

**DEFINING HETEROGLOSSIA: PSYCHOLOGICAL DYSFUNCTION  
AND THE DIALOGISM OF THE TESTIMONIAL PASTICHE IN  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE***

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**ABSTRACT and INTRODUCTION**

In an early scene in *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks recovers from a hysterical episode in which she recoils, shrieking and horrified, from a doctor wishing to examine her. Having assaulted her reader with a barrage of temporally disorienting narrative tricks in the novel's opening chapters, Atwood returns to the present in this scene. Grace, locked up and left to contemplate her explosive behavior, reflects upon her time in the asylum: "*Gone mad* is what they say, and sometimes *Run mad*, as if mad is a direction, like west; as if mad is a different house you could step into, or a separate country entirely. But when you go mad you don't go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in" (Atwood 33). In this passage, Atwood prompts us to consider the possibility of Grace's madness within strictly defined parameters. The italicizing of the two "diagnostic" phrases emphasizes their instability – highlighting the variability of their meanings according to the many different discourses to which they might belong. Grace's references to bodily movement and physical place ascribe distinctively spatial and temporal qualities to her condition, while also serving to orient her character in the position of observed isolation. With this orientation in place, Atwood begins to suggest the fallibility of a pseudo-scientific diagnosis that is entirely dependent upon observation, distinctly highlighting its vulnerability to external cultural forces. The social, linguistic, and spatio-temporal factors established in this passage function to define madness throughout the narrative, as Grace Marks's mental condition is continually assessed and refigured, both within and without the narrative, in a variety of contexts. Also demonstrated by this passage is Atwood's deep concern for the malleability of specific terms associated with madness and the irreverent authoritarian manner in which they are employed. The dialogic tension which results, as exemplified by Grace's acute dissatisfaction with the accuracy of such terminology, suggests the existence of an elaborate narrative construct which is founded on the notion of psychological dysfunction. Throughout the narrative, spheres of discourse, all radiating from the same objective interest – Grace's madness – are pitted against one another, resulting in a system of narrative constructs which, subsequently, becomes the primary source of dialogic tension and heteroglossia in the novel.

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In her first few sessions with Dr. Jordan, Grace describes this extraordinary collision of discourses: "In the courtroom, every word that came out of my mouth was as if burnt into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never get the words back; only they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place" (Atwood 68). Here, Grace's persecutors, having determined her testimony is flexible in light of her perceived incapacity, redefine her words by incorporating them into their own discourse – that of the penal sphere – where they take on a new and foreign significance. In referring so specifically to the courtroom, this description ascribes chronotopic features to this brand of dialogism, establishing a textual pattern of misinterpretation and consequent self-censorship in matters relating to her testimony and conviction.

This self-censorship plays a particularly important role in Grace's encounters with Dr. Jordan. Grace, responding to this pattern of misinterpretation among those responsible for her fate, adopts a number of illusory techniques in relating her extended testimony. After explaining her frustration with the manipulative behavior of her persecutors, she asserts: "But now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well" (Atwood 69). Though the intent expressed here is not explicitly deceitful, it orients Grace in a position of subversive power in this dialogic doctor-patient relationship. As this relationship develops, so does Grace's adeptness at manipulating her tale. The frame narrative which results is a great source of heteroglossia in the text, with Grace adopting a number of narrative perspectives as she recalls her experience. The first sign of this occurs in Grace's account of servant life:

They could go traipsing up and down the front stairs in their fancy clothes and trinkets...and most of them could not light a fire if their toes were freezing off, and it was a wonder they could blow their own noses or wipe their own backsides, they were by their nature as useless as a prick on a priest...and most of them did not know their own arse from a hole in the ground. (Atwood 158)

The pronounced dialogism at work in this passage is complicated by the multiple narrative voices it adopts. In the frame narrative – which, in this instance, is distinguished from the main narrative only by an apologetic aside to Dr. Jordan – Atwood seamlessly combines the divergent languages of Grace, the inhibited prisoner, and Mary Whitney, the outspoken young servant – deliberately opposing them to that of Dr. Jordan's scientific inquiries. The first and most apparent level of dialogism occurs within the frame narrative, drawing its energy from the contrast between Mary's verbal audacity and the buttoned up manner of her superiors. After establishing the socioeconomic nature of their difference by citing their "fancy clothes and trinkets," she describes their behavior in explicitly vulgar terms. Though this dialogic tension does not manifest itself in a conflict of directly competing heteroglossia, the functional results are essentially the same – the conduct of the privileged class, expressed in the common tongue of an outspoken servant, creates a critical sociolinguistic disparity. This also creates a dialogic force external to that of the frame narrative; one which results from the reimagining of the boundaries of propriety that would normally prevent the expression of such "democratic ideas" between Dr. Jordan and his female patient. Though it is unclear whether or not Grace has nefarious intentions in adopting the character of Mary Whitney in this context, the socioeconomic tension expressed in this episode refers implicitly to the profound differences between Grace and Dr. Jordan in the main narrative, causing a dialogically driven shift in the balance of power in their relationship.

Grace's assimilation of Mary's bold narrative voice also allows the expression of a dialogic opposition based specifically in religious conflict. Bakhtin addresses such oppositions, identifying them as "surface upheavals of the untamed elements in social heteroglossia" (326). Irony aside, Grace's employment of the vernacular, "as useless as a prick on a priest," points to a more collective social issue, specifically, the religious tension present between members of Protestant and Catholic churches of Northern Ireland. Grace acknowledges this issue directly in the relating of her sea voyage to Dr. Jordan: "There was one good effect of all the suffering. The passengers were Catholic and Protestant mixed . . . . But there is nothing like a strong bout of seasickness to remove the desire for a scrap; and those who would cheerfully have cut each other's throats on land, were often to be seen holding each other's heads over the scuppers, like the tenderest of mothers" (Atwood 117). Through Grace's expression of this stratifying colloquialism, Atwood allows Mary Whitney's verbal impudence to reflect a more universally troublesome social unrest.

The testimonial structure exemplified in these sessions also allows Grace to subvert the authoritarian discourse of psychiatry in almost imperceptible increments, granting her autonomy in her relationship with Dr. Jordan. This is particularly significant in portions of the text featuring Grace as the dominant narrative voice. In these episodes, the narrative develops synthetically, as filtered through the lens of Grace's personal experience. Atwood achieves this by presenting

Grace's private internal response and opposing it to that which she publicly expresses, giving us a clearer view of the extent of her dialogic insubordination. For example, in an attempt to psychoanalyze Grace by "speaking her language," Dr. Jordan asks what kind of quilt she'd make for herself if she were given the choice. Internally, Grace's response is firm and immediate: she would make a Tree of Paradise. Her actual response is quite tailored, however. She recounts it, then justifies her answer:

But what I say to him is different. I say, I don't know, Sir. Perhaps it would be a Job's Tears, or a Tree of Paradise, or a Snake Fence; or else an Old Maid's Puzzle, because I am an old maid, wouldn't you say, Sir, and I have certainly been very puzzled. I said this last thing to be mischievous. I did not give him a straight answer, because saying what you really want out loud brings bad luck, and then the good thing will never happen. (Atwood 98)

Grace is especially particular here, taking great care to disperse the possible interpretive weight of her answer by surrounding it with noncommittal filler, shifting the focus from the Tree of Paradise to the Old Maid's Puzzle. With this shift, Atwood suggests a variation in the sexual and gendered implications of these titles according to the discourses and beliefs to which they are linked. The name "Old Maid's Puzzle" refers to cultural forces outside of itself, namely, male-imposed expectations of femininity and, more specifically, marriageability – labels that concisely define the worth of their human objects in terms of their physical usefulness. Though the metaphorical significance of the Tree of Paradise is not necessarily apparent from this passage, it is distinguished from the Old Maid's Puzzle as a literary image which is distinctively autonomous. It might also be suggested that the Tree of Paradise links Grace metaphorically to the biblical Eve – an association which, in the context of Dr. Jordan's frequently misguided interpretive efforts, implies an element of threatening sexual independence. Heidi Darroch addresses this pattern of self-censorship:

Grace's account, then, is intended by Atwood to be read as one more version of the hysteric's story, a narration that, since Freud, links together memory, sexuality, power, and violence. While the hysteric may seem to be a forlorn, disenfranchised figure, for the male doctors who treated her, and marveled at the cunning transformations of her intractable symptoms, she was a source of mysterious, seductive wiles, an exaggeration of "normal" female traits. (106)

In Bakhtinian terms, that Grace chooses to identify herself in this context with the Old Maid's Puzzle instead of the Tree of Paradise is particularly significant in our observation of gendered heteroglot contradictions in the text, highlighting the susceptibility of the female subject to culturally informed misinterpretations of metaphor.

This pattern of verbal subversion proves cumulatively quite powerful, as evidenced by Dr. Jordan's constant frustration with Grace both professionally and personally. This is alluded to towards the end of the novel, as Dr. Jordan rides to Toronto, having completely abandoned Grace's case: "Grace's will is of the negative female variety – she can deny and reject much more easily than she can affirm or accept. Somewhere within herself...she knows she's concealing something from him" (363). This statement reflects these competing desires. With the inclusion of such terms and phrases as "negative female variety," "deny and reject" and "affirm or accept," the first half is characterized by extremely specialized discourse, conveying his professional desire to reach a conclusive diagnosis. These terms also expose the fallibility of this type of discourse in assessing the mental condition of the female subject. By their reliance on simplistic binary oppositions and their expression of narrow and misogynist attitudes, these terms reveal Dr. Jordan's ineptitude, as a patriarchal agent of authoritative psychiatric discourse, in assessing Grace's mental condition in all its complexity. The second half of the statement is emotionally focused, revealing Dr. Jordan's personal involvement with Grace. That she is "concealing something from him" reflects his internal feelings of emasculation; he is unable to manipulate her verbally to draw out the information he seeks. He also wishes to expose that which is "somewhere within herself" – a statement carrying suggestions of a deeply emotional, possibly romantic or even sexual interest in Grace. These gendered dialogic constructs are especially

pertinent to our discussion of the impact of competing heteroglossia on the reconstruction of historical narrative. In a sense, Grace's self-censorship constitutes a re-authoring of her own story. Dr. Jordan's response to this process is similar to that which Gilbert and Gubar argue occur in the literary world: "If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power.... As we shall see, a further implication of the paternity/creativity metaphor is the notion that women exist only to be acted on by men, both as literary and as sensual objects" (8).

The issue of Grace's madness becomes particularly significant in the development of other gendered and socioeconomic heteroglossia in the text. As her behavior is judged, interpreted, and assessed by other female characters, gendered socio-linguistic patterns of perception emerge. Grace addresses one such pattern as she experiences it in her interactions with the Governor's daughters: "Miss Lydia tells me I am a romantic figure; but then, the two of them are so young they hardly know what they are saying.... they say, Grace, why don't you ever smile or laugh, we never see you smiling, and I say I suppose Miss I have gotten out of the way of it, my face won't bend in that direction any more. But if I laughed out loud I might not be able to stop" (Atwood 25). Here, Grace criticizes their general naiveté—specifically, their obtuseness in apprehending the reality of her situation—by ironically approximating the cadence and content of their unperceptive inquiries, and then punctuating it with her fiercely satirical commentary. Stylistically, the absence of quotation marks emphasizes this deliberate juxtaposition, highlighting their contradictory linguistic systems while also allowing Grace to inject her internal ironic responses into the dialogue. Atwood expands upon this technique in the following paragraphs, with her description of the girls' scrapbooks. She writes, "And their friends write things in their graceful handwriting, *To dearest Lydia from your Eternal Friend, Clara Richards; To Dearest Marianne In Memory of Our Splendid Picnic on the Shores of Bluest Lake Ontario*" (Atwood 25). Atwood reproduces these textual snippets, removing them from their original contexts and injecting them into Grace's narrative. The resulting collage provides a uniquely visual linguistic structure in which Grace and the Governor's daughters are positioned in apparent opposition to one another, highlighting their profound difference as it is manifested in competing heteroglossia.

Ruth Parkin-Gounelas notes the inherent paradox of such visually stimulating structures: "Tragedy may not be 'one long scream,' but the visual object is all she has to stand in for it, and it is with vision that her text remains, with all its beauty as well as its deception. Tragedy may be experienced temporally, what she calls here the hours, days, and years or a life. But like the dream, product of the unconscious, it can only ever be represented in images" (685). In this sense, the visual scrapbook becomes a metaphor for the tragic indeterminacy of Grace's experience, precisely by the inability of its limited temporal condition to contain it. This becomes especially significant later in the passage, when Atwood also includes a series of poems written by friends of the girls. Structurally, these pieces mirror an earlier poem in which the story of Grace Marks is told in a stilted ballad: "McDermott held her by the hair, / And Grace Marks by the head, / And these two monstrous criminals, / They strangled her till dead" (Atwood 12). Here, the gruesome content of the story is magnified by the absurdity of its nursery-rhyme delivery. The poems from the girls' scrapbooks employ an identical form: "Although from you I far must roam, / Do not be broken hearted, / We two who in the Soul are One, / Are never truly parted. Your Lucy" (Atwood 25). Within the context of this collage-like structure, the grotesque unsuitability of this verse form for containing Grace's story is amplified by its comparative aptness in expressing the empty-headed poetic whims of the Governor's daughters and their socialite friends. We might also interpret Atwood's employment of these archaic forms as a kind of stylized parody, especially with consideration of Atwood's poetic pursuits exterior to the text. These poetic efforts are, according to Grace, "characterized by a cool, literal language that functions syntagmatically... [which is] usually found in prose, and, therefore, seems more ordinary, unobtrusive and prosaic" (Grace 61). Thus, the inclusion of mirroring satirical poetic

forms is also uniquely self-reflexive, emphasizing the artifice of such language and calling for a new aesthetic that defies traditional form in order to express an incomprehensible reality.

Margaret Homans refers to this phenomenon in terms of French feminist literary criticism, noting the ultimate inexpressibility of the female experience as manifested in the “multicentered” aesthetics of particular novels by female authors. She cites the work of Monique Wittig, whose “novel is multicentered, violates narrative conventions of temporal or causal sequence, and presents fissures between moments of discourse that feminist analysis characterizes as eruptions of the female – of that which lies outside the present system of representation” (Homans 190). The dialogic contradiction resulting from Atwood’s nontraditional narrative structure reaches its climax when Grace is specifically reminded of her own experience while perusing the scrapbook: “That one is signed, *I will always be with you in Spirit, Your loving ‘Nancy,’ Hannah Edmonds*, and I must say the first time I saw that, it gave me a fright, although of course it was a different Nancy. Still, the rotten bones. Her face was all black by the time they found her, there must have been a dreadful smell” (Atwood 26). The dialogism achieved in this passage by Atwood’s unique narrative structure complicates Bakhtin’s definitive assessment of the dialogic inertia of the poetic image: “The language in a poetic work realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something that cannot be disputed, something all-encompassing” (286). In Atwood’s pastiche, however, poetry is manipulated as a form of heteroglossia, infused with the language of a distinct belief system, rather than a series of isolated poetic images. It is the linguistic collision of these belief systems, embodied in the diverse language of their poetic representations, which provides the most pronounced dialogism in these encounters.

A similar dialogic phenomenon occurs in Atwood’s use of rhetorical and authoritative excerpts. She includes materials from a variety of sources, all of which pass judgment on Grace’s character, her conviction, and her mental condition. For example, William Harrison, a reporter from an Ontario newspaper, remarks: “Grace was of a lively disposition and pleasant manners and may have been an object of jealousy to Nancy.... There is plenty of room for the supposition that instead of her being the instigator and promoter of the terrible deeds committed, she was but the unfortunate dupe in the whole dreadful business” (Atwood 183). Harrison’s comments, though ostensibly sympathetic, are patronizing and self-serving. Bakhtin addresses the artifice of this type of discourse, claiming that “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own” (Bakhtin 294). Isolated, this authoritative excerpt is dialogically stagnant, expressing the limited perspective of its inflexible author. Atwood, however, takes advantage of this limitation, contrasting it with instances of Grace’s self-meditation. For example, before our exposure to this newspaper clipping, Grace voices her frustration with inadequate portrayals of her in the news media: “A lot of it is lies. They said in the newspaper that I was illiterate, but I could read some even then.... And I’ve learnt a lot more since being here, as they teach you on purpose. They want you to be able to read the Bible, and also tracts, as religion and thrashing are the only remedies for a depraved nature and our immortal souls must be considered” (Atwood 27). Here, Grace firmly asserts the fallibility of such supposedly authoritative sources. She then extends this claim by disproving the assumption that she is intellectually inferior – a ‘dupe’ – by demonstrating an especially perceptive awareness of her persecutors’ dogmatic psychological toolbox. Thus, Atwood complicates this notion of isolated authoritative discourse, seizing the opportunity to dialogize these excerpts, engaging them with the main narrative to produce a strikingly interactive and intertextual element to the work.

Perhaps the most defining scene of competing heteroglossia occurs at the end of the novel, when Jeremiah, disguised as Dr. Jerome DuPont, hypnotizes Grace in an attempt to placate her observers and acquit her of criminal responsibility. At the time of the hypnotism, the characters in Mrs. Quennell’s library are all those who have taken an interest in Grace’s

conviction and mental condition. Atwood prepares her reader for this explosively dialogic scene by classifying them according to their varying facial expressions, all of which indicate the origins of their interest in Grace. The Governor's wife "wears an expression of yearning piety, tempered with resignation"; the Reverend "manages to look both benign and approving"; Lydia is "nervously twisting her handkerchief" and glancing flirtatiously at Dr. Jordan, whose feelings are considerably more complicated. Atwood writes, "As for Simon, he senses that his face is set in a skeptical and not very pleasant sneer; but that's a false face, as underneath it he's eager as a schoolboy at a carnival. He believes in nothing, he expects trickery and longs to discover how it is worked, but at the same time he wishes to be astonished" (Atwood 395). In emphasizing these nonverbal clues, Atwood identifies each character in terms of individual and collective belief systems, establishing the necessary social circumstances in which heteroglossia is most fiercely combative in novelistic dialogism. With this arrangement firmly in place, Atwood introduces the first in a series of systematic linguistic oppositions. Dr. Dupont begins:

Please banish all thoughts of Mesmerism, and other such fraudulent procedures. The Bradian system is completely logical and sound.... It involves the deliberate relaxation and realignment of the nerves, so that a neuro-hypnotic sleep is induced. The same thing may be observed in fish, when stroked along the dorsal fin, and even in cats; although in higher organisms the results are of course more complex. (Atwood 396)

Here, Jeremiah demonstrates an acute awareness of the methods by which his largely upper class audience can be manipulated, consciously appropriating artificial but convincing scientific discourse. While this seems to win the respect of most of the present company, Dr. Jordan is not fooled by the fraudulent language and is disturbed by Dr. Dupont's dramatic delivery: "It's too theatrical, too tawdry, thinks Simon; it reeks of the small-town lecture halls of fifteen years ago, with their audiences of credulous store clerks and laconic farmers, and their drab wives" (Atwood 398). Indeed, the linguistic conflict between Dr. Jordan's authentic psychoanalytic process and this flamboyant display of dramatized pseudo-scientific discourse is described in specifically discriminatory socioeconomic terms. Jordan's professional insecurities, derived from his failure to glean any conclusive diagnostic information from Grace during their extended sessions, are manifested in the form of class hostility, indicating a more collective social upheaval – another example of Bakhtin's assessment of individualized dialogic oppositions.

After preparing readers by establishing these specific sociolinguistic parameters, Atwood presents the hypnosis. Simon begins by asking whether Grace and James were ever involved in a physical relationship. Grace responds with uncharacteristically peevish laughter, calling Simon a hypocrite: "You want to know if I kissed him, if I slept with him. If I was his paramour. Is that it?...Whether I did what you'd like to do with that little slut who's got hold of your hand?" This perceptible disjunction between character and discourse creates a complex dialogic response that reverberates throughout the encounter, conflicting with the belief systems of every character present – Lydia, for example, "gasps, and withdraws her hand as if burned." Furthermore, as Simon's inferiority complex is unmasked, it becomes clear that he feels threatened by what he deems her "crude mockery." He is alarmed by the language that bursts from the normally discreet Grace: "He was expecting a series of monosyllables, mere yes's and no's dragged out of her, out of her lethargy and stupor; a series of compelled and somnolent responses to his own firm demands" (Atwood 400). The opposite occurs as Grace fully assimilates Mary Whitney's character – with all its working class verbal bravado – into her performance. Grace becomes increasingly impulsive and vulgar, adopting, once again, the voice of Mary Whitney. This time, however, her assimilation of Mary's character is supernaturally and subconsciously expressed from a trance-like state, rather than deliberately manufactured – establishing a Freudian narrative structure that permits the public expression of a latent reality. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar address the benefits of this structure for the female character in terms of the dream or trance-writer, citing its ability to express the entrapments of male-imposed mythic stereotypes while also envisioning possible means of escape (313). These benefits apply quite literally to Grace's final testimony, in which she assigns to Mary Whitney the criminal responsibility for the murders

of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Grace feeds on Dr. Jordan's insecurities and the disgust of her audience, seizing the opportunity afforded by her perceived madness to attack her persecutors verbally. Thus, in this final example of socioeconomic and gendered dialogism, the heteroglossic voices competing to define Grace's madness throughout the text collide and deconstruct in the face of Grace's narrative reconstruction. She is left purged and guiltless: "Mrs. Quennell leaves the room with Grace, holding her by the arm as if she's an invalid. But she walks lightly enough now, and seems almost happy" (Atwood 202).

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