

Silence and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

“If we were all on trial for our thoughts, we would all be hanged”
(Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*)

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Abstract: Silence is a concept both praised and criticised when put to practice. The latest trends in society encourage individuals to be their true selves; simultaneously, some are reproached for presenting too much of themselves to the world. In this sense, discretion is arguably closely linked to a performative silence used as a rhetorical tool for self-protection. The question is whether silence and performativity are opposite or complementary terms. The main purpose of this article is to analyse this binary logic from an intersectional perspective. More specifically, to ascertain whether resistance to society's limitations can be performed through silence or necessarily through performative actions. The case study is Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996) set in mid-nineteenth century, puritan Canada. Atwood's postmodern fictionalization of Grace Marks makes her a conflicted character with a duality that terrorises society. She is, in Hegelian terms, both the Master and the Slave. Grace's discretion later becomes performative, in the sense that it alters reality and brings something new into existence: her social resistance. This article has led to the conclusion that Grace makes a calculated use of her silence in an attempt to balance the lack of control that she seems to have over the press's representation of her identity.

Discretion is the self-protection tool behind the reasoning from the motto of this article. Individual thoughts are not always meant to be shared and, indeed, the fact of choosing whether to divulge them or not could be considered a modern survival skill. In this sense, it could be argued that discretion is very closely linked to a performative silence used as a rhetorical tool. In not sharing certain things, we protect ourselves against external judgement. This concept is as pertinent in our twenty-first century society as it was in the nineteenth century or the

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seventeenth century worlds. However, the perspectives from which this notion is applied have necessarily varied. Our current society has become a global media platform where we tend to share personal or everyday occurrences with anyone, anywhere. We could argue that silence has somewhat changed the arena where it plays its role.

This article focuses on the potentialities of silence as a rhetorical tool, particularly as used by women, in the nineteenth century. According to Michèle Lardy, there have been many authors throughout the centuries who have linked discretion and silence with women, making them almost inseparable. Indeed, they thought that women should be discreet and maintain “control of the tongue” (5). Cornelia Dahmer’s research (2016) argues that a young woman could “show off her exemplariness” by rejecting any kind of self-presentation, by actively avoiding becoming the centre of attention. This advice, along with many other guidelines were generally compiled into conduct books, a genre particularly popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Research in this field has attributed the popularity of conduct books to the “prevailing ideal of femininity” (Dahmer). This ideal was closely linked to social silence and a conscious control of women’s “allegedly natural loquaciousness” (Dahmer). In her research, Cornelia Dahmer refers to a wide range of conduct books, mostly from the eighteenth century, such as *Advice of a Mother to her Daughter* (1784) by Marchioness de Lambert, *The Polite Lady* (1760), anonymously published, or John Bennett’s *Letters to a Young Lady* (1784), to name but a few. Dahmer points out that, although silence was a pillar of these conduct books, they did not delve deep into the topic.

The particular kind of silence that these books want women to adopt is not one that they would personally choose, but rather, one that is forcefully imposed to adjust behaviour to certain social norms. In this sense, and going back to more recent times, Belenky et al. (1986)

carried out a study that shows the different ways of knowing that women experience, depending on the source of the knowledge they acquire and produce and their view of it. The first one of these perspectives is Silence, which is the focus of attention of the present study and is therefore developed in the following pages.

It would be of special interest for the analysis in this paper to establish the differences and/or similarities that exist between the concepts of discretion, as a synonym for silence, and performativity. Judith Butler (1993) defines “performatives” as acts or practices that produce that which they name, but which do so by “citing the conventions of authority” (13). Consequently, silence could be classified as the opposite of “performance”, since it does not produce anything but rather, a lack of something. However, this immaterial reality does perform something that can be seen as a tool for resistance.

Essentially, contrary though these terms may seem, it is my opinion that silence and performativity hold some common ground in certain aspects, which is why they shall be used and combined in the analysis that follows. In this study, the concepts of discretion and silence are used interchangeably, since they both refer here to the same reality. These concepts, alongside others relating to gender, class and age are addressed in this article. My intention is to dive into the novel *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood while using intersectionality as an oxygen tank.

This approach calls our attention to the overlapping of different factors that influence an individual’s experience of life. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality in 1989, claims that “without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks of our movements, left to suffer in virtual isolation.” From then on, this frame has been used for the problems faced by socially marginalised people. Crenshaw compares these injustices to an intersection of roads where the

individuals find themselves and which combines roads such as xenophobia, classism, ableism, racism, sexism and more. One of the reasons why intersectionality is an important angle from which to examine *Alias Grace* is because the nineteenth century witnessed a racialization of the Irish people. They were considered non-white, as opposed to the “superior” race of English colonizers. In this sense, we must expand Jeannette King’s claim that in *Alias Grace* “the inequalities of class reinforce those of gender” by including the inequalities of race to the list of factors influencing Grace’s experience as a “multiply oppressed” person (78).

This analysis of *Alias Grace* has two aims. The first aim is to provide a brief overview of the events on which the book is based and establishing their relation to the topic here presented. The second is to analyse two fragments of the novel. This allows us to see how silence is used performatively in the text because of its rhetorical power.

The Power of Silence in *Alias Grace*

In *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood fictionalizes the real events that led to the imprisonment of a young Irish girl in nineteenth-century Canada. The girl is Grace Marks, one of the hundreds of thousands of Irish people that fled to North America during the Great Famine that devastated Ireland. In the voyage, she loses her mother and is left alone with her abusive father and younger siblings. Once in Canada, she does as many young girls did at the time, lie about her age—as she would “stand a better chance of being hired” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 147)—and get a situation as maid-of-all-work at an important house in Toronto. A series of unfortunate events lead to her moving to the Kinnear house, where she works for the Scottish gentleman Thomas Kinnear, under the command of Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper with whom Kinnear is having an affair. Both Kinnear and Montgomery are murdered, a crime for

which Grace Marks and James McDermott, the male servant in the house, are imprisoned and the latter is hanged.

Some striking features of *Alias Grace* are its ambiguity, the lack of a closed ending or the absence of a clear opinion on the part of the author regarding the events that took place in the nineteenth century. Atwood maintains that Grace's story has been told in a number of ways, all of them different, their key elements changing depending on the audience for whom they were intended. Thus, Atwood found herself facing several of Grace's versions, McDermott's versions, those told by the newspapers and Susanna Moodie's version.¹ In fact, Margaret Atwood based *Alias Grace* mainly on Moodie's *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853), with which she actively engages in the novel, through its epigraphs and the text itself. However, while Atwood does use Moodie's work as a starting point, she fictionalizes the story and presents the reader with moments in Grace's life that were not described by the nineteenth century poet (Barbosa 172).

Susanna Moodie visited Grace Marks twice, once in the Kingston Penitentiary and once in the Toronto Lunatics Asylum. The first time, she considered Grace to have "an air of hopeless melancholy" (Moodie 169), while the second time, when Grace was already in the Asylum, Moodie said that her face was "lighted up with the fire of insanity ... and fiend-like merriment" (224). These different depictions show that even the same person could see Grace in different ways. Indeed, there seems to be a pervasive influence of the context in which Moodie saw Grace over her opinions of her. It seems hard to believe that seeing her surrounded by what Moodie describes as "raving maniacs" (224), would not influence her attitude towards Grace herself. According to Atwood, the different versions and audiences were "influenced by received climates of opinion, about politics ... about the nature of women—their weakness and seductive qualities, for instance—and about insanity" ("In Search of AG" 1515). Indeed, the reader, not unlike Susanna Moodie, sees these myriad versions under a myriad of lights and

forms a wide range of opinions on Grace. Still, Margaret Atwood refuses to provide a final version, a satisfactory answer to questions about Grace's guilt or innocence, her lucidity or insanity.

Heidi Darroch (2004) argues that Atwood's explanation of Grace's guilt or innocence was of a "both-and" kind, rather than of an "either/or" kind (119). This is achieved through the postmodernist approach from which Margaret Atwood creates her version of Grace Marks. Furthermore, this allows for this character to be a very complex individual with her own understanding of religion, society and life, as well as with the capacity to use silences to her advantage, as one of the only tools she possesses during her imprisonment.

There is an ongoing debate around the ideas proposed by Atwood. In some instances, a certain notion may be self-evident, but this does not remain so throughout the entire text, because the author tends to question everything. Regarding this constant questioning of the notions in her novels, Atwood herself argues that the ambiguity and difficulty to identify an objective truth is a reflection of our own contemporary lack of trust on memory and the continuity of time ("In Search of *AG*" 1515). One of the key, fictional, characters introduced in the novel is Dr. Simon Jordan, who has to write a favourable report on Grace's behalf under commission from a reverend who believes her to be innocent. Her honesty, or lack thereof, with Dr. Jordan is one of the main features of the book as well as of this study.

Atwood speculates that Grace's imprisonment for life, instead of her execution, was due to her gender and age, since she was "very young and tender" (*Alias Grace* 439). This type of affirmative action saved Grace's life. Had she been a man, however young, she would have been hanged, just like James McDermott. This would probably be the only time when being a woman played a favourable part in Grace's life.

It is evident that, as a work by Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* has been researched by many critics (see C.A. Howells, G. Siddall, F. Tolan, among others). However, there are still some issues that she presents that seem to be insufficiently explored. In this article, my steps follow a path similar to that proposed by Stephanie Lovelady in her 1999 article about *Alias Grace*. In her text, Lovelady outlines the importance and differences of the main ways of storytelling used in the novel. As she suggests, Grace is an autodiegetic narrator, telling her own story to Dr. Jordan, to the reader or to herself. There is a correlation between Grace's private narration and the female private sphere of the Victorian era, as Lovelady aptly points out (37). Until the end of the nineteenth century, there was a clear distinction between the world of women and men, separated into the public and the private spheres. However, the boundaries of this separation began to blur towards the end of the century, causing a "growing anxiety" among many Victorians who felt that this separation of society "should be" clear (King 129). Furthermore, according to Jeannette King, this separation into two spheres has been challenged in recent years by those who "question the extent to which women were confined to their 'proper sphere'" (11). In the nineteenth century, women were limited by society, which kept them in the private sphere, unable to access the public sphere to the same extent as men. Lovelady claims that these public and private spheres intertwine in *Alias Grace*. It is her opinion that Grace's shift from private to public realms is a "strategic, if compromised, move to make the best of available roles" (Lovelady 36). In this respect, Atwood outstandingly shows how this passing from one sphere to the other troubles Grace. She is a servant, a quiet and pious girl whose life is private until her story is known by all, until she becomes "a household name and an object of collective fascination and horror" (Lovelady 36).

Besides the powerful discourse and negotiations of women who challenged these boundaries, the use of silence as an act of power and a rhetorical tool can be observed in accounts of women's experiences, such as the fictional account that occupies us, *Alias Grace*.

In fact, there is a tendency nowadays to re-examine these silences and to fill the gaps. The aim of this re-visioning is to reclaim the narratives of those women who dared to challenge social norms, regardless of whether they used verbal or non-verbal performative acts as their tools. Grace Marks seems to choose the latter, since she is determined regarding her decision to remain silent concerning the crime and certain aspects of her private life. In fact, late in the novel, Grace's lawyer calls her "Our Lady of the Silences" when he discusses her case with Dr. Jordan (Atwood 433).

The version of the events that is told during the trials paints her as a victim of her male counterpart, James McDermott. As mentioned above, Atwood toys with the idea that Grace is saved from hanging thanks to her young age and her gender. At the beginning of the novel, Grace mentions some of the things that are said about her, where we can see that many consider her "soft in the head and little better than an idiot" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 25). As a matter of fact, this passage from the novel relates to her seemingly genuine lack of control over the public representation of her identity. However, it is my opinion that Grace is more than capable of influencing some of the public constructions of her identity. We cannot access the reality of the case and see how the real Grace Marks acted, but through this fictional retelling we can see that her performance with the public closest to her eventually prompts her release from prison. She performs an identity that charms the doctor and committee who work on her release. Indeed, Atwood explains in the afterword that Grace "so impressed a good many respectable persons ... that they worked tirelessly on her behalf" and that they "submitted many petitions aimed at securing her release" (*Alias Grace* 539), which is ultimately granted in 1872.

Coupled with this apparent lack of control, silence seems to be particularly relevant in this novel. Arguably, silence seems to be one of the mechanisms Grace uses to overcome the that lack of control. In fact, Cheryl Glenn (2002) supports this claim by arguing that silence can be considered a "feminist rhetorical art, often one of resistance" (262). She explores the

use of silence as a mechanism to “refuse the discipline ... of sociopolitical culture and power” (262). This notion is the basis of this article and could be used as a means to explain Grace Marks’ behaviour, as represented by Margaret Atwood. For instance, the fact that Grace remains silent during the trial or when Dr. Jordan asks her certain questions indicates that silence is her way of taking back control of her own narrative. However, the silence that Grace uses in the novel differs from that presented by Belenky et al. in the study mentioned above. By silence, Belenky et al. understand an absolute dependence on the whims of an external authority, rendering these women voiceless and isolated. Women develop their identities in a world dominated by patriarchal conventions and rules and by the idea that valid knowledge comes primarily from male sources. By making it their first principle, Belenky et al. emphasise the impact that silence has on the shaping of women’s lives and experiences, even to this day. It is my opinion that the meaning given to silence in *Alias Grace* is, on the contrary, an empowering one that is more closely related to the idea of silence put forward in Glenn’s work.

However, the task of discerning whether silence is truly empowering or whether it remains a control mechanism is a challenging one. For instance, an aspect that would favour the vision of silence as an empowering tool would be Grace’s refusal to speak when asked during her conversations with Dr. Jordan. This could be considered a sign of resistance to dominant powers, embodied here in a male doctor prying information from a vulnerable young woman. Jeannette King refers to the “role of science as the ‘magic key’ to the understanding of gender” (12) in the Victorian period and its literature.

In this respect, science is used both by Dr. Jordan and by the staff at the Asylum. There, Grace spends some time and science is used as an excuse to have “filthy ideas” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 359) and pose sexualized questions, which she refuses to answer. Grace has her own experience with the science used to analyse her. Her reaction to being further studied through science by Dr. Jordan is to remain silent because she wouldn’t be “anybody’s plum,” so she

“say[s] nothing” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 46). The fragments that will be analysed in the following section will try to justify the opinion that, at least in the case of Grace Marks, silence is indeed a tool for resistance against silencing and dominant powers. Although we might add that it takes some time, specifically thirty years of imprisonment, for this resistance to bear fruit.

A Fragmented Analysis of *Alias Grace*

There are many studies in which the power of silence and the silencing powers of society are discussed, but they generally do so from a twenty-first century perspective, whereas *Alias Grace*, although written in the late twentieth century, is set in the nineteenth century. Another example of studies focusing on other time periods is the aforementioned article by Michèle Lardy, in which she states that “Discretion, Silence and Modesty” were paramount virtues for women in the seventeenth century and that they had tongues that needed to be tamed. The first perspective that Belenky et al. present gives evidence of the fact that this misogynistic idea has not substantially changed throughout the centuries. Moreover, in her thesis, Aungkanang Pailanon quotes Belenky et al. by saying that this silence creates in women “feelings of being ‘deaf and dumb,’” thus developing a deep lack of confidence which prevents them from trying to create meaning and content of their own (77). These ideas of silence, lack of education and submission, as well as the “manly” desire to instruct and teach young women and wives can be seen explicitly in Atwood’s novel. At one point, Dr. Jordan thinks of all the women that his mother has “trailed before him, like feathered fishing lures” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 101). He thinks of their irreproachable morals and candid manners, but he also refers to their minds as some kind of blank canvas for him to draw upon. For him, they are “unbaked

pieces of dough which it would be his prerogative to mould and form” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 101). The notion that a man’s prerogative is to make of his wife what he wishes her to be goes in line with Belenky et al.’s research suggesting that silenced women feel inferior and need the authorisation and knowledge of a superior entity, it being a man. The Victorian ideal widely known as the Angel in the House—embodied by the women to whom Dr. Jordan is introduced—is shattered by Grace’s actions. She no longer belongs in the category of the angels, of the women who remain silent within their private, domestic sphere. Instead, she enters the realm of the criminals. However, even this realm appears to be divided into two sections: men and women. Judith Knelman studies the “gender-specific interpretations of nineteenth-century murder” in her book *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (1998). Here, she addresses the somewhat sensational representations of women as crime perpetrators instead of victims. She also studies how “expectations about criminal behaviour were different for women and for men, in part because they were based on the fears and insecurities of the dominant social group —men” (Knelman xii).

Here, I argue that Grace resists being labelled as a violent and insane criminal by remaining silent. She does not conform to the norms mainly because she is not the embodiment of evil that society expects her to be. In this sense, we could think of her silence as a performative act which allows her to gain certain rights that she would have otherwise been denied. Such is the case of her work in the Governor’s house during her imprisonment. Jeanette King claims that this contact with the Governor’s household has “given her voice a ‘ladylike’ sensibility” and that she learns there to “reveal nothing” (77), a technique which she uses in her exchanges with Dr. Jordan. At first, the doctor thinks of her as a “cornered woman” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 68) but then he changes his opinion and sees that it is her who is “assessing him” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 68), her silent eyes scrutinizing him.

In the first fragment I look at more closely, the narrative belongs to Dr. Jordan. It is an important passage because he describes Grace Marks and her general attitude. In a letter he writes to an old friend, he talks of Grace in this manner:

It would be helpful to me, if she were indeed mad, or at least a little madder than she appears to be; but thus far she has manifested a composure that a duchess might envy. I have never known any woman to be so thoroughly self-contained. ... Her voice is low and melodious, and more cultivated than is usual in a servant — a trick she has learned no doubt through her long service in the house of her social superiors; and she retains barely a trace of the Northern Irish accent with which she must have arrived. ...

She ‘sits on a cushion and sews a fine seam,’ cool as a cucumber and with her mouth primed up like a governess’s, and I lean my elbows on the table across from her, cudgelling my brains, and trying in vain to open her up like an oyster. Although she converses in what seems a frank enough manner, she manages to tell me as little as possible, or as little as possible of what I want to learn. (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 153)

Even though we have already seen silence as a feminine virtue that was to be exercised by women of all ages, social classes and races, this passage presents a difference. Here, Dr. Jordan believes that Grace is acting above her station, and it is her silence and how she performs it that seem to make him believe this. This representation of Grace is directly influenced by Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, where she described Grace as someone who looked “rather above her humble station” (170). In this sense, there was a general idea that lower-class individuals were, as Barbara Braid argues, “closer to nature and more animalistic than others” (232). This meant that they were considered to have a general lack of

respect for social norms and thus needed to be treated with authority to “maintain the control over the dark and animalistic powers” (Braid 233). Indeed, Grace’s acting as “above her station” further proves that Grace is “multiply oppressed” (J. King 78) and that her experience is layered with different aspects such as class, gender, age and race.

Theories of intersectionality and multiple oppression or jeopardy play a key role in these cases (see Deborah K. King 1988). As mentioned in previous sections, Grace is a young girl, an Irish immigrant and a servant, all of which makes her narrative “an indictment of the laws that condemned her, but failed to protect her” (J. King 78). These laws were often too eager to condemn working-class individuals. According to Knelman, “the accusation of murder against a woman [was] unusual” (9), when compared to their male counterparts. However, given the social code of the time, murder by women was not only a crime against life but also a challenge to “the social stereotype of femininity” (Knelman 20). This seems to be the reason why the legal powers of the time made an example of these women and punished them in an attempt to prevent other women from giving in to any kind of criminal desires.

In this rigid social code that dictated Victorian life, women from lower classes were considered loud and irreverent, not simply talkative, as their upper-class counterparts. This is illustrated by Mary Whitney’s character in *Alias Grace*. She is a servant girl, just like Grace. She is presented as someone almost insolent and feisty, at least behind closed doors because otherwise she risks losing her position. Mary Whitney uses her discourse, rather than her silence, to resist oppressing hegemonic powers. From her limited access to wider knowledge, she manages to tell Grace about the injustices of the world, about women, natives and servants. All of these are embodied in Mary herself, since her “grandmother had been a Red Indian” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 173). According to Grace, Mary is an “outspoken young woman, and did not mince words, and she had very democratic ideas” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 183). However, her fate is tragic, since she dies of an ill-performed surgical abortion. This traumatic

experience influences Grace, who, from then on, incorporates Mary's outspoken personality into her own guarded and silent nature.

There are several instances of Grace's intentional use of silence in the novel. The second fragment under analysis in this article appears early in the novel and it is concerned with Grace's self-containment and capacity to hide her intellect whenever it suits her. She does not want to indulge in the doctor's desires by answering all of his questions. Grace knows that Dr. Jordan wants to tell himself that he has managed to get some truth out of her, as if she were a plum that he can "pull out" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 46), a peach too ripe that is "splitting open" for him to see (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 79). But she "will not be anybody's plum" so she decides to "say nothing" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 46).

Alice Crary claims that a way of ascertaining the adequacy of a feminist theory investigation would be to see if it "occasions women's greater understanding of the sources of women's pervasive sense of dislocation" (380). Taking this claim, we look into the investigation Dr. Jordan is carrying out in *Alias Grace* and we observe that his study of Grace's mental state is not to help her or other women like her to better understand what they are experiencing. Instead, his objective is merely his own advancement within his field of research. To establish himself as a prominent academic and set up the private Asylum he "dreams of establishing" (Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 60). The doctor uses a variety of methods to obtain information from Grace, treating her like a fruit that needs to be torn open to reveal its core, to confirm his beliefs about her because "his ideological inheritance regarding women means he desires above all to believe in what he thinks he sees" (J. King 77). However, Grace refuses to cooperate.

The continuous refusal to answer his questions in a straightforward manner is clear when Dr. Jordan asks Grace a question early on in the novel. He gives her an apple and asks

her what the apple makes her think of. “The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige. I go back to my stupid look” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 45). This answer she gives is also related to the second fragment under analysis in this study:

And he says, If you could make a quilt all for yourself, which pattern would you make?

Well, there is no doubt about that, I know the answer. It would be a Tree of Paradise like the one in the quilt chest at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s... It would be a great deal of work and would take a long time, but if it were mine and just for me to have, I would be willing to do it.

But what I say to him is different. I say, I don’t know, Sir. Perhaps it would be a Job’s Tears, ... 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 say this last thing to be mischievous. (Atwood 113)

For Grace, the answer is something obvious. She shares this answer with the reader, but not with the doctor. Had she given him this answer, he might have gained certain insight into her mind and past, and this is not something she wants to do. Therefore, she does not share it with the doctor. Instead, she says that she does not know and gives him a simpler, non-straight answer. She tells him she is “puzzled” and she answers in a “mischievous” manner to maintain that façade of aloofness and mystery that she believes will interest the doctor the most.

Another way of interpreting her answer would be to think of her superstitious nature. Grace may have answered in this manner not only to keep the doctor interested but also because in her opinion “saying what you really want out loud brings bad luck, and then the good thing will never happen” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 113). She reasons her own thinking process by

remembering her late friend Mary: “you should be careful about saying what you want or even wanting anything, as you may be punished for it” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 113). She sees speaking the truth and voicing one’s thoughts and wishes as something negative which will lead to punishment.

We could argue that through deception and performative silences, Grace survives the tragedies in her life and even manages to be freed from life imprisonment. In her thesis *Escaping the Labyrinth of Deception* (2007), Christel Kerskens states that “the deceptive strategy constitutes the heroine’s way of survival” (370). We may ask ourselves whether it is what Grace actually tells the doctor or what she does not say that liberates her. In fact, Dr. Jordan never actually writes the report on Grace’s behalf. However, the Reverend on The Committee to Pardon Grace Marks says that, according to Dr. Jordan, Grace was neither conscious nor responsible for the crimes and should therefore be released.

Finally, the idea that Grace’s conscious and performative silence is what saves her life could be confirmed by a passage from Hannah Kent’s novel *Burial Rites* (2013) that presents another woman in a situation similar to Grace’s. The protagonist of this text, a woman much like Grace Marks, is sentenced to die for her crimes and, before her execution, she talks with a priest about her life and crimes. Unlike Grace, she is not pardoned. Agnes, the protagonist, thinks that she is “too clever” to be pitied by people, that they think she’s “too knowing to get caught up in this by accident” (Kent 131), with reference to the double murder of which she stands accused. She thinks that if she had been “dumb and pretty and young” (Kent 131) like the other woman accused of the crimes, she would have been pardoned because that’s why people “don’t want to see her die” (Kent 132).

This is closely related to the narrative in *Alias Grace*, where Grace is not sentenced to die because she is too young and “soft in the head” (Atwood 25). But the question that remains

is whether she is in fact any of these things or whether she is playing the part. We might tend to believe the latter because, even at her young age, she knows that outspoken, smart women are mostly feared. Margaret Atwood lets us guess the answers to these questions, never giving a straight answer herself.

Conclusions

The author's representation of Grace Marks brings to the fore an idea that has been explored in other fields of study, but which does not seem to be generally applied to literary criticism: the conscious and performative use that some individuals make of silence. It can be concluded that Grace makes a calculated use of her silences. For a long time, practically all her life, she has not been in control of what has happened to her: she is taken to Canada by her family, she is placed as a servant in one house after another, she is involved in a double murder and her story is told over and over again by the press.

Grace lacks control over those events. There also seems to be a lack of control over the press's representation of her identity, which is possibly the reason why she decides to take control over her conversations with Dr. Jordan. Even though he is an educated man, it is she—the woman, the servant, the criminal—who decides what to tell, what to keep secret, when to talk, when to lie and when to remain silent. Dr. Jordan is a mere excuse for her to tell her version of the story. Perhaps this gives her the necessary power over him. Her mysterious ways and silences interest him and, in the end, they may have influenced the report which, years later, frees Grace from her life imprisonment.

We need to bear in mind that this novel is a fictionalization of the events, which gives Atwood much liberty to play with the identity of her characters. However, as she says,

“somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery” (“In Search of *AG*” 1515). Whether it was Grace, McDermott or someone else who did it, is not easy to prove. The different versions of the story and the forgotten or ignored details do not simplify the task of finding the truth.

This novel, despite not being the best-known of the author’s works,² seems to be an endless source of social critique. This is hardly surprising given that the majority, if not all, of Margaret Atwood’s texts include numerous critiques to social practices in a myriad of styles, from poetry to historical fiction or dystopia. Additional studies to achieve a deeper understanding of *Alias Grace* are, in my opinion, required. This novel has been analysed from a vast number of perspectives and yet it continues to shed light on some interesting questions. At the same time, it leaves the reader with many unanswered questions which are potentially interesting for further research. The concept of silence as a tool for resistance against dominant powers is not novel. However, the application of this concept to the general literary framework is much needed. Future investigations might confirm the initial conclusions of this brief research and extend the explanations of how performative silences can be a rhetorical tool by applying this idea to further literary works.

¹ Susanna Moodie is considered by many critics a “central [figure] to the Canadian literary heritage” and the “genuine mother” to later Canadian writers. See Janet Giltrow (1981) or Javier Martín Párraga (2018).

² According to a ranking by the American bookseller Barnes and Noble, *Alias Grace* would be 4th on the list, after *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Meanwhile, Penguin Random House’s “Essential Margaret Atwood reading list” does not feature *Alias Grace* at all.

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