



Grace Marks, a Violent Madwoman or a Helpless Victim?

Women, Madness and Crime in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Final Degree Thesis

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2020-2021

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Emma Domínguez Rué for her guidance, practical feedbacks and necessary facilities for the research. Also, I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience and understanding.

Abstract

This study focuses on the analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and its principal character, Grace Marks, a young maid of humble origins accused of murdering her master and his housekeeper. For this purpose, the theoretical framework of this dissertation has been grounded on theoretical texts written by women in the twentieth century. These works explore the conceptualization of women from Victorian society in the nineteenth century by emphasizing the construction of femininity according to society, medicine and culture. As for the analysis, the aim is to study the narrative voices that build the character according to the moral values of the period. Hence, special emphasis will be put on the construction of Grace Marks' identity based on femininity, invalidism and madness, and social class. Throughout the paper, it is revealed the reason that led Atwood to rescue this silenced story from the previous century by giving voice to a woman who suffered the patriarchal values at a young age.

Keywords: Victorian society, femininity, madness, social class, patriarchal moral values.

Resum

Aquest estudi es basa en l'anàlisi de la novel·la de Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1996) i el seu personatge principal, Grace Marks, una jove minyona d'origen humil acusada d'assassinar l'amo de la casa i la seva majordoma. Amb aquesta finalitat, el marc teòric d'aquesta dissertació es basa en textos teòrics escrits per dones en el segle XX. Aquestes autores exploren la conceptualització del gènere femení en la societat victoriana al segle XIX tot emfatitzant la construcció de la feminitat d'acord amb la societat, la medicina i la cultura. Pel que fa a l'anàlisi, l'objectiu és estudiar les veus narratives que construeixen la protagonista

d'acord amb els valors morals de l'època. Per tant, es posarà especial èmfasi en la construcció de la identitat de Grace Marks basada en la feminitat, la invalidesa i la bogeria, i la classe social. Al llarg del document, es revela la raó que va portar Atwood a rescatar aquesta història silenciada d'un segle anterior, donant veu a una dona que va patir les conseqüències d'una societat patriarcal des de petita.

Paraules clau: societat victoriana, feminitat, bogeria, classe social, valors morals patriarcal.

Resumen

Este estudio se basa en el análisis de la novela de Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1996) y su personaje principal, Grace Marks, una joven sirvienta de origen humilde acusada de asesinar al propietario de la casa y a su ama de llaves. El marco teórico de esta disertación se basa en textos teóricos escritos por mujeres en el siglo XX. Estas autoras exploran la conceptualización del género femenino en la sociedad victoriana en el siglo XIX enfatizando la construcción de la feminidad de acuerdo con la sociedad, la medicina y la cultura. En cuanto al análisis, el objetivo es estudiar las voces narrativas que construyen la protagonista de acuerdo con los valores morales de la época. Por todo ello, se pondrá especial énfasis en la construcción de la identidad de Grace Marks basada en la feminidad, la invalidez y la locura, y la clase social. A lo largo del documento, se revela la razón que llevó a Atwood a rescatar esta historia silenciada de un siglo anterior, dando voz a una mujer que sufrió las consecuencias de una sociedad patriarcal desde pequeña.

Palabras clave: sociedad victoriana, feminidad, locura, clase social, valores morales patriarcales.

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1. Introduction

This dissertation revolves around Margaret Atwood's historical fiction novel, *Alias Grace*, from 1996. The story explores the life of a fifteen-year-old girl accused of instigating two murders that occurred in 1843 in Canada, for which she was imprisoned for nearly thirty years. My analysis will use research on women's mental disorders and feminist theory to examine the main character, Grace Marks, according to the standards of Victorian society.

Margaret Atwood (1939) is a Canadian writer, author of more than forty works including novels, fiction, poetry, children's books, graphic novels and critical essays. She was granted a rise in her literary reputation thanks to titles such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for which she received several awards. Later on, in 1996, *Alias Grace* was published and she was also awarded several prizes. It is precisely this novel which has been selected for this dissertation.

Grace Marks was an Irish young servant who was convicted of the crime of her master, Mr. Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery, along with a servant, James McDermott. The crime brought her to the trial that drastically changed her life, as she was condemned to a life sentence instead of confronting imminent death. Atwood succeeds in giving a voice to this forgotten female figure, a teenage maid who was imprisoned and diagnosed with madness by the powerful patriarchal forces that judged and studied her for a lifetime. To construct this novel, the author relied on historical records, fragments of newspapers, public judicial documents and literary sources like Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* (1853). The novel that is being analysed contains Moodie's declarations of her visits to the celebrated murderess Grace Marks. Nonetheless, due to a lack of evidence to

complete the novel, Atwood added fictional elements that contribute to the creation of an intriguing psychological narrative.

Alias Grace explores the life of a poor, unprotected immigrant woman, whose destiny is determined by the declaration of an unreliable man. Her circumstances in life make her be pronounced mad and a murderess without evidence of either of these two labels. Hence, Atwood's narrative reflects the concept of femininity of that period and the connection it has with the ideas about mental health and socioeconomic status. In other words, the nineteenth century Victorian societal structure was determined by gender and socioeconomic status, in which patriarchal institutions and moral values relegated women to an inferior position. In addition to the social changes of the period, the development of medicine became a decisive factor for women's lives, as medical theories reinforced patriarchal values. The labels established by these classist and sexist beliefs affected significantly their present and future. Namely, if madness was diagnosed to a woman belonging to a lower social class, this would lead her to a lifetime of suffering, experimentation and even death.

Within the novel, Grace Marks is in charge of narrating the story that brought her to prison for almost thirty years and led her to a life based on medical experiments, interviews, trials and observations, ruled by inequalities and injustices. Readers are introduced to her through her psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan and also through his letters to other doctors, lawyers and clergymen that have also followed her case closely. Jordan, who becomes Grace's confidant, has the job of recovering her loss of memory after the crimes in order to value her mental condition. Additionally, there are other male personalities who also influence the convict's identity: Reverend Enoch Verringer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie and Dr. Samuel Bannerling.

These men use her as a tool to show their own patriarchal authority over women as well as over men. Hence, Atwood portrays the masculine figures from a critical perspective, as they are shaped according to patriarchal values, and they use the convict to reinforce their own power.

Atwood recovers the silenced story of this woman who was confronted with suffering and death without the chance to stand for herself: the apparent manipulation of her testimony leads the reader to questioning the truth of the events that occurred. Thus, this paper aims to analyse Grace Marks as a woman subjected to the moral values of the Victorian society and considered mad and guilty of a double crime by men in a position of power. Apart from their definitions, this time her own testimony has been taken into consideration by the author. Furthermore, it is relevant to explore the story and the reason that brought Atwood to rescue a story that was never shared and transform it into a life narrative.

The theoretical framework and the analysis of the novel are grounded on theoretical works about women and madness mainly written by women in the twentieth century, which explore the triad of gender, class and madness from a feminist perspective in a patriarchal world. In order to analyse Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, the theoretical sources used include Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987), *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (1993) by Diane Price Herndl, *Women & Madness* (1972) by Phyllis Chesler, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1984) among others.

Regarding the structure of the paper, the introduction is followed by the theoretical framework, which introduces the main topics analysed. The information has been divided into three sections: Victorian femininity, women and madness, and social class. In the analysis, the five narrative voices that construct the novel have been studied following the structure of the previous section. Finally, the conclusion reflects upon the information presented along the different sections.

In this dissertation, among others objectives, I aim to observe how Atwood builds the different characters and how they perceive Grace as a woman. To accomplish this, special emphasis will be given to the use of language and behaviour of both the male figures in the novel and Grace Marks herself.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Femininity in the Victorian period

By definition, the term “woman” is “an adult female human being” as it is stated in the Cambridge Dictionary. Nonetheless, today's definition of this term encompasses a wide range of ideas – more specifically, sorority, feminism, and empowerment – all of which are now included in the definition of the word. It is widely acknowledged that these concepts have been incorporated due to the tireless efforts of women who advocated for their rights and told their stories to the world. In this sense, women writers helped to bring the harsh reality that many women faced, into the spotlight through their literary texts and Margaret Atwood is an outstanding example of those efforts.

Patriarchal ideals dominated nineteenth century society, placing women in a lower social status than men. Gender binaries shaped men and women's social conduct, confining the latter to the private sphere and assigning them the feminine archetype of “the Angel of the House”, which implied being powerless and compliant. The notion of sex as a taboo was a significant feature of this era. Indeed, the concept of “the double-standard”, according to Keith Thomas’ “The Double Standard”, stands for the belief that a man could be liberated sexually before or outside marriage and chastity was not a requirement before the commitment (195). As for a woman, virginity was the only power that one was able to control: it was her virtue, and once it was lost, she was lost as well. In line with these expectations that women had to fulfil, Diane Prince Herndl in *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* exposes the cultural definition of a woman in the nineteenth and twentieth century:

She was pure and sexual, innocent and guilty, capable of running a large household but incapable of professional work, meant to live in the country but forced to live in the city, encouraged by social mores to bear fewer children but condemned to using birth control or abortion, expected to maintain her social standing but risking her health by seeking too much pleasure and luxury. (Price 38)

Price's statement reveals that the definition of women concentrated on opposites, reflecting the high expectations, prejudices and repression attached to women by the societal rules and its ideology. Indeed, a woman's destiny was defined by her gender and socioeconomic status. Those belonging to the higher classes had to accept marriage as one of very few options to survive. Once settled in a marital relationship, a woman's body was mainly aimed at bringing children into the world and her life was confined to the domestic. It is not surprising then that for young girls, as it is explored in Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, entering adulthood meant "deny, suppress, and stupefy emotions", which led to "madness, hysteria and mental deterioration" (65). Similarly, women from the lower classes of society were usually enrolled in service at an early age until they got engaged and became wives and mothers if they were given the chance. As regards middle-class unmarried women, they were considered a "social problem" (Showalter 61) since they did not perform as wives nor mothers. Thus, being considered useless and superfluous to society, they were believed to be prone to mental disorders.

Marriage in the nineteenth century was considered a repressive institution for women that regarded them as the perfect wives if they followed the rules of the husband and the patriarchal society. As it is explored in Chesler's *Women & Madness*, Zelda Fitzgerald (1900-1948), an American painter, author and celebrity encountered the limitations of being a woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was a victim of marriage and her idea

of their union differed from the one of her companion. Whereas he believed that her nature defined her role in the couple, she considered her marriage a show in which she was expected to pretend to be the perfect silent wife and repress her willingness to express herself and her art (8). Similarly, Chesler mentions Esther Greenwood's quotation from the single novel written by Sylvia Plath, entitled *The Bell Jar*, in which the protagonist of the text describes her perception of marriage as a static place with no room for freedom:

[...] one of the reasons I never wanted to get married [was that] the last thing I wanted was intimate security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all direction myself... the trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters... maybe [marriage and children] was like being brainwashed and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state [...] (quoted in Chesler 6)

In Victorian times, the mind-set was grounded on the positioning of men as the central figures of society. They lived in the public sphere, which meant that they spent most of their time outside the home. As a result, men played a major role in scientific discoveries, and they became the primary experts in the field of women's diseases. In other words, it was men, not women, who diagnosed women with the disease known as "female malady" or "invalidism". The attitude that both husbands and clinicians presented towards women with illnesses was based on "disbelief and pity, emotional distance, physical brutality, economic and sexual deprivation, drugs, shock therapy, and long-term psychiatric confinements" (Chesler 39).

Thus, regarding women's mental condition and with the development of medicine, another definition for women arose: invalidism. It supported the notion that women were often at risk of becoming ill, and endorsing suffering as a result of their gender. Invalidism was, therefore, regarded as "a state of weakness or a predisposition to tendency toward illness" (Price 1).

This definition is complemented with the etymological meaning of the non-valid which describes the status of women in society as a result of power and culture (Price 1). This conceptualisation of feminine disease is purely patriarchal and oppressive, attributing a negative connotation to the female gender.

Housework was not expected of a wealthy woman because it was already done by domestic service. Therefore, women lacked a particular task to engage in, but were discouraged to do intellectual work. In Charlotte Perkins' short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper", the husband embodies an authoritarian attitude that restrains the wife at home, forbidding her to communicate with the exterior, read or write. These type of men made women believe that there was no life outside the four walls of the house and it triggered outbreaks of hysteria and madness, which on many occasions led to terrifying consequences for those who were accused of it.

Invalidism and madness are two distinct concepts that during the Victorian Period were usually connected. In fact, one of the consequences of being diagnosed as an invalid was becoming mad. Hence, these illnesses defined women as a problem for society. Invalidism, on the one hand, was a phase that was thought to affect mainly women and it was regarded with pity. On the other hand, madness implied more negative connotations and, therefore, society's objective was to hide it: "Madness is shut away from sight, shamed, brutalized, denied and feared" (Chesler 26). The solution that was considered convenient was to hospitalise women in asylums, according to the symptoms believed to be signs of insanity. This illness described its victims as those who presented "delusions or displays of physical aggression, grandeur, sexuality, and emotionally – all traits which would probably be more

acceptable in female-dominated cultures. Such traits in women are feared and punished in patriarchal mental asylums” (Chesler 31). Madness as well as invalidism had to be prescribed by a male psychiatrist who assessed women’s mental condition.

Bearing in mind the treatment that women received, it is known that those wives belonging to the upper classes saw it as a form to escape from their reality and a strategy to subvert all the pressure imposed on women to be the perfect heterosexual feminine figure. However, rather than being an act of liberation, this is an act of victimization in order to escape masculine suppression: “[...] illness represented feminine refinement, wealth, and leisure; it was a condition to which women aspired” (Price 152). Therefore, it should be seen as a response to the restrictions imposed in women’s life caused by the overwhelming social and political transformations of the century.

Those whose thoughts challenged patriarchal discourses met a similar fate, being women who firmly established themselves as artists and were tenacious, talented, and assertive. They had lost interest in their husbands sexually and had stopped caring about their physical appearance. As a result, they were assumed to be insane, and the only way to keep them under control was to commit them to a mental institution. Namely, Zelda Fitzgerald, whose husband did not accept her condition as a female artist and he described her as a “writer of limited talent” (Chesler 25).

In short, women in the nineteenth century were constrained by a culture that required them to conform to patriarchal expectations of femininity: patriarchal ideas about women’s inferiority allied with medical opinions about women’s propensity to illness, particularly to mental disorders.

2.2. Victorian Femininity and Mental Illness

There were many advancements in medicine in the nineteenth century, with a particular emphasis on the psychological field. Men, who were the driving forces behind the growth, viewed women as patients with little understanding of the female anatomy. As a result, there were several gaps and ambiguous truths that determined women's mental health without allowing them to express themselves. It is explicit in Perkins' "The Yellow Wallpaper" that the man of the house, who is a doctor, amid her protests, decides about his wife's diagnosis. This was not an unusual case; it became a standard practice in Victorian households where men were the ones to decide for both themselves and their partners. As a consequence, their decisions were usually favourable for them and harmful for their wives, as Showalter points out:

In a society that not only perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them legally powerless and economically marginal, it is not surprising that they should have formed the greater part of the residual categories of deviance from which doctors drew a lucrative practice and the asylums much of the population. Moreover, the medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions, to deny them political rights, and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing. As women's demands became increasingly problematic for Victorian society as a whole, the achievements of the psychiatric profession in managing women's minds would offer both a mirror of cultural attitudes and a model for other institutions. (73)

From a medical standpoint in the nineteenth century, women's inferiority took two conflicting paths. On the one side, the biological argument was grounded on the idea that women were biologically inferior due to a mistake of nature in organizing the female anatomy. Their organs were naturally weak and susceptible to disease and pain (Price 34).

Furthermore, Showalter deepens this theory by mentioning that “the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control” (55), which contributed to the vulnerability to insanity. It maintained, on the other side, that women were personally responsible for their illnesses because they purposefully overworked these already weakened organs. Considering menstruation, childbirth, and lactation the only functions for which the female body was designed, they sapped all of a woman's energy. Hence, anything that could take vital energy from her reproductive organs could harm her and her children’s health (Price 34). In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, there is a reference to George Man Burrows, who reflects upon the connection of the brain and the uterus claiming that the functions of the brain are so intimately connected with the uterine system that if any process related to the latter is interrupted, the brain can be affected (56). In line with this, there was an accepted theory that claimed the relationship between artistic activities and the incapability of bearing children. In this case, it was believed that women had a certain amount of energy that, if administered in the wrong tasks, the blood system would be altered, and the uterus would not receive the adequate quantity of blood to get pregnant.

Additionally, it was believed that the symptoms of insanity could emerge at any stage of a woman’s life, specifically, during the “biological crises of the female life-cycle” (Showalter 55), including, pregnancy, puberty, childbirth and menopause. Withal, the menstrual cycle was understood as a dangerous period due to its unfavourable effects on the brain. The medical justification behind this theory was that the loss of blood during the period could affect the brain and thus, it predisposed women to insanity (Showalter 56). Therefore, adolescence was a dangerous period for a girl in the transition to adulthood, as the menstrual

cycle weakened the female body, transforming her into a “prisoner of her reproductive cycle” (Showalter 67).

Leaving aside the medical myths offered by male professionals, it is critical to concentrate on the underlying causes of women's illness. In *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940*, Price gives voice to some evidence to justify certain attitudes and behaviours of women. Starting with the change of the societal model, industrialisation and urbanisation permitted women belonging to the middle-class to avoid physical labour, leading to a sedentary life. Exercising, as well as eating spicy and rich foods were thought to excite girls “to masturbation and other sexual infelicities” (Price 27). Therefore, patriarchy dictated women’s physical activities, diets and even basic hygiene. The nineteenth century clothing style was also a cause of women’s condition, due to the use of corsets and the weight of the clothes. These pieces of clothing affected internal organs of those wearing them – namely, they constricted breathing, restricted the waist and caused difficulties in moving freely (Price 27).

Worth of note also is the mental and emotional state of women affected by their role in society. Price exposes the social and political changes in the mid-nineteenth century society as a cause of stress, anxiety and unhappiness of women. The pressures they had to deal with were overwhelming and, in addition, they could not express themselves nor share their thoughts, and this contributed to depressions. Moreover, a different yet interesting point is the ignorance of the female body both of men and women. Nowadays, in puberty and early adolescence, girls are encouraged to be mindful of their bodies’ strength. Nonetheless, at that time, young women transitioning from childhood to adulthood did not know their nature and

they suffered a traumatic process of growth. The menstrual period and sexuality were unknown terms for girls entering womanhood, as well as for men that would be part of their life. Hence, the pressure to fulfil the adult role of women by losing their freedom and becoming socially dependent led to emotional crisis (Showalter 57).

To understand the alleged madness of women, it is interesting to recover patriarchal values and feminine standards. Following the natural course that society expected from women, after marriage they had to provide children to their husbands. They were once again subjugated to the standards of their time and they were forced to start their journey through motherhood. As a result, not having children was a sign of madness, as revealed in Chesler's work:

They are probably as maddened by the absence of maternity in their lives as they would be by the demands it would eventually place upon their freedom. The combination of nurturance deprivation *and* restrictions upon their uniqueness or heroism is deadly. They cannot survive as just "women," and they are not allowed to survive as human or as creative beings. (30-31)

The lack of knowledge about maternity led to misunderstandings about postpartum depression. Regrettably, this term was inexistent at that time, and women were simply regarded as ill and therefore, mad. Literature has reflected this disease in different forms and hence, returning to Perkins' "The Yellow Wallpaper", the protagonist is trapped in a nursery after becoming a mother. Thus, her incapacity to face the situation of being a mother and the restricting rules of the husband and doctor direct her to an episode of madness.

Also in relation to maternity, sexual assault was a common occurrence that often resulted in infanticides. As a result of being raped, many women were forced to kill their own children

as a means of surviving. They were then sent to asylums with other criminal insane women, as they were deemed criminals and murderesses. This kind of crimes were considered to be products of women's nature and therefore, women's sentences were accepted by society.

In all cases, women were hospitalised in mental health institutions that aimed to re-educate them by persuading them that being a domestic wife was the only solid choice available to them, leaving no place for a life outside the standards imposed by the patriarchal ideals. Asylums were used to keep them from rebelling against these predetermined ideas. Violence and brutality were two key elements in these mental institutions where the term "women" lost any possible positive characteristic. Sexual repression and sexual abuse were commonplace, leading to enforced maternity without the chance to perform abortions nor prevent them by using contraceptives. As Chesler observes:

Experimental or traditional medication, surgery, shock, and insulin coma treatment, isolation, physical and sexual violence, medical neglect, and slave labor are routinely enforced. Mental patients are somehow less "human" than either medical patients or criminals. They are, after all, "crazy"; they have been abandoned by (or have abandoned dialogue with) their "own" families. (35)

Another recurrent technique was solitary confinement, consisting of the isolation of women in cells as a form of torture that aimed to calm those who were supposedly mad. In the 1840s, this punishment was effectively publicised in British and American penitentiaries as a successful tool. Elaine Showalter provides an explanation of the consequences of this practise, by claiming the rise of mentally ill people in those prisons where solitary confinement was exercised. Those prisoners in isolation suffered from nightmares and

hallucinations, had suicidal thoughts and many attempted to take their own life (Showalter 69).

At the same time, unmarried women were also believed to be susceptible to become mad, and consequently, considered a social problem. They were stigmatized by words like “redundant”, “superfluous,” and “peculiar”, and they were often thought to be prone to mental illnesses, as it is explored in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*. Another relevant aspect to study is the economic status as an influence on mental health. As Showalter argues, poverty was regarded as a cause of insanity: “Women were the majority of recipients of poor-law relief, and poor people were more likely to be committed to institutions than people from the middle or upper class. Furthermore, diseases caused by poverty could lead to madness” (54).

Feminist literature gave visibility to the silent and yet scandalous stories that numerous generations of women kept to themselves for centuries. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, mention that by recovering female literature, these women recovered female stories of those who challenged their patriarchal society (64). The feminist writers being approached in this theoretical framework did not belong to the same historical period nor the same geographical background. Nevertheless, they were the first ones to share their idea of feminism, by stepping up and giving voice to all the hidden stories that women had experienced.

Summarising, a woman’s destiny was meant to be decided when she reached womanhood. One choice was to follow the limiting feminine standards according to the patriarchal values, and therefore, assuming a life dictated by strict rules that would often lead to invalidism. The

other option consisted in defying the imposed philosophy that would send them to a mental institution to be cured of their insanity. In both cases, women were the victims of the circumstances of the times when culture and medicine endorsed each other, meaning that invalidism and madness were excuses to maintain them marginalised in the private sphere.

2.3. Mental Disorder and Social Class

In the nineteenth century, a woman's fate was dictated by her gender and socioeconomic status. Thus, the social class they were born in determined a future that would not be easily challenged. To illustrate this statement it is relevant to bring to the fore that class was a determinant factor for the psychiatric condition (Showalter 26). Hence, depending on the social class, being considered invalid or mad had different consequences.

Elaine Showalter in her book differentiates the three main social classes and the treatment that women considered invalid or lunatic received. The wealthy families could afford invalid women who were unproductive. Hence, the moment they were diagnosed with a mental disease, they were kept at home seeking private care. As the author points out, "among the wealthier classes, bizarre behaviour would be described as nervousness or eccentricity until the patient became unmanageable, suicidal, or violent" (Showalter 26). At this point, they were sent to private asylums that were not comparable to the ones that sheltered the middle and lower classes. Those belonging to the middle class were often incapable of affording private institutions, and therefore, they found themselves coping with the public ones. Finally, the lower class considered public asylums as an alternative to the workhouse. As Showalter describes, "lunatics maintained in poor families had often been neglected, brutalized, or starved" (Showalter 27). As a consequence, their life in a mental health centre

was almost better than the chances of surviving in their current living conditions. Indeed, as Showalter states, the number of poor lunatics in public asylums quadrupled between 1844 and 1890. They accounted for 91 percent of all institutionalized psychiatric patients by the turn of the century (27).

Nonetheless, those from the lower classes were not privileged since they were not pitied for their sickness. Actually, their economic situation made them vulnerable to the eyes of the masculine gender and the high social classes in general. Their poverty justified the treatment they received, which could lead to violence, betrayals, accusations, manipulations and sexual assaults among others.

In fact, this can be explained by the metaphor of the corset. This piece of clothing was essential in wealthy women's outfits, and it is generally known for the discomfort and harm that caused to women and their bodies – namely, the deformity of the waist and the damage on the internal organs. As a matter of fact, wearing it implied the absolute control of the appetite and the breath, which for the society of that time was extended to the control of the natural instincts. However, those that did not stand out for their wealth did not wear the corset. Hence, they did not have something that restricted them physically, which was directly linked to their moral looseness. Put another way, being part of the lower classes signified that women were incapable of controlling their appetite and, consequently, their natural instincts. As a result, this was used as an explanation for the number of children that poor women bore.

To sum up, women's socioeconomic status was a determining factor in how they were treated in society. As a result, the scientific field was not an exception, and the detection of invalidity

or madness presented different repercussions on women that did not belong to the same social class. The following section of the paper sheds light on the analysis of Grace Marks as an alleged criminal from the Victorian Period. The study of the protagonist of *Alias Grace* is grounded on the social ideas towards femininity, mental illness, and social class from the era. Thus, this analysis has been carried out throughout the examination of the male narrative voices that describe the criminal woman.

3. Analysis

This section of the paper aims to examine Atwood's *Alias Grace* by shedding light on the character of Grace Marks. Thus, to carry out the study, the main figures analysed will be Dr. Simon Jordan, Reverend Enoch Verringer, Dr. Samuel Bannerling, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie and Grace Marks.

To fully comprehend Grace Marks as a character, it is necessary to study the various masculine narrative voices that, by defining her, create their own identities. Indeed, it was a man's declaration that led her to a life-threatening situation. After the crime, the murderer James McDermott, another servant in Mr. Kinnear's household, accuses Grace of being the mastermind behind the murders. Nonetheless, Atwood's depiction of McDermott as an alcoholic, a criminal and a man with a violent behaviour, must be utterly considered. Regardless of his profile, the killer is believed in the courtroom and with his declaration, he sentences Grace to death without a chance to defend herself.

Lack of protection in a woman is a key factor to attract powerful men, as those selected for the analysis: their dominance is reinforced by using Grace as a tool to strengthen their position in society. They need to victimise or criminalise her to prove that they are respectable saviours, a practise that weakens her and fosters her vulnerability.

As regards the methodological approach used for the analysis, the characters' description of the female figure is based on the sections observed in the theoretical framework. Indeed, these sections inform the way these men approach Grace as a woman, the way she is

described as an alleged criminal and a madwoman and, finally, the influence of social class in her current situation.

Throughout these narrative voices, the author characterizes the protagonist by attributing her certain traits that are fictional rather than veritable. Hence, the aim of this section is to study the intention of the writer in giving voice to this notorious female figure from the previous century. For this reason, Grace will be also analysed as a narrative voice that contrasts with the masculine ones.

3.1. Dr. Simon Jordan

Dr. Simon Jordan is a young man from the United States of America, who despite belonging to the upper classes, faces impoverishment after his father's death. Living with his mother, he is not fond of marriage nor forming a family. Indeed, his lifetime objective is to be the director of his own mental asylum. Simon is trained as a medical doctor who considers himself a scientist and is fully committed to research on mental illness and the human mind. Hence, the moment he is offered the opportunity to observe and help the celebrated murderess Grace Marks, he travels to Canada.

As regards his personality traits, in the novel, he is presented as a reflexive man with sexist and classist prejudices. His thoughts reflect his feelings towards women and this is noticeable in his manipulative character. He is concerned about his role in society according to his gender and profession and he diminishes women by judging their actions in a prejudiced way. Nevertheless, on some occasions, he is moved by his emotions and, in spite of his professionalism in the medical field and his commitment to Grace's case, he abandons his research because he is not capable of facing the consequences of his acts.

3.1.1. Grace Marks as a Woman in Victorian Times

In the course of the nineteenth century, gender was one of the main aspects that divided society, which granted men's authority and power over women both in the professional and personal spheres. Simon Jordan has a socioeconomic status that gives him a higher position than women and that allows him to judge them with his knowledge and authority.

Being judgemental with women is part of his character, which leads to analysis and criticism of the actions and physical appearance of his subjects. This paternalism allows him to judge women, as he believes his gender and profession give him the license to know all about the opposite gender, including Grace Marks and Mrs. Rachel Humphrey, his landlady in Canada. Additionally, to fulfil the role of the Victorian man, he considers marrying for money: "Of course he could always marry money [...]. He thinks of the prominent front teeth and duck-like neck of Miss Faith Cartwright, and shivers" (Atwood 65). However, this confession reflects the materialisation of marriage, as marrying Faith Cartwright would secure his economic position in society. Hence in this quote, his superficiality and disrespect are highlighted. To pose a different example, it is relevant to observe the doctor's description of Grace. In this case, the portrayal wants to define her as a woman from the lower classes struggling with suffering and pain:

[...] he finds himself thinking of Grace, as he sees her every weekday, seated opposite him in the sewing room. In her portrait, she looks older than she was, but now she looks younger. Her complexion is pale, the skin smooth and unwrinkled and remarkably fine in texture, perhaps because she's been kept indoors; or it may be the sparse prison diet. She's thinner now, less full in the face; and whereas the picture shows a pretty woman, she is now more than pretty. Or other than pretty. The line of her cheek has a marble, a classic, simplicity; to look at her is to believe that suffering does indeed purify. (103)

From this excerpt, Simon romanticises and idealises the pain and the suffering of Grace, which devaluates her actual feelings. Furthermore, both comments on women are constructed from the patriarchal discourse that undermines women reducing their identity to their bodies.

The development of research on mental illness during the century reinforced men self-assurance towards women. Being a young white man well-known in the medical field, he believes himself to be more acknowledged than others, especially than women like Grace Marks. The convict, who is used to deal with men who share the same socioeconomic status as Jordan, is aware of their paternalism, and in one of their meeting she states: “[...] and I can see he is going to teach me something, which gentlemen are fond of doing. Mr Kinnear was like that as well” (168).

Regarding the subject discussed above, Simon appropriates the patriarchal discourse to present himself as the hero that will save Grace from her terrible fate. He describes her as “[...] a nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon, awaiting the next day’s burning at the stake, or else the last-minute champion came to rescue her” (68). Once again, his place in society has given him the chance to deem himself a saviour for those weaker than him. Although his life is covered in flaws and issues to solve, he still manages to present himself as women’s saviour. All in all, the freedom he is allowed to is connected to the double-morale that permits men to behave differently outside and inside the household. In this precise case, outdoors, he is presented as a flawlessly and innovative psychiatrist caring for his patients. Even so, in intimacy with Mrs. Humphrey, he is depicted as a misogynist and paternalistic man.

3.1.2. Grace Marks as a Mentally Ill Woman

It is generally acknowledged that madwomen were regarded as social hazards and were therefore, enclosed in prisons or mental asylums. The following dialogue established between Simon and Grace shows his first approach to her. His interrogation is grounded on his authoritarian position as he is in control of her future:

Don't be afraid, he says. You aren't mad, really, are you Grace?

No Sir I am not, I say.

Then there is no reason for you to go back to the Asylum, is there?

They don't listen to reasons there, Sir, I say.

Well that is what I am here for, he says. I am here to listen to reason. But if I am to listen to you, you will have to talk to me. (45)

Nonetheless, his behaviour could also be understood as a form of self-defence, as he believes that she can be violent. Hence, he feels the need to threaten her for his own sake. Grace, in their first encounter objects: "He says, I give my word, that as long as you continue to talk with me, and do not use control of yourself and become violent, you shall remain as you were. I have the Governor's promise" (46-47). Furthermore, Simon's thoughts reveal the impression that Grace causes on him, "he is in the presence of a female animal; something fox-like and alert" (103). In this excerpt, he does not consider her an ordinary woman, and from his words, it is noticeable that he fears her. It can be read that her wildness intimidates him, as he cannot have her under control.

The doctor treats Grace as an object of study that allows him to implement his own methods and theories to discover whether she is guilty or innocent. In his letters directed to family, friends and professional colleagues, he mentions his advancements in his visits with the

convict. He sheds light on the relevance of helping her to recover her memory and learn about the life experience that changed her plans categorically. Despite the fact that his job must serve to determine her mental condition and help her, his purpose seems to differ. Simon grounds his ideas on his notions as a scientific who excels in the mental illness field, but he does not empathise with the patients. He even allows that his personal life interferes in his professional career, when he has an affair with Mrs. Humphrey, his landlady, and loses focus on his job. Then, Grace notices him distracted, and towards the end of the novel, as an act of cowardice, he abandons the case and his patient for his own personal matters. His distractions make him absent and he hardly ever listens to her and therefore, he interprets whatever suits best into his studies about madwomen. Thus, in the following extract from the novel, Grace is described as a woman with trust issues and as a professional challenge for a doctor like him:

She appears to act in the household as a sort of unpaid servant, though whether this service is viewed by her as a favour or a penance, I have yet to ascertain; nor will it be an easy task, as the gentle Grace, having been hardened in the fire now for some fifteen years, will be a very hard nut to crack. Enquires such as mine are ineffective unless the trust of the subject might be gained; but judging from my knowledge of penal institutions, I suspect Grace has had scant reason to trust anyone at all for a very long period of time. (61)

Towards the end of the novel, when Grace is hypnotised by the supposed Dr. Jerome DuPont, the woman enters into a mental state that makes her lose self-control. In this performance, the woman seems to be possessed by the soul of her dead friend Mary Whitney. Throughout Grace's body, Mary communicates to the audience by stating that she is guilty and that she is the murderess that committed the crimes, which places the burden of guilt upon Grace. Once the hypnosis reaches the end, the patient does not seem to recall anything that has

happened, and the doctor draws a hypothesis. Relying on the scientific method, he looks for an explanation that justifies it as a “neurological condition” (470), presupposing that Grace suffers from double consciousness.

3.1.3. Grace Marks: Mental Disorder and Social Class

Social class was a determining factor for the treatment of mentally ill women. Although they were all victims of patriarchal society, depending on their socioeconomic status their reality differed. Thus, Grace Marks being a servant and a criminal, receives particular treatment from Simon. On the one side, in the first visit, he provides her with an apple:

He smiles, and then he does a strange thing. He puts his left hand into his pocket and pulls out an apple. He walks over to me slowly, holding the apple out in front of him like someone holding out a bone to a dangerous dog in order to win it over. (43)

As the quote reflects, Grace realises his fear, and this can be understood as his dread for the mentally ill and poor women who were diagnosed as mad. The fear that most men, but especially Jordan, feel towards Grace is connected to her social status. If she had belonged to a higher class, the treatment received would have never been the same. For instance, he would not have left her in the course of the medical procedure. Hence, this proves that the young doctor is not devoted to his patients but to his own interest of becoming a popular psychiatrist. Although compassion is not a recurrent feeling regarding mentally ill women, Simon empathises with the woman’s stories, specifically when she talks about Mary Whitney. Her life suffered a fatal setback the moment she got involved in an affair with her masters’ son. Pregnant and desperate, she resorted to an abortion but complications in the procedure ended up with her life. On an occasion, Grace tells him about Mary’s death and,

he cannot help but to be moved by the servant's ending. This is the part of the text in which his emotions can be spotted:

It's too bright for him, too harsh, as if he's been closed up in a dark room for a long time, although the sewing room is far from dark. It's Grace's story that is dark; he feels as if he's just come from an abattoir. Why has this account of death affected him so strongly? Of course he's known that such things happen; such doctors exist, and it isn't as if he's never seen a dead woman. He's seen a great many of them; but they have been so thoroughly dead. They have been specimens. He has never caught them, as it were, in the act. This Mary Whitney, not yet – what? Seventeen? A young girl. Deplorable! (215)

Nevertheless, the sympathy he feels is not veritable, because it does affect his way of working. Thus, he pities Grace and Mary Whitney for their unfortunate life from the perspective of a wealthy man, that is, if their social class had differed his methods would have been different as well.

Another recurrent aspect in the novel is the difference between classes represented by Simon and Grace. The latter is surprised on various occasions when the former is ignorant of the housework that servants face daily. In fact, the narrator even mocks him when he asks for details of her tasks as a maid.

3.2. Reverend Enoch Verringer

Verringer is a Methodist reverend who, being educated in England, converts from Catholicism to Methodism. Similarly, like many other families, he moves to Canada, where he exercises as the Reverend of Kingston. His role in the novel is based on the fight to release Grace from prison, whom he believes to be innocent.

He benefits from the power that religion attributes to him, to become the head of the committee to free Grace from the Penitentiary. The members forming this commission look for the best professionals from the mental health care field to visit the prisoner and provide a favourable petition that declares her not guilty. The mercy he feels for the convict and their insistence on her liberation leads to the ultimate success of setting Grace free after being imprisoned for almost thirty years.

3.2.1. Grace Marks as a Woman in Victorian Times

Historically, religion has constructed women as modest humans who have had to play the part of the silent female devoted to husband and children. This ideal was grounded on patriarchal rules and therefore, it contributed to women's vulnerability that placed them in a low position in the social hierarchy. Additionally, the clergy had the moral right to guide people to do good according to the values established by society. Grace is neither married nor has a family to protect her, which makes her vulnerable to society's eyes. Hence, the clergyman sees her as a victim of her own society, as she has not been able to fulfil the roles expected from women. This victimization of the protagonist makes him behave as the saviour that will save her from the misfortune she has to face.

This act of heroism is questioned by Dr. Simon Jordan, who analyses the Reverend's modus operandi to find out the reason behind this persistent fight to prove Grace's innocence. Hence, he provides an explanation based on a hypothesis:

Verringer is in love with Grace Marks! Hence his indignation, his fervour, his assiduousness, his laborious petitions and committees; and above all, his desire to believe her innocent. Does he wish to winkle her out of jail, vindicated as a spotless innocent, and then marry her himself? She's still a good-looking woman, and would no doubt be touchingly grateful to her rescuer. (91)

This passage depicts the eagerness of two men who take advantage of the influence that society bestows on them in order to save a poor and helpless woman who seeks masculine assistance. Envy is present in this last quote, which makes it impossible to believe that these two men actually care for the criminal woman.

3.2.2. Grace Marks as a Mentally Ill Woman

Considering the collision between religion and science, the Reverend does not believe in scientific explanations. Hence, he fights to liberate her from prison because he does not share the idea of Grace being mentally ill. He victimises her to the extent that he denies her having a condition and thus, considers her imprisonment both in the Penitentiary and the Asylum to be unfair. He confronts the doctors like Samuel Bannerling, who question him for believing that the girl is not a murderess. Moreover, during the hypnosis, he negates any scientific justification that explains the performance.

After Dr. Jerome DuPont's intervention, the Reverend contributes to the discussion of the events that occurred by mentioning the tradition followed two hundred years ago. He goes on pointing out the fact that the victim would have been believed to be possessed by the devil, which would have required an exorcism. At the moment this hypnosis takes place, he does not suggest such a technique, but he contradicts the medical explanation to impose the religious discourse by claiming that it has been God's act.

As a consequence, this religious belief does not blame Grace, which reinforces her role as a victim. Hence, this is the result of the imposition of the religious principles that underrate women by giving men power.

3.2.3. Grace Marks: Mental Disorder and Social Class

Traditionally, poor people have sheltered under the help and the understanding of the Church. Grace was actually religious, and this made it easier for the Reverend to make her believe that the committee directed by him would be her salvation from harmful future events.

Thus, Reverend Verringer appropriates the religious discourse to manipulate Grace to believe in the power of religion. Besides, he takes advantage of his gender to impose it and, therefore, make it more credible.

3.3. Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie

His first experience as a lawyer is Grace's defence in the trial after the detention. His declaration is a determining factor for her future, as he is able to commute the death sentence to life imprisonment.

The information the readers get from him is provided through Simon's narrative during the meetings, in which they discuss about Grace. According to his descriptions, MacKenzie is a misogynist man who considers himself powerful and knowledgeable enough to manipulate women. In his discourse, he presents women, and especially madwomen, as weak human beings in need of a man who can help them. Hence, in his job, he does not care for his client but his own reputation, and therefore, he manipulates Grace and her discourse to achieve his objective.

3.3.1. Grace Marks as a Woman in Victorian Times

His manhood and knowledge as a lawyer place him immediately in a high position in the hierarchical scale in society. In other words, his gender and job allow him to become a man

with great influence over women. In his first judicial case, he uses this power as a tool to win the trial and the outcome is positive for him. His objective is to gain popularity and strength as a lawyer rather than to help his client. For this reason, achieving a verdict of life sentence instead of a death sentence means the first victory for him.

His attitude reflects the idea that he believes in women's simplicity and vulnerability, which attracts him. He considers that all women are more or less identical with the only difference that madwomen are manipulative, as it is the case of Grace Marks. The convict exposes the first impression she gets from him in the first visit by stating that being locked together in the cell, he behaves in "a little too familiar" (415) way for her taste.

3.3.2. Grace Marks as a Mentally Ill Woman

The lawyer shares publicly his thoughts about women without any fear of being judged, which can be read as a consequence of the patriarchal society. Hence, his discourse is grounded on the sexualisation and materialisation of Grace. In this case, he is aware of her cognitive ability and believes that she will use it alongside experience to manipulate men and seduce them for her own benefits. The following quote describes Grace as a victim of isolation that is resisting to lose control of her instincts for Simon: "The poor creature has fallen in love with you. A single man, more or less young and not ill-favoured, appears to one who has long been sequestered, and deprived of masculine company. You are doubtless the object of her walking daydreams" (438).

MacKenzie enforces his male supremacy, and he continues exploring the belief of Grace being completely blind to her sexual needs. In fact, psychiatrists at that time believed that uncontrolled sexuality was a symptom of female insanity in women (Showalter 74). As a

result, the lawyer is obsessed with her and his own idea that she is attracted to him, which can be read in the following extract from the novel:

‘I had the very experience myself, or the twin of it; for I had to pass many hours with her, in her jail cell in Toronto, while she spun out her yarn for me to as great a length as it would go. She was besotted with me, and didn’t wish to let me out of her sight. Such melting and languorous glances! A hand placed on hers, and she would have thrown herself into my arms.’ (Atwood 439)

In line with the misogynistic and sexist arguments, he pursues an explanation to justify the fact that he did not touch her. In this case, he presents himself as a man who was able to control his natural instincts. Unlike her, who could not have been able to resist the attraction. In this quote, he explains to Simon, his ability to control himself:

‘Fear is a remarkable aphrodisiac; I advise you to try it some time. We lawyers are so often cast in the role of St. George, at least temporarily. Find a maiden chained to a rock and about to be devoured by a monster, rescue her, then have her yourself. It’s the usual thing with maidens, wouldn’t you agree? I won’t say I wasn’t tempted. She was very young and tender then; though no doubt prison life has hardened her.’ (439)

In spite of this declaration and considering that he is more powerful than Grace and that society would not have judged him, it is interesting to identify the reason why he respected her. One possible explanation could be the fact that he fears her, as she is an intelligent woman, with a great capacity to defend herself. In fact, he points out: “‘That woman has nerves like flint. She’d have made a good lawyer, if a man’” (437). Nevertheless, he does not want to lose his authority and power to a woman, and for this reason, he considers her a madwoman and a criminal. In line with Grace’s intelligence, it is essential to consider MacKenzie’s reflection upon the woman as a criminal. He objects that those with a criminal

mind read about themselves constantly, to avoid contradictions between the arguments that they state and those explained in the newspaper. This statement questions Grace's stories, as she might be lying about her own life.

3.3.3. Grace Marks: Mental Disorder and Social Class

Bearing in mind that Grace is MacKenzie's first client, he manages to win the trial by avoiding her death sentence. However, he imposes his power and authority to her:

He wanted me to tell my story in what he called a coherent way, but would often accuse me of wandering, and become annoyed with me; and at last he said that the right thing was, not to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed. (415)

Additionally, he manipulates her speech by portraying her as a victim of the circumstances that made her miserable in order to achieve his objective:

When my turn came, I said what Mr. MacKenzie had told me to say, and my head was all in a turmoil, trying to remember the right answers; and I was pressed to explain why I hadn't warned Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, once I knew James Mc Dermott's intentions. And Mr. MacKenzie said it was for fear of my life, and despite his nose he was very eloquent. He said that I was little more than a child, a poor motherless child and to all intents and purposes an orphan, cast out upon the world with nobody to teach me any better; and I'd had to work hard for my bread, from an early age, and was industry itself; and I was very ignorant and uneducated, and illiterate, and little better than a halfwit; and very soft and pliable, and easily imposed upon. (419)

Despite using her as an object of compassion, he believes her guilty and mad. In fact, he must believe her to be a lunatic in order to save her in the trial, and consequently, become a hero. Winning the trial means gaining a reputation as a good lawyer, in spite of his young age and

inexperience. As a result, he takes benefit from the power that society attributes to him by using Grace as the means to achieve success.

3.4. Dr. Samuel Bannerling

This masculine figure is relevant for the analysis of Grace Marks, as he was the doctor at Toronto's Provincial Lunatic Asylum, where Grace was sent after some years of being imprisoned. Those institutions at that time were aimed to analyse the mental health of the patients by carrying out experiments and tests that caused traumas and harmful experiences to those that suffered them.

Dr. Bannerling is introduced by means of letters directed to Dr. Simon Jordan and Reverend Verringer, which allow the readers to learn his thoughts from his own words. His opinion towards Grace's is constructed by prejudices against women derived from his position as a man and a doctor.

3.4.1. Grace Marks as a Woman in Victorian Times

His professionalism in the mental health field and his position in the upper social class gives him the right to judge women according to the prejudices established by society. Hence, the discourse used to determine Grace's role in the crime is created by misogynistic and classist values.

The character's personality is composed of the power he has as a man and a doctor, which allow him to believe that he knows everything about everyone, not only his patients. Namely, in the letter directed to Reverend Verringer, he mentions: "I have studied her carefully, and know her character and disposition better than you possibly do" (504). Besides, his form of

writing and addressing to others, – in this case he writes to Verringer –is also influenced by this paternalism that characterises him:

Busy yourself with the care of consciences, and with the delivery of edifying sermons for the improvement of public life and private morals, which God knows the country is in need of, and leave the brains of the degenerate to the authorities who specialize in them. (504-505)

3.4.2. Grace Marks as a Mentally Ill Woman

Bannerling believes in Grace's madness by claiming her capacity to manipulate others and to invent lies that suit her version of the facts. Far from romanticising her actions, he criminalises her as the murderess of Mr. Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. These words represent his opinion of her, "she is an accomplished actress and a most practised liar" (81). Actually, he warns Simon to distrust her words, as she can create proper stories to be declared innocent. In the letter, he uses the reference of the Odyssey to explain her eagerness towards lying:

Many older and wiser heads have been enmeshed in her toils, and you would do well to stop your ears with wax, as Ulysses made his sailors do, to escape the Sirens. She is as devoid of morals as she is of scruples, and will use any unwitting tool that come to hand. (81-82)

He is obsessed with her and her guilt and reinforces his ideas by shedding light on her participation in vicious acts that were "inspired by her degenerate character and morbid imagination" (82). According to his perspective of the issue, he would not take part in the committee led by Verringer because he believes her guilty, and therefore, he considers that she does not deserve her freedom.

3.4.3. Grace Marks: Mental Disorder and Social Class

The low social class is a key aspect to understand the treatment used against the convicts. In Grace's case, she is sexualised and objectified as a body rather than a human being. As a consequence, Dr. Bannerling abuses her sexually during her stay in the Lunatic Asylum as a patient. Sexual contacts were recurrent between middle-aged therapists and younger female patients in the asylums of Victorian Times (Chesler 140). Thus, he does not have any consideration for her neither as a woman nor a patient.

In his discourse, he dehumanises Grace by referring to her as a savage animal that cannot be accepted by society: "She is a creature devoid of moral facilities, and with the propensity to murder strongly developed. She is not safe to be entrusted with the ordinary privileges of society" (Atwood 504). Hence, he criminalises her to treat her as a weak person and therefore, sexually abuse her without having a guilty conscience.

3.5. Grace Marks

Grace Marks is portrayed as a young woman that has been in prison for a long time, accused of being the instigator of the murders of her master and his housekeeper. Her faultless conduct in prison gives her the chance to work daily at the Governors' house. There, she is visited by Dr. Simon Jordan, a professional in the psychological field who interrogates her to determine whether she is innocent or guilty. It is then, when through her narrative, the readers are able to learn about her life, the reasons that brought her to her current situation and future events.

At a young age, she becomes an immigrant when moving from Ireland to Canada with her alcoholic and abusive father, a mother subjected to violence and multiple children. During

the overseas trip, her mother suffers from disease and dies, leaving young Grace as the maternal figure in the family. As the relationship with her father aggravates, she leaves her family to become a maid in Mr. and Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's house. There, she meets Mary Whitney a young servant, who in her ultimate chance to save herself from a fatal future, dies after going through a clandestine abortion. However, even after her death, she is still strongly present in Grace's life. Her luck takes a turn the moment she is employed by Nancy Montgomery, Mr. Kinnear's housekeeper. She accepts living at their house, also inhabited by James McDermott, another servant, and Jamie Walsh, a young boy that helps with the house duties. In six months, her life takes a path she had not imagined when she sees herself involved in a double murder that sentences her for life in Toronto's Penitentiary.

The years in prison and the Lunatic Asylum are marked by experiments, traumas and interrogations that criminalize and victimize her. In the end, the committee formed to release her from prison achieves its objective, and she gets the freedom she envied for almost thirty years.

3.5.1. Grace Marks as a Woman in Victorian Times

Grace is aware of her socioeconomic status, as well as the stigma she has been assigned as a product of the patriarchal values. She views herself as a victim of society and with her words she reflects on the judgement she receives. She is opposing paternalistic criticism and assumptions towards her by writing the following description:

Sometimes when I am dusting the mirror with the grapes I look at myself in it, although I knew it is vanity. In the afternoon light of the parlour my skin is a pale mauve, like a faded bruise, and my teeth are greenish. I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of the blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my

own life, that I was ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be a judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (25)

Furthermore, this acknowledgment of class and gender makes her realize she differs from wealthy women. She is neither a mother nor a wife, and at a young age, she laments the fact that she would never be married or have children of her own. However, she states that “[children] can be too much of a good thing you could say, and I would not like to have nine and then die of it, as happens to many. But still it is a regret” (78). This reflection shows that she is completely aware of the consequences of being a mother, but despite all, she regrets not fulfilling the role she is expected to as a woman. Another interesting fact, is the idea that she is not a lady and she has never been, which gives her the freedom to behave the way she pleases, as she cannot be judged to do so:

‘A lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but I am beyond that’.

‘What do you mean, Grace?’ he said.

‘Only, I was never a lady, Sir, and I’ve already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don’t wish to, I needn’t say anything at all’.
(104)

In spite of not being a woman that follows the social standards, she is aware of her eagerness and intelligence. On an occasion, she remembers her friend Mary Whitney telling her that she is innocent, young and ignorant, but she is not stupid, which means that she can learn.

Precisely, if she had not fought for her own life, she would not have survived. In the interviews, she tries to shape her discourses according to her listener, because in the same manner they study her, she studies them. Grace has the capacity to observe and analyse people, and this is what she does with Dr. Simon Jordan. In this excerpt, she pays attention to him and although these are her thoughts, readers can understand that she does not feel vulnerable nor inferior than him and says:

Today Dr. Jordan looks like more disarranged than usual, and as if he has something on his mind; he does not seem to know quite how to begin. So I continue with my sewing until he's had time to gather himself together; and then he says, Is that a new quilt you are working on, Grace? (168)

Her reputation of being a liar is also linked to her ability to manipulate her own discourse according to the circumstances she faces. To exemplify the statement, this sentence should be considered: "But I did not say that they were made of cloth, nor did I say when I had seen them last; nor did I say that they were not a dream" (281). In the novel, lying is used as a tool to survive and in the end, once she is out of prison, she invents her own story to avoid judgment. Being a forty-year-old and a spinster with no friends and no children, she builds a story with Jamie Walsh, the young boy that worked in Mr. Kinnear's house. To not raise suspicions, they manage to tell people that they resume a love story that started in the past.

3.5.2. Grace Marks as a Mentally Ill Woman

Grace is in constant fight to demonstrate her sanity and innocence. However, despite her politeness and integrity, she is still seen as a criminal. For this reason, when she is in the Governors' house, she is deprived of having the scissors within reach:

They insist on removing those [the scissors] from within my reach, so if I want to cut a thread or trim a seam I have to ask Dr. Jordan, who takes them out of his vest pocket and returns them to it when I have finished. He says he does not feel any such rigmarole is necessary, as he considers me to be entirely harmless and in control of myself. He appears to be a trusting man. (71)

This quote presents her as a woman who is actually not ill, and who is aware of the condition she has been given. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, she shares her thoughts, and in some cases, they depict signs of insanity. Namely, her desire to kill her father:

I had begun to have thoughts about the iron cooking pot, and how heavy it was; and if it should happen to drop on him while he was asleep, it could smash his skull open, and kill him dead, and I would say it was an accident; and I did not want to be led into a grave sin of that kind, though I was afraid that the fiery red anger that was in my heart against him would drive me to it. (149-150)

In the last sentence of this excerpt, she is showing self-control not to hurt him, but as she mentions, she is willing to do it. This violence can be read as the revenge she wants to take against him for the abuses she has received as a child. Moreover, her dreams are also representative of this madness, and as she comments to Dr. Simon, due to these nightmares, she is brought to the Asylum. There is a dream which she frequently has before and after the terrible events take place. In fact, she describes Nancy's death the way she was found, with Grace's kerchief around her neck:

'Then up head I saw Nancy, on her knees, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes. Around her neck was a white cotton kerchief printed with blue flowers, love-in-a-mist, and it was mine. She was holding out her hands to me for mercy; in her ears were the little gold earrings I used to envy'. (365)

The technique of hypnosis was developed in the nineteenth century, and it consists of an exercise in which the therapists assisted their patients to use their unconscious skills to

achieve a therapeutic goal (Erickson and Rossi 5). The believed professional in the novel is Dr. Du Pond, an old acquaintance of Grace. While she is under a state of hypnosis, she seems to be possessed by Mary Whitney's spirit, and she declares herself guilty of helping McDermott to kill his master and the housekeeper, accepting, therefore, her share of guilt: "The kerchief killed her. Hands held it," says the voice. "She had to die" (Atwood 466). Furthermore, the convict adds: "The wages of sin is death. And this time the gentleman died as well, for once. Share and share alike!" (466). Hence, she claims that justice has been done, now that Mr. Kinnear is also dead. Once the hypnosis is brought to an end, she wakes up without knowing what has happened. Thus, this event leads to different interpretations to justify the phenomenon, but the author does not reveal the outcome. Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration that Dr. Jerome DuPont is Jeremiah the peddler, an old friend of Grace.

3.5.3. Grace Marks: Mental Disorder and Social Class

Dr. Jordan provides a safe space for Grace with the interviews, as she has the chance to share feelings that have been plaguing her for years – namely, her childhood memories that are marked by the trip from Ireland to Canada. The loss of her mother entails an early youth with an abusive and violent father, who triggers her to abandon him as well as her younger siblings. Enrolled in the service of the household, she avoids sexual harassment from her father. Nevertheless, she is not capable to forget such hideous events:

And then I felt it was not any of these three, but another man, someone I knew well and had long been familiar with, even as long ago as my childhood, but had since forgotten; nor was this the first time I'd found myself in this situation with him. (326)

After Mary's death, she is again left without protection and she decides to accept Nancy Montgomery's offer to work for her, providing that she can escape from the abuses of other men that benefit from her position as a poor, young, servant. Hence, she sees herself as a temptation for men who cannot control themselves, and therefore, they are likely to abuse women like Grace. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, if a man with a proper position in society assaulted an impoverished woman, he was not penalised, whereas she was believed a liar and she could even be punished: "A woman like me is always a temptation, if possible to arrange it unobserved; as whatever we may say about it later, we will not be believed" (32).

Grace's social standing, familiar situation and occupation are determining factors in how she is viewed in her life. An upper-middle class girl in the same situation would not have been sentenced in the first place, nor deemed mad, and she would have had protection from the family. Hence, these characteristics make her be perceived as a morally loose woman who cannot control her impulses, making her vulnerable to any kind of violence that a man or society can inflict on her. Even though she is mindful of her role in society, Dr. Jordan's visits offer her the opportunity to discuss her side of the story, although she is not always heard. The final outcome is favourable to her, and she is granted the freedom she had hoped for when she began her sentence as a prisoner at the age of fifteen.

The analysis of this historical novel reveals the classist and sexist prejudices attributed to a notorious woman with a life marked by misfortune. Hence, in the concluding section of this dissertation, I will summarise all the ideas and questions that have arisen from the previous parts of the paper.

4. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's narrative, *Alias Grace*, is grounded on the portrayal of a low-class maid in the nineteenth century, a tough historical period for women in general but especially for poor ones, who were subjected to the patriarchal values embodied by men in positions of power. To construct the story and the characters, Atwood takes a critical perspective towards a men-centred society which gains relevance throughout the novel. Hence, although the author does not proclaim her opinion towards Grace's role in the crimes, she recovers this nineteenth century story a century later, which evidences her aim to criticise the patriarchal moral values that restrained and oppressed women.

Grace Marks, as the protagonist of the story, is characterised as a madwoman belonging to a low social class. These definitions come from male voices and her own. Nevertheless, considering the period the story is set in, men's discourse had a greater impact on society, and therefore, more credibility than hers, despite the fact that their ideas were not completely true. The main issue present in the story is the questioning of the girl's guilt and insanity. Hence, two differentiated opinions arise. On the one hand, some are convinced of her innocence and sanity, as is the case of Reverend Enoch Verringer, the leader of the committee to release her from prison. Mr. Kenneth McKenzie and Dr. Samuel Bannerling, on the other hand, assume her implication in the double murder and her madness. A different perspective is the one adopted by Dr. Simon Jordan, who does not share his opinion explicitly but romanticises and idealises her pain and suffering to his own advantage. Finally, Grace is given a voice to construct her life story to justify her innocence and inexistent madness.

Throughout the novel, Atwood's perception is built and made noticeable through the characters. Readers are introduced to the different narrative voices by means of their descriptions of Grace. By analysing their language and their interaction with her, the four men reveal aspects of their own personality that have a relevant role in defining her. Jordan approaches Grace as an object of study to pursue his professional goal – namely, to prove innovative psychiatric methods. Moreover, he abandons the case for his concerns. Following religious ideals, Verringer aims to achieve Grace's freedom in order to guide her to Christian life. MacKenzie manipulates the discourse of the imprisoned woman to win the trial and gain a favourable reputation. In Bannerling's case, he endorses physical violence against Grace for his own sake, as he dehumanises her for her current situation. One common trait that men share is that their mind-sets are grounded on patriarchal values. Therefore, they believe Grace a woman in need of a saviour, even if they have to manipulate her discourse. Lastly, the alleged criminal shapes her narrative depending on those who listen to her, as she is aware of what is more convenient for her to say in every situation. Hence, by using her knowledge on the matter, she fights to be released from prison, and she actually reaches her goal.

The fact that the author presents these powerful men with flaws, contributes to the empowerment of Grace's discourse. In other words, in the novel, she is granted the opportunity to challenge the statements that men attribute to her, by condemning the control and manipulation received. Although her arguments make men's narratives lose credibility, the author does not assure her veracity on some occasions – for instance, the hypnosis performance led by her old acquaintance Jeremiah the peddler or Dr. Du Pond, in which she seems possessed by her former co-worker Mary Whitney.

It should be noteworthy that the author depicts Grace as a poor teenage girl who is unprotected and at a vulnerable age, and who suffers the consequences of a misogynistic society. Her characteristics make her morally loose, weak and in need of re-education in society's eyes. Thanks to this dehumanisation, together with the fictional traits added, the author constructs the identity of this mysterious woman of Victorian society. However, Atwood, far from pitying her, gives her a voice to make the readers decide whether to acknowledge or deny her innocence and insanity.

From an analytical point of view and considering the literary quality of the text, the thorough research work of the author to write it and the main topic it revolves around, further investigation on both the novel and the subject matter should be carried out. In addition, the theoretical sources mostly provided by female authors could be contrasted to other theoretical shreds of evidence written by men. Furthermore, the analysis of Grace's character from a psychological perspective would also offer a different insight into the matter.

To conclude, this dissertation has contributed to share an insight into women's life at a time when being born a female was rather a burden than a blessing. Nowadays, society works to assure that the progress carried out by women who advocated for their rights, continues until gender equality is achieved. Therefore, literature is a key aspect to give visibility to the silenced stories that have contributed to give a voice to the feminist movement. Hence, stories like *Grace Marks*' retold by authors like Margaret Atwood are essential to make people critical about the society we belong to and its origins.

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