

Significant problems in alias grace novel

Sociology, Identity



The social status of women and the issue of mental health are two topics that are often discussed in literature. Whether this is because they make exciting stories, or that they actually have merit and should be researched, is up to the reader. However, one thing is clear; Margaret Atwood has created a social commentary on the current status of mental health and gender inequality in the world with her novel, *Alias Grace*. Not only has it sparked conversations about these issues all over the internet, but *Alias Grace* has become a staple in literature throughout North America, and has influenced the work of many.

Margaret Atwood is a famous Canadian writer whose work spans from poetry compilations, to childrens stories, to novels. Her obvious prestige in the literary field makes anything she writes a compelling read that will also often touch on prominent social issues. Her writing can be related to her in that most of her protagonists are female, and from Canada. One interesting thing, however, is that most of the fictional characters that she creates are based on actual people, and have been developed through research of criminal records, news articles, etc. This can be seen in *Alias Grace* through the various news articles intertwined within the story. This brings up another point, that part of Atwood's success is because of the unique way that she writes. Not only are her stories told through narratives, but also poems, articles, and letters. Perhaps this adds some more depth to the story and makes it seem more real, or maybe its just nice to have a break from narratives every once in a while.

Alias Grace can be analyzed differently by anyone; Atwood's use of language to describe tone, symbols, and prominent themes throughout the book

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allows for different topics to be discussed in many different ways, as well as the creation of metaphors and symbolism regarding elements of the story. For example, when Grace says “ Today I am in the sewing room before Dr. Jordan. There’s no sense in wondering what has delayed him, as gentlemen keep their own hours; so I continue to sew...” (Atwood 196) it brings up the topic of how the respective genders are treated differently. By her saying that gentlemen are essentially on a different time schedule than women are, she is implying that their time is more important than that of a woman’s. Grace also happens to be sewing, an activity that is stereotypically correlated to women, adding more to the differences between genders shown here. Atwood’s tone is also an important detail of the story, as it can create a certain mood or environment meant to be experienced by the reader. The following quote, “ But I knew better than to complain of her to the matrons... They view such tale-tellers with disgust... They might not believe me, or might say they did not, as the Warden says a convict’s word is not sufficient evidence...” (Atwood 239) is one example of Atwood’s use of tone to describe situations. The loaded language and explanation of Grace’s situation adds perspective to what she is going through, and also shines a light on the treatment that prisoners received at the time, regardless of who they are or whether or not they are actually guilty.

Another important aspect of the novel *Alias Grace* is the switching of view point that occurs throughout. One segment may be told by Grace, while another part may be told from Dr. Jordan’s perspective. This creates a new element of unpredictability and excitement, as one character may have a very different outlook on something than the other. Because of this, *Alias*

Grace becomes almost a sort of mystery novel, as it is unclear what is going to happen next or who is going to do what next, or who is really guilty. “ The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma.” (Atwood 410) Another example of this would be that during some of Jordan’s narrative, it can be seen that his desires are more than they may really seem. The thickening of the plot through love interests or personal thoughts on issues adds depth to the story, and creates a more emotionally believable novel. Even though the various points of view present throughout allow for the reader to become more involved in the story, these elements can also be analyzed through a literary lens, perhaps what the author intended. The major lens used in this work is the feminist lens, for example; “ But he tried to push his way into my room, saying we would be married soon enough anyway. And I said we would not... And he said he would have my promise off me anyway.” (Atwood 341) This quote implies that because Grace is a woman, she will be married to him soon because that’s her only real duty as a woman; to become a wife. Through the use of a literary lens, Atwood is able to convey the theme of gender inequality without stating anything explicitly.

Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a compelling work primarily dealing with the mistreatment of mental illness and the inequality that exists between genders, as well as some other social issues. Throughout the book one will find examples of these issues being discussed, whether they are explicitly stated, or implied with the use of symbolism/imagery. *Alias Grace* takes two issues that are usually somewhat uncomfortable to discuss with others, and makes them out to be important without overemphasising anything or

making anything seem inappropriate. The way that this has been done allows for the book to spark meaningful conversations without becoming controversial, which is a very hard thing to accomplish. Atwood has created a social commentary on the current status of mental health and feminism in the world with her novel, *Alias Grace*.