

Appropriating History in Margaret Atwood's novels The Handmaid's Tale

And Alias Grace

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Muncie, Indiana

April 1998

May 9, 1998

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Purpose of Thesis

This analysis of Margaret Atwood's appropriation of history is limited to two of her works, The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace. The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that illustrates what could happen to our society if the ideologies of Ronald Reagan and the Religious Right of the 1980's were to become governmental policy. The fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and pornography and the support for religion in government and censorship are traced for their oppressive effects on the women of the fictional society Gilead. Alias Grace is a historical novel based on Atwood's own research into the real case of Grace Marks, a celebrated murderess of the nineteenth century, and Victorian society itself. In the life of Grace and the lives of the characters around her, the restrictive aspects of the Victorian myth, the popularity of the Spiritualist movement, and nineteenth century theories on mental illness work together to document the gender inequality of the time period. Margaret Atwood's use of historical events and societal restrictions of the Reagan and the Victorian era are shown to serve as a way to give oppressed women a voice in literature that they could not have otherwise. The societies in both of the novels, when compared to each other, are found to have similar views concerning the rights of women.

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The search for women's voices in history has been a difficult and tedious task at best. Until very recently, cultural expectations of women have dictated how much they have been able to say about themselves and the world around them. At a few points in time, women have not been able to say virtually anything at all. Margaret Atwood said recently, "the novel has its roots in the mud, and part of the mud is history; and part of the history we've had recently is the history of the women's movement, and the women's movement has influenced how people read, and what you can get away with" (Atwood 4). Two of the most oppressive movements in recent history for women have been the Victorian Era and the Reagan Era. In her novels The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace, Margaret Atwood effectively appropriates historical fact from these two points in time in the lives of her female characters to show how society and the government have worked against the women's movement towards gender equality. In doing this, she is able to explore the minds of these women and their reactions to the world around them. Though they are over a century apart, the ideologies that define Victorianism and the Religious Right of the Reagan years are shown to be strikingly similar.

On August 21, 1980, Ronald Reagan was quoted as saying, before a crowd of journalists and New Evangelical Right supporters, "all the complex questions facing us at home and abroad have their answer in that single book [the Bible]" (Martin 217). In November of that year, he was elected as the next President of the United States. In the two terms that he served, this statement proved to be an ominous sign of how he intended

to run the country. The rise of the Religious Right impacted aspects of our society heavily, especially those concerning women. Inspired and alarmed by this, Margaret Atwood wrote The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopian novel that carries Reagan's desire for a country ruled by the Bible to the extreme. Though it is set in the future, Atwood uses the Religious Right ideas of the 1980's and the backlash against the feminist movement that coincided with it as the basis for Gilead's government and societal rules. Specifically, Reagan's policies and Religious Right ideology concerning abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, legislated religion, pornography, and censorship can be examined for their strong influence on The Handmaid's Tale.

When Reagan was elected in 1980, the Christian Right had already begun to take a tight hold on American society. Through President Reagan, it found a way to push its ideology into the White House and affect policy-making. The Christian (or Religious) Right consisted of several evangelical groups, including the Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable, and the Christian Voice (Wald 226). Reagan appointed Jerry Falwell, the leader of the Moral Majority, as his spiritual advisor while in office (Moen 53). These organizations all shared a common agenda that they called the "profamily program" (Wald 227). Originally termed the "Christian Bill of Rights" by its creator, Jerry Falwell, it opposed gay rights, abortion, pornography, the Equal Rights Amendment, the teaching of evolution in schools, the approval of "immoral" behavior on television, and alcohol and drug abuse (Moen 200). It pushed for voluntary prayer and Bible reading in public schools, tax exemption for churches, and noninterference by the government with Christian school agendas (Wald 227). Perhaps more than anything, the Christian Right stressed that the responsibility for the promotion of the "traditional family

unit” fell upon the government (Wald 227). Throughout his presidency, Reagan proved himself to be a supporter of this system of beliefs. In his 1984 State of the Union address, Reagan devoted an entire section to stressing the importance of “traditional values” such as family, faith, work, and community (Moen 202). He publicly supported the designation of 1983 as the “Year of the Bible” (Moen 54).

Specifically, the Reagan administration made strong efforts to discourage women’s rights to an abortion and equal rights. Reagan called abortion “a wound on the national conscience” and called for more consideration of adoption as an alternative (Moen 204). C. Everett Koop, an avid abortion opponent, became surgeon general (Moen 106). Conservative Justice William A. Rehnquist was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court by Reagan, and Sandra Day O’Connor, Antonin Scalia, and Anthony M. Kennedy were appointed to the Court as well (Moen 172). This resulted in the very narrow 5-4 affirmation of a woman’s right to an abortion by the Supreme Court in 1986 (Moen 172).

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s strong reaction to Reagan’s attempts to outlaw abortion is evident. In Gilead, abortion is an act punishable by death. Offred sees six doctors hung on the Wall with pictures of fetuses around their necks and thinks:

These men, we’ve been told, are like war criminals. It’s no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive.

(Atwood 44)

Babies are indeed the most valuable commodity in this society. A woman gains her status according to her fertility. Women, consumed by jealousy, attack each other physically over pregnancy. Handmaids earn the reward of never being labelled as an Unwoman if they bear a healthy child for the Commander. Indeed, it is a Handmaid's very life that is in jeopardy if she is unsuccessful in conceiving. As she lays upon the doctor's table during her gynecological exam, Offred thinks to herself, "Give me children, or else I die" (Atwood 79). Fetal life is more important than the lives that already exist because the population is in a huge state of decline. The environment has been seriously damaged due to the consumption of natural resources and the pollution of the land, air, and water. As a result, most babies are born with physical malformities and mental defects, if they even survive long enough to be carried to full-term. Once a handmaid gives birth to a healthy child, she is rewarded by never being sent to the Colonies or labeled as an Unwoman. Either one of the two leads to horrible mistreatment and even death for a woman branded as such.

As Reagan failed to encourage the movement towards equal rights for women, Jerry Falwell and his followers became more outspoken against feminists and the liberals that backed them. Ironically, the Equal Rights Amendment came under attack most severely by Phyllis Schlafly and the women of the Religious Right (Martin 162). The Equal Rights Amendment called for the prohibition of sexual discrimination by the states and the government, and equal pay and job opportunities for women (Wald 224). Approved by Congress in 1972, it was quickly ratified in twenty-two state legislatures (Wald 224). Only sixteen states short of adoption, it seemed as though the ERA could not fail. Through the efforts of her rigorous "Stop-ERA" campaign, however, Phyllis

Schlafly and allied antifeminist groups such as the Eagle Forum managed to put an end to its popularity (Wald 224). In 1982, Jerry Falwell called the ERA and the feminist movement "a delusion.... full of women who live in disobedience to God's laws" (Martin 166). According to many of these religious conservatives, God has ordained women to exist as they always have been historically. A woman's special purpose in life is to take up the role of wife and mother. She is not meant to be more successful and "worldly" than a man. Rather, she should stand beside him and support him in his endeavours. The ERA was defeated in 1983, three states short of ratification (Wald 224). Among the citizens in states that failed to ratify, like Utah and Nevada, both high rates of church attendance and membership in fundamentalist denominations were found (Wald 224).

Atwood takes the defeat of the ERA and the Religious Right's anti-feminism a few steps further and presents the reader with a population of women that truly have every personal right stripped of them. The women of Gilead have their names taken away when the new regime takes over. The only jobs that they can have are those that are appointed by the government. They can not receive or use an education. All women are expected to be passive and obey the men around them. They have no voice in government and can not own property. Their marriages are determined for them. Aunt Lydia and the Gileadean government tell the women that it is for their own protection and well-being that things are this way. Aunt Lydia says, "There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to, and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 33). The Handmaids are renamed to be the "personal possessions" of their Commanders (Howells

130). The Handmaids' children are taken away from them and given to other women higher in status to raise. Women are, essentially, "two-legged wombs," denied of any sexual choice in a patriarchal society (Howells 128). When Janine recounts the details of her gang-rape, Aunt Helena and the other Handmaids at the Red Center tell her that it was her fault, chanting that God caused it to teach her a lesson about being a tease (Atwood 93). Two women in the novel, Moira and Serena Joy, represent the opposite sides of the ERA controversy. Serena Joy is an older, formerly prominent gospel singer that bears a striking resemblance to Tammy Faye Baker, one of the most popular Evangelical figures of the 1980's. Once outspoken against the feminist cause, Serena Joy is no longer allowed to make speeches. Offred says, "She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood 61). Moira is the good friend that Offred finds to be an inspiration to her. When she escapes, the Handmaids admire her. She is the rebellious feminist that embodies what women used to be when they fought for their rights. Her spirit can not be broken, until she is forced into prostitution.

Throughout both of his terms as President, Reagan also pushed a strong prayer rhetoric. He stressed the importance of God to the founding of America, the "inherent virtue" of prayer, and he challenged Congress to "halt the double-standard of prayer on Capital Hill, but not in schools" (Moen 203). He specifically saw the legalization of prayer in schools as a way to incorporate religion into education and policy. He stated that there was a need for remedial legislation (Moen 203).

As United States citizens listened to Reagan's speeches and watched him attempt to integrate his Christian values into their legal system, some feared that the line between

church and state was beginning to blur. Gilead itself is a frightening representation of this. Atwood took the rhetoric and practices of 17th century Puritans and made them a part of the mind-set of Gilead. References to women as Handmaids or Jezebels is an example of this, as are the Birthing Stool and the birthing "party" that a Handmaid must undergo with the Commander's wife and her friends (Howells 130). Gilead runs by Old Testament laws of subservience of women to men and severe punishments for crimes, like the Wall hangings and the Salvagings. There is one religion, and one alone. The people live by the strict law of sex for procreation only. Because Gilead has one way of living and one God to worship, there is a strict intolerance of anyone who may be different. Crippled people and barren women are sent away. Free-thinkers are snatched by the Eyes and not seen again. Atwood presents a dark picture of a world run by the Bible, Christian doctrine, and fanaticism, as Reagan and Falwell hoped to do.

One of the most disturbing trends of the Reagan era was the joining of forces between the Christian Right and numerous feminist groups to put a ban on pornography. Though these two sides opposed each other vehemently on every other issue, both felt that pornography is damaging and dangerous. Feminists held that sexually explicit films and magazines exploit women and contribute to violence against them (Wilcox 123). Specifically, groups like Women Against Pornography and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media held that the potential harm to women outweighed the First Amendment rights of the media and favored legislation outlawing depictions of "degrading" sexual images of women (Pell 134). These groups and other smaller ones often held slide shows where women were shown in violent, explicit sexual positions in pornography and degrading poses in magazines and television (Pell 134). They also

picketed adult book shops and theaters using the slogan "take back the night," which came to be associated later with the fight to prevent rape (Pell 134).

The fundamentalist side of the pornography issue was just as outspoken about its opposition to it, but for different reasons. Conservative law professor William A. Stanmeyer of the University of Delaware, active in the fight against pornography, sums up the Christian Right's view best by saying:

First, it is reasonable to assume that a depraved moral outlook can lead to depraved conduct; the harm to society outweighs the right of the publisher of pornography. Second, pornography debases sex; it teaches that human beings are animals; it teaches bad values to children. Third, uninhibited indulgence in excessive sexual pleasure, actually or vicariously, erodes human mental health. And fourth, by using the law to bring about virtue, society improves its ethical standards. (Pell 136)

Basically, they felt that pornography does harm to the human mind, body, and system of morals. They saw themselves as proponents of virtue and decency, and sought to make it their duty to instill this in the rest of the American public.

Atwood's concern over this movement to ban pornography shows up in The Handmaid's Tale several times. The women have to cover themselves as much as possible, most often donning a veil and long cloaks similar to those worn by Islamic women (Brians 2). The Commander quotes a passage from the Bible, 1 Timothy 2:9-11, that reads, "I will that women adorn themselves with modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but with good works" (Atwood 286, Brians 9). When Offred and Ofglen see a group of

Japanese tourists on the street, they stare at the women's clothing and bright make-up. Offred thinks, "We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds about things like this" (Atwood 38). They are taught to cover their bodies and be ashamed of any sort of sexual attraction that a man may have towards them. In this sense, they are responsible for any sexual wrongdoings against them at the hands of men.

Atwood also gives the reader images that coincide with the feminist battle against pornography. Offred's mother, a feminist activist from the 1970's, takes Offred to pornographic magazine burnings when Offred is a child. She remembers, "The woman handed me one of those magazines. It had a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands. I looked at it with interest. It didn't frighten me" (Atwood 51). Atwood implies here that people do not have either an inborn sense of repulsion towards pornography or a fear of it. Such feelings are taught and learned. Aunt Lydia, like the feminist opponents of pornography, shows "old" pornographic films from the seventies and eighties to the Handmaids as part of their education. The films contain graphic and violent content, like "women hanging upside-down from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed" (Atwood 152). Aunt Lydia then points out to the Handmaids, "You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then" (Atwood 152). She stresses the difference between the former society that promoted violence against women and the present society that protects them from such harm. If men are not allowed to see such images, then they will not feel that it is acceptable to commit atrocities against women.

Pornography was not the only thing that the Christian Right and Reagan wanted to restrict. Soon after Reagan took office, censorship in the federal government and schools became commonplace. In the fall of 1981, Reagan distributed copies of an executive order that required officials to keep documents secret when there was any "reasonable doubt" about the need for classification. Signed on April 2, 1982, the order also expanded the CIA's right to spy on other Americans. Also in 1981, Attorney General William French Smith announced that there needed to be changes made in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). These changes allowed businesses and the federal government to make it a long, difficult process to receive information that needed only to be requested in the past. The also kept judges from having the power to decide if information was properly classified. In the fall of 1982 the battle to weaken the FOIA failed in Congress, but Reagan had by now shown his strong determination to keep the public as ignorant about the matters of government as possible (Pell 52-58).

While this was going on, precedents involving censorship in schools were being set. Parents in Kanawha County, West Virginia scored a major victory against "offensive, obscene, unpatriotic" English texts that became well-known around the country (Wald 223). Schools began banning books like The Wizard of Oz and Huckleberry Finn because of things like the presence of a witch in the text and the use of offensive language (Wilcox 12). Teen magazines like *Ms.* found themselves kept from the eyes of the youth that they were written for without signed parental consent because of sexual content and gynecological articles (Pell 116). Perhaps the most notorious book banners were the Gablers. At the 1982 hearings of the Texas State Textbook Committee, they proclaimed that parents should not encourage their children to exercise their minds

in school, saying, "leaving students to make up their own minds about things just isn't fair to our children" (Pell 121). The Gablers succeeded in getting 18 of the 28 books that they brought before the committee banned (Pell 122).

Gilead has taken every right guaranteed by the First Amendment and the Freedom Of Information Act away from its citizens. No information is released to the people without governmental knowledge and tainting. The citizens only know what their leaders want them to know. The Eyes, their version of the CIA, spy on citizens and keep track of any conduct that may be against their rules. Offred speaks numerous times of the fear that she and the others have of saying anything out loud that could be construed as defiance towards Gilead. No one really knows what happens to people that are taken by the Eyes for such offenses. There is no freedom of the press in Gilead. Magazines and newspapers have been banned. The Handmaids are not allowed to read at all. Offred must do her shopping by matching pictures of what she needs from coupons and shop signs. The universities and schools have been closed. Books are confiscated and considered contraband. When Offred enters the Commander's study and sees what he keeps there, she thinks, "Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare" (Atwood 177). The Commander asks her to play a game of Scrabble with him, and she is thrilled. As she plays, she thinks, "I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it" (Atwood 180).

Margaret Atwood, in creating her dystopian vision of what could happen if one group gains enough power, points out a basic fact that Reagan lost sight of. While he

contended that our nation was built upon faith in God, he failed to acknowledge that it was also founded by people with a desire to preserve and maintain personal freedom. He and the ideology of the Religious Right returned women to their positions as second-class citizens and worked against gays and other minorities as much as it could. It is important to bear in mind that a dystopia is “a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities” (Brians 1). Atwood does not attempt to make Gileadean society a prediction of what she believes the future will be. Rather, The Handmaid's Tale serves as a “wake-up call” to those of us that should be concerned about the kind of impending oppression brought on by any group that is allowed to gain too much power.

In addition to using her talents to generate an interest in social and political issues of the present, Margaret Atwood takes her readers 150 years into the past in her most current novel, Alias Grace. In it, Atwood creates a fictional story based on the actual events and details surrounding the case of Grace Marks, who was possibly the most celebrated murderess of her day. As Grace's story unfolds, the reader is given a chance to see how Atwood challenges the Victorian myth, uses the Spiritualist movement, and presents theories on mental illness to show their effects on the women of the nineteenth century.

First, the details of the murders and the lives of those involved lent themselves to a large amount of sensationalism in the press. Grace Marks was a sixteen-year-old servant employed at the home of Thomas Kinnear in Richmond Hill, Canada. She was said to be extremely attractive and of a pleasant disposition. On July 23, 1843, Mr. Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, were murdered at the Kinnear home.

She had been axed in the head and strangled, while he had been shot in the chest. Both of the bodies were discovered in the cellar the next day, and a search was immediately called for Grace Marks and the other servant, James McDermott. The two were found to be staying in separate rooms at a hotel in the United States the next night, laden with clothing and valuables belonging to Mr. Kinnear and Nancy. Stories of a love affair between Grace and McDermott quickly appeared in the newspapers, and Kinnear and Nancy's longtime sexual involvement was revealed when autopsy reports showed that she had been pregnant when she died. Grace claimed that McDermott had committed the murders and forced her to go with him to the United States, while McDermott said that Grace had killed Nancy herself and had planned the scheme. He also said that Grace had bribed him with promises of sex if he would kill Mr. Kinnear and Nancy. Grace and McDermott were both tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for Kinnear's murder. However, due to a substantial group of petitioners and her lawyer, Grace's sentence was commuted to life in prison. McDermott was publicly hanged on November 21, 1843, claiming until the moment of his death that Grace was at fault. Grace served her sentence at the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston until she was pardoned in 1872. She moved to New York, where no further record of her exists (Atwood 460-461). Alias Grace is supposed to be written in 1869, 16 years after the murders and at the time in Grace's life when she has already spent half of it in prison.

Using these bare facts along with letters and her own research, Atwood re-created the Victorian society Grace existed in. The ideal woman of this period lived by a strict set of rules and expectations that restricted every aspect of her life. Victorians came to call issues concerning "sexual inequality in politics, economic life, education, and social

intercourse" the famous "Woman Question" (Abrams 902). Women could not vote and had virtually no say in government (Smith-Rosenberg 15). Married women struggled to own and handle their own property (Abrams 903). Very little educational opportunities existed for the woman who wished to forego the role of wife and mother and pursue a career of her own (Smith-Rosenberg 17). Because of horrible working conditions and pay, many women were forced into lives of prostitution (Abrams 903). Nevertheless, Victorian women were held to the "angel in the house" image and all that it stood for (Abrams 904). They were expected to be completely selfless and pure in every way (Abrams 904). A woman was to be kept protected from the ills of society, and her role was to be a subservient wife and a gentle mother (Delamont and Duffin 21).

It is apparent, then, why this Victorian society was fascinated by Grace Marks. Who she was and what she was rumored to have done went against every expectation of how women should be. Though she claims to have been forced to accompany McDermott after the murders, she is found with him alone in a hotel room late at night. Grace thinks to herself:

That is what really interests them- the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes. (Atwood 27)

Grace's situation epitomizes the double standard of morality in Victorian society, or the "angel and the whore" image (Delamont and Duffin 31). For those that choose to believe that she is an innocent victim that was forced to be an accomplice by McDermott, she is

the angel. The petitioners for her release blame her actions on everything from amnesia to insanity. They are unable to consider that a Victorian woman can also be a brutal killer. Those that want her to be kept in jail and blame her for the murders see her as an evil temptress that seduced McDermott and used sex to get him to murder Kinnear and Nancy. Margaret Atwood herself says:

One group felt that women were feeble and incapable of definite action; that is, that Grace must have been compelled by force to run away with McDermott and that she was a victim. Other people took the view that women, when they got going, were inherently more evil than men, and that it was therefore Grace who had instigated the crime and led McDermott on. So you had a real split between woman as demon and woman as pathetic. (Rozen 4-5)

At the same time, Dr. Simon Jordan, Grace's psychiatrist, finds her crime and the idea of her as a killer to be intensely erotic. Atwood writes, "Murderess, murderess, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. Murderess. He applies it to her throat like a brand" (Atwood 389).

This suggests a definite attraction to the forbidden and damned woman that defies the Victorian ideal. Grace is rumored to be a sexual, passionate, deceptive, bloodthirsty woman, yet this is what he desires. Despite the push towards purity and morality, Victorian men kept the prostitution industry thriving during the nineteenth century.

Another crucial influence on the lives of many women during Grace Marks's day was the Spiritualist Movement. In North America, it began in Upstate New York and

spread rapidly everywhere, including Europe, gaining a particularly strong hold in the Kingston-Belleville area where Grace was in prison (Atwood 464). Spiritualists believe in a spirit world that humans, through a medium, can communicate with (Ford 173). Miraculous healings and contact with the dead are also an important part of the religion (Ford 174). Medical practitioners attacked spiritualism as soon as it emerged for its "quackery" and its claims to heal the physical body (Ford 174). For women, especially those in the middle and upper classes, this proved to be an opportunity to gain fame, power, and respect. Spiritualism had its most active following amongst the Victorian female population (Ford 174). These women were accustomed to living in the shadows of their respected, prominent husbands and were almost useless (Moore 110). Declaring a "calling" to be a medium gave them their own public attention and a purpose (Moore 110). Also, mediums under the influence of spirit controls could step out of their gender roles and do or say anything that they wanted to (Moore 111). Prudent Victorian wives, while possessed by a spirit, turned into "swearing sailors, strong Indian braves, or oversexed male suitors" (Moore 111).

In Alias Grace, some of Atwood's female characters are completely absorbed in the spiritualist craze. The Governor's wife and her high society friends have spiritual Thursdays. Led by Mrs. Quennell, they often try to communicate with the dead and channel the spirit of the Governor's wife's son, Will. The skeptical Dr. Jordan says, "Spiritualism is the craze of the middle classes, the women especially; they gather in darkened rooms and play at table-tilting the way their grandmothers played at whist, or they emit voluminous automatic writings, dictated to them by Mozart or Shakespeare" (Atwood 83). The women persuade Dr. Jordan to allow Grace to undergo hypnosis in

search of her true guilt or innocence. While hypnotized, Grace's body is taken over by the spirit of Mary Whitney, her former friend. Mary Whitney claims to have committed the murders. She is the opposite of Grace. She is loud, crude, without remorse, and perversely evil. The women are then convinced that Grace did nothing wrong, while the men think otherwise. Dr. Bannerling calls hypnotism "a blatant piece of charlatanism and preposterous tomfoolery" and says it is "second in imbecility only to Spiritism, Universal Suffrage, and similar drivel" (Atwood 434). He, along with other medical doctors, refuses to believe that the spirit of Mary Whitney, insanity, amnesia, hysteria, or anything but Grace herself killed Kinnear and Nancy. According to them, she is a "creature devoid of moral facilities" (Atwood 435). She is either an angel or a whore. There is no in-between for the Victorians. Still, her supporters grasp for any reason to excuse her defiance of the Victorian standard for women without having to accept the probability of Grace's true nature.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, there seemed to be an explosion of diseases that affected mainly women. The most common and puzzling of these was hysteria. Physicians and psychologists considered hysteria to be a "neurosis," or a character disorder (Smith-Rosenberg 197). It seemed to affect women of childbearing age from the middle to upper classes of society (Delamont and Duffin 33). Hysterical women complained of such symptoms as depression, nervousness, emotional mood swings, and disabling physical pain (Smith-Rosenberg 201). The hysterical "fit" characterized itself by epileptic-type seizures, uncontrollable laughing or sobbing, heart palpitations, hallucinations, and trances that could last for days (Smith-Rosenberg 201). Two other female nervous disorders, neurasthenia and chlorosis, caused symptoms

similar to hysteria excluding the hysterical fit (Delamont and Duffin 37). Unable to find organic causes for these ailments that were spreading rapidly, many physicians determined that they were the result of disturbances in the reproductive system (Smith-Rosenberg 204). Ovulation was blamed by Dr. Robert Barnes and Dr. Thomas Lightfoot in 1857 for the "arousing of mania, delusions and other insane phenomena in the inmates of lunatic asylums" (Delamont and Duffin 36). In 1869, Dr. Beard blamed the "increased mental activity of women" and technological advances for these nervous symptoms (Delamont and Duffin 37).

Curiously, no one seemed to notice the correlation between these psychosomatic disorders and the increased pressures put upon women to conform to the Victorian ideal of womanhood. When a woman was diagnosed with one of these ailments, doctors recommended that she rest in bed and isolate herself from intellectual stimulation (Delamont and Duffin 38). This is the subject of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story The Yellow Wallpaper, published in 1892 (Gilbert 89). The main character is confined to bed and solitude after the birth of her child, and slowly loses her sanity. She insists throughout the story that she needs social stimulation and mental exercise to cure herself, but is kept from it by her doctor and her husband. The role of passive, selfless wife and mother kept these middle to upper class women relatively useless and emotionally repressed until it became unbearable, and they needed to act out. Ironically, it was these illnesses that gave women more power. From their bedsides, they could dictate their households and be catered to by their families (Smith-Rosenberg 207).

Several of the women in Alias Grace display these tendencies towards nervous disorders. Grace herself is placed in an asylum for a period of months because she

exhibits symptoms of hysteria and insanity. Dr. Bannerling, critical of her motivations to do so, says, "her madness was a fraud and an imposture adopted by her in order that she might indulge herself and be indulged" (Atwood 71). Grace is unhappy with the treatment that she receives in the penitentiary. Therefore, her antics, which come on suddenly and disappear for good in a matter of months, are seen as suspicious by the doctors that treat her. This leaves open the question of whether or not Grace actually knew that the ailments so commonly suffered by other women were, in fact, psychosomatic. If she did, then she faked them well and used them to her advantage. The high society women whom Grace serves are also sufferers of these mysterious spells and ailments. When the Governor's wife corners Simon and asks him about vague pains and dizzy spells that she has, Atwood writes, "When he first received his medical degree, he was unprepared for the effect it would have on women; women of the better classes, married ladies especially, with blameless reputations" (Atwood 81). They love to share their symptoms with him every time that they see him in the hopes that someone will be able to identify the real cause of their suffering. Simon is just as baffled by their ailments as they are. Throughout the course of the novel, though, the wives do nothing but gossip and dabble in Spiritualism. The men around them pay no attention to anything that they have to say until they start to complain that they are ill.

Alias Grace is not just a fictionalized novel based on the true story of Grace Marks. It is a unique experience that takes the reader into mid-nineteenth century Victorian society. Margaret Atwood takes their attitudes and theories about women and puts them to work in the lives of her characters. Through them, we experience their oppression and private suffering in a way that no one could have ever done in 1869.

Grace's story continues to fascinate people over 150 years after the murders. This is not because of the crimes themselves. It is her personal life and her defiant spirit that makes her so intriguing. She is the perfect example of what was thought of women that went against the Victorian ideal. As much as doctors, psychologists, journalists, and theorists desire to "crack" her and answer the ultimate question ("did she, or didn't she?"), the truth dies with Grace decades later as a free woman. She makes no apologies for anything that she might have done and remains what she has always been; an innocent victim, a seductive murderess, or someone in-between.

While tracing the appropriation of history in The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace, one may wonder why Atwood chooses to use so much of it. The answer to this question is simply, "why wouldn't she?". Historical fiction is an incredibly effective way to study a society's cultural norms and attitudes. Nina Baym notes, "the study of American women's writing turns our attention to the questions of what a culture is, and how writing may represent it" (Showalter 13). It is almost unavoidable that a writer creates works according to what the society at the time will and will not allow. This is reflected in the writer's choice of subject matter, language, style, and tone. In the present society that Atwood writes in, she can say or do almost anything that she wants to in her novels. For women, it has not always been this way.

Before the twentieth century, women writers were seen as hysteric, neurotic, and mad (Gilbert 61). The literary genre was dominated by male writers (Rubinow-Gorsky 9). The few female writers that dared to enter this realm published under male pseudonyms like George Sand, George Eliot, and Acton Bell, Ellis, and Currer, who were really the three Bronte sisters (Gilbert 65). The women that did publish their works under

female names, like Jane Austen, complained that they felt pressured to produce stories that dealt with the “domestic” over the “dramatic” and the “miniature” over the “major” (Gilbert 64). Before the 1870’s, women wrote stories and novels that reflected the “dominant ideology of women’s culture,” such as the importance of motherhood, Christian virtue, close friendships between women, domestic duties, and ideal female traits such as gentleness, nurturing kindness, and selflessness (Showalter 14). Because of this, the nineteenth century female writer felt that she was not allowed to communicate the real truths about the life of a Victorian woman (Gilbert 75). Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson write about “the presence of absence” in women’s literature, or the “hollows, centers, caverns within the work—places where activity that one might expect is missing... or deceptively coded” (Gilbert 75). When women were portrayed in literature, most of the time they were minor characters or they were flimsy and one-dimensional. They lacked depth compared to their male counterparts, and their lives were trivialized. They could not be represented accurately, because society would not allow women to think evil thoughts or have complex personalities. Women really did not have their own distinct voice, honest and unaffected by male expectations. Therefore, it becomes the job of the contemporary female writer to explore the lives of these early, oppressed women and their quests for self-definition and their own stories (Gilbert 76). She needs to give them a history and try to piece together what she can to document real accounts of the trials and tribulations of their lives.

This is exactly what Margaret Atwood does for Grace Marks and Offred. She writes as an author reflecting upon the past in both of the novels. Therefore, she can include subject matter that would never have been permitted in the oppressive times in

which the women live. For Alias Grace, Atwood had to rely on the accounts of newspapers and Susanna Moodie's novel Life in the Clearings for the unreliable facts surrounding Grace and her life. The newspapers condemned her as a bloodthirsty temptress. Susanna Moodie documented her as a frightening lunatic, as she requested to see Grace in the asylum during her insanity phase (Atwood 1). No one really knew Grace as a person, or at least no one wrote about her as such. It is topics like the story of Mary Whitney, Grace's best friend, that would have been left out. Mary becomes pregnant by the son of her employer and, because of the condemnation she would face as an unwed mother, chooses to have an illegal abortion. She bleeds to death from it. When the maids find her body lying in her blood-soaked sheets the next morning, they look upon it with disgust and contempt and say that she deserved her fate. The Handmaid's Tale could never have been written at all in contemporary Gilead. Offred can not look at words, let alone pick up a pen and write something. Atwood can include harsh language and sexually explicit imagery in both of the works. She gives us a look at the insides of these women's heads. We know their thoughts and feelings towards the cultures that oppress them. They are not perfect Christian models of Victorian or Gileadean womanhood. They are complex characters with weaknesses and fears, just like us. Atwood's contemporary freedom to give us "what would be missing" makes these women frighteningly realistic.

The points that the feminist movement is at in history in The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace are also crucial to understanding why Atwood chose the periods in time that she did to set her characters in. Alias Grace takes place in the 1860's at a time when the women's movement was beginning to take hold. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth

Cady Stanton had already begun their activism, and women were questioning their roles in Victorian society. They were starting to want more of what men had; more education, more equality in their marriages, and more of a say in government. In other words, the seeds of discontent were being planted around Grace and in her society. It started to become clear that women were given roles and expectations that they could not possibly live up to. The tension between Victorian ideals and human tendencies began to create cracks in Grace's culture. She and her sensational story served as a catalyst for this movement towards change. Her story in everyone's newspapers was an alarming sign that the Victorian "angel in the house" image was about to crumble. People saw that women could be as evil as men could. In a sense, she was a sign that the feminist movement was on the horizon.

In comparison, The Handmaid's Tale is set right after the backlash of the 1980's toward the second wave of feminism that took place in the 1970's. Instead of a society that is progressing towards equal rights for women, Gilead is a world in which women's rights have been completely taken away. The Christian Right agenda has been implemented into governmental policy, and the huge strides that the women of Grace's era made towards gender equality have been erased. Offred's generation, the daughters of the feminists of the 1970's, has found itself in this situation because they as women have refused to continue fighting for their rights. They have passively accepted these patriarchal norms. As a result, they are returned to the Victorian days of intellectual starvation and objectification.

This is the crucial similarity between The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace. Though one is a futuristic fiction, the other is centered around actual historical fact and

research. A world like Gilead is not impossible. There are too many commonalities between Victorian society and Gileadean society for Margaret Atwood's novels to be dismissed as pure fiction. The women in both societies have no rights, and are looked upon in basically the same way. They function as breeders for the next generation, not as free-thinking contributors to society. They are second-class citizens at best in the cultures that they are expected to further. The oppression that Grace and the other women experience in Alias Grace is based on the heavy research that Margaret Atwood did on Victorian culture before she began to write it. Gilead's pro-Christian, anti-feminist government is the result of Atwood's own critical look at the Reagan era, her distrust of his motives, and the threat that an administration like his could pose to the quest for equality.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood is not a fiction writer who chooses to create stories for their sheer entertainment value. She uses her talents to explore political issues and cultural ideologies for their positive and negative effects, most often on women. In The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace, she criticizes the two most powerful ideologies promoting women's oppression in American recent history. In many ways, the Religious Right is a revival of Victorian beliefs. In both of these novels, we are given an intimate look at Offred and Grace's personal experiences in these patriarchal worlds and their reactions to them. The element of historical truth that weaves through these two novels is too obvious to ignore. Perhaps that is what makes these women's stories so alarming. Alias Grace and The Handmaid's Tale remind us that nothing is more important than personal freedom and equality. They are worth fighting for and, in a world that is so prone to shifts in political power, must be guarded with our very lives.

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