

I Am Telling This to No One But You: Private Voice, Passing, and the Private Sphere in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grâce*

Stephanie Lovelady

Volume 24, Number 2, 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24_2art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lovelady, S. (1999). I Am Telling This to No One But You.: Private Voice, Passing, and the Private Sphere in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grâce*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 24(2), 35–63.

Article abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* brims with references to the act of narration. Private and public narration intersect in Grace's tale, which cannot be said to be truly private or public, but which moves along a continuum between these two poles. In three realms, narrative transmission, her perception of her ethnic identity, and her adoption of gender roles, there is a movement away from the public toward the private. The mixture of public and private voice in Grace's narration is not merely a curiosity, but demonstrates Grace's unfulfilled needs for privacy and intimacy.

I Am Telling This to No One But You: Private Voice, Passing, and the Private Sphere in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

STEPHANIE LOVELADY

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterward that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (298)

ALIAS GRACE BRIMS with references to the act of narration. Susan Sniader Lanser has noted that private narration, in which a narrator addresses another character in the text, is much more likely to contain "considerable commentary on communication itself" than public narration because "the immediate communicative context of the private narrator" (*Narrative* 139) is represented in the text. In classic cases of private narration, the narrator is speaking directly to another character, either aloud or, in epistolary novels, in letters. Public narrators, by contrast, either directly or implicitly address "a reader-figure or audience 'outside' the text" (138).

As Grace Marks narrates her life story to Dr. Simon Jordan from her jail cell, she must carefully modulate what she says because Simon is no casual conversationalist. He has been asked by a clergyman who believes in Grace's innocence to interview her and write a letter to the Governor on her behalf. Though she rarely mentions the underlying purpose of their meetings, she is always mindful of and motivated by it. In her conversations with Simon, Grace finds an opportunity to participate in shaping her own representation, power this "celebrated murderess" (22) lacks in court or in the press. Her narration is private; she narrates specifically to Simon, and their relationship shapes what she says. At the same time, she has a broader

implied audience which is quite public and which cannot help but shape her discourse. *Alias Grace* is based on an actual 1843 Canadian murder case and examines mid-nineteenth-century immigration as well as gender and class relations from a late-twentieth-century perspective.¹ Grace, a lower-class Irish immigrant at the centre of a sensational murder trial, is the subject of others' scrutiny and is figured as a dangerous force to be contained, frequently seen filtered through characters of higher social status like Simon. But Grace also narrates a good part of her own story. Private and public narration intersect in Grace's tale, which cannot be said to be truly private or public, but which moves along a continuum between these two poles.

The nineteenth-century notion of gendered public and private spheres is also influential in the novel. Grace, whose previous life as a household servant remained circumscribed within the domestic and the private realms of most nineteenth-century women's lives, moves squarely into the public sphere when she becomes a household name and an object of collective fascination and horror. However, even before "Grace Marks" became synonymous with monstrous and uncontrolled criminality, as a member of several subservient classes of people, if not as an individual, she was *already* in the public sphere, the object of several forms of cultural anxiety, most notably the "Irish Question" (80) and the "Woman Question" (22).² While Atwood did not invent her name, Grace is aptly named. The Mark she bears is not the "Mark of Cain" (105), as her aunt suggests in cursing Grace's father, but a question mark. She is the subject of earnest Victorian social questions about ethnicity and gender. Moreover, she is an amnesiac who has forgotten the key to a compelling mystery, a victim of possession who cannot know, or a charlatan who knows all and will not tell. The private and the public, the hidden and the exposed, all intertwine in *Alias Grace*.

In three realms, narrative transmission, her perception of her ethnic identity, and her adoption of gender roles, there is a movement away from the public toward the private. This movement does not represent a natural feminine affinity for the private sphere, or a cowed surrender to it, but rather a strategic, if compromised, move to make the best of available roles. The private sphere is both stifling and liberating for Grace, while the public sphere, often attractive for the poor Irish serving girl, ultimately proves too perilous.

Telling It to Yourself or to Someone Else

Not only does *Alias Grace* contain both public and private narration but there is also a notable intermixing of these modes. Simon is represented

by a public narrator, who describes his thoughts and actions in the third person for an audience outside the text. Simon serves as a focalizer, or a character to whose thoughts and feelings readers have access (Prince 31-32), in these scenes, the second most common kind of narrative situation in the text, which is also liberally sprinkled with epigraphs, poems, and letters. The most common and most complex narrative situation is Grace's narration. When she speaks she is often narrating her life story to Simon, sometimes for chapters at a time without interruption. These are fairly straightforward cases of private narration, despite Grace's very public secondary audience. However, this narration is interspersed with Grace's observations about Simon's reaction to her story and her description of her activities in prison between their sessions. She always reports her own thoughts and actions in the first person whether she is telling him her story, breaking away from this story to record thoughts she does not report to him, or relaying incidents that occur while he is not present. Presumably she acts as a public narrator in the latter two cases, because her audience is outside the text. Therefore, she is not speaking to a specific character. In many cases, however, what seems like public narration is shifted back into the private realm, or into an intermediate zone by a key phrase, as I will demonstrate.

Grace several times refers to telling stories to herself, noting that in prison there is "a lot of time to think, and no one to tell your thoughts to; and so you tell them to yourself" (161), and that a story is not a story until "you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else" (298). These statements raise the possibility that her seemingly public narration is not in fact directed outwards at a hypothetical public audience, but exists only as a record of Grace's interior monologue. If she is her own intended audience, narration would remain private because she is a character in the text and speaks only to herself when she is not speaking to Simon. This split between Simon's public narration and Grace's private narration would seem to mirror the Victorian construction of a male public sphere and a female private sphere. However, such a neat opposition cannot be sustained because of Atwood's use of homodiegetic, heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators. A homodiegetic narrator also acts as a character within the text while a heterodiegetic narrator does not. An autodiegetic narrator tells his or her own story, as opposed to an observer narrator (Prince 9, 40-41). Simon is never a public narrator, only a focalizer; he is *represented by* a public narrator but he is not one himself. He is on occasion a private narrator, in his letters for instance. Meanwhile Grace, an autodiegetic narrator, has more narrative privilege than Simon. More-

over, I will argue that Grace's narration can be considered public, at least in places. Narrative voice not only alternates between public and private, but often takes unexpected turns. Thus, the public/private, male/female association is challenged as much as it is upheld in narrative terms.

The novel begins with a series of epigraphs, then the following description: "Out of the ground there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shiny and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground" (5). Because there is no explanation of narrative context, no frame narrative, no quotation marks to mark this text as spoken dialogue, it appears to be public narration. By the third paragraph, which starts "I tuck my head down while I walk" (5), it is clear the narrator is homodiegetic, while it is not yet clear whether or not she is autodiegetic. The fourth paragraph gives some orienting information about the narrator: "It's 1851. I'll be twenty-four years old next birthday. I've been shut up in here since the age of sixteen. I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble" (5). Eventually, clues that the scene is a dream, a hallucination or a vision begin to emerge: "I watch the peonies out of the corners of my eyes. I know they shouldn't be here: it's April, and peonies don't bloom in April" (5-6), is followed by "this time it will all be different, this time I will run for help... none of it will have happened" (6). After two pages of description, there is some extra spacing and this startling sentence, which ends the chapter: "This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to this part of the tale" (6). Narration that seemed public is rendered private by this explanation. What we have been reading has not been narrated principally for a "reader-construct" (Lanser, *Narrative* 137), but to another fictional character, to whom we have not yet been introduced. Yet, on the other hand, someone, a public narrator or the implied author, has chosen to begin with this excerpt of Grace's narration, to present it out of order and first. The sentence that alerts us to the fact that the narration is private — "This is what I told Dr. Jordan" — seems to imply that this organizer is Grace herself, who acts in her arranging capacity as a public narrator, even as she narrates privately. These two pages are public and private at once.

Eventually, Simon begins to shape Grace's narration. While he listens and takes notes she feels "as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me" (69). She imagines him writing on her body in a vivid demonstration of his shared authorship in the story he is allegedly merely recording. Simon's influence extends even into scenes in which he is not present. Grace plans her stories for him, wondering: "What should I tell

Dr. Jordan about this day?" (295). That this narration takes place in the context of their relationship, that she crafts it specifically for him, moves what might be considered public narration closer to the private pole of the continuum, even though Grace is not technically telling this story to another character. When Simon ceases to visit Grace altogether she continues the story, complete with direct addresses, composing it in her mind as if he were still listening and anticipating his desires: "What should I tell him, when he comes back? He will want to know about the arrest, and the trial... I could say this" (353). When it becomes apparent that Simon is not returning she writes him a letter which she intends to smuggle out of prison, asking him to write the Governor on her behalf. Receiving no reply, Grace continues to address him mentally for decades, and after her own release from prison and her marriage, she notes, "I've written many letters to you in my head" (441). In fact, the last twenty pages of the book consist of one of these mental letters, describing her new life. Simon, or rather the idea of him, has become a confidante for Grace: "as I have no close woman friend I can trust, I am telling you about it, and I know you will keep the confidence" (456), as well as someone with whom she can share an unorthodox Biblical interpretation: "I am telling this to no one but you, as I am aware it is not the approved reading" (459). The focus of these addresses to Simon is no longer on how to tell the story to please or interest him but on how telling the story to him will please or comfort Grace. She has internalized Simon as an audience, as someone who will hear her, something Grace is always seeking.³ When he tells her, "I simply wish to know what you yourself can actually remember," she responds, "Nobody has ever cared about that before, Sir" (307). It is a subdued but nonetheless affecting moment.

Internalizing Simon, however, changes Grace's speaking voice. The carefully modulated voice she uses to speak to him, and later to herself while imagining him, is not the angry, bitter voice she uses before she meets Simon. The bitter voice frequently incorporates the discourse of others in order to satirize it, as in this imitation of the visitors to the Governor's house where Grace is hired out:

When I have gone out of the room with the tray, the ladies look at the Governor's wife's scrapbook. Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, they say, and You let that woman walk around loose in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it. Oh well one must get used to such things in our situation, we are virtually prisoners ourselves you know, although one must feel pity for such poor

benighted creatures Although naturally she can be here only during the day, I would not have her in the house at night. . . . Oh I don't blame you, there is only so far one can go in Christian charity, a leopard cannot change its spots and no one could say you have not done your duty and shown a proper feeling. (24)

Or in this prediction:

I will shrivel, my skin will dry out, all yellow like old linen; I will turn into a skeleton, I will be found months, years, centuries from now, and they will say Who is this, she must have slipped our minds, Well, sweep all those bones and rubbish into the corner, but save the buttons, no sense in having them go to waste, there's no help for it now. (35)

Grace continues to display anger after she meets Simon, and sometimes even directs it at him, but in a much more restrained fashion.⁴ When he asks her if she feels she has been treated unjustly, she responds mildly, "I don't know what you mean, Sir" (91). The blistering, mocking anger disappears from her tone once she adopts Simon as a permanent narrative audience. Crude or forthright thoughts do emerge in her dialogue after this point, but she always uses the cover of her friend Mary, either imagining what she would say or quoting something she did say. For example, "lady or lady's maid, they both piss and it smells the same, and not like lilacs neither, as Mary Whitney used to say" (216). Mary becomes a crutch to say what Grace cannot while Simon is listening. Habitually quoting Mary also is a way for Grace to keep her dead friend alive, to continue their dialogue, to retain her as an interlocutor alongside Simon.

The mixture of public and private voice in Grace's narration is not merely a curiosity, but demonstrates Grace's unfulfilled needs for privacy and intimacy, as well as for what the Governor's wife calls "an enlarged sphere" (82), both literally and figuratively. Lanser argues that as white women characters' voices first emerged in the eighteenth century, private voice in epistolary novels "channelled female voice into forms that contained and defused it" (*Fictions* 26). Female characters, often male-authored, were not empowered to speak to the world at large, but only within a private relationship. A novel like *Jane Eyre* (1847), with its bold use of personal voice and direct address to readers, represented a breakthrough. For African-American women authors, Lanser asserts, however, private voice may not be a restriction to escape but "a necessary first location of power" (*Fictions* 198) for people forced into servitude and denied privacy. To reclaim the private is also to assert power. She points to

novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *The Color Purple* (1982), which both rely on a sympathetic listener or letter reader to create a safe place from which to narrate. Grace stands somewhere in between these positions. She is closer to Jane Eyre, a young, white female servant from a genteel family fallen on hard times who has caught the eye of her prosperous employer. But Grace is younger, ethnically Other, a lower ranking servant from a poorer family. Mr. Kinnear might seduce her, but he will not marry her, as Grace has learned from his housekeeper Nancy's example and Mary's before her. The avenues that lead to power for Jane — a wholesome Englishness that contrasts with Rochester's mad wife's decadent Creoleness (see Spivak) — and to a genteel middle-class position of governess, are blocked off for the impoverished Irish maid-of-all-work.⁵

Grace's life, first as a servant, then as a prisoner, lacks the privileges of both the private and the public spheres. She is constrained by the private sphere — the Governor's parlour where she is hired out is literally an extension of prison for her — without enjoying any real privacy, either as a prisoner or as public figure. She notes that in prison "nobody ... does you the courtesy of knocking" (35), and she resents being treated as "a fascinating case, as if I was a two-headed calf" (32). She suspects Simon of being "a collector" (41) and another doctor of viewing her as "a sight that must be seen" (244). The reason for tourists' and doctors' interest is her status as an infamous criminal. As Sarah Robertson notes, "the individual Grace has been subsumed by the public Grace" (154). Grace, like her historical counterpart, is the subject of numerous newspaper articles. In the novel (as in real life), the chronicler of mid-nineteenth-century Canadian life, Susanna Moodie, devotes a chapter of *Life in the Clearings* (1853) to her. Atwood uses quotations from Moodie as epigraphs, and Simon and Grace both read her account and refer to it. It was Moodie who first described Grace Marks as a "celebrated murderess" (Moodie 195), a term Grace repeats many times. Grace suspects that the salacious nature of the murders plays no small role in the public's fascination with her: "They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they'd admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes" (27). Simon is also compelled by this question. When Grace is hypnotized, he immediately asks if Grace ever "had relations" with James, realizing only as he asks that this is "the one thing he most wants to know" (399). After they are married, Jamie, too, persuades Grace to tell him the story of what happened at Mr.

Kinnear's over and over and "his favourite part... is when poor James McDermott was hauling me all around the house ... looking for a bed fit for his wicked purposes" (457).

Even before she becomes a celebrity, Grace experiences intense scrutiny. As a child in a large, poor family she tries to hug herself tight to shrink herself "because there was never enough room for me, at home or anywhere" (33). At Mr. Kinnear's, when her afternoon idyll making daisy chains in the meadow with Jamie is watched by her employer and two other servants, she is angered and reports, "I felt as though my afternoon had not been mine at all, and not a kind and private thing, but had been spied upon by every one of them ... exactly as if they'd all been lined up in a row at the door of my chamber, and taking turns at looking through the keyhole" (263).⁶ Grace explains that her need for privacy is the reason she withholds information from Simon. When he asks her to relay a dream from the previous night, she does, but only after the page-long dream has been narrated does the reader find that Grace has only remembered the dream silently, and then responded to Simon, "I can't remember, Sir" (101), adding to herself, "I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself" (101). This trick, the withholding that initially looks like compliance, is possible because in Grace's narration, there are no quotation marks, so it is often unclear whether text is spoken or thought until a tag clause appears at the end.⁷ Grace guards her privacy through silence, and by playing the part expected of her. "I have a good stupid look I have practised" (38), she confides to the reader, and uses it on Simon during their first meeting. Later, when she trusts him more, she tells him of her use of a similar tactic at Mr. Kinnear's: "I had now been a servant for three years, and could act the part well enough" (224).

But just as Grace desires the physical and mental privacy of an escape from publicity (a greater entry into the private sphere), she also wants to escape from the restricted life of the prison (a greater entry into the public sphere). On one level this desire for release is literal. Grace wants out of prison. Early in her narration (pre-Simon), she mocks the prison authorities who have sentenced her to solitary confinement: "I'm being left alone to reflect on my sins and misdemeanors, and one does that best in solitude, or such is our expert and considered opinion, Grace, after long experience with these matters" (34). She longs to go outside. When Simon presents her with an apple, she smells it and thinks, "It has such an odour of outdoors on it I want to cry" (39). Despite this very real desire for literal escape, as a reviewer has attested, the novel as a whole

examines “the cramped, desolate, private spaces that served as the cauldron for stewing resentments and desires” (“Women on the Verge” 1). Nina Auerbach notes that Grace’s imprisonment functions as a symbol of women’s imprisonment in domestic roles as well as immigrants’ entrapment in poverty. Auerbach asserts that the prison “is only an extension of the rooms, houses and ships beyond the jail” (1). Consider the following passage, which refers literally to prison, but also to the restriction of all subordinate classes of people:

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

In fact I have no idea what kind of sunrise there was. In prison they make the windows high up, so you cannot climb out of them I suppose, but also so you cannot see out of them either, or at least not onto the outside world. They do not want you looking out, they do not want you thinking the word *out*, they do not want you looking at the horizon and thinking you might someday drop below it yourself, like the sail of a ship departing or a horse rider vanishing down a far hillside. (237)

Grace’s narrative false start here, which presents her fantasy of the sunrise as fact, is an example of the way she “thinks the word *out*.” Simon, frustrated by the knowledge that Grace is withholding information from him, surmises that her “strongest prison is of her own construction” (362). There is some truth to this assertion, but with this statement and by dismissing the story of her childhood and immigration as “only the usual poverty and hardships, etc.” (133), he ignores the material facts that conspire to trap Grace, the prisons not of her own construction which define her in the public eye. Two of the most prominent are Irish nationality and female gender. While Grace’s Irishness is something she can make private if she chooses, passing by assimilation rather than by outright denial, gender proves a more difficult border to cross.

Passing Through Air

“When you cross over the border, it is like passing through air, you wouldn’t know you’d done it; as the trees on both sides of it are the same” (266), Jeremiah tells Grace. He is speaking of crossing the U.S./Canada border in order to escape paying customs, but Jeremiah is a seasoned border crosser.⁸ He appears in the text as Dr. Jerome DuPont, “Neuro-

hypnotist" (83), Jeremiah Pontelli, peddler, Gerald Ponti, magician, and finally, in the English translation of his symbolic surname, Gerald Bridges, medium. He identifies himself as an American of French Protestant descent or as an American of Italian descent. Other characters refer to his "trace of a foreign accent" (83) and his "gypsy doings" (155); they identify him as a "Jew peddler" (338), and accuse him of being "a heathenish sort of man" (197) and of having "a low foreign look" (270); but none can pin a specific ethnic identity on him. That he is a Jew or a gypsy are common guesses. Jeremiah has "the air of being able to see more than most could" (265), according to Grace, or "the deep liquid eyes and intense gaze of a professional charlatan" (83) according to Simon. His hair is usually dark but sometimes red. He wears a "sand-coloured" suit (305). Jeremiah slips through others' definitions of him like sand, escaping where Grace seems trapped.

Grace first develops a friendship with Jeremiah when he comes to peddle his goods at the house where she has her first position. When she begins to sense danger at Mr. Kinnear's, he makes her an offer: to run away with him as a "medical clairvoyant" (267). Jeremiah has previously told Grace, "You are one of us" (155), puzzling her. One possible meaning is that, like him, she has the ability to escape societal definitions and create her own identity. "You would need a different name, of course; a French one or something foreign, because people on this side of the ocean would find it hard to believe that a woman with the plain name of Grace had mysterious powers" (268), he coaches her. Grace is tempted. As she says, in "a new country, friends become old friends very quickly" (264). The escape Jeremiah offers is not only from danger, but from social class and nationality. If she follows his example she can jump the barriers, assume a French name, perform in the parlours of the middle and upper classes as well as in travelling shows for the lower classes, be accepted as a specialist in hypnotism one day and wander the byways of Ontario selling buttons and clothes the next. Ultimately, because he does not mean to marry her, Grace rejects the offer and shortly thereafter she finds herself in prison. Her imprisonment contrasts starkly with Jeremiah's physical and social mobility. Jeremiah makes another attempt to free Grace by hypnotizing her for the Governor's wife and her circle of friends who have been working for Grace's release. Grace feels this attempt represents "a pact" (306) that Jeremiah has made with her, but it does not free her. By the end of the novel, however, Grace has been freed and when she sees Jeremiah, now Gerald Bridges, "celebrated medium" (455), at a performance, he winks at her and she gives him a discreet wave, which escapes the

notice of her husband. She reflects, "I would not wish any here to learn my true name; but I know my secrets are safe with Jeremiah, as his are safe with me" (456). For now, like Jeremiah, Grace is also a name-changer, an "escape artist" assimilated into society under a new name, no longer bound by her history as a celebrated murderess, her childhood poverty, or her Irishness.

Grace indignantly quotes the preface to her confession, which reads "*both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*" (103, original emphasis). She protests, "That made it sound like a crime, and I don't know that being from Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such. But of course, our family were Protestants, and that is different" (103). Grace's comments reveal several important points. The phrase "by their own admission" associates Irishness with deviance, and simultaneously identifies it with something one could and might want to conceal. (The wording is reminiscent of today's "avowed homosexual.") Anti-Irish prejudice and Grace's lack of positive associations with Ireland or a strong Irish identity make passing an acceptable option for her. She suffers through a miserably poor childhood in the absence of the ethnic solidarity she might feel if that poverty were attributable to English oppression rather than her maternal grandfather's and her father's personal disgraces.¹⁰ Separated almost immediately from any family that might have reinforced her national identity when her mother dies and she goes into service in Canada, Grace is left without much sense of national origin: "I don't recall the place very well, as I was a child when I left it; only in scraps, like a plate that's been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in" (103).

However, Grace has some ideas about the Irish. Her assertion that Irish Protestants are "different" (and presumably less worthy of slander) points to one assimilation strategy available to Grace, stressing her Protestantism over her Irishness. She takes advantage of this strategy almost immediately upon immigrating. The first time words are put in her mouth for her. When the twelve-year-old girl is being interviewed for a position as a scullery maid, the housekeeper conducting the interview wants to know "if I was a Catholic, as those from Ireland generally were; and if so she would have nothing to do with me, as the Catholics were superstitious and rebellious Papists who were ruining the country" (128). Later she needs no encouragement to disassociate herself from Catholics, as seen in her insistence on Protestant difference or in her distaste at seeing James act "so Papist" (332) when he crosses himself. While she does not

go as far as her father, who has been involved in anti-Catholic terrorism in Ireland, Grace is quick to disassociate herself from Catholics when possible.¹¹

But disassociation is not always so easy. The Reverend Verringer, one of the petitioners for Grace, notes to Simon that political factors hinder Grace's chance for release, as the "Tories appear to have confused Grace with the Irish Question, although she is a Protestant; and to consider the murder of a single Tory gentleman — however worthy the gentleman, and however regrettable the murder — to be the same thing as the insurrection of an entire race" (80). Like Grace, Verringer makes the distinction between the Catholic and Protestant Irish, although to his disappointment, others are not making it. Grace is marked as Irish in several ways. Simon notes a "trace of the Northern Irish accent" (133) in her voice. Her red hair is frequently commented upon and holds negative associations for many who do so. Quoting the newspaper descriptions of herself, Grace notes she has the "Red hair of an ogre" (33), the interviewing housekeeper fears she will be "bad-tempered, as redheaded people frequently were" (128), and prison guards assume she will be sexually available to them because "a little fire ... comes with the redness of the hair" (240). Not only is Grace marked as Celtic by the colour of her hair,¹² in one instance a specifically Catholic identity is attached to her when her lawyer, sympathizing with Simon's difficulty in getting to the bottom of Grace's story, nicknames her "Our Lady of the Silences" (373).

Grace is Methodist. Her maternal grandfather was a minister who "had done something unexpected with the church money" (104), lost his position and left his family destitute. Her father was Anglo-Irish, and presumably Anglican, but not religious. As an adult, Grace attends a Methodist church. While this is an unsurprising choice, given her family background, it is also a very strategic, assimilationist one. Cecil Houston and William Smyth have noted that in mid-nineteenth-century Canada, Protestant churches, especially the quickly growing Methodist church, served as "forums for ethnic fusion" (169). In these churches, Irish Protestants met and intermarried with Scots, English, and American settlers. While the Anglican religion remained associated with English ethnicity, and Presbyterianism with Scotch heritage, the ethnicity of a Methodist was not as easily traceable. Protestant churches, Houston and Smyth assert, are part of the reason that in Canada, "the Irish have disappeared" (3), despite the immigration of half a million Irish to Canada from 1815 to 1845 and their status as "a pivotal charter group" (8) of Canadian settlement.¹³ Simon notes the political advantages of Methodism when he

suspects Reverend Verringer has converted from the Church of England to Methodism because of “the falling political star of the former in this country, and the rising one of the latter” (78). Methodism was safely Protestant, but not too closely associated with England at a time when the Canadian identity was consolidating under the federation which joined British Canada West and French Canada East.

Aside from church affiliation, marriage is another factor that affects the perception of ethnicity. In fact, if she takes her husband’s name, marriage can obscure a woman’s ethnicity to outside observers. As girls, Grace and Mary play a game throwing apple peelings to see what letter they will spell in order to divine the initials of their future husbands. Grace’s peel falls into a J. Mary jokes Grace will marry Jim, the stableboy, or Jeremiah, and in fact several men whose names start with J — Jeremiah, Simon Jordan, and two others who share Jim’s name — are potential sexual partners for Grace. James McDermott, the Irish Catholic servant who is hung for the murder of Mr. Kinnear, is widely believed to be Grace’s lover, and to have been urged by her to commit the murders. Jamie Walsh, the neighbour boy who has a crush on Grace, testifies against her at the trial, repents and marries her after her release. If a partnership with Jeremiah would have offered Grace a kind of flexible ethnicity, perceptions of her sexual relations with James reinforce her Irishness in the public eye, to the detriment of her image. Her eventual union with Jamie helps erase her national identity, even though he is probably Irish, and may even be Catholic by birth.

James and Jamie represent two distinct kinds of Irish identity. James represents the criminal, rebellious Irishman Anglo-Canadians so feared. He is a “surly black-browed rascal” (278) according to Mr. Kinnear, and a self-described “scapegrace ... never one to lick the boots of the rich” (226), endowed with a prodigious amount of physical energy. When he expends it in an ethnic-identified way, step-dancing in the barn loft, the noise sounds ominous to Grace. James is filled with ethnic resentment. Grace reports that “he hated all Englishman ... they were all thieves and whores, and stealers of land, and ground down the poor wherever they went” (257). It is largely because of the perception that Grace is the paramour of the Catholic, Celtic-identified McDermott that she cannot escape the taint of Irishness during the trial. The association of Irishness with criminality and revolt plays an important part in the pre-trial publicity. As Grace’s lawyer notes to Simon, the recently quashed populist Rebellion led by William MacKenzie, who “took the part of the poor Scots and Irish” (372), cast a political shadow over the scandal, though

Grace was ten years old and still in Ireland at the time. Being Irish is enough to make her suspected of being anti-Tory — moreover, her murdered employer was a Tory, and also a Scot, but a lowland Scot, which according to James is “the same thing” (257) as being an Englishman.

Jamie Walsh, the fife-playing youth who makes daisy chains with Grace, represents a considerably less threatening version of the Irish-Canadian, as his juvenile nickname implies. He is never explicitly named as Irish, but his Irish surname, red hair and freckles all suggest such an identity. Walsh is not only an Irish name, but for the most part, an Irish Catholic name,¹⁴ though Jamie’s religion is never mentioned, except to note that after their marriage Jamie attends the Methodist church with Grace. If Jamie was born Catholic, his conversion to Methodism is notable since relatively few Catholics converted. Also remarkable would be Grace’s acceptance of him, given her bias against Catholics. On the other hand, this distaste could be what prompts Jamie to convert, or evidence of Grace’s lack of viable options when Jamie proposes.

Whether he is a convert or not, Grace and Jamie’s married life is carefully conformist in order to protect Grace’s identity and their privacy. Ironically, marriage to a countryman does not bring Grace back her lost ethnicity, but rather helps Grace to assimilate more completely as Jamie is as bent on anonymity as she is. They name their cat Tabby and their dog Rex because “we don’t wish to get a reputation in the neighbourhood for being too original” (455). The next sentence announces that they attend the Methodist church, presumably for the same reason. By successfully avoiding detection and by obtaining a house of her own, Grace gains the privacy she has always lacked, and entry to a more satisfactory version of the domestic sphere than the one she experienced as a servant. While she has greater access to the outside world than she did as a prisoner, her life is still for the most part circumscribed by the private sphere. Grace’s chief pleasures are in keeping her own house, in quilting for herself and in her hopes that at forty-six she may be pregnant with her first child. Her marriage to Jamie, a man who is more suited to home life than Jeremiah and more open to assimilation than James, makes this quiet, private life possible. They have heeded this advice from the conduct book *The Ideal Woman*: “Let the woman’s first requisite be a man who is domestic in his tastes, and the man’s first object be a woman who can make his home a place of rest for him” (Melendy 47). Grace is neither the celebrated murderess she was nor the celebrated medium she could have been. Instead she sits on her porch and admires a scene “so peaceful you would think it was a picture” (453). Her passing, both in terms of ethnic assimilation and

in hiding her identity, is not as flamboyant an escape from definition as Jeremiah's, but it is an escape of sorts, an escape into privacy.

Their Own Limited Sphere

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt writes that Grace's "subordinate roles as a child, a poor person, a servant and a prisoner have bred in her a bitter sense of irony" (19). This is certainly true, but the reviewer leaves her gender off the list. This proves to be the subordinate identity most difficult for Grace to escape. By the end of *Alias Grace*, she is not a child, or poor, or a servant or a prisoner, but she is still a woman. She is freer than she was at the beginning of the novel, but she is not altogether free. Whether campaigning like Mrs. Quennell for "an enlarged sphere for women" (82) or cheerfully accepting their "own limited sphere" (429) like Simon's mother, all the women of *Alias Grace* live lives shaped by gender and by the long-lived Victorian concept of public and private spheres belonging respectively to men and to women. *The Ideal Woman* explains women's role in the home as follows:

If it be the man's part to lay the foundations and erect the building, it is woman's to beautify and enshrine music and the kindly arts within them. It is his to build and hers to beautify. It is woman who informs the home with light and life. Her hand it is that decorates and adorns, that culls and twines the flowers and leaves, and lets in "sweetness and light" into the rooms. Her touch is that of the purifying, transforming and beautifying angel in the home, or indeed to be a help-meet in every sense of the word. (Melendy 45-46).

Nine-year-old Grace, in charge of her younger siblings and taking care of a house inhabited by a continually sick and pregnant mother and an alcoholic, underemployed father, may not succeed in purifying, transforming, and beautifying the home to the extent Mary Melendy envisioned. She does, however, understand from a very early age that the domestic sphere, whether in her own home or those of others, is her realm, never questioning this fate or even wishing it could be otherwise. The third of her parents' nine surviving children, she sees her older sister go into service and her older brother go to sea while she is quite young. When she is almost thirteen she begins her own career as a domestic servant. It never occurs to Grace to even fantasize about following her brother's example instead of her sister's. She knows and accepts that poor boys leave home to take jobs that may be arduous and ill-paying but which at least lead them into the wider world, while poor girls go from their own

homes to the houses of others and perform much the same domestic work they have already been carrying out from an early age. Grace inherits responsibility for the ever-increasing number of younger siblings at the age of nine, then passes it on to the next youngest sister, who is nine and a half, when she goes into service herself. There is a deep sense of inevitability in this pattern. Her submissive mother, trapped into an abusive marriage by her first, illegitimate pregnancy, does not give Grace much to hope for in adult life:

She'd begun life under Aunt Pauline's thumb and continued the same way, only my father's thumb was added to it. Aunt Pauline was always telling her to stand up to my father, and my father would tell her to stand up to Aunt Pauline, and between the two of them they squashed her flat. She was a timid creature, hesitating and weak and delicate, which used to anger me. I wanted her to be stronger so I would not have to be so strong myself. (104-05)

This is a portrait of female weakness, but it is also one of female strength. Aunt Pauline has a force of will Grace's mother does not, as does Grace herself.

Grace senses the *corrosive effect entrapment within the family sphere* has on her mother, even to the point of misunderstanding a common turn of phrase:

When I was quite young, six or seven, I put my hand on my mother's belly, which was all round and tight, and I said What is in there, another mouth to feed, and my mother smiled sadly and said Yes I fear so, and I had a picture of an enormous mouth, on a head like the flying angel heads on the gravestones, but with teeth and all, eating away at my mother from the inside, and I began to cry because I thought it would kill her. (107)

Grace's mother does eventually die, eaten from within by a tumour in her uterus on the ship from Ireland. Grace's childhood, such as it was, ends here. But Grace learns from her mother's negative example. She has a power of cunning resistance and withholding that her mother lacks, as demonstrated in her conversations with Simon. She is something of a trickster figure.¹⁵ The Eve, Pandora, and Scheherazade motifs running through the novel all underscore Grace's role as a transgressor. She is able to take advantage of the roles available to her, even when they are severely limited, as she admits when she tells Simon she knows how to "act the part" of a servant. The role of murderess, which moves Grace out of the

private domain into the public eye, is a surprise and more of a challenge. Early in the novel she muses:

Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word — musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor.

Murderer is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices. (22-23)

In her more frank, pre-Simon voice, Grace is trying on the role that has been handed to her, trying to find some good in it, something she can use. There is of course a very practical advantage to being a murderess rather than a murderer. James is the one hanged. Grace's youth and gender allow her lawyer to argue she is "little better than a halfwit; and very soft and pliable, and easily imposed upon" (361) by the murderous McDermott, and to win her the clemency of a life sentence. Several options are open to Grace as a convicted murderess. She is sometimes tempted to act the brutal madwoman, reasoning that "If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one" (33); and she does in fact spend several years in a lunatic asylum. By the time the book opens, however, Grace is committed to being the "model prisoner" in hopes of pardon and release. This is a role, she notes, that takes unseen strength to carry off, like hanging off a cliff. Tom LeClair sees Grace fitting herself into feminine roles Simon will understand by using the literary conventions of local colour and romance. Prone to fainting, or feigning this trait, she encourages Simon's self-described tendency to see her as "the heroine of a sentimental novel" (58) by describing the "genteel swooning" LeClair points out "was not expected of an Irish serving girl" (26). At the same time, she steers him away from believing she is merely playing the lady by making an argument for her own candidness. She asserts, "I have no reason not to be frank with you, Sir, . . . A lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but I am beyond that. . . I was never a lady, Sir, and I've already lost whatever reputation I ever had" (90). By indicating she is beyond caring about her reputation and has forsworn all hope of release, Grace attempts to minimize any doubt Simon might have about the veracity of her story.

The story Grace tells Simon revolves around three women, all of them seduced and come to disastrous ends, all having failed one of the cardinal rules of Ideal Womanhood, to contain one's sexuality within the domestic, marital relationship. Though Grace herself does not get pregnant out

of wedlock, these illegitimate pregnancies shape her life.¹⁶ The cultural narrative of the fallen girl is a powerful force in her life. Aunt Pauline tells Grace her mother's story to warn her that "too many young women were caught in that fashion" (105). Their hasty marriage traps both of Grace's parents and their children into a life of unhappiness and poverty. After her mother dies, betrayed in death as in life by the female reproductive system, Grace finds a new mother-figure in Mary Whitney, with whom she works in the laundry at Grace's first domestic position.

Mary is three years older than Grace, also an orphan, part friend, part mother to the girl who has known little of friendship or mothering. "Mary took me under her wing from the very first" (151), Grace reports, and "comforted me better than my own mother could have done, for she was always too busy or tired or ill" (164). Mary provides Grace with her first opportunity to tell her story, to be listened to and to have her grief validated. Mary teaches Grace how to be a servant, not only how to do laundry, but also how to be "respectful and demure" to her employers while behind their backs "she made jokes about them and imitated their faces and walks and ways" (150). It is a lesson Grace learns well, though being more restrained than Mary, she does not fully apply her acerbic wit to her superiors until she is a prisoner, and then only in her own mind. Mary gives Grace new ways of looking at her position which undermine the dominance of master over servant: "In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a great deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all" (158). This, like Mary's habit of stealing candle stubs to extend the lighted portion of her day, is a reclamation of the privacy and private time that are so scarce for servants.

As Richard Eder notes, Mary also initiates Grace into female sexuality, explaining menstruation to the terrified girl when she reaches her menarche and repeating warnings similar to Aunt Pauline's: "Grace, you will be a beauty, soon you will turn the men's heads ... but you must be very careful what you ask, and you must never do anything for them until they have performed what they promised; and if there's a ring, there must be a parson to go with it" (164-65). Mary also gives Grace an idea of what sort of future she can reasonably hope for. She tells her they will save money from their wages for their dowries. Mary's vision is of Grace as "mistress of a tidy farmhouse, and independent" (158). For herself she imagines she will

marry a nice young farmer whose land was already cleared and a good house built; and if she could not get one of those, she would settle for

one with a log house, and they would build a better house later. She even knew what kind of hens and cows they would have — she wanted white and red Leghorns, and a Jersey cow for the cream and cheese, which she said there was nothing better. (166)

If the level of detail about the house and the farm animals is greater than that about the husband, this is not surprising because girls like Grace and Mary are in training to excel in the domestic realm. Their hopes centre around transferring familiar domestic labour from an employer's home to their own. In Mary's ideal scenario, as in Melendy's, it is her husband's task "to build" the house before she arrives and hers "to beautify" it with the prettiest chickens and the best cheese and cream. The most obvious alternative to this role, that they continue as servants, is not attractive. Mary assures Grace they will not — "being a servant was not a thing we were born to. ... on this side of the ocean folks rose in the world by hard work, not by who their grandfather was" (157-58). Two other cultural roles for women who fail to become the Ideal Woman surface as well, when Mary tells Grace that wrapped in a sheet after a bath she looks "very comical, just like a madwoman" (152) and takes her down to the red-light district to "see the women who made a living by selling their bodies" (152). Wife, maid, madwoman and prostitute/criminal are the cultural roles open to Mary and Grace. They can be domestic and "independent" as mistresses of their own homes, domestic for pay in the homes of others, or exist dangerously outside of domesticity, out of their minds or outside the law, their sexuality threateningly unregulated. Grace inhabits all four female roles within her lifetime, beginning as a servant, thrust into the national spotlight as a celebrated murderess and suspected paramour, descending into (or feigning) madness, recovering and ending as a quiet, moderately prosperous wife. What makes her remarkable is her ability to move through these roles, between the private and the public sphere, to emerge from madness and sexual scandal and turn these common narrative ends into a mere interludes in her life, phases she can move beyond.

Mary is the key to Grace's movement through each of these roles. As she taught her how to be a maid while she was alive, after her death Mary teaches Grace how to fill other female roles. Grace tells Simon, "without her, it would have been a different story entirely" (102), and it would have. When Mary, ignoring her own warnings to Grace, becomes pregnant and dies of a botched abortion, Grace is orphaned anew. After they play the apple peelings game to determine the identities of their future husbands and Mary's peel breaks three times in a row, foreshadowing her death before marriage, Grace dreams of her mother's burial at sea, sub-

stituting Mary's dark hair for her mother's auburn hair rippling out of the sheet. The conflation of mother/Mary in the dream indicates that the second loss is as crushing as the first to Grace.

Grace finds herself "depressed in spirits" (202) for years after Mary's death. When she meets Nancy Montgomery, a housekeeper whose joking manner reminds her of Mary and who is looking to hire an additional servant, Grace, now almost sixteen, takes the job. Nancy hires Grace to provide cover for her affair with Mr. Kinnear, but she is also fearful lest he should turn his libidinous attention to the younger girl. As a result, she is alternately kind and sharp with Grace and Grace is disillusioned: "I thought we would be like sisters or at least good friends, the two of us working side by side, as I had done with Mary Whitney. Now I knew this was not the way it was going to be" (223). Despite her failure to fill Mary's shoes, Nancy continues to be linked with Mary in Grace's mind, just as Mary was linked with Grace's mother. When Nancy asks Grace to brush her hair, Grace remembers how Mary brushed hers. Eventually James tells Grace that Nancy is Mr. Kinnear's mistress, and soon after she recognizes the symptoms of Nancy's pregnancy. Although there is little love lost between Nancy and Grace, the news hits Grace hard. "Oh no, Oh no.... It cannot be" (279), she thinks, then wonders what Mr. Kinnear will do when he finds out:

Boot her in the ditch. Marry her. I had no idea, and could not rest easy with either of these futures. I wished Nancy no harm, and did not want her cast out, a waif on the common highway and a prey to wandering scoundrels; but all the same it would not be fair and just that she should end up a respectable married lady with a ring on her finger, and rich into the bargain. It would not be right at all. Mary Whitney had done the same as her, and had gone to her death. Why should the one be rewarded and the other punished, for the same sin? (276)

The mother-Mary-Nancy line is firmly established now. The two possibilities, a marriage or none, are the paths Grace's mother and Mary took when they found themselves pregnant. After she is rejected by the father of her child, Mary predicts that "no decent man would marry her, and she would have to go on the streets, and become a sailor's drab, as she would have no other way of feeding herself and the baby" (173). She and Grace explore the options of hiding the pregnancy and giving the child up for adoption or going to a workhouse, but nothing seems tenable. Having been down this road with Mary, Grace can only imagine disaster for Nancy if Mr. Kinnear will not marry her. The question is

never settled because they are both murdered in short order. Characters who believe Grace was involved in the murders construe that Grace must have been jealous of Mr. Kinnear's involvement with Nancy, but by looking to romantic motives for an explanation, they go astray. It is Mary who makes this "a different story entirely" than what the courts and the press see.

During the hypnotism scene, after Simon identifies the mysterious voice emanating from Grace as Mary, "Mary" affirms:

I told James to do it. I urged him to. I was there all along! ... Grace doesn't know, she's never known! ... You mustn't tell her! ... Do you want to see her back in the Asylum? I liked it there at first, I could talk out loud there. I could laugh. I could tell what happened. But no one listened to me. ... I was not heard. ... 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... (402-03)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted that Victorian women writers "almost obsessively create characters who enact their own, covert authorial anger" (77), often in the figure of the madwoman, who is sometimes taken for a ghost. Atwood returns to this trope of nineteenth-century female anger by reintroducing it in the familiar forms of mental illness or spiritual possession. After the hypnotism, Simon, Reverend Verringer and Jeremiah discuss what they have seen. "Two hundred years ago, they would not have been at a loss, ... It would have been a clear case of possession," (405) Verringer asserts. But the men settle instead on a psychological condition known as "*double consciousness*" (405) or "*dédoublement*" (406), which closely resembles today's multiple personality disorder, a still controversial condition believed to be brought on by trauma that causes the conscious self to fracture. If we accept the diagnosis, the moment of disassociation is easy to pinpoint. When Mary dies, Grace hears a voice crying "*Let me in*" (178), which she believes she has misheard because she thinks Mary's ghost would want to be let *out* the window, as a fellow steerage passenger told her when her own mother died. Grace faints soon after:

when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me I myself was Grace, I would not believe them, but cried, and tried to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her. They told me

later they'd feared for my reason, which must have been unsettled by the shock of it all; and it was no wonder, considering. (180)

Grace reports hearing another voice shortly after her realization that Nancy is pregnant, which echoes the words of her own response: "I heard a voice whispering: *It cannot be*. I must have been frightened into a fit, because after that I lost consciousness altogether" (279). As the day of the murders draws closer, Grace's narrative becomes fractured and vague. She loses consciousness over and over, sleepwalks and has vivid dreams which may not be dreams at all. Presumably during these lost times, "Mary" is seducing James in order to gain his co-operation in the murder and helps him carry it out. "Mary" is in control again while Grace is in the Asylum. It is also quite likely that "Mary" influences Grace's bitter and sardonic voice early in the novel even after Grace has regained control and outwardly become "the model prisoner." Even more dramatically than Grace has internalized Simon as her audience after he is gone, she has internalized Mary as a speaking voice. Sometimes this is clearly conscious, as when she quotes Mary or tries to imitate her: "I try to think of what Mary Whitney would say, and sometimes I can say it" (63). Other times Grace seems almost but not quite conscious of "Mary"'s presence within her, as when another inmate spills soup on her and she is chastised for protesting, then "I was suddenly very angry and I screamed, I did nothing, I did nothing! It was her, it was her fault!" (32). She is literally speaking of the soup, but on some level she may also be speaking of the murders. Grace's very mind seems divided into public and private zones to which she has varying access. As Hilary Mantel points out, "Grace can know and not know, she is good at that" (4). She is not only "utterly present and unfathomable" (Eder 2) to readers, but also to herself.

By having Verringer raise the possibility of possession, pointing out that in different contexts the same set of facts are interpreted quite differently, Atwood is keeping a supernatural explanation open. From a literary perspective there is not nearly as much difference between these two explanations as there would be from a psychological or religious perspective. "Mary" works as easily as a ghost as an alternate personality.¹⁷ Her references to speaking to Nancy could be taken as either evidence of the spirits' communication with each other in the afterlife, or the existence of a third personality that manifests itself only to "Mary" and not to Grace. Positing the existence of three separate personalities adds resonance to Grace's final act of stitching scraps of Mary's petticoat and Nancy's dress into a quilt and declaring she has done this "so we will all be together" (460).

Grace may have slightly more agency as a multiple personality than as a victim of possession, since the psyche of a multiple presumably splinters in order to shield the original personality from painful knowledge. The splintering is a self-protective move from within, not an invasion from without. A final possibility, and one in which she retains the highest degree of agency, is that Grace is faking everything. This option is open but improbable since even in her own interior monologue she never admits to the murders or even hints that she has any memory of them. Atwood has explored the theme of the suppressed, unknown self throughout her career, particularly in *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye* (1988). That Grace knows all and doesn't tell seems unlikely, though she may certainly know more than she tells, or she may wilfully alter the story as she does the song "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son" since "I didn't see why I shouldn't make it come out in a better way" (238). It would be wrong, however, to impose any one of these three explanations — mental illness, possession, or outright deception — on *Alias Grace* as the authoritative one, because the novel is so committed to ambiguity, multiple narratives, and undecidability.¹⁸ The novel's end, with Grace unsure if she is pregnant or if the heaviness in her stomach is a tumour like the one that killed her mother — "a life or a death" (459), is one more example of the withholding of certainty and stable meanings common throughout the novel.¹⁹

Rather than choosing between the common female narrative ends of madness, marriage, or death, *Alias Grace* calls attention to these limited choices by invoking all three, relegating madness to a narrative middle and ending at a fork in the road, one path leading to a few more decades of married life for the middle-aged newlywed, the other to an early death.²⁰ Grace's maturation as measured by conventional milestones goes into slow motion in prison. As she notes, in the Penitentiary "some of them stay the same age all the time inside themselves; the same age as when first put in" (380). Physically at least, this happens to Grace, who is said to look older than her age at sixteen when she is incarcerated and younger than her age after almost three decades in jail. According to Janet, Grace appears to be "almost a girl" (446). However, time has not stood still, and the twenty-nine years represent a real loss. When Grace associates the word "murderess" with a "musky and oppressive" smell "like dead flowers in a vase" (22-23), she invokes a traditional image of maidenhood, flowers, but these blossoms have been left to rot.

Grace's status as "almost a girl" at forty-five is no doubt partially due to her being unmarried. Prison temporarily halts the marriage plot for her. That she marries immediately upon her release from prison, saying sim-

ply “I did not have many other choices” (452), points to the near inevitability of marriage as the end of a woman’s story. When it seemed she would never be released from prison, Simon thinks, “Her story is over. . . . the thing that has defined her. How is she supposed to fill in the rest of the time?” (91). If the marriage plot defined most Victorian women’s stories, Arwood seems to be asking, how did they fill in the rest of their time? The forced stasis that delays Grace’s marrying until middle age may not be that much different than the arrested development of a woman who marries at twenty and suddenly finds her story over. When Grace observes that the new Governor’s daughter Janet, who finds Grace’s box of clothing and presents it to her on her release, is “too young to have realized what the effects of twenty-nine years shut up in a box might be” (445), she is referring not only to her rotted clothes, or to her own time in prison, but to Janet’s own likely fate. Marriage, Grace points out once she has married, “is not what most girls imagine when young” (453).

Nonetheless, she makes the best of it. Marrying in her forties without romantic illusion, Grace thinks, “at least the two of us know what kind of bargain we have gotten into” (453). The conclusion of the novel is one of partial satisfaction. Grace has made a remarkable escape from many of the roles that seemed to have trapped her, from *Irish serving girl*, to sexually degenerate criminal, to lunatic. Yet her deliverance is into a somewhat disturbing marriage in which she had little say. Jamie sends for her when she is released from prison and she is brought to him without knowing the identity of the gentlemen who has agreed to provide her a home, or what her role in that home is to be. Grace agrees to the marriage, but afterward always calls Jamie “Mr. Walsh,” indicating distance between them. She is “troubled” (456) by Jamie’s insistence that she re-live the murders over and over, performing the role of McDermott’s victim for him. Grace’s release from a prison symbolizing women’s constriction in domestic roles leads her into one of those very roles; it is an improvement, but not a triumph.

Conclusion

Grace sometimes wonders what would have become of her if she had run away with Jeremiah. She concludes, “my fate would have been very different. But only God knows whether it would have been better or worse; and I have done all the running away I have time for in this life” (456). Grace gains a measure of freedom by conforming, both in terms of assimilation and by creating a conventional, domestically bound life for herself — in other words, by retreating as far as possible in both ethnic and

gender terms into the private sphere.²¹ She also contains the running narrative she keeps of her life within the context of a private relationship by addressing it to Simon, rather than to the public at large.

It is not surprising that she should do so. While Grace gives evidence throughout the novel of her discomfort with the constriction of the private sphere and the limited, culturally-scripted roles available to her, she has ample motivation to blend into Canadian society by assimilating and following conventional gender roles. An already weak Irish identity and her Protestantism make shedding any associations with her Irish origins easy.²² Moreover, Grace finds comfort and satisfaction in the private sphere, in her intimate friendship with Mary, and in the concrete pleasures of sewing and washing so lyrically described throughout the novel. Grace is never one to covet male privilege, accepting gender conventions as given. She does not consciously choose her two public roles, madwoman and criminal celebrity, and given the choice, she rejects another public role in which she would have been on display as a medicine show performer. Grace probably feigns her shock — “under their own names? ... I would never be so brazen” (68) — when Simon tells her of the literary magazine female employees of his father’s mill put out, but that it is a credible response demonstrates the degree to which women are expected to remain in the private sphere, and Grace does not veer very far from this expectation, at least not of her own volition. All the behaviour that thrusts her into the public sphere, as well as the most public aspects of her narration, come from the alternate personality or ghost, “Mary,” who dares what Grace does not. “Mary” transgresses not only by acting sexually outside of marriage and committing murder, but also by speaking freely — that is, publicly and outside the boundaries of acceptable female speech. That Grace needs “Mary” to perform these roles for her is a measure of her dis-satisfaction with contemporary gender configurations.

Late in the novel Grace quotes the hymn “Amazing Grace”:

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind but now I see.
I hope I was named after it. I would like to be found. I would like to see. Or to be seen. (379)

The hymn touches on many themes in Grace’s life. Its authorship by a slave-ship captain whose conversion led him to turn his ship back to Africa recalls her traumatic sea voyage. The song also calls to mind

Grace's unexpected release from prison, the blindness of her amnesia, and the extent to which so much of her story and her self is lost to her. She expresses a desire to have her true self found, seen by others and to see it herself. As Auerbach has pointed out, it is only by fulfilling the existing roles of "celebrated murderess, madwoman, victim and demon" that "a Victorian servant could turn a life of washing and quilting into a riveting public narrative" (3). But Grace would like to bring what is hidden and private out into the open in a way which would be more genuine than the spectacle of her celebrity. It is an unrealized desire.

NOTES

¹ Atwood's ability to recreate the Victorian world is widely praised. See especially Auerbach, Cameron, LeClair, Mantel, and Robertson. (Rubin dissents, claiming that Grace's acceptance of Mary's abortion is anachronistically feminist). Nonetheless, many of the issues treated in *Alias Grace* do have continued relevance in the present. The private/public distinction so fundamental to the novel, both in narrative and thematic terms, can be seen as a reflection of inner/outer binaries that have shaped twentieth-century thinking about psychology and literature. Some critics see *Alias Grace's* form (the novel is long, partly epistolary, leisurely paced and contains multiple viewpoints) as a tribute to Victorian story-telling techniques. See Prose and reviews in *Publishers Weekly* and *Chicago Tribune Books*. If some of the social issues such as "the Irish Question" seem quaint as specific white ethnicities have lost much of their meaning in contemporary North American society, others remain quite relevant. The regulation of the sex lives of unmarried young women through sanctions on illegitimacy and abortion has continued, from late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anti-prostitution campaigns and rescue home narratives to contemporary welfare reform debate and political skirmishes around access to abortion.

² This and all other references to Grace Marks are to the fictional Grace Marks and not the historical Grace Marks, unless otherwise noted. However, this statement could also be applied to the actual Grace Marks, which is no doubt why she made such a lasting mark on the Canadian and Atwood's imagination. Atwood has returned to the figure of Grace Marks several times, first in her poem "Visit to Toronto With Companions" in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and secondly in a television play, *The Servant Girl*, which aired on the CBC in 1974.

³ As Nina Auerbach notes, despite his manifest failures to understand, Simon is the only one who truly tries to hear Grace after her arrest.

⁴ Though I don't entirely agree with this characterization, this surface conventionality is what I believe Elspeth Cameron is reacting to when she contrasts Grace's "bland, prim, mealy-mouthed" spoken discourse with her "opulent and intense" (40) inner life.

⁵ That Rochester's wife, Bertha, is white but questionably so, is from a British colony, and goes mad raises the possibility that Grace occupies the positions of Jane and Bertha at once.

⁶ This scene recalls what Nancy Armstrong calls Mr. B.'s "ocular rape" (122) of Pamela through spying, letter reading, and other violations of the servant girl's privacy.

⁷ In Simon's sections, by contrast, spoken dialogue is clearly differentiated from

thought in the conventional way. In fact, in one chapter, which consists solely of Grace's narration without any introductory scene, interruption from him, or supplementary thoughts from her, the presence of quotation marks at the beginning of every paragraph is the only way to know that the point of view is Simon's — that what we have read is what she says as he remembers it, rather than as she does.

⁸ There are frequent references to crossing the U.S./Canada border in the text as well as to Niagara Falls, a natural feature which spans the border. Not only does Jeremiah cross the border, but Simon is an American who comes to live in Canada and then returns, while Grace flees to the U.S. with James after the murders and is arrested there and brought back to Canada. These flights across the border echo William Lyon MacKenzie's flight to the United States after the failure of the 1837 Rebellion in Canada as well as the series of unsuccessful raids by the Irish nationalist Fenians who invaded Canada from the United States in 1866.

⁹ Coral Ann Howells discusses other "escape artists" in Atwood's fiction such as Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Lesje in *Life Before Man*, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Elaine in *Cat's Eye* (69, 97).

¹⁰ These disgraces impoverish the formerly middle class family and inspire Grace's uncle to pay their passage to Canada in order to be rid of them. Most pre-famine Irish immigrants to Canada were, like Grace's family, Protestant and from families of moderate means. The pattern of more prosperous relatives pre-paying the passage of poorer relatives was a very common one. (See MacKay, and Houston and Smyth.)

¹¹ Noel Ignatiev has argued that Catholic Irish-Americans overcame religious prejudice against them and gained access to mainstream American society, or "became white" by disassociating themselves politically from African-Americans, their natural class allies. It could be argued that in a Canadian context, Irish Protestants like Grace gained power by exploiting an existing religious divide in Canada which favoured Protestants over Catholics.

¹² Some Irish Protestants are ethnically Celtic, but many are not. The important point is that Grace is believed to be.

¹³ Glazer and Moynihan note that in the United States, where Irish immigration was more Catholic than in Canada, Protestant Irish immigrants quickly "ceased being Irish" (240).

¹⁴ See baptismal, marriage, and cemetery areas on the *Walsh Family Genealogical Home Page*. Walsh is a well researched surname and this site is quite comprehensive, providing a history of the name and historical information about thousands of mainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Walshes in the Irish diaspora worldwide. In cases where religion is noted, an overwhelming majority of Walshes are Catholics, about 90% in the marriage listing section, for example. The historical Jamie Walsh testified at Grace Marks's trial, but their subsequent marriage is Atwood's invention. Given Atwood's painstaking historical research, it is not unreasonable to assume she has paid attention to the national, ethnic, and religious associations of the surnames of the historical figures she fictionalizes.

¹⁵ See Tom LeClair. Coral Ann Howells, writing before *Alias Grace* was published, also notes the prevalence of tricksters in Atwood's work.

¹⁶ Though it is more peripheral to the plot, the Governor's daughter Lydia also gets pregnant by a military officer and is forced into a hasty marriage with Reverend Verringer to cover it up.

¹⁷ Atwood takes a similarly ambiguous stance toward Elaine's vision or hallucination of the Virgin Mary in *Cat's Eye*.

¹⁸ This characteristic ambiguity has been the focus of early criticism of *Alias Grace*. Christie March explores the heteroglossia inherent in symbolic objects in the novel, or their power to mean different things to different characters. Margaret Rogerson in analysing the quilt Grace sews for herself at the end of the novel finds it could be "an abject and terrified admission of guilt, an innocent desire to create a memorial to the only female friendships that

she had ever experienced, or a brazen celebration of a crime for which she feels no remorse," in other words, a product of "memory, amnesia or madness" (21).

¹⁹ Atwood also thus avoids what she wryly identifies as the common Canadian literary phenomenon of the "Baby Ex Machina," whose appearance at the end of a book gives it more hope than its vision has previously been able to sustain (*Survival* 207).

²⁰ Of course, as Atwood points out in her experimental short story, "Happy Endings," "The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*" (*Good Bones* 55-56) or in this case, Grace and Jamie die, Grace and Jamie die, Grace and Jamie die, which of course, their historical counterparts have, at least a century ago.

²¹ Jane Marcus has noted a similar movement in the writing of many prominent turn-of-the-century women who turned to autobiography as a "deliberate resignation from the public world and patriarchal history... re/signing their private lives into domestic discourse" (114). However, Marcus argues that these women were motivated by a belief that could they retain their fame only through gender-appropriate domestic discourse, whereas Grace seeks to lose her fame, or rather her infamy, entirely.

²² In 1938, Marcus Hansen formulated three generational positions for immigrants. According to Hansen, second generation immigrants seek assimilation while their children try to return to their ethnic roots. Many theorists of ethnic identity categorize child immigrants as second generation and Grace fits Hansen's assimilationist second generation position nicely. Authors such as Werner Sollors and Mary Dearborn have rightly critiqued Hansen's schema for its rigidity, but it remains useful in some circumstances.

WORKS CITED

- Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Publishers Weekly* 7 Oct. 1996: 58.
- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
- . *Good Bones and Simple Murders*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- . *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- . *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Auerbach, Nina. "The Housemaid's Tale." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Women's Review of Books* Apr. 97: 1+.
- Brookner, Anita. "A Wretch Like Her." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Spectator* 14 Sept 1996: 36.
- Cameron, Elspeth. "Alias Fiction." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Canadian Forum* Jan./Feb. 1997: 39-42.
- Dearborn, Mary V. *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Eder, Richard. "Her Truth is Scheherazade's." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 15 Dec. 1996: 2.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Glazer, Nathan, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: M.I.T. P, 1970.
- Hansen, M.L. "The Third Generation in America." 1938. *Commentary* Nov. 1952: 492-500.

- Houston, Cecil J. and William J. Smyth. *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links and Letters*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. Modern Novelists. New York: St. Martin's, 1996.
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- . *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.
- LeClair, Tom. "Guilty Verdict." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Nation* 9 Dec 1996: 25-27.
- Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. "Did She or Didn't She?: A Tale of Two Murders." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *New York Times* 12 Dec. 1996: C19.
- MacKay, Donald. *Flight From Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990.
- Mantel, Hilary. "Murder and Memory." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *New York Review of Books* 19 Dec. 96: 4+.
- March, Cristie. "Crimson Silks and New Potatoes: The Heteroglossic Power of the Object in Atwood's *Alias Grace*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 22.2 (1997): 66-82.
- Marcus, Jane. "Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women." *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988. 114-46.
- Melendy, Mary R. *The Ideal Woman: For Maidens, Wives, Mothers*. N.p.: E.E. Miller, 1915.
- Moodie, Susanna. *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*. 1853. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989.
- Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.
- Prose, Francine. "Death and the Maid: Margaret Atwood's Latest Novel Revolves Around a Notorious Murder in 19th-century Toronto." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *New York Times Book Review* 29 Dec. 1996: 6.
- Robertson, Sarah. Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Canadian Book Review Annual*. 1996. Ed. Joyce M. Wilson. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. 154.
- Rogerson, Margaret. "Reading the Patchworks in *Alias Grace*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.1 (1998): 5-22.
- Rubin, Merle. "Novel Approaches to History." Rev. of *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. *Wall Street Journal* 15 Nov. 1996: A12.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243-61.
- Walsh Family Genealogy and History Home Page*. Internet. 10 March 2000. <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~walsh/>
- "Women on the Verge: Two Novels of Madness and Mayhem." Rev. of *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood. *Chicago Tribune Books* 19 Jan. 1997: 1+.