Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Alias Grace (1996) may appear to be a new direction for Margaret Atwood. The novel is based on considerable research of a real, uneducated Irish woman, Grace Marks, and a famous nineteenth-century crime she supposedly committed with one lover, James McDermott, against her Scottish master and lover, Thomas Kinnear, who represents his class with the aristocracy of social advantage and educational opportunity that continues in Canada (Margaret Atwood Papers, AG, Kinnear research). The novel also appears to take seriously topics and genres, including double personalities, sex scandals, and murder mysteries, previously exposed to parody. Because of this, it seems less experimental, less postmodern, than The Handmaid's Tale and The Robber Bride. Occasionally, since “Grace was the O. J. Simpson of her time” and may have resembled O. J. in feeling “battered” and minimizing the gravity of the crime (Wiley, 2; Atwood Papers, AG, Psychiatry notes), its story even seems to resort to the “parlour theatrics” and kind of melodrama (Joan Thomas, C10) associated with contemporary TV trials, throw-away mystery paperbacks, and popular histories, including one of her nineteenth-century sources, Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings. As Stein points out, the novel makes use of genres in which Atwood has written before, including the Jamesian ghost story, detective thriller, Gothic tale, autobiography, and Scheherazade story, but still uses what Stein considers a nineteenth-century style, including
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social realism, comedy of manners, epistolary form, Gothic fiction, and even a ballad (103). Since The Blind Assassin (2000) arises from what Atwood calls the same “UR Manuscript,” The Angel of Bad Judgment (Margaret Atwood Papers), the two novels indicate a paradoxical but not uncommon direction for a postmodern writer: increasing documentation that compounds textual gaps and coexists with growing magical realism; in the case of Alias Grace, blood-red flowers that appear on the ground and in the cell of Grace’s prison. Alias Grace is again a feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial metafiction.

Feminist fiction, grounded in a belief that change is possible, analyzes gender as socially constructed. As a tool of feminist critique, feminist metafiction can reveal the conventionality of the codes of fiction, how they have been constructed, and how they can be changed (Greene, 4). Feminist intertextual revisions, sometimes involving direct reader address and always revealing the ideologically determined discourses encoded in traditional tales, also frequently have a “metanarrative function” (Cranny-Francis, 85, 89, 94). In opposition to Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophical usage, where “metanarrative” often refers to totalizing or legitimating master discourses, such as science (xxiii–xxiv), “metanarrative” here simply refers to narrative about narrative, as one of its varieties, metafiction, is fiction about fiction (Holman and Harmon, 297). Although postmodern metanarrative, including antinarrative, resembles Lyotard’s questioning or deligitimatizing discourse (37, 79), it marks a fundamental historical and cultural break with modernism (Jameson, xvi). Despite some attempts to label Canadian fiction, including Alias Grace, as essentially realistic and transitional or “intramodern” (Kirtz, “Facts”; “The Past”), postmodernism is no less evident in Canadian than in U.S., Latin American, New Zealand, or Asian fiction; and characteristics of Canadian postmodernism (See Hutcheon, Canadian Postmodern, 1–25; “Circling,” 168–69) even largely define international conceptions. Like the metafictions of Louise Erdrich, Rosario Ferre, and Keri Hulme, Alias Grace uses postmodern techniques such as self-reflexiveness and intertextuality to foreground issues of class, sexual politics, and other political issues, including those of the postcolonial condition.

The novel is based in part on Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings, designed to reconfirm English attitudes about the “uncivilized” life in Canada. It is also set immediately following the nearly successful Mackenzie Rebellion, widely supported by the Canadian poor, and during a period of large-scale Irish emigration. Thus, the novel is not only centered in nineteenth-century colonial attitudes about Canada,
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the lower classes, and the Irish, shared by many Anglo-Canadians as well as by the English; it also critiques these attitudes.

Alias Grace is about history, money, class, gender, ethnicity, psychoanalysis, legend, and myth. It is also about spiritualism, magic acts, master-servant narratives, misreading (Atwood letter to Ellen [Seligman], 17 March 1996), and all fictions, including Atwood’s, Canada’s, and our own. Resembling folklore itself (March, n.1), it deconstructs not only orally transmitted and published stories that we may assume are facts, but also national and social myth, gender roles, constructions of personal identity, and readers’ expectations of novels and reality. Both Simon and Grace, “the artful minx, with her blandishments!” continually call attention to Grace’s narrative-while-quilting as a “story.” Not only Grace’s attorney, MacKenzie, but Atwood notes that “butter wouldn’t melt in [Grace’s] mouth,” and Grace knows how to arrange herself as well as her narrative to attract interest (Atwood letter to Edna Slater, 3 Sept. 1996). Once again, Atwood’s use of intertexts, and, ironically, even her “Author’s Afterword,” foreground the novel’s focus on fiction making. In this novel, however, Atwood uses the unique image of quilting to represent the piecing together of different stories into a new pattern, in this case a pattern that questions master patterns and, by implication, all patterns. In addition to marking and naming each of the fifteen sections that correspond to quilt squares, these metaquilts comment on themselves, the women who make them, any variation from traditional patterns, and the stories they depict. Thus, the quilt patterns and section titles highlight the metafictionality of Alias Grace and themselves function as postmodern metafiction.

Characteristically, Atwood’s afterword begins with an assumption of clear boundaries between fiction and reality: “Alias Grace is a work of fiction, although it is based on reality.” She notes the appeal of the Kinnear-Montgomery murder story and Grace’s ability to “polarize opinion.” Suggesting some of the reasons why this historical incident is significant, Atwood notes that “Attitudes towards [Grace] reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women”: Grace was simultaneously a female fiend, a temptress, the real instigator and murderer, and a silenced, unwilling victim (461). Again appropriate to Atwood’s purposes, Grace gave three different accounts of the Montgomery murder and James McDermott gave two. The novel also quotes from Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings (1853), a central but third-hand source for information about the murder, and the one on which Atwood based her earlier CBC television play The Servant.
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*Girl* (1974). As Atwood points out, Moodie’s book was influenced by Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, and anything based exclusively on it “cannot now be taken as definitive” (467). Atwood also referred to Canadian, U.S., and British newspapers; penitentiary, asylum, emigration, and medical records; letters from doctors who examined Grace; letters from clergymen and others who circulated petitions on Grace’s behalf; the published confessions of Marks and McDermott; song lyrics; maps of Canada; photographs of Ireland; and research on Spiritualism, Mesmerism, mental illness, including “dissociation of personality” (dedoublement), the Mackenzie Rebellion, and psychology (See Acknowledgments; Atwood Papers, AG). In addition, she consulted quite a few other literary, historical, and medical accounts of the period, including *Letters of a Lifetime; History of Toronto and County of York, Ontario; Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (467); Kiracofe’s *The American Quilt; Cyclopedia of Fraternities; Laver’s Costume and Fashion; The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*; and the works of Emily Dickinson, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Charles Dickens, and Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Atwood Papers, AG). The afterword ends by stating what we have already observed, that “the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’. . . . Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent” (461, 465). Frequently, Atwood again does so by embedding literary, folklore, and other popular culture intertexts, including fairy-tale, mythic, and biblical stories and popular songs. Although she notes that “People want an outcome / They want a guilty person / They want to know who did it / They don’t like not knowing,” she chooses not to provide closure either to the relationship between Grace and Simon or the extent of Grace’s involvement in the murders (Atwood Papers, AG Notes to 1995, 14 Aug.; Letter to Ellen, 17 Mar. 1996). Paradoxically, what most attracts readers, including those in her friend’s book club where Atwood discussed this novel, are the gaps that remain in the novel, gaps that the reader is delighted to fill.

At the end of the novel, when Grace is married and possibly pregnant, she uses pieces of Mary Whitney’s white petticoat, her faded yellow prison nightgown, and Nancy’s pink-and-white flowered dress to make three of the triangles of a Tree of Paradise quilt, the first she has ever made for herself (459–60). Because traditional quilts are generally composed of fabrics actually used by the maker’s family and friends, quilts are literally pieces of lives, as this one is. Fabrics from pants, blouses, and dresses worn in the past and associated with random,
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daily events, sometimes significant (such as weddings, birthings, and funerals), are brought together to form a pattern. Fragments are ordered into a whole; bits of the past become useful parts of the present, available to provide warmth and comfort in illness and in daily life and to remind the users of their personal, familial, communal, ethnic, racial, and even national pasts.

Quilting styles and names vary according to regions, periods, and countries of origin, and quilts frequently tell stories. Probably originating in Asia and as old as the Egyptians (*Quilt History*), quilts have shown mythic, folkloric, biblical, and historic stories, including Tristan and Iseult, the Seven Deadly Sins, and Arthurian ones (*Quilt History/Page.html*). Quilt block names, thus, are rooted in history and may show biblical influence, as with Jacob’s Ladder. Other names, a kind of “folkloric poetry” that was rightfully whatever the maker chose (Bacon, 70, 72), might come from trades and occupations, nature, square dancing, or politics (*Quilt Block Names*) or be inspired by familiar objects, humor, pathos, tragedy, or sentimental meaning (Bacon, 70, 72).

Significantly for Atwood’s purposes, quilters have traditionally been women. As literary works, including Glaspell’s play *Trifles* and short story “A Jury of Her Peers,” Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Lives” and novel *The Color Purple*, and Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek’s play *Quilters*, indicate (See also *Poetry and Prose Page*), quilts are pieces of women’s lives and expressions of women’s feelings. In addition, quilting has usually been a social activity, a means for women to be with other women in a socially approved activity and a means for them to exchange family stories and vent anger or frustration with the “male world” from which women have been excluded (See also Rogerson, 11). Where other arts have been unavailable to subordinated women whose primary role was defined as nurturer and who could not always afford such supplies as paints and canvas, quilting has been a vehicle for breaking silence and speaking. Quilting helped establish and maintain a separate women’s culture with its own codes of language and manners prevalent in both the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century. Thus, quilting is an appropriate vehicle for retelling a nineteenth-century woman’s story. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood alludes to these quilt patterns: the Log Cabin, Job’s Tears, Old Maid’s Puzzle, Tree of Life, Tree of Temptation, Pine Tree, Jacob’s Ladder, Broken Plate, Flower Basket, Wild Goose Chase, Nine Patch, Memorial Quilt, Attic Windows, and Wheel of Mystery. In addition, she uses Jagged Edge, Rocky Road, Puss in the Corner, Young
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Man’s Fancy, Broken Dishes, Secret Drawer, Snake Fence, Fox and Geese, Hearts and Gizzards, Lady of the Lake, Falling Timbers, Solomon’s Temple, Pandora’s Box, the Letter X, and Tree of Paradise patterns as section titles.

In Alias Grace, Grace quilts in the sewing room at the governor’s mansion where she works during the day while serving her prison sentence for the murders. As she quilts, she tells her story to an American psychoanalyst, Simon Jordan, a character Atwood invented for the novel, who is seen mostly through his objects and his position, as his father was. As he writes down in a notebook what Grace says, she feels that he is drawing her or drawing on her skin and that she is splitting open like a ripe peach (69). He also records his own dreams, which suggest the locked boxes or fenced interiors he wants to open in Grace. Like other men of his period and profession, including Freud, Simon subscribes to the double standard and the angel/whore split and resents his loss of status and independence of action due to loss of the mills. As in The Robber Bride, characters’ dreams, such as those about corridors, drowning, and severed hands, seem to interpenetrate and comment on one another and on everyone’s repressions, projections, and fragmentation. Letters Simon writes and receives (including to or from Dr. Workman and Bannerling; his mother, Mrs. William Jordan; his friend Dr. Edward Murchie; and clergy) and his interior monologues comment on, and are pieced into, Grace’s narrative. Grace’s interior monologue similarly comments on Simon, his expectations, his creation of story, her efforts to offer or deny him what he wants, and the psychologically revealing associations, visions, and dreams she rarely tells Jordan but tries to decipher herself. She also makes private metafictional comments to the reader about the story she tells and the memory—yet another story—she gradually constructs and unravels. Thus, Grace, a superior seamstress, presents the reader with blocks for a many-layered story quilt complete with border design and padding. As readers “progress” through the book, they must quilt the pieces, creating their own patterns and watching them deconstruct as they are constructed.

Grace uses the conversational style characteristic of folktales, frequently emphasizes the oral quality of her tale, and accompanies it with the folk activity of quilting. Atwood characteristically disarms the reader with allusions to nursery rhymes such as “Simple Simon” and “Little Jack Horner”; myths and folk tales about Perseus, Saint George, Ulysses and the Sirens, the Lorelei, mermaids, Pan, Pandora, Ariadne, Scheherazade, Eurydice, the Pied Piper of Hamlin [Hameln], “Fitcher’s Bird,” and “The Girl without Hands”; the Apocrypha story
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about Susanna and the Elders; literary and opera “myth” such as The Lady of the Lake, The Faerie Queen, Heart of Darkness, her own poem, “Five Poems for Grandmothers” (THP), and the opera Sonnambulla; and biblical stories about the Trees of Knowledge and Paradise, the Tower of Babel, Jacob and Esau, Solomon, Lot’s wife, Jeremiah, Job, Simon Peter, Rachel, and Jonah. She even rewards the apparent murderess and her readers with a romantic fairy-tale resolution. But if Grace is a Scheherazade telling her story to entertain a doctor more associated, in her experience, with death than life, she is well aware of quilting’s subversive potential. We should be as well.

Atwood admits that her pattern “got bigger than I intended it to be. . . . I think originally there were only nine quilt-pattern titles, and then I just needed more. I needed to have more to cover the actual story as it unfolded” (Wiley, 4). Each section features an illustration of the quilt pattern under the title and, on one or more pages, section epigraphs, usually consisting of quotations from historical documents paired with literary ones from the period. Together they ironically or humorously foreground the section content. Although section and quilt titles changed some as the novel developed, passages or events often ironically name both title and quilt.

 Appropriately, the quilt marking the novel’s first section, which is also its only chapter, is a “Jagged Edge” pattern that pictures a literal jagged edge, nicely opposing the closing “Tree of Paradise.” It is accompanied with a quotation from Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings that ironically alludes to “the superior moral training of the feebler sex” but states Moodie’s great interest in seeing “the celebrated murderess” Grace Marks (3). Grace, a model prisoner who has already been “shut up” for eight years for the murder of Thomas Kinnear, begins her story with the spots of dark red that appear in the prison-yard gravel, swell, burst, and then fall back to the ground as she walks. Grace associates these peonies, “glossy like satin,” with the white ones in Mr. Kinnear’s garden when she first saw Nancy. On that day, Nancy wore the pale dress with pink rosebuds that Grace wears not only when she is trying to escape, but also when she is on trial for the murder. They also contrast with the white ones she gathered for Mary Whitney’s funeral, before she ever saw Nancy or Kinnear. Blood-red flowers, similar to those associated with violence and passion in Atwood’s Fitcher’s Bird watercolor (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics, plate 3), The Handmaid’s Tale, and “Bad News” (GB) subliminally haunt both Grace and the reader throughout the book, revealing Grace’s unconscious preoccupation with blood, the murders
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it signifies, and dead characters alive within her. These red peonies thus introduce what Atwood refers to as the “is-it-alive-or-dead-or-both motif” later imaged in the decapitated chicken running around Kinnear’s yard. As Atwood points out to one of her editors, Grace has a temper, life experience, and submerged rage: She is “very preoccupied with laundering” (Letters to Edna Slater, 3 Sept. 1996; Ellen, 17 Mar. 1996). These spots of color, both memories and anger she tries to repress, thus become a recurrent, subversive part of the pattern that constitutes this book-as-quilt.

Section 2, “Rocky Road,” a variation of the well-known Jacob’s Ladder pattern and one of several road designs, including Road to Tennessee or Kansas or the White House, is again brief and one of several “X” quilt patterns. It provides background on the crime and shows the “rocks” that Grace’s friend Jeremiah predicts in her future, including the “rocky road” to and within prison. For the reader, it illuminates the “rocky road” to “solving” the book’s mystery. At one point, the quilt pattern marking this section was “Wheel of Mystery.” The warning epigraphs from the Toronto Mirror about McDermott’s execution and the Kingston Penitentiary punishment book about punishments for particular offenses, such as bread and water for staring and being inattentive at breakfast, contrast with the flattering pictures of Marks and McDermott and the poem celebrating their fame.

Section 3, “Puss in the Corner,” a quilt design that is similar to Thirteen Squares and does not feature a cat, presents Grace as the sly puss, invisible to others and possibly invisible to herself. Like section 4, “Young Man’s Fancy,” section 3 presents “Ourself behind ourself, concealed” (46). Susanna Moodie’s description of Grace is matched with a passage from Emily Brontë’s “The Prisoner.” The “soft and mild” face of Brontë’s captive contrasts with her announcement that she won’t be held for long (19). In the governor’s parlor with her hands folded “the proper way although I have no gloves,” Grace thinks about “jellyfish ladies,” who are mostly water and whose legs are penned in by wire crinoline cages. As a young girl, she remembers never having enough room and being told not to be too intelligent (33, 22–23). But here and elsewhere she counters such thoughts with the imagined comments, which she always labels “crude” or “coarse,” of her dead friend, Mary Whitney. “As Mary Whitney said” increasingly signifies a less socialized, freer, irreverent, and possibly revengeful aspect of Grace that she seems to repress. Expressing relief that she was “not present” to see Nancy’s rotting body, she says that “There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of
again." Beginning to see the red flowers again, this time growing on the wall of her cell, she notes that “when you go mad you don’t go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in” (26, 33). This section ends with Grace pressing to her forehead an apple she associates with the Tree of Knowledge.

Section 4, the “Young Man’s Fancy” quilt pattern, identifies individual constructions of Grace, especially Dr. Jordan’s romantic “fancy.” It begins with the Dickinson epigraph from “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted”: “Ourself behind ourself, concealed.” Moodie’s description of Grace in the asylum and a quotation from Dr. Workman, one of Grace’s real doctors, follow. Unlike Dr. Bannerling, who favors cupping and bleeding to reduce the animal spirits of the insane, and Dr. Jerome Dupont—named after the chemical company (Letter to Ellen, 11 Mar. 1996) but really Jeremiah Pontelli, Grace’s trickster peddler—Dr. Workman feels blindfolded in attempting to cure problems of the human psyche. Ironically, Simon—the doctor who sets out to see all but resembles his namesake, the apostle Simon Peter—is blind in a more general way. The section ends in the “quicksand” of Simon’s sexual as much as medical frustration with Grace, who is “a hard nut to crack”; with his landlady, who waylays him; and with Lydia, who captures him on a “tongue-coloured setee” (54, 90). Feeling like the voyeur he is as he watches Grace threading a needle, he finally glimpses “the puss in the corner”: He imagines Grace “washing herself with her tongue, like a cat” (91).

Sections 5, “Broken Dishes”; 6, “Secret Drawer”; and 7, “Snake Fence,” again underline the sense in which we hide ourselves from ourselves. Section 5’s title refers not only to the quilt pattern and to the actual broken dishes it suggests, in this section the teapot that Grace’s Aunt Pauline gives her mother and that breaks on the journey from Ireland to Canada, but to the scraps and pieces, as of a broken plate or the book’s mysteries, “that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in” (103). Although “Secret Drawer” was once intended for section 7, with the “Snake Fence” pattern for section 6 (Atwood Papers, AG), it appropriately depicts the mind as a forbidden room. When Simon dreams of opening a door at the end of a Bluebeardian secret corridor, the sea rushes out and immediately closes over his head, suggesting lost memories rising to the surface. When he dreams that his father’s dead hand is coming back to life, instead of exploring the implications for his identity, he rationalizes that his dream is really Grace’s story (139–41). Although “Pandora’s Box” is the title quilt of
section 13, Grace works on a “Pandora’s Box” quilt in this section and remembers all the beautiful quilts, including a “Wild Goose Chase,” she saw at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s house. She notes that in the “Attic Windows” pattern, from one point of view the boxes may seem open, and from another, closed (162). We get a peek inside the secret drawer or box when Grace faints after she hears the dead Mary’s voice say, “Let me in.” Later she does not remember worrying that Grace is lost and has gone into the lake, marking her first bout of amnesia (180). But if the Pandora’s box of Grace’s psyche—or, for that matter, of Simon’s—is fully opened, what will we see inside? In section 7, after hearing about the ghost of Mary Whitney, Simon feels as if he has been closed in a dark room or come from an abattoir. This section’s title, “Snake Fence,” literally refers to the snake fence on which McDermott displays his agility and the period of harmony before the murder when Grace wishes nothing would ever change. Although this quilt pattern does actually depict “snakes,” subliminally, it suggests the hidden snake in the Garden of Eden and anticipates the snakes Grace will hide in the Tree of Paradise quilt she makes after she marries the man who helped convict her, Jamie Walsh.

Many of the quilt titles and sections draw attention to the sexual politics Grace finds intrinsic in the display of quilts. In section 6 she sees quilts as flags of war, placed on the tops of beds as warnings of “the many dangerous things that may take place in a bed” (161). Section 8, “Fox and Geese,” announces a chase. In addition to readers, chasers include prison keepers; ironically, they consider women edible but think that they should have been born without mouths, their only useful areas being below the waist (240). Lydia moons after Simon; Nancy, who has had one illegitimate child, is pregnant with her master’s child; Jamie makes Grace a May Queen; and Grace dreams of a man caressing her. The chapter ends with the possibility that Grace has been embellishing her story to please her audience, thus leading Simon and us on a wild goose chase. Section 9, “Hearts and Gizzards,” prefaced with McDermott’s grizzly description of choking and dismembering Nancy, juxtaposes a gruesome depiction of the crime, which McDermott says he committed to have Grace, with the humorous telling of Simon’s romantic entanglements. In some of these he ironically feels snarled as in a spider’s web (293), imprisoned, when he really only wants to be Grace’s heroic rescuer (322).

Section 10 (X), “Lady of the Lake,” like 14, “The Letter X” quilt pattern, marks two “Xs” in the text and foregrounds how quilt illustrations may self-reflexively mirror literature (Scott’s Lady of
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*the Lake* and the lady in the lake of Arthurian romance), incidents in the text we are reading (Grace in the lake), and even names in the text (the steamer “Lady of the Lake,” in which Grace and McDermott flee). Although Grace finds no lady and no lake in the quilt, she thinks that the boat was named for the poem and the quilt for the boat so that things do make sense “and have a design to them” (340). Similar to its treatment of other images of grand order and design, however, the book immediately undercuts this clarity, as the water seems to erase Grace’s footsteps and all her traces, as if Grace Marks leaves “no marks.” Even more disconcerting for readers who wish, like Dr. Jordan, to hold on to the image of her that Grace constructs, is her calm satisfaction with being erased: “It is almost the same as being innocent” (342).

Similarly, section 11, “Falling Timbers,” a variation of the World’s Puzzle, Solomon’s Puzzle, and Drunkard’s Path designs (Lithgow, 59), highlights the puzzles and falls in this section. It may also ironically suggest the timbers of the popular pioneer Log Cabin design, which, with the associated Pine Tree pattern, came to symbolize the American colonies’ fight for freedom against oppression (Lithgow, 59). Not only are the timbers here falling, but the Log Cabin design itself is missing from the quilt-pattern section titles. Although Grace says that every young woman should have a Log Cabin quilt—to her, symbolizing home and hearth—and makes one for another young woman, the Log Cabin quilt she later sleeps under in marriage is both second-hand and potentially unlucky (Rogerson, 17). “Falling Timbers” also parallels Simon’s fall with that of Grace and James McDermott and continues the self-reflexive emphasis that makes the novel metafiction. When Simon is not listening to Grace’s consciously enhanced tale of capture (353), he sleeps with a “respectable woman,” his opium-taking landlady. When Grace was preparing for trial, she received literary advice about recounting the story of the crime—“to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed”—and she apparently practices her skill with the stories she tells Jordan, readers (357), and possibly herself. What she dreads most about the possibility of being hanged is being “cut up into pieces, and bits and fragments” (358), unlike the “whole cloth” she wants to offer Jordan (353). Simon concludes that Grace’s “strongest prison is of her own construction.” Ironically, this quilt section ends as the previous one does: Like Grace, he wants to be anonymous and “lose himself completely” (366).

In section 12, “Solomon’s Temple,” another design without any
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apparent Solomon or temple, Simon definitively proves himself devoid of Solomon’s wisdom. After hearing that Grace’s attorney, Kenneth MacKenzie, thinks Grace is guilty of helping to kill Nancy, Simon recognizes that Grace is the only woman he wishes to marry. The section ends with his ludicrously whispering “murderess” while thinking of hothouse gardenias.

In section 13, “Pandora’s Box,” the “box” of Grace’s psyche and what she has not remembered about the murders is opened during hypnosis, but Simon also faces the “Pandora’s box” possibilities of his own actions as he is invited to murder his landlady’s husband and contemplates murdering the landlady. In addition, as in other Atwood texts, when what was closed is opened, we face our inabilities to distinguish truth or reality from fiction. Illustrating the death-in-life motif, the Mary Whitney voice admits that she, not Grace, helped kill Nancy, thus solving the mystery of the book. But is it solved, or do the windows, including the one from which Mary’s soul supposedly could not escape, again only appear to be open from one angle? The Mary personality also tells Simon that “Curiosity killed the cat” (400). Since the hypnotist is Grace’s friend Jeremiah the Peddler posing as Dr. DuPont, we may be seeing a parlor trick. Grace could be acting, as, for that matter, she might have been in claiming not to remember. On the other hand, a double personality offers an explanation of details, in both novel and historical crime, that seem to defy rationality. In both the actual crime and in Atwood’s novel, the first murder victim is a reader, Thomas Kinnear, who is killed while reading a “Godey’s Ladies” book. Although he is not killed in the bedroom, the magazine is later discovered, blood-covered, in Nancy’s bed (331). In opening the Pandora’s box of the novel, it is wise to remember the parodic images of Atwood’s earlier prose poem “Murder in the Dark,” where the persona invites us to play games with the game: “You can say: the murderer is the writer, the detective is the reader, the victim is the book. Or perhaps, the murderer is the writer, the detective is the critic and the victim is the reader. . . . In any case,” the persona says, “I have designs on you . . . by the rules of the game, I must always lie” (MD, 30).

Section 14, “The Letter X,” a pattern that forms five more X’s in the text, relies on the puns of which Atwood is so fond: After the initial quotations, including a letter by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the section consists entirely of letters, some probably not delivered. These letters fill in what happens to Simon, who interestingly experiences the kind of amnesia he thinks Grace has, and Jeremiah, who, in another
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disguise, performs “The Future Told in Letters of Fire” at area theaters. Section 15, based on “The Tree of Paradise” quilt, which ironically appears to be falling, consists of another letter that fills in what happens to Grace. Whether or not the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are the same, as Grace believes, making not only the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil the same, but the consequences of eating them equivalent, she is released from prison and marries. In Atwood’s fictionalization, her rescuer is Jamie Walsh, the flute-playing Pan Grace knew when she worked for Kinnear. Recognizing that this role as an object of pity “calls for a different arrangement of the face” than when she was an object of horror and fear (443), Grace rejects the plausibility of the “happy ending” “just like a book” that Janet and many readers would supply (445). Whether Atwood’s happy ending is indeed happy, and whether quilt spells guilt, are again questions for each of us.

As *Alias Grace* is a construction based on “reality,” so all our histories and conclusions are exposed as theories, speculations, the best we can do to build a structure over the abyss after the grounds of our being have been deconstructed (Derrida, 351–52). Although readers will endlessly debate whether Grace really helps kill Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, whether she really has either amnesia or a double personality, and whether she has sex with Kinnear and James McDermott, again such questions are beside the point, either/ors that overlook the pluralism of both identity and truth. As Grace notes in her mental letter to Dr. Simon Jordan on the final page of the novel’s final section, “The Tree of Paradise,” and of her version of her story, she may have finally guessed—or, more likely, is posing—a riddle. She will put a “border of snakes intertwined” on the Tree of Paradise quilt she makes after marriage, rather than the conventional bridal quilt with flowers and vines symbolic of fruitfulness, love, and longevity (Atwood Papers, *AG, Fashion Quilts*; see also Rogerson, 20). Her border suggests the snakes of the Great Goddess and of Atwood’s other trickster snake goddesses including Circe and Zenia (*YAH, RB*) as well as the Eve/snake of Eden and Atwood’s *Double Persephone* covers (*Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics*, figures 3, 4). Although the snakes will look like vines or a cable pattern, “without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing.” She is changing the pattern to suit her own ideas and telling no one else, because her interpretation of the story on which the pattern is based is “not the approved reading.” Although the snakes could be phallic symbols, as Freud and Rogerson suggest (qtd. in Rogerson, 20), if the border
encodes deceit and sexuality, we cannot exclude either this trickster storyteller or the sexist cultures that make killers of female snakes into mythic heroes (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Politics*, 17–19). “Like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they [get] the main story right but some of the details wrong” (459–60).

Atwood, too, throws in a few embroidered snakes in her pretty pattern (460), thereby subverting our approved readings of quilts, literature, gender, culture, reality, and all master narratives. Grace is “alias Grace” because all of her, and our, identities are aliases, fictions. Where gaps exist in her or our life narratives, we too are “free to invent.”

NOTES

Shorter versions of this article were presented in 1997 at the International Popular Culture Association meeting in Brisbane, Australia, the Association for Canadian Studies in the U.S. Conference in Minneapolis, and the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Denver.

1. In Atwood novels, many characters are also mainly “in pieces.” In *Surfacing*, David is a clumsily worked patchwork, and in *Alias Grace*, Rev. Verringer would have us avoid the horror of being mere patchworks, without a soul, if we are mainly our unconscious mind, i.e., what we repress or forget (406).

2. When questioned about why Simon is not described further, in reference to more than objects and position, Atwood jokes that “the higher your class, the less likely you are to be subject to the impertinence of description! (It’s the beginning of surrealism, which substitutes objects for people.)” (Letter to Nan [Talese], Ellen [Seligman], Liz [Calder], Phoebe [Larmore], Vivienne [Schuster], 30 Jan. 1996.) She had hoped to have Workman play the Simon Jordan part until she discovered that Grace’s stay in the asylum overlapped his tenure by only three weeks. Early drafts do refer to this character as William (Atwood Papers, AG).

3. In short, “he is not a 20th-Century Sensitive Guy” (Atwood letter to Ellen [Seligman], 3 Mar. 1996.)


5. Atwood also considered a similar design with space instead of squares beside the diamond.