

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**“Young Man’s Fancy”: Destabilizing Victorian
Medical Discourse through the Doctor-Patient
Relationship in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996)**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the representation of Victorian psychiatric discourse in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). The analysis focuses on the figure of Dr. Simon Jordan, Atwood's fictional addition to the real-life events in which the novel is based, as a representative of this discourse. His embodiment of the Victorian ideal of the gentleman and the man of science are used to analyse how ideals of masculinity and femininity as well as his medical gaze impact this character's perception of Grace Marks, the convicted murderess he conducts a psychological study about. The discussion focuses on the gradual collapse of his rational perspective and the destabilization of cultural frameworks as a historiographic metafiction novel.

Keywords: *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood, historiographic metafiction, Victorian psychiatric discourse, masculinity, femininity.

1. Resum del Treball

Aquest Treball de Final de Grau se centra en la representació del discurs psiquiàtric de l'època victoriana en la novel·la basada parcialment en fets reals *Alias Grace* (1996) de Margaret Atwood. Concretament, el treball pretén investigar com la novel·la desestabilitza l'autoritat d'aquest discurs a través de la relació entre pacient i metge representada pels personatges de Grace Marks i Simon Jordan. Grace Marks és una criada i immigrant irlandesa que ha estat condemnada pels assassinats del seu amo i de la criada amb la qual mantenia una relació secreta. El psiquiatre Simon Jordan, un personatge fictici creat per Atwood, té la tasca de descobrir la implicació real de Grace en els assassinats i revelar si és una "assassina sense pietat" o una "víctima innocent" de la manipulació de James McDermott, el suposat amant amb el qual la Grace va cometre els crims.

El treball situa la novel·la en relació amb la concepció que presenta del discurs històric com a novel·la de metaficció historiogràfica. L'enfocament de Linda Hutcheon (1988, 1989) sobre aquest gènere postmodern entén tant el discurs històric com la literatura com a discursos indeslligablement construïts des d'un punt de vista subjectiu. Això fa que es qüestionï l'autoritat del discurs històric com a representació objectiva del passat, ja que es presenten les dues narracions com a igualment vàlides. A *Alias Grace* això es mostra a través de l'estructura "patchwork" que incorpora documents històrics com a elements paratextuals i els juxtaposa amb la narració fictícia. De la mateixa manera, una anàlisi a través de la concepció sobre la relació entre el poder i el coneixement de Michel Foucault a *Discipline and Punish* (1975), mostra com la novel·la representa el discurs psiquiàtric com una forma de coneixement vinculada a institucions de poder. Es situa la tensió entre coneixement i ignorància al centre de la relació entre Grace i Simon.

El fet d'assenyalar com el coneixement que produeix el discurs psiquiàtric està influenciat pels valors de gènere i classe de la societat patriarcal victoriana exposa les seves limitacions per definir i classificar els individus, com la Grace, de manera objectiva des de la seva posició d'autoritat.

A l'apartat "The Gentleman and the Man of Science" se situa el personatge de Simon Jordan en relació amb la seva identitat com a membre de la classe benestant i home de ciència. S'analitzen les concepcions de masculinitat relacionades amb aquestes figures a partir de l'anàlisi de Heather Ellis (2017) sobre el paper de la masculinitat burgesa en el procés de resignificació social de les ciències a inici del segle XIX. La novel·la remarca la importància de l'educació de Simon en un context burgès per entendre valors i actituds que adopta de forma inconscient i com l'home de ciència dins el món aristocràtic es recolza en aquests valors de masculinitat activa i dominant per reforçar la seva autoritat social. En aquest sentit, s'argumenta que la novel·la converteix Simon en objecte d'estudi a través d'una narració en un estil indirecte lliure i un narrador impersonal que jutja i assenyala la seva falta de consciència sobre els valors que perpetua. D'aquesta manera, la relació entre metge i pacient queda invertida, ja que és Simon el que és examinat.

En aquest apartat, es posa èmfasi en com la novel·la destaca la diferència entre homes amb poder, com Thomas Kinnear, l'amo de la casa on treballa Grace, i dones de classe social baixa, com les criades Nancy Montgomery i Mary Whitney. Els seus embarassos visibilitzen la situació de vulnerabilitat en què es troben i el control econòmic i sexual que els homes de grups socials amb poder exerceixen sobre elles. El paral·lelisme que s'estableix entre Thomas Kinnear i Simon, tots dos procedents d'un context social similar, permet analitzar com l'interès científic de Simon per definir el caràcter de la Grace es barreja amb el seu desig de controlar-la sexualment. Aquest desig, però, entra en conflicte amb les responsabilitats que el rol científic exigeix: una mirada racional i

autocontrol per marcar distància emocional. Els somnis s'utilitzen a la novel·la per explorar les contradiccions internes i els desitjos reprimits que sorgeixen a partir de les normes socials associades a la seva identitat. El personatge de Simon contribueix a una representació de les limitacions i contradiccions dels discursos socials dominants, ja que manté una relació ambigua amb la masculinitat que ell mateix personifica. Tot i que en moments concrets reconeix la incomoditat i dificultat que li produeix haver d'encaixar en el seu rol dins el món burgès, és incapaç d'identificar com aquests rols són producte del discurs que ell mateix perpetra, sobretot en la seva relació amb les dones i des de la seva posició com a psiquiatre. Així, la novel·la presenta un personatge que, sense ser-ne conscient, es qüestiona els valors que ell mateix representa.

A continuació, l'estudi sobre la feminització cultural de la bogeria i de les pràctiques psiquiàtriques als manicomis durant l'època victoriana d'Elaine Showalter (1985) serveix per identificar les actituds de Simon que provenen d'aquest sistema de valors. El manicomi, com argumenta Showalter, és representatiu de les actituds patriarcals de la societat victoriana envers la dona i la seva sexualitat, que exerceix el seu poder a través de la classificació i definició de la normalitat. Simon encarna aquesta visió jeràrquica que observa, classifica i jutja les dones des d'una posició que considera privilegiada i superior. Tendeix a objectificar-les com a casos d'estudi sense mostrar empatia o compassió. La relació entre en Simon i Grace mostra com el discurs científic es veu influenciat pels valors de gènere i classe que Simon manifesta en els altres àmbits de la seva vida. En aquest sentit, la narració que la Grace fa de la seva experiència com a criada, radicalment oposada a l'experiència que viu Simon com a "gentleman", es presenta com l'element que fa trontollar progressivament la identitat de Simon. El testimoni de la Grace entra en contradicció amb la visió del món que Simon coneix i defensa. La seva experiència amb dones de classe baixa, com prostitutes i criades, havia

estat marcada per l'objectificació i explotació sexual, justificada com a forma d'obtenir coneixement sobre la naturalesa humana. La seva actitud és incompatible amb mirada més humanitzadora del relat de la Grace.

Al mateix apartat, també es mostra com les experiències de Grace com a criada, pacient d'un manicomi i presonera influeixen en la seva capacitat per controlar el relat que explica a Simon i manipular-lo a partir dels coneixements que té sobre els valors que defensen les classes benestants. El tipus de control disciplinari que pateix a la presó i al manicomi, justificat com a mesura de millora moral, li fa descobrir el silenci i la contenció com a eines per evitar la categorització i el judici de les classes superiors. A la novel·la, les actituds ambivalents envers la sexualitat femenina de la societat són un exemple del judici que s'aplica a Grace, ja que exemplifiquen com els diaris i la societat en general mostren interès i curiositat per la naturalesa sexual dels crims i, alhora, condemnen aquesta sexualitat. Per aquest motiu, Grace opta per mantenir en secret la seva versió dels fets i, així, situar-se a ella mateixa en una posició ambigua entre les etiquetes que se li assignen, com les de “dona immoral” i “víctima innocent.” Finalment, la representació tant de Grace com Simon com a personatges que mantenen una relació ambigua amb els ideals de masculinitat i feminitat s'interpreta una forma de desestabilització del discurs dominant des de diferents perspectives. Ni Grace, com a representant dels discursos minoritaris, ni Simon, com a representant dels discursos dominants, no encaixen amb els ideals imposats. D'aquesta manera, la novel·la mostra l'impacte d'aquests discursos tant sobre els oprimits com sobre els que es beneficien d'aquest sistema.

L'apartat “Collapse of Rationality” se centra en la degradació progressiva de la mirada racional de Simon a través del relat de Grace. A partir de la contraposició de Showalter entre racionalitat, associada amb la masculinitat i la mirada mèdica, i irracionalitat, associada amb la feminitat, s'observa la forma en què Simon imposa la seva

mirada al relat de la Grace. Intenta que aquest relat esdevingui coherent segons el seu criteri, però la incapacitat de Simon per acceptar les parts que contradiuen la seva visió del món, que ell veu com a irracionals, limita la seva capacitat per entendre la perspectiva de Grace. Simon es focalitza únicament en els aspectes psicològics que la defineixen i deixa de banda com els factors socioeconòmics formen la seva identitat. Aleshores, el relat de Grace frustra els objectius de Simon, ja que, juntament amb el silenci, l'amnèsia i la manipulació que exerceix la Grace, es converteix en un relat ambigu que no desvela els motius dels assassinats. Aquesta frustració per determinar la personalitat de Grace, el xoc que suposa el qüestionament de creences a partir de la nova visió que presenta Grace, i la frustració del seu desig cap a ella desencadenen el col·lapse mental de Simon, que es troba en un estat d'esgotament profund. Simon finalment transgredeix les normes del que és socialment acceptable a través de la relació amb Rachel Humphrey, la seva llogatera casada i més gran que ell, que es troba en una situació de vulnerabilitat econòmica. En aquesta relació externalitza el seu desig socialment inacceptable i reprimat.

La culminació del col·lapse de la perspectiva racional es produeix durant la sessió d'hipnotisme que es du a terme per resoldre el misteri que envolta Grace. Jerome DuPont, un personatge que es revela com a fals hipnotista i que coneix Grace des d'abans que ella entrés a la presó, du a terme la sessió en què l'esperit de Mary Whitney posseeix el cos de Grace i es presenta com a autora real dels crims. Aquest episodi, impossible d'explicar des de la perspectiva científica de Simon, el porta al límit de la seva comprensió i, finalment, abandona aquest cas que l'ha fet enfrontar les parts irracionals i reprimides d'ell mateix. Irònicament, acaba perdent la memòria, justament el que pretenia recuperar del relat de Grace, després de ser ferit a la Guerra Civil dels Estats Units. La sessió d'hipnotisme contribueix a l'alliberament de la Grace de la presó. Tot i això, la novel·la

evita presentar aquesta alliberació com una resolució completa del conflicte que provoquen les estructures socials que l'han condicionada.

En definitiva, la interpretació que presenta aquest treball entén que la novel·la representa els mecanismes de funcionament dels sistemes patriarcals d'una manera complexa, ja que no simplifica la figura de Simon únicament com a opressor. També explora com les concepcions de masculinitat del sistema de valors que defensa creen conflictes interns en relació amb la seva identitat. Grace es mostra capaç de percebre les limitacions dels discursos produïts per les classes benestants. Això és precisament el que Simon no aconsegueix descobrir i el que el manté atrapat dins aquest mateix sistema, ja que és incapaç de percebre aquest discurs com una narrativa amb limitacions. L'acte narratiu es presenta com una eina interpretativa que dona forma a l'experiència a través de la retrospecció i que construeix el significat des de diferents perspectives. La reorganització simbòlica que fa Grace de les narratives i identitats que se li imposen amb la seva vànova de "patchwork" que anomena "Tree of Paradise" representa el procés paral·lel de resignificació amb el relat que construeix de la seva vida i que comparteix amb Simon.

Una de les línies d'investigació que es proposen per ampliar la recerca sobre *Alias Grace* se centra en la classificació de la novel·la com a "feminista" i com aquesta etiqueta, que Atwood rebutja perquè considera simplificadora, delimita les expectatives dels lectors i les seves interpretacions de l'obra. Finalment, es proposa un estudi comparatiu amb altres novel·les neo-victorianses per comparar la forma en què es tracta el discurs psiquiàtric, el concepte de bogeria o els ideals de masculinitat i feminitat. Una anàlisi des d'aquesta perspectiva pot permetre valorar i entendre la manera com les interpretacions contemporànies del passat estimulen i faciliten el fet d'establir una visió crítica sobre les narratives històriques.

2. Introduction

2.1 Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood became interested in the story of Grace Marks through Susanna Moodie's portrayal of this figure in *Life in the Clearings* (1853), the autobiographical account of her experience as a British immigrant in Canada. Grace Marks became known in Canada for being convicted alongside her alleged romantic partner, James McDermott, for the murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, in 1843. Atwood saw a potential to turn these facts into a fictional story and attempted to transform Grace's story, through Moodie's point of view, into a television script and then a play. However, she was dissatisfied with the results and decided to investigate and expand her knowledge of the case to write *Alias Grace* in 1997. In 2017 the book was adapted by Sarah Polley into a positively regarded Netflix series (Mangan), after the success of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), another adaptation of a 1985 Atwood novel.

The story is based on the known facts about the sixteen-year-old convicted murderess and the scandalous details of the murders that shocked Canadian society. However, Atwood incorporates fictional elements and characters, such as Dr. Simon Jordan, the psychiatrist who tries to recover Grace's memory of the crimes. As she states: "Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent." (Atwood *AliasGrace* 542). Atwood takes advantage of the mystery surrounding the enigmatic historical Grace Marks, whose characterization in newspapers of the time remained inconsistent and contradictory. She was portrayed both as a "fiend and a temptress" and an "unwilling victim." The incoherent accounts of the murders and the difficulty of establishing Grace's personality and her motives behind the murders drove Atwood to explore the ways in which we make sense of the past through historical records and written accounts. In *Alias Grace*, the incapability to define the moral dimensions of

the murders through a single point of view evolves into a metafictional interrogation of the prevailing accounts of the past that we often accept without questioning.

2.2 State of the Art

Alias Grace has been interpreted from different perspectives, such as Gina Wisker's, who Atwood's interest in Canada's national history and the viewpoint she holds "through her contemporary social and ethical preoccupations" (Wisker "History" 92). She rejects any "reductive versions of history" and tries to recover "lives and voices hidden from formal, approved versions of history" (Wisker 92). Her interest in the past is also linked with its connection with the present and the possible, speculative, futures: "The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it." (Atwood "In Search" 1516). As Wisker remarks, the critical approaches in which *Alias Grace* has been read, such as Magali Cornier Michael's (2001), focus on "historical constructedness and artifice, the potential deception of testimony and memory" (Wisker "Atwood's 'Alias Grace'" 67).

Although Atwood refuses the label "feminist" as she believes it is sometimes used too broadly or to overly simplify her work (Atwood "Bad Feminist"), many critics have taken feminist approaches to interpret Grace as a complex survivor of class and gender constraints, who also challenges the role of the victim (Wisker "No Nearer the Truth" 122). Moreover, the presence of quilting in the novel, as a woman's form of artistic expression, is also seen as crucial to both Grace's resistance and the deconstruction of historical knowledge (Wisker "No Nearer the Truth" 124).

Some critics have focused on the presence of psychiatric discourse and medical institutions, especially through the character of Dr. Simon Jordan. Hilde Staels (2000), Katarina Gregerdotter (2022), or María Lopez (2012) have interpreted his presence as another element of the novel's interrogation of the construction of knowledge and its relationship to power within the Victorian patriarchal society. Other readings take a neo-

Victorian approach, such as Rosario Arias (2005) who links the presence of the occult as “a metaphor for the postmodern idea of resurrecting Victorian deep-seated anxieties and concerns in contemporary historical novels.” (Arias 88).

This dissertation draws from the criticism that focuses on the presence of the psychiatric and medical institutions in the novel. However, while these readings focus on the construction of knowledge, this thesis incorporates a feminist perspective as it focuses on the way in which gendered ideals of masculinity and femininity interact with the Victorian psychiatric discourse.

2.3 Objectives and Methodology

It is crucial to consider the postmodern point of view from which *Alias Grace* is written in order to analyse how the novel interacts with the Victorian psychiatric discourse and the gender norms that surround it while simultaneously subverting its authority from a contemporary perspective. This dissertation will argue that *Alias Grace* portrays how the knowledge and “truths” that the Victorian psychiatric institution produced, especially about women, were directly influenced by cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Moreover, this thesis will analyse how the novel discredits these conceptions through the interaction between the character of Grace Marks and the psychiatrist Dr. Simon Jordan, a fictional character added to the real story whose purpose is to analyse Grace and determine the nature of her character. To do so, different theoretical sources will be used, such as Michel Foucault’s theory of the relationship between power and knowledge, developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and cultural analyses of Victorian conceptions of femininity and masculinity in science and psychiatry, such as Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady* (1985) and Heather Ellis’ *Masculinity and Science in Britain, 1831-1918* (2017). Although the novel is set in Canada, Canada West specifically, it portrays broader conceptions about Victorian ideals of gender and

psychiatry, embodied in the figure of Dr. Simon Jordan, so the concepts in the analyses based on Britain will be applied to analyse this case.

2.4 Historiographic Metafiction

Alias Grace has been classified as a historiographic metafiction (Staels 428), a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, because of the way the novel interacts with the historical past in a way that is parodic and also self-conscious. This postmodern genre presents an awareness of the textual mediation that determines our access to history and places the historical discourse at a similar level of veracity with other discourses, such as literature: “It is a return made problematic by overtly metafictional assertions of both history and literature as human constructs” (Hutcheon “Historiographic Metafiction” 4). In her Bronfman lecture “In Search of ‘Alias Grace’: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction” at the University of Ottawa in December 1998, Atwood discusses the resurgence of the Canadian historical novel and details her own writing process of *Alias Grace*. She highlights the enormous significance memory and its limitations have on the contemporary understanding of history, and how history and the story, which includes fiction, present a parallel process of remembering and organizing memory:

We live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of larger memory we call history, is being called into question. For history, as for the individual, forgetting can be just as convenient as remembering, and remembering what was once forgotten can be distinctly uncomfortable. (Atwood “In Search”, 1505)

One of the limitations of memory that Atwood points out, that is close to Hutcheon’s conceptualization, is its dependence on textual mediation: “If you’re after the truth, the whole and detailed truth, and nothing but the truth, you’re going to have a thin time of it if you trust to paper; but, with the past it’s almost all you’ve got.” (Atwood “In Search” 1514). The issue of the authority which is attributed to different texts is something explicitly discussed in *Alias Grace*, as it can be seen in the reference to the apocryphal

texts that are not accepted in the biblical canon. In a conversation between Grace and her employer, Thomas Kinnear, in chapter 25, Grace's apparently innocuous and innocent questions about the validity of the apocryphal texts end up exposing the process through which certain texts are selected, authorized and given institutional legitimacy. Their exchange highlights how God's truth is actually mediated by men: "perhaps God wrote it, it was men who wrote it down; which was a little different" (Atwood 259).

Magali Cornier Michael highlights the patchwork quilt nature of the novel as one of the major conceptual and formal tools for destabilizing the authority and centrality of specific metanarratives that have dominated Western culture. That is, the juxtaposition of official texts about the real life events of the murders of Thomas and Nancy as epigraphs, such as interviews, legal confessions or newspaper excerpts that often portray a contradicting version of the events and the fictionalized first-person account of Grace Marks and the third-person narration in free indirect style that deals with Dr. Simon Jordan's experience. This juxtaposition serves as a means to level out and challenge the authority of both discourses by presenting both of them as valid and also fabricated (Michael 421): "*Alias Grace* enacts the impossibility of locating one overall or definitive pattern or version of the events" (Michael 429). Although Atwood accentuates the constraints of accessing the truth, she never argues that one such truth does not exist: "although there undoubtedly was a truth —somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery—truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us" (Atwood "In Search" 1515).

The deconstruction of homogeneity, characteristic of this postmodern perspective, shifts the focus and assigns value to what Hutcheon coins as ex-centric discourses, which in American postmodernism are defined by terms such as "nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 130). In *Alias Grace*, dominant bourgeois Victorian gender discourses are examined and contrasted with alternative experiences in

relation to both femininity and masculinity, such as those from the immigrant lower classes. The novel portrays different ways in which social and cultural discourses, such as Victorian alienism, the legal system, and the press, conceive norms about class and gender alongside with experiences that contradict these ideals.

Additionally, historiographic metafiction's subversiveness is also present in the novel in its formal structure, through its use of the expectations that certain genre conventions create, as a historical and antidetective novel, in order to shatter them. Hutcheon emphasizes this ironic use of literary norms: "Postmodernism signals its dependence by its use of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 130). On the one hand, *Alias Grace* positions itself as a historical novel by adhering to the 19th-century realist bourgeois conventions, such as the "minute representation of mundane life," the "emphasis on external circumstances" and the "portrayal of a character as a product of a specific environment or a victim of familiar dispossession" (Staels 431). These realist conventions, however, do not create the effect with which they are associated: the construction of a coherent account of the past. Therefore, they are used in an ironic manner that highlights the limitations of trying to access a transparent account of the past. On the other hand, the book also functions as an antidetective novel. It presents the dichotomy between reason and intuition by means of introducing a "psychoanalyst-detective whose inquest is purely guided by positivist detection and who lacks a traditional detective's creative spirit and intuitive side" (Staels 432). This creates a sense of entrapment, which is manifested through Dr. Simon Jordan's existential quest and disorientation towards Grace's narrative (Staels 432).

In sum, by acknowledging certain generic and cultural expectations and refusing to fulfil them, *Alias Grace* positions Dr. Simon Jordan and the reader in a state of

frustration. This frustration contributes to the postmodern interpretation of discourses as unstable means to generate knowledge.

2.5 Power and Knowledge

The personal and political dimensions of power are a central element in Atwood's literary universe. She frequently portrays how gender and power interact and is particularly interested in the representations of the victim position (Somacarrera 32). In *Alias Grace*, power imbalances are made visible throughout Grace's experience as an Irish immigrant maid in different contexts, such as the houses she works at, the legal process after the murders, her experience in the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, and, finally, in the Kingston Penitentiary. The experience of the maid is highlighted to be one that is legally, economically, and culturally subjected to patriarchal institutions, represented by male figures in the novel. This is exemplified in the relationship between Thomas Kinnear, the master of the house at which Grace works as a maid, and Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper who has a secret relationship with her employer. When Nancy becomes pregnant as an unmarried woman of a lower class, she also becomes more vulnerable and dependent on her master's will. As Grace observes: "What would he do if he found out, I wondered. Boot her into the ditch. Marry her" (Atwood 321). A similar situation happened to Mary Whitney, also a maid and friend of Grace, who became pregnant by one of the master's sons and died due to a badly performed secret abortion.

Knowledge is another way in which power operates, and one that the novel explores comprehensively. Michel Foucault's perspective of the way in which power, understood as a network of relations rather than singular superior force, operates in modern disciplinary institutions, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), includes the creation of knowledge through observation and classification of individuals: "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and

the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (Foucault 194). Throughout the process which Foucault labels “the examination”, exemplified with the medical observation or the school evaluation, the individual is objectified and turned into a case study that can be interpreted through the processes of hierarchical surveillance, documentation, and normalizing judgement (Foucault 192). Each individual becomes an object of scientific knowledge that can be “described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality” and also “corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (Foucault 191). Therefore, these disciplinary institutions, reinforced by its authority in society, define and create what is considered the norm. The body becomes the object and target of power. It becomes a visible and legible object so it can be effectively governed, made to be docile and to self-discipline through its measurement against these standards.

As María Lopez points out, in her Foucauldian reading of the novel, *Alias Grace* exemplifies the mechanisms of control from disciplinary institutions by emphasizing a division of class in which the lower classes become a spectacle for the upper and middle ones: “Practices of power, as carried out in penal institutions, and by the legal and scientific communities, intend to turn Grace, who finds herself in a position of marginality, and hence, of lack of power, into a knowable individual to be supervised and controlled” (Lopez 159). This is reiterated by the binary social divisions the novel establishes between the sane and the insane “suggesting that the inclusion in this second group depends on low social origins, together with the disadvantage of being a woman” (Lopez 159). The arbitrary nature of these categories is made explicit throughout the novel, for example, when Simon Jordan comments on the interest and unquestioning belief of middle-class women in Spiritualist practices: “If these people were not so well-to-do, their behaviour would get them committed.” (Atwood 95).

In Atwood's works the female body is examined in the context of patriarchal oppression, as Sarah Appleton points out: "Atwood's evolving articulations of the female body [...] reveal uncanny observations that directly correspond with the ever-increasing concerns of women and the power politics that attempt to dictate female value and challenge the woman's right to possess her own body" (Appleton 62). In *Alias Grace*, oppression of the female body is analysed through the way in which power and knowledge interact with it. The image of the doctor who inspects and cuts a woman's body open with his knife is one that is repeated all throughout the novel: "While a medical student, he dissected a good many women —from the labouring classes, naturally" (Atwood 84). This is an image Grace associates with memories of loss and immense fear, and it illustrates the imbalance of power in the doctor-patient relationship: "Where there's a doctor it's always a bad sign. Even when they are not doing the killing themselves it means a death is close, and in that way they are like ravens or crows" (Atwood 31).

Dr. Simon Jordan's purpose as a psychiatrist is to observe and examine Grace and establish a fixed truth about her, something she will challenge by complicating her own legibility as Simon's study case (Gregersdotter 74). The novel positions the contrast between knowledge and ignorance as the central tension that is used to diminish the authority of the psychiatric discourse and the discourse around gender norms, as it reveals them not to be neutral or universal perspectives of knowledge. The following passage illustrates Simon's position in relation to this tension:

It was the knowledge they craved; yet they could not admit to craving it, because it was forbidden knowledge —knowledge with a lurid glare to it; knowledge gained through a descent into the pit. He has been where they could never go, seen what they could never see; he has opened up women's bodies, and peered inside. [...] Thus he is one of the dark trio —the doctor, the judge, the executioner— and shares with them the power of life and death. (Atwood 94)

Simon trusts his scientific methods of observation to be able to explain the world. He presents this knowledge obtained through rational observation as exclusive and privileged,

something inaccessible to women. Instead, it is linked with socially powerful institutions, such as the psychiatric, legal, and penal institutions. However, his failure throughout the novel to produce any conclusive judgements about Grace's character reveals Simon's rationalist perspective to be constrained and ineffective.

3. The Gentleman and the Man of Science

In chapter 27, Grace delivers a description of Simon while speaking with Lydia, the prison Governor's daughter, that is worth considering as it situates and summarizes Simon's identity within the upper-class sphere. Grace's description through social categories instead of psychological ones suggests how essential these are in shaping one's identity:

What sort of man is he really?

A gentleman, I said.

Well, I knew that much, she said shortly. But what is he like? An American, I said, which was another thing she knew. Then I relented, and said, He seems like a proper enough young man. (Atwood 284).

Dr. Simon Jordan is a young American psychiatrist from Massachusetts who comes from an upper-middle-class family. His father owned a mill and expected his son to follow in his footsteps as a business owner. However, studying science at Harvard and in Europe for him became a way to assert his own value by building a career for himself: "He must accomplish something of value, discover something of note; he has his name to make" (Atwood 101). For Simon, science is only a secondary pursuit, always having the family business in mind as a safety net, until his priorities are shifted when the business fails, and he begins to feel the economic pressure of having to maintain himself afloat after his father's death. This pressure to succeed and his mother's dependence on him cause for him to take on Grace's case in hopes of making a scientific discovery that will help him establish his professional career and later allow him to open his own mental asylum: "In order to raise the money for it he would have to be able to offer something novel, some new discovery or cure, in a field that is already crowded and also very contentious"

(Atwood 64). It would be adequate, then, as Grace points out, to summarize Simon's character as a man who has been raised to fit into the masculinity ideal of the gentleman in a bourgeois environment with certain expectations in relation to marriage and status, and who is also expected to suit into certain aspects of the figure of the man of science.

A crucial aspect to consider is the narrative voice that appears in the chapters focused on Simon's character. While Grace's chapters are narrated from a first-person perspective, Simon's chapters are narrated in a free indirect style. The narrator's incisive comments ironically expose Simon's thoughts "that is, his limited, reductive point of view and his homogenizing medical discourse" (Staels 445). The impersonal narrator judges Simon's ignorance (Staels 445) and reinforces the novel's attempt at pointing out the inconsistencies in Victorian medical discourse: "He's a fool, a soft-hearted idiot; if he had any sense he would be out of here as if the Devil himself were in pursuit" (Atwood 167). Ironically, this narration style, which places Simon as the subject being analysed and observed, subverts the doctor's function as interpreter, as he is now the one who is being interpreted by the narrator, Grace, and the reader.

Staels summarizes Simon's gaze in the following manner: "Simon imposes an interpretative grid on reality which is that of a natural scientist, a rationalist and a typical representative of the puritan upper middle class" (Staels 445). In this sense, Heather Ellis' analysis of the figure of the man of science in Britain's early Victorianism and its integration with the figure of the gentleman will be very useful to characterize the identity and the gaze embodied by Simon. Ellis provides a historical and cultural study centred around the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), an organization founded in 1831 created to promote science's value in society and to increase the status and social authority of the figure of the man of science. Ellis' argumentation illustrates how, in the context where, culturally, science was in a weak position, during the "Decline

of Science” debate,¹ the figure of the man of science and the masculinity ideals attached to it became a central element in this cultural re-examination.:

Their task was to realize a new version of the man of science in the public mind—as a figure of masculine authority connected to the real world, entrusted by the public to inform them about scientific progress and to lobby government on their behalf about the need to fund science appropriately. (Ellis 8)

The new model of masculinity that the BAAS promoted distanced itself from the image of the scholar, which was seen as antisocial, effeminate, and vulnerable: “Much of this ridicule stemmed from the widespread perception that scholars deliberately isolated themselves from wider society and rejected ‘normal’ gender roles and family relationships” (Ellis 7). Instead, with the influence of Romanticism, which brought new ideas regarding masculinity and its relationship with imagination, creativity, and the emotions, different models considered masculine and virile emerged (Ellis 49). A different relationship with nature which reinforced man’s active physical power and ability to dominate natural forces was presented, hence the “man of knowledge in action” model emerged (Ellis 50). The Romantic figure of the genius also elevated the social authority of the intellectual and the poet (Ellis 51).

Most importantly, Ellis proposes a case in which the scientist adjusts himself as a public persona through active collaboration with other disciplines and the adoption of a different social model that is aristocratic to promote scientific research. Here is when the figure of the gentleman-scientist emerges. The economic autonomy and social respectability that the man of science gained proved this merge to be successful: “Thus, it was not merely the aristocracy’s political influence, but their general cultural authority that was attractive to the advocates of the new Association who sought not merely to

¹ The “Decline of Science” debate refers to the early nineteenth century perceived weakness of British science and its lack of social authority or government funding (Ellis 8).

influence government but to raise the perceived value of science across the nation as a whole” (Ellis 62). Essentially, this historical study emphasizes the relative fragility of the man of science’s masculinity as it struggled to uphold its image and social relevance, and depended on aristocratic sociability to maintain authority.

Dr. Simon Jordan can be analysed as a fictional figure that represents aspects of this historical reality, as his own sense of economic and social power depends on his ability to produce a “scientific” discovery and his capability to convince those around him of his value as a masculine man of science. Certainly, a more secure position would be the one Simon’s mother, Mrs William P. Jordan, wants for her son, to be a business owner, like his father, marry and maintain the traditional values he has been raised to fulfil: “I long for the day when you choose to settle down among us, and to establish yourself properly, in a manner fitting to you” (Atwood 56). Simon’s mother, using her illnesses as an excuse to manipulate her son, pushes him to abandon his scientific pursuits and to find a proper wife. This suggests a tension between the expectations placed on him and his own professional goals. As Gregersdotter also notes: “His education and sense of professionalism are what guide him, but his emotional background, including constant demands from his mother to find a proper wife, are obstacles to his line of work” (Gregersdotter 84).

A fundamental aspect of aristocratic sociability, which Ellis points out, was the public meetings organized for the scientists to expose their discoveries and share them to an upper-class audience composed of male peers and female spectators. The purpose of these meetings was to communicate “a strong, masculine image of science outside the Association” (Ellis 65). They boosted “healthy rivalry” between scientists and created a hierarchy of authority, which is identified as “crucial to the successful functioning of meetings as sites of masculine performance” (Ellis 66). Additionally, these performances

of intellectual masculinity reinforced an image of popular scientific heroes that was also promoted by the press. In *Alias Grace*, various meetings take place at the Governor's house, where Grace works as a maid during the day while she is still in prison. The main guests include Reverend Verringer, a Methodist minister in favour of prison reform and distrustful of scientific advances, who belongs to the committee that defends Grace's innocence; the prison Governor's wife obsessed with collecting newspaper cutouts of morbid crimes and focused on marrying off her daughter to a proper suitor such as Dr. Jordan; Jerome DuPont, the mysterious expert in hypnotism and mesmerism later revealed to be Jeremiah the Peddler, who knew Grace before she was imprisoned; and Mrs Quennell, a Spiritualist who accompanies DuPont, among other characters. Simon, despite disapproving of this crowd and emitting judgment upon them, must overcome his own sense of superiority and adapt himself to their standards: "He keeps forgetting he is no longer rich, and therefore no longer entirely his own man." (Atwood 83). He must perform the desired role to ensure his research with Grace is funded, which the committee defending her honor sees as an opportunity to prove her innocence. He debates with them about prison reform trends, mesmerism, madness and even prostitution; he also entertains them while he embodies the figure of the intellectual. At the same time, science gives the aristocracy an air of intellectualism which elevates their social status:

He's writing a book; the Governor's wife likes to know people who are writing books, books with forward-looking aims, it shows that she is a liberal-minded person with advanced views, and science is making such progress, and what with modern inventions and the Crystal Palace and world knowledge assembled, who knows where we will all be in a hundred years. (Atwood 30-31).

Mixed-sex sociability and the presence of women in these meetings was "vital to the transformation of the public reputation of the man of science" (Ellis 73). Feminine approval contributed to "boosting the masculine reputations" and affirming their masculine traits: "Their perceived attractiveness to women became part of their masculine

image and something they worked hard to secure” (Ellis 75). Lydia, the Governor’s daughter, becomes a semi-regular guest at the committee’s meetings once Simon starts being a part of them. For Simon, Lydia is an acceptable and reasonable companion, which his mother would approve of. She is a “A healthy young animal” (Atwood 99), and “too innocent to understand her lack of innocence” (Atwood 102); her character “like that of all such girls, must be unformed and childish” (Atwood 99). Like the other young women his mother “arranges” for him, she is pure and young. For Simon, talking to these girls “it’s like talking to a basketful of kittens” (Atwood 101), they validate his own sense of masculinity. However, he does not seem too eager to marry one of them. His indifference might stem from an aversion to his mother’s potential entanglements in his future life:

What she really wants is a daughter-in-law who can be moulded, not by Simon, but by herself; and so the girls continue to be floated past him, and he continues to turn away indifferently, and to be gently accused by his mother of laziness and ingratitude. He rebukes himself for it—he’s a stray dog and a cold fish—and takes care to thank his mother for her pains, and to reassure her: he will marry eventually, but he isn’t ready for it yet. (Atwood 101)

Despite his mixed feelings and disinterest, he “enjoys being gazed at by eyes as luminous as hers” (Atwood 224), so he entertains Lydia’s modest flirtatious approaches and enjoys the feminine validation and the comfort this position provides him. The role of the husband makes him feel both at ease for the simplicity and social power it entails and disturbed because of her mother’s extreme endorsement of strict social impositions.).

Kumamoto Stanley highlights an interesting parallelism between the figure of Mr Kinnear and Simon Jordan. Simon, as a doctor, and Thomas Kinnear, as the master of the house Grace works in, share a position of power over Grace because of their socioeconomic position in the Victorian patriarchal context. Simon’s desire to pin down Grace’s psychology, to “dominate” Grace, is interpreted as his attempt to substitute Thomas Kinnear as Grace’s master and hero: “Simon envisions himself as Grace’s rescuer, but he also realizes that he wishes to control her” (Stanley 380). In Simon’s case,

his desire to control Grace as an object of knowledge also becomes mixed with his desire to control her sexually. Throughout the novel he oscillates between his socially unacceptable attraction towards Grace and his desire for Lydia. In contrast with Grace, who is older, alert, and “fox-like”, Lydia is young and innocent, like a “kitten” (Atwood 101). His longing for control and erotic attraction could also be linked with his upbringing and his previous relationships with maids, as well as his perception of them. Gentlemen, as young boys of a superior class than maids, have the power to control them sexually and economically. The different dream passages in the novel may point to Simon’s desire to control Grace, and to the fact that the nature of this desire is repressed by different factors. His desire to control her sexually is met with the expectations to secure a socially acceptable marriage. Moreover, as a rational and self-possessed scientist he must maintain an objective and detached attitude towards her. This forces him to impose emotional restraint. In the dream sequences, the way in which his childhood memories and his experiences as a doctor appear as crucial elements could suggest that the novel emphasizes the role that class and identity have in his repressed desire for Grace.

For example, in one of these voyeuristic dreams, Simon visualizes himself as a boy walking through the attic corridor of his childhood home, where the maids have their chambers, and fantasizing about peeking through the clothes and possessions of the maids. The maids he sees inside the chamber through the keyhole are portrayed in an erotic light: “There are people in there though, he can sense them. Women, the maids. Sitting on the edges of their narrow beds, in their white cotton shifts, their hair unbound and rippling down over their shoulders, their lips parted, their eyes gleaming. Waiting for him” (Atwood 159). Simon’s projection of the maids depicts them as reciprocally desirous of him. Nevertheless, his lack of real access to them could be interpreted as a reflection of his lack of access to Grace as well. Suddenly, in the dream, one of the doors

opens and he finds himself drowning in the sea, which is often interpreted in Atwood's novels as a representation of the unconscious (Staels 438). While he struggles to remain afloat, the maids skilfully swim around him laughing and abandoning him in his agony and desperate calls for help: "It's the maids, only they can swim. But now they are swimming away from him, abandoning him" (Atwood 160).

Simon clings to a broken chair as different objects that belonged to his father appear in this ocean and begin to morph together into a monstrous figure of Simon's father coming back to life: "He watches in horror because now they're gathering, twining together, reforming. Tentacles are growing. A dead hand. His father, in the sinuous process of coming back to life" (Atwood 160). The asphyxiating atmosphere conveyed in this scene could suggest Simon's internal world is suffering a significant rupture. He experiences feelings of shame and confusion: "He has an overwhelming feeling of having transgressed" (Atwood 160). Simon, who believes in the use of dreams as a diagnostic tool to treat amnesia, interprets his own dream or fantasy as his brain's identification and reorganization of the elements that Grace has mentioned in her story that day: "It was Grace's story, with its Atlantic crossing, its burial at sea, its catalogue of household objects; and the overbearing father, of course. One father leads to another" (Atwood 160). However, a different interpretation of this sequence could reveal his failure to link his desperate attempt at holding onto the objects, memories and values inherited by his father to his own struggle to fulfil the expectations created by the Victorian roles of the gentleman, the man his father was, and the man of science, who he wants to become.

His inability to establish this connection could also imply that Simon is not capable of seeing how these expectations are causing internal conflict and contradictions in himself. There are some moments in which he recognizes his discomfort about the roles

he is supposed to fulfil. For example, he does not see as natural the social norms of gentlemanly attire, he sees them as constricting and unnecessary:

He stands in front of his looking glass, attempting to tie his stock. He hates cravats and stocks, and wishes them at the Devil; he resents his trousers as well, and all stiff and proper clothing generally. Why does civilized man see fit to torture his body by cramming it into the strait-jacket of gentlemanly dress? Perhaps it is a mortification of the flesh, like a hair shirt. (Atwood 83).

Despite this attitude of discomfort and his anxiety towards these norms, Simon never fully recognizes what is causing this discomfort or admits his ambiguous position in relation to the masculinity ideals he is supposed to fulfil. It is this ambiguity that makes Simon an interesting figure because it can be interpreted as a contribution to the novel's challenging of dominant discourses. By presenting a character that unintentionally questions the masculinity ideals that he embodies, as part of the upper-class patriarchal discourse, the novel reveals the limitations and contradictions of these same values he upholds.

4. Perceptions of Women

Elaine Showalter provides an analysis of the history of psychiatry and the cultural representations of madness and its feminization during the Victorian period up until the twentieth century in *The Female Malady* (1985). Her analysis of the functioning of public asylums and the social understanding of the relationship between female patients and doctors is very useful to understand the medical perspective that is represented in *Alias Grace*. Showalter links the problematization and defiance of women's roles in society with the growing feminization of madness. Psychiatry became a tool to domesticate and control through paternalistic methods any behavior that confronted cultural and social impositions for women. Showalter highlights the importance of the asylum as representative of broader social attitudes: "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" (Showalter 73). She compares the new model of asylums to that of the traditional patriarchal family structure, in which the men, the father or the superintendent, have legal, moral and intellectual power over women, their daughters and wife or patients: "Mirroring the patriarchal character of the Victorian age, the asylum became increasingly like the family, ruled by the father, and subjected to his values and his law" (Showalter 49).

An interesting concept which can be linked with Atwood's representation of a Victorian doctor is the prevalence of the doctor's interpretations and observations over the patient's account of their own experience. Showalter points out that the doctor's power to record knowledge and document their interpretations exemplifies how the male voice, which obeyed patriarchal structures, was the one that defined madness and health for women. This influenced the cultural perception of madness and reinforced those same patriarchal beliefs (Showalter 60). She provides the example of psychiatric photography as an illuminating case of this phenomenon: "That we should have so many remarkable pictures of Victorian madwomen, and so few of their words, reminds us how strongly the power of definition rested with the male observer. [...] The act of photographing itself is a form of appropriation: a capture of the subject." (Showalter 97). This medical gaze can be tied back to the Foucauldian understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge, as the patient, mainly lower-class women, such as Grace, becomes objectified by the psychiatric institution, embodied by the doctor, and transformed into an object of knowledge.

Simon's view of his role as a doctor embodies this capability of disregarding the patient's experience in favor of his own interpretation, therefore objectifying the patient. As he states, he sees the doctor as a sculptor who must limit any compassion or empathy

for the patient, his “base material or clay, from which his work of art was to be formed”: “The afflicted did not need your compassion, but your skill” (Atwood 217). His psychiatric approach does not focus on the socioeconomic circumstances of Grace as a maid, an immigrant, and a woman. He ignores the patterns of oppression that she suffers because of her identity and instead focuses solely on the study of her mind: “I approach her mind as if it is a locked box, to which I must find the right key” (Atwood 153). He is unable to read the clues in Grace’s story that will lead him to the key to understand her better because he is also unable to read these same clues in his own life. His perception of the world is too subjected to the patriarchal Victorian conceptions of femininity, which inevitably influence his research despite his claim to objectivity: “I must stick to observation, I must proceed with caution. [...] I must resist melodrama, and an overheated brain” (Atwood 69).

These contradictions in his perception of women are clearly exemplified in the chapters where the narrator juxtaposes Simon’s mental descriptions of the women he interacts with, along with moments in which Grace’s story progressively makes him question his own beliefs. An indicative passage of Simon’s contradictions is when he judges Susanna Moodie’s account of Grace, which appears in the fiction, as deceptive because she is a “literary lady” and “like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to –’ ‘Embroider’” (Atwood 223), when, ironically, he is also subjected to the same cultural beliefs as a member of the upper-middle class. Other condescending judgments he emits about women he encounters include the patronizing depiction of Lydia and the Governor’s wife's portrayal as a woman “of an obvious respectability” (Atwood 93), but with provincial taste and unintellectual.

It is particularly interesting to look at how he perceives women of the lower classes, such as maids and prostitutes. Simon’s ideologically charged description of prostitutes,

which he disguises in a pseudo-scientific analysis, are indicative of his position of power. He justifies his experience with prostitutes as a way to gain knowledge about the human condition, and about women specifically: “To heal humanity one must know it, and one cannot know it from a distance; one must rub elbows with it, so to speak” (Atwood 86). As Lopez points out, this justification only proves further his objectification of women’s bodies as objects of knowledge and desire: “His intimate knowledge of humanity is no more than mere sexual exploitation, as he maintains all the privileges of his position and with women from the lower classes as his object of desire” (Lopez 160).

This attitude towards women of the lower classes can also be extended to maids, whom he similarly objectifies and judges for their sexual desirability. The comments he makes about Dora, his landlady’s housekeeper, are very significant of his attitude: “He has tried imagining her as a prostitute –he often plays this private mental game with various women he encounters– but he can’t picture any man actually paying for her services” (Atwood 65-66). He also comments on Reverend Verringer’s housekeeper’s appearance: “If she were to smile, her face would crack like an eggshell. There must be a school for ugliness, thinks Simon, where such women are sent to be trained” (Atwood 218). His perception of women of the lower classes becomes the way in which Simon’s predispositions are made visible.

Another element Showalter identifies in Victorian medical discourse is the doctor’s fear of female sexuality and the link they established between sexuality, the female reproductive system, madness, and morality. Simon’s perception of women includes this moralizing element related to sexuality. He frequently uses binary logic of classification of reality, referring to women in terms of “pure” and “impure” (Staels 445):

In the course of his travels, he’s encountered many women who could scarcely be accused of refined natures. He has seen madwomen tearing off their clothes and displaying their naked bodies; he has seen prostitutes of the lowest sort do the same. He’s seen women drunk and swearing, struggling together like wrestlers, pulling the

hair from each other's heads. [...] So he is under no illusions as to the innate refinement of women; but all the more reason to safeguard the purity of those still pure. (Atwood 100)

The physical and moral control of women's sexuality, applied for the patient's moral improvement, was carried out in asylums through a series of disciplinary practices: "The ladylike values of silence, decorum, taste, service, piety, and gratitude [...] were made an integral part of the program or moral management of women in Victorian asylums" (Showalter 78). The depiction of Grace's stay in the asylum and Kingston Penitentiary includes some of the practices designed for the control of the patient's and prisoner's behavior, such as solitary confinement (Showalter 69): "I'm being left to reflect on my sins and misdemeanours, and one does that best in solitude [...] Some say it refines the complexion" (Atwood 37-38). In the asylum and prison Grace learns what behavior is considered adequate and how to discipline herself: "I used to speak that way as well, but have learnt better manners in prison" (Atwood 36). Her experience as a maid, a prisoner, and a madwoman has taught her how the ruling class exercises its power and how to protect herself by making it harder to be defined and objectified, to be read, using silence and self-containment as a defence mechanism: "So I stopped telling them anything. [...] At last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma'am No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir" (Atwood 35-36). Lopez argues that this "knowledge" of how the ruling classes and institutions operate positions Grace in a "superior position of power," as it gives her a sense of agency (Lopez 171).

This attitude of repression of women's sexuality in the asylum is also significant of larger attitudes in Victorian society, which in the novel are represented through the real excerpts from newspapers, such as *The Star*, *Transcript and General Advertiser* and *The Executioner*, Susanna Moodie's depiction of Grace and confessions from the trial. Judith Knelman analyses the ideological influences of the newspapers as historical documents

and how their account of the trial varied according to their positioning on class and political issues. An essential point she argues is that newspapers “suggest what constituted social and cultural reality at a particular time” (Knelman 685). This implies that rather than portraying a neutral representation of history, they “create the effect of history” (Knelman 685).

In this sense, the press’ interest in the sexual nature of the crimes provides information about Victorian society’s attitudes regarding sexuality and the morality around it. As Grace points out, people are interested in the romantic relationships of the residents of Mr. Kinnear’s house, such as Grace’s alleged relationship with James McDermott:

That is what really interests them —the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don’t care if I killed anyone [...] No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don’t even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes. (Atwood 30).

Although society condemns female sexuality as, for example, both Mary and Nancy were judged for becoming pregnant as unmarried women, the public is also interested in the possibility that Grace was romantically involved with James. This, as Greggerdotter points out, reflects the ambivalent attitudes towards female sexuality in Victorian society: “The public’s sexual curiosity mirrors the sexualised double standards of Victorian society” (Greggerdotter 79).

Grace relies on the ambiguity around her case to place herself in a liminal position between the contradictory identities that society has placed on her. By never disclosing her version of the events, she is able to simultaneously embody every identity that has been placed upon her, as a “sinful woman” and “pure and innocent woman” (Greggersdotter 80). As Rosario Arias points out: “her protean figure embodies the contradictions that shaped Victorian culture” (Arias 92).

This analysis of both Grace and Simon as figures that present ambiguity in relation to their role in the dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity can be interpreted as the novel's destabilization of these discourses from different perspectives. Neither Grace, as a representation of the "ex-centric" discourse, as a lower-class immigrant woman, nor Simon, as part of the dominant discourse, fit into the norms that are imposed on them. This representation can be read as emphasizing how the patriarchal system affects both the people who lack power and those who possess it.

5. Collapse of Rationality

An idea that is underlined throughout the novel, which is also present in Showalter's analysis, is the doctor's trust in rationality. Showalter not only highlights the medical practices that enforced patriarchal norms in asylums, but also the cultural association between irrationality and madness to femininity and reason to masculinity (Showalter 4). As it has been mentioned, Simon, as the representation of the rational scientific discourse, believes in objectivity and rationality. He imposes his rationalist perspective and demands Grace the same rationalist approach when she tells her story. As Stael argues, Grace "transforms her memories into a coherent, 'acceptable' narrative" (Stael 434). Simon's struggles to comprehend the irrational side and poetic expressions of Grace's story stem from his inability to acknowledge the irrational parts in himself. In this sense, Stael's interpretation of Grace as Simon's repressed self is particularly interesting: "Grace is Simon's second self as the beloved who reaches out to him in order to guide him through the labyrinth or underworld, both metaphors for his unconscious. Yet Simon experiences his unconscious female spirit as a threat to his persona or fixed identity" (Stael 442). The novel explores Simon's relationship with this rational perspective, and the gradual

distortion of it, through two parallel narratives: the relationship between Simon and Grace, and Simon's relationship with his landlady, Mrs Humphrey.

As it has been emphasized, Simon struggles to control his own attraction towards Grace. He is met with Grace's manipulation through her use of silence and amnesia and her embodiment of ambiguity. As Stanley concludes: "Grace relies upon a strategy in which she defers the closure of desire" (Stanley 378). By refusing to be fully known and maintaining Simon's projections of desire, she is also refusing to be fully "had" (Stanley 379). This leaves Simon in a position of sexual frustration and erotic confusion that end up triggering his desire towards Mrs Rachel Humphrey, a middle-aged woman whose abusive husband has recently abandoned her. Although she embodies the values of an aristocratic upper class, she struggles to maintain her image because of her economic decay. Their relationship is defined by their mutual dependence: Simon is Rachel's solution for her economic vulnerability, and Rachel is Simon's remedy for his sexual frustration. The first instance Simon discovers Rachel in this new sexual light, he is surprised by his own reaction. This inappropriate and irrational reaction, which threatens his public image and his authority as a scientist, makes him begin to question his own mental state and his capability of self-restraint: "He is both sane and normal, and he has developed the rational faculties of his mind to a high degree; and yet he cannot always control such pictures" (Atwood 163).

The growing tension that forms between these two characters is accompanied by the deterioration of Simon's mental state. He suffers from nervous exhaustion and disorientation from the constant doubt and suspicion he feels towards Grace's truthfulness: "He can't seem to keep track of the pieces. It's as if she's drawing his energy out of him" (Atwood 338). Ironically, his attempt to recover Grace's lost memory is producing a similar memory deterioration effect in him. The stress and disorientation

make him doubt his own memories; he feels as if he is forgetting something he is unable to retrieve and is constantly “on the verge of remembering” (Atwood 341). For Simon, Grace’s story of struggle and abuse seems to contradict his own memories of the “happier days” of his youth and his experiences with “cheerful young maidservants” (Atwood 215). However, he is also able to empathize with Grace in some moments, such as when she recounts Mary Whitney’s death. For a brief instance, he manifests his ability to perceive women in a humanized and compassionate perspective, one that is new for him: “He’s seen a great many of them; but they have been so thoroughly dead. They have been specimens” (Atwood 215). This discovery makes him reconsider his social privileges in relation to Grace and maids in general: “he is free as air and may do whatever he likes, while she must be bolted and debarred” (Atwood 216). Nevertheless, this reflection, which also shocks him, is quickly discarded as he is invaded by a sense of discomfort. After imagining the lives of Mary and Grace, he immediately thinks to himself: “He would like to wash his hands” (Atwood 215).

However, Simon’s lack of acceptance of his unexplainable desires is reinforced by the guilt and shame he experiences. In different passages, it is made clear that Simon would like to be freed from the responsibilities of aristocratic society. His desire for anonymity and Europe’s morally relaxed atmosphere produces a sense of guilt in him: “yet such is his perversity that he would rather be in London or Paris. There he would be anonymous, and would have no responsibilities. [...] He would be able to lose himself completely” (Atwood 426). This same feeling is manifested when he fantasises about marrying Grace: “Madness, of course; a perverse fantasy, to marry a suspected murderess” (Atwood 453).

Despite Simon’s disapproval of ungentlemanly values, such as when he appears to be disgusted at other men lusting for Grace, such as the lawyer MacKenzie (Atwood

439), he is unable to see how he portrays this same figure of the hero and how he enjoys the feeling of validation and desire from women. When Grace's story begins to expand his awareness of himself, his relationship with women's attitudes, such as the gratitude they display to him, changes. Now that he is able to see it as a forced form of admiration, he dislikes it, it is "like being covered with syrup" (Atwood 422). Eventually, the anxiety of noticing these parts in himself becomes too distressing and he ends up transgressing the limits of what is socially normative in his world. In a dream-like state, the only moment his irrational desires can be expressed "for in dreams everything is permitted" (Atwood 408), he consummates his desire for Grace when hers and Mrs Humphrey's image blend into a single figure.

The culmination of the downfall of Simon's rationalist worldview is represented in the hypnotism session, where Jerome DuPont, the mesmerist showman, and Mrs Quennel put on a performance in which the voice of Mary Whitney's ghost acts as Grace's unconscious self, repressed by trauma (Stael 437), that is presented as the real perpetrator of the murders of Nancy and Thomas Kinnear. Rationality, in this context, loses all its authority. Jeremiah/Jerome, as Lopez points out, is presented as Simon's antagonist. A reading through Foucault's theory shows how Jeremiah, as a member of the lower-class, embraces his ability to subvert the rigid and homogenising social identities that comes with being aware of the categories imposed by the dominant class and their constructed nature (Lopez 167-168). Like Grace, he performs different aliases and embodies a subversive perspective.

This experience is so shocking for Simon that he ends up abandoning the case and Mrs Humphrey, taking advantage of the sudden return of her husband, to leave town for good. This episode has brought him close to facing his own repressed self, but his fear and rigidity have interfered with his success: "He has gone to the threshold of the

unconscious, and has looked across; or rather he has looked down. He could have fallen. He could have fallen in. He could have drowned” (Atwood 479) His fate, now, is limited to the role his mother envisioned for him. When he loses his memory when he is wounded during the US Civil War, his mother can happily take care of him and arrange his future marriage with Faith Carwright now that his interest in Lunatic Asylums has completely faded. He ends up in the position he most despised: “married to Faith Cartwright and imprisoned in an armchair by the fire” (Atwood 340). Meanwhile, the hypnotism performance contributes to Grace’s liberation from prison a few years later. Although she eventually marries and leaves behind the traumatic period of her life in prison, this is not presented as a complete resolution as she continues to live within the same social structures that produced the narratives imposed on her.

Atwood's representation of Simon Jordan as a character who is at the same time subjected to the Victorian patriarchal discourse and a perpetrator of this discourse offers a nuanced perspective on the way oppressive systems operate. Grace seems to be able to recognize aspects of Simon he is not aware of, as someone who has been raised into the identity of the gentleman, which, in this system offers a set of privileges: “In a way they are like children, they do not have to think ahead, or worry about the consequences of what they do. But it is not their fault, it is only how they are brought up” (Atwood 249). Despite all the violence she has had to endure from men such as him, she pities him for his inability to reflect critically about the beliefs and oppressive acts he participates in. His inability to acknowledge his own responsibility in reproducing patriarchal values, prevents him questioning the narrative that shapes his identity. Subsequently, he remains trapped inside the same hierarchical structures from which he benefits.

The act of narrating appears in the novel as an interpretative tool to shape memory into meaningful stories. Grace’s Tree of Paradise quilt is the final symbolic integration of

her experiences. She uses the fragments of Mary and Nancy's clothes and her own to construct a new pattern. It is also through the narrative act she can gain consciousness of a new deliberately hybrid identity for herself, symbolized in the quilt, that reframes the narratives imposed on her. Narration, framed uniquely as a rational act, as Simon perceives it, is not enough to understand the complexities of individual experience. The awareness of these limitations is precisely what Simon lacks. It is what keeps him in his ignorant position and prevents him from seeing the larger narrative. As Grace points out, stories and narratives are created after the lived experience and they help us comprehend what seems confusing in the present: "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion. [...] It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else" (Atwood 346). This passage reinforces the novel's suggestion that meaning is found through retrospective interpretation. Simon's tragedy lies in the rigidity with which he observes and categorizes the world and his inability to recognize the limitations of his perspective.

6. Conclusions and Further Research

In sum, *Alias Grace*, as a historiographic metafictional novel, repeatedly engages with the deconstruction of ideological systems and social conceptions about gender and class embedded in the Victorian psychiatric epistemological framework. By exposing these beliefs systems, rooted in institutional authority, as fabricated, the novel foregrounds the instability of the truths these systems produce and questions their validity and influence in society.

This dissertation has underlined how the analysis of the ideals attached to the figure of the gentleman and the man of science, as part of an upper-class homogenising discourse, and its comparison with the character of Simon Jordan, who is full of nuances,

contradictions, and ambiguity in respect to these models of masculinity, can expand the understanding of this character. Not only can Grace be seen as a disruptor of class and gender norms, as someone who deliberately navigates them as part of her manipulation tactics, Simon is also part of this disruption. The complexity in which Simon, who embodies the systems of patriarchal and class oppression, is portrayed, allows for him to not be reduced in the same binary classification logic he reproduces as purely morally corrupt.

In the last section, the gradual subversion of Simon's rationalist perspective, culturally linked with science and masculinity, has been presented as crucial to the novel's critique of Victorian psychiatric discourse. Its failure is linked with its inability to articulate the complexity of Grace's subjective experience and to incorporate the irrational and poetic elements of her story. Lastly, the novel highlights the relationship between identity and the cultural narratives through which it is constructed. This representation draws attention to the influence cultural categories have on the way individuals perceive themselves and others. Grace's awareness of the limitations of these narratives can be seen as an act of agency, as it allows her to reframe and negotiate the identities imposed upon her.

To further expand the research on *Alias Grace*, it would be particularly interesting to situate the novel within discourse surrounding literature and media that is labelled as "feminist", a term that Atwood specifically refuses because it oversimplifies both her literary work and the great variety of feminist approaches that are all usually put in the same box. Jana Cattien's analysis of the TV show of *Alias Grace* (2019) reads the show "as a critical reflection on the ways in which 'feminism' is consumed and reified in the present" (Cattien 330), this reading, as she states, "takes 'feminism' itself as the object of critique" (Cattien 323). Building on Cattien's analysis and her understanding of the

consequences of using the term “feminist” to describe or advertise fictional work, it can be similarly useful to see how the novel is classified in terms of its “feminist” contents and identify how this classification shapes the readers’ expectations and interpretations of the text.

Moreover, another interesting research approach which could expand this analysis of *Alias Grace* is a comparative study with other historical or neo-Victorian novels, in line with Rosario Arias’ comparison of *Alias Grace* with Sara Water’s *Affinity* (2005) through both novel’s presence of spiritualism. A comparative analysis about the way neo-Victorian novels treat aspects such as madness, gender norms or psychiatry could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how this genre is able to examine the past through contemporary concerns and encourages the reader reconsider established historical narratives from a new light.

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