

# The Multiple Identities of Grace Marks: a comparative analysis of *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* by Susanna Moodie and *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood

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**Resumo:** Susanna Moodie inclui um capítulo inteiro sobre Grace Marks em seu livro *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, e é através da leitura do texto de Moodie que muitos leitores do Canadá, incluindo Margaret Atwood, entram em contato com a história dessa mulher, que, condenada por assassinato, passou quase 30 anos na prisão, e foi finalmente perdoada. Neste artigo pretendo comparar a forma como Moodie, e Atwood depois dela, retratam a história de Grace Marks, especialmente a maneira pela qual Marks constrói a sua identidade no romance de Atwood. Sendo Marks uma personagem perturbada, discutir sua identidade, tanto como mulher quanto como canadense, é uma questão central na análise de seu comportamento. Para isso, recorri às leituras de Gardiner, Christ e Humm sobre a identidade feminina. E porque Marks é uma personagem histórica, não apenas uma ficção, eu também tenho buscado inspiração nas teorias de Hayden White sobre história e literatura. É possível concluir que Marks é uma personagem polêmica e complexa, e que sua identidade é construída através do uso de pseudônimo como uma maneira de encobrir e proteger a si mesma.

**Palavras-chave:** identidade; história; literatura.

Grace Marks was an Upper Canadian criminal who was convicted of murder in 1843, alongside with James McDermott, for killing Mr. Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. However tried and convicted, it was never totally clear how the events happened, and the true participation of Grace Marks is still a mystery. Stimulated by such a mystery, and through the reading of Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853), Margaret Atwood publishes, in 1996, her amazing novel *Alias Grace*. The novel presents a mixture of historical facts – she based part of her story in official documents of the trial – and fictional ones, including some aspects of the new spiritual wave that happened in

the United States by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that was brought to Canada by believers and charlatans alike.

In this paper, I intend to compare Atwood's novel to Moodie's text, in order to show that history and fiction walk together, especially because not everything is clear about the historical event. I also intend to discuss the use of alias and madness in *Alias Grace* as a way the main character, Grace Marks, finds to protect herself.

Emory Elliot, in "New England Puritan Literature", states that "[a]s many historians admit, a record of past events is the hybrid product of facts and interpretation". (1994, p. 205). Hayden White, in *Tropics of Discourse*, suggests that a historical situation can be configured according to the historian's wish to emphasize a certain aspect, or to endow a certain event with a particular meaning. This is, as White says, "essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation". (1985, p. 85). This connection between History and Literature is very pertinent to this article, since it deals with historical and literary characters and texts. As Maria Barbosa, in "The Pocahontas Narratives in the Era of the Romantic Representations of the Native Americans and their influence on the construction of an American National Identity" (2005, p. 22) points out, "[w]hen a historical event changes into a literary one, being fictionalized and thus entering the fictional world, it still keeps its historical aspect, acquiring thus a different status, a kind of mythical, legendary one." This is what happens, to a certain extent, to Grace Marks.

This way, it is possible to point out that history and fiction are interrelated, and in *Alias Grace* such a relationship is quite clear. Based on the historical fact, but not stuck by it, Atwood creates a narrative that deals with a moment in Marks's life that is totally forgotten by Moodie, the moment after Marks has returned from the asylum, sleeps in prison and works at the governor's house during the day. Murphy, in "Subverting from Within: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*" says that the way Atwood "imaginatively reconfigures historical facts" is a way of creating a "subversive text" that "'writes back' to both the journals of a Canadian literary ancestor [Susanna Moodie], and to Canada's nineteenth century self-image". (MURPHY, online). Atwood does mention the same moment Moodie does, but as a flashback, a resource that is used throughout the novel. Moodie describes Marks in prison before her period of madness, and a visit she made to the Asylum, in which the writer sees Marks again. To the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, Marks is a "shrieking, capering madwoman". (MURPHY; online). Here is the way Moodie describes Grace Marks in prison:

She is a middle-sized woman, with a slight graceful figure. There is an air of hopeless melancholy in her face before the touch of hopeless sorrow paled it, have been very brilliant. Her eyes are a bright blue, her hair auburn, and her face would be rather handsome were it not for the long curved chin, which gives, as it always does to most persons who have this facial defect, a cunning, cruel expression.

Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong stealthy look; her eye never meets yours, and after a furtive regard, it invariably bends its gaze upon the ground. She looks like a person rather above her humble station, and her conduct during her stay in the Penitentiary was so unexceptionable, that a petition was signed by all the influential gentlemen in Kingston, which released her from her long imprisonment. She entered the service of the governor of the Penitentiary, but the fearful hauntings of her brain have terminated in madness. She is now in the asylum at Toronto; and as I mean to visit it when there, I may chance to see this remarkable criminal again. Let us hope that all her previous guilt may be attributed to the incipient workings of this frightful malady (MOODIE; 1853, p. 106-107).

It is possible to notice that Moodie is sympathetic to the girl, considering that the crime may have been caused by madness, not by cruelty. Visiting her in the Asylum, Moodie writes:

Among these raving maniacs I recognised the singular face of Grace Marks--no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment. On perceiving that strangers were observing her, she fled shrieking away like a phantom into one of the side rooms. It appears that even in the wildest bursts of her terrible malady, she is continually haunted by a memory of the past. Unhappy girl! when will the long horror of her punishment and remorse be over? When will she sit at the feet of Jesus, clothed with the unsullied garments of his righteousness, the stain of blood washed from her hand, and her soul redeemed, and pardoned, and in her right mind? It is fearful to look at her, and contemplate her fate in connexion with her crime. What a striking illustration does it afford of that awful text, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord!" (MOODIE, 1853, p. 139).

It is possible to notice, in Moodie's texts, her concerns about Marks's mental as well as spiritual health. To the colonist writer, both were closely related, and Marks's allegedly madness was, almost certainly, caused by her sin, or, most likely, she has committed the crime because she was already mad. Moodie, as a nineteenth century woman, could not accept that a woman would be able to perform such hideous things.

Describing Moodie as "embroider" (ATWOOD, 1997, p. 223) while writing her texts, Atwood makes a much elaborated embroidery, narrating the story of the infamous criminal after Marks is again in prison, and, through a fictional character, Dr. Simon Jordan, she has Marks herself telling her story, a story that follows the official one in some aspects, but with some strong and mysterious contradictions. Marks's own confession is questioned, and whether she was in full control of her mind during the murder, or whether she was temporarily insane, is just a matter of speculation. The alias she used in her attempt to escape, Mary Whitney, is explained by Atwood through the creation of other fictional characters, whose stories are also narrated by Marks, a totally unreliable narrator. So, the mystery is left unsolved, but Grace Marks has certainly got a voice in Atwood's novels. It is a very ironic narrative, which server to rethink and redress history, illustrating what Linda Hutcheon (1989, p. 131) has called 'the use of irony as a powerful subversive rule'.

A very important issue in *Alias Grace* is the way Grace Marks portrays herself and is portrayed by the other characters. In a novel with different points of view, Marks's identity is certainly multiple and unstable. Understanding the way such an identity is built is crucial to the development of the story and the violent murders of Mr. Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. The very concept of identity, however, as a concept for many literary criticisms, has become a cliché without being clearly defined. To Judith Gardiner, in "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", "the word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women." (1981, p. 347). Such contradictions may be caused by the difficulty in defining the term, for even the meaning in a dictionary is contradictory. Identity can be seen either as the self or as the way someone is seen by other people. Each person may have more than one identity, according to the circumstances, being those identities defined by the person him/herself, by the environment, or by the desires of other persons. With the arousal of the feminist conscience in the 1960s,

the search for an identity became one of the central concerns of women's literature in the majority of western culture. Women felt they had to reinsert themselves in a tradition that had put them, mostly invisible and silent, in the relegate place of the Other. It was believed, then, that if women could tell their stories, that would be possible to achieve a balance that would correct the usual association of the male with humankind in general. To Gardiner (1981, p. 342), "female identity is a process" that helps to illuminate the different characteristics of women's writing. However, as Maggie Humm points out, in *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*, "sexual identity is always unstable, it is susceptible to disruption by the unconscious and disruption manifests itself in the discontinuities and contradictions in everyday language. ... Additionally, the idea of femininity will always be open to redefinition" (HUMM, 1986, p. 59). This way, the phrase **female identity**, more than a solution, becomes a challenge.

Talking about identity, it is impossible not to talk about gender. Miriam Grossi, in "Em busca de Outros e Outras: Gênero, Identidade e Representação", says that the cultural opposition between the feminine and the masculine starts from the biological difference and is built differently in each time and place. The author also says that it is "in the permanent game of contrasts that the otherness is built, and the feeling of identity is consolidated".<sup>1</sup> (GROSSI, 1994, p. 336). Therefore, she affirms that it is in the search of **other** that it is possible to find the own self. This restates the point of view of Humm when she questions:

How can one speak from the place of the Other? Where and what are the places and spaces of the Other? How can women in literature, and for that matter men, be thought about outside the existing Masculine / Feminine framework? ... how can women break away from the logic of oppositions? how can women break out of this (psychoanalytic) imposition of the place of suppression without having to enter the masculine space of the symbolic? (HUMM, 1986, p. 60).

As Alicia Ostriker (1986, p. 59) has pointed out, in "Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity", "women have always been defined, and allowed themselves to be defined, by the 'world' of male culture" in such a way that talk about an autonomous self seems to be absurd. Being defined by a world, whether male or

female, means that everybody has to behave in accordance with what is expected of each one. In the case of women, this means that they must be **feminine** and, sometimes, even submissive, for this is the constructed behavior that has been imposed to them. This also implies that all they have to wear masks, behaving according to the others' expectations, not according to their own. It is important to point out that women have always been seen as the **other** in relation to men, and when a woman searches for her own identity is because she needs to feel complete.

As Carol Christ says, in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, when the woman hears her own voice, being aware of her own value, trying to please herself instead of pleasing others, she must find an answer to all the problems mentioned before. The author also states that the women's search for **identity** in literature "begins in an *experience of nothingness*. Women experience emptiness in their own lives in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives" (CHRIST, 1986, p. 13). To the author, the experience of nothingness starts in a woman's life since her birth and follows her for her entire life, for she internalizes the oppressors' voices (mother, father, teachers) and learns to doubt the value of her thoughts, her feelings, her creativity, provoking a strong sense of inferiority and very low self-esteem (CHRIST, 1986, p. 13). Because women live in a male defined world, their experience in patriarchy is similar to the experience of nothingness. Such an experience, says Christ, is followed by an **awakening**, that is a metaphor for enlightening, a movement, in the case of women, from prison to freedom, from self-denial to a new affirmation of self-knowledge, power and responsibility. The search for a female identity is connected to the act of telling stories, according to Christ (1986, p. 6). To that author, "without stories there is a sense in which a woman is not alive", for the women's history have not been told due to centuries of male domination. Rosemary Hennessy, in *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, says that it is crucial to feminism to disarticulate and rearticulate the process of telling stories and the stories themselves. To the author, "nowhere is the question of who feminism speaks for more crucial than in the histories we tell" (HENNESSY, 1993, p. 100).

In this work, therefore, I use the concept of female identity as the process through which female literary characters, based or not on historical characters, search for a new conscience of being women, turning away the social and cultural masks imposed to them by patriarchy. In this sense, each of these women can find

multiple and dynamic selves that will constitute the full identity. As far as Grace Marks is concerned, it is possible to identify several and contradictory selves in her narration of her own story, and in the way she is seen by the others who also narrate her story. But it is also possible to say that, after going through so many sufferings, she has finally decided to become what people expect her to become, in order to be safe and free. As Anita Brookner (1996) suggests, in “A wretch like her”, “she beats Simon Jordan at his own game, and shows herself to be a first-class manipulator of mental phenomena”. As the character says, “the cellar walls are all around me, and I know I will never get out. This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story” (ATWOOD, 1997, p. 7), making it clear that she is in control, that she knows what she is talking about.

Dr. Simon Jordan is a psychiatrist who believes firmly he is able to find out whether Grace is guilty or not guilty of the perpetrated crimes. Thus, he asks her to tell him her story. As she does so, the reader gets to know that: she is an Irish girl whose mother died during the trip to Canada; she became a servant at a very early age in order to escape hunger and an abusive father; she becomes friend to another servant, Mary Whitney, who dies after a badly succeeded abortion; she accepts a job at Mr. Kinnear’s house, because there she would be better paid, and also due to a promise of friendship with the housekeeper; that Nancy Montgomery, one of the victims, was responsible for hiring to work in the farm. The reader also learns, from Marks’s account, that she is a very sensitive girl who, following what Spiritualists say, can be easily dominated by spiritual (or demoniac) forces. Such possible domination, that she narrates in a hesitant voice, is a way she finds to say that she had no conscience of the events; she could not remember the killings, because she was not herself. The way she talks about the murders, for instance, is unclear, “dreamy and vague” (BROOKNER, online), as if she were not conscious of what was happening. In a certain sense, she is very conscious of everything, but she needs to pretend she is not, in order to build an identity of her own. As Coral Ann Howells proposes, in *Private and Fictional Worlds*, the novel can be read as “a women’s fictive autobiography where Grace eludes patriarchal constructions of her identity” (HOWELLS, 2003, p. 30), meaning, therefore, that Grace Marks acts in order to manipulate people and make them believe she is innocent of the accusations. Because of her acting, she ends up alive and free. As it is described in Novelguide.com, in “Alias Grace”:

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 (NOVELGUIDE.COM, online)

As Joyce Hart (ONLINE) says, in “Critical Essay on *Alias Grace*”, “[t]he identity of Grace Marks is confusing because it is complicated by her either trying to protect her innocence or trying to hide her guilt”, as the convicted girl controls all her actions while in prison, for, when she tried to be herself, she was sent to the asylum, as a lunatic. Hart also says that Grace Marks is not only a prisoner by law, but 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”. (HART, online).

Atwood’s review and rewriting of Moodie’s account on Grace Marks is a way of revisiting Canadian history, and also of presenting the way women were seen and treated in that period. The way Dr. Jordan describes Grace Marks is a clear indication on how 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal society saw women: feeble, hysterical, weak. What is interesting to point out is that it was this sexist thought that prevented Marks from being executed: as it is stated in Novelguide.com (ONLINE),

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.



It is not by chance that the character says she would “rather be a murderess than a murder” if such were her choices. She shows once more how conscious she is of herself, and of her possibilities as a woman, possibilities a man would not have.

A very important issue to be discussed here concerns madness in contrast with spiritual possession. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a “phenomenal spread of Spiritualism across the US” (THE CANADIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA, online) that reached Canada and has certainly influenced people from different backgrounds and social status. Communication with the dead people is one of the most important aspects of Spiritualism, as well as the possibility of spiritual possession. Because many people surrounding Grace Marks (in Atwood’s novel) believed in such things, she acts accordingly in order to make people believe her innocence. To sceptical doctors, like Simon Jordan, her behavior could be either just an act, or a proof of her allegedly madness, the reason why she had spent sometime in the Asylum. Madness itself is treated in Atwood’s novel not as pathology, but as a social construction: people who do not behave according to certain social rules are considered mad. Grace Marks learns, in a very painful way, to follow those rules. As Harris and Pinho point out, in “(In)sanidade em *Alias Grace*”, in Atwood’s novel the concept of madness is arbitrary. The criteria used to classify someone as mad is social class, not mental health. Marks’s crime is outrageous not just because lives are lost, but mainly because it represents an act of insubordination. Thus, “the relationship between madness, or better, the labelling of madness, and poverty portrayed by Atwood in the novel is a traditional act of social segregation”<sup>2</sup> (ONLINE). As Foucault says, in *História da Loucura*,

in the history of madness, it [hospitalization] designates a decisive event: the moment when madness is perceived on the social horizon of poverty, inability to work, the inability to integrate into the group, the moment it starts to insert in the text of the city’s problems. The new meanings attributed to poverty, the importance given to the obligation of work and all the ethical values attached to it that determine the experience made of madness and change its meaning. (FOULCAULT, 2000, p. 89).<sup>3</sup>

Grace Marks was not only poor, was Irish and a woman. Thus, it was quite easy and very socially accepted to label her mad. In one of the moments of her

narration, when she is possessed by Mary Whitney, or pretending to be, the relationship between such behavior and madness is quite clear:

“Here! With Grace, where I am now. It was so cold, lying on the floor, and I was all alone; I needed to keep warm. But Grace doesn’t know, she’s never known!” The voice is no longer teasing. “They almost hanged her, but that would have been wrong. She knew nothing! I only borrowed her clothing for a time.”

“Her clothing?” says Simon.

“Her earthly shell. Her fleshly garment. She forgot to open the window, and so I couldn’t get out! But I wouldn’t want to hurt her. You mustn’t tell her!” The little voice is pleading now.

“Why not?” asks Simon.

“You know why, Dr. Jordan. Do you want to see her back in the Asylum? I liked it there at first, I could talk out loud there. I could laugh. I could tell what happened. But no one listened to me.” There is a small, thin sobbing.

“I was not heard.”

“Grace,” says Simon. “Stop playing tricks!”

“I am not Grace,” says the voice, more tentatively.

“Is that really you?” Simon asks it. “Are you telling the truth? Don’t be afraid.”

“You see?” wails the voice. “You’re the same, you won’t listen to me, you don’t believe me, you want it your own way, you won’t hear. . . .” It trails off, and there is silence.

“She’s gone,” says Mrs. Quennell. “You can always tell when they go back to their own realm. You can feel it in the air; it’s the electricity.”

For a long moment nobody says anything. Then Dr. DuPont moves. “Grace,” he says, bending over her. “Grace Marks, can you hear me?” He lays his hand on her shoulder.

There’s another long pause, during which they can hear Grace breathing, unevenly now, as if in troubled sleep. “Yes,” she says at last. It’s her usual voice. (ATWOOD, 1997, p. 468-469)

A very important aspect of Mark’s life is presented in the passage above: the fact that no one listened to women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Believing or not in

possessions, spirits, or whatever, what becomes clear is that the use of alias is a way Marks find to protect herself, consciously or unconsciously, in order to say she was not involved in the murders, to avoid death.

**Abstract:** Susanna Moodie includes a whole chapter about Grace Marks on her book *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, and it is through the reading of Moodie's text that many Canadian readers, including Margaret Atwood, get in contact with the history of that woman, who, convicted by murder, spent almost thirty years in prison, and was finally pardoned. In this paper I intend to compare the way Moodie, and Atwood after her, portrays the history of Grace Marks, especially the way in which Marks constructs her identity in Atwood's novel. Being Marks a disturbed character, discussing her identity, both as female and as Canadian, is a central point in analyzing her behavior. For that, I have dealt with the theories of Gardiner, Christ and Humm about female identity. And because Marks is a historical character, not only a fictional one, I have also dealt with the theories of Hayden White about history and literature. It is possible to conclude that Marks is a controversial and complex character, and that her identity is built through the use of alias in a way of disguising and protecting herself.

**Keywords:** identity; history; literature.

**Résumé:** Susanna Moodie consacre un chapitre entier à Grace Marks dans son livre *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, et c'est par la lecture du texte de Moodie que de nombreux lecteurs canadiens, dont Margaret Atwood, entrent en contact avec l'histoire de cette femme, qui, condamnée par meurtre, a passé près de trente ans en prison, avant d'être finalement graciée. Dans cet article, j'ai l'intention de comparer la façon dont Moodie, et Atwood plus tard, retracent l'histoire de Grace Marks, en particulier la manière dont Marks construit son identité dans le roman de Margaret Atwood. Étant donné le trouble de Marks, réfléchir sur son identité, en tant que femme et en tant que canadienne, est une question centrale dans l'analyse de son comportement. Pour cela, j'ai tiré parti des analyses de Gardiner, Christ et Humm sur l'identité féminine. Et parce que Marks est un personnage historique, non seulement une fiction, je me suis également inspirée des théories de Hayden White sur l'histoire et la littérature. Il est possible de conclure que Marks est un personnage controversé et complexe, et que son identité se construit grâce à l'utilisation d'un pseudonyme comme une façon de se déguiser et de se protéger.

**Mots clés:** identité; histoire; littérature.

## Notas

- <sup>1</sup> In the original: “no permanente jogo de contrastes que se constrói a alteridade e se consolida o sentimento de identidade” – my translation.
- <sup>2</sup> In the original: “A relação existente entre a loucura, ou antes, entre a rotulação de loucura e a pobreza retratada por Atwood no romance é um ato tradicional de segregação social.” – my translation.
- <sup>3</sup> In the portuguese version: “Mas na história do desatino, ela designa um evento decisivo: o momento em que a loucura é percebida no horizonte social da pobreza, da incapacidade para o trabalho, da impossibilidade de integrar-se no grupo; o momento em que começa a inserir-se no texto dos problemas da cidade. As novas significações atribuídas à pobreza, a importância dada à obrigação do trabalho e todos os valores éticos a ele ligados determinam a experiência que se faz da loucura e modificam-lhe o sentido.” – my translation.

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