

Power, Knowledge, and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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Abstract:

This article analyses Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of power, as articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976). The study argues that Atwood's novel exemplifies Foucault's conception of power as productive, relational, and capillary, rather than merely repressive. It explores how institutional mechanisms—such as the prison's disciplinary apparatus, the psychiatric interview as a confessional technology, and discourses surrounding the hysterical female body—construct Grace Marks's identity as a criminal subject while simultaneously revealing sites of resistance.

The analysis begins with Foucault's theories of panopticism and disciplinary power, illustrating how the Kingston Penitentiary enforces constant visibility and self-regulation on Grace, transforming her into a "docile body" through labour like quilting. This regime produces knowledge about her criminality via examinations and classifications, mirroring Foucault's "power/knowledge" nexus. The psychiatric sessions with Dr. Simon Jordan further demonstrate confessional rituals, where Grace is compelled to produce "truth" about her memories, sexuality, and the murders. However, these encounters expose power's circulation: Simon's authority unravels as he becomes entangled in his own desires, highlighting the instability of the medical gaze.

Central to the study is the intersection of power with gender and sexuality. Grace's body is situated within Victorian discourses, linking her alleged madness to sexual exploitation and class vulnerability. Yet, Atwood portrays resistance through Grace's narrative strategies—selective silence, fragmented storytelling, and the symbolic quilting of her "Tree of Paradise"—which subvert attempts to fix her identity. The novel thus critiques the production of truth, showing how subjects can reconfigure power relations creatively.

Keywords: power/knowledge, resistance, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) is a masterful work of historical fiction that reimagines the infamous 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery in Upper Canada, focusing on the enigmatic figure of Grace Marks, a 16-year-old Irish immigrant servant convicted as an accessory. Drawing on real historical records, Atwood crafts a postmodern narrative that alternates between Grace's first-person recollections and third-person perspectives, particularly those of Dr. Simon Jordan, a young psychiatrist attempting to unravel her "amnesia" through proto-psychoanalytic interviews in the Kingston Penitentiary.

Critically, the novel interrogates themes of power, gender, class, and truth production in Victorian society. Atwood exposes the intersections of patriarchy and colonialism, portraying Grace as a subaltern figure whose voice is mediated through male authorities—doctors, lawyers, and journalists—who impose narratives of madness, criminality, or innocence upon her. Influenced by feminist theory, the text challenges the reliability of historical "facts," using motifs like quilting to symbolise fragmented identity

and female agency amid oppression. The novel can be read through lenses like Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and confession, highlighting how institutions produce "docile bodies" and coerced truths.

As mentioned, the novel centres on Grace's imprisonment and her encounters with Dr. Simon Jordan, an American psychiatrist who interviews her in hopes of determining her sanity and possible innocence. Through fragmented narration, quilting metaphors, and shifting identities, Atwood interrogates how power operates not merely as repression but as a productive force that constitutes subjects, truths, and bodies. Michel Foucault's theories—particularly those in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976)—provide a powerful lens for this critique. Foucault argues that power is capillary, relational, and inseparable from knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*); it produces "docile bodies," regulates populations through biopower, and extracts truth through confessional discourses. In *Alias Grace*, these mechanisms manifest in the penitentiary, the psychiatric interview, gendered and classed bodies, and the contested narratives of guilt and innocence. Ultimately, while power thoroughly constitutes Grace as a subject, the novel reveals spaces of resistance through silence, storytelling, and bodily ambiguity.

CHARACTERISATION OF GRACE MARKS

Atwood's characterisation of Grace is a deliberate exercise in postmodern ambiguity, blending historical realism with psychological depth to explore themes of power, gender, class, and narrative unreliability. Through fragmented narration, symbolic motifs, and strategic silences, Atwood constructs Grace not as a fixed entity but as a fluid subject shaped by societal discourses, resisting easy categorization as victim, villain, or heroine.

At the heart of Grace's characterisation is her narrative voice, which dominates much of the novel in first-person sections. This voice is poised, articulate, and disarmingly intelligent, contrasting sharply with her working-class origins and the era's expectations of female subservience. Grace's recounting of her life—from poverty in Ireland, abusive family dynamics, to exploitation in Canada—reveals a keen observer of social hierarchies. For instance, she notes the hypocrisy of the upper classes: "It was the custom for such girls as Nancy to be hired only if unmarried, and to be dismissed when they wed; but the rules were different, it appeared, for Mr. Kinnear" (227). This insight positions Grace as a critic of gender and class inequities, yet her tone remains detached, almost performative, suggesting a calculated self-presentation. Critics like Coral Ann Howells argue that this voice embodies feminist resistance, allowing Grace to "quilt" her story from scraps of experience, much like the quilts she sews, symbolizing agency amid fragmentation (Howells 142).

Atwood employs ambiguity to complicate Grace's character, refusing to resolve her guilt or innocence. Grace claims amnesia regarding the murders, but hints of dissociation—possibly embodying her deceased friend Mary Whitney—suggest psychological complexity. This aligns with Victorian notions of female hysteria, critiqued in the novel through Dr. Simon Jordan's psychiatric interviews. Jordan views Grace as a puzzle to solve, objectifying her as "a celebrated murderess" (43), but Grace subverts his gaze by offering selective truths and dreams that blur reality and fiction. Her famous quip, "I have no notion of what is in my own mind" (103), uncovers this elusiveness, inviting readers to question whether her "forgetting" is genuine trauma or manipulative strategy. From a Foucauldian perspective, as explored in broader analyses of the novel, Grace's characterisation illustrates how power produces subjects through confessional discourses; she is "known" via prison records, medical exams, and sensational newspapers, yet she resists total legibility.

Gender plays a pivotal role in Grace's portrayal, highlighting the vulnerabilities of women in 19th-century patriarchal structures. As a servant, Grace endures sexual exploitation, from her father's abuse to Kinnear's

advances and James McDermott's violence. Atwood uses these elements to depict Grace as a product of systemic oppression, her body a site of contested ownership. However, Grace's resilience shines through subtle acts of rebellion, such as her ironic compliance in prison or her final quilt, the "Tree of Paradise," which weaves together fabrics from her oppressors' lives: "And so we will all be together" (460). This act transforms victimhood into creative defiance, echoing feminist readings that see Grace as a subversive figure who reclaims narrative control (Stael 428).

Critically, Atwood's characterisation critiques the commodification of female stories. Grace becomes a spectacle—ogled by tourists, dissected by doctors—mirroring how historical women like her were reduced to archetypes. Yet, by ending the novel without closure, Atwood empowers Grace's ambiguity, challenging readers to confront their own biases in interpreting "truth." In comparison to Atwood's other works, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Grace prefigures resilient female narrators who navigate dystopian constraints through language and memory.

In sum, *Grace Marks* is characterised as a prism reflecting societal power dynamics, her opacity a deliberate narrative strategy that defies resolution. Atwood's portrayal not only humanizes a historical figure but also interrogates the ethics of storytelling, making *Alias Grace* a profound study in character complexity.

QUILTING AS A SYMBOL

In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), quilting serves as a symbol that encapsulates themes of fragmentation, reconstruction, agency, and resistance within the oppressive structures of Victorian society. Grace Marks, the protagonist—a convicted murderess imprisoned in the Kingston Penitentiary—engages in quilting as part of her "model prisoner" routine, transforming a mundane, disciplinary activity into a profound metaphor for her psychological and narrative processes. Through quilting, Atwood critiques gender roles, power dynamics, and the construction of identity, drawing on the historical tradition of women's needlework as a form of subversive expression. The symbolism evolves across the novel, culminating in Grace's final quilt, which weaves together personal history, trauma, and defiance.

Quilting first appears as a tool of disciplinary power, aligning with the novel's Foucauldian undertones. In prison, Grace is assigned sewing tasks to render her a "docile body," productive and contained. She reflects on this irony: "They say I am a good seamstress, and so I am; and that is why I am allowed to work here, in the Governor's wife's own parlour, as a favour" (5). This echoes the historical context where quilting was both a domestic skill expected of women and a rehabilitative labour in institutions. Symbolically, the act of piecing fabric mirrors the fragmentation of Grace's life: her immigrant hardships, abusive family, exploitative employment, and the traumatic murders. Each stitch represents an attempt to impose order on chaos, much like the psychiatric interviews with Dr. Simon Jordan, who seeks to "piece together" her fragmented memories. However, quilting subverts this control; it becomes a space where Grace exercises autonomy, selecting patterns and fabrics that encode her story.

The novel's quilts are laden with symbolic patterns drawn from Victorian quilting traditions, each reflecting Grace's inner world. Early on, Grace describes common patterns like "Log Cabin," "Pandora's Box," and "Attic Windows," which evoke confinement, hidden dangers, and glimpses of escape (95-96). These names foreshadow her narrative strategy: just as quilts hide seams and batting beneath a unified surface, Grace conceals truths beneath layers of selective storytelling. Quilting symbolises the female oral tradition, where women "stitch" narratives excluded from official histories. As a servant and prisoner, Grace's voice is marginalized, but through quilting, she metaphorically "sews" her testimony. Critics like Hilde Stael interpret this as a feminist reclamation: "Quilting functions as a metaphor for the piecing together of a female self in a patriarchal context" (Stael 433).

The pinnacle of quilting symbolism is Grace's final creation, the "Tree of Paradise" quilt, which she makes after her pardon for an imagined recipient—perhaps a daughter or herself. This quilt incorporates charged fabrics: a white piece from Mary Whitney's petticoat (symbolising lost innocence and friendship), a faded yellow from Grace's prison nightdress (representing incarceration), and a pink-and-white floral from Nancy Montgomery's dress (evoking the murder victim and Grace's guilt or complicity). Grace declares, "I've decided to call the pattern the Tree of Paradise ... And so we will all be together" (459-60). Here, the quilt symbolizes reconciliation and wholeness amid fragmentation. The "Tree of Paradise" alludes to the biblical Eden, but Atwood inverts it: rather than expulsion, it suggests a reclaimed paradise through creative synthesis. The tree's branches and roots mirror Grace's branching narratives—truths, lies, and omissions—that defy singular interpretation. Symbolically, it resists the novel's power structures: the law that convicts her, the psychiatry that pathologizes her, and the society that commodifies her as a "celebrated murderess."

Furthermore, quilting embodies resistance and agency. In a world where Grace's body is scrutinized and controlled—through medical exams, public spectacles, and sexual exploitation—quilting allows her to control material fragments, turning oppression into art. This aligns with feminist readings, such as those by Coral Ann Howells, who notes that Atwood uses quilting to "explore the connections between women's creativity and their social constraints" (Howells 147). Grace's quilts are not passive; they are active reconstructions, challenging the reader to "piece together" her guilt or innocence, much like the ambiguous historical records Atwood draws upon.

Quilting in *Alias Grace* is a rich symbol of piecing together identity from societal scraps. It critiques the fragmentation imposed by class, gender, and institutional power while celebrating women's subtle defiance. Through this motif, Atwood not only humanizes Grace but also invites readers to question how stories—and selves—are stitched into coherence. The symbolism endures as a testament to resilience, transforming needlework from drudgery to a narrative weapon.

DISCIPLINARY POWER AND THE PENITENTIARY

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* traces the emergence of modern penalty from spectacular corporal punishment to disciplinary institutions that produce "docile bodies" through surveillance, routine, and examination. The prison, exemplified by Bentham's Panopticon, induces self-discipline: "the inmates...[are] caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" because they internalize the possibility of constant observation (Foucault, *Discipline* 202–03).

Atwood's Kingston Penitentiary mirrors this architecture. Grace describes a regime of meticulous timetables, uniforms, labour, and surveillance that renders prisoners visible and calculable. She notes the Governor's wife's visitors peering at her "as if I were a goldfish in a bowl" (Atwood 5), evoking the Panopticon's "unequal gaze." The matrons and warders enforce "good behaviour" through rewards (better food, sewing privileges) and punishments (solitary confinement, reduced rations). Grace learns to perform docility: "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" (6). This self-policing produces the "model prisoner," exactly the subject Foucault describes—one whose soul becomes "the prison of the body" (Foucault, *Discipline* 30).

The novel further illustrates how disciplinary power extends beyond the prison walls. Grace's earlier life as a servant already subjected her to hierarchical observation: masters watched servants, men watched women, the wealthy watched the poor. Her arrival in Canada and entry into domestic service replicate the "art of distributions" Foucault outlines—bodies assigned to specific spaces and functions (Foucault,

Discipline 141–49). The murders occur within this matrix of class, gender, and sexual power, where servants' bodies are economically and erotically exploited.

PSYCHIATRIC POWER, CONFESSION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF TRUTH

Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* that the Christian confessional evolved into a secular scientific technique for producing truth about the self, especially the sexual self. Confession is a ritual of power: “one does not confess without the presence...of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it” (Foucault, *History* 61). The listener (priest, doctor, judge) holds interpretive power; the speaker produces “truth” that reinforces the listener's authority.

Dr. Simon Jordan embodies this figure. His interviews with Grace constitute a modern confessional apparatus. He brings objects (a potato, a button) to trigger memory, takes exhaustive notes, and interprets her silences and dreams. Grace is acutely aware of the power imbalance: “He sits across from me...He is reading aloud from my confession” (Atwood 41). She repeatedly insists, “That is not really my Confession...It was only what the lawyer told me to say” (Atwood 42), exposing how her “truth” was already constructed by legal discourse. Jordan's desire to “cure” her or elicit a coherent narrative mirrors the psychiatric will-to-knowledge that Foucault links to the deployment of sexuality.

Grace's possible dissociative identity (the emergence of “Mary Whitney”) further complicates this. When Mary speaks through Grace during hypnosis, confessing to Nancy's murder (“The kerchief killed her. Hands held it” [Atwood 444]), the novel parodies the confessional demand for a singular, accountable subject. Foucault notes that the sciences of the abnormal required the abnormal subject to speak the truth of her abnormality (*History* 60–67). Jordan's eventual breakdown—his erotic obsession with Grace, his flight to Europe—reveals the instability of the “expert” position. Power circulates; the doctor becomes the object of his own investigative gaze.

The novel also engages Foucault's ideas on madness. In *Madness and Civilization* (though less directly referenced here), Foucault shows how madness is produced by the psychiatric gaze that isolates and classifies. Grace's periods in the asylum expose her to electrotherapy and moral treatment, techniques designed to realign the soul through the body. Her “hysteria” or “double consciousness” is never definitively diagnosed, keeping her in a liminal state that serves both medical curiosity and the possibility of pardon.

GENDER, CLASS, AND BIOPOWER ON THE FEMALE BODY

Foucault's concept of biopower—the administration of life at the level of populations—operates through sexuality, reproduction, and the regulation of bodies. In *Alias Grace*, working-class female bodies are sites of intense biopolitical investment. Servants like Grace and Mary Whitney are economically productive yet sexually available; their bodies are both labour power and objects of desire. Mary's botched abortion and death illustrate the lethal consequences of clandestine reproductive control under Victorian sexual morality.

Grace reflects on the vulnerability of servant girls: “We were like the jellyfish...mostly water” when describing upper-class ladies, but the metaphor rebounds on herself—beautiful, translucent, easily discarded (Atwood 21–22). Upper-class women, too, are regulated through marriage and domesticity, yet they wield limited power over servants. The Governor's wife collects Grace as a celebrity murderess, turning her into a domestic spectacle while maintaining class distance.

The murders themselves are entangled with sexual jealousy, class resentment, and bodily violation. Nancy's pregnancy threatens Kinnear's household economy and reputation; McDermott's violence is explicitly sexualized. Atwood suggests that the crimes emerge from the very power relations Foucault describes: the intersection of sovereign (master's) power and emerging disciplinary/biopolitical mechanisms.

Grace's own body becomes a battleground. Her menstruation, headaches, and possible pregnancies are scrutinized. During hypnosis, the exposure of her body (and Mary's voice) enacts a form of epistemic rape. Jordan's erotic dreams and eventual breakdown show how the disciplinary gaze can turn back on the observer, destabilizing masculine scientific rationality.

DISCOURSE, NARRATIVE, AND RESISTANCE

Foucault insists that "where there is power, there is resistance" (*History* 95). Resistance is not exterior to power but immanent within it. In *Alias Grace*, Grace resists through narrative control and strategic silence. She quilts literal and metaphorical fragments—piecing together identity the way she pieces cloth—symbolising the archaeological reconstruction of the self from dominant discourses. The Tree of Paradise quilt pattern she imagines for herself represents both lost innocence and subversive creativity.

Her repeated statement, "how can I be all of these different things at once?" (23) highlights the discursive production of subjectivity. By refusing a single coherent self, Grace frustrates Jordan's (and society's) demand for a stable confessing subject. Her alias—"Grace Marks" itself a constructed identity—further undermines fixed truth. Silence, often read as repression, becomes tactical: "I have learned to keep my own counsel" (102). Foucault notes that silences "are less the absolute limit of discourse...than an element that functions alongside the things said" (*History* 27). Grace's silences and selective revelations produce uncertainty that protects her from definitive condemnation.

The novel's ambiguous ending—Grace's possible marriage, her continued uncertainty about the murders—refuses closure. Atwood thus performs a Foucauldian genealogy: exposing how "truth" about Grace Marks was (and remains) an effect of power relations rather than an objective fact.

CONCLUSION

Alias Grace vividly dramatizes Foucault's central insight that power is productive. The penitentiary produces the docile prisoner; the psychiatric interview produces the confessing madwoman or hysteric; discourses of class, gender, and sexuality produce the criminal servant girl. Yet the novel never presents Grace as merely passive. Through her narration, quilting, and strategic ambiguities, she exercises a counter-power that fragments the very truths power seeks to impose. By making Grace both subject and object of multiple gazes, Atwood demonstrates that subjectivity itself is a site of ongoing struggle. In an era when women's voices, especially those of the working class and the incarcerated, remain contested, *Alias Grace* remains a powerful reminder that the production of truth is always also the production of subjection—and that resistance begins with questioning who gets to tell the story.

In conclusion, *Alias Grace* not only dramatizes Foucault's theories but also emphasises their relevance to contemporary issues of surveillance and confession. By blending historical fiction with theoretical critique, Atwood reveals power's pervasiveness and the potential for agency within it.

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