


Chapter 17

The Ominous Southern Border in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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ABSTRACT

*For her first and only historical novel, Margaret Atwood chose the convicted murderer Grace Marks – a 19th-century case that attracted notoriety due to Grace's gender, attractiveness and age. However, in reading *Alias Grace*, Atwood's invention of displaced American characters is striking, particularly as the novel holds them as responsible for Grace's trajectory than actual historical players. It appears that in addition to her portrait of Grace as a protagonist who subverts power relations, Atwood wanted to establish a historical context for the insidious threat of Americans. This chapter examines the function of Canada's southern border in *Alias Grace*, examining the conflicts generated by American characters temporarily residing in Canada. To begin, this chapter will first establish the context of historical northern crossings by American citizens, as well as Atwood's other portrayals of visiting Americans. Overall, while Atwood's American characters are generally benign figures, she consistently presents them as a subtle threat to Canadians and Canadian identity.*

INTRODUCTION

As there is more news coverage of individuals entering the United States rather than exiting, this is true of Anglophone literature as well. When prominent Commonwealth authors write novels critiquing American culture and power, they tend

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to follow a migrant's journey within the U.S.: for example, *On Beauty* (Smith, 2005) and *Americanah* (Adichie, 2013). However, despite Margaret Atwood's regular border crossings into the United States, this Canadian author has more frequently portrayed American citizens who have crossed Canada's southern border. Instead of the Canada-US border offering opportunity for Canadians, in Atwood's work, this border functions as an existential threat. In particular, transient Americans are a troubling presence in Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996).

Margaret Atwood chose as her historical subject the convicted murderer Grace Marks—a case that attracted notoriety due to Grace's gender, good looks, and age (16 years old). Grace Marks was convicted as the accomplice of James McDermott, who killed their employer Thomas Kinnear and Kinnear's housekeeper/lover Nancy Montgomery. The trial debated whether Grace was a seductress who manipulated McDermott—or an innocent girl who fled with him out of fear. Atwood's choice of Grace as a protagonist connects to themes in her other novels. Grace Marks was a figure who was disempowered on multiple levels—as a woman, an Irish immigrant, a servant, a mental patient, and as a prisoner—who nonetheless managed to become free, ultimately escaping public control and knowledge.

Alias Grace opens in 1859, 16 years after the murders. By this point, a group had organized to have Grace freed; the final chapter is set in 1872. Atwood set out her guidelines for shaping Grace Marks' story:

...every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be; but, in the parts left unexplained—the gaps left unfilled—I was free to invent. (Atwood, 1988, p. 1515)

According to these rules, Atwood was required to follow the biographical details of figures historically known to be associated with the events—but she was free to invent characters and characteristics that were not specified, as long as they were “suggested by something in the writing about Grace”.

However, in reading *Alias Grace*, Atwood's invention of displaced American characters is striking, particularly as the novel holds them possibly as responsible for Grace's trajectory as the actual historical players. It appears, in addition to her portrait of Grace as a protagonist who subverts power relations, Atwood wanted to establish a historical context for the insidious threat of Americans, particularly American men. In *Alias Grace*, America and Americans are intentionally interwoven into this Canadian historical novel, playing a role in a story in which they had little or no factual part. Perhaps Atwood believes that the impression that the U.S. and Americans are not a part of Canadian history is, in fact, what makes the United States so threatening. In *Alias Grace*, Canada and America serve as complementary refuges—though the motives and goals of their border-crossing citizens may not be

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