Alias Grace Study Guide

Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood

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Introduction

In the novel *Alias Grace*, author Margaret Atwood retells the story of Grace Marks, a real nineteenth-century Canadian woman who was accused of, and spent thirty years in jail for, the murder of two people. These murders were the most sensationalized story of the mid-1800s, and accounts of the trial and aspects of Marks's life were well publicized. Atwood was first attracted to this story through the works of so-called Canadian journalist Susanna Moodie, who wrote about a wildly crazy Grace Marks. Atwood admits that at first she believed Moodie's recounting of the circumstances that surrounded this famous murderess. In fact, Atwood wrote a collection of poems called *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and also a television script based on Moodie's version of Grace Marks's life. Atwood's interest in Marks waned for several years, but when it resurfaced, she dug deeper into the story. That was when she discovered numerous discrepancies in Moodie's work and decided to write her own version of Marks's story.

In real life, Grace Marks, a sixteen-year-old Irish immigrant, was sentenced to life imprisonment for her role (which was never fully defined) in the murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery. Kinnear and Montgomery were having an affair, and many people have speculated that Marks, who was recently brought into the Kinnear household as a servant, was jealous. Montgomery, after all, was a maid, not the mistress of the house, and Marks resented Montgomery's airs of superiority. At least, that is one version of the story. Marks claimed various interpretations of her involvement in the murders, including one in which she states that she could not remember what happened on the day of the murders and another in which she claims to have been temporarily possessed by a dead girlfriend of hers. *Alias Grace* does not solve all the puzzles of this mystery, but it does present a patchwork story, details of which come from a variety of real sources as well as from Atwood's imagination, thus leaving readers to come to their own conclusions.

Alias Grace, Atwood's ninth novel, became a bestseller in North America, Europe, and in other countries around the world. The book helped win Atwood several literary prizes including the Premio Mondello, *Salon Magazine*'s best fiction of 1997, the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, the Giller Prize, and the Canadian Booksellers Association's Author of the Year award.

Author Biography

Margaret Atwood is often referred to as Canada's greatest living writer. She was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario. She wrote her first story when she was six. Atwood's father, Carl Edmund Atwood, is an entomologist and her mother, Margaret Dorothy Killam Atwood, is a dietitian. In 1945, her family moved to Toronto, where she graduated from high school and afterward attended Victoria College. While there, she studied under Northrop Frye, another famous Canadian author and literary critic, and the poet Jay MacPherson. Upon graduating from college, Atwood won the first of many literary prizes. The E. J. Pratt Medal was awarded to her for her self-published book of poems, *Double Persephone*. She then went to the United States, where she earned her master's degree at Harvard.

In 1966, Atwood won another prestigious honor, The Governor General's Award, for yet another collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*. In 1967, Atwood married Jim Polk; they divorced in 1977. Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969. By the 1970s, Atwood's published works secured her a position as one of Canada's rising stars in both poetry and fiction.

To date, Atwood has written twelve books of poetry, four children's stories, four nonfiction books, and ten novels. *Alias Grace* was her ninth novel. Atwood has also written scripts for television and has edited several collections promoting Canadian writers. Many of her works have been translated into foreign languages and published in other countries, where she enjoys a wide readership. Two of her novels, *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, have been made into movies.

Atwood's ability to win awards began early in her career and has not diminished throughout her career. One of the most coveted was the Booker Prize, which she won for *Blind Assassin* in 2000.

Besides her writing and editing skills, Atwood has also taught at numerous universities: York University in Toronto, New York University, and the University of Alabama - Tuscaloosa. Atwood is also a rather humorous cartoonist, especially when based on the experience she has gathered while promoting her works on book tours. (See her website.) Atwood is also prone to travel all over the world, giving lectures on literary themes or on her experiences as a writer. She is active in several organizations, such as Amnesty International.

Atwood is married to Graeme Gibson, another Canadian writer. They have three grown children. In 2004, Atwood was living in Toronto.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

Alias Grace begins with a recurrent dream that Grace Marks has. Grace narrates this chapter and states that it is 1851, she is twenty-four years old, and is in prison. She is a model prisoner, she claims, but it is difficult. The chapter ends with the conclusion of Grace's dream.

Chapter 2

A clip from the *Toronto Mirror* from November 23, 1843 and a statement from the *Punishment Book* from the Kingston Penitentiary start Chapter 2. The remaining text is a long poem written about Grace Marks and James McDermott. McDermott was hanged for the murders. Grace went to prison.

Chapter 3

Grace works at the governor of the penitentiary's home. She describes the governor's family. She mentions the scrapbook in which the governor's wife keeps stories of criminals. Grace reads the accounts of herself and says most of them are lies. Grace mentions her friend Mary Whitney. When a doctor enters the scene, Grace screams. She is afraid of him, but she does not tell the reader why.

Grace faints and is awakened and dragged back to the prison, still screaming. Later she describes her cell. She briefly relates her previous experiences at the "Asylum." It was in the asylum, Grace contends, that she stopped sharing her thoughts. "At last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly. . . ." And because of this, Grace is allowed to go back to the penitentiary.

Dr. Simon Jordan enters Grace's cell and tries to quell her fears by stating he is not "the usual kind of doctor." Grace protects herself, carefully selecting her words. Dr. Jordan brings Grace an apple. When he asks, in his analytical way, what the apple makes Grace think of, Grace plays stupid, something her lawyer had told her would save her life. Jordan tries to gain her confidence. He tells her he wants to talk to her, and her answers will not cause her any harm.

Chapter 4

Three letters begin this chapter: one from a doctor friend of Jordan's explaining what Jordan is trying to do in talking to Grace; one from Jordan's mother; and the final one from Jordan to a friend, further explaining his project with Grace.

The narration then switches to third-person, describing portions of Jordan's life. Jordan is having second thoughts about his research on Grace. There follows a description of Jordan's room in a boarding house, as well as an account of a servant woman who unnerves Jordan.

The narration returns to Grace, who talks about daily routines in prison. Jordan visits Grace at the governor's house. Grace does not say much during their first meetings. To help begin a conversation, Jordan talks about himself. This approach seems to work as Grace opens up.

The third-person narration then returns as Jordan meets Reverend Verringer, who is fighting for Grace's release but needs someone of Jordan's stature to help. Jordan believes that the reverend might be in love with Grace. Jordan is invited to attend the Tuesday Discussion Circle. Miss Lydia, the governor's daughter, flirts with Jordan before the meeting begins. The chapter ends with Jordan trying again to get Grace to talk.

Chapter 5

Grace narrates. Jordan asks what she dreamt about the night before. Grace relates her dream to the reader but tells Jordan that she does not remember. Jordan asks about her confession, which she says was only what her lawyer told her to say. Then Grace tells Jordan about her life in Ireland and her trip to Canada. There were nine children in her family. Grace was the third oldest. Her mother died after giving birth on the voyage to Canada. Her father was worthless, but found the children a cheap room at the back of Mrs. Burt's house. Mrs. Burt introduces Grace to Mrs. Honey, the housekeeper of Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. Grace lands her first job. The chapter ends with a letter Jordan writes to a friend, further relating his dealings with Grace.

Chapter 6

Mrs. Humphreys, Dr. Jordan's landlady, brings Jordan his breakfast and faints. Dora, the housekeeper, has left because Mrs. Humphreys could not pay her. Mrs. Humphreys' husband has abandoned her. Jordan buys food and cooks for her. He also gives her an advance on the rent.

Grace takes up the narration with Jordan visiting her again. She tells of her working at Mrs. Parkinson's and her relationship with Mary Whitney. Mary teaches Grace how to be a good housekeeper and offers practical wisdom about life. Jeremiah the Peddler, who befriends Grace, is introduced. At Christmastime, Mrs. Parkinson's son, Mr. George, falls sick and does not return to college. During the winter, Grace suspects that Mr. George and Mary are having an affair. Mary gets pregnant, and when Mr. George does not follow through on his marriage proposal, Mary has an abortion and dies.

Chapter 7

Dr. Jordan and Reverend Verringer discuss Susanne Moodie's account of Grace. Verringer concludes that Moodie tends to "[e]mbroider" her stories.

Grace continues. She leaves Mrs. Parkinson's and wanders from one job to another until she meets Nancy Montgomery, who offers Grace a job at Mr. Thomas Kinnear's, where Nancy is the housekeeper. Grace arrives at Kinnear's and describes the house and land. She meets James McDermott and Jamie Walsh. After a short period of time, Grace is disappointed with Nancy's treatment of her. Nancy is not as friendly as Grace had hoped and acts as if she is better than Grace. McDermott coarsely tries to seduce Grace.

Chapter 8

The next day, Grace tells Jordan that Nancy asks Grace to kill a chicken, which Grace cannot do. So Jamie Walsh kills the hen for her. Nancy invites Grace to go to church with her. At the church, Grace notices how coldly they are greeted. A few days later, Nancy, tired of McDermott's attitude, gives him his notice to leave. Later, McDermott tells Grace that Nancy is sleeping with Mr. Kinnear.

McDermott tells Grace that Kinnear and Nancy "deserved to be knocked on the head and thrown down into the cellar. . . ." Jordan interrupts Grace's narration and tells her that in his confession, McDermott stated that Grace had been the one to put him up to the murders. Grace denies this. She returns to her story and tells about spending her birthday afternoon with Jamie, who said he wanted to marry her. Jeremiah the Peddler shows up a few days later and suggests that Grace leave and come with him.

Tension grows between Grace and Nancy Montgomery. Nancy is showing signs of pregnancy and is jealous of Kinnear's attention to Grace. Grace overhears Nancy telling Kinnear that she might get rid of Grace.

Chapter 9

The story switches back to Dr. Jordan. He is becoming disoriented and unorganized. Mrs. Humphreys hangs around his room too much. Jordan is distracted when he goes to see Grace. One night, after he has gone to bed, Mrs. Humphreys comes to his room in her nightgown and gets into his bed.

Grace is concerned about coming to the end of her story, the actual murders. She tells herself she cannot remember all the details. She wonders what she should tell Dr. Jordan.

Dr. Jerome Dupont appears and asks Dr. Jordan if he might hypnotize Grace. When Grace sees Dr. Dupont, she realizes it is Jeremiah the Peddler.

Later, Dr. Jordan asks Grace about her relationship with Kinnear. Jordan drops the subject and asks for more details about the day of the murders. Grace says Nancy told her to leave. James McDermott tells Grace he is going to kill Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Grace thinks he is just bragging. She did not warn Nancy because Nancy would not believe her. Grace relates the same dream that was recounted at the beginning of the novel. She sees Nancy with blood on her face.

James McDermott goes to Nancy's room and kills her. McDermott threatens to harm Grace if she tells Mr. Kinnear, who has just come home. Later, when McDermott tells Grace to shoot Kinnear, she cannot. So McDermott does. Grace sees him throw Kinnear's body into the cellar. Jordan presses for more details, but Grace says she cannot remember.

Chapter 10

Grace faints when McDermott threatens her with a gun. She awakens in her bed, and McDermott is telling her she must keep her part of the bargain, implying she was to have sex with him. She fears for her life and keeps putting him off, hoping that will give her time to figure things out. She talks him into leaving the house. McDermott agrees, and they go to Toronto. They leave the next day by ferry. Grace plans to leave McDermott the following morning, but the two of them are caught.

Chapter 11

Dr. Jordan travels to Toronto to meet with Grace's lawyer and to visit the Kinnear house. In his absence, Grace continues her story to herself, relating the trial. Jordan reflects on the cumbersome relationship he has entered into with Mrs. Humphreys.

Chapter 12

Kenneth MacKenzie, Grace's lawyer, proclaims that Grace is "guilty as sin." After visiting the Kinnear house, the graves of Kinnear, Nancy, and Mary Whitney, Jordan whispers "[m]urderess, murderess" as he thinks about Grace on his trip home.

Chapter 13

Dr. Dupont hypnotizes Grace. Dr. Jordan asks if she had sex with James McDermott. Grace lashes out at him, accusing Jordan of desiring her. Grace says McDermott and Kinnear would do anything for her. When asked if she killed Nancy Montgomery, Grace replies, "The kerchief killed her. Hands held it." When the governor's wife calls Grace by name, Grace replies, "I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!" Eventually the so-called spirit emanating from Grace says it is Mary Whitney. When Grace is brought out of her trance, she remembers nothing.

Jordan returns home, feeling oppressed about his involvement in Grace's case. He cannot continue. He also must break off his relationship with Mrs. Humphreys. He decides to leave town and return to Europe.

Chapter 14

A series of letters follows. Mrs. Humphreys writes to Dr. Jordan's mother. Dr. Jordan's mother responds, telling Mrs. Humphreys to leave her son alone. Grace writes to Jeremiah the Peddler, also known as Dr. Jerome Dupont, who is now a part of a circus.

Chapter 15

Grace is pardoned. She is taken to New York where Jamie Walsh is waiting for her. He marries her.

Characters

Agnes

Agnes is the chambermaid at the Parkinson's home. She helps Grace after Mary dies. She cleans the room and defends Grace when Mrs. Honey and Mrs. Parkinson accuse her of not telling the truth about Mary.

Dr. Bannerling

Dr. Bannerling is the director of the asylum. He believes Grace pretends to be mentally incapacitated and that Grace is guilty of murder. He thwarts any attempt made to release her from prison.

Mrs. Burt

Mrs. Burt rents a cheap room at the back of her house to Grace's family when they first arrive in Toronto. She befriends Grace's father at first because she feels sorry for him. However, when she finds out that he wastes his day drinking instead of working, she grows tired of him. When Grace's father insists that Grace find a job, Mrs. Burt introduces her to Mrs. Parkinson's housekeeper.

Dr. Jerome Dupont

Dr. Jerome Dupont is a charlatan. He takes on several different disguises. He first appears in the story as Jeremiah the Peddler. He is somewhat infatuated with Grace but not to the point of getting married. He asks Grace to leave the Kinnear place and travel with him. He returns later as Dr. Jerome Dupont, a hypnotist. He tells Grace not to give him away. Then he puts her into a trance. Later, Grace sees a poster advertising a circus and recognizes his face.

Governor's Wife

The governor's wife employs Grace as a servant. She is fascinated with crime and criminals and keeps a scrapbook of newspaper clippings of crimes. She hosts discussion club meetings, bringing together people who support Grace's release. She does not fully trust Grace, however.

Mrs. Honey

Mrs. Honey is the head servant at Mrs. Parkinson's house. She is anything but sweet, Grace says. She is strict and quick to blame Grace.

Mrs. Rachel Humphreys

Rachel Humphreys rents out a room to Dr. Jordan. When her husband leaves her, Rachel is distraught. Jordan befriends her, paying for her food and consoling her. Later, Rachel slips into Jordan's bed and begins a more personal relationship with him. When Jordan leaves her, she writes letters to Jordan's mother in search of him.

Jeremiah the Peddler

See Dr. Jerome Dupont

Dr. Simon Jordan

Jordan takes an interest in Grace's case several years after she has been imprisoned. He is involved in the early studies of psychiatry and wants to pry as many details from Grace's mind as he can, trying to determine if she is lying or truly suffers from amnesia. He is fascinated with her and her story. But when she is hypnotized and speaks in a voice that is vile and accusatory, he cannot accept that she is possessed by the spirit of Mary Whitney, as some of the other spectators believe. Jordan eventually leaves without coming to any substantial conclusions. Instead, he runs away from Grace, from his landlady with whom he was having an affair, and from his mother who wants him to marry. He returns to Europe, where he finds life less burdensome. At the end of the book, he returns home and is involved in the Civil War.

Mr. Thomas Kinnear

Thomas Kinnear is a well-to-do, although somewhat socially stymied gentleman who lives outside of Toronto. He is a bachelor and a well-known womanizer. For this reason, respectable women tend to shun him. He is also suspected of having ties with a revolutionary political group, therefore making many men wary of him. Kinnear lives with his housemaid, Nancy Montgomery, with whom he is having an affair. When Grace Marks comes to work for him, he flirts with her, arousing Montgomery's jealousy. Although he sleeps with Montgomery, and she eats at the dinner table with him, Kinnear often reminds her that she is only his maid. He is found dead in his cellar, the victim of bullet wounds. It is suggested that James McDermott killed him.

Miss Lydia

Miss Lydia is the older of two daughters of the governor. She has a crush on Dr. Jordan and openly flirts with him. Although Dr. Jordan is flattered and even slightly aroused, he does not pursue her.

Kenneth MacKenzie

MacKenzie is Grace's court appointed lawyer. According to Grace, MacKenzie told her to lie and to pretend to be stupid in order to save her life. Later, when Dr. Jordan visits him, MacKenzie says that in his honest opinion, Grace is "guilty as sin."

Grace Marks

Grace's story dominates this novel. Grace is the sixteen-year-old who is accused of the murders of her employer, Mr. Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy. Grace narrates much of the story, sometimes allowing the readers into her private thoughts and exposing some of the contradictions in her story. She is in prison at the time of the story and relates much of what has happened to her through her talks with Dr. Jordan. She maintains a somewhat innocent manner, turning over any vile remarks she makes to her friend Mary Whitney. When she is hypnotized and suggests that she killed Nancy, she talks in a very different voice, which many people believe is Mary Whitney. Grace has been told by her lawyer to maintain the demeanor of stupidity in order to save her life. She also learns, while at the asylum, that if she truly opens up her thoughts to anyone, she is accused of being crazy. If she acts out in prison, she is punished. So she learns to keep everything to herself. She chooses her words very carefully. When she is in doubt about the truth of something, she claims she does not remember. She also reverts to dreamlike sequences, in which only vague images prevail. In the end, her story is so incomplete no one knows for sure if she is guilty. She does win her pardon, though, and marries the once-young boy, Jamie, who had a crush on her in his youth.

James McDermott

James is a stable boy at the Kinnear household. He is very hostile most of the time. He talks back to Nancy, and she grows tired of him. He is given his notice to leave, which angers him further. He decides to kill Kinnear and Nancy. He supposedly tries to bring Grace into the act and later forces her to leave with him. He is caught, found guilty, and hanged.

Nancy Montgomery

Nancy is the only housemaid in Thomas Kinnear's home. When she meets Grace she tells her that she is looking for extra help. Grace finds Nancy friendly and decides to

take the offer. When Grace arrives at Kinnear's, however, she finds Nancy to be less welcoming than Grace had hoped. Nancy is often harsh and puts on airs as if she were the mistress of the house. Nancy dresses very well, eats dinner with Mr. Kinnear, and as Grace finds out later, also sleeps with Kinnear. When Kinnear travels to Toronto for a day or two, however, Nancy warms up to Grace and even asks Grace to sleep with her. As soon as Kinnear returns, though, Nancy once again dismisses Grace. When Nancy discovers Kinnear flirting with Grace, she decides to fire Grace. Nancy is discovered, later, in the cellar. She has been strangled and her throat has been cut. It is unclear whether James McDermott or Grace has killed her.

Mrs. Alderman Parkinson

Mrs. Alderman Parkinson is the mistress of the house where Grace lands her first job. The Parkinson family is very rich, and the house is very elegant, employing many servants. It is here that Grace meets Mary Whitney and Jeremiah the Peddler.

Mr. George Parkinson

George is the son of Mrs. Parkinson. He comes home from college for Christmas and gets sick. After the holidays, he is too weak to return to school. While at home, he becomes involved with Mary Whitney and gets her pregnant. Then he refuses to marry her.

Aunt Pauline

Pauline is the sister of Grace's mother. She lives in Ireland and often gives money and food to her sister. When Pauline becomes pregnant, her husband, Roy, tells her that she can no longer support her sister. So Pauline gathers enough money to send Grace's family to Toronto, where she believes they have a better chance.

Mrs. Quennell

Mrs. Quennell is a famous spiritualist of the time. She tries to explain the voice that emanates from Grace while Grace is hypnotized. She believes it is someone else talking through Grace.

Uncle Roy

Roy is Grace's uncle. He is very generous toward Grace's family until his wife becomes pregnant. Then he puts his foot down and says he can no longer afford to help them.

Reverend Verringer

Reverend Verringer heads the committee that is trying to free Grace. He enlists Dr. Jordan's help. He also brings together other supporters, including Dr. Jerome Dupont. After many years, Verringer is successful.

Jamie Walsh

Jamie is a year younger than Grace. He develops a strong crush on her when she comes to the Kinnear household. He tells her that he wants to marry her when he grows up. At her trial, however, Jamie says he was surprised at how Grace looked and acted when he saw her immediately after the murders. His testimony helps to convict her. Later, Jamie is instrumental in her release. He promises to marry and take care of her.

Mary Whitney

Mary is the same age as Grace, but she has more experience both in her job and in the world in general. She teaches Mary about life. The two of them are very close until Mary begins her affair with Mr. George. Mary gets pregnant and is jilted. She has an abortion and dies from it. The spirit of Mary stays with Grace, and under hypnotism, the supposed spirit speaks out.

Social Concerns

Margaret Atwood further solidified her international reputation by winning the Booker Prize for The Blind Assassin (2000), and Alias Grace was also short-listed for the Booker Prize in the year of its publication, 1996. During that same year, it won the Giller Prize, a prestigious Canadian award for fiction. Early in her career and over her constant objections, Atwood was classified as a feminist because of certain recurring motifs and because her career took flight during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the heyday of feminism. She has shown that she is far more than this single perspective would indicate, that her approaches to politics and literature are global and multifaceted and that she is enthusiastically involved in bringing about positive change.

While it is true that Atwood's foremost social concern is the treatment of women and that her female characters tend to be either powerful heroines or male-dominated victims, her fiction and poetry also present female and male characters who are not so easy to classify, who - by their very existence - question and belie the stereotypes and labels that society would force on them through habit or convenience. The title character of Alias Grace, Grace Marks, is just such a creation, and she is even more realistic and difficult to pigeonhole because she is based on an actual nineteenth-century maid imprisoned for murder at the age of sixteen. Atwood seems to be saying, sotto voce (under the breath or in a private manner), that truth is stranger and more multifarious than fiction because people are naturally more interesting than anything an artist could ever fashion. In a 1994 lecture, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses" (which she has delivered in various venues), Atwood noted that "motives are complex, and human nature is endlessly fascinating."

After reading Alias Grace, which includes lengthy stretches of narration by the title character, several "omniscient" glimpses into her mind, and many documents about her, readers still do not know her very well, and they can make no definite judgment as to her guilt. As Atwood herself says in the Author's Afterword, "The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma." The title of the novel, while it may seem to be a telling clue, is just another part of Atwood's labyrinthine mystery. As Goethe implies in Faust (two parts, 1808, 1832), the full truth may ultimately be unknowable, or it may change with time, just as everything alive naturally does. Nevertheless, Atwood tried not to stray too far from the published facts of the case.

During the writing of this novel, Atwood observed some rigid rules, as she makes clear in the Afterword:

Details of prison and asylum life are drawn from available records. . . . I have not changed any known facts. . . . When in doubt, I have tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent.

Luckily for Atwood and the reader, there were many gaps, and she has followed the advice of John Keats in one of her favorite quotes: "Load every rift with ore."

Her most important invention is the character named Dr. Simon Jordan, a doctor-cum-psychologist who represents the curative possibilities of informed counseling but who also sometimes shows the coldness and irrationality that often accompanied the treatment of the mentally ill during that era.

(The infamous London asylum known as Bedlam was still being run in the manner that caused its name to enter the dictionary.)

Was the real Grace insane? There is no way of knowing. Having spent eight years in the Kingston, Ontario, penitentiary, she was inexplicably moved to the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, where she was kept for eighteen months, then sent back to Kingston with a note from the superintendent saying that she was too sane to be in the asylum.

The fact that Grace was not only moved around capriciously but also was placed on public view in both institutions as a celebrity and a curiosity, like a trained bear, demonstrates the depersonalization that is one of Atwood's concerns in the book.

Implicitly, though using a nineteenth-century example, Atwood is pointing out that much of society still has the despicable tendency to view those who are somehow different as objects rather than human beings. This integral yet unspoken statement recalls part of what Gabriel Garcia Marquez is showing in his well-known story, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," (1955) and is also one of the points of Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1924).

The character Grace is transcendent, artistic, and deeply spiritual. At the end of the novel she is creating a "Tree of Paradise" quilt, and she muses on the situation of Adam and Eve in the Bible:

I believe there was only the one [tree], and that the Fruit of Life and Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death.

Here, at age 45 and finally free of prison, Grace demonstrates once more her unusual though natural wisdom, born of innocence and common sense, yet complicated by a questing, restless spirit. She also wonders if "God has taken it into his mind to make up a little for all I was put through" by allowing her to become pregnant by her husband, Jamie Walsh. She is not entirely sure, though, that what is growing inside her is a baby. It could also be a tumor because her mother died of such a cancer. She is "most reluctant" to consult a doctor, for she has seen what doctors can and cannot do. Thus, Atwood seems to say, people can rely on neither religion nor science for unerring salvation or total knowledge.

However, had it not been for the intervention of religious groups and of Jamie, who earlier testifies against Grace, she would still have been locked up at Kingston with only her inner strength and peace to rely on. Her savior turns out to be a man, with help from groups headed by clergymen, but not before she has suffered almost thirty years of imprisonment because of the opinions of other men (judge, jury, some newsmen, and

Jamie himself, before he changes his mind). This scenario points up one of Atwood's most pervasive concerns: the psychological and physical damage done to women in a society ruled by a traditional, ingrained, patriarchal system. Grace Marks is not a typical victim, though, and her particular, even peculiar, wisdom and courage shine through as powerful traits that have already "saved" her, even before the intervention of men.

Alias Grace shows both the possible strength of the individual female personality, when nurtured from within and when tested by ferocious pressures, and the evocative power of Margaret Atwood as she grapples with history, politics, religion, and human nature. Grace is a victim who gradually becomes a victor. Her guilt or innocence - i.e., the crux of the mystery - becomes secondary to the reality of her life and the virtuosity of Atwood's characterization, imagery, and structural strategies, which serve to underline her social consciousness and to deepen the emotional impact on the reader.

Techniques

Modern and postmodern artists, including writers, have often used pastiche and collage, whereby the whole becomes greater than the parts. Take, for example, what James Dickey called the most important twentieth-century poem, The Wasteland (1922) by T. S. Eliot. It is a collage of voices that sometimes approaches nonsense, yet the overall effect is startling, memorable, and strikingly original. The painter Jackson Pollack created masterpieces out of chaotic lines and colors that occasionally seem too random or careless yet attach themselves to the mind as if they matched the synapses and pathways of the brain itself. Likewise, Atwood takes newspaper clippings, personal letters, official documents, literary quotations, and the widely varied voices of her characters (including different tenses in the narration) and puts them all together to form a tumbling river of a story, a hauntingly effective novel, a truly original creation, even though it was primarily fashioned from fact. As part of her preparation for writing Alias Grace, Atwood studied the art of quilting as it was practiced in the mid-nineteenth century. Grace is making a quilt at the end of the book, and the novel itself is a quilt, a blending of old and new to create a particular kind of beauty that has never existed before in exactly that pattern with exactly those colors and shapes.

Atwood also makes full use of her talent for sensual imagery, at times creating an almost psychedelic synaesthesia, i.e. an especially effective blending of images that appeal to more than one of the reader's senses. For example, at the beginning of the book, Grace describes peonies that are blooming amid the gravel of a prison walkway: "They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark red flowers all shining and glossy like satin."

The visual aspect of the passage is powerful and poetic, but one also gets the feel of satin and the implied smell of the large blossoms.

Another talent of Atwood's, and a hallmark of her writing, is her forthright, matter-of-fact method of depicting the grotesque, as in the scene in which Mary is found dead:

The nightdress and petticoat were soaked with blood, and the sheet was all red with it, and brown where it had dried. . . . And there was indeed a smell in the room; it was the smell of wet straw, from the mattress, and also the salty smell of blood; you can smell something very similar in a butcher's shop.

Later, Grace imagines the man who got Mary pregnant as "not having any thoughts in his head about poor Mary, no more than if she was a carcass hung up at the butcher's."

Thematic Overview

Within a deceptively simple plot, Atwood manages to address an amazing array of themes. According to the New York University Medical School, which maintains a web site providing commentaries on major works of literature that involve the medical profession, Alias Grace at least touches on the following: Abandonment, Abortion, Acculturation, Adolescence, Catastrophe, Child Abuse, Communication, Death and Dying, Doctor-Patient Relationship, Domestic Violence, Empathy, Family Relationships, Freedom, Grief, History of Medicine, Homicide, Human Worth, Hysteria, Individuality, Institutionalization, Loneliness, Love, Memory, Patient Experience, Physician Experience, Poverty, Power Relations, Pregnancy, Professionalism, Psychiatry, Psychotherapy, Religion, Sexuality, Society, Suffering, Time, Trauma, and Women's Health.

Of course, there is not enough space in this essay to discuss how Atwood deals with each of these concepts, any of which can lead to important themes, but a glance at the major plot elements of Alias Grace indicates how such a wide range of topics are included. Grace is an Irish immigrant whose mother has died during the voyage to Canada and whose father is an abusive, irresponsible alcoholic; she loses touch with her siblings after going into domestic servitude and loses her best friend, her co-worker Mary Whitney, when Mary dies from the complications of an illegal abortion after becoming pregnant by their employer's son.

Then, while working for another rich man, Grace is embroiled in a double murder by a scoundrel named James McDermott, a stable hand, who claims she was the mastermind of the crime. However, because of her lawyer's pleadings, based on her age and gender, Grace's death sentence is commuted to life in prison, and she spends almost thirty years in custody before being pardoned.

While in prison, Grace becomes a cause celebre for a reformist religious group and is examined by the young Dr. Jordan, who has been hired by the group to try to exonerate her. He is interested in the fledgling science of psychology, in advancing his career, and in someday opening an asylum of his own. Tellingly, he is an upper-middleclass American, though recently having fallen on hard times, who is experimenting on a lower-class Canadian subject, whom he occasionally considers as an object ("a hard nut to crack"), so the themes of social hierarchy and international politics also come into play. Dr. Jordan, while a believable, well-rounded character, is obviously symbolic, introduced by Atwood for sev eral distinct purposes (e.g., to represent the state of psychology in those days, to act as a possible savior and love interest for Grace, and to be her sounding board and confidant while she tells her story).

Most themes in Alias Grace will be familiar to readers of other Atwood novels, especially Surfacing (1972), Bodily Harm(l982), and The Handmaid's Tale (1986). Grace is at once the pawn of forces beyond her control and the powerful center of her own universe, yet no matter what she does or has done to her, she is a part of a rigid social structure that dictates behavior and impacts personalities, especially those of women, who were, after

all, only awarded the right to vote in the United States in 1920 and who, according to the latest statistics, continue to average less pay than men for doing the same jobs. The interpersonal political themes centering on women versus men and women versus the patriarchal society in general figure prominently in Alias Grace just as they do in most of Atwood's work.

What is new and somewhat disturbing in the novel is Atwood's treatment of the split self, an age-old literary theme that she imbues with surging vitality. Has Grace been "possessed" by the spirit of Mary Whitney; does Grace have the mental disorder known as split personality, a form of schizophrenia; or is she faking it to make herself appear innocent or at least less guilty?

("I have a good stupid look, which I have practiced," she admits to the reader. Does she also practice being Mary?) Who exactly is Grace Marks anyway? During her formative years, she has been subjected to such horror and agony that it is no wonder that even she herself has problems with knowing and elucidating her identity for Dr.

Jordan. Characteristically, Grace tends to brush away doubts and fears like stray hairs: "When you are sad, it is best to change the subject." However, Atwood offers few clues as to who actually committed the murder of Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper and mistress of Thomas Kinnear, the latter having clearly been killed by McDermott, and no one is ever tried for Nancy's murder, since McDermott and Grace have already been convicted and sentenced for the killing of Kinnear. If Grace strangled Nancy or helped finish her off, perhaps she was acting out of fear of McDermott, or maybe she was acting under the influence of, or acting as, Mary.

The disturbing part of Atwood's handling of this theme is that there are no answers; the work suggests that all individuals are made up of a wide variety of personalities. Individuals are collages, just as this novel is, and the parts are shifting on a daily basis as people interact with a changing world. Atwood offers no firm ground to stand on, no easy ideologies, no convenient belief systems. The novel is as open as freedom itself, which, when considered honestly and fully, can be a frightening concept. Furthermore, as Atwood once said in a lecture on the literary portrayal of madness, "The prospect of losing our self and being taken over by another, unfamiliar self is one of our deepest human fears" ("Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer for," Stratford, Ontario, September 1997).

Themes

Sexuality

The topic of sexuality permeates this novel. Grace, for instance, is accused of using the promise of sexual favors to persuade James McDermott to kill Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. It is also highly suspected that Grace and Jamie Walsh had a sexual encounter in the orchard, when in fact their meeting was quite innocent, at least in Grace's recounting of the event. There are social repercussions toward Nancy Montgomery when she enters the public realm. Most villagers assume that Montgomery and Kinnear are sleeping together, and they shun her and Grace when the two women show up at church one Sunday. Montgomery, like Mary Whitney, more than likely, offers herself to Kinnear in hopes of elevating her position, hoping to obtain a marriage contract.

Mary Whitney, the young girl who befriends Grace, becomes involved in a sexual encounter with her employer's son. Mary hopes for marriage, but Mr. George is obviously in the relationship only for the sex. Mary is abandoned once she becomes pregnant and dies because of a botched abortion.

Grace, while in prison, must constantly fend off the sexual overtures of the guards who transport her from the penitentiary to the governor's house. And Mrs. Humphreys, Dr. Jordan's landlady, seeks the comfort of a sexual relationship with the doctor in order to ease the financial and matrimonial trouble that faces her. Dr. Jordan's problems with his own sexuality, whether he is in bed with Mrs. Humphreys, or fantasizing about Miss Lydia, the governor's daughter, or Grace, his patient, presents the male side of the story.

In many ways sexuality drives this story and its characters. It is suggested that sexuality might have been the underlying cause behind the murders. James McDermott lusts for Grace. Grace lusts for Kinnear. And it is their opposite attractions that lead to the murders, at least according to some accounts. Sex ultimately brings about the death of Mary Whitney. Dr. Jordan all but cracks under the pressure brought about by his sexual involvement and by his sexual fantasies. Those characters who only flirt with sexuality, such as Jeremiah the Peddler and Jamie Walsh, are spared.

Interestingly, according to Grace's interior dialogue, her sexual feelings are all but fully oppressed. Grace acts embarrassed and shocked at Dr. Jordan's intimation that McDermott had sex with her. She proclaims at one point that her sexual relationship with McDermott is all that any one cares to hear about. She is appalled by McDermott's attempts to have sex with her, and leaves one of her jobs because the master of the house makes attempts to have sex with her. When under hypnosis, although she claims to be Mary Whitney, Grace decries Dr. Jordan for his sexual fantasies about her. She is also completely dismayed when McDermott, Kinnear, and Montgomery accuse her of having sex with Jamie Walsh in the orchard.

Feminism and Pre-Feminism

Atwood recounts the details and circumstances of women in the nineteenth century. She portrays these women through the eyes of her own experiences in the twentieth century, eyes that are attuned to the history of discrimination against women. Atwood has the advantage of hindsight and an education in feminism□things that the women in her novel were unaware of. So either wittingly or unconsciously, Atwood emphasizes the imbalance that is inherent in the patriarchal society of this earlier period of time, relating the events of this story with a somewhat accusing tone.

Atwood constructs the women in this story, for the most part, as either privileged women with soft hands and many layers of petticoats or as working-class women with chafed skin and tired faces. Neither group is composed of fully realized women. The privileged class is tightly entrapped in corsets and are dependent on men. An example is Mrs. Humphreys, who is devastated by her husband's departure, not so much because she has lost the great love of her life but because she envisions herself being thrown out onto the street, unable to take care of herself. On the other hand, the working-class women, according to Atwood's portrayal, have three options in life. They work as servants all their lives; they marry and are taken care of by a man; or they become prostitutes.

Ironically it is the nineteenth-century concept of femininity that may have saved Grace from hanging and from completing her life sentence in jail. It was believed, during those times, that women were frail, moral, and incapable of vicious crimes such as murder. Even though circumstantial evidence pointed to Grace's involvement in the murders, she avoids the death sentence and eventually wins an early release from the penitentiary. Would this have been true if she had been a man? The answer seems to lie in the fate of her accomplice, James McDermott. There appears to have been little discussion as to whether or not he was guilty and should be hanged. There also is the strange relationship between Grace and Jamie Walsh. Walsh developed a crush on Grace, but later he testified against her in court. It was his evidence that finally pinned the murders on her. Atwood suggests that Walsh may have done this because he was jealous of Grace's supposed relationship with McDermott. However, in the end, Walsh is instrumental in gaining Grace's early release. He promises to marry her, to support her, to protect her. Grace's femininity, or at least the nineteenth-century definition of her femininity□one in which she once again becomes incapable of hurting anyone□convinces Walsh that he has betrayed her and must now rescue her.

Style

Point of View

Alias Grace is told through a variety of points of view. These points of view alternate, giving the reader, for example, a more personal testimony as related by Grace Marks throughout most of the novel and then switching to a more distant observation offered by the third-person account of Dr. Simon Jordan's circumstances. It should be pointed out that Grace's first-person point of view is often unreliable. Although Grace sometimes admits that she is not being fully honest with Dr. Jordan, there are other times when it is not clear if she is even being honest with herself. Other points of view include replications of newspaper accounts of the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery and the subsequent trials of Grace and McDermott. There are also lyrics of popular ballads concerning the murders, accounts quoted from Susanna Moodie's journals, and from letters to and from Dr. Jordan and other correspondents. By providing this collection of points of view, Atwood lays out different interpretations of the events, demonstrating the confusion that surrounded the real court case and the inability of either proving or disproving Grace Marks's innocence or guilt.

Metaphor

The main metaphor employed in this novel is that of the quilt. Atwood names each of her chapters after a specific quilt pattern. Graphic depictions of the patterns are also offered, showing the reader that these designs, much like the testimony of Grace Marks, can be construed in a variety of ways. For example, when one looks at the patterns, the pieces of the quilt arrange themselves in different ways, depending on how the eyes align them. The names of the patterns offer clues on how to look at them. These names include Jagged Edge, Rocky Road, Secret Drawer, and Pandora's Box. The quilt names each suggest the tone of the chapter that is to follow. The use of the quilt metaphor is appropriate because Grace's skill in sewing is mentioned quite often throughout the story. Also, while Grace relates the events of her past to Dr. Jordan, her hands are often kept busy with piecing together the scraps of material to make the cover of a quilt. As she creates the quilt, so too does she create her story. Overall, the quilt metaphor refers to the piecing together of information that has been gathered from different sources, which offer many different interpretations.

Reality and Fiction

Atwood offers a combination of real events mixed with her own imagination in an attempt to create a complete story. Although no solid conclusions can be drawn at the end of her novel with regard to Grace Marks, the novel does present a story with a beginning, middle, and an end. In order to glue all the real events together, Atwood had to invent fictionalized characters, such as Dr. Jordan. Jordan helps to fill in some of the

widest holes in the recorded real events by acting as a vehicle through which Grace can retell her version of the circumstances. Of course, Grace's interior dialogue is a creation of Atwood's imagination, which provides an attitude that is probable even though it might not be true. By mixing real news accounts, lyrics of real songs, and parts of real journals, Atwood adds authenticity to her fictional work. By mixing the author's imagination to the reality of trial and murders, Atwood provides her readers with a more rounded version of the Grace Marks story.

Historical Context

Toronto's Kingston Penitentiary

The Kingston Penitentiary, which opened in 1835 (eight years before Grace Marks was sentenced), was the first so-called modern prison to be built in Canada. It was to take on a different approach to incarceration. Instead of being a place solely dedicated to punishment, the official program was based on reform. Today, it remains one of the oldest prisons in continuous use in the entire world. Across the street from the main penitentiary is the Kingston Prison for Women, which opened in 1934. Prior to the opening of the Prison for Women, females were jailed in the main building but segregated from the male population. The penitentiary, with its massive gray limestone walls, has the appearance of an ancient and imposing fortress. It is located right on the waterfront of Lake Ontario; and in 1976, the sailing events of the Olympics were held right outside the building. The Kingston Pen, as it is referred to, houses Canada's most dangerous and notorious criminals. A riot occurred in 1971, during which much of the Kingston Pen was destroyed. Today, the prison accommodates up to four hundred inmates, all housed in separate cells.

Susanna Moodie

Susanna Moodie was born in England in 1803. After she married, she moved with her husband, in 1832, to the wilderness in Upper Canada. Susanna had been well educated by her father, and she and her sisters were accomplished writers. One of Moodie's most famous books was published in 1852. She called it *Roughing It in the Bush: Or Life in Canada*. In the book, Moodie offered sketches of her life and the cultural shock she experienced in moving from a lively city life in England to the challenging existence she encountered in the woods of Canada. Moodie visited Kingston Penitentiary, which many people did in the nineteenth century as part of a tour, and she asked to meet Grace Marks, who was the most notorious prisoner at that time. Moodie then went home and wrote about Grace. Later Moodie toured the Toronto Lunatic Asylum and again found Grace there. Moodie recalled that Grace was screaming continually during her visits, which lead Moodie to describe Grace as a wildly crazy woman. Moodie died in 1885.

Toronto's Lunatic Asylum

Not until the 1800s was there made any distinction, in Canada, between criminals and people with mental problems. Up until that time, criminals, the insane, and those who were in debt were all imprisoned together. This changed in 1841, when the first asylum for the insane was built in Toronto. Of the group of insane, the criminally insane were the most difficult to house. They disrupted the order and discipline of the penitentiary and required continual observation in the asylum. Females deemed criminally insane were even more difficult to deal with, since at the time, women were considered the

gentle sex, so the definition of a criminally insane woman was a hard concept for the general public to accept. Consequently, female criminals exhibiting traits of insanity were often taken back and forth between the penitentiary and the asylum as doctors and prison officials tried desperately to define who and what these women were. The women themselves sometimes took advantage of this quandary. The asylum was more comfortable than the penitentiary. In fact, the asylum was one of the first buildings in Toronto to have running water (hot and cold), steam heat, and ventilation. Therefore, many female criminals were accused of faking their mental illness in order to remain housed in the asylum.

Irish Immigration to Canada

By 1867, almost one-quarter of the entire population of Canada was Irish; and in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, most of the Irish immigrants were Protestant. One of the most influential causes of this immigration was the promise of land, which in Ireland had become a distant dream of many of its poor inhabitants. Between the years of 1829 to 1859, it is estimated that over 600,000 Irish landed at Grosse Île, the major clearing port of immigrants coming to Canada by sea. In 1855, according to British records, more than two million people left Ireland. Most of them emigrated to North America, either to Canada or the United States.

Journeys across the Atlantic were far from easy. Most ships were overcrowded, and most people were not prepared for the length, or the hardships, of the journey. Many did not realize they would have to supply most of their own food, so by the end of the journey, most people were malnourished. Many others died during the journey. By 1847, these ships, overflowing with poor immigrants, were disrespectfully referred to as Coffin Ships because of the number of deaths that occurred during the trip. Once landed on Grosse Île, all immigrants were quarantined, much as was done in the United States at Ellis Island. The facilities at Grosse Île, however, were not equipped to handle the huge numbers of people who were arriving, and in 1847, five thousand immigrants died of an outbreak of typhus. Most of these victims were Irish.

Critical Overview

Alias Grace was a bestselling novel not only in North America but in other countries as well. The mystery of Grace Marks's involvement in the murders that take place in the novel, as well as in real life, plus Atwood's deep research into nineteenth-century Canadian life are two alluring factors that draw readers to this book. Or as Susan H. Woodcock, writing for the *School Library Journal*, found: "Atwood may be playing a game with her readers but it is one in which many will willingly participate for the fun and mystery while learning about life in colonial Canada." Woodcock's attraction to this novel was based on Atwood's ability to create compelling characters who differ a lot from one another and are well developed. Barbara Mujica, writing for *Americas* also enjoyed Atwood's ninth novel for the author's well developed characters, but also for Atwood's extensive research into nineteenth-century Canada. "She brings to life not only the enigmatic and fascinating Grace Marks, but also an entire period in Canada's history." Mujica also points out the theme of quilts, which Atwood used throughout the work. Grace Marks was noted for her fine sewing skills, particularly quilting. Atwood uses a different quilting pattern for the title of each of her chapters to reflect Marks's skills and to set a theme for that section of the story. "The novel is structured like a quilt," Mujica writes, "in which each piece contributes to the total image, yet often the image changes form, depending on the angle from which it is viewed."

Another way to look at the novel might be through the observations of Mona Knapp, who wrote a review of the book for *World Literature Today*. Knapp focuses on the psychological aspects of the novel. She writes: "The novel's form is an elaborate exercise in fragmentation." Rather than looking at the metaphor of the quilt, Knapp sees the novel as a representation of Grace's mind, which is also fragmented. The story, Knapp writes, "is unsettled, perhaps in an effort to reflect the fact that [Grace's] story, like her personality, will never be wholly known." Knapp also points out how the fictional character of Dr. Jordan, unlike a quilter, who takes random pieces and sews them together to make a unified cover, becomes "unraveled" by Grace. He becomes so involved in Grace's fragments that he himself becomes disassociated.

The quilting theme also appealed to Melinda Bargreen, who reviewed the novel for the *Seattle Times*. However, Bargreen found, "[t]he strongest aspect of the novel is Atwood's use of detail, recalling vividly the scents of smoke and laundry, the shapes and textures of clothing, the state of medicine and fledgling psychology. . . ." For Mel Gussow, writing for the *New York Times*, it was Atwood's keen observation of her characters' psychology that drew him into the story. "With dry, ironic wit, a poetic sensibility and more than a hint of the Gothic, [Atwood] has uncompromisingly observed the psychology of the people in her society."

Most critics have praised Atwood for not trying to solve this mystery that will never be solved. As John Skow for *Time* stated it: "[Atwood] is scrupulous in not pretending to know the whole truth of Grace Marks." The result, Skow concluded, is that "[t]he formidable and sometimes forbidding Margaret Atwood has turned a notorious

Canadian murder case from the mid-nineteenth century into a shadowy, fascinating novel."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart examines Atwood's character, Grace Marks, as a symbol of the Victorian definition of woman.

Grace Marks, in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, is an extremely complex creature. Her complexities, however, are intensified for many reasons. Some of her personal traits are distorted because they are recorded by unreliable sources, such as newspapers accounts, popular ballads, and people who were swayed by ulterior motives. But there are other reasons for Grace's complexities. She was living at a time when women were defined by Victorian notions of femininity, which ranged from some of the highest ideals to some of the worst evils. Women were often considered the receptacles of morality at the same time as they were seen as seducers and manipulators. *Alias Grace* is about a young woman who committed murder, but it is also about the conflicts that women, influenced by the Victorian Age, suffered.

The identity of Grace Marks is confusing because it is complicated by her either trying to protect her innocence or trying to hide her guilt. But Atwood's story about Grace goes beyond the question of whether Grace committed murder. And it goes beyond the question of whether she was confused or mad. The main issue of the novel focuses on Grace, but true to Atwood's feminist pursuit, the search for Grace's true identity is symbolically the search that all women living in a suppressed environment are involved in the search for self. Although Grace embodies this search in Atwood's novel, the real question seems to be: Who was the Victorian Woman? Was she the frail, lesser member of the two sexes? Or was she an equal in stamina and intelligence? Was she the epitome of virtue? Was she violent and capable of vicious crimes? Or, did she encompass all of these traits, and more? To gain a better glimpse into the author's feminist attitude, readers have only to take a deeper look at Atwood's protagonist.

In the opening of *Alias Grace*, Grace describes herself as a woman who abides by the rules of her Victorian society. "I tuck my head down while I walk," she declares, as befits her station in life. She is a maid, symbolically declared by her "chapped" hands. She bows her head in humility, reflecting her lower status, both economic and that determined by her sex. And she walks in silence "inside the square made by the high stone walls." She is the essence of conformity. "These shoes fit me," she states, "better than any I've ever had before." She is, at the time of this statement, a prisoner of the state. But she is also, as were most women of her time, a prisoner of social laws. Women, whether they were the well-kept wives and daughters of the rich, or the poor uneducated daughters of the underclass, were held in their place by concrete walls even if they could not see them.

"[T]he cellar walls are all around me," Grace continues, "and I know I will never get out." This quote also comes from the first chapter. With these words, Grace describes her feelings at the scene of the murders. But is it an honest depiction? After the above quote, Grace immediately says: "This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story." This sentence qualifies her previous statement, and, in the process,

Grace provides a hint of her real feelings. Grace is not saying that her sense of imprisonment, "I know I will never get out," is an honest one. Rather, she is implying that it might merely be a version of a "story." She might be saying this because it is what she believes Dr. Jordan wants to hear, something she often admits to doing throughout her story. Using Grace as the speaker of her feminine contemporaries, one might ask, what is Atwood declaring with these words? Is she stating that the women of Grace's time might also have been playing roles, ones they believed the men in their lives wanted? In other words, does Grace truly feel confined? Is she really comfortable walking in those shoes? Or is she pretending, hoping that in playing out her role according to the rules, she will eventually win some small portion of freedom? After all, this could have been the way Victorian women found release. They might have performed, as Grace did, only what was expected of them so they could find peace within the four walls of their confinement.

Obviously Grace did not always act according to law. She was angry and jealous of Nancy Montgomery, so Grace got rid of her. In some limited and short-lived way, Montgomery's murder freed Grace. But Grace soon found out that acting upon her crudest emotions ultimately caused her imprisonment. Her confinement was compounded later when she also acted out her emotions inside the penitentiary. When she vocalized her frustrations and fears in loud screaming fits, she was defined as mad and thrown into the asylum. While there, she was constantly probed and no doubt further confined either in solitary loneliness or by other means of constriction such as straight jackets. It was while in the asylum that Grace learns to keep her thoughts to herself. Her emotions must be kept under control. She discovers that if she remains nonresponsive or at least if she answers questions with minimal and socially acceptable short statements, she is left alone and eventually is returned to the prison, where the stigma of madness somewhat disappears. If she has any dream of realizing her release from jail, it will be actualized through her practice of silence.

There are many stories of Victorian-influenced women being driven mad because their emotional lives are too heavily suppressed. Emotions are often looked upon as a sign of weakness and acting them out is a disturbance to the controlled notion of sanity. Many women, like Grace, learn that silence brings them more acceptance and favor. Other women take on a different mode of silence, such as feigning ignorance. Grace relates that her lawyer tells the court she is "next door to an idiot." Playing out this role, he tells her, is her "best chance." She "should not appear to be too intelligent." Not only were Victorian women being fed this line, many women, up until the late 1960s, not only pretended to be unintelligent, many of them often believed it. Education was for men. Women's motives for going to college were said to be only to find a husband. It was also believed that professional careers were too far removed from the home□the socially accepted domain of women. Once again, in playing the role of the less intelligent, women found, if not fulfillment, at least acceptance and a synthetic peace.

Another question that Atwood raises is that of women's sexuality. At one point in the story, Dr. Jordan notices that Grace is a bit prudish when it comes to discussing sex. He wants to know if Kinnear ever made advances to her, but Dr. Jordan doesn't know how to ask Grace. During his first visit with her, he offers Grace an apple. In biblical terms,

the apple represents temptation. And it is Eve who offers it to Adam, an act that has forever identified Eve, in some interpretations, as the seductress and the source of Adam's fall. But Dr. Jordan's questions about sex are double-edged. He is, on one hand, trying to find out if Grace is guilty or innocent. But he also finds the discussion of sexuality titillating.

There are suggestions in the novel that Grace was not so prudish as she seems. In some accounts, Grace is said to have enticed James McDermott to commit the murders in exchange for having sex with her. On the other side, Atwood reveals Dr. Jordan's own sexual desires, which include not only the seduction of his landlady but also his sexual dreams as a young boy. He also is aroused by Miss Lydia's attention as well as by his contacts with Grace. In exploring Dr. Jordan's sexual desires, Atwood is setting up the dichotomy between the definition of women as innocent virgins and, at the other end of the spectrum, as whores, while men suffered no such labels and were able to enjoy socially acceptable sexual passion. Grace in her so-called normal state does sound like a prude, but when she is put in a trance, another side appears, one more crude but also more exacting. Once she is fully hypnotized, Dr. Jordan says: "Ask her . . . whether she ever had relations with James McDermott." Then the narrator explains: "He [Jordan] hasn't been intending to pose this question; certainly not at first, and never so directly. But isn't it□he sees it now□the one thing he most wants to know?"

Grace is momentarily released from her inhibitions, and she points an accusing finger. "Really, Doctor," Grace says, "you are such a hypocrite!" With this revelation, the tables are turned. Now Dr. Jordan feels as if he must suppress his emotions. "He's shaken, but must try not to show [it]." Grace has taken off her social mask and in doing so, she has seen Dr. Jordan more clearly. Grace says, "[w]hether I did what you'd like to with that little slut who's got hold of your hand?" And then Grace admits she allowed McDermott to do all the things, as she says, that Dr. Jordan wanted to do to her.

But Grace's awakening does not last. When pressed further, she cannot take credit for having seen things as they are, for expressing her inner feelings. Instead, she gives credit to Mary Whitney, her dead friend, whom she claims has possessed her. Grace has crawled back into her shell. If she had not, she would never have been released from jail. "I must have been asleep," she insists upon coming out of the trance. ". . . I must have been dreaming. I dreamt about my mother. She was floating in the sea. She was at peace." It is interesting to note that both Grace's strength and her peace come from women who are dead□her mother and Mary Whitney. Both of these women had passed to the other side. And in their passing, as Grace sees it, they have climbed over the four walls of their prison and found peace and freedom.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Alias Grace*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

A movie of *Alias Grace* is in the making and is scheduled to star Cate Blanchett. The movie will be directed by Dominic Savage, an award-winning young British talent. Casting for the movie is expected to be completed by the end of 2003.

For more information on Atwood's life and career, connect to the Margaret Atwood Society's world wide web page at http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/atwood or to Atwood's personal web page at http://www.owtoad.com where you will find some of her speeches and cartoons.

Topics for Further Study

Atwood used the word "alias" in the title of this work for a specific reason. Re-read the novel and pull out the different ways in which Grace hides behind or uses an alias. Although using Mary Whitney is the most obvious of Grace's aliases, there are also more subtle ones. Write a paper on how Grace's use of aliases either helps or hinders her.

Dr. Simon Jordan was attempting to psychoanalyze Grace, prompting her to delve into her subconscious by using objects that he believed might enliven their discussions. List all the objects, such as the apple and the radish, that Dr. Jordan used, and write a short essay on each, describing what kind of metaphors Dr. Jordan was trying to employ. For example, the apple is often associated with Eve and the Garden of Eden. What might Dr. Jordan have been trying to suggest by using each object?

Grace shares several dreams with the readers throughout the story. One of them is often repeated. Find these dreams and write your interpretations of what they might represent. Do not worry about being factual. Let the ideas flow from your first impressions, much as you might try to figure out what your own dreams might mean.

Investigate modern techniques of criminology. Then pretend you are the leading investigative detective of the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Write a report of your findings. Do not hesitate to make them up, but base them on real technology of the present time. Gather enough information to prove Grace Marks was either innocent or guilty.

Spiritualism was very popular in the 1800s and early 1900s. Research this practice. What did it entail? Who were some of its greatest followers? What effects did it have on popular culture? Do you see any remnants of spiritualism in modern culture?

Gather news accounts of sensational murders in modern times, such as the O. J. Simpson case. Atwood demonstrates how journalists of Grace Marks's day exaggerated many of the details. Do you think this still happens today? If so, how? Bring in various versions of a single event, demonstrating discrepancies in the stories.

What Do I Read Next?

Alice Munro is a fellow Canadian author, who often writes about people who live in small, rural Canadian towns. The lives of the characters she writes about, however, are any thing but simple. Her collections of short stories are legendary. One of her more recent collections is *Dance of the Happy Shades and Other Stories* (1998). There are fifteen stories included, each of them depicting ordinary moments in life, but they are looked at through the eyes of someone who can decipher the underlying meaning.

Carol Shields, an American who has adopted Canada as her home, wrote the Pulitzer Prize—winning *The Stone Diaries* (1993), her most famous work. Shields creates a fictional character and then writes the book as if it were her protagonist's autobiography. The story follows the life of Daisy Goodwill as she tries to make sense of her somewhat dull life. The introspective monologue is the strong point of this work.

Angela Carter's works are often compared to Atwood's, or vice versa. Carter was known for taking fairy tales and twisting them to reflect her favorite feminist theories. *Bloody Chamber* (1990) is her most critically acclaimed collection of short stories. In this book, Carter retells the famous "Bluebeard Tale," turning it on its head so that women, rather than being the victims, are victorious in the end.

Surfacing (1972) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are two of Atwood's most popular novels. In *Surfacing*, Atwood's female protagonist returns to her childhood home on a remote island to search for clues about her father's mysterious disappearance. The search brings more to the surface than the protagonist could have imagined. This story is often classified as a thriller. *The Handmaid's Tale* was a departure in writing for Atwood, as the story takes place in the future. Atwood's depiction of the future represents everything a feminist would never want to experience, one in which women are completely without freedom.

For a male's perspective of life in prison, Ernest J. Gaines has written *A Lesson before Dying* (1993). It is a story set in the South in the 1940s, and its protagonist is a young black man who is asked to teach another young black man, waiting to be executed for murder, how to die. The prisoner insists he was wrongfully convicted, a condition not improbable in the South for black men during this time.

Key Questions

The appeal of the main character is the primary basis for the popularity of the novel, and Grace Marks was also attractive in real life. As Atwood points out in the Author's Afterword, prisons and asylums in the 1800s "were visited like zoos," and one of the "star attractions" was Grace, who with her long, red-auburn hair and faraway stare must have seemed the epitome of the madwoman, as well as a beautiful and sympathetic figure for those who believed in her innocence. That belief would seem to have been based more on wishful thinking than on reality, though. Grace gave three versions of the killings, all of which implicated her in at least some manner, if only complicity and silence, though her confession in prison was likely forced by a brutal warden. There were those who argued that McDermott was so strong and violent that he also could have forced Grace to do as he said. However, Atwood portrays Grace as more intelligent and willful than that and perhaps even evil and calculating beneath her simple, charming exterior. "Evil women are necessary" in literature, according to Atwood ("Spotty-Handed Villainesses"); "women have more to them than virtue.

They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?" Grace Marks is certainly one of Atwood's most complicated characters.

1. Upon her release from prison, the historical Grace was required to fill out a questionnaire, which still exists. When asked what was "the immediate cause of the crime for which you have been sent to the Penitentiary," Grace wrote, "Having been employed in [the] same house with a villain." What do you think? Did Grace take a conscious, active part in the killing of Nancy Montgomery? Was she guilty or innocent?

2. Does Atwood point to Grace's guilt or not? What are the clues, if any, for either interpretation?

3. Those used to privilege, as Grace points out, come to expect it and take it for granted. Apparently the reverse is also true: those used to servitude fall into a pattern of obedience and obsequiousness, as seen in Grace's normally non-aggressive behavior. How does Atwood make the reader aware of Grace's more rebellious side? What are some specific instances, aside from the times when her "Mary persona" appears?

4. Make a list of Dr. Jordan's motives for getting involved with the case. How many of them are selfish? How many of them could eventually help Grace and society in general? Are anyone's motives ever completely pure and simple? Why or why not?

5. How has the treatment of the mentally ill changed during the past hundred years? Do you think it will improve as much over the course of the next hundred years? If so, what will be the main reasons for that improvement?

6. Arguably the turning point in Grace's life occurs when she decides not to run away with Jeremiah, who is first a simple peddler and later the accomplished "neuro-

hypnotist" known as Dr. Jerome DuPont (who apparently leads Grace to speak as Mary). Why does Grace choose to stay behind at Thomas Kinnear's house instead of sharing adventures with Jeremiah? What kind of life do you think she would have led as his assistant and lover?

7. In discussing Alias Grace, Atwood has referred to the public's fascination with the Kinnear case as being based on the elements of sex, violence, and insanity, and she has claimed that if such a case occurred today, the media attention and the public reaction would be much the same. How much does such a thirst for lurid details drive the popularity and entertainment value of Alias Grace itself? Is there anything wrong with this kind of fascination? What is its source?

Literary Precedents

Because Atwood is painstakingly and relentlessly original, it is tempting to say that there are no literary precedents, that Alias Grace is unique. Nonetheless, Atwood is playing with certain conventional patterns, such as the Gothic romance; the novel focuses on the well-known concept of the split self; the plot is based on a true crime; and much of the narration is limited and suspect. Thus, Alias Grace shares similarities with several well-known works, the most famous and closely related being Goethe's Faust (mentioned earlier), Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898), and Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (1966).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who published prodigiously, probably more than any other writer in history, is primarily known for one work, the enormously influential play Faust, which was based on a true story or perhaps several true stories mixed with legends. According to Michael Beddow, in his lecture "Faust as Representative and Outsider" (London University, 1985), "There was at least one real person calling himself 'Faustus' in 16th-century Germany. The name appears in various historical documents attached both to a magician of dubious repute and a respectable theologian."

The anonymous writer of the Faustbuch (1587) "took various tales of the wiles and escapades of magicians then circulating in Germany and attributed them all to Johann Faust." From those stories sprang Goethe's Faust.

Its relationship with Alias Grace is mostly based on Faust's claim to have "two souls," which is essentially the problem Grace has.

After her hypnosis, when she speaks as Mary, Jeremiah/Jerome posits, "If two persons [in one brain], why not two souls?"

She seems split between the almost angelic and aptly named Grace and the vulgar, earthy, and ironically named Mary, just as Faust is torn between his desire for transcendence, along with ultimate knowledge, and his love for the pleasures of the earth and the flesh. Eventually, although he sells his soul to Mephistopheles and commits murder, among other crimes, he is saved by "Divine Grace" and ascends into the sky, still reaching for the ever-receding vision of ideal purity and truth represented by his former lover, Margarete, a symbol of what Goethe referred to as "das Ewig-Weibliche" (the Eternal Feminine).

In the romantic Gothic novels of the nineteenth century, the heroine is presented as pure but is beset by troubles and villains.

According to Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms, 1988), The victimization of the heroine serves a necessary function in the formulaic plot of Gothic fantasy. Although the heroine typically shows independence and courage, the pattern allows her to do very little for herself. . . . Her need for salvation,

her vulnerability evokes heroic qualities in the man who rushes to her defense and thus becomes the hero.

There is a traditional connection, then, between the heartbroken, repentant Faust rushing too late to help his beloved Margarete and Dr. Jordan trying in vain to aid Grace.

Jamie Walsh thus becomes the unlikely hero of the tale.

Grace and Mary can both be compared to Margarete, too, for Margarete has been condemned to death for killing her illegitimate child fathered by Faust. She dies but her soul is spared by God, and she is welcomed into heaven. One way of viewing Mary's death after the illegal abortion is to see her soul being spared from hell because it enters the body of Grace. "Let me in," Grace hears Mary say after she has died.

Then Grace faints and goes into a deep sleep. When she awakens, she strangely asks for Grace and becomes alarmed, saying they must search for Grace, that she is "lost." Then she falls asleep again, and when she reawakens she does not remember anything that happened during the time between her long sleeps. This strange occurrence is analogous to the trance she goes into at the behest of Jeremiah/Jerome. The spiritual aspects of Faust and Alias Grace are not easily understood, and both authors simply show what happens, letting the audience decide what it means and whether it is plausible.

Rarely concerned with plausibility, Robert Louis Stevenson both spun tales and recounted tales of romance, terror, and adventure. His Jekyll and Hyde have become the quintessential split personality, and the Gothic nature of his novel matches the horror, pseudo-science, and mysticism in Atwood's tale of the perils and salvation of Grace. The lasting appeal of Stevenson's story attests to the human fascination for the occult and the concomitant, contributory fear of the demon within, the larcenous side of ourselves that we must hold firmly in control. Freud would have called it the id, and Mary is a strong representative of some of the wild, selfish impulses attributed to that part of the self.

In her lecture "Spotty-Handed Villainesses," Atwood mentions that the evil in Henry James's The Turn of the Screw comes from "a split-off part of the character's own psyche," meaning that of the young governess who narrates most of the novel, and Atwood also says that the story "revolves around notions of female sexuality." While there are mentions of sexuality in Alias Grace, most of the sex happens offstage, as it were, and Atwood chooses to focus instead on the mind of Grace and to make use of the artistic possibilities of the limited narration by a character who some in the novel refer to as an expert liar and actress. Like her friend Jeremiah, Grace may be a con-artist. As Atwood says in her lecture, too, "every artist is, among other things, a con-artist," and Grace is creative.

Just as in James's classic novella, readers must make up their own minds as to what has happened and what they believe.

James, in his preface to the New York edition (1908), says that he sacrificed "roundness" or closure in The Turn of the Screw" to fullness . . . exuberance." And he referred to his tantalizing, psychological horror story as "an annexed but independent world in which nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it." Truth, in other words, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For a writer of realism, this is a radical concept, even though it has turned out to be very realistic, as Atwood knows and demonstrates, and as Goethe, so far ahead of his time, instinctively knew and had the courage to write about.

Truman Capote was courageous, too, when he essentially broke new ground with In Cold Blood. For the first time, a writer artistically novelized an actual series of events, and the book became a bestseller.

Ernest Hemingway had also tried his hand at a "nonfiction novel" when he wrote The Green Hills of Africa (1935), an account of one of his safaris, but it is haphazardly written and did not sell well. Capote based his novel on more than eight thousand pages of research, so his main creative task, aside from the writing itself, was shaping the story to fit the structure of a novel, which he did carefully and effectively.

Unlike Atwood, Capote invented hardly anything. His novel is based strictly on interviews, news reports, and physical evidence. It is, nevertheless, powerful literature, helped by the fact that most of the people involved were inherently interesting, especially Perry Smith, the murderer to whom Capote got the closest, who was a writer of poetry and had a startling way of expressing himself. For instance, Smith said of the father of the family he and his accomplice killed, "I didn't want to harm the man.

I thought he was a very nice gentleman.

Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat." Smith illustrates here the split self, the creative, sensitive criminal who is still somehow capable of sudden, horrific violence. The fascination for the reader is the same as in Alias Grace and is based on the same fears: Could there be a killer hiding in everyone? How can normal-seeming people turn out to be monsters? Does everyone house a monster within?

Further Study

Cooke, Nathalie, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, ECW Press, 1998.

There are many critical works about Atwood's writing but little if anything about the author's private life. This is the first full-length biography of the Canadian author.

Gray, Charlotte, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill*, Duckworth Publishing, 2001.

Gray gives a detailed glimpse into the life of Susanna Moodie, an early pioneer in Canada, recounting the hardships that Moodie and other immigrants had to face. Moodie came to Canada filled with hope, but in the end she wrote back home, trying to dissuade anyone from following her to the North American wilderness.

Hartman, Mary S., *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes*, Robson Book, 1995.

The period covered here is much earlier than Grace Marks's time, but this book provides very interesting reading. Hartman takes the reader back in time and provides a detailed recounting of women's lives in prison.

Shorter, Edward, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac*, John Wiley and Sons, 1998.

Shorter is a medical historian at the University of Toronto. In his book, he writes about the earliest treatments of madness, which were often considered satanic possession. Shorter also examines the long history of hiding people away in asylums. The book follows treatments to contemporary times, in which a variety of pills are administered to counter many mental illnesses. Critics praise Shorter's storytelling skills used in this book.

Vanspanckeren, Kathryn, and Jan Garden Castro, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, Ad Feminam: Women and Literature series, Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

This is one of the more accessible of the critical studies of Atwood's work.

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Beauchesne, Mitt, Review of *Alias Grace*, in the *National Review*, Vol. 49, No. 2, February 10, 1997, p. 58.

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Skow, John, "In Very Confused Blood," in *Time*, Vol. 148, No. 27, December 16, 1996, p. 76.

Woodcock, Susan H., Review of *Alias Grace*, in the *School Library Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 6, June 1997, p. 151.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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