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Quilted Selves and Shadowed Psyches: A Psychoanalytic Study of Grace Marks

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Abstract— *This paper examines Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace through Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic frameworks, focusing on the psychological complexity of Grace Marks, a historical figure convicted of murder in 19th-century Canada. The novel's fragmented narrative, recurring motifs, and symbolic textures create a rich terrain for exploring themes of repression, trauma, and identity. Grace's disjointed memory and ambiguous role in the murders are interpreted as signs of deep psychological distress, particularly tied to the repression of sexual trauma and loss. Drawing from Freud's concepts of the unconscious, hysteria, and the death drive, as well as post-Freudian ideas on dissociation and trauma narratives, the paper argues that Grace's psyche functions as a quilted self—stitched together by fragments of repressed memories, alter egos, and symbolic dream language. The novel also interrogates the patriarchal structures of medicine and psychiatry through Grace's interactions with Dr. Simon Jordan, whose clinical gaze and erotic transference reflect both the objectification of female hysterics and his own unresolved Oedipal conflicts. Symbols such as quilts, mirrors, fruit, and locked rooms serve as unconscious signifiers, revealing buried desires and traumas. Rather than offering a conclusive psychological diagnosis, Atwood resists closure, constructing Grace as a fluid, unstable subject whose multiplicity challenges dominant narratives of truth, guilt, and sanity. Ultimately, Alias Grace becomes both a critique of 19th-century psychiatric discourse and a postmodern meditation on the unknowability of the human mind.*

Keywords— ***Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace, Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Repression, Dissociative Identity, Female Hysteria.***

I. INTRODUCTION: FREUD IN THE QUILTS

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) presents itself not just as historical fiction but as a complex psychological case study, one that resists straightforward interpretation and invites layered readings through psychoanalytic theory. Based on the real-life case of Grace Marks, a 16-year-old domestic servant convicted of murder in 1843 Canada, the novel reconstructs her story through interviews, memories, dreams, and fragmentary testimonies. Grace's psychological depth, combined with Atwood's metafictional techniques and embedded critiques of gender and power, make *Alias Grace* particularly fertile ground for Freudian and post-Freudian analysis.

The novel's very structure echoes the psychoanalytic case study—Dr. Simon Jordan, a rising star in 19th-century psychiatry, seeks to uncover the truth about Grace's involvement in the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. In doing so, he mirrors Freud's role as both scientist and confessor. Grace becomes the subject of analysis, her unconscious mind the territory to be decoded, and her narrative the field where repression, hysteria, dissociation, and the death drive surface in unpredictable ways. Atwood deftly destabilizes the reader's reliance on any singular "truth" by presenting multiple perspectives and unreliable narrators, reflecting Freud's insight that the psyche is never fully transparent to itself.

As Zhang Yating notes, Atwood constructs Grace as a "hysterical subject" whose fragmented self must be read through the very discourses that seek to contain her—medical, legal, and psychoanalytic. *Alias Grace*, then, is not only a historical mystery but a deeply psychoanalytic novel, in which quilt patterns, dreams, and silences become as revealing as confessions. This paper applies Freudian and post-Freudian lenses to examine Grace's fractured psyche—her dissociation, defenses, symbolic imagination, and encounters with the clinical gaze. In

doing so, it will argue that Grace Marks is less a subject to be understood than a psychic text to be interpreted.

II. REPRESSION, TRAUMA, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

At the core of Grace Marks' characterization in *Alias Grace* lies a profound psychic opacity. Her supposed amnesia regarding the double murder she was convicted for—alongside James McDermott—forms the central mystery of the novel. This repression, a cornerstone of Freudian psychoanalysis, functions as a defense mechanism that shields the ego from memories too traumatic to bear. Freud posited that repression, especially in the context of traumatic or taboo desires, often returns in disguised forms—through symptoms, dreams, or slips. In Grace's case, her fragmented memory is not absence but a symptom of deeply buried trauma.

Early in the novel, Grace herself questions her truth:

"When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all… it's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 5).

This line hints at the retroactive construction of memory, where repression delays coherent narrative formation. Grace's inability—or refusal—to clearly recall the murders suggests a split within the psyche, between the narrating "I" and the knowing unconscious. What remains unspeakable resurfaces in subtle ways: through her dreams, associations, and moments of silence or confusion during questioning.

The trauma Grace has endured is manifold—childhood abuse, starvation, immigration, loss of her mother on the voyage to Canada, and, most poignantly, the death of Mary Whitney, her best friend and emotional anchor. Mary's death from a botched abortion marks a decisive rupture in Grace's psyche. The language Atwood uses to describe Grace's reaction is subdued, almost numb, as though her mind has recoiled from the horror. Grace does not process the event in a cathartic narrative, but rather submerges it, echoing Freud's model of latent trauma—an event that becomes traumatic only through its return.

This repression finds further manifestation in Grace's ambiguous relationship to Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear's housekeeper and mistress. Grace exhibits contradictory emotions—admiration, jealousy, resentment—and narrates these feelings with measured ambiguity. Nancy, in many ways, mirrors Mary Whitney: a woman who exerts influence, both caring and cruel, over Grace. When Nancy is murdered, Grace's mind fractures again, and her selective amnesia sets in. As H. Tiedemann argues, "the breakdown of Grace's psychic continuity is not merely a legal puzzle but a mirror of 19th-century gendered trauma" (Tiedemann, 2001).

Freud's notion of the return of the repressed also operates symbolically. The name "Mary Whitney" returns in unexpected moments. During a hypnosis session with Jeremiah the peddler, Grace appears to be "possessed" by Mary's spirit—a literalization of the divided self and repressed memory. This scene dramatizes the conflict between ego and unconscious, casting Mary as both alter ego and revenant of trauma.

"It's not Grace speaking… It's Mary Whitney. She's come back from the dead" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 417).

In psychoanalytic terms, this moment could be seen as a collapse of repression, where the unconscious asserts itself through a dissociative trance. Rather than remembering Mary, Grace becomes her, illustrating Freud's idea that repressed content often returns in disguised or symbolic forms.

Post-Freudian theorists like Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth have emphasized that trauma resists narrative closure. Grace's story aligns with this view: her tale is full of gaps, contradictions, and narrative slippage. These are not signs of deceit but indicators of psychic wounds too deep for linear telling.

Thus, Grace's fragmented memory is not an anomaly to be resolved but a truth of trauma itself. Her repression is not only personal—it is cultural, gendered, and symptomatic of a world that punishes female desire, curiosity, and agency. *Alias Grace* forces us to read these silences not as absences, but as rich with unconscious meaning.

III. HYSTERIA AND THE CLINICAL GAZE

One of the most significant psychoanalytic frameworks in *Alias Grace* is the concept of female hysteria, especially as interpreted in the 19th century through the lens of male-dominated science and psychiatry. Grace Marks is treated not only as a criminal subject but also as a hysteric—an "unruly" woman whose psyche and body become a site of both fascination and control. Atwood critiques the historical treatment of women as psychologically unstable and pathologized beings, while simultaneously portraying Grace as someone who skillfully navigates, manipulates, and sometimes subverts the clinical gaze.

The term "hysteria" itself, rooted in the Greek word *hystera* (womb), historically framed women's emotional excesses as disorders of the reproductive system. Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) interpreted hysteria not as fakery but as a manifestation of unconscious conflict, often rooted in repressed sexuality or trauma. In *Alias Grace*, these dynamics are echoed in the

relationship between Grace and Dr. Simon Jordan, who represents the scientific rationalism of the era. Yet, as much as Jordan attempts to penetrate the secrets of Grace's psyche, he is constantly thwarted by her indirectness, her silences, her narrative diversions.

Grace reflects on her interactions with Jordan with ironic detachment:

"He thinks I am a child. He wants to pet me, like a dog. He wants to tame me, or perhaps to rescue me, like a princess in a tower" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 288).

This observation illustrates the power imbalance in the therapeutic dynamic and alludes to what Michel Foucault terms the **"**medical gaze**"**—the reduction of the patient to an object of knowledge and surveillance. Grace's body, her femininity, and her trauma become data points for Jordan's scientific ambitions, yet she remains elusive, never quite what he expects.

Atwood constructs Grace as a woman whose hysterical "symptoms"—memory loss, dreams, possession—challenge the authority of psychiatry. She is both subject and spectacle, aware of the role she is being asked to play. During her trance/hypnosis scene, Grace "becomes" Mary Whitney, and the men in the room (Jordan, Reverend Verringer) interpret this as either fraud or evidence of possession. Atwood allows neither interpretation to dominate, keeping Grace's psyche resistant to capture.

H. Tiedemann notes that *Alias Grace* "reanimates the figure of the hysteric not to reaffirm male diagnosis but to show how female subjectivity is written over, fragmented, and surveilled" (2001). Grace's "hysteria" is not a simple psychological state but a cultural construction, emerging from her gender, class, and vulnerability.

Atwood's portrayal of hysteria also parallels Freud's early recognition that hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences—memories turned pathological. Grace's symptoms—her silences, her gaze, her fragmented storytelling—are acts of resistance as much as illness. Her refusal to provide a neat narrative destabilizes the power dynamics of the clinic, positioning her not as a helpless patient but as a performer of psychoanalytic ambiguity.

Thus, *Alias Grace* interrogates the clinical gaze and the historical treatment of women's minds, exposing the gendered biases of early psychiatry while simultaneously using the tools of psychoanalysis to reveal the depths and duplicities of Grace's psyche.

IV. DISSOCIATION AND MULTIPLE SELVES

Grace Marks's psychological fragmentation in *Alias Grace* is most vividly realized through the theme of dissociation—a key post-Freudian concept that reflects the mind's defense against unprocessable trauma. Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder) arises when a person develops distinct identities or "alters" as a way of compartmentalizing traumatic experiences. Atwood subtly weaves this phenomenon into the narrative, suggesting that Grace's identity is quilted together from pieces of self, memory, and repression.

The clearest manifestation of dissociation in the novel occurs during the hypnosis scene, in which Grace, under trance, appears to become possessed by the spirit of Mary Whitney. Jeremiah the peddler, now posing as a hypnotist, guides her into an altered state. There, "Mary" speaks through Grace:

"She has gone inside the veil… Grace is not here. It's me. It's Mary Whitney, come back from the dead" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 417).

This moment can be interpreted as literal spiritual possession, but through a psychoanalytic lens, it reads as a dramatic externalization of Grace's inner split. Mary's voice emerges as an "alter," allowing Grace to express feelings—rage, guilt, grief—that her conscious self cannot integrate. This is textbook dissociation: Grace, as a traumatized subject, splits her psyche to protect herself from unbearable knowledge and emotional pain.

Notably, Mary Whitney was Grace's closest companion and a figure of rebellious vitality. After Mary's death due to a secret abortion—a trauma Grace internalizes without resolution—her voice begins to echo within Grace, not only metaphorically but psychically. The loss of Mary does not lead to mourning; instead, it leads to internal incorporation, a kind of haunting that Freud described in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), where the mourner identifies with the lost object so deeply that the ego is altered.

Throughout the novel, Grace's identity is constructed and deconstructed by others. To the newspapers, she is a "fiend"; to Simon Jordan, a "puzzle"; to herself, she is both actor and acted-upon. Atwood emphasizes this multiplicity through narrative fragmentation: the reader receives the story through Grace's filtered memories, Jordan's notes, and third-person excerpts, none of which offer a stable truth. This polyvocality mirrors the split subject—a psyche divided by trauma, class oppression, and gender expectations.

The motif of mirrors recurs in the text, reinforcing Grace's fractured identity. In one scene, she observes her reflection:

"Sometimes at night I would look into the glass and wonder whether that was really me… It seemed too much

to expect that there should be two of me" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 284).

Here, the mirror becomes not a device of self-recognition but of uncanny estrangement, invoking Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage—a moment of identification that is always underwritten by misrecognition. Grace sees herself and yet does not, an experience that encapsulates the uncanny in Freudian terms: the familiar becomes strange, the self becomes other.

In dramatizing dissociation, Atwood resists closure. She does not resolve whether Grace is innocent or guilty, sane or mad, possessed or repressing. Instead, she presents a plural subject, one whose fractured mind reflects the psychic toll of trauma, gendered violence, and social marginalization. Grace's multiplicity is her wound—but also, perhaps, her mode of survival.

V. SYMBOLISM, DREAMS, AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Alias Grace is richly symbolic, and Margaret Atwood uses the unconscious language of dreams, recurring images, and objects to construct a text that functions like a dreamscape—discontinuous, layered, and governed by repressed desire and trauma. Through Freudian and post-Freudian lenses, these symbols—quilts, fruit, locked rooms, mirrors, and especially dreams—reveal the buried content of Grace Marks's psyche and expose the mechanisms by which trauma is both concealed and communicated.

One of the most persistent and significant symbolic structures in the novel is the quilt. Each chapter is named after a quilt pattern: "Pandora's Box," "Jagged Edge," "Tree of Paradise," and so on. These serve not just as decorative motifs but as metaphors for the psyche—fragmented, stitched together, holding disparate pieces in uneasy alignment. As Grace herself remarks:

"A quilt is a sort of a thing you spread on a bed; it is made of patches, cut from old clothes... things that have been worn out, or torn or stained" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 241).

In this analogy, the quilt mirrors Grace's identity, patched together from discarded memories, violated moments, and half-told stories. The quilt is both a product of female labor and a symbol of repression—a domestic object that conceals deeper, darker realities beneath.

Freud emphasized that dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious," and dreams in *Alias Grace* are central to both Grace's and Simon Jordan's characters. Jordan's dreams are revealing in their grotesqueness and erotic confusion:

"He dreamed of Grace's face, twisted and pale... her hair was coiled around his throat like a rope" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 278).

This dream fuses desire, guilt, and strangulation—suggesting both erotic transference and unconscious fears about being overpowered by female sexuality. Jordan, ostensibly the analyst, is also the dreamer, subject to unconscious drives and projections. He is not above Grace, but entangled in the same web of desire and repression.

Grace's own dreams are more elusive. She often dreams of Mary Whitney, and those dreams bleed into hallucinations and trance states. These nocturnal visions, like her waking slips in memory, are coded forms of speech, expressions of repressed trauma that cannot be fully articulated. Freud's concept of dream condensation and displacement—where latent content is disguised through symbols—is vital here. Mary becomes a symbolic stand-in for Grace's desire, guilt, and rage, appearing in dreams as a return of the repressed.

Objects also serve as unconscious signifiers. The apple, often associated with knowledge and temptation, appears when Grace is in Kinnear's home, subtly invoking Edenic transgression and repressed sexual desire. The locked chest in Nancy's room, which Grace is forbidden to open, becomes a classic Freudian symbol of repression—the sealed container of taboo content.

"I thought of looking in it. But I was afraid to... I did not wish to see what was inside it" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 132).

Here, the locked chest represents both Nancy's secrets and Grace's own unconscious, and her refusal to open it aligns with the mechanism of repression itself—the refusal to know.

Mirrors and reflective surfaces frequently unsettle Grace's sense of self. These not only reinforce the theme of dissociation, as discussed earlier, but also function as Freudian symbols of the ego, often fractured or distorted in the face of trauma. Grace's unease in front of her reflection is an acknowledgment of a self that is no longer whole.

In addition, the motif of fruit recurs—often in sexualized or violent contexts, hinting at repressed desire. During one memory, Grace recalls Mary biting into a peach, juice dripping down her chin—an image that merges sensual pleasure with foreshadowed death.

All these symbols—quilts, dreams, fruit, locked objects—create a textured, unconscious fabric that mirrors the workings of Grace's psyche. They also mimic the therapeutic process, in which seemingly disconnected elements are gradually assembled into meaning.

Through these symbols, Atwood constructs a world where the unconscious speaks continuously, if not clearly. Grace's silence is filled with these signs. Psychoanalysis becomes not just a theme, but a method of reading the novel itself—decoding the quilted fragments to find the deeper patterns of repression, desire, and defense.

VI. EROTIC TRANSFERENCE AND THE OEDIPAL DR. JORDAN

While Grace Marks is ostensibly the subject of analysis in *Alias Grace*, it is Dr. Simon Jordan who undergoes perhaps the most subtle psychological unraveling. His fascination with Grace becomes increasingly charged with erotic projection, a phenomenon Freud referred to as transference—the redirection of unconscious desires and conflicts onto another person, often within a therapeutic relationship. Jordan's feelings toward Grace oscillate between professional curiosity, paternalism, and latent sexual desire, revealing his own unresolved psychic tensions.

From early in the novel, Jordan's gaze is both scientific and voyeuristic. He imagines her in domestic and sexual terms:

"He sees her in her cell, sitting quietly, her head bent, sewing with delicate, competent fingers. He thinks of her hands on his body" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 245).

This moment reveals his attempt to reconcile Grace's perceived innocence with his sexual fantasies—an internal conflict typical of Oedipal dynamics. Jordan's inability to separate his investigative role from his desire mirrors Freud's concept of counter-transference, where the analyst projects their own unconscious onto the patient.

Jordan also exhibits signs of an unresolved maternal complex. His relationship with his own mother is marked by suffocation and control, and Grace becomes a vessel through which he displaces this ambivalence. As Zhang Yating suggests, "Dr. Jordan's erotic fixation on Grace is less about her than it is about his own internal voids" (2009).

Ultimately, Jordan fails to "cure" or possess Grace. She eludes his interpretations and confounds his desire. This failure can be seen as the collapse of the Oedipal fantasy—the analyst-hero who cannot penetrate the mystery of the feminine. In psychoanalytic terms, Grace becomes the "phallic woman"—the unknowable object of both desire and fear, undoing Jordan's illusion of control.

VII. DEFENSE MECHANISMS AND THANATOS

In *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks's psyche is structured not only around repression and dissociation but also a constellation of defense mechanisms that shield her from traumatic knowledge. Freud identified defenses such as denial, projection, and intellectualization as unconscious strategies to cope with internal conflict. Grace exhibits many of these—often simultaneously—revealing the extent to which her identity is a carefully maintained fiction created for psychic survival.

For example, her apparent intellectualization of Mary Whitney's death allows her to distance herself from grief. She narrates Mary's abortion and subsequent death with a detached tone:

"She was stiff, her mouth was open. Her hands were cold. She didn't answer me" (*Alias Grace*, Atwood 154).

Rather than expressing direct emotion, Grace observes clinically—repressing affect through objective language. Similarly, Grace often deflects trauma through storytelling, weaving long tangents or memories into her narrative to avoid painful topics. This may be seen as a kind of narrative projection, allowing her to speak of herself without directly confronting truth.

The specter of Thanatos, Freud's death drive, haunts the novel as well. Grace's repeated proximity to death—her mother's burial at sea, Mary's botched abortion, Nancy's murder, her own trial and near-execution—reveals an unconscious flirtation with annihilation. These deaths are not simply external events but become internalized losses, shaping Grace's unconscious will. The calmness with which she discusses death, and her ambiguous role in the murders, hint at a latent identification with death as both punishment and escape.

Atwood does not present Grace as suicidal, but her life is suffused with a quiet mourning, a resignation that borders on submission to fate. Her survival is not triumphant—it is **a** negotiation with Thanatos, where living becomes its own form of resistance against psychic erasure.

VIII. CONCLUSION: GRACE'S PSYCHE AS PATCHWORK

Grace Marks, the enigmatic center of *Alias Grace*, defies resolution—not only for Dr. Simon Jordan and the judicial system but also for readers and critics. Her identity remains fragmented, multifaceted, and elusive. This paper has shown that Atwood's rendering of Grace is not an accident of narrative ambiguity but a deliberate evocation of a psyche shaped by trauma, repression, and dissociation, and legible only through the symbolic, the unconscious, and the unsaid.

Psychoanalysis, especially in its Freudian and post-Freudian articulations, provides a valuable interpretive framework for understanding Grace's interiority. Her patchy memory, trance-like states, symbolic dreams, and evasive speech act not as evidence of deception but as markers of a traumatized subject negotiating psychic survival. The themes of repression, hysteria, dissociative identity, and the death drive are all stitched into her narrative like the quilts she sews—each fragment meaningful, each gap significant.

Atwood simultaneously critiques and employs psychoanalysis. Grace is positioned within the 19th-century discourse of female hysteria, subjected to the medical and legal male gaze, yet she retains agency by withholding coherence, refusing the narrative of either innocence or guilt. Her multiplicity becomes a form of resistance—a refusal to be "cured," explained, or consumed.

Grace's final silence is perhaps her most powerful act. By neither confirming nor denying her role in the murders, she escapes total inscription into any one truth. Her psyche is a quilt, not a mirror: layered, stitched from scraps, beautiful and unsettling.

Ultimately, *Alias Grace* uses psychoanalytic tropes not only to explore the hidden layers of Grace's mind but to challenge the authority of those who seek to decode her. In doing so, Atwood affirms that identity—especially for women under patriarchy—is not singular or stable but quilted, shadowed, and always partly hidden.

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