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**THE MULTIPLICITY OF TRUTH
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis offers an alternative interpretation to the alleged “split personality” of Grace Marks, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s novel *Alias Grace* (1996). The aim of the thesis is to explore the potential of Grace’s “split personality” as a narrative tool in conveying a philosophy of truth characteristic to Atwood, according to which the “truth” is not absolute but multiple, consisting of several truths of the same reality.

The thesis consists of four parts: an introduction, a literature review, an empirical part, and a conclusion. The literature review consists of three parts, giving an overview of previous interpretations of Grace’s “split personality”, the interpretation of *Alias Grace* as a postmodern ironic “antidetective novel”, and Atwood’s philosophy of the multiplicity of truth. Similarly, the empirical part is divided into three parts, examining the manifestation and impact of Grace’s “split personality” as a narrative tool on the basis of three events in the novel: Grace and Dr. Jordan’s first meeting, the death of Mary Whitney, and the hypnosis session conducted by Dr. DuPont. The conclusion presents the main findings of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
1 LITERATURE REVIEW	8
1.1 Madwoman or Manipulator	8
1.2 <i>Alias Grace</i> as an Antidetective Novel	11
1.3 Atwood’s Philosophy of the Multiplicity of Truth.....	13
2 EMPIRICAL PART	15
2.1 The Apple of Knowledge	16
2.2 The Truth of Violence	19
2.3 “And Somebody Else Comes in”	22
CONCLUSION	27
REFERENCES	30
RESÜMEE	32

INTRODUCTION

“The true story lies / among other stories,” reads the third part of Canadian poet and novelist Margaret Atwood’s poem “True stories”, adding, “[t]he true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue” (Atwood 1981: 11). Similarly to Atwood’s explorations of identity, the truth or “true story” tends to remain elusive in her works, not adhering to an absolute singularity. This can be observed in her 1996 historical novel *Alias Grace*, which is a fictionalized retelling of the 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. James McDermott and Grace Marks, the protagonist of the novel, were convicted of the crime, and while McDermott was hanged, sixteen-year-old Grace was spared and sentenced to life-long imprisonment. During her trial, the public perception of Grace’s character was distinctly varied, ranging from meek and innocent to violent and erotic. One of the more known accounts was by Susanna Moodie, who in her *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853) attributes to Grace qualities of cunningness, arrogance, and madness. Grace’s reputation was further sensationalized by her giving several different accounts of the day of the murders, as a result of which the extent of her guilt was never officially confirmed.

It can perhaps be blamed on the lack of concrete historical evidence then that the novel *Alias Grace* similarly never offers a straightforward answer to whether Grace was guilty or not. Still, Atwood’s understanding of the fickleness of truth lies at the core of the narrative. While she has not denied the existence of a final answer to Grace’s guilt, she remarks that “truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us” (Atwood 1998: 1515). The novel sets out to solve the mystery regardless, introducing psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan, who is assigned to conduct sessions with Grace to get to the bottom of what happened on the day of the murders. Thereby Atwood sets up a narrative dynamic of suspect-mystery-

detective, where Grace naturally assumes the role of suspect and Dr. Jordan the detective. This creates the illusion of *Alias Grace* as a traditional detective novel, which is broken by the lack of a conclusive answer at the end of the novel. Namely, the perpetrator is revealed to be the ghost of Grace's deceased friend Mary Whitney, who possessed Grace during the murders. Alternatively, this "ghost" can be understood as a secondary personality and Grace's condition therefore a case of dissociative personality disorder (DID), which can be defined as "a disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states" (Fuehrlein and Nurcombe 2019: para. 14). The disorder tends to be accompanied by symptoms such as (ir)regular switching between personality states and amnesia, both of which Grace herself displays. Regardless of whether Grace was actually possessed or switched to another personality state, the true identity of the perpetrator remains ambiguous as Grace herself is claimed to not have been present during the murders.

While Grace's split personality¹ can be analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective, there is little previous research explicitly on its function in terms of the narrative of the novel. This thesis will attempt to fill this research gap to offer an alternate perspective to what has otherwise been considered an anachronistic depiction of DID (Knelman 1999: 682; Schwarz 2013: 303). As the inconclusive answer to the question of Grace's guilt is a direct product of the manifestation of her split personality, it acts as the catalyst in the

¹ The term "split personality" can be used to refer to the media trope of the same name. The trope entails the existence of two or more distinguishable "personalities" within one character, who may possess varying degrees of awareness of each other and coexist in a relationship of cooperation or opposition (tvtropes.org: Split Personality 2023). The term "split personality" will be used throughout the thesis to maintain clarity without making any conclusive diagnosis and with full recognition of the term not being favorable among people actually with DID.

detective novel becoming an *antidetective* one, a term ascribed to the novel by Staels (2000). This links back to the Atwoodian philosophy of the “true story” being “multiple and untrue” and “unknowable”. Therefore, Grace’s split personality can be interpreted to have been utilized in *Alias Grace* as a tool to convey this philosophy.

The unreliability of Grace’s story is further emphasized by her deliberate manipulations of the truth, which are revealed to the reader through comments in Grace’s narration, such as: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan /.../” (Atwood 1997: 7, hereafter *AG*: 7). As a young, disadvantaged woman in 19th-century patriarchal society, Grace has likely realized that there exists no singular true story of her life that can free her from imprisonment. Since she already exists in multiples in the public eye, she is forced to switch and adapt to offer multiple stories to survive, whereby the true story lies somewhere in between. Considering the aforementioned narrative dynamic of suspect-mystery-detective connecting Grace and Dr. Jordan, Grace can be perceived to exist on one end of the spectrum, where she has recognized and embraced the Atwoodian philosophy of the multiplicity of truth, whereas Dr. Jordan is on the other end, seeking to affirm a singular truth that is rooted in his preconceptions. Arguably, Dr. Jordan’s inability to adapt causes his failure as a detective and unravelling at the end of the novel.

Therefore, the primary aim of this thesis is to explore the potential of Grace’s split personality as a narrative tool to convey Atwood’s philosophy regarding the multiplicity of truth and what relationship exists between this notion and how Grace conducts herself, particularly with Dr. Jordan. The secondary aim is to understand the impact of Atwood’s philosophy on Dr. Jordan’s investigation and how it ultimately leads the investigation to fail, whereby the traditional detective narrative is transformed into an antidetective one. In order to investigate these questions, I will begin by laying the groundwork in the literature review

by delving into interpretations of Grace's split personality and unreliability as a narrator, *Alias Grace* as an antidetective novel, and lastly the way Atwood approaches the concept of truth in her works. In the empirical part, I will analyze three events in *Alias Grace* by a close reading of the text to examine the manifestation and impact of Grace's split personality as a narrative tool. The selection includes Grace and Dr. Jordan's first meeting, the death of Mary Whitney and its aftermath, and the hypnosis session carried out by Dr. DuPont and its aftermath.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Madwoman or Manipulator

As Goldblatt (1999: 275) notes, Grace Marks is not unlike other of Margaret Atwood's female protagonists. Her heroines tend to be women from a humble background, who have fallen victim to the expectations placed on them by society. In order to survive and reclaim agency over their lives, they must transform into braver, wiser, and more independent versions of themselves. To this transformation, Goldblatt (1999: 275) ascribes the term *reconstruction*, whereby *to reconstruct* simply means "to rebuild" whereas the original verb *to construct* means not only "to build" but also "to fabricate; to devise or invent". Therefore, a *reconstruction* of this kind could be understood as an intentionally artificial symbiosis of knowledge and imagination. Similarly to other of Atwood's heroines to whom Goldblatt (1999: 280) applies the term *reconstruction*, the survival of Grace Marks in her circumstances is dependent on her reconstruction of herself. Grace is a young woman disadvantaged not only by her age and gender in a 19th-century patriarchal society but also her poverty and immigrant status. Her situation only worsens with her sentencing to life imprisonment. By the time the main plot of the novel begins, it is 1859 and Grace has spent nearly as many years in the asylum and penitentiary as she had been alive prior to her incarceration in 1843 at the age of only sixteen. Although Grace describes herself as a "model prisoner" (*AG*: 5) and there is support from the Methodist church to pardon her (*AG*: 87), there seems to be no permanent escape from her confinement. It is only when psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan is employed to get to the bottom of Grace's condition that there arrives an actual opportunity for Grace to be pardoned.

Grace's survival hinges upon her being pardoned, which can only happen if she is proven innocent through her sessions with Dr. Jordan. As Atwood herself (1998: 1515) points out, in

their sessions, Grace and Dr. Jordan exist in a symbolic opposition of contemporary patriarchal power dynamics in a patriarchal society, whereby Dr. Jordan, as the representative of patriarchy, significantly exceeds Grace in terms of his gender and education. In order to ensure her survival, Grace has to reconstruct her story in a manner that would reveal the exact “true story” Dr. Jordan is looking for (Staels 2000: 431). As a result, her narrative is not entirely truthful (Staels 2000: 434), which is illustrated by the pointed remarks Grace makes in her narration, such as: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (*AG*: 7). Although the purpose of Grace’s sessions with Dr. Jordan might be to tell her story honestly, truth is not a luxury Grace can afford herself if she wants to survive. Atwood (1998: 1515) and Goldblatt (1999: 281–2) concur with Staels’s idea of reconstruction, arguing that it is by becoming a storyteller, who shares, hides, and manipulates information about her life consciously and shrewdly, that Grace manages to assume power in her circumstances and transform from victim to rebel.

Despite this transformation and ultimately her pardoning, Grace does not exactly emerge as a victor in her story. She has control only over her own narrative, not the narratives created by the public. Knelman (1999: 683) points out the “troubling” contradictions in Grace’s recollections, theorizing that “[Grace’s] own reconstruction is based less on her recollection of the events in question than on her recollection of other people’s accounts”. Similarly, Siddal (2004) and Michael (2000) highlight the impact that the public representation of Grace’s character had on her and her acute awareness of it. For example, Grace finds the label “celebrated murderess” ridiculous in nature, yet she acknowledges the impact of such labels in newspaper sales (Michael 2000: 436). This suggests a certain duality or even multiplicity to Grace’s character, which is also communicated by Goldblatt (1999: 280) in her description of Grace as outwardly “humble” but inwardly “worldly wise” and “knowledgeable”. However, Grace’s understanding of people’s perceptions of her do not enable her to become free from

them. Siddal (2004: 91) shows how the aforementioned label of “celebrated murderess” and its eroticized violence continue to haunt and trap Grace even after she is pardoned and released from confinement. Financial difficulties force Grace to marry Jamie Walsh, a man that testified against her for rejecting his advances. She becomes stuck in a cycle of reinforcing the image of a “celebrated murderess” by “feeding her husband fictions /.../ [about] the sexual and violent aspects of her life” (Siddal 2004: 91). These stories still seem to excite Walsh, although years have passed since the murders, and Grace is no longer the impressionable young girl but a grown, married woman. This particular conundrum suggests that the success of such reclamations of female agency as Grace and other of Atwood’s heroines attempt can remain limited.

“It is uncertain whether Grace is a madwoman or a manipulator,” Goldblatt (1999: 280) writes. This attribution of the title “madwoman” points not only to Grace displaying seemingly different faces depending on the company, but the question of Grace’s alleged split personality. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that the one to aid James McDermott in the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery was not Grace herself but the ghost of Mary Whitney, Grace’s deceased friend, who had possessed her body during the murders. While there is certainly a Gothic element to this particular conclusion of the mystery, Knelman (1999) and Staels (2000) have observed Grace’s split personality to be a rendition of real-life dissociative identity disorder, whereby Knelman (1999: 682) calls it “a misleading and indeed anachronistic reconstruction” and Staels (2000: 437) suggests the manifestation of Mary Whitney to be a coping mechanism that Grace developed as a result of her traumatic past. Schwarz (2013: 311) remains uncommitted to this interpretation as Grace’s narration is too fractured in terms of the multiplicity of her character for there to exist a singular truth to the question of whether she was actually guilty or not. As Grace is the sole reconstructor of her story, Schwarz (2013: 302) points

out that she might very well be a liar, having possibly received help from Jeremiah, the peddler, in the hypnosis session that revealed the identity of Mary Whitney.

1.2 *Alias Grace* as an Antidetective Novel

An *antidetective novel* as opposed to a detective one can be defined as “a high-parodic form that stimulates and tantalizes its readers by disappointing common detective novel expectations” (Tani 1984, as cited in Staels 2000: 447). Applying this term to *Alias Grace*, Staels (2000: 432) places Grace Marks and Dr. Simon Jordan in the roles of suspect and detective respectively while the reader assumes the role of interpreter. As the detective, Dr. Jordan is assigned the task of ascertaining Grace’s guilt in the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, and expected to adhere to the conventions of a traditional detective novel by offering a rational, satisfying conclusion to the mystery, i.e. either by confirming Grace’s guilt or finding the true culprit in the case of her innocence. However, Staels (2000: 432) claims that Dr. Jordan fails at this task owing to the rigidity of his positivist approach to the investigation, whereby he does not acquire the “absolute knowledge” he is seeking through science and reason. Additionally, Dr. Jordan does not possess the creative and intuitive qualities of a detective (Staels 2000: 432), which can be inferred to have left him at a loss in the face of the conclusion to the mystery: that the true culprit was the ghost of Mary Whitney, who possessed Grace’s body and committed the murders herself. Since possession as a conclusive answer is, in terms of the basic concepts of science and reason, an irrational one, the expectations of the traditional detective novel are not met and *Alias Grace* is transformed into an antidetective one.

The failure to provide a rational and thus satisfying conclusion to the mystery is not the only quality of *Alias Grace* as an antidetective novel that Staels (2000: 436) highlights: “In the

antidetective novel, however, *the design* is more important than the story events, and the traditional roles of victim, criminal, and detective are *reversed*" (emphases mine). As the one to recount her life and recollection of the murders, Grace becomes the designer of not only her own story but also that of the narrative as a whole. In her reassignment of the roles in a detective novel, Staels (2000: 436) excludes Grace from this trio by assigning the roles of victim and criminal to Dr. Jordan and the author respectively, leaving the role of detective to the reader. The judgement of the reader is, unlike Dr. Jordan's, not clouded by positivism, which allows them a more comprehensive perspective in terms of interpreting the streaks of irrationality in Grace's narrative. As pointed out by Hutcheon (1988: 156), granting this kind of power to the reader is not uncommon in Atwood's postmodernist works, but the reader's becoming a part of the creation process through their reading comes with significant responsibility. Additionally, allowing the reader to investigate the text as a whole arguably extends Grace's role as narrator from the first-person to the plane of metanarrative, where her person remains wholly undetermined but for the voice that tells the story. Siddall (2004: 95) echoes this notion of Grace becoming a voice as part of a metanarrative, commenting on Grace's decision to recurrently recount the "struggles of working-class women in Britain and Upper Canada /.../ such as her mother, Mary, and Nancy" instead of complying with Dr. Jordan's single-minded quest for the truth.

According to this reassigned dynamic described by Staels (2000: 432), while Grace has been elevated to the voice of the whole narrative, Dr. Jordan has been demoted to a victim, butchered by the author, the criminal, and in turn Grace, who looms above Dr. Jordan's impending doom. Dr. Jordan takes up the task of investigating Grace to advance his career (Schwarz 2013: 313), but his unshakeable confidence in his ability to engineer "a recoverable and accurate narrative" of the murders becomes his detriment once his quest for the "truth" fails

(Siddal 2004: 94). The irrational “truth” revealed in the hypnosis session sends Dr. Jordan into a crisis, marking his failure as a psychiatrist, as he is incapable of recounting the “supernatural ideas” suggested at the session (Schwarz 2013: 313). Arguably, it is Dr. Jordan’s failure to overcome his rigid beliefs and subsequent unravelling that Atwood uses to illustrate the danger of fixating on the notion of a singular truth.

1.3 Atwood’s Philosophy of the Multiplicity of Truth

As outlined by Hollis (1995: 117–120), the question of whether there exists a “single, dominant version of the truth” is characteristic to postmodern irony and has persisted throughout Atwood’s work. In response to this question, Atwood has formed a philosophy of there existing not a true *story* but true *stories*, attributing a quality of multiplicity to the notion of “truth” as a whole. According to this philosophy, one story is in an unextractable relationship with other stories, where each singular story is influenced by all the other stories, but none of the stories are made less true by these influences as they are “based on reality as it is experienced by individuals”, and thus they must all be born witness to (Hollis 1995: 121, 139). However, as Hollis (1995: 129) goes on to elaborate, this philosophy is limited by a physical reality, comprised of some corporeal or material fact, that can be manipulated by these stories, i.e. language, but exists outside them nevertheless. In the case of *Alias Grace*, Atwood herself (1998: 1515) has defined the physical reality existing outside the narrative: “[A]lthough there undoubtedly was a truth—somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery—truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us.” Her statement attributes to the novel the aforementioned quality of multiplicity in terms of the “truth”, which ultimately remains unknowable and, in the form of

Grace's narration, functions as a continuous multi-faceted manipulation of the physical reality of the murders.

When it comes to the realities experienced by women in particular, Atwood proposes that the experiences of women have been forced to remain more grounded in the physical reality than those of men, as men have historically been allowed more liberty to speculate about what lies beyond that physical reality (Ingersoll 1990: 187, as cited in Hollis 1995: 130). However, as is pointed out by Hutcheon (1988: 142), selfhood (which can be understood as a form of personal reality) as defined in our culture by men is still characterized as "coherent, unified, [and] rational". In regard to Atwood's heroines, Hutcheon (1988: 144) proposes the possibility that they are drawn to irony in particular, as it does not cling to the coherent and rational, allowing the women to explore their selfhood in male-unidentified terms. In *Alias Grace*, although the faces Grace adopts and the stories she tells typically adhere to male-defined expectations of her, she eventually finds freedom and rebellion in reconstructing her story to Dr. Jordan (as showed by Goldblatt 1999, Atwood 1998, and Staels 2000), which later crosses the male-defined boundaries of rationality owing to being "possessed" by the ghost of Mary Whitney. Whether it be through possession or a mental health condition, Grace exhibits a "split personality" that can be argued, on a narrative level, to be a device for Atwood to communicate the rigidity of the male-defined restrictions of selfhood and how Grace has, in her inherent multiplicity, succeeded in telling her true story in the context of other true stories whereas Dr. Jordan has unravelled in the face of a true story that deviates from his expectations, which are rooted in male-defined coherence and rationality.

2 EMPIRICAL PART

Applying the ideas expressed by Hollis (1995) and Hutcheon (1988) to *Alias Grace*, an antidetective novel as defined by Staels (2000) and thus postmodernist and ironic in nature, it can be inferred that Grace Marks possesses an acute self-awareness in terms of the narrative she embodies. Moreover, the multiplicity in how others portray Grace and how Grace portrays herself communicates the co-existence of multiple stories that can be understood as “true stories”, which distort each other and the physical reality at their center, i.e. the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. From an outside perspective, Grace’s multiplicity can be interpreted as her having a “split personality”, which can, therefore, be argued to function as a narrative device to convey Atwood’s philosophy of the multiplicity of truth. Moreover, with the understanding that Grace’s assumed power as the voice of the entire narrative exceeds Dr. Jordan’s, whose role as detective has been compromised to that of victim, as indicated by Staels (2000), Grace’s “split personality” can be argued to act as a catalyst for the novel’s transformation into an antidetective novel and consequently Dr. Jordan’s unravelling, for it is the narrative created by the author, i.e. Grace, that he falls victim to, and it is the lack of one singular truth that eludes him. In the following, the empirical part of this thesis will examine three points in the novel that showcase the impact of Grace’s presumed split personality on her relationship with Dr. Jordan and his investigation. These three points include Grace and Dr. Jordan’s first meeting, the recounting of the death of Mary Whitney, and the hypnosis session at the end.

2.1 The Apple of Knowledge

“We are locked into this room together,” (*AG*: 42) Grace remarks, when Dr. Simon Jordan first enters the prison cell and proceeds to introduce himself. The door is locked from the outside, but Dr. Jordan shows no signs of being ill at ease, albeit the keeper had warned him that Grace could lash out (*AG*: 67–8). He wishes Grace good morning and smiles, “presenting an image of goodwill” (*AG*: 68) as he himself describes looking back on the encounter. Dr. Jordan has no reason to be worried, for despite being locked into the room with Grace, he does not view himself as a prisoner or Grace as dangerous, which immediately marks the beginning of his downfall caused by his overconfidence. Although Grace’s remark can be interpreted as mere nervousness at the thought of being locked into a small room with another doctor after previous mistreatment (as indicated in *AG*: 38), the words “we”, “this”, and “together” suggest a forced intimacy created by a narrative trap that cannot be escaped before the story is over. Dr. Jordan does not notice the trap whereas Grace, the voice of the narrative, does.

Dr. Jordan fails to observe Grace objectively already before and during their first meeting. His impressions of Grace are romantic, likening her to a “heroine of a sentimental novel”, a “nun in a cloister”, a “maiden in a towered dungeon”, a “cornered woman” (*AG*: 67–8), attributing to Grace a general quality of helplessness. Ironically, it is in the light that Grace appears as such; once she steps out of the light, the illusions fall away, showing Grace “frankly assessing” Dr. Jordan, “as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny” (*AG*: 68). The changes brought on by the shifting of light coincides with what Hollis (1995: 123) remarks regarding Atwood’s philosophy on truth, “/.../ whose interpretation varies with the ‘shifting light’ or with a shifting perspective”, referencing Atwood’s *True Stories*. While Dr. Jordan does show signs of being unsettled by the revelation in hindsight, warning himself against “imagination and fancy” (*AG*: 69), he does not understand the experience for what it is: an

indication that he has already been eluded by Grace's many faces and will be doomed in his pursuit of discovering the one "real Grace".

However, with regard to Grace "frankly assessing" Dr. Jordan (*AG*: 68), Dr. Jordan is correct in his observation, as Grace critically examines Dr. Jordan immediately upon his arrival:

He's a young man, my own age or a little older, *which is young for a man although not for a woman*, as at my age a woman is an old maid but a man is not an old bachelor until he's fifty, and even then there's still hope for the ladies, *as Mary Whitney used to say*. (*AG*: 41; emphases mine)

Grace's remark "/.../ which is young for a man although not for a woman /.../" displays her quality of being "worldly wise" and "knowledgeable", as described by Goldblatt (1999: 280), which is illustrated by Grace's further comments about Dr. Jordan's "not poor" but also "not fashionable" or "handsome" appearance (*AG*: 41). Grace's reference to Mary Whitney at the end indicates not only that Grace has acquired this worldly knowledge from Mary but Mary is also consistently on Grace's mind, which is supported by similar renditions of what Mary used to or would have said (such as in *AG*: 38). Once Dr. Jordan addresses Grace, however, Grace adopts her face of the "humble servant girl" (Goldblatt 1999: 280), looking down and asking about the other doctor. Dr. Jordan assuredly interprets this as her being frightened, although Grace never responds to even Dr. Jordan's direct question of her being frightened of him (*AG*: 42). Grace's demure behavior allows Dr. Jordan to remain assured and placated, while inwardly Grace is keenly analyzing his possible intentions: "I can't say that I am afraid of him yet. It's too early to tell; too early to tell what he wants. No one comes to see me here unless they want something." (*AG*: 42)

As discussed in the previous chapter, Dr. Jordan's failure as both psychiatrist and detective is caused by his single-minded search for "absolute knowledge" (Staels 2000: 432) and overconfidence in his ability to elicit a singular coherent narrative from Grace (Siddal 2004: 94). This overconfidence manifests as the points of reference Dr. Jordan uses to coax Grace to

talk. Firstly, he alludes to the Book of Job, which Grace recognizes but refuses to respond to while putting on her well-practiced “stupid look” (*AG*: 42–3), deliberately distorting Dr. Jordan’s image of her. Secondly, Dr. Jordan offers Grace an apple as a similarly biblical reference to the Tree of Knowledge, which Grace also recognizes but does not respond to, adopting her “stupid look” again (*AG*: 45). However, once she accepts the apple from Dr. Jordan, she utilizes it in a manner that seems to, again, purposely mislead Dr. Jordan, but this time arguably on a narrative level.

When Dr. Jordan reveals himself to be a psychiatrist, who works “not with bodies, but with minds” (*AG*: 45), Grace immediately hides the apple behind her back as though concealing from him her mind and the knowledge it is supposed to offer to him. At the end of their meeting, Grace puts the apple to her forehead (*AG*: 47), seemingly confirming that the knowledge (or the truth) Dr. Jordan is looking for is indeed all there in her mind. Additionally, since she is no longer hiding the apple, she appears to have conceded to Dr. Jordan’s conditions of talking to him. Dr. Jordan does not realize, however, the significance of Grace’s head being not bare but concealed with a cap. Grace herself makes note of this when Dr. Jordan first enters, looking at her head with a “measuring look”: “However I have my cap on, so there’s nothing he can see” (*AG*: 42). Dr. Jordan is attempting to already see into Grace’s mind, but it is covered and thus hidden from him. Since Grace never removes her cap, her lifting the apple to her forehead is submission only outwardly, misleading Dr. Jordan to think that he has got what he wanted.

Grace never reveals that she understands the symbolism of the apple, making Dr. Jordan’s victory seemingly a private one. However, since Grace does understand, she has deliberately manipulated Dr. Jordan to think of her as simpler than she actually is, already leading him astray on his quest for the truth of the murders. The multiplicity of Grace strikes Dr. Jordan at the very start, considering his aforementioned romantic associations when he first

saw Grace and his outright statement to Grace: “Perhaps you are a liar” (*AG*: 46). Despite this, Dr. Jordan falls victim to his own “imagination and fancy” (*AG*: 69) and fails to notice when Grace is indeed lying, marking the beginning of his failure in his investigation.

2.2 The Truth of Violence

Mary Whitney was Grace’s closest friend, whom Grace describes to have taken young Grace immediately “under her wing” (*AG*: 174) upon the latter’s arrival at Mr. Alderman Parkinson’s house. The girls worked together and slept in the same bed in the attic. Their relationship was one of close friendship, so when Mary became pregnant out of wedlock, which could ruin a young woman’s entire life at the time (as suggested in *AG*: 201), Grace recounts herself being “very distressed on her behalf, and also on mine, for she was the truest and indeed the only friend I had in the world” (*AG*: 201). When Mary died in the aftermath of an abortion, Grace underwent a ten-hour-long episode of hysteria and dissociation, followed by amnesia (*AG*: 208–9). Although Grace’s account of the episode is what Dr. Jordan focuses on, particularly in relating his findings to Reverend Verringer (*AG*: 220), Mary Whitney continues to haunt him. After his meeting with Grace, Dr. Jordan “staggers out into the sunlight”, stunned by the contrast between the bright day and the darkness of the sewing room (*AG*: 216). In fact, it is Grace’s story that has, according to himself, “caught him off guard” and constituted a “dire surprise” in a story that he had thus far been following with “a certain personal pleasure” (*AG*: 216). Dr. Jordan’s reaction indicates that something about Mary Whitney’s story has shaken him, although as a psychiatrist, he should remain calm, collected, and untouched by whatever Grace tells him.

In telling Dr. Jordan about Mary, Grace seems to intentionally focus on the tragic, gruesome mundaneness of Mary's situation. According to Grace, it was not difficult to conceal the abortion, for no one in Mr. Alderman Parkinson's household asked about the details; the women presumed Mary to have died as a result of a miscarriage, "as women frequently did" (*AG*: 206). However, at the time, a pregnancy out of wedlock was sinful and shameful enough, driving the household to suppress the actual cause of Mary's death and claim it was "low fever" (*AG*: 206). Had Mary kept the baby and survived childbirth, her life would still have been ruined, as she did not have any family to turn to and the father of the child who had sworn to marry her abandoned her (*AG*: 201). At Mary's funeral, Grace notes the lack of people present and suspecting that rumors about the real cause of Mary's death had spread, grieves the unfairness of death of her mother as well, who had been "just tossed into the sea" (*AG*: 229).

As pointed out by Siddal (2004: 95), Grace's purpose in telling these grim stories to Dr. Jordan is to give a voice to the struggles of disadvantaged women such as Mary and her mother. The stories born from these struggles are all "true stories", retellings of the physical reality of violence, particularly violence against women. The Atwoodian philosophy in this regard, according to Hollis (1995: 137-9), considers language unable to fully convey the nature of this violence; nevertheless, this violence exists, which is why it is crucial to "bear witness", i.e. listen and take action. In relation to the violence against women, Grace draws Dr. Jordan's attention to the men who commit the violence as well, emphasizing how, similarly to the harm they cause, the perpetrators have not changed in character either. Mary had been with the man because she had believed him different from other men (*AG*: 200), and Grace compares the doctor, who had performed the abortion, to Dr. Bannerling, who had severely mistreated her (*AG*: 38, 203). According to Grace, together, Mary's lover and the doctor had killed her:

“*And you are the first person I have told about the doctor, Sir; but it is my true belief* that it was the doctor that killed her with his knife; him and the gentleman between them. For it is not always the one that strikes the blow, that is the actual murderer; and Mary was done to death by that unknown gentleman, as surely as if he’d taken the knife and plunged it into her body himself.” (AG: 206; emphases mine)

One the one hand, Grace’s mention of Dr. Jordan being the first person to whom she has told the truth about there being a doctor and whom he had reminded her of, combined with the admission “it is my true belief”, appears to communicate trust. On the other, if considered on a narrative level, Grace’s words come across as urgent, which is supported by the fact that Dr. Jordan is the first person Grace has had the chance to talk with at length in a while. Additionally, since Grace and Dr. Jordan stand in opposition in terms of 19th-century patriarchy (Atwood 1998: 1515), Grace might find it crucial to broaden Dr. Jordan’s perspective while she has the chance and he is forced to listen to her. When Dr. Jordan comes to their next meeting, Grace checks whether he has truly been listening to her, pretending to forget where they last left off; Dr. Jordan, however, remembers, as Mary Whitney proves to still be on his mind (AG: 228).

As previously discussed, following his meeting with Grace, Dr. Jordan is fairly shaken by what Grace told him. Attempting to understand his feelings, he reaches the following conclusion:

Why has this account of a death affected him so strongly? Of course he’s known that such things happen; such doctors do exist, and it isn’t as if he’s never seen a dead woman. He’s seen a great many of them; but they have been so thoroughly dead. *They have been specimens. He has never caught them, as it were, in the act.* This Mary Whitney, not yet – what? Seventeen? A young girl. Deplorable! He would like to wash his hands. (AG: 216; emphasis mine)

Dr. Jordan’s distress suggests that Grace’s effort has proven fruitful in that it has upset Dr. Jordan, forcing him to personally connect with Mary as a victim, more specifically a woman, who has been subjected to a violence society considers commonplace. In terms of Grace’s “split personality”, Grace employs her multiplicity to tell the stories shared by many and call Dr. Jordan to bear witness to the violence lying at the center of these stories. Although Dr. Jordan remains haunted by Grace’s story throughout the day, wondering why Grace must be confined

to a cell while he can walk freely (*AG*: 216), he has slipped back into his old mindset by the evening, fondly recalling a tumble with one of his childhood household's maids, where he was in a position of power (*AG*: 218), and entertaining lewd thoughts about one of the Governor's young daughters (*AG*: 225). This, however, is not a failure on Grace's part, for the physical reality of violence continues to exist. The fault lies in Dr. Jordan, whose focus remains fixed on practical questions, such as those of Grace's condition and Mary's existence (*AG*: 219-20). He remains unwilling to consider the large scope of stories and truths centered around the same type of violence, which emphasizes his failure as a psychiatrist in terms of truly understanding the essence of Grace's suffering.

2.3 “And Somebody Else Comes in”

As mentioned in chapter 2.2., in the aftermath of Mary Whitney's death, Grace collapsed and experienced an episode of hysteria and dissociation. Dissociation in particular is suggested by Grace as having asking others “where Grace had gone” (*AG*: 208), indicating that Grace had felt removed from her body and sense of self. Dr. Jordan, however, defines it as “hysterics, mixed with what would appear to have been somnambulism”, when sharing his findings with Reverend Verringer (*AG*: 220). The episode was marked by “two long sleeps”, but despite being told she was awake during the time in between, Grace does not remember anything she said or did (*AG*: 209). While the people tending to her wrote the episode off as shock, Grace expresses to Dr. Jordan that her amnesia had “worried” her (*AG*: 208–9). The revelation fascinates Dr. Jordan, especially because this episode of a unique and complete loss of memory starkly contrasts with Grace's otherwise excellent recollection, where “every button and candle-end seems accounted for” (*AG*: 215). At the same time, the contrast seems suspicious, which is not

helped by the fact that Mary Whitney is no longer there to confirm or deny anything (*AG*: 215–6). Even once Dr. Jordan locates Mary’s grave, he remains unconvinced, likening the “physical token” of the grave to that of a magician’s prop: “A magician produces a coin from a hat, and because it’s a real coin and a real hat, the audience believes that the illusion too is real” (*AG*: 451).

Arguably, this musing of Dr. Jordan foreshadows the hypnosis session that is carried out by Dr. Jerome DuPont, also known as Jeremiah the Peddler, to ascertain Grace’s guilt or innocence. Before the session, Dr. Jordan is experiencing conflicting emotions, sneering outwardly whereas inwardly he is “eager as a schoolboy at a carnival”, albeit the word “carnival” emphasizes that, despite his earnestness, Dr. Jordan is not taking the event seriously (*AG*: 459–60). However, as the session goes on, he becomes increasingly more derailed and unsettled. When Grace claims herself to not be Grace, and Mrs. Quennell fuels the idea that a spirit has possessed her, not-Grace only has to start singing *The Rose of Tralee*, a song beloved by Mary Whitney, for Simon to independently draw the conclusion: “Not Mary /.../ Not Mary Whitney” (*AG*: 196, 468). That being said, he remains undecided, telling Grace to “stop playing tricks” and asking whether she is “telling the truth” (*AG*: 468).

When Grace first enters the room with Dr. DuPont, the first thing Dr. Jordan notices is Grace’s uncovered head (*AG*: 460). In the context of Grace and Dr. Jordan’s first meeting, discussed in chapter 2.1, Grace removing her cap seems to indicate that she is finally willing to bare her mind to him and speak the full truth. For Dr. Jordan, however, the lack of the cap does not possess the same significance as it might for Grace. During their first meeting, Dr. Jordan perceived Grace lifting the apple to her forehead as a sincere submission whereas Grace’s head had been covered, still obscuring the true depths of her mind. Now, Grace enters with her head bare, but as she “falls asleep”, Dr. DuPont places a veil over it (*AG*: 462). The difference is,

however, that albeit the head is covered, it is emphasized in its entirety: “Now there’s only a head, with the merest contour of a face behind it” (*AG*: 462). From the emphasis on the head, it can be inferred that the mind is still bared, but with the face obscured, it is uncertain who exactly is speaking. As a result, another voice is able to speak from Grace’s mouth. Although it is agreed upon that the speaker is the ghost of Mary Whitney, it is Dr. Jordan who comes to that conclusion, without not-Grace ever explicitly confirming or denying it. Plausibly, it is not far-fetched, considering it was the name “Mary Whitney” that Grace used when escaping with McDermott.

Not-Grace cements the idea that it is, in fact, Mary Whitney, who is speaking, by mentioning details that Dr. Jordan specifically knows from Grace’s story about Mary. As previously mentioned, not-Grace sings *The Rose of Tralee*, which is a song Dr. Jordan evidently remembers Mary liked, and she makes a direct reference to Grace forgetting to open the window when Mary died to let out her spirit (*AG*: 207, 468). Considering Dr. Jordan’s aforementioned comment about the unreliability of physical tokens (*AG*: 451), one might substitute the hat and coin for a grave and shroud and achieve a similar result. This leaves Dr. Jerome DuPont in the role of a magician.

Schwarz (2013: 305) highlights the untrustworthiness of Dr. DuPont’s character, pointing to his many aliases, prior acquaintance with Grace, and his suggestion for them to travel together. Dr. DuPont, or rather Jeremiah, proposes Grace could become a “medical clairvoyant”, adding: “/.../ I would teach you how, and instruct you in what to say, and put you in trances /.../” (*AG*: 311). Additionally, Jeremiah recounts how he used to travel with another woman, who would “have a muslin veil put over her, and go into a trance, and speak in a hollow voice” (*AG*: 310). Taking into account the muslin veil and hollow voice, the similarities between Jeremiah’s words and the hypnosis session are prominent. Consequently, there is a strong

possibility that Jeremiah and Grace are conspiring to devise a ruse that would absolve Grace of any guilt, whether it be by claiming she was taken over by a spirit or possesses a “double consciousness” (as mentioned by Dr. DuPont in *AG*: 470–471).

While Staels (2000: 437, 440–441) explicitly attributes dissociative identity disorder to Grace, she also defines Mary Whitney as the “suppressed part” of Grace or her “other voice”. This “other voice” tends to be more honest and often crude, wishing to say something completely different from what the outwardly demure Grace Marks would never say. When Grace is assaulted by Dr. Bannerling, she describes how Mary Whitney would have told the doctor: “Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard,” while Grace herself is powerless to fight back with the same ferocity (*AG*: 38). Regardless of whether it is truly the ghost of Mary Whitney speaking during the hypnosis session, she begs to be heard, accusing Dr. Jordan: “You’re the same, you won’t listen to me, you don’t believe me, you want it your own way, you won’t hear...” (*AG*: 468) On a narrative level, Grace is in her rawest form, split into multiples. She is split into Grace Marks and Mary Whitney but also comprises the stories of the women whose stories she has recounted to Dr. Jordan, which he has refused to hear. The supernatural nature of the hypnosis session unmoors Dr. Jordan completely as it clashes with his positivist worldview. In the aftermath, he admits his defeat:

However, the fact is that *he can't state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him.* She glides ahead of him, just out of his grasp, turning her head to see if he's still following. (*AG*: 473; emphasis mine)

With Grace as the embodiment of the narrative and split into multiples, she is, in fact, the truth, i.e. the collection of all the multiple stories all centered around the same physical reality.

Dr. Jordan, who is unable to cope with what he has experienced, descends into a frenzied state, experiencing disconcerting dreams of being killed and buried (*AG*. 476), and he eventually escapes Grace. His escape marks his failure as both a psychiatrist and the detective in this story,

as he has neither cracked the true nature of Grace nor procured a singular, rational answer to the mystery of the murders.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored an alternative interpretation to the alleged “split personality” of Grace Marks, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s 1996 historical novel *Alias Grace*, which is a fictional retelling of the 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Prosecuted at only sixteen years of age as an accomplice in the murders alongside James McDermott, Grace Marks has remained an elusive figure throughout history not only due to the uncertainty surrounding the true extent of her part in the murders but also the different labels she has acquired as a result of intense public scrutiny. As opinions of Grace Marks vary from her being an innocent, falsely prosecuted girl to her having gleefully committed the murders, there have been different theories about her true personality. This thesis, however, focuses solely on Grace’s depiction in the novel. In *Alias Grace*, the differences in public perception of Grace still exist, but her “split personality” primarily stems from her exhibiting a secondary personality by the name of her deceased friend Mary Whitney or, alternatively, being possessed by the latter’s spirit. As previous research has studied Grace’s split personality primarily from a psychoanalytical perspective, this thesis has sought to fill a research gap by exploring it as a narrative device to drive a metanarrative shaped by a philosophy of truth characteristic to Atwood’s works.

On the basis of the scholarship on Atwood, this thesis has defined Atwood’s philosophy of truth to be centered around the multiplicity of truth. According to this philosophy, truth is not absolute but consists of several truths that may differ in form but communicate the same physical reality that exists outside of language. The physical reality that this thesis has found the stories contained within *Alias Grace* to communicate is the violence experienced by and committed against women. These stories are experienced by struggling working-class women such as Grace

Marks herself but also her mother, Mary Whitney, and others. This thesis has found that Grace assumes the role of the (meta)narrative of *Alias Grace* to give a voice to the hardships of women in a 19th-century patriarchal society. In her conversations with Dr. Simon Jordan, a representative of the 19th-century patriarchy as an educated middle-class man, Grace is able to transcend her disadvantaged position through relating these hardships and reconstructing her own story on her own terms.

This thesis has analyzed Grace's elevation to the plane of metanarrative in the context of *Alias Grace* as an antidetective novel, whereby the thesis has primarily relied on the research of Staels (2000). Grace is able to exist as part of the metanarrative due to her "split personality", which, if interpreted as a narrative tool, allows her to reconstruct and switch between faces and stories to communicate multiple truths as part of a larger truth regarding the violence against women, thus adhering to the Atwoodian philosophy of truth. Additionally, this thesis has found Grace's split personality to be the catalyst to *Alias Grace* transforming from a plausibly traditional detective novel into an antidetective one, whereby there exists no singular satisfactory or rational answer to the mystery of the murders. Dr. Jordan, who fills the role of detective, becomes the victim as the truth eludes him; on his quest to find an absolute truth regarding Grace Marks, he cannot cope with the actual multiple nature of truth and must escape as part of his unravelling at the end of the novel when the "truth", supernatural and irrational, is revealed.

In the empirical part, this thesis has analyzed the following three events in the novel by the method of close reading: Grace and Dr. Jordan's first meeting, Mary Whitney's death, and the hypnosis session conducted by Dr. DuPont. In summary, this thesis has found that already in his first meeting with Grace, Dr. Jordan is doomed to fail on his quest for the truth due to his overconfidence and inability to see through Grace's lies and illusions. Particular significance

lies in the apple that Dr. Jordan offers to Grace as a gift, which Grace puts to her forehead in a misleading sign of submission. The other two events analyzed in the empirical part illustrate Dr. Jordan's continued downfall until his ultimate failure and escape following the hypnosis session.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Alexandra Tuuling

The Multiplicity of Truth in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

(Tõdede paljusus Margaret Atwoodi romaanis „Alias Grace“)

Bakalaureusetöö

2023

Lehekülgede arv: 32

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö käsitleb alternatiivset vaatenurka Margaret Atwoodi romaani „Alias Grace“ (1996) peategelase Grace Marksi niinimetatud „lõhestunud isiksusele“. Antud töö peamine eesmärk on uurida Grace'i „lõhestunud isiksuse“ potentsiaali narratiivse vahendina vahendamaks Atwoodi loomingule iseloomulikku filosoofiat tõest, mille järgselt pole „tõde“ absoluutne, vaid seda iseloomustab paljusus, st tõde koosneb mitmest erinevast, ent sama reaalsust kujutavast tõest.

Bakalaureusetöö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kirjandusülevaatest, empiirilisest osast ja kokkuvõttest. Kirjandusülevaade koosneb kolmest osast, andes ülevaate varasematest Grace'i kui „lõhestunud isiksuse“ tõlgendustest ning käsitledes „Alias Grace'i“ kui postmodernistlikult iroonilist „antidetektiivromaan“ ja Atwoodi filosoofiat tõdede paljususest. Sarnaselt kirjandusülevaatele on empiiriline osa jaotatud samuti kolmeks osaks, kus on analüüsitud Grace'i „lõhestunud isiksuse“ ilmumist ja mõju järgneva kolme romaanis aset leidva sündmuse alusel: Grace'i ja Dr. Jordani esimene kohtumine, Mary Whitney' surm ja Dr. DuPonti läbiviidud hüpnosisessioon. Kokkuvõttes on välja toodud uurimuse tulemused.

Märksõnad: Margaret Atwood, „Alias Grace“, lõhestunud isiksus, antidetektiivromaan

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