must be emphasised that both characters have also suffered the oppressions faced by people of the same social and gender status. In trying to climb the social ladder and escape the yoke that constrains them as servants, Mary and Nancy have an affair with their superiors in the hope of being able to join them in marriage. However, both end up succumbing to the boundaries of the system and their undertakings sentence them to doom. Therefore, it is worth highlighting the not only economic but also sexual exploitation that domestic workers confront. In a way, their bodies go from being a mere capitalist product to also being transformed into a sexual object. Consequently, this eroticisation of the working classes accentuates the inequality to which these women are subjected (Wang, 2010: 59).

Thus, returning to the pattern of the Tree of Paradise, Grace's discourse again acquires that sympathetic nuance as she symbolically inscribes herself in their unhappy stories, almost paying homage to her companions (Murray, 2001: 79). For this reason, these characters' loss of individuality should not be read in terms of dehumanisation, but rather understood as a fundamental process for the establishment of a sense of community which, for Grace, is even a necessary consolation. Consequently, it could be argued that the quilt in question takes on a comforting significance of psychological recovery, acceptance and even reconciliation with her own past.

### **3. QUILTING AS A NARRATIVE ARTEFACT**

After addressing the symbolic component that the textile brings to the novel, it is essential to consider its potential as a literary mechanism. First of all, reflecting on the allusions that Grace makes to her own discourse allows us to glimpse a whole succession of references to the semantic field of quilting:

What should I tell him, when he comes back? He will want to know about the arrest, and the trial, and what was said. Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour. (Atwood, 2010: 349)

According to Murray (2001:72), throughout her career, the protagonist repeatedly demonstrates her extraordinary dexterity with the needle. In fact, her work seems to be so internalised that she ends up developing a certain automaticity in her quilting:

I watched my needle go in and out, although I believe I could sew in my sleep, I've been doing it since I was four years old, small stitches as if made by mice. You need to start very young to be able to do that, otherwise you can never get the hang of it. (Atwood, 2010: 73)

Similarly, the following fragment happens to be appropriate to point out the relevant imagery of the movement of the needle's appearance and disappearance as a metaphor of Dr. Jordan's intermittent presence. The assiduity of his visits will become a temporal reference point for Grace (Murray, 2001: 72):

I used to count from my birthdays, and then I counted from my first day in this country, and then from Mary Whitney's last day on earth, and after that from the day in July when the worst things happened, and after that I counted from my first day in prison. But now I am counting from the first day I spent in the sewing room with Dr. Jordan. (Atwood, 2010: 100)

Inevitably, these quotes illustrate the point I have been making about Grace's full awareness of the importance of her encounters with Simon, insofar as they may grant her a ticket out of prison. This awareness is manifested in her frequent interruptions of her own narrative to reveal comments such as: "I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised" or "I should not speak to him so freely, and I decide I will not" (Atwood, 2010: 47, 163). In addition to these obvious statements, there are other patterns that accentuate this sense of distrust, such as the meticulous provision of very specific autobiographical details in order to induce the reader to a passive acceptance of the story told (Michael, 2001: 435).

Ultimately, although the text is replete with caveats regarding premeditated and unbiased narrative construction, these do not seem to invalidate Grace's account. Instead, its suspiciousness is acknowledged and accepted as one (but not the only) way to access the novel's diegesis (Michael, 2001: 436). Building on this idea, I argue that Atwood makes use of the discourse of sewing to dispose of a great number of literary strategies. These include the protagonist's alternation between a public narration, including the interventions she projects towards Simon Jordan or the prison workers, and a private narration, comprising the apparently intimate digressions whose privileged access is only granted to the readers. Another strategy to highlight concerns the fluctuation between the use of the first person in Grace's monologue

narrative, and the limited third person in the chapters focusing on the character of the alienist (Michael, 2001: 429).

Moreover, there is a deployment of other formal resources patently used in the form of paratexts. Firstly, the inter-artistic physical and linear distribution of quilt patterns introduces the beginning of each of the fifteen sections that make up the novel. Each of these black-and-white illustrations correspond to traditional designs of Canadian culture, the original name of which gives the section its title. The close relationship between these opening labels and the content of the chapters is therefore evident. Thus, the resulting literary text is constituted as an album made up of patchwork pieces that readers will have to combine and assemble by themselves in order to construct the whole quilt.

To succinctly illustrate one of the patterns presented, I turn to the fifth section entitled “Broken Dishes”. This design could be connected to the teapot that Aunt Pauline gives Grace’s mother before her emigration to Canada and which, after her death on board, is accidentally broken: “Aunt Pauline’s teapot fell off onto the floor, and the teapot broke” (Atwood, 2010: 125). The repetition of the word “teapot” already suggests and underlines the significance of this object in the narrator’s psyche. This naming effectively suggests the symbolic value of the traumatic rupture that immigration will entail for Grace on social, cultural and psychological levels (Murray, 2001: 72); namely, through the separation from her few family ties in Ireland, through the unquestionable effort of adaptation to a new country, and through the death of her own mother, which, in turn, could represent the loss of the motherland.

However, this strategic arrangement is not the only one employed by Atwood. After the images of the patterns, each section is juxtaposed with different captions (forty-one in all, drawn from a wide variety of documentary sources), among others: Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings*, the poetry of authors such as Tennyson, Basho, Browning or Dickinson, newspaper accounts from *Toronto Mirror*, *Star* or *Chronicle*, the supposedly actual confessions of Grace and McDermott or the record inscribed in the penitentiary “Punishment Book” (Michael, 2001: 429). It is convenient to note that their spatial distribution causes these extracts to enter into dialogue with one another. Some dialogues challenge and destabilise the conventional separation of genres by coupling fragments of striking linguistic similarity, as in the disruption between prose and verse in the epigraphs at the head of the section “Puss in the Corner”.<sup>1</sup> In this case, Moodie’s aforementioned prose is combined with Emily Brönte’s poem “The Prisoner” to achieve a considerable stylistic parallelism (Michael, 2001: 443). Meanwhile, other

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.



dialogues involve the questioning of Grace's credibility through their mutated discordance. This is the case in the section "Falling Timbers"<sup>2</sup> where the first two headings relating to the apparently rigorous reporting of the case openly contradict Grace's behaviour after her arrest (Michael, 2001: 442).

In any case, according to Michael's considerations, the arrangement of the quoted material once again forms a patchwork that, instead of pointing the reader in a single direction, invalidates any hierarchy and leads to a conclusive reflection on the dynamic fragmentation and multiplicity of the novel (2001, 431). In the same way, the large number of passages referred to in this format gives them a privileged and substantial space in terms of the conventional proportion that these epigraphs usually keep with the rest of the literary piece. As a result, a striking blurring of the traditional line between paratext and body of the text can be observed. Paratextual elements fulfil a reinforcing or accompanying function conveyed from the threshold of the "inside" and "outside" of the text (Genette, 1991). However, in the case of *Alias Grace* (1996), epigraphs go beyond their conventional role by actively inserting themselves into the dissonant narrative dialogue (Murray, 2001: 431-432).

It is thus worth pointing out that, beyond the paratextual boundaries, the work includes a considerable variety of literary genres combined together, among which the gothic novel, autobiography, legend or fable, magical realism, epistle, journalism, melodrama or detective thriller can be mentioned. Such experimentation entails a significant transgression in that, instead of inscribing herself in a particular genre by including its conventional formal elements, Atwood brings together different particularities of easily identifiable genres to place them on the same level, thus enhancing and suspending their authority in equal measure (Wang, 2010: 63). Thus, the text can be regarded as an example of Linda Hutcheon's parody, which, far from denoting the usual notion of parody or ridicule, corresponds to the "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (2004: 26). Paradoxically, this device both embraces and challenges what it parodies in a way that constructs a tension between the concepts of continuity and discontinuity, which invites a postmodern reconsideration of the idea of origin and originality. In line with Carmona, this prism of parody could be useful to analyse the relation between Grace's real official case and Atwood's fictionalisation in the novel (2006: 48).

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2.

#### 4. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTIONALITY AND *ALIAS GRACE*

Regarding this notion of parodic intertextuality, it is imperative to devote some space to the concept of historiographical metafiction. To do so, I would like to draw on the thesis formulated by Linda Hutcheon, who has been regarded as an influential theorist specialising in the historical impulse present in postmodern writing since the 1980s. In her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (2004), she already posits this term to designate a mainly narrative artifact which combines literature, history and theory to oppose art discourse and history discourse: “Its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (2004: 5), which stimulates the epistemological questioning of how this past is known and what is the ontological status of its documents and narratives (2004: 50).

Indeed, historiographical metafiction undermines the representational powers of history by foregrounding practices such as reading, writing, and interpreting a past that loses its conclusive and irrefutable character. Moreover, this new sub-genre differs from the traditional historical novel by having distinctive features such as eccentric, individual and culturally conditioned protagonists; the use of detailed factual data not for the purpose of achieving precise historical accuracy, but for the purpose of questioning its veracity; the attempt to validate or authenticate the fictional world through the incursion of historical characters and, ultimately, the endeavour to blur fictional and historical boundaries through a formal and ontological sleight of hand (Wang, 2010: 41).

By connecting these reflections with *Alias Grace* (1996), the structural collage I have referred to so far takes on intrinsic value and relevance. The architectural arrangement threaded by the oscillation between the voices of Grace and Simon, the plurality of opinions and judgements expressed about the protagonist, the interspersing on intertexts, the engravings and patterns imprinted on the paratextual and diegetic dimensions, etc. imply the impossibility of these versions, facets or strands to provide the definitiveness, ultimacy or fidelity to the facts. Therefore, the partiality implied by this multiple juxtaposition of contrasting narratives circumscribes the rupture of the hierarchy between them all and a rejection or disavowal (or, at the very least, questioning) of the certainty they entail. As Dr. Jordan himself points out: “Nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved either” (Atwood, 2010: 383).

According to Carmona Rodríguez, this reflection is transferred to the very construction and conception of the main character. The variety of discourses that are shaped around Grace provokes her configuration among the flow of all of them, thus involving questions of gender,

social class, mental health and nationality. To materialise this idea, Atwood gestated a postmodern ambiguous dimension between the figures of author and reader, repeatedly insisting on the latter's work in the production of textual meaning:

Grace se mueve oscilatoriamente entre lector y autor: lee lo que la opinión pública ha escrito sobre ella, expresa sus opiniones sobre esa producción atribuyéndole significados y, además, elabora un texto testimonial y memorístico que se concibe en muchos casos como una versión alternativa. Al recuperar auto-reflexivamente el entramado de producción del texto y su lectura, la novela de Atwood apunta directamente a la participación de múltiples subjetividades en la producción textual. Al convertir a Grace en lectora y escritora, autora de historia y de ficción por efecto de la metaficción historiográfica, la novela proporciona una doble visión de dos planos encontrados. (Carmona Rodríguez, 2006: 47)

However, the theses concerning historiographical metafiction do not function exclusively within the contextual limits of novelistic plotting and meshing but are translatable to a theoretical and ontological dimension concerning the past and history as a process of constant reconceptualisation. Thus, by restructuring the frames of enunciation, the immovable authenticity of historical documents as unappealable truths is questioned and their conception as discursive constructs is invited, just as it is in the domain of fiction.

Through the juxtaposition of different kinds of texts, Atwood's novel highlights "documents" as nothing more than texts that have been culturally privileged but are, like all texts, inevitably mediated in ways that produce rather than simply represent material events and persons. (Michael, 2001: 426)

This reasoning could incur a certain paradox, since in it the desire for access to the past and its respective sources coexists with the awareness and acceptance of the absence of a real and infallible approximation to that past and, therefore, the recognition of a non-existent guarantee of legitimacy (Murray, 2001: 66). Atwood's work, however, does not impinge on this dangerous relativism: "there undoubtedly was a truth –somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery–" (Atwood, 1998: 1515). *Alias Grace* does not only manifest this postmodern disbelief in the metanarratives that shape Western culture, but also provides alternatives to these metanarratives. Indeed, the very use of the artifact of patchwork is already disjunctive in that it destabilises the authority of these predominant cultural schemas (such as journalistic reporting) and brings into focus other marginalised discourses such as those usually associated with gender or femininity (Michael, 2001: 441).

Thus, by actively participating in the contemporary conception of history as a social, cultural and textually constructed process, the strong gender dimension of the advent of the standardisation of history as a discipline or science of knowledge, in the second half of the nineteenth century, is worth considering. Consequently, this gender dimension has meant that for years there has been a lack of female figures in the study of historiography (Michael, 2001: 423). In fact, the limited female presence, relegated to historical subgenres associated with the spheres of private life such as memoir or biography, is immediately dismissed in favour of a more public, allegedly universal or general history. Thus, the framework of this knowledge is built on the foundations of a political history while, as with Simon's neglect of his patient's idiolect, "details of women's lives were perceived as belonging only to the realm of anecdote, not in scientific history" (Pomata, 1993: 27).

According to Michael, from the 1970s onwards, with the expansion of the second feminist wave and the concurrent development of the currents of the Annals School and Social History, the question of the patent absence of women in the historiography of the previous two centuries began to be addressed. Although the study of women's history or herstory today comprises a wide variety of strands, there is a unanimous recognition of the conviction that women are also a valid focus of enquiry and, above all, of the need for a revision of the established norms of typification in terms of historical transcendence (2001: 424). Hence the relevance of quilting in this alternative context to the positivist doctrines of historiography. Involved in this re-conceptualisation and re-evaluation of the discipline, the metaphor valorises female representation by dissociating it from the traditional conception that separated it from the respectable and circumspect spheres of history and art, and thus symbolically gives a look and a voice to women who have so often been brutally silenced (Michael, 2001: 426).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the various aspects of the topic, explored in previous sections, I argue, on the one hand, that the quilting motif constitutes a mechanism that enhances the possibilities of narrativity and, on the other hand, that the conceptual and representational boundaries of the textual and the textile are increasingly dissipating at the semiotic level, providing an optimal breeding ground for its artistic analysis.

By understanding Grace's work with the needle as an analogy of her own discourse, it is essential to note the author's intention to endow the story with a female prism as narrator and protagonist. Grace Marks is constituted as a character traversed by a complex network of

alterities that places her in a constant state of intermediation. At the same time, this network encourages the inscription of her identity in terms of intersectionality, underlining the categories of gender, religion, class, mental functionality, sexuality, and ethnicity. Thus, their narrative immediately adopts an irremediably dissident dimension.

In this sense, Atwood's premeditated decision to grant enunciation to someone like Grace converges with the concerns of second-wave feminisms, on which the author undoubtedly draws. In effect, *Alias Grace* (1996) invites through its pages to the recovery of the feminine historical register and all that this entails, that is, the rescue and celebration of those artistic forms, customs, literary genres, stereotypes, epistemes, etc. socially linked to this gender. In order to materialise this purpose of recovery, the author problematises and evidences the silencing which women have traditionally had to deal with, while at the same time she is committed to a revision and reconstruction of these feminine voices: "La escritura se funda en el trabajo artesanal con la lengua, trabajo que le permite calar hondo, hendir la lengua de la cotidianeidad, de los bordes, de lo mínimo, del margen y fundar una poética a partir de sus figuras" (Perilli, 2004: n. p.).

Consequently, a work that takes in all this background of female otherness cannot but be presented in a fragmented manner, on this occasion projected through the artefact of patchwork. Among other collage mechanisms, it is convenient to recapitulate the alternation of private and public narratives, the historiographical metafiction, the appearance of paratexts in each section, the changes of grammatical person in the narrative, the combination of literary genres, the presence of an unreliable narrator, and so on. In this way, the literary piece adopts a tension between a chaotic and disintegrative idiosyncrasy of a text that seems to be in the process of elaboration and a unitary and agglutinative dimension that is perceived when contemplating the resulting product with a certain distance.

However, this symbolic and formal mechanism lies not only in the articulation of dissident subjectivities, but also implicitly involves a challenge to male discursive authority. Through her quilting idiolect, Grace gains a certain degree of intervention that allows her to resist or at least negotiate her own individuality. Thus, aware of her limitations and the opportunity for prosperity presented by her interviews with Dr. Jordan, she begins to plot a strategic manipulation that will grant her a relative liberation. Perceiving Simon as a powerful mode of access to the hegemonic position of authority he represents, Grace sews her verbal and behavioural negotiation through a meticulous and subtle conversational distortion of her past life, behaviour or mental instability. In this sense, embracing Scheherazade's motif, the convict

transgresses the power structures between her and the alienist and succeeds, albeit temporarily, in taking control and reversing the hierarchical relationship. In this way, Grace adopts the role of doctor, actively conducting the conversation according to her own convenience, while Simon embodies a passive role and ends up, ironically, becoming a patient after being wounded in the war, and after failing with the clinical case (Arias Doblaz, 2005: 95).

In consequence, I argue that the representation of the patchwork symbol in *Alias Grace* (1996) can provide us with a valuable lens through which to observe the female narrative as an artifact from which to enunciate dissidence and also as a proto-model of resistance cultivated in the midst of silencing, captivity or marginalisation. Hence, I suggest, through this semiotics of the textile, the revision and revaluation of the traditional imaginary associated with feminine spheres, as well as the institutionalisation of everyday life and spaces considered domestic.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: “Puss in the Corner” Epigraphs

She is a middle-sized woman, with a slight graceful figure. There is an air of hopeless melancholy in her face which is very painful to contemplate. Her complexion is fair, and must, before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled it, have been very brilliant. Her eyes are a bright blue, her hair auburn, and her face would be rather handsome were it not for the long curved chin, which gives, as it always does to most persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression.

Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong, stealthy look; her eye never meets yours, and after a furtive regard, it invariably bends its gaze upon the ground. She looks like a person rather above her humble station....

– Susanna Moodie,  
*Life in the Clearings*, 1853.  
(Atwood, 2010: 28)

The captive raised her face; it was as soft and mild  
As sculptured marble saint; or slumbering unweaned child;  
It was so soft and mild, it was so sweet and fair,  
Pain could not trace a line, or grief a shadow there!  
The captive raised her hand and pressed it to her brow;  
“I have been struck,” she said, “and I am suffering now;  
Yet these are little worth, your bolts and irons strong:  
And, were they forged in steel, they could not hold me long.”

– Emily Brontë,  
“The Prisoner,” 1845.  
(Atwood, 2010: 29)

## Appendix B: “Falling Timbers” Epigraphs

The girl, instead of exhibiting any traces of broken rest and a guilty conscience, appears quite calm, with her eye full and clear as though she slept sound and undisturbed – her only anxiety appears to get some of her clothes sent to her, and her box. Of the former she never had but few – she wears at the present time the murdered woman’s frock, and the box that she asks for belonged to the same poor sufferer.

– Chronicle and Gazette,  
Kingston, August 12th, 1843.  
(Atwood, 2010: 343)

“But though I have repented of my wickedness with bitter tears, it has pleased God that I should never again know a moment’s peace. Since I helped Macdermot to strangle [Nancy] Montgomery, her terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me for a moment. They glare upon me by night and day, and when I close my eyes in despair, I see them looking into my soul – it is impossible to shut them out.... at night – in the silence and loneliness of my cell, those blazing eyes make my prison as light as day. No, not as day – they have a terribly hot glare, that has not the appearance of anything in this world....”

– Grace Marks,  
to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by  
Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings*, 1853.  
(Atwood, 2010: 343)