

Independent Study Unit  
Log One

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*Alias Grace*

by

Margret Atwood

(Pages 1 – 323) ✓

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ENG 3UR

## Passage One: First Pages

This Japanese flower is often known as "the rose without thorns". The Virgin Mary is also referred to this often. The name 'Mary' will echo throughout the work.

A simile is used to compare the peonies to snails' eyes. This can also be related to Grace's hope that her innocence will become known.

"Out of the gravel there are **peonies** growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, **huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin**. Then they burst and fall to the ground.

Contrast is used to describe the flowers, but can also describe Grace. There is darkness within her, despite her beauty.

In the one instant before they come apart they are like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's, that first day, **only those were white**. Nancy was cutting them. She wore a pale dress with pink rosebuds and a triple-flounced skirt, and a **straw bonnet** that hid her face. She carried a flat basket, to put the flowers in; **she bent from the hips like a lady**, holding her waist straight. When she heard us and turned around to look, she put her hand up to her throat as if startled.

Mr. Kinnear, Grace's employer, and Nancy Montgomery, the housewife, are introduced.

White signifies purity and innocence. When Nancy cuts the white peonies, it symbolizes a loss of innocence.

The peonies are a metaphorical description of Grace.

This description of clothing and actions demonstrates the time period.

I tuck my head down while I walk, keeping step with the rest, silently two by two around the yard, inside the square made by the high stone walls. My hands are clasped in front of me; they're chapped, the knuckles reddened I can't remember a time when they were not like that. The toes of my shoes go in and out under the hem of my skirt, blue and white, blue and white, crunching on the pathway. **These shoes fit me better than I've ever had before**. It's 1851. I'll be twenty-four years old next birthday. I've been shut up here since the age of sixteen. I **am a model prisoner, and give no trouble**" (5).

Metaphorical description of Grace's current situation.

The year is identified, which assists in describing the setting.

Grace describes herself as a model prisoner. This may give the impression that she is hiding something, for if she were truly innocent she would proclaim to be.

A flashback is used to create two settings and inform that the novel will take place over multiple settings. It also introduces key characters.

# Context

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This passage is taken from the very first page of Margret Atwood's *Alias Grace*. The first page is very complex, and holds not only one, but two settings. The beginning of the passage takes place at the Kinston Penitentiary in August of 1851. Grace Marks, the main character, has been convicted of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, as well as his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Nearly every morning, Grace Marks is escorted to the Governor's wife's parlour; here, she cleans and often hems the clothing of the Governor's wife and daughter. On this particular afternoon, however, Grace is visited by a doctor wishing to measure the size of her skull, hoping to discover whether or not insanity can be detected by its width. It is after this passage that Grace's extreme fear of doctors is learned. Grace's fear of doctors traces back to her early childhood, and now plays a large role in her life in the penitentiary, for she tells the story of her life to a psychiatric doctor, Dr. Jordon. It can be seen that her story is told in first-person.

The second part of the passage contains a flashback, in which the second setting is seen. The sight of growing peonies takes Grace back to the home of her employer, Thomas Kinnear. Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery live in a large house in Richmond Hill. The long, winding drive-way gives sight to the well-kept orchard, and a grand verandah encircles the house. Grace will serve as Thomas and Nancy's maid for a term of nearly six months. It is at this point, however, that Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery are found dead, and Grace is one <sup>the</sup> ~~whom is~~ convicted of the act.

This passage is placed at the very beginning of *Alias Grace* to introduce many key aspects. First of all, Margret Atwood describes the time period solely through the description of

the characters. By mentioning that Nancy wore "a straw bonnet that hid her face" (5), assumptions can be made that *Alias Grace* takes place during the 1800's. By stating that Grace is "a model prisoner" (5), the fact that she is a convicted prisoner is understood; however, it is unknown as to why she has been imprisoned. Next, the flashback is used to demonstrate that there will be multiple settings, and it creates a background to the current situation. The flashback also evokes many questions, such as 'Who are Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery?', and 'Why has Grace Marks been "shut up in [the penitentiary] since the age of sixteen" (5)?'. It creates a sense of intrigue and wonder as to what has happened in Grace Marks' life to have placed her in her current situation. It is significant that this passage is placed at this particular spot due to the fact that so many key aspects are introduced. Literary devices, ideas and themes, the writing style, and echoes all play key roles in the significance of this passage.

# Significance

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Several literary devices are present within this passage. Grace observes the peonies as she walks along the path, describing how “they come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snail’s eyes” (5). This simile implies that Grace harbours some form of hope despite being surrounded by greyness. She then describes how the peonies “burst and fall to the ground” (5). Despite the hope that Grace has that she will eventually be released from prison, there is a constant nagging that causes her to fall to the ground. *→ What is the source of this nagging feeling? Do we know yet?* Essentially, Grace Marks is the peonies growing along the walkway, and the first hint of contrast and contradiction is seen.

Throughout *Alias Grace*, there are religious undertones that are echoed. The first echo involves the name ‘Mary’. The very first line of the passage mentions a Japanese flower, the *source?* peony. This flower is often known as the “rose without thorns”, which is also a name that refers to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the New Testament, Genesis 3:15 is the first mention of the Virgin Mary. It states, “*I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shall lie in wait for her heel*”. It is believed that Grace Marks’ involvement in the murder of her employer and housekeeper is based on the fact that Grace harboured bitter feelings towards Nancy due to her beauty. Furthermore, although Grace has virtually no recollection of the murders, she dreams of Nancy Montgomery, whose face is covered in the blood from a wound on her head. This passage from the book of Genesis depicts the murder of Nancy. Next, Dr. Jordon describes Grace as having “the vapid pensiveness of a Magdalene” (65). Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection of Christ; however, it is also believed that seven devils were cast upon her. Lastly, Grace Marks uses the alias name, ‘Mary Whitney’. The social acceptance of the name ‘Mary’ as virginal and pure

seems to contradict the views expressed of the name in the Bible. The constant contradiction of the name gives the impression that Grace Marks is untruthful. She states that she has no recollection of the murders; however, she may be lying to protect herself. Grace claims that she is "a model prisoner" (5); however, the question as to why Grace does not continue to proclaim her innocence, despite being convicted, is impossible to ignore. ✓

Literary devices are used to demonstrate this contrast. The contrast that is used to describe the peonies – being "dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin" (5) – implies that Grace may be hiding the truth, and that her story (as well as the way she presents herself) is merely a façade. ✓ If the growing peonies are a metaphorical description of Grace Marks, then despite the fact that she may be "shining and glossy" (5), and present herself as "a model prisoner" (5), there is a darkness that she hides – one that can only be recognized when her beauty and presentation are disregarded. Margaret Atwood uses connotation when describing the bursting and falling peonies. The true meaning behind this statement will not be known until a later time. ✓ Furthermore, Grace mentions that her "shoes fit [her] better than any [she has] ever had before" (5). This relates to the concept that Grace is a "model prisoner" (5). Why does she feel the need to be an exceptional prisoner? It is as though Grace's shoes metaphorically describe her current situation: she fits extremely well in a place that she claims she does not belong. The contrast that is seen between the "dark-red flowers" (5) and their glossy, shiny appearance; the contrast that is seen regarding the name 'Mary' within the Bible and social beliefs; and the contrast between Grace's hope for release and her strangely- obedient behaviour can all relate to the idea that Grace Marks has great contrast within herself. She may not be what she appears to be. ✓

The removal of innocence is a theme that can be traced throughout the work thus far. In Grace's initial flashback, she imagines the peonies from Thomas Kinnear's orchard. They "were white" (5), and Nancy Montgomery "was cutting them" (5). The colour white is a symbol of purity and innocence. Grace's specific memory of Nancy cutting the pure, white peonies symbolizes Grace's belief that Nancy played some part in the removal of her innocence. Furthermore, when Grace and her family made the long voyage to Canada from Ireland, Grace's mother died on the ship. Grace wrapped her mother in a white bed sheet, and a crew member tossed her mother's body into the ocean. A large piece of Grace's innocence was thrown into the water alongside her mother's body. After this incident, Grace is appointed the role of the mother to her younger siblings. She is forced to mature very fast, and at the ripe age of twelve, she leaves home to find a job. The continual growth and maturation at such a young age removes a great deal of Grace's innocence.

The writing style that is used provides information about the characters, using a quiet tone that eases its way into the story. Grace Marks describes the peonies that are growing "through the loose grey pebbles" (5) in a poetic way. Grace continues to compare the peonies' buds to "snails' eyes" (5). By describing the environment poetically, it seems as though Grace is an intelligent young woman and that she also has a great imagination. These two features could benefit Grace in a high degree. By using her intelligence and skill of speaking, she is able to better fool the lawyers, jury, judges, and now (or so she *thinks*), Dr. Jordon. This, too, relates to the idea that there is contrast within Grace. Are her intelligence and personality genuine or is she simply using her poetic abilities to fool those around her? ✓

Excellent  
Passage Choice

## Passage Two: Character

"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. Apart from ~~the incidental~~ <sup>What incident?</sup> the time of my arrival – which I was unfortunately too late to witness – there have been no outbursts. 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 Northern Irish accent with which she must have arrived, although that is not so remarkable, as she was only a child at the time and has now spent more than half her life on this continent.

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**; although I have managed to ascertain a good deal about her family situation as a child, and about her crossing of the Atlantic, as an emigrant; but none of it is very far out of the ordinary – only the usual poverty and hardships, etc. Those who believe in

the hereditary nature of insanity might take some comfort in the fact that her father was an inebriate, and possibly an arsonist as well; but despite several theories to the contrary, I am far from being convinced that such tendencies are necessarily inherited" (152).

A metaphor comparing Grace's composure to that of a duchess. This focuses much on appearance.

By using the word 'appears', Dr. Jordon implies that there is more to Grace than meets the eye.

Emphasis is placed on the idea that Grace is hiding something, or that she is fooling those around her.

The theme of fabrication and construction is introduced.

Simile is used to demonstrate that Grace is extremely hard to read. She manages to keep all of the important information to herself.

Emphasis is again placed on her appearance, and she seems to be described with a high class.

A trained doctor is having difficulty reading Grace. Her silent state implies that she is hiding something.



## Context

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This passage is taken from a journal entry of Dr. Jordon. Nearly every afternoon, Dr. Jordon and Grace meet in Grace's prison cell. Dr. Jordon encourages Grace to tell her side of the events which have placed her in prison. Before this passage, Grace describes to Dr. Jordon her trip from Northern Ireland to Canada, as well as her family situation after the fact. While on the ship to Canada, Grace's mother dies, and Grace is left to take over as the role of the mother. Grace's father's abusive tendencies increase dramatically as a result of her mother's death. The mental and physical abuse becomes so great that Grace contemplates killing her own father by smashing an iron cooking pan over his head. After this passage, Grace continues the story of her life. She tells Dr. Jordon of her second employer, Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. It is here that Grace meets Mary Whitney, a name that she will eventually use as an alias. Mary Whitney is another maid, and soon she and Grace become great friends. However, Mary soon becomes pregnant, and feeling as though she has no other choice, she <sup>was</sup> receives an abortion. Unfortunately, the abortion results in Mary's death. This is where Grace's extreme fear of doctors originates.

Thus far, Grace Marks has informed Dr. Jordon of very little. She has told him the story of her life up until the age of thirteen. While Grace tells her story, she remains calm and composed. This passage is of great significance because it demonstrates how easily Grace is capable of manipulating situations and the people around her. Even Dr. Jordon, whom is trained in the psychiatric field, is unable to see into Grace's mind, for she tells him "as little as possible of what [he] want[s] to learn" (152). It is as though she knows exactly what he wishes to learn, and exactly how to prevent such knowledge from being known.

# Significance

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Silence is a key theme throughout *Alias Grace*. Dr. Jordon feels as though he has to “open [Grace] up like an oyster” (152) in order to get any valuable information from her, for she “manages to tell [him] as little as possible” (152). Silence can be traced back to Grace’s early childhood, when she was sworn to secrecy upon a Bible regarding her father’s fraudulent actions. *interesting*

While serving as a maid at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s house, Mary Whitney made Grace swear that she would tell no one of her abortion. Now that Grace is in prison, she claims that she is a “model prisoner” (5), and maintains that she is innocent. However, even while in jail, Grace remains silent. She does not proclaim her innocence. The fact that Grace remains in such a silent state implies that she is keeping something to herself.

The narrator of this particular passage is Dr. Jordon, a psychiatric doctor. Dr. Jordon has not met Grace before; therefore, he is an unbiased observer of the situation. He writes in a very frank manner, and he expresses confusion when reflecting on his conversations with Grace. He notices that Grace remains in a silence state. He expresses that he has “never known a woman to be so thoroughly self-contained” (152) and that she has “manifested a composure that a duchess might envy” (152). A duchess is constantly in the public eye, and must contain herself in order to maintain her own reputation, and well as the reputation of her family. Grace, however, has no reputation to uphold, for nearly all of society considers her guilty; nor does she have any ties left to her family. By using terms such as “duchess” (152) and “governess” (152), it seems as though Grace is being referred to a class higher than her own. The idea of contrast can be highlighted once again – Grace is being referred to as someone in a higher class, but in reality, she is considered to be in the class of the mentally ill.

Grace provides Dr. Jordon with "as little as possible of what [he] want[s] to learn" (152), and he feels as though he needs to "open her up like an oyster" (152) in order to gain any information at all. The defense mechanism of the oyster is its outer shell – it remains clamped shut in order to protect its inners from outside contaminants. Furthermore, if such contaminants get into the shell, the oyster releases a liquid to consume the particle. This forms a pearl. Silence is Grace Mark's defence mechanism. She attempts to keep other people out of her mind in order to protect her story. However, when an individual manages to uncover a sliver of information, Grace uses her second mechanism: the pearl. She uses her poise, presentation, and "low and melodious" (152) voice to her advantage, in order to cover up any mistakes she may have made. The formation of a pearl takes many years; however, the ~~construction~~ results are beautiful. This can also relate to the idea of fabrication and construction, which will be examined later.

The idea of silence can also be related to the time period of *Alias Grace*. At this time, women did not have much say in the things that happened to them. Their lives and the choices within it were often guided by the men in their families. Grace had grown up in an environment where silence was the only thing she knew, and now, it seems as though she is using it to her advantage.

Fabrication is also a key theme throughout *Alias Grace*. While Grace and Dr. Jordon converse, Grace is often sewing; mending her own clothing, or creating quilts. Nearly every morning, when Grace is escorted to the Governor's wife's parlour, she sews, also. Margaret Atwood places this action in *Alias Grace* intentionally. Sewing and involving the use of fabrics implies that there is some form of construction and fabrication involved in Grace's story. It is important to recognize that when Dr. Jordon comes to speak with Grace – in hopes that he will be able to discover something in her subconscious relating to the murders of her employer and

his housekeeper — that she is always sewing. She designs and builds upon her quilts as though she is constructing a story with intricate details.

The Governor's wife believes, too, that Grace is a "model prisoner" (5). Grace does not pick fights, nor throw her food, nor experience sudden outbursts of anger — this is why the Governor's wife allows her in her home. However, here, she is constantly sewing, as well. Grace claims that she has been sewing her entire life, and that her work is so incredible as to belong in a shop. Does this imply that Grace has been constructing events throughout her entire life? Due to the fact that Grace is constantly sewing in the Governor's wife's presence, it implies that she is not a model prisoner; that she has merely redesigned her personality for this particular environment. Dr. Jordon refers to Grace's "cultivated" (152) voice as "a trick she has learned no doubt through her long service in the house of her social superiors" (152). The idea that Grace's story and her presentation are merely a trick is emphasized.

The idea that Grace uses her beauty, speaking abilities and presentation in order to fool those around her is echoed throughout *Alias Grace*. The name 'Grace' is Latin, and means 'charm' or 'graceful' (<[www.babynames.com/m/Names/name\\_display.php?n=Grace](http://www.babynames.com/m/Names/name_display.php?n=Grace)>). In this particular passage, Dr. Jordon wishes that Grace was "at least a little madder than she appears to be" (152). By using the word 'appears', Dr. Jordon senses that underneath her appearance, something is not right. By describing her as having "a composure that a duchess might envy" (152) and a "mouth primed up like a governess's" (152), there is great emphasis placed on her appearance and her charm.

# Bibliography

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Atwood, Margret. *Alias Grace*.

McClelland and Stewart Publication. September 1996.