

Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object in Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Cristie March

Volume 22, Number 2, Summer 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc122_2art05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)
1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

March, C. (1997). Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object in Atwood's *Alias Grace*. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22(2), 66–82.

Article abstract

Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace*, by exploring the story of Grace Marks through an authorial mosaic that includes multiple characters' points of view, as well as journal entries, letters, and other bits of prose and journalism relevant to her trial, invites a reading through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia. In particular, various objects throughout *Alias Grace* provide instances of heteroglossic intersection, especially during the exchanges between Grace and Dr. Jordan and over the course of her trial. The irresolution created by competing systems of coding in these instances corresponds to what some have labelled Atwood's use of "feminist-dialogic" speech as a resistant language mode. This frustrated speech and the concept of heteroglossia allow for readings of objects within the novel as both closed and opened, ultimately offering a multiplicity of readings that creates a text as unbounded as the main character.

CRIMSON SILKS AND NEW POTATOES: THE HETEROGLOSSIC POWER OF THE OBJECT ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

Cristie March

Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *Alias Grace*, explores the story of Grace Marks through an authorial mosaic that includes several characters' points of view as well as journal entries, letters, and bits of prose and poetry relevant to Grace's trial and the double murder of which she was accused.¹ This multitude of voices invites a reading through Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, the overlapping layers of language that at once connect and isolate character/author, reader/author, character/character, and that allow an exploration of the means by which characters understand and misunderstand one another in their attempts to establish meaningfully verbal communications. In *Alias Grace*, physical objects provide a heteroglossic intersection, particularly during the interviews between Grace and Dr. Simon Jordan. The object occupies a linguistic space that confounds the significance both characters try to attach to it, creating a distance that resists their ability to know each other. This inability to know, to maintain a connection, renders them voiceless in the sense that the words each speaks cannot affect them, and provide only dead ends where language fails to communicate. Yet these dead ends establish a means for creating other manifestations of heteroglossia, as the frustration over meaning translates into a deferred desire for the speaker one cannot understand, perpetuating the heteroglossic nature of language and object.

In his essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin outlines some aspects of heteroglossia relevant to this essay, although he is mostly concerned with the effect of the authorial voice in the novel, primarily its function as an additional layering

of meaning within any characterization or discourse that occurs within the text. For instance, he notes that

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different interactions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. (324)

However, I wish to employ a working definition of heteroglossia that is not so much concentrated on the relationship of author, language, and text, as on character, language, and object. Therefore, while much of Bakhtin's discussion of object in text is relevant, I am focusing on the ways characters linguistically interact. Michael Holquist, editor of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, provides a glossed conceptualization of heteroglossia in its most basic sense that encompasses this interaction. He defines heteroglossia as

The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions — social, historical, meteorological, physiological — that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. (428)

In *Alias Grace*, this irresolution manifests itself in the position of objects as intersections of heteroglossic meaning for characters' speech. These intersections, however, are not moments in which meaningful communications occur, but moments of disjointed interaction, during which characters misunderstand one another's intentions and meaning when speaking about the objects around which they themselves centre. As Bakhtin notes, "no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and its speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object,

the same theme" (276). This elasticity becomes evident in the connections characters and objects have within the text, and the significations these characters attach to objects as a means of negotiating intersections between language and individuals.

One object, or set of objects, that becomes such an intersection is Nancy's clothing, particularly after she is murdered. Grace, a maid-of-all-work, first meets her during an auction at which Nancy has bought "some very pretty crimson silk . . . and some fine gloves" (200) and has "a lovely parasol, pink in colour" (201). When Grace arrives at the Kinnear house, she describes Nancy as a "gracefully dressed lady with a triple flounce" in "a bonnet the same pale colour as her dress" (208). Many of Grace's subsequent descriptions of Nancy also focus on clothing or jewelry. It becomes clear, too, that Nancy is particularly concerned with her own attire. She lends Grace clothing fit for church, but wants Grace "to give the dress and bonnet back that very day, as she was concerned that they might get soiled" (254). The importance of Nancy's clothing in Grace's account sets up a value judgement of both Nancy and Grace in their relationship with each other. Grace says that Nancy appears to be a *lady*, complete with gloves, silks, and gold earrings. The use of "lady" creates a hierarchical system of labour in which Nancy is mistress and Grace is servant. Yet this hierarchy is already in place by virtue of the fact that Nancy, as the housekeeper, is located socially above Grace. Referring to Nancy as a "lady" reveals an irony of which Grace is both cognizant and unaware. She often questions Nancy's possession of this fine clothing; for instance, Grace wonders "what a housekeeper would be wanting with a dress like that [crimson silk]" (200), or how she could afford her gold earrings "on the salary of a housekeeper" (210). She also notes that Nancy's wearing of the clothes seems misplaced or inappropriate: "it was as if she'd put on her best clothes to go out front and cut the flowers" (208). Grace's observations clash with the social implications of being a "lady." If Nancy were in fact a lady, Grace would not have reason to question. However, when Grace discovers Nancy's position as Mr. Kinnear's mistress, her use of "lady" becomes farcical as Nancy tries desperately to be the lady of the house but cannot successfully fulfill the role. Nancy's clothing, then, occupies a space where labels like "lady" and "housekeeper" become confused and

elastic as one identity blurs into, but does not merge with, another.

The value judgment Nancy's dress elicits is what Bakhtin calls "the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (278). Clothing signifies issues of social status so that it becomes a subtext for the characters to identify wrongdoing. When the novel's characters do not attach the same verbal significance to the object of attire, the intersection of character and the language used warps and assumes new meanings not necessarily expected, resulting in confused and angered responses. This warping occurs when Grace dons Nancy's clothing. Jamie Walsh responds bitterly to this shift in meaning when testifying at Grace's trial,

But then his emotions overcame him, and he pointed at me, and said, "She has got on Nancy's dress, the ribbons under her bonnet are also Nancy's, and the tippet she has on, and also the parasol in her hand."

At that there was a great outcry in the courtroom, like the uprush of voices at the Judgment Day; and I knew I was doomed. (360)

The idea of Grace wearing the dead woman's clothing creates horror, described as akin to "Judgment Day," within the courtroom, an appropriate acknowledgment that, morally outraged, the court will now pronounce judgment against her. The words also evoke an image of last reckoning, which, indeed, Grace feels it is. She has been relying on Jamie "to say a good word for me; and he looked so young and fresh, and unspoiled and innocent" (360). But instead he utters the words that seal her sentence. As MacKenzie, her trial lawyer, tells Dr. Jordan, "The foolish girl could not be dissuaded from dressing herself up in the murdered woman's finery, an act which was viewed with horror by the press and public" (375). Indeed, the novel presents an account of the trial from *The Chronicle and Gazette* that reads, "her only anxiety appears to get some of her clothes sent to her, and her box. . . she wears at the present time the murdered woman's frock, and the box that she asks for belonged to the same poor sufferer" (347).

Again, Nancy's clothing becomes a morally and socially coded object which leads to a further coding of language concerning Grace. By referring to the "murdered woman's frock" and the "poor sufferer," the newspaper levels a judgment on Grace as not only murderer but usurper, and cold-blooded enough to make the apparel her "only anxiety."

Yet Grace's own coding of Nancy's clothing shifts from meaning to meaning more than the one-sided accounts of the newspaper and lawyer.² Initially, her rationale for taking the clothing does not necessarily correlate to the public's. She says,

I looked into Nancy's box, and at her dresses; and I thought, There is no need for them to go to waste, poor Nancy has no further use for them. So I took the box and all in it, and her winter things too; but I left the dress that she'd been sewing, because it seemed too close to her altogether, as it was not finished. (332-33)

Here the reference to "poor" Nancy conceives Nancy as victim, but does not create the same adverse judgment of Grace because she has established a desire not to let the clothing "go to waste." In this sense, assuming possession of the clothing seems practical, particularly given the state of her own clothing. Also, her sensibilities concerning the dead woman appear less numbed than *The Chronicle and Gazette* would have it; she refuses to take one of the dresses because it is "too close" to Nancy.

But the conclusion of Grace's sentence concerning Nancy's unfinished dress transforms some of that sensitivity into personal concern "as it was not finished; and I'd heard that the dead would come back to complete what they had left undone, and I didn't want her missing it, and following after me" (333). Her sorrow over Nancy's death extends only so far. Grace has the luxury of referring to her as "poor" Nancy and indicating that the unfinished dress carries reminders of the woman, but reveals that she leaves the dress for fear of supernatural repercussions, not sentiment. Grace's subsequent dressing unveils an unexpected subtext that also confuses her motives:

I put on one of Nancy's dresses, the pale one with the white ground and the small floral print, which was the same one she had on the first day I came to Mr. Kinnear's . . . and Nancy's summer shoes of light-coloured leather, which I had

so often admired, although they did not fit very well. And also her good straw bonnet. (333)

In this passage, Grace reveals the potential for jealousy submersed in her comments and questions concerning Nancy's "inappropriately fine" dress by referring to the shoes as ones she "had so often admired." More significantly, Grace refers to the dress and shoes as neither "*the dress*" and "*the shoes*" nor "*her dress*" and "*her shoes*" but "*Nancy's dress*" and "*Nancy's shoes*." By establishing the clothing as Nancy's, and herself as one who is donning the dress of another, Grace clothes herself not only in the garments, but also in Nancy's own identity. She is wearing the dress that made Nancy look like a "lady," complete with the "good" bonnet, and is taking the winter clothing, including the crimson silk that she initially notes does not suit a simple housekeeper — nor, we might add, a simple serving girl.

But by assuming Nancy's mantle, so to speak, Grace also assumes the identification of Nancy as sexual mistress. The clothing that reveals Nancy's relationship with Mr. Kinnear informs Grace's assumed position as McDermott's paramour. Not only is Grace guilty of murder, she is guilty of sex, displacing social disapproval of Nancy's situation from the dead woman onto herself. Grace recognizes the importance this displacement has had on the court's verdict; she is not only a murderess, but also a paramour, a combination that elicits stronger condemnation. In addition, Grace is guilty of aspiring to rise above her station through her assumption of Nancy's dress. She notes that accounts say "I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so" (23). Here a dichotomy of meaning attached to the object of clothing manifests itself. Grace is "decently" dressed, with all of the social and moral implications that the word contains, but has "robbed a dead woman." These words, like Jamie's courtroom pronouncement, elicit horror and disgust. At the same time, Grace only "appears" decent, creating a deceptive image of Grace as criminal veiled in the garb of decency. Both her heightened sexuality and aspirations combine to create a shift in meaning because the clothing becomes a symbol, not only of her criminality, but also of the instability of her role as maid. Thus, the issue of sex is further problematized by the social hierarchies endangered through the servant's assumption of an upper-class position.

Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather*, investigates the "doubled Victorian image of womanhood" (80) that arises in relation to the working-class woman and class "cross-dressing." She notes the many instances of sexual relations between "maids and their male charges" (85) and discusses the implications for power relations between a boy who will eventually have social power, and the nurse or maid who temporarily has authority over him. The intersection between sex and power within the household, then, becomes troubled by the idea that a maid can exert power over the man of the household. Grace, by assuming the clothing of the mistress, becomes a tangible space for this anxiety over power and social position. She evokes Nancy, who rises above her station as "mere" housekeeper to become "mistress" of the house, and therefore earns the condemnation of the courtroom which exists as a means to maintain the social order she transgresses.

This instability of object meaning in relation to Grace's dress motivates Jamie's response at the trial. At the beginning of their relationship, Jamie and Grace appear to be on equal ground, and Jamie is obviously smitten by her. This causes Nancy to comment that "he has a bad case of puppy love, it is written all over his face, he used to be my admirer but now I see he is yours" (25). Jamie transfers his affections for Nancy, who as Mr. Kinnear's mistress is unattainable, to Grace, who is within his reach. But Grace, from the beginning, reveals through her speech that she has higher aspirations. When Jamie suggests that they get married, Grace notes that "a girl of fifteen or sixteen is accounted a woman, but a boy of fifteen or sixteen is still a boy" (262). She therefore does not take his affections seriously, although she realizes their impact in the courtroom:

I was hoping for some token of sympathy from him, but he gave me a stare filled with such reproach and sorrowful anger, that I saw how it was with him. He felt betrayed in love, because I'd gone off with McDermott; and from being an angel in his eyes, and fit to be idolized and worshipped, I was transformed to a demon, and he would do all in his power to destroy me. (360)

By wearing Nancy's clothing, then, and occupying Nancy's sexual position, Grace moves from the realm of the attainable and possible to the realm of the unattainable and the impossible. She is, effec-

tively, off-limits to Jamie who is "still a boy," although she is available to McDermott and Mr. Kinnear, who are men. Jamie, unable to reconcile himself to this shifting meaning implied by the clothing, targets it as improper for Grace to wear according to the meaning he attaches to it. Thus, he must "demonize" Grace, and cannot refrain from clarifying in the courtroom that she is the usurper by virtue of the fact that she has appeared in Nancy's garments.³

As an object, then, Nancy's clothing becomes a space where language affects characters in devastating ways, not only because it elicits specific social and moral responses, but because the subtext of the clothing also reveals ideological links that shift among characters and the language that defines those characters. Grace's own inability to "properly" negotiate with the object, evident in the slippage of language and social shifting, reveals the irreconcilable nature of physical objects within the heteroglossic system. Her attempts to render Nancy's clothing as a neutral term, not imbued with the event of Nancy's death, are irreconcilable with its social significance. But what happens when the object becomes a space for the complete breakdown of language and meaning?

The speech interactions between Dr. Jordan and Grace are loci for such breakdowns. The two characters approach the object/word differently in their relationship with one another and thus results not in a privileging of one over the other — as with Nancy's clothing when Grace is punished for imbuing the object with the "wrong" meaning — but in a stalemate. Although Dr. Jordan intends that the object serve as translator of meaning to provide a catalyst for language, he and Grace cannot, in their frustrated discourse, relate the meaning of either to the other. The breakdown results in a deferral of desire, as Grace and Dr. Jordan, at first stumbling over physical objects, begin using them, both as a means for creating a new signification of language, and as a means to avoid the implications of that signification. The result is a heteroglossic layering that obscures and creates meanings for the characters' interactions.

Dr. Jordan's use of language in the text is that of a professional; he attaches linguistic significance to other characters' utterances particularly Grace's, according to the dictates of his medical training. He is thus functioning verbally within the realm of what we can consider a "unitary language." Bakhtin notes that

Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the

historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence posited [*zadan*] — and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. But at the same time it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallizing into a real, although still relative, unity — the unity of the reigning conversation (everyday) and literary language, “correct language.” (270)

Here Bakhtin identifies unitary language as a literary language, but the importance Dr. Jordan’s training imbues to his own understanding of language is unitary as well. For the purposes of Dr. Jordan’s analysis, what a patient says functions linguistically within a psychological matrix such that the meaning the doctor ascribes to language is the “true” significance of the meaning the utterance has in that patient’s mind. Dr. Jordan, through his psychologist’s interpretation of what is said, “imposes specific limits” on the heteroglossic potential of speech, forcing it into significations of mental condition without regard for the speaker’s conceptualization of meaning.

Dr. Jordan’s unitary language breaks down, however, when confronted with Grace’s words. The two circle warily around language in their relation/investigation of Grace’s story as Dr. Jordan strains to decipher what Grace “truly” is or is not saying, while she tries to understand what he wants to hear and to decide what she does and does not want to reveal. For instance, when speaking with Grace in her cell about his travels, he uses a Biblical reference to see if she understands it. Grace thinks,

I know it is the Book of Job, before Job gets the boils and running sores, and the whirlwinds. It’s what Satan says to God. He must mean that he has come to test me, although he’s too late for that, as God has done a great deal of testing me already, and you would think he would be tired of it by now.

But I don’t say this, I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised.

I say, Have you been to France? This is where all the fashions come from.

I see I have disappointed him. (38-39)

In this passage, Grace has some idea of Dr. Jordan’s intentions,

but chooses, by asking the question, not to enter into the information game he proposes. This game of master and student, question and answer, does not *elude* her; instead *she slips out* of the relationship by refusing the game through her denial of the verbal. In this sense, Atwood's linguistic construction of Grace works along the resistant lines J. Brooks Bouson suggests in *Brutal Choreographies*, using Patricia Yaeger's viewpoint of Bakhtin's "dialogical word." Yaeger claims that the novel is a "multivoiced form" that allows "women writers 'an opportunity to interrupt the speech practices, the ordinary patriarchal assumptions of everyday life' (*Honey-Mad* 183, 31)." Bouson extends this idea to Atwood's use of "feminist-dialogic" speech as a resistant language mode (*Brutal* 7). Thus, Grace's language, in deliberately misunderstanding Dr. Jordan's speech, resists the patriarchal/linguistic role he has created for her.⁴

Dr. Jordan, in turn, cannot know that she is refusing his gambit, and instead takes her question at face value, assuming that she must not have understood his allegorical reference. In keeping with the concept of a unitary language, his training suppresses the existence of heteroglossia through his assumption that her speech will reveal the desired glimpse into her psyche, but that she herself cannot manipulate language to create new meaning or "truth" in the way that, as a psychologist, he can. The result is a linguistic standoff of sorts, in which Jordan, functioning within his own language group, cannot access the slippage of speech Grace creates. Grace, through this shifting, resists the implications of his language's meaning and thereby renders it meaningless in her language sphere. The breakdown occurs because Dr. Jordan does not realize that he must negotiate with Grace's words on her terms as well as his own.

But the most evident breakdown of language under the strain of heteroglossia occurs when the two focus on the objects that lie between them on the table: the fruits and vegetables that Dr. Jordan brings to their interviews. In an effort to draw Grace into recalling her involvement with the murders of Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, he brings items like an apple or a turnip for what is, in his mind, a means of word association. He sees the string of speech and concepts clearly:

Every day he has set some small object in front of her, and has asked her to tell him what it causes her to imagine. This

week he's attempted various root vegetables, hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet — Root Cellar — Corpses, for instance; or even Turnip — Underground — Grave. According to his theories, the right object ought to evoke a chain of disturbing associations in her. . . (90)

Again, as with his biblical references, Dr. Jordan functions within a definition of object-word relationships that denies Grace her own system of meaning. He suppresses the heteroglossic implications of her speech, the avenues for his own misinterpretation, by convincing himself that the right combination of object and word will elicit those "disturbing associations," that confirm the importance of the object/word within his own language system.

Yet the responses to his inquiries, he notes, are superficial. "So far she's treated his offerings simply at their face value, and all he's got out of her has been a series of cookery methods" (90). But Grace is withholding information, and Dr. Jordan gives no indication that he suspects her word/object associations are in fact any more than the most superficial treatments. When he presents her with the apple in her cell, for instance, he asks her "What does Apple make you think of?" Grace thinks "of Mary Whitney, and the apple peelings we threw over our shoulders that night, to see who we would marry, but I will not tell him that." Instead she feigns ignorance, trying to pretend she cannot understand the question. Called on her response, though, she turns the game against him and replies "my sampler." As she notes, "He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is." She therefore gives him an answer he cannot decipher, and which she must explain, so that she keeps him off-balance as a means of resisting the game. "Now it is his turn to know nothing" (40), she thinks. Grace resists by tapping into a language and meaning system that Dr. Jordan cannot access, and by shifting from language itself. Rather than relying on the words, she relies on "their faces" to reveal information to her. Dr. Jordan, on the other hand, fixates on the word and its potential meaning. Grace can easily elude him, then, by restricting her words to the "face value" meaning that so disappoints him. She knows the answer he wants: "The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any

child could guess it" (40), but she "will not oblige" (40). While Grace can access the meaning of his object/language in the case of the apple, Dr. Jordan cannot access hers.

But even Grace, who has been playing with the language, falls victim to slipperiness of meaning herself. Whereas with the apple she knows the meaning Dr. Jordan imputes to the object, she cannot understand his persistence in attaching meaning to the series of other items he brings, and entangles herself in the system with which she has been playing. Although she *would not* attach "proper" meaning in earlier encounters, she finds she *cannot* do so now because she no longer exists outside the system of language and meaning. When Dr. Jordan presents her with a potato, for example, she thinks,

I don't know what he expects me to say about it, except that I have peeled a good many of them in my time . . . but they are nothing to have a long conversation about . . . Sometimes I think Dr. Jordan is a little off in the head. But I would rather talk with him about potatoes, if that is what he fancies, than not talk to him at all. (97)

For Grace, a potato does not carry the significance of "Root Cellar — Corpses."⁵ Instead, the vegetables serve to remind her of a life she can no longer access, a life where objects like these, rather than remind her of the incidents that have caused her present imprisonment, remind her of the life this imprisonment has replaced. As a result, she ascribes the talk about potatoes to Dr. Jordan's "fancy."

Even when Dr. Jordan tries to lead her answer, by suggesting his own linguistic and conceptual links, their meanings fail to connect in a way either participant finds significant. When he presents her with a parsnip, for example,

Does it bring anything to mind? he asks.
Well, there is Fine words butter no parsnips, I say. Also they are very hard to peel.
They are kept in cellars, I believe, he says.
Oh no, Sir, I reply. Outside, in a hold in the ground with straw, as they are much improved by being frozen.
He looks at me in a tired fashion, and I wonder what has been causing his lack of sleep. (197)

Grace cannot follow the leads he offers her because she does not

have access to his perception of the language of the object, nor he to hers. This inability to understand the other's language system results in a stagnation, where the meaning of words and objects becomes lost in the object itself. The way the vegetables lie "between them" becomes a signifier for this "dead ending" of language, the way the heteroglossic intersection of the object cannot allow either enough access to do more than agree on the name of the object. The meaning of that name offers differing associations for each character.

The position of an object in language, as Grace and Dr. Jordan relate to it, becomes more significant when we consider the way the physical position of an object informs the meaning it acquires. The various vegetables lie always on the table, functioning as a barrier to the understanding of language. But their position as the barrier transforms them into a site of access, not to language, per se, but to the person whose language cannot break through the barrier.⁶

For Dr. Jordan, Grace, through the inaccessibility of her language, becomes an enigma he does not want to understand so much as to possess. He applies meaning to the words that describe, yet do not describe, her:

Murderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand." (389)

Grace also "brands" herself with the word as medium. At the trial, when the judge says, "'Death,' I fainted, and fell on the railing made of pointed spikes that was all around the dock; and one of the spikes went into my breast, right next to my heart" (361). But the word "death" becomes a sexualized label when she then says "I could show him [Dr. Jordan] the scar" (361). As the doctor wants to "brand" Grace's neck, Grace wants to bare her breast to him. Words as labels take on meanings that both Grace and Dr. Jordan can access and understand as a highly sexualized and sensualised language.

In effect, then, the frustrated discourse surrounding objects requires the invention of a language that can provide a physical connection rather than a cerebral one. Both characters bring the

abstract associations of language with object to a physical level where the body becomes a canvas for language as function, not meaning. Grace is "branded" by murderess and "scarred" by death such that the tangibility of the words slip beyond the barrier of the object, resulting in the creation of yet another language of signification. The proliferative power of heteroglossia, the creation of languages through the intersection (or lack thereof) of other languages, spawns paths for communication that manipulate or shift language in ways that limit relationships and unmake those limits.

Like Jamie, Dr. Jordan involves himself in a sort of object fetish where language undergoes a deferral of desire to know and desire to possess. He displaces Grace's own body onto the organic, much like Jamie displaced his frustration onto Grace's assumption of Nancy's clothing. Grace remains unattainable, and so the information Dr. Jordan seeks through the use of vegetables and fruits is also unattainable. But the confusion surrounding the object, and the characters' inability to attach similar meanings and signification to that object, open avenues for interpreting other labels, personal labels, in highly sexualized ways. The linguistic frustration over objects translates into a sexual frustration that displaces itself onto Grace's body. An object may be "just sitting there between us" (98), but the object that fails as an intersection between Dr. Jordan's and Grace's languages of meaning becomes instead the conduit for the deferral of frustrated attempts to evoke or impose signification.

The "fetishizing" of the object occurs when both parties fail to attach similar meaning to the objects that in part form their relationship. Jamie, who transfers his desire for Nancy, the unattainable, onto Grace, the attainable, is rebuffed when Grace dons Nancy's clothing, associating herself with the previously untouchable body. Jamie's conception of Nancy's clothing as representative of that which is closed to him fails to influence Grace's own interpretation of the clothing's significance. The clothing therefore become an embodiment of Jamie's sexual frustration and a source of great bitterness. Finally, Grace's adoption of that attire is the betrayal that sparks Jamie's anxiety at the trial. When he is confronted with it he cannot but fixate on the clothing, reading it as the symbol of his sexual failure and verbally rendering it as the signifier of Grace's guilt.⁷

Dr. Jordan, similarly obsessed with possessing Grace, invests the objects between them with the sexual frustration of her inaccessibility. Her seeming inability to interpret those objects in ways he finds meaningful amplifies that frustration. Were she to "read" them as he does, making the linguistic associations he seeks, the obstacle to their mutual understanding would disappear and create an avenue for sexual connection as well. That she cannot establish those word associations compounds the frustration, requiring a reworking of object significance that opens other forms of communication. Here Dr. Jordan's and Jamie's relationships with Grace differ. Jamie cannot commence this reworking because Grace, who does not return his affections, is not complicit in the desire to overstep the boundaries of object and language. In her relationship with Dr. Jordan, however, there is a mutual desire for intimacy that permits a negotiation, from both sides, of the boundaries surrounding objects by inscribing language instead on the body. The shifting language becomes the means by which another object, her body, attains a meaning ascribed to it by both characters. Grace's participation enables this new meaning-making that allows the potential for establishing the dialogue between Dr. Jordan and herself.

The concept of heteroglossia, then, provides a way to read an object as both closed and open. The object functions within each language group in a way that often refuses the other's understanding, but at the same time the frustration of not being able to understand sparks the creation of another way to manipulate the naming of the object that offers both speakers ingress to a discourse. This naming is evidently a sexualized labelling of body, Grace's body specifically, raising its own set of questions concerning who does or does not hold power over the meaning of words as they relate to the woman's body. But the heteroglossic lens offers us more than one way to read through Grace's story, creating a multitude of interpretive avenues for us to follow. This multitude in turn denies a definitive reading of her tale, leaving the text as unbounded as Grace herself proves to be.

NOTES

¹ This mosaic, along with the fact that we as readers are uncertain as to how Grace's narrative comes to us, littered as it is with epistolary segments, provides a slippage of authenticity that lends the narrative, though premised as a "historical" novel, an element of the folkloric. The implications of an oral story with an indeterminate origin lend to the shifting of meaning in the story itself, as we question, then re-question, the accounts we receive throughout the novel. Barbara Garlick investigates this issue of narrative as folklore or fairy tale in her essay, "*The Handmaid's Tale*: Narrative Voice and the Primacy of the Tale." Elisabeth Mahoney also works with the "power relations between any discourse and its supplements [alternative narratives within the text]" (30) and the empowerment such "slidings" offer to women in narrative in her essay, "Writing So to Speak: The Feminist Dystopia."

² The fact that Atwood plays with different textual forms is, to Eleonora Rao, indicative of the discursive freedoms her characters attain despite the prescribed behavior we might expect from character relationships. In her essay, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: Writing against Notions of Unity," Rao says that the "multiplicity of styles in Atwood's text further signifies authorial freedom from any unitary or singular discourse," and that this "textual plurality, as Bakhtin argues, 'opens up the possibility of never having to define oneself in language'" (136). When we read the various accounts of Grace's story as we are hearing her own version, the "textual plurality" informs us that Grace can slip in and out of her story, defying our definitions of her, and later defying Dr. Jordan's.

³ Grace also becomes subject to a verbalized expression of the gendered gaze, whereby she as woman is gazed upon and summarily judged by Jamie Welsh's male gaze. Pamela Cooper works with issues of this gaze in her essay, "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*." She notes that in Gilead, "Within the oppressive culture depicted in the novel the woman's body is obsessively designated as the site of male fear, anxiety, and desire" (53). Jamie's reactions to Grace's "cross-dressing" in Nancy's clothing identifies his gaze as such a troubled intersection. Clothing therefore assumes not only heteroglossic implications for class, but also for gender. Dr. Jordan, as the "medical authority" Cooper discusses, works within this context as well.

⁴ So Dr. Jordan's unitary language is not only the language of his profession, but also of his male social presence: the unitary language of patriarchy.

⁵ In her essay, "'Listen to the Voice': Dialogism and the Canadian Novel," Sherrill Grace notes that Bakhtin's idea of the "threshold" applies not only to dialogue, but to narrative spaces: "symbolic threshold spaces such as coffins, cellars, crypts" (120). That Dr. Jordan and Grace negotiate verbally over objects that are to lead to the root cellar and the events that occurred there plays into this dual threshold of dialogue and space.

⁶ In the introduction to her critical work, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse*, Hilde Staels offers a play between Julia Kristeva's and Bakhtin's concepts of the "borderline experience," where the linguistic "threshold experience"

can come to represent "a shift towards a different type of discourse, namely that of the socially rejected, marginalized space that exists outside the realm of symbolic signification" (14). This "different type of discourse" is at work in *Alias Grace*, where the object becomes both barrier and threshold for meaning-making.

⁷ Of what Grace is guilty is another heteroglossic intersection. For Jamie, Grace's use of Nancy's clothing associates her with his sexual anxiety such that she becomes guilty of betraying him and "choosing," in effect, Mr. Kinnear. For the jury, however, the guilt is assumed instead to be murder guilt, and Jamie's words of accusation become that accusation of murder. Jamie's blurted words, the moment they leave his mouth, transform and carry with them the courtroom spectators' own judgements on Grace, and become "proof" of her murderous nature.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 1996.
- Bakhtin, M.M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 259-422.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993.
- Cooper, Pamela. "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:4 (Spring 1995): 49-66.
- Garlick, Barbara. "The Handmaid's Tale: Narrative Voice and the Primacy of the Tale." *Twentieth-Century Fantasists*. Ed. Kath Filmer. London: St. Martin's Press, 1992. 161-71.
- Grace, Sherrill. "'Listen to the Voice': Dialogism and the Canadian Novel." *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*. Ed. John Moss. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1987. 117-36.
- Holquist, Michael. Glossary. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. By M.M. Bakhtin. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 423-34.
- Mahoney, Elisabeth. "Writing So to Speak: The Feminist Dystopia." *Image and Power*. Ed. Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham. New York: Longman, 1996. 29-41.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Rao, Eleonora. "Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle: Writing against Notions of Unity." *Writing and Subjectivity*. Ed. Colin Nicholson. London: MacMillan, 1994. 133-152.
- Staels, Hilde. *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse*. Tübingen: Francke, 1995.