

**CROSSING BORDERS: DISPLACEMENT AND THE
CONSTITUTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN *ALIAS GRACE*, BY
MARGARET ATWOOD**

**ENTRE FRONTEIRAS: DESLOCAMENTOS E A
CONSTITUIÇÃO DA SUBJECTIVIDADE EM *ALIAS GRACE*, DE
MARGARET ATWOOD**

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It's not easy being quiet and good,
it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge
when you've already fallen over; you don't
seem to be moving, just dangling there, and
yet, it is taking all your strength.

Margaret Atwood

ABSTRACT: In the poststructuralist turn, a less unified and universalizing concept of space as merely a meaningless stage is proposed. Such notion, as Michel Foucault announced in the 1970s, will no longer be perceived by its fixity or a simply referential aspect, acquiring, among different forums of discussion in the Humanities, a dynamic character. In parallel fashion, studies concerning the constitution of subjectivity point towards its oscillating status, showing how the subject is the product of multiple discourses, which makes any demarcating of solid frontiers, a hard task. The present work aims at analyzing the novel *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, under the light of spatial criticism, as well as Gender theory, deconstructing essentialisms around women. In this novel, Atwood gives voice to the historical figure Grace Marks, young Irish immigrant in the XIX century, which becomes mentor and accomplice of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his mistress and governess of the house, Nancy Montgomery. The author constructs a self-aware character-narrator who will know how to manipulate, through language, the many contexts in which she finds herself in, reversing the hierarchy of discourse, re-signifying her allegedly inferior position. Works by Philip Wegner and Neil Smith around the notion of space, Lorna

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McLean and Marilyn Barber about the Irish immigration in Canada, as well as Linda Hutcheon, Chris Weedon, and Jane Flax's theories will be the theoretical apparatus of this investigation.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Space, Post-colonialism, Margaret Atwood.

RESUMO: A guinada Pós-estruturalista de meados do século XX propôs uma visão menos unificada e universalizante do conceito de espaço, este visto anteriormente como um mero cenário. Tal noção, conforme prenunciava Foucault nos anos 1970, não mais será compreendida por sua fixidez ou valor referencial, adquirindo, nos mais variados fóruns de discussão nas Humanidades, um caráter dinâmico. Paralelamente, estudos voltados para a constituição do sujeito apontam para seu status oscilante, demonstrando como este é produto de uma multiplicidade de discursos, o que dificultaria qualquer tentativa em se demarcar fronteiras sólidas para o mesmo. Este trabalho tem por objetivo analisar o romance *Alias Grace* (1996) de Margaret Atwood à luz da crítica espacial e da teoria do gênero a fim de desconstruir essencialismos sobre o sujeito-mulher. No romance, Atwood dá voz a uma figura histórica, Grace Marks. Esta jovem imigrante irlandesa do século XIX muda-se para o Canadá, onde acaba se envolvendo no homicídio duplo de seu patrão, Thomas Kinnear e sua amante e governanta, Nancy Montgomery. Atwood constrói uma personagem-narradora autoconsciente que saberá manipular, através da linguagem, os diferentes contextos (sociais e geográficos) nos quais se vê inserida, revertendo a hierarquia do discurso, ressignificando sua suposta condição frágil e inferior. Trabalhos de Philip Wegner e Neil Smith quanto à noção de espaço, Lorna McLean e Marilyn Barber sobre a imigração irlandesa no Canadá, bem como de teóricas do gênero como Linda Hutcheon, Chris Weedon e Jane Flax, entre outros servirão de aporte teórico desta investigação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gênero, Espaço, Pós-colonialismo, Margaret Atwood.

Under the light of Post-Structuralist thought, one can observe an expressive turn in the fruition of the literary text, which can be seen in criticism through different categories of analysis, *e.g.* Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class, as well as their intersectionalities. Nevertheless, in any of those instances, it is important to highlight the primordial role of language, understood not only as a shallow mediator, but also as a way of constructing meanings in different contexts. In this sense, commenting on studies by Foucault, Michelle Barrett (1999) reminds us that language is, in itself, ideologically loaded, which brings about the importance of keeping a questioning attitude towards the issue of “transparency” in the realm representation. Coming from this perspective, a certain

fluidity, as well as fragility, in regards to the constitution of Gender categories can be noted, which results in the impossibility of labeling the subject in a univocal, and/or unequivocal, way.

In this train of thought, a new aspect is surfaced, one that focuses on an element as oscillating as Gender, which has gained increasing visibility in academic forums due to its pertinence in terms of the constitution of such subjects, thus, by its similar vulnerability and possible reconceptualization: the projection of space. Philip Wegner (2002), while discussing the contributions of Lefebvre to Spatial Criticism, affirms that

any socially produced historical space is constituted by a dialectically interwoven matrix of what he calls ‘spatial practices’, ‘representations of space’, and ‘spaces of representation’, each allied with a specific cognitive mode through which we ‘re-present’ it to ourselves: respectively, the domains of the ‘perceived’, the ‘conceived’, and the ‘lived’ (WEGNER, 2002, p. 182).

This work aims at analyzing *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, under both the aforementioned aspects, Gender and Space, deconstructing essentialisms around women. In the novel, Atwood gives voice to the historical figure, Grace Marks, young Irish immigrant in the XIX century, who ends up becoming the mentor and accomplice of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his supposed mistress and governess of the house, Nancy Montgomery. The girl and John McDermott, the one who Marks allegedly convinced to execute the crimes, were convicted to capital punishment; however, while the latter was hanged right after the trial, a defense based on stereotypes around masculinity and femininity saved the former from death, and sentenced her to life imprisonment, under the idea that the female sex was vulnerable, fragile, unstable, and not intellectually capable. In the first pages of the text, Grace remembers:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that hang me would be a judicial murder [...] it was my own lawyer Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., who told them I was next door to an idiot. I was angry with him

over that, but he said it was by far my best chance and I should not appear to be too intelligent. (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 22, 24)

Interestingly, the plot is presented as a case of pioneer psychoanalytical practice, in which a young American psychiatrist, Dr. Simon Jordan, who has just returned from Europe, hears about the Marks case and asks permission to interview the prisoner, using a new method of unveiling the human mind. He introduces himself to Grace, who had been exposed to backwards treatments: “I understand that you are afraid of doctors. I must tell you right away that I myself am a doctor. My name is Dr. Jordan. Dr. Simon Jordan. [...] Do you have a bad of knives? I say. A leather satchel. No, he says. I am not the usual kind of doctor.” (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 38, 40). Such interlocution will enable Grace to revisit her entire life story, as well as alter, edit, omit, and recreate herself. Thus, Atwood constructs a self-aware character who will manipulate, through language, the different contexts in which she will find herself in, reversing the hierarchy of discourse, re-signifying her apparent inferior position.

For the purpose of this presentation, I have decided to specifically discuss the first section of the book in which Atwood recreate the narrator’s memories of a difficult childhood in Ireland, the trip to Canada on the ship, and her first jobs as a domestic servant in Toronto, in an attempt to show the fluidity of her subjectivity, which has been constructed by herself in language, fully aware of both the ideas of what it was to be an Irish woman in that Canadian scenario as well as the ideal Victorian Angel of the House.

Once this paper considers that both notions of space and subjectivity are intrinsic to the text, thus, come into being only in language, it is important to start by commenting on the theoretical apparatus of this reading.

The whole dynamic developed by Atwood along the pages of *Alias Grace* (1996) can be aligned to the definition of post-modernism in Linda Hutcheon (1990)’s work, which links the so-called controversies around the edge between the personal and the political, as well as the implosion of certainties. I believe that, by questioning the very notion of “Truth”, Atwood is unfolding, in many layers, a sequence of games that blur the ideas of “belonging / distancing”. According to Hutcheon, post-modern fiction acquires “the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (HUTCHEON, 1990, p. 1). In parallel fashion, Jane Flax (1991) affirms that, considering that the current main goal of Feminist Theory is to study

gender relations, it is necessary to think beyond those, assuming a posture in which we attempt to reach *how we think* of them. In this sense, post-modernism, as well as feminism, “contribute for an increasing uncertainty of Western intellectual circles about the validity and appropriate methods to explain and/or interpret the human experience.”² (FLAX, 1991, p. 221. My own translation).

In *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon (1987) discusses the importance of challenging humanist beliefs by calling the attention to the fact that, “we cannot rely on biological femaleness and language as expression, general categories which suppress the social construction of femininity and language as a site of political struggle” (WEEDON, 1987, p. 85). The proposal then is to intertwine the processes of conceptualizing gender and language. In her critique, she points out how “the plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all are basic principles of poststructuralism.” (WEEDON, 1987, p.86). Language becomes, in this sense, an “infinite process of play and the deferral of fixed meaning.” (WEEDON, 1987, p.86)

For the purpose of this presentation, I intend to demonstrate the relevance of these studies in relation to a different, broader, understanding of space and its applications towards critical thinking and literary studies. In his work, “Spatial turn: On the Concept of Space in Cultural Geography and Literary Theory”, Hess-Luttich (2012) calls the attention to the fact that

the popularly used metaphor of “text as space” raises questions in relation to narratology and scientific approaches to textual analysis. So it was that numerous *linguistic turns, iconic turns, cultural turns*, etc., were followed by a *spatial turn* – a term the impact of which can also be seen in the field of literature based on the increasing popularity of such vogue terms as 'literary cartography', 'mapping', 'literary topography', etc. (HESS-LUTTICH, 2012, p. 01)

However, even though these terms have been commonly used nowadays, by pointing out the loose ways in which those have been applied, the scholar alludes to an unfixed status of the “space” itself, opening up various possibilities without closure. He declares that “space is one of

² “contribuem para a crescente incerteza dos círculos intelectuais ocidentais sobre a fundamentação e métodos apropriados para explicar e/ou interpretar a experiência humana.” (FLAX, 1991: 221)

the most obvious of things, which is mobilized as a term in a thousand different contexts, but whose potential meanings are all too rarely explicated or addressed (HESS-LUTTICH, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, our comprehension of the term focuses on the categorization of space as a construct, a both cultural and social product that is under constant renegotiation and cannot be applied, on one hand, simply to the materiality of the land, and, on the other hand, not just explored in its metaphorical uses through language. Coming from such perspective, we will observe, in the following section of this work, the various ways in which the protagonist Grace Marks is constituted within the realm of her constant displacement and negotiation with her surroundings, being well equipped to use, in her favor, two extremely opposite social figures: the Irish immigrant and the Victorian lady.

Lorna R. McLean and Marilyn Barber (2012), in their study of Irish immigrant domestic servants in the XIX century comment on Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) as

an historical novel rather than a documentary, [which] tells a compelling story of Grace's harsh emigrant experience, but does not explicitly link the Irish emigrant background to Grace's own sense of her identity and her treatment. Both individual and collective memory are, as Atwood emphasizes, mutable and selective. (MCLEAN, BARBER, 2012, p. 134).

Grace's emigrant experience is narrated to Dr. Simon, from her very poor childhood in the North of Ireland until her arrival in Canada, as well as the first impressions of the people and new life ahead of her. I believe that, even though the novel is not centered on the tensions and relationships between the her actions and her "Irishness" within that historical context, the reader is exposed to her level of awareness in relation to her background, identity and the possible consequences around those stereotypes. For example, while commenting on a few newspaper articles about the trial, Grace observes:

I did, indeed come from the North of Ireland; though I thought it very unjust when they wrote down that *both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*. That made it sound like a crime, and I don't know that being from

Ireland is a crime; although I have often seen it treated as such. But of course our family were Protestants, and that is different. (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 103).

This passage denounces the character's knowledge that, not only being Irish had extreme social implications, but also that, even within that national identity, location and religion were also relevant notions to take into consideration when judging an immigrant like her. Bronwen Walter, in *Outsiders Inside* (2001), questions the complicated assumptions regarding whiteness, race, and identity in the Irish diaspora, specifically in the case of women. First of all, it is noticeable that, during different times, women were the majority of immigrants registered both in Canada and in the United States, possibly due to the Irish laws regarding inheritance, marriage, and dowry, leaving many daughters without perspective. At the same time, in North America, domestic work seemed to be always available, and, different from work destined to men, never sporadic.

Furthermore, Walter affirms that "Catholicism was regarded with distaste and even fear" (WALTER, 2001, p. 28), exemplifying the hybridity among "English" speakers and the impossibility to relate their identities directly to a "particular set of power relations, including those of class and gender." (WALTER, 2001, p. 28).

Along the lines of her tale to Dr. Jordan, Grace is going to portray a family in which the doctor could establish some sort of recognition, coming from a "good Protestant home", knowing that being Catholic was seen as problematic in that society. She explains that her mother had been the daughter of a Methodist clergyman, whose death forced their children to fend for themselves. However, Grace highlights that, "both (her mother and her sister) had an education, could embroider and play the piano." (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 104). Ideals of dignity and even a consciousness of a higher class are hinted in the entire process of moving out of Ireland. We read:

although my mother prayed more and more, we went to church less and less, because she said she was not going to have her poor tattered children paraded in front of everyone like scarecrows, with no shoes. It was only a parish church but despite her feeble nature she had her pride, and being a clergyman's daughter she knew what was decent in a church. She did so long to be decent again, and for us to be decent as well. But it is very hard, Sir, to be decent, without proper clothes. (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 106).

Both the focuses on religion and being well dressed demonstrate how Grace is well aware of the dual game “to see and to be seen” in relation to the constitution of people’s identities. Aside from that, I would argue that by choosing to narrate the sequence of events in her life in that order, Grace is both showing how she belongs to a certain group, whose history was marked by the colonial project and its subsequent hardships, and distancing herself from the derogatory assumptions around her *ethos*, being a victim of her times.

Interestingly, another important aspect regarding the way Grace was seen can be significantly identified by her power to project herself within parameters of the idealistic Victorian Angel of the House. Talking about his new patient to a friend, Dr. Jordan writes: “thus far she has manifested a composure that a duchess might envy. I have never seen any woman to be so thoroughly self-contained.” (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 132). Later on, she is also referred as the “Duchess of Silences”. She is not depicted as the “Irish Biddy”, in McLean and Barber’s words, not “good-hearted and willing, but dim inept, untidy, and careless” (MCLEAN & BARBER, 2012, p. 136). On the contrary, she met the expectations of a woman who belonged to another social status, one that detaches her from her own Irish identity. Jordan affirms:

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 primmed up like a governess’s (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 134)

Furthermore, Atwood’s selection of “factual” data, printed *ipsis litteris* as paratexts, mostly epigraphs, throughout the entire story, also hint on a possible recognition by that upper middle class and the 16 year old girl being accused of murder. Susana Moodie, a Victorian English traveler who registered in her diaries the life of Colonial Canada in the XIXth century, for example, gets to visit Grace twice: in the Kingston Penitentiary and in the Asylum, giving quite contradictory accounts on the immigrant. If, on one hand, Moodie sees her “lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment. [...] like a phantom” (ATWOOD, 1996, p.

44), she also describes Grace, in a different situation, as a “middle sized woman, with a slight graceful figure. [...] her complexion is fair [...] She looks like a person rather *above her humble station*” (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 20). These contradictory descriptions were written in the same diaries, published in 1853, entitled *Life in the Clearings*. Susana Moodie as well as her sister Catherine Parr Trail have been subject of inspiration and research in a great deal of Atwood’s historical work and revisionism.

These infinite layers of dubious, ambivalent narratives, which unstable any attempts for closure and fixed positions continue to be developed by Atwood; however, it is important to acknowledge how the narrative shows Grace’s control over such readings, or the impossibility of defining the subject under immobile labels. The character’s understanding that she is the product of multiple voices, which can be appropriated and used both to her favor or against her image, can be seen in what she says, during one of her conversations with Dr. Simon, regarding her real status in society: “A lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but I am beyond that. [...] Only I was never a lady, Sir, and I’ve already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don’t wish to, I needn’t say anything at all” (ATWOOD, 1996, p. 90).

Grace is capable of empowering herself through all her losses, she recognizes the possibility to voice (or omit) whatever she wants due to the fact that she has no longer any responsibilities over what she is or how she pictures herself to others. At the same time, the character’s awareness of what a lady is and should be like, with this admission that she was never that angel proves how she was simply taking advantage of the few characteristics she shared with that imaginary: Marks is constructed in between the two opposite stereotypes of women available to her, but instead of seeing them as imposed, aggressive categories, she blurs, in her usage of language, the frontiers between them, adjusting her image according to her needs.

In this paper I argued that, even though Atwood’s *Alias Grace* does not focus specifically on the relationship between the Canadian criminal history and the Irish Diaspora, the author constructs a character who is constantly oscillating among various discourses and definitions, never allowing any fixity or definite statement around herself. Thus, such character that is also a profusion of texts, a mosaic of sources (documents, testimonies, diaries, and fiction) is only possible due to the biased recreation of this woman’s past, as she told to her Doctor, Simon Jordan. Grace’s account is marked by a series of displacements, which inevitably imbricate her process of

being, becoming with her mobility: a poor Irish scenario, a ship transporting hundreds of foreigners seeking a new life in the Americas, her life in Toronto, the urban homes of the Canadian upper middle-class as well as the rural setting where she committed the crime. In this kaleidoscopic narrative, I believe Atwood places her protagonist within an essentializing construction, appropriated strategically in language, imploding the very notion of “Truth”, unfolding it as a negotiation, mere tricks with mirrors.

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