

Alias grace through a feminist lens



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Feminism is defined as “ the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and the organized activities on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Merriam-Webster). This includes liberation from sexual, religious, legal, and economic oppression as well as breaking free from rigid gender roles, which are justified by the biological differences between men and women. These differences include, first and foremost, the fact that women bear children. This fact has had effects on the way women in the United States are expected to live and behave. Throughout the history of this country, up until about the 1960s, women had been thought of as subservient to men. Males are typically supposed to be “ the provider” in their families and women are supposed to be child-bearers, nurturers, housekeepers, and cooks (Blum 77). This harmful divide of the sexes was put in place by the patriarchy long ago, the effects of which can still be seen today in pay inequality, the media of the modern day, the glass ceiling, and the current division of domestic labor (Blum 83). The issues that feminists face today, however, are but a ripple effect of the mistreatment and oppression of women before and during the nineteenth century. Naturally, this would be reflected in literature written about the time period. Such is the case is Margaret Atwood’s novel *Alias Grace*. Through the personalities and actions of her characters, Atwood provides much evidence as to why the emergence of feminism was necessary at this time in United States history.

In the 19th century, which is when the novel *Alias Grace* takes place, the feminist movement was just beginning to emerge in the United States of America. Nineteenth-century feminists became fed up and began to reject the Victorian image of a woman’s proper image and role that had been

carried over to the United States (Murdoch 124). The Victorian idea was that men were supposed to occupy the public sphere while women occupied the private sphere in life. This meant that men were expected to participate in talks and activities pertaining to labor and politics, while women were expected to take care of the home and children (Murdoch 121). Based on the biological differences in the sexes, and with no regard to individual capabilities or qualifications, men and women were split into two separate and very distinct roles. Men became breadwinners and women became mothers, wives, and housemaids. The emergence of feminism was a response that challenged this notion, and obviously it was met with much resistance. Queen Victoria herself, at this time, denounced feminism, referring to it as “ the mad, wicked folly of women’s rights” in private letters to some of her correspondents (Murdoch 132).

Feminists of the 19th century disagreed, however. In the United States, first-wave feminism consisted of a wide range of women from different backgrounds, ranging from women from Conservative Christian groups that took up the cause to more diverse and radical feminists. Prominent feminist figures during this time period included Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Willard, Matilda Joslyn Gage, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and the National Woman Suffrage Association. First-wave feminism is considered to have concluded with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the amendment that finally granted women the right to vote in the United States (Siegel). All of this activity was considered new and radical, and was historically unprecedented. For the first time in the history of the United States, along

with many other nations including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Scotland, and France, women were able to have a voice of their own as opposed to being expected to marry and stay subservient to their husbands (Siegel).

The protagonist in *Alias Grace* is a young woman named Grace Marks, who was convicted for the murder of her former employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery along with James McDermott, who was also employed by Kinnear as a stablehand. First, the fact that Grace's literal partner in crime James McDermott was executed by hanging for the murders and Grace was not speaks volumes about how women were thought of as frail, easily influenced, and inferior to men. While this idea serves Grace in the novel and even saves her life from execution, this ideology is harmful in that it was halting the progress of women's equality as well as reinforcing this way of thinking in women's minds so they have less motivation to try to bring about change. When Grace begins talking to Dr. Simon Jordan about her life, she mentions how her mother was often pregnant and she had to deal with a father who did not do much but drink (so one can only imagine that there may have been some domestic abuse involved.) This furthers the idea that women are meant to bear children and take care of the home, and is another case of how this novel illustrates the need for feminism at the time. There are many instances in which Grace is treated in such a way that sexism is hinted at. While this would have been viewed as "normal" in the time period during which the novel takes place, it leaves room for vast inequality between the sexes.

The character that most represents the need for feminism and almost a feminist call to action is Mary Whitney. Mary Whitney is an incredibly strong

female personality in the novel who influences Grace heavily during their time together at the Parkinson's in Canada. With Grace having come from the type of family that she did and being left without a strong female figure in her life after the death of her mother on the ship, Mary Whitney acts almost maternally towards her, teaching her how to act the role of a servant. Grace states this directly: " Mary took me under her wing from the very first" (Atwood 151). While Mary is teaching Grace, Grace notices that Mary is more bold and modern than most women during this time. For example, Mary was egalitarian and believed that they should " remember that (they) were not slaves, and being a servant was not as thing (they) were born to, nor would (they) be forced to continue at it forever; it was just a job of work" (Atwood 157). This shows that Mary Whitney believed in the power of the self and that women did have the ability and strength to make better lives for themselves without the help of men. This is furthered by her plans to save her own money to pay for a dowry and marry by choice to become the mistress of her own household, not because she needs a man to survive. This is an example of her taking initiative to start a comfortable life for herself; it is not an example of her feeling inferior to or dependent on any man. One can see Mary's influence in Grace during Grace's recollection of the time Mary Whitney asked if she would like to see the street where the whores lived. At first, Grace was scared, but Mary told her there was nothing to be afraid of, and Grace decided she was right and realized she was actually curious. Grace then goes on to say how she would sell her body if she was starving, which actually would have been an honest way to make a living, however unsanitary or unsafe, especially in times of financial

hardship. Mary's strong personality rubs off on Grace in a time when it is necessary to be a more independent woman.

It is necessary to be a strong, at least semi-independent woman, especially as part of the lower class, during this period of time partly due to the rampant misogyny present in society. There is no lack of this contempt for women amongst the male characters in the novel. Dr. Simon Jordan finds himself attracted to Grace, which goes against any professional or medical ethics. Because this is frustrating to him, he literally uses his landlady to alleviate this by having an affair with her regardless of the fact that he does not even find her attractive. Not only is this wrong from a moral human standpoint, but it indicates complete disregard to having any sort of respect for women. Misogyny can also be observed in the comments passed by the guards attending to Grace:

“ Oh ho, says the one, that's what I like, a little high spirits in a woman, a little fire, they say it comes with the redness of the hair. But is it red where it most counts, says the other, a fire in a treetop is no use at all, it must be in a fireplace to cast enough heat, in a little cookstove, you know why God made women with skirts, it's so they can be pulled up over their heads and tied at the top, that way you don't get so much noise out of them, I hate a screeching slut, women should be born without mouths on them, the only thing of use in them is below the waist” (Atwood 240).

This type of speech is being allowed in a public institution where the employees are being held to no standards. The attitudes of men towards women in *Alias Grace* exemplify why feminism was needed in the 19th

century. Feminism was needed because women were being openly disrespected and abused, and rape culture was developing exponentially, as can be observed in the aforementioned quote.

Feminism is a cause that more women than ever are starting to take personally and become more and more actively involved with. Women have been fighting for political, economic, and social equality for centuries now. The fight dates back to approximately the beginning of the nineteenth century, when groups of feminists began to organize and become more radical. The first wave of feminism gained women the right to vote in the United States and several acts were passed in the United Kingdom pertaining to women's marriage and property rights. This activity is reflected in literature written about this time period, including *Alias Grace*. The need for feminism during this time is clearly displayed through the treatment of female protagonist Grace Marks, the feminist insight of essential peripheral character Mary Whitney who acted as something of a mentor to Grace, and the misogyny spewed by most of the male characters throughout the novel, including Dr. Simon Jordan and the guards attending to Grace. The novel can help one to understand why the feminist movement took off when it did.

Works Cited

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