Refracted: *Alias Grace* Series Through a Freudian Perspective

Bárbara J. Paiva

FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

Citation: Bárbara J. Paiva. "Refracted: *Alias Grace* Series Through a Freudian Perspective." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 10, n.º 1, 2021, pp. 121-134. ISSN: 1646-4728. Web: http://ojs.letras.up.pt/.

Abstract

From 1843 to 1872, Grace Marks (Sarah Gadon) served time, at the Kingston Penitentiary, for murdering her employer Thomas Kinnear (Paul Gross), and his housekeeper/lover, Nancy Montgomery (Anna Paquin). In 1859, a young American psychiatric doctor, Dr. Simon Jordan (Edward Holcroft), travels to Kingston, under the request of a clemency committee, to study Grace, helping her restore her lost memory of the crimes, with the purpose of writing a favourable report which would concede Grace's pardon. This article undertakes the examination of the television miniseries *Alias Grace*, based on the 1996 homonymous novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, by focusing on the analyses of the overall series through a Freudian perspective. It will be argued that each episode is imbued of symbolism that normally escapes the understanding of the viewer. Therefore, I shall illustrate certain aspects connected with Freudian symbolism, according to film studies language, while establishing other important connections to prove the profuse presence of the male gaze and how Grace Marks, an ambivalent protagonist with a fluid personality, navigates this stereotyped 19th society dominated by patriarchal values and invested in the annihilation of the female subject.

Keywords: Film Studies; Feminist Criticism; Male Gaze; Identity; Uncanny

Resumo

De 1843 a 1872 Grace Marks (Sarah Gadon) cumpriu pena, na Penitenciária de Kingston, por assassinar o seu empregador Thomas Kinnear (Paul Gross) e a sua governanta/amante, Nancy Montgomery (Anna Paquin). Em 1859, um jovem médico psiquiatra americano, Dr. Simon Jordan (Edward Holcroft), viaja até Kingston, a pedido de um comité de clemência, para estudar o caso de Grace, auxiliando-a a restaurar a sua memória perdida dos crimes, com o propósito de compor um relatório favorável que concedesse o perdão a Grace. O presente artigo examina a minissérie televisiva *Alias Grace*, baseada no romance homónimo, de 1996, de Margaret Atwood, ao focar-se na análise da série por inteiro a partir de uma perspetiva Freudiana. Cada episódio é imbuído de simbolismo, que normalmente escapa à compreensão do espectador. Serão portanto abordados certos aspetos ligados ao simbolismo Freudiano, de acordo com a linguagem dos estudos cinematográficos, enquanto se estabelecem outras conexões relevantes para comprovar a presença profusa do "male gaze" e a forma como Grace

Marks, a ambivalente protagonista detentora de uma personalidade fluida, navega nesta sociedade estereotipada do século XIX, dominada por valores patriarcais e investida no aniquilamento do sujeito feminino.

Palavras-chave: Estudos Cinematográficos; Crítica Feminista; *Male Gaze*; Identidade; o Estranho

In 1915, Sigmund Freud's book *The Unconscious* was published to great success. However, some of the issues addressed in the book had already been anticipated by Emily Dickinson's poetry. In her following poem, which served as an epigraph to the first episode of the series *Alias Grace*, based on the 1996 homonymous novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, her awareness of the existence of multiple selves within ourselves and how some parts of the human mind are scarcely understood capture a concept that Freud would later theorize:

> One need not to be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
> One need not to be a House -
> The brain has Corridors - surpassing
> Material Place -
> . . . Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
> Should startle most -
> Assassin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least. (Dickinson 333)

For Dickinson, the true element of horror lies in the self-hidden behind the self, not the murderer that might have "hid in our Apartment".

To establish a clear line of though throughout the series, each episode opens with a quote from a celebrated Gothic author, which is explicitly related with the content of the episode that follows. Hence, in line with Emily Dickinson's quote, the opening shot of the series is of the "celebrated murderess" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 1; 02,54'-02,56') looking herself in a mirror. In a psychological sense, mirrors symbolize the verge between the conscious and the unconscious mind. By looking herself in a mirror, Grace is looking towards the depths of her mind, the unconsciousness. In fact, while Grace is looking in the mirror, she is doing different facial expressions to convey what people say about her:

> . . . that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard . . . that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder . . . that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper…that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all these different things at once? (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 1; 00,30'-01,20').

Each facial expression represents a self, a different facet of Grace. Within herself there is an amalgam of different voices which translates her inherent ambivalence essential to the story.

The miniseries follows the narrative of the novel faithfully. After committing the murders, the sixteen-year-old Irish servant girl was arrested fleeing Canada with James McDermott (Kerr Logan), Kinnear's stable boy. Following a notorious trial James McDermott was convicted of first-degree murder and hanged while Grace Marks, although initially sentenced to death, was later convicted as an accessory to the crime and was instead imprisoned. Approximately eight and one-half years into her sentence, Grace began exhibiting signs of insanity being, therefore, incarcerated for a period of time in the Toronto Lunatic Asylum.

Accordingly, Grace is a frankly puzzling character, as she oscillates among the stereotypes typically attributed to 19th century women which consisted in binary roles of either angels or demons. Indeed, such a highly speculated case as hers, which received a prolific coverage from not only Canadian newspapers but also those of the United States and Britain, facilitated an extensive manipulation of her figure, causing her words, her image, and her actions to be distorted, consequently beyond her control. Grace claimed, at a certain point of the series: "You should never let your picture be in a magazine or newspaper if you can help it, as you never know what ends your face may be made to serve by others once it has got out of your control" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 3; 25,59'-26,07').

Moreover, through our millennial eyes, we can denote a certain parallelism with the use of Grace's image on magazines and newspapers with the use of images on the Internet, serving as a 21st century social comment. Even so, she was acutely aware that her identity known to the public is a fabrication of others: ". . . ask lawyers and judges and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 1; 07,47'-07,51').

The presentation of Grace's story in historical documents, ballads and newspaper cuttings reflect a stereotyped image about contemporary Victorian women;

thus Grace perfectly embodies the contradictions that shaped Victorian culture. She is simultaneously the image of the ideal, demure, subservient woman and the unscrupulous murderess. As Kathleen Kendall stated: “Female criminals paradoxically appeared to embody both innocence and guilt, good and evil” (3). Grace’s identity is deconstructed, opening a way for her to be associated with criminal events, something which remains doubtful throughout the series. This culminates, ultimately, in the construction of a character with uncertain and conflicting traits, as they are fragmented.

According to Coral Ann Howells: "The fascination of a character like Grace is intimately bound up with nineteenth-century anxieties about women and their true nature: are they angels in the house or are they lying devils, and which is Grace?" (30). This is precisely the question Dr. Simon Jordan will seek an answer for. With newly developed techniques, Dr. Jordan is committed to studying Grace and help her restore her memory, which would lead to solving the mystery of Grace’s guilt or innocence. Dr. Jordan attempts to do so by introducing a different image from traditional psychiatry treatments, which still had a kind of medieval system, as is exemplified in the series: torture, physical restraint and punishments, and abuses of all sorts were frequent. So Dr. Jordan proposes an innovative approach, that closely resembles Freud’s psychoanalyse, the “talking cure”, consisting in the search for free associations. As Alison Toron noted,

> . . . the "talking cure", therapy is based upon a clearly defined power relationship: Dr. Jordan asks questions; Grace responds; Dr. Jordan records information and draws conclusions from it. Grace becomes a "case" for Dr. Jordan to study . . . The analyst is supposed to move the patient from a state of amnesia to traumatic revelation (8).

This is explicitly showcased on the series, as the power relationship between Dr. Jordan and Grace is displayed. When Dr. Jordan visits Grace at the penitentiary, he is standing while Grace sits inside the cell with a darker atmosphere eclipsing her and this creates the contrast between the authoritarian figure of the male doctor and the marginalised figure of the female patient and criminal: “Dr. Jordan already has an ‘edge’ over Grace not only because he is educated, but also because he is a man (‘In Search’ 1515). Moreover, he is free, and Grace is not. These inequalities lead to misunderstandings and frustration on both sides” (Toron 4).

An apple is the first item Dr. Jordan brings to start his therapy of word association. Grace, however, deliberately fails to meet Dr. Jordan expectations, by not demonstrating the “type of abstract thinking” he is looking for, instead she gives

"materially-grounded answers" (Toron 4). Nevertheless, not by chance is the first object handed to Grace an apple. In the Christian tradition, the apple stands as the biblical symbol for temptation, the fall of man and the loss of innocence. In the book of Genesis, the forbidden fruit is picked by Eve from the Tree of Knowledge, and consequently Eve is cast out from the garden of Eden.[1] Just like Grace is cast out from society.

Evidently, Dr. Jordan is testing Grace, just as God tested Adam and Eve, but unlike the biblical figures, Grace knows better, to conceal herself as innocent waiting patiently for Dr. Jordan to leave, and to only then eat the apple, consummating the sin, and to unravel: "The apple of the Tree of Knowledge is what you meant, Doctor Jordan. Good and Evil. Any child could guess it" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 1; 09,23'-09,31'). In their first session, at the governor's house, Dr. Jordan brings a beetroot and Grace simply states that it is a vegetable hard to clean a stain from, but, again, she premeditates on missing the intended point to associate it with blood and murder. Margaret Atwood explains this behaviour by saying that Grace: ". . . is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives" (Stanley 372).

Nonetheless, as the sessions progress: ". . . in the frame-story parlour, Grace is bathed in beatific light . . ." (Valentine n. p.), tending to sit in quietude on the right side of the screen, which represents the unknown, while Dr. Jordan appears on the left, representing the known, establishing Grace as a dominant figure over Dr. Jordan. In addition to that, Grace always sits for the sessions with countless pieces of cloth near her since she is working on a quilt for Miss Lydia. The fact that Grace is sewing specifically a quilt is quite symbolic, since a quilt is essentially, made, or constituted of several scraps that are stitched together, which may indicate a strong analogy to the human memory, highlighting "the fragmented story that she offers Simon Jordan . . ." (Garrett n. p.). Thus, on these sessions, Grace is both figuratively and literally sewing scraps. Grace carefully manipulates the scraps of information that Dr. Jordan so eagerly listens to, completely oblivious of how Grace works her own narrative of the facts regaining some sort of control over her life. Moreover, the fact that Grace is weaving a quilt that is not hers also shows the lack of agency she has in relation to her actions.

For the second session, Dr. Jordan determines a different method, he starts enquiring about Grace's dreams for "the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (Freud, *The Interpretation of*

Dreams: The Complete and Definitive Text 604). Even though, Grace merely claims: "I suppose I have. Though none I can remember at the moment" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 2; 04,17'-04,22'); it seems that she has a recurrent dream about Nancy Montgomery, an apparent fragment of memory when she first saw her at Mr. Kinnear's farmhouse. Nancy is wearing a pink dress, the same one Grace wore at her infamous trial, picking up red roses unto a basket, then suddenly a cut appears on Nancy's forehead, blood running from it, she grabs her throat with startled eyes and falls to the ground. Pursuant to Genevieve Valentine:

> What makes Grace an uncanny[2] rather than a tragic figure is the control she exerts in the telling. Half the satisfaction of her interviews is seeing what scraps she keeps away from Dr. Jordan's prying eyes. And as she presents her unanswered questions to Dr. Jordan, he is, inch by inch, forced to answer them himself. (n.p.)

However, even though Dr. Jordan remains uncertain about Grace's ethos, his growing fascination and attraction towards her materialize in his lustful dreams. Quoting Sandra Stanley: "Dr. Simon Jordan, who attempts to study the imprisoned Grace, fantasizes about the convicted woman . . . crossing the eroticized boundaries between doctor and patient . . ." (380). Indeed, in their first session, there is a moment when Grace pauses sewing to lick the thread for it to pass through the hole of the needle, as Dr. Jordan looks intensely at her. On the one hand, this seems to represent a direct connection with sexual intercourse and desire, whereas on the other hand it can be read as yet another biblical reference as in the New Testament, Jesus professes the commonly well-known expression: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle . . ." (Matthew 1221). This particular expression conveys a metaphor for a very limited, or narrow opening to pass through. And certainly, it is very hard, or nearly impossible, for Dr. Jordan to pass through Grace, to capture her essence, and such a struggle creates tension, incredibly palpable in the intimate atmosphere of Governor's parlour: "Given how much of the series rests on this claustrophobic rhythm, it's remarkable how effective it always is to cut from Grace's carefully-arranged features to the Doctor's vampiric attention - an old-fashioned horror beat . . ." (Valentine n. p.).

Such an idea is continuously reinforced, as the second episode starts, with Dr. Jordan dreaming of Grace standing outside the penitentiary with a white dress on, most likely a nightgown, a possible indication of Dr. Jordan's desire for Grace's innocence. She is exposed to the cold, which shows vulnerability, and Dr. Jordan comes, and protectively places his coat on Grace's shoulders embracing her. Dr.

Jordan yearns to be Grace's saviour, which is pointed out when Dr. Jordan climbs up the stairs to meet the imprisoned Grace at the penitentiary. A rescuer that also seeks to control Grace, whom he wants to possess, but who realizing that impossibility, gets sexually involved with Mrs. Humphrey (Sarah Manninen), his landlady, instead. Perhaps, a subtle hint of this sexual arousal is the means of Dr. Jordan's transportation to Kingston. He travels by train, which is implicitly associated with feelings of excitement expressed through sexual desire, according to the latent Freudian symbolism of the train being understood as a representation of a phallus.

Still, the sessions are characterized for their intentional overbearing feeling that haunt the viewer with its immured close-ups. Building up the sense of anxiety and confusion, Grace's transgressive nature as a murderess is ultimately what attracts Dr. Jordan as he

> . . . fears that he is losing himself in Grace's narratives - her multiple representations of herself - which, like Scheherazade's stories, become narratives of survival. Simon feels he must unlock Grace's Pandora's box . . . What the doctor does not realize, however is that he also is Pandora. (Stanley 380)

Alluding again to the scene of the needle, mentioned above, it additionally represents a classic example of the male gaze,[3] which is one of the moving forces of the plot. Due to her servant status, Grace excites passion and lust among more than one man. Another example of the male gaze in the series is, for instance, when Tomas Kinnear: ". . . surreptitiously and lustfully gazes at Grace when she scrubs the dirty kitchen floor . . . ." Both these men represent a ". . . dominant class, fantasize about Grace, a member of the labouring class . . ." (Stanley 372). As Stanley further explains:

> . . . bourgeois male's erotic fascination with hired servants . . . [Freud displaced] the male's fascination for the maid onto the biological parents, attempting to reintegrate male desire back into the endogamous drama of the family romance, in which the male's oedipal yearning is directed at the desirable mother, not the "dirty" maid. But in these scenarios, the dirty maid . . . is precisely the one who excites this passion, and the unstable boundaries between classes become an eroticized topography for transgressive desire. (371)

This actively illustrates that Grace Marks is the object through which the eroticised knowledge is explored, and she is aware of this, being involved in this social dynamic lifting the story to a regime of psychosexual manipulation. Furthermore, one of the few art objects portrayed in the series is a painting by Guido Reni, entitled "Susanna

and the Elders". Grace comes across with this painting when she is cleaning her employers' bedroom. The story of the Apocrypha's, of a woman falsely accused of a grave crime saved only by the intervention of a man, seems to unsettle Grace, with its uncanny resemblance it appears as an implicit foreshadowing of Grace's future. As Grace listens to this augur narrated by Mr. Kinnear, she ". . . doesn't yet understand that the horror of the story is that women are always being watched" (Valentine n.p.).

This surveillance becomes even more acute on Grace's birthday. Even though she, apparently, has the afternoon for herself, she is never alone, which is perceptible by the way the scene is shot. The camera is placed behind Grace and she is being watched by someone, most likely by James McDermont. In this scene the male gaze is presented through the eyes of a man behind the camera following Grace's every move, a parallel to a horror film shot, a prolonged and abusive observation of the female subject, as Grace becomes the focus of an intrusive gaze: "The camera is far from a neutral observer. Harron knows it; familiar tricks of the horror genre are presented in a way that forces us to consider how violence it implies. In horror, anticipating the violence is both a source of suspense and of perverse glee . . ." (Valentine n.p.). Later, when Grace returns to the farm, Mr. Kinnear awaits to interrogate her. At a purely visual level, Mr. Kinnear is shot from a low angle which establishes his dominant character. In contrast, Grace is shot from above, and is depicted as passive and weak, consummating: "the idea of patriarchal norms as an unconscious, poisonous force" (Valentine n. p.). Ultimately, Grace comes to face that the supposed afternoon by herself was a mere falsehood, as she was all thoroughly surveyed by punctilious eyes of different male characters.

Lastly, to conclude this episode, Grace has a very peculiar dream: she goes outside the house and meets with McDermont, George Parkinson (Will Bowes) and her own father (Jonathan Goad), and gets involved with all of them. She is an object of sexual desire, being embraced and kissed by each one of them. The dream is a reflexion of the oppressive masculine authority, the constant surveillance, representing that patriarchy ultimately is the fatal blow of the plot. But, in this dream, Grace is stricken by the vision of three headless angels sitting on a tree in quiet judgement. Three angels appear to be symbolic of three women: Grace's mother (Kirstin Rae Hinton), Mary Whitney (Rebecca Liddiard) and Nancy Montgomery: ". . . a warning from women to women about the inescapable" (Valentine n.p.). When Grace wakes up, she notices that her feet are dirty, raising the doubt whether it was an actual dream or an episode of somnambulism. Notwithstanding, this dream displays how Grace ". . . enters a social unheimlich,[4] an arena in which polymorphous social

desire destabilizes the hierarchy of the class system. Within this social unheimlich, Grace excites Thomas's sexual interest and allegedly encourages James to kill Nancy to rid herself of a rival" (Stanley 372).

A propelling factor for Grace to enter this social unheimlich is the tragic death of her close friend Mary Whitney. Every time Grace recalls Mary, she has an immediate memory about when they decided to test the old wives' tale, of cutting the peel of an apple in one piece and throwing it behind their backs, so that it would spell the name of their future husbands. Again, the reappearance of the apple is quite symbolic, being associated with female sin. Indeed, throughout the series there are a couple of references to the so called "Eve's curse", which is generally connected with certain female afflictions such as the pain of childbirth. For instance, Mary mentions it when Grace menstruates for the first time. Also, when Mary dies, another servant seeing the cause of Mary's tragic death exclaims: "It is the curse of Eve we must all bear" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 2; 39,30'-39,34').

A curse epitomized by the theme of female death, bound to the brutal annihilation of women as subjects, demonstrated by the conflict of female characters restricted by social conventions, to which they were limited to react in three different ways: either to adapt and accept it, to rebel against it following the path of criminality, or to violently scourge against it leading to abortion, suicide and/or death. Transgressive behaviours performed by women, such as an illegitimate pregnancy, dared the societal ideal of respectability whereas men, eminently those of higher classes, walked out unscathed from their transgressions. Therefore, the experience of motherhood, for the members of the working class especially, is converted into something perilous. Throughout history, the occurrence of pregnancy and childbirth had a direct connection with imminent death, a prediction for female extinction. Hence the desperate search for violent means to interrupt or deny the possibility of generating a child: Mary Whitney, for instance, is left with no other option but to abort, after being abandoned by George Parkinson, while Nancy is brutally murdered still bearing her unborn child. Ironically, the quality that best defines womanhood - the ability to generate a new life - is ultimately the cause for their grim life ending. Another factor of the utmost importance to notice is that the outcome of that innocent game comes true, Grace does end up marrying a man whose name starts with the letter J, while Mary shall not live long enough to get married.

The second episode culminates with the shocking death-bed scene of Mary Whitney. As Grace is staring at the corpse, she hears Mary say, "Let me in", and thinking she meant "Let me out", she rushes to open the window to let Mary's soul

out. Later, when Grace is washing the blood out of the bedsheets she passes out, and when she wakes up, she is desperately looking for Grace, giving the impression that she assumed another identity. However, Grace has no memory whatsoever of this happening, representing Grace's first episode of amnesia as well as the moment which constitutes the first manifestation of the doppelgänger. Naturally, the discussion about the existence of such individuals as alter egos, or doubles (doppelgängers) is a central aspect in *Alias Grace*. Freud understands the existence of the double as an event that causes strangeness. In the words of the psychoanalyst, in *The Uncanny*, the doubles are characterized by:

> . . . transferring mental processes from the one person to the other . . . so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own - in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. (Freud, *The Uncanny* 9)

Such is further emphasized when Grace adopts Mary's name as her own, on her escape with James McDermott, assuming thereby a new identity: "And finally, there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name . . ." (Freud, *The Uncanny* 9).

Nevertheless, this outstanding reaction is understood by Dr. Jordan as a hysterical behaviour caused by a great shock following Mary's death, quoting: "This hallucination was followed by an episode of fainting and hysterics, mixed with what would appear to have been somnambulism, after which there was a prolonged sleep and subsequent amnesia" (*Alias Grace: Miniseries*, episode 3; 02,29'-02,40'). Indeed, Grace's lapses of memory begin to occur just as Mary dies, so it can be inferred that a strong connection exists between these two women and the processes of Grace's memory. Furthermore, on the night before the murders Grace dreams of Mary being beside her bed holding a firefly in a jar, leading Grace to think that a window should be open. And, after the murders, while Grace rests at the Lewistown tavern she dreams of walking towards Mr. Kinnear's house, Mr. Kinnear himself is walking behind her holding a lantern, she looks ahead and Nancy is inside the house at the window and holds a lamp. Then, on the place where Nancy was, appears Mary, someone is holding Grace's hand; it seems to be a feminine one, maybe her mother. All the deceased characters hold some sort of light in Grace's dream. Although this dream is an omen to the feminine triad, it curiously gives a sense of confinement, especially of feminine figures as there is a pattern concerning female death and confinement:

Grace's mother's soul cannot leave, nor Mary's, and Nancy's body is closed in the basement.

Yet, this consistent problematization of fragmentation of identity presented in the form of a doppelgänger reaches its height on the hypnosis's scene performed by Dr. Jerome du Pont (Zachary Levi), who "works via a direct appeal to the unconsciousness through neuro-hypnosis . . . designed reclaim repressed memories and to heal the psyche" (Pourgharib 9). On this scene, a black veil is placed over Grace, which may symbolize a darker side, the unconscious, and Grace assumes the identity of Mary Whitney, speaking in an unusual voice, referring to herself in the third person singular and communicating in an uncharacteristically frank manner. This scene may reveal a case of split personality, a symptomatic "double consciousness", a case of spirit or demonic possession, entering the realm of parapsychology, or a mere trick played by Jeremiah (aka Dr. Jerome du Pont), or by Grace bearing in mind how she manipulates the scraps of her own narrative, all the possibilities remain open. Rather than revealing the desired truth, this scene simply maintains ". . . Grace as an enigma - as an 'alias' - providing us with a series of potential narratives that attempt to name Grace's illusive/elusive identity" (Stanley 372).

Finally, Grace's uncanniness is revealed when the camera follows Grace's invisible movements, a travelling subject for an extended amount of time, as she recalls wandering at Mr. Kinnear's house. With a lengthy tracking shot the camera is used as an agent of suspense, suggesting once more the uncanny as Grace's presence looms heavily over Mr. Kinnear's house. She is within and without. Paradoxically, she remains as an active element albeit her absence is stressed. In symmetry with the opening, the quote chosen for the last episode is the following:

> I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -
> As if my brain had split -
> I tried to match it - Seam by Seam
> But could not make it fit. (Dickinson 439)

Emily Dickinson writes, in these verses, that she fails to place together all the parts of her cracking mind. And so does the viewer of *Alias Grace*. Since the series has an open ending, the viewer will never have a definite answer of what truly happened, or what version of the story is right. There are several possibilities, a lot of unanswered questions, as it is impossible to have a clear access to Grace's thoughts and emotions, she must remain an enigma, to honour the ambivalence of the whole plot.

The denouement of the series is disguised as a happy ending. Having spent most of her adult life locked away, once free again, Grace remains nonetheless limited; limited to one single option for how she must spend the rest of her life, and, naturally, Jamie Walsh's (Stephen Joffe) offer of a respectful and settled life as a married lady is the best she will ever get. Hence, such also represents how deceitful the concept of marital bliss and happiness so widely propagated by the Victorian discourse was, as most women were left with no other alternative but to conform to it. This offer is rushed out of guilt and regret and not of love. And, by accepting this offer, Grace gets everything that Mary Whitney envisioned for her future. Grace, as if a prism refracts Mary's light, meticulously follows everything that Mary wished for, re-enacting her dream life: marrying a settled farmer with a property of his own, having, white and red Leghorns, and a Jersey cow for the cream and cheese, two horses, Charley and Nell, a cat named Tabby, and a dog named Rex. Mary is incorporated in Grace's life and the phenomenon of the doppelgänger is clearly completed. Grace may not have carried on using Mary Whitney's name; however, there is certainly a reoccurrence of events between them, and Grace is undoubtedly confounded in Mary.

In the final scene, Grace makes her own quilt, the Tree of Paradise, which incarnates both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. In her quilt she fits together three different pieces of cloth, Mary's red petticoat symbolizing the heart fire, Nancy's pink dress, and her yellowish prison gown; their lives intertwined and sutured together at the centre of the quilt. This quilt is a warning, as Grace hangs it outside at the end of the series, so that it looks like a flag, a warning, and a testament of the "unvarnished picture of systematic male abuse of female servants" (Garrett n. p.).

Moreover, "in Grace's final words, we discover that she established a collective identity . . . with two dead female servants: Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery" (Stanley 373); a collective identity where all women share the social status of maidservants and all transgress boundaries as they perpetuate in Grace's life as haunting ghosts, precipitating a mingling between the living and the dead. The series concludes with Grace having surpassed the men who sought to diminish or phantom her. At the last shot/reverse shot Grace is looking back at Dr. Jordan. Now she stands in the role of the examiner, while Dr. Jordan is the helpless patient: "Doctor and patient exchange roles . . . , Grace becomes the doctor, the mesmerist who exerts control over those who listen to her stories, whilst Dr. Jordan becomes the patient, the madman who, ironically, ends up losing his memory altogether" (Doblas 95). This phenomenon can be identified as a case of Freudian countertransference,[5] which

consists of the transferring of emotions, desires and expectations between a therapist and the patient. The person in treatment redirects feelings towards the psychotherapist, leading to the creation of an emotional entanglement. Yet, besides this notorious emotional entanglement, from Dr. Jordan's part particularly, what is possible to conclude is that there is a shift on the power relation between them, due to Grace's influence on Dr. Jordan unconscious feelings. As once the male gaze yearned to penetrate Grace, at last she stands at an advantageous position allowing her to be the cautious and casual observer, no longer being seek as the object of desire, no longer in the vulnerable position of focus of the male gaze, the servant to be possessed by the Doctor or the Master as the social class warfare enabled.

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Little, Brown & Company, 1960.

Doblas, Rosario Arias. "Talking with the dead: revisiting the Victorian past and the occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters *'Affinity'*". *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, vol. 13, 2005, pp. 85-105.

Ebert, Roger, editor. *How to read a movie*, 30 de August de 2008, www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/how-to-read-a-movie. Accessed 12 January 2021.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams: The Complete and Definitive Text*. Basic Books, 2010.

---. *The Uncanny*. Penguin Books Ltd, 2003.

Garrett, Roberta, editor. The conversation. "Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: a period drama for the #metoo movement", 05 December 2017, theconversation.com/margaret-atwoods-alias-grace-a-period-drama-for-the-metoo-movement-88204. Accessed 28 December 2020.

Harron, Mary, director. *Alias Grace*: *Miniseries*, 2017.

Howells, Coral Ann. *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Kendall, Kathleen. "Beyond grace: criminal lunatic women in Victorian Canada". *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol.19, no.1/2, 1999, pp. 110-5.

Pourgharib, Behzad. “Margaret Atwood: Twenty-Five years of Gothic Tales”. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, April 2011, p. 9.

Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto. “The Eroticism of Class and the Enigma of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace”*. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol.22, No.2, 2003, pp. 371-86.

The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Salt Lake City, Utah, USA: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014.

Toron, Alison. “The Model Prisoner: Reading Confinement in *Alias Grace*”. *Canadian Literature*, 2011, pp. 12-28.

Valentine, Genevieve, editor. *The Real Villain in Netflix’s Alias Grace Is the Male Gaze*. *Electric Lit*, 20 November 2017, electricliterature.com/the-real-villain-in-netflixs-alias-grace-is-the-male-gaze/. Accessed 05 January 2021.

[1] The term “apple” is never used in the creation stories of the Bible. Eve and Adam ate the fruit of “the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil", there is no explicit connection to an apple. This generic perception of the forbidden fruit being an apple, most likely, came from the artists’ imagination when they started depicting this biblical scene in paintings, as apples are a commonly recognized fruit.

[2] A kind of disturbing strangeness evoked by something (a person, a situation, a fact, or an impression) that cannot be described as mysterious but as strangely familiar, which causes a certain feeling of anguish and confusion, and in some extreme cases, terror. In Sigmund Freud’s article *Das Unheimliche*, 1919, Freud proposes that the apparently strange is in fact a disguised representation of what is familiar.

[3] The term “the male gaze” was first coined by filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey, in her paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973). It consists in the cultural depiction women, in the visual arts and in literature, through a masculine perspective, which tends to sexually objectify women while the man is empowered.

[4] The Freudian term “unheimlich” corresponds to the term uncanny in English. This word has an ambivalent etymology: “heimlich” means “homely” but paradoxically also means, in certain situations, something hidden inside, concealed, or withheld from others. Thus, Freud notes that although “unheimlich” initially may seem the opposite of what is familiar it is in fact, in between its many meanings, identical with its opposite and, therefore, not familiar. “Unheimlich” denotes a feeling of unease and it’s frequently associated with strong emotions such as terror, fear, or dread.

[5] Freud originally developed the concept of countertransference (in German: *Gegenübertragung*) in 1910, on his work entitled *The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy*.