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著者	Sellwood, Jane
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Imagining Grace Marks: Susanna Moodie's "Grace Marks" and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Jane Sellwood

In her *Roughing It in the Bush*(1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853) Susanna Moodie's nineteenth-century imagination seems to construct Canada as a binary of the wilderness and civilization reiterated by Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*(1971), a title which he admits having "pilfered" from Atwood's 1970 book of poems, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie.* In that series of poems, and in her recent novel, *Alias Grace*(1996), Margaret Atwood's references to Moodie's writing both draw on its representation of an English Canadian literary imagination constructed by Victorian cultural values in the context of the mid-nineteenth-century colony of Canada West, and rewrites it according to a late twentieth-century post-colonial critical emphasis on the construction of both the human subject and historical record.

According to Northrop Frye, identity is contingent upon not only culture but also the imagination, which, as states in his preface to *The Bush Garden*, is, relative to culture, rooted in context, and has a vegetable quality which makes it "always sharply limited in range" (i). In Moodie's "Grace Marks," a sketch included in *Life in the Clearings*, and in Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*, the identity under construction is that of Grace Marks, a young Irish immigrant woman incarcerated for her involvement in the murder of her employer and his housekeeper.

The identity represented in both texts is, according to Frye's definition, limited according to the imaginations of their writers. Thus, while Moodie's mid-nineteenth-century text assumes a correspondence between her reader's imagination and her authoritative representation of the woman, Atwood's late-twentieth-century text draws attention to the multiplicity of viewpoints involved in imagining Grace Marks.

Atwood's *Alias Grace* is drawn from Moodie's account of an actual event that took place in the summer of 1843, in what is now Eastern Ontario. A young servant, Grace Marks, along with a young male employee, James McDermot, was convicted of the murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. Moodie's text gives an account of her visit to the Toronto asylum where she views the behaviour of the young woman as clearly indicating her mental instability, and implies the doubtless guilt of Grace Marks in the double murder. After reiterating hearsay and newspaper accounts of the day about the case, Moodie's narrative gives a first-hand impression of the female subject who was at the centre of much sensational newspaper comment and speculation at the time:

> She is a middle-sized woman, with a slight graceful figure. There is an air of hopeless melancholy in her face which is very painful to contemplate. Her complexion is fair, and must, before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled it, have been very brilliant. Her eyes are a bright blue, her hair auburn, and her face would be rather handsome were it not for the long curved chin, which gives, as it always does to most persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression.
>
> Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong stealthy look; her eye never meets yours, and after a furtive regard, it invariably bends its gaze upon the ground....She entered the service of the governor of the Penitentiary, but the fearful hauntings of her brain have terminated in madness. She is now in the asylum at Toronto; and as I mean to visit it when there, I may chance to see this remarkable criminal again. Let

> us hope that all her previous guilt may be attributed to the incipient workings of this frightful malady. (*Clearings* 209)

In her discussion of Susanna Moodie's writing in *Survival*, her 1972 critical survey of Canadian literature, Atwood problematizes Frye's thesis of the binary of bush and garden and its imaginative continuum in English Canadian literature. According to Atwood, Moodie's psychological collision with a nineteenth-century Romantic ideal of Nature and the difficulties she has dealing with the physical environment produce not an oppositional binary, but "a double-minded attitude towards Canada, one half of which she approves of by imposing the cultural values she has brought with her from England, but not being able to "account for the hostilities she finds in the other half" (*Survival* 51).

In her *Life in the Clearings*, Moodie's observations of urban settlements in colonial English Canada reflect this psychological duality. Moodie's double-mindedness may be read as a projection in her fascination with Grace Marks, in whose "madness" may be read the dangerous effects of physical and cultural hostility in the New World. As a figure of Moodie's projection, Grace is locked inside the garrisons for the wild and uncontrollable, that is, the new penitentiary and lunatic asylum at Kingston and Toronto respectively. Nevertheless, Moodie's sketch presumes to render a first-hand and therefore believable view of the female subject who is Grace Marks.

On the other hand, Atwood's *Alias Grace* juxtaposes texts Atwood used as sources in her research and places them in the narrative so that they are as much a part of the structure of the novel as the chapter divisions, which use as headings the names of nineteenth-century quilt patterns. Conventional historical fiction uses historiographical methods of research, selection, analysis, and synthesis to construct a

narrative which is then produced as the truth about an event. *Alias Grace* makes this process transparent by including the extensive list of her sources in the "Acknowledgements." In the "Author's Afterword" Atwood reiterates not only the recorded facts of the Kinnear murders, but also makes explicit that she has "of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators who claimed to be writing history)" (*Alias Grace* 559). The "Afterword" also criticizes Moodie's account of the Grace Marks story, which as Atwood points out, is given third hand, and is marked by figments of Moodie's tendencies toward melodrama:

> Moodie's retelling of the murder is a third-hand account. In it she identifies Grace as the prime mover, driven by love for Thomas Kinnear and jealousy of Nancy [his housekeeper] , and using the promise of sexual favours to egg McDermott on. McDermott is portrayed as besotted by her and easily manipulated. Moodie can't resist the potential for literary melodrama, and the cutting of Nancy's body into four quarters is not only pure invention but pure Harrison Ainsworth. The influence of Dicken's Oliver Twist--a favourite of Moodie's--is evident in the tale of the bloodshot eyes that were said to be haunting Grace Marks.(*Alias Grace* 556)

While Moodie's rendering of Grace Marks is embedded in her observations of a visit to Kingston Penitentiary, as part of a tour of Canada West, her ostensibly objective account of Grace Marks is laced with the effects of an imagination formed by English Canadian social attitudes and cultural values influenced by those of the British imperial centre. On the other hand, Atwood's Grace Marks is reconstructed to represent the late-twentieth-century post colonial emphasis on the position of a working class immigrant woman of the period. Atwood's novel addresses current concerns that parallel the colonized position to issues of difference in gender, class and race.

Unlike Moodie's Grace Marks, Atwood's Grace is a female subject who speaks in the text, an "I" narrator who tells her own story, on her own terms, to Dr. Simon Jordan. Significantly, Atwood's text alternates the third person point of view of the psychologist, and the first person point of view of Grace Marks. In this excerpt, Grace has begun her talking sessions with Jordan:

> And that is how we go on. He asks a question, and I say an answer, and he writes it down. In the courtroom, every word that came out of my mouth was as if burnt into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never get the words back; only they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place....But now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well. (Alias Grace 77)

Atwood's novel uses the talking sessions Grace has with Simon Jordan, an "alienist," as practitioners in the new mental science of psychology were then called, as a way to reshape both Moodie's rendering of Grace Marks, and to rethink--in terms of present intellectual concerns with the historical, linguistic and psychoanalytic construction of the subject--Moodie's construction of the identity of Grace Marks.

At the time, the innocence of Grace Marks was supported by a group of petitioners to have her sentence commuted. Engaged by those seeking her release, and having received permission from the Governor of Kingston Penitentiary to examine her, Simon Jordan strives for objectivity in his analysis of Grace Marks, convinced that he is less interested in her guilt or innocence in the matter than in discovering the mental processes that led her, in the course of her interrogation by police and the courts, to give three versions of what happened on the day of the murders. But Jordan has his own motive; he is anxious to

demonstrate to the medical establishment the current psychological theories he has learned in Europe with a view to currying favour and establishing his own institution. However, as his first meeting with Grace forewarns, Jordan's objectivity is challenged repeatedly; his imagination is a constant interference in his carefully structured analytical sessions:

> He approached her with a calm and smiling face, presenting an image of goodwill--which was a true image, after all, because goodwill was what he felt. It was important to convince such patients that you, at least, did not believe them to be mad, since they never believed it themselves.
>
> But then Grace stepped forward, out of the light, and the woman he'd seen the instant before was suddenly no longer there....Her eyes were unusually large, it was true, but they were far from insane. Instead they were frankly assessing him. It was as if she were contemplating the subject of some unexplained experiment; as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny.
>
> Remembering the scene, Simon winces. I was indulging myself, he thinks. Imagination and fancy. I must stick to observation, I must proceed with caution. A valid experiment must have verifiable results. I must resist melodrama, and an overheated brain. (*Alias Grace* 66-67)

The imagination, and its limiting "vegetable" quality (as Frye has put it) is, in Jordan's nineteenth-century context, dangerous because it is thought to be antithetical to the intellectual properties of culture such as observation and scientific procedure. Ironically, Jordan's imagination seems poised for dangerous intrusion on his faith in scientific objectivity.

On the other hand, despite her restrained compliance with Jordan's probings, Grace's narrative consciousness coolly delineates him:

> I see what he's after. He is a collector. He thinks all he has to do is give me an apple, and then he can collect me. Perhaps he is from a

> newspaper. Or else he is a travelling man, making a tour. They come in and they stare, and when they look at you, you feel as small as an ant, and they pick you up between finger and thumb and turn you around. And then they set you down and go away. (*Alias Grace* 45)

In contradiction, her verbal responses to Jordan apparently defer to his authority in the doctor-patient relationship:

> You won't believe me, Sir, I say. Anyway it's all been decided, the trial is long over and done with and what I say will not change anything. You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself. In any case I can't remember, I can remember other things but I have lost that part of my memory entirely. They must have told you that. (45)

By virtue of her duplicitous narrative voice, Grace's position as victim in relation to the powerful cultural institutions that incarcerate her takes on a curiously double status in the text.

Atwood's view of the Canadian cultural imagination as transmitted by Canadian literature sees it as produced by the positions available to the "victim" in a culture conditioned by its colonial history. Atwood's schema of positions available to those in the situation of the colonized posits four positions: one, to deny the fact that you are a victim; two, to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea; three, to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable; position four is to be a creative non-victim (*Survival* 36-38). This position seems most problematic for the Canadian imagination, as it has been shaped by colonialism, since it "is a position not for victims, but for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims" (38). As the victim observed by Simon Jordan,

Grace Marks would appear to occupy position two, that is, cognizant of her victimhood, but resigned to it. However, the interior narrative voice refuses this position, and directs the female subject that is Grace in Atwood's text towards position four, the location that eludes the constructions of colonial culture.

An agent in this movement is the voice of Mary Whitney, a servant in the Toronto household where Grace was employed, after leaving her father and siblings on their rural homestead shortly after the family emigrated to Canada from Ireland in the early 1840s. Mary Whitney becomes pregnant by the son of the employing household; he refuses to acknowledge his involvement. A victim of her class and gender, after an abortion Mary Whitney bleeds to death in the room she shares with Grace. The latter, it seems, carries this memory, and a momento of Mary Whitney's kerchief, with her into her new employment at the rural home of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery, in whose murders she becomes implicated. As she flees with James McDermott after the double murder, Grace assumes the name of her dead friend.

When the voice of Mary Whitney speaks through Grace while she is under hypnosis, assumptions about her victimhood, which Atwood's text has carefully constructed through the subject/object binary of first and third person point of view, are put into question. At this point in the narrative, a reception of Grace constructed by the reader's imagination is destabilized by the intrusion of Mary Whitney's voice during the hypnosis by Dr. Jerome Dupont. This character is an "alias" figure in Atwood's text, having been introduced previously in Grace's narrative as Jeremiah the pedlar, whom she first meets in the kitchen of her first employer, and whom Grace later reads about as yet another incarnation in Gerald Bridges, a celebrated spiritualist medium. At her first meet-

ing with "Jeremiah," this elusive figure, and his association with the irrational workings of the imagination, establishes his connection to Grace by telling her, "You are one of us" (180).

The hypnosis session, attended by Simon Jordan and other supporters of Grace, is held with the hope that it will serve to recover her memory of the day of the murders, and establish her innocence. But the voice of Mary Whitney intrudes, defiant and derisive, as it relates details of the murder of Nancy Montgomery. "It was my kerchief that strangled her," she tells her horrified but fascinated audience, "Hands held it." And gleefully, she adds, "You've deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!" (*Alias Grace* 481) Responding to Simon Jordan's question about her identity, she replies:

> "Come doctor....You know the answer. I told you it was my kerchief, the one I left to Grace, when I, when I"...."Not Mary, says Simon, not Mary Whitney." (Alias Grace 482)

Significantly, Mary Whitney's kerchief figures first in the opening pages of the novel. In Chapter One, "Jagged Edge," Grace's narrative outlines in hallucinatory detail the bloody figure of Nancy Montgomery: "Around her neck is a white cotton kerchief printed with blue flowers, 'love-in-a-mist,' it's mine," this voice tells the reader (*Alias Grace* 6). In the psychological parlance of the time, according to Atwood's text, the phenomenon of Mary Whitney's persona inhabiting the "fleshly garment" of Grace Marks was called "double consciousness" or *dedoublement*; in such cases, "the subject, when in a somnambulistic trance, displayed a completely different personality than when awake, the two halves having no knowledge of each other" (*Alias Grace* 486). The interjection of Mary Whitney's voice as evidence of a double consciousness destabilizes the narrative's construction of Grace's character and calls into question the self-contained, pragmatic and percep-

tive but resigned voice that has constructed her throughout the text.

It also problematizes the question of Grace's guilt or innocence. If she did take an active part in the murder, and the aggressive tenor of Mary Whitney's voice suggests that, as the latter consciousness, she well may have, did she do so as Mary Whitney, "alias Grace"? Mary Whitney's voice works to elude both the authority of the text to direct the reader's imagination and the construction of the female subject as an object to be pinned down for the curiosity and satisfaction of the observer. Mary, alias Grace, thus eludes her position as victim. As a representation of the colonial position, this "double consciousness" resists the hegemony of the powerful term in the binary of victimizer and victim.

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Susanna Moodie's "Grace Marks" construct the identity of the female subject according to the imaginative contingencies of their time and place. Atwood and Moodie view the identity of Grace Marks from different locations in Canadian history, and thus from different constructions of the imagination. In the differing treatments of Grace Marks, this character is a figure of the ways she is imagined by these two writers; the differences in the ways she is imagined signify the shifts in the Canadian imagination from Moodie's mid-nineteenth-century Canada West to Margaret Atwood's late-twentieth-century Central Canada. The "true character of the historical Grace Marks," as Atwood insists, "remains an enigma" (*Alias Grace* 558).

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