Hungry for Truth and (Hi)story: Images of Food in *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Alias Grace *is a historiographic metafiction written by Margaret Atwood in 1996 about Grace Marks, imprisoned for double murder. The style of the novel is a convincing reconstruction of the Victorian historical novel because of authentic descriptions of 19th century Canadian households and domestic life and its regular meals. The food motif is a vivid undercurrent in* Alias Grace *just as it is in Atwood's other novels. Images of food intensify the realistic portrait of Canada, however, the food operates on a deeper, symbolic level: images of food, eating, and hunger are often interwoven with the power and class injustice. The analysis shows that hunger is not only physical experience and a hard fact of prisoner's life but it can be metaphorical, manifested as hunger for truth and story. The article argues that imprisoned Grace controls her hunger to usurp responsibility for her story. It also illustrates that women are constantly associated with food and edibles and thus it points to related issues of cannibalism and power struggles. Although the motifs of food, eating and cannibalism have been discussed by numerous critics including Sarah Sceats, Heidi Darroch, and Sharon Rose Wilson, this article extends their research by exploring Atwood's strategies of writing and storytelling using food images. The article examines Atwood's postmodern technique of cooking up the* Alias Grace *from many historical texts and using genre fiction ingredients.*

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, cannibalism, eating, food, historiographic metafiction

Introduction: Food and Hunger in *Alias Grace*

Alias Grace (1996) has a significant position in Margaret Atwood's *oeuvre* as it points to the status of the historical novel as a work of fiction. The novel draws attention to the process of writing history, grounding it within very accurate historical, cultural, social, and political contexts while it nevertheless remains a novel, "fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art […], literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present."[1] *Alias Grace* is a fictional retelling of the sensational 1843 double murder of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery.[2] James McDermott, Kinnear's manservant, was found guilty of murder and executed while Grace Marks, who was only sixteen at the time of crime, was convicted as an accessory to the crime but her death sentence was commuted to life in prison. After nearly thirty years in prison, she was freed. The style of the novel is a believable pastiche of Victorian writing because of authentic descriptions of 19th century Canadian households and domestic life, including regular meals. The food motif is a vivid undercurrent not only of *Alias Grace* but many of Atwood's other novels. This

1 Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13

2 Atwood first read about Grace Marks in Susana Moodie's writing. In 1974, she wrote a television play *The Servant Girl* following Moodie's version. Recently, CBS Television in Canada broadcast a television miniseries directed by Mary Harron and starring Sarah Gadon, based on Atwood's *Alias Grace* and adapted by Sarah Polley.

article proposes a reading the metaphors of food and hunger motifs, linking them to the hunger for truth that Dr. Jordan and readers want to know about murders and (hi)story.

The novel is based on real historical events and draws on authentic primary historical documents (including clips from newspaper reports, an extract from the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book, emigration and medical records, letters from doctors who examined Grace, letters from clergymen, the published confessions of Marks and McDermott). Atwood also worked with various sources on Spiritualism, Mesmerism, fashion and the history of Toronto.

As Coral Ann Howells sums it up: "Atwood has done a great deal of historical research."[3] And although Howells claims that *Alias Grace* is "a historical novel in a postmodern context" but "not historiographic metafiction"[4] the novel is seen as an example of historiographic metafiction[5] by several critics including Alice Ridout, Hilde Staels, and Jennifer Murray. Howells argues that Atwood's text is hybridized and mixes in elements of genres like "women's fictive autobiography and Gothic romance, plus some nineteenth-century surprises like spiritualism, mesmerism, and women's quilt making,"[6] however, she seems not to take into account the novel's self-reflexivity. Since Atwood uses not only generic hybridity and multivoiced representation but also self-reflexivity to pose questions about the reliability of historical representation and interpretation, the novel should not be seen as only as a hybridized historical novel but as an example of historiographic metafiction. As Murray points out, "*Alias Grace* may indeed be seen as an historiographic metafiction to the extent that it shows […] theoretical self-awareness through the undissimulated piecing together of information from historical documents, thereby drawing attention to its modes of construction and representation."[7]

The constant tension between the historical and the fictional, the tension between the Dr. Jordan's and readers' hunger for truth and (hi)story and Grace's resistance is metaphorically expressed by cooking and eating metaphors. Grace feeds Dr. Jordan only partial pieces of her story. Metaphorical hunger represents also Atwood's writing and storytelling strategy as she selects pieces of historical documents to feed her readers (and still leave them hungry).

As this article illustrates, Atwood's writing not only explores various aspects of food and eating, it is also inextricably structured in terms of cooking (constructing) the text using ingredients (elements) from traditional recipes (genres). Although the motifs of food and related issues of eating and cannibalism have been discussed by numerous critics including Sarah Sceats, Heidi Darroch, and Sharon Rose Wilson, the way the novel links these motifs to questions of storytelling and hunger for story have not been fully explored in its own right and will form the important

3 Coral Ann Howells, "Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood's Novels," in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard Nischik (New York: Camden House, 2000), 151.

4 Howells, Coral Ann, "Transgressing Genre," 150.

5 Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction novels as "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. […] Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three [literature, history, or theory] these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 19885), 5.

6 Howells, "Transgressing Genre," 150.

7 Jennifer Murray, "Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 26, no. 1 (2001): 65.

topic of this article. It also shows how the novel appears to employ concepts from historiographic metafiction in the dynamic of a relationship of storytelling and hunger for truth and story (i.e. the relationship between Grace and Dr. Jordan) and its resulting ambiguity. Moreover, images of food simultaneously intensify the realistic portrayal of Canada in Grace's life and recall her hunger for power over her story and also, symbolically, represent our own hunger for truth. Grace cooks up her life story in a way calculated to stimulate her audience's (including the reader's) appetite for an exciting story. In a similar way, Margaret Atwood prepares her novel: she melts the historical documents, picks up spicy ingredients, mixes up pieces of reported newspaper stories, creating a delicious casserole of hybrid historiographic metafiction.

Alias Grace is set in mid-nineteenth century Canada. Grace is an immigrant Irish servant and the novel implies motifs of class and gender inequality, poverty, and immigration. The novel reads like a faithful reconstruction of the Victorian novel because of its very detailed depiction of Canadian households and domestic life, domestic chores, handiwork, meals, and food.[8] The food motif is important not only as an illustration of the nineteenth century lifestyle but it operates on a deeper, symbolic level as well as the images of food, eating, and hunger are often interwoven with the power and class injustice. Parker argues that women are not usually portrayed eating, because "consumption embodies expressions of power."[9] Grace is a hungry prisoner and a powerless woman, her consumption is regulated by the society.

More importantly, I suggest that the search for a true account of Grace's story is presented as a hunger for truth as well as, in other metaphors, a sexual appetite. To complete the triangle, *Alias Grace* also makes links between food and sexuality. In "The Sexual Aberrations," originally published in 1905, Freud speculates about analogies between the hunger for food, and sexual libido, which is hunger for life and hunger for sexual satisfaction:

> […] sexual need in man and animal is expressed in biology by the assumption of a 'sexual impulse. This impulse is made analogous to the impulse of taking nourishment, and to hunger. The sexual expression corresponding to hunger not being found colloquially, science uses the expression 'libido.'[10]

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood's male and female characters charge food with erotic tensions and hunger with sexual appetite.

Hungry Prisoner's Story

The opening murder scene of the novel plays upon the practice of seeing history and fiction in opposition. The scene is well documented in various sources and Atwood's novel includes various details from witnesses' reports: kneeling Nancy Montgomery, the cellar, the blood flowing down Nancy's face. However, it is all dissolved in a dreamy, surrealistic atmosphere. By including anti-

8 For a detailed analysis of patchworks, quilting metaphors and story-telling techniques, see Katarina Labudova, "Postmodern Scheherazades : the Patchwork Metaphor in Angela Carter's *Wise Children* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 6, no. 1 (2014): 107–116.

9 Emma Parker, "You Are What Your Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 3 (1995): 349, Accessed 24 November 2015. doi: 10.2307/441857.

10 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. (1905, New York: Basic Books, 2000), 1.

realistic elements, Atwood points to the fictionality and textuality of her novel. While history is believed to stand apart from fiction by offering a true, objective, and verifiable account of real events, Hayden White questions and deconstructs this opposition and shows that authorized versions of history are also results of bias, omission, narrative perspective limitations, and exaggeration:

> The true explanation lay in the telling of a story that was as accurate in its details as it was compelling in its meaning. But accuracy in the details was often confused with the truth of the meaning of the story. It was not seen that the meaning of the story was given by the mode of emplotment chosen to make of the story told a story of a particular kind.[11]

Similar strategies are employed in fictional narratives and Atwood's novel points to them by giving very accurate description of objects and household items but not articulating the final truth of the murder mystery.

Atwood's *Alias Grace* raises the question of who gets to narrate an historical event. The past can be accessed only via language and textual traces and thus it raises questions of author(ity), control, power, and ideology. As Hutcheon suggests: "To write history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control: it is the story of the victors that usually gets told."[12] Atwood's novel reconstructs the (traditionally marginalized and/or eliminated) history of a female prisoner. Like many other women writers of historical novels, she spices up "history through fiction as part of the urgent need to tell 'her story'", as Diane Wallace puts it in *The Woman's Historical Novel*.[13]Although the novel feeds the reader with details from historical, cultural, social, and political reality, it questions the authority of monological history and blurs the strict fact/fiction, history/fiction opposition.

The novel is based on (sometimes contradictory) traceable historical documents, but Margaret Atwood had to sift the evidence and exclude some data as some sources might be more objective, some written for dramatic effect and some very subjective: not only histories, the historical subjects are made of paper as well. As Hilde Staels argues, "both, the historical and the fictive Grace are products of discourse. We know her only from texts, from fictionalized history, past and present."[14] Grace self-reflexively comments on this:

> 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 against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder. That I am fond of animals, that I have blue eyes that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition and a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that

11 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 142.

12 Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern*, 72

13 Diane Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: The British Woman Writers, 1900–2000* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hamshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 176

14 Hilde Staels, "Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 2 (2000): 430. Accessed April 2, 2018.doi: 10.1353/mfs.2000.0044.

> I am soft in the head and little better that an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at one?[15]

In *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks is presented as an ambiguous Victorian woman, both ethereal and innocent, and, simultaneously viewed as potential monster – aggressive, and sexually greedy. In *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Krugovoy-Silver suggests that for the reason of potential monstrosity of Victorian women, "self-control became an integral part of the Victorian woman's life: she was expected to control her behavior, her speech, and her appetite as signs of her dominion over her desires."[16] Because Grace represents a triple risk for her society – not only a young woman but also a member of a subordinate class and finally a convicted criminal – she is often in situations where she is deprived of power. The novel points to these power relations through the relationship to food and the satisfaction of appetite. Grace's appetite is controlled by others, by her parents' poverty, by her masters, and by the penitentiary. The prison represents the ultimate regulation of appetite and hunger: "No supper last night or the night before that, nothing except the bread, not even a bit of cabbage; well that is to be expected. Starvation is calming to the nerves. Today it will be more bread and water, as meat is exciting to criminals and maniacs"[17] Indeed, Deborah Lupton comments on food restrictions among prisoners in the nineteenth century. She states that "[n]utritional science as a cogent approach to food and eating practices developed in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, stimulated by the problems of food and health, food scarcity among the poor and working class, the nutritional requirements of prisoners and soldiers, food storage and transport in the wake of the industrial revolution."[18] Grace's hunger is a hard fact of her powerless life, however, she learns how to control it and use it to empower herself.

Greedy Pleasures

Even though the novel's basic scheme comes from accessible accounts of a notorious and widely reported nineteenth-century Canadian murder case that are in the public domain, Atwood mixes in intertexts from literature, folklore, fairy tales, myth, the Bible, ballads and songs. As Jerome De Groot argues, "historical writing can take place within numerous fictional locales: romance, detective, thriller, counterfactual, horror, literary, gothic, postmodern, epic, fantasy, mystery, western, children's books. Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics."[19] I would argue that there is a constant thread from the metaphors of eating and cannibalism in the novel's language, through the themes of cooking up a life story, or being hungry for the facts of a case on the narrative level, to Atwood's technique of cooking up the *Alias Grace* from many intertexts and the way in which the text has incorporated (or eaten) other texts. Atwood's postmodern, richly intertextual writing combines ingredients and

15 Margaret Atwood , *Alias Grace* (London: Virago, 1996), 25.

16 Anna Krugovoy-Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

17 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 38.

18 Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 70.

19 Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London and New York: Routledge: 2010), 2.

methods from a variety of genre recipes. The intergeneric hybridity, rich intertextuality as well as tactics of parody and satire enable us to label the novel as historiographic metafiction as its "metafictional self-reflexivity and intertextuality renders [its] implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic."[20] In this line, Petr Chalupský observes that "[a]t the heart of historiographic metafiction thus lies a paradox: it installs material reality imposes a totalising order on it, yet only to subvert its autonomy and permanency by employing destabilising narrative strategies such as intertextuality and parody."[21] Atwood uses gaps in the official history and interweaves them with various fictional and non-fictional texts to question the authoritative historical narrative.

The key genres with which Atwood explores intertextual combinations are the Gothic novel, the memoir as well as the narrative strategies of the mystery and the detective novel, genres which themselves imitate, or even parody, the methods of the traditional historical novel. The genres of (fictive) memoir[22], historical novel[23] and detective fiction[24] are conventionally associated with efforts to discover the truth; and this is a strategy that Atwood both elaborates on and subverts in *Alias Grace*. As there are gaps, contradictions and paradoxes in the historical records, Atwood was "free to invent."[25] As she remarks, "*Alias Grace* is very much a novel rather than a documentary."[26] Nevertheless, Atwood chooses not to invent an unambiguous final version and leaves much for the reader to fill in.

While reading the book, readers might anticipate various ways of handling the source material and building a narrative. It might be a historical novel in which Atwood scandalizes a shocking murder case to demonstrate that Canadian history is not dull: "the lure of the Canadian past has been partly the lure of the unmentionable – the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo."[27] On the other hand, *Alias Grace* might be "a revisionist story, introducing new evidence to prove that Grace was the innocent victim."[28] But Atwood uses a different strategy to provoke our appetites: she shows Grace as both cunning and innocent, cruel and gentle.

20 Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metahiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P.O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: John Hopkins Unversity Press, 1989), 3.

21 Petr Chalupský, "The Living Presence of Invisible Agencies and Unseen Powers – The Dramatised and Reinvented History of Peter Acroyd's Novels," *American and British Studies Annual* 9 (2016): 14.

22 Bethany Ober Mannor, "Fictive Memoir and Girlhood Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no.5 (2014): 551. Accessed March 23, 2018. doi: 1080/00111619.2013.811400.

23 Howells, "Transgressing Genre: A Generic Approach to Margaret Atwood's Novels," 149.

24 Earl Ingersoll, "Whodunit: The Mystery/Detective Story Framework in Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*," in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, ed. J. Brooks Bouson (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), 74.

25 Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," in *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2005), 227.

26 Atwood, "In Search," 227.

27 Atwood, "In Search," 218.

28 Ingersoll "Whodunit: The Mystery/Detective Story Framework in Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*," 75.

Tasty Memories

The narrative presents the efforts of an American physician Simon Jordan, who uses various pre-psychoanalytical methods to investigate Grace's involvement in the murders. He acts like a detective and/or a psychiatrist trying to apply objective and scientific methods. Dr. Jordan, like the reader, is hungry for truth: Grace's innocence, or Grace's guilt (if inevitably proven by science and objective evaluation of facts). But the truth of Grace's involvement is never revealed. Dr. Jordan's approach of scientific objectivity fails as he becomes more and more subjective and personally involved: he is hungry not only for the true story but his appetite for Grace is also erotic and undermines his objectivity. Dr. Jordan cannot stop thinking about Grace and her stories remind him of his own desires for the maids in his youth. He associates her with the chambermaids who dominated his childhood and smelled "like strawberries and salt."[29] Dr. Jordan associates women with food: they are "jelly-like,"[30] "pudding-faced,"[31] their skin is "milky,"[32] and they "slump to the floor like melted cheese."[33] His scientific method (intended to stir up Grace's repressed memories) clearly works on him and he becomes obsessed with Grace. DeFalco observes that:

> The upper-middle-class Simon also indulges in cannibalistic sexual fantasies that equate sex and engulfment. These multiple, distinctly gendered, fantasies of consumption are in line with the role of food and eating in Atwood's previous works, reflecting a patriarchal, imperialistic culture based on greedy devouring.[34]

Dr. Jordan's desire to devour is matched by an anxiety about being devoured himself. He feels intimidated by Grace and other women, including gossipy curious servant Dora: "Dora is a hefty creature, and could snap a man's spine in two with her thighs, which Simon envisions as "stubbled like a signed turkey; and enormous, each one as large as a piglet."[35] Dr. Jordan's anxiety here is a mirror (reversed) image of his anthropophagic interest in Grace as Dora's strong body threatens Dr. Jordan's physicality.

Having exhausted his scientific methods (possibly forerunners of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis), he accepts the Spiritualists' and mesmerizers' dramatic methods. Dr. Jordan's belief in science and rationality weakens not only because of his metaphorical hunger for truth but also his dissatisfaction with food he is served in Canada: "Every meal is a burnt offering."[36] Because of his metaphorical and literal hunger, he feels "like a roasting chestnut."[37] He is being cooked. He is not in charge; Grace is.

29 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 64.

30 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 83.

31 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 65.

32 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 84.

33 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 83.

34 Amelia DeFalco, "Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in *Alias Grace,*" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2006): 780. Accessed 4 April 2018. doi: 10.1353/utq.2006.0247.

35 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 66.

36 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 61.

37 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 472.

Despite everything he tries, Grace remains an enigma. She is aware that her audience (society, Dr. Jordan, the reader) crave for the identity of the person responsible for the horrendous crime: "If my own death sentence had not been commuted at the last minute, they would have watched me hang with the same greedy pleasure."[38] The profound need to find the truth is imitated in the detective novels and historical novels, however, Margaret Atwood's historiographic metafiction never satisfies this hungry desire, which Grace associates with negative characteristics: "It was not the same doctor in any case, it only looked like him. The same cold and greedy look, and the hate."[39] This ambiguity, uncertainty, and enigma of Grace Marks is what attracts Atwood's attention: not only is it impossible to make a reliable and verifiable reconstruction of the crime from contradictory historical records available, but the story is full of silence, lies, and claimed amnesia. Dr. Jordan perceives Grace's ambiguity and sees her as an animal to prey upon. From the very first moment, her (food-like) scent is attractive as well as distracting: "She smells like smoke; smoke, and laundry soap, and the salt from her skin; and she smells of the skin itself, with its undertones of dampness, fullness, ripeness […] Ferns and mushrooms; fruits crushed and fermenting."[40] The method that he imagines will evoke a chain of disturbing associations in Grace starts working on him instead.

The Opaque Blue of Veins, the Ivory of Teeth and Bones: Morbid Appetites

According to Diana Wallace, women writers of historical novels deliberately turn to the gaps and silences in the records. Recovering women's history becomes "the province of the novelist, who had the freedom to reinvent the past on behalf of the marginalized and excluded."[41] Grace Marks is marginalized and excluded not only as a young girl, but also as a member of the working class and as a prisoner. Margaret Atwood not only recreates her voice but also multiple voices of other women, including Nancy Montgomery and Mary Whitney.

Alice Ridout points out that *Alias Grace* is "concerned with how women's histories are erased from official, public history."[42] Atwood suggests that the silence of what is not said and what is claimed to be forgotten is as important as the (unreliable) historical sources: "[We] live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of larger memory we call history, is being called into question."[43] Atwood explains that she does not believe there is no truth to be known but concludes that "although there undoubtedly was truth – somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery – truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us."[44] Grace (in Atwood's novel) does not claim either guilt or innocence but claims the truth is unknowable to her. To establish credibility for her claims, she knowingly exploits the gaps between event, memory and story. She understands that as an immigrant, young girl, servant, and convicted criminal, she is not to be trusted and listened to but

38 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 32.

39 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 33.

40 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 103.

41 Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel,* 177.

42 Ridout, "Historical Turn," 302.

43 Atwood, "In Search," 212.

44 Atwood, "In Search," 228.

that until the question of her guilt or innocence is closed, she has a space for survival. According to Diane Wallace, "in the millennial 1990s, 'serious' women writers increasingly turned to the historical novel, or rather to new versions of the genre which they shaped to reflect their sense of history as subjective, multiple, contingent and fragmented."[45] Margaret Atwood uses the historical novel genre to subvert the official history of the murder case and she turns the gaps in the records into questions and doubts.

In *Alias Grace*, speaking and eating, as oral activities, converge. Traditionally, the silencing of women's voices has been as important as the restriction of their appetites for maintaining control of women. Moreover, Grace's voice is unheard as she is not only a woman but also a prisoner, but when she is withholding her story from Dr. Jordan, she uses hunger and silence as a source of power (over her audience). Power derives not only from eating (and speaking), control over one's hunger and silence can also be empowering.

Grace uses silence and deception to preserve her control over the narrative. Her silence and manipulation might be used as a strategy of resistance. Grace recognizes that she is powerless, so by using silence and evasion, she can protect herself and manipulate her audience (including the reader and Dr. Jordan). Thus, she can subvert the official narrative of her guilt. We can see how this operates in the scene where she discusses the different connotations of the words murderer and murderess: "I would rather be a murderess that a murderer, if those are the only choices."[46] By discussing the way a person is seen differently under different labels, and discussing it as a hypothetical, she suggests that these labels are being forced upon her and opens the possibility of false accusation. Moreover, her claim that the word murderess sounds like a taffeta skirt rustling across the floor points to an awareness that history can only be known through textual signs and that these can operate through associations far removed from their conventional meanings. Grace's appreciation of the paradoxical term "a celebrated murderess"[47] points again to textuality and metafictionality of history. She is a murderess because "that is what has been written down."[48] If the past is made of paper and ink (newspaper clippings, reports, the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book, emigration records, medical records, letters from clergy, letters from doctors, the published confessions), its very textuality is highlighted in Atwood's novel, which also points to its own cooking, mixing and reheating.

Delicious Lies: Roots of the Truth

In *Alias Grace*, a key use of the food motif is as a currency for the objective comparison of life in nineteenth century Canada and Ireland:

> Food was certainly easier to come by in the Canadas than on the other side of the ocean, and there was a greater variety of it; and even then, the servants ate meat every day, if only salt port or bacon;

45 Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel,* 203.

46 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 25.

47 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 25.

48 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 25.

> and there was good bread, of wheat and also of Indian corn; and the house had its own three cows […], fruit trees, and strawberries, currants, and grapes."[49]

However, images of food operate on a more subjective, symbolic level as well. Dr. Jordan's search for Grace's secret is presented as a hunger that she refuses to feed. To Dr. Jordan, Grace's mind/memory is a locked box he needs to open to unearth the truth about the murders. He associates women and Grace with food: he sees her as "cool as a cucumber,"[50] "a very hard nut to crack"[51] and wants to "open her up as an oyster,"[52] which is a disturbingly cannibalistic image. Grace recalls their first meeting and her experience of Dr. Jordan's psychological exploration is almost physical: "a feeling like being torn open; not like a body of flesh, it is not painful as such, but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting open of its own accord."[53] Grace experiences Dr. Jordan's interest in her as threatening physical intrusion. Atwood uses disturbing cannibalistic images to depict Dr. Jordan's hunger for Grace and other women: "He must lift off the sheet, then lift off her skin, whoever she is, or was, layer by layer. Strip back her rubbery flesh, peel her open, gut her like a haddock."[54] There are frequent images of (sexual) cannibalism throughout the novel: the female body is constantly associated with food.[55]

As the murder took place in a cellar, Dr. Jordan brings edibles, such as root vegetables (that might be associated with the cellar) to their session, as if a potato or a parsnip would be the key to Grace's memories of the crime scene. Indeed, Grace remembers the cellar of Mr. Kinnear very well:

> The cellar stairs were too steep for comfort, and the cellar below was divided into two parts by a half-wall, the dairy on one side, which was where they kept the butter and the cheeses, and on the other side the place where they stored the wine and beer in barrels, and the apples, and the carrots and cabbages and beets and potatoes in boxes of sand in the winter.[56]

But, when Grace is asked for her cellar-associations, she plays Dr. Jordan, ironizes him, providing only cooking proverbs: "Fine words butter no parsnips."[57] Grace mocks his tactics and resists associations, instead, giving him recipes and meals. As Sarah Sceats points out, Grace's "replies are resolutely practical, those of commonsense."[58] By bringing edible objects to their sessions (pieces of fruit, root vegetables), Dr. Jordan tries to get inside Grace like a piece of food that is eaten, digested and incorporated. To Grace, a hungry prisoner, the food he brings to the sessions are not just instruments of truth or symbols of domestic life and home comforts. Sarah Sceats suggests

49 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 172.

50 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 153.

51 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 61.

52 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 153.

53 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 79.

54 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 408.

55 It is not only female body that is associated with meat and food. Grace suggest that the audience watching James McDermott's execution and dissection see him as a piece of meat: "They cut him into pieces like a pig to be salted down, he might as well have been bacon as far as they are concerned." Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 31.

56 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 247.

57 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 228.

58 Sceats, Sarah, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 122.

that Grace's life is "externally regulated, especially where food is concerned […], from her poor childhood through emigration and her life in service and into her life in the penitentiary."[59] Thus, Dr. Jordan's edibles intensify not only the lack of food in Grace's life but also the lack of power and agency. Hungry Grace is provoked by a well-fed man who ignores this irony. Nevertheless, to keep her dignity and the little power she has, Grace hides her hunger and desire.[60] In sessions where Dr. Jordan works to access Grace's unconscious and repressed memories, she uses silence to perform her confession on her own terms. The prison has taught her to control her speech and her face as well as to hide her hunger. To evade Jordan's questions, Grace develops what she calls a "good stupid look,"[61] with which she meets any question she does not wish to answer.

When he brings an apple, she resists a temptation and refuses to eat it: "He is playing a guessing game […] There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want […] The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil […] But I will not oblige."[62] In her mocking tactics, she gives him apple pie as an answer to his elaborate plan. Not only does she refuse to eat his bait, she refuses to be eaten as well. She sees him as a hungry and greedy truth hunter and refuses to be his edible prey: "He wishes to go home and say to himself, I stuck in my thumb and pulled out the plum, what a good boy am I. But I will not be anybody's plum.[63] She sees through his intentions and resists.

Grace also uses food metaphors when thinking about her life choices: she admits she wants to keep and strategically use the little power she has over her story. "[…] but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death."[64]

Grace chooses to satisfy her own appetite for a free life and fails to satisfy Jordan's hunger for truth; and by this she becomes an active subject, rather than a passive victim to be rescued by Dr. Jordan.

One particular piece of food, the apple, represents Grace's ambiguous appetites. She is offered the apple at her first meeting with Dr. Jordan who asks whether there is any apple one should not eat. She refuses to tell him what he wants to hear and uses her power to withhold her 'truth'. According to Sarah Sceats, "the apple's biblical symbolism and Dr. Jordan's 'riddle' are only part of the story. For the incarcerated Grace its associations are also those of freedom and the outdoors, its succulent taste and the culinary possibilities to which she has no access in prison."[65] The apple triggers her memories of Mary Whitney and the ritual of throwing of apple peel on Halloween to

59 Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 122.

60 Kasson argues that "In Victorian times, the dictates of bourgeois manners ruled against eating in public, for to eat to be forced to see another eat promiscuously or immodestly constituted a kind of social obscenity." As eating is seen as sensual it had to be kept in private. Grace is forced to eat by Dr. Jordan, which emphasizes his desire to have (sexual) control over her. Kasson, J.F. "Rituals of Dining: Table Manners in Victorian America," in *Dining in America 1850–1900*, edited by Grover, K. (Rochester, NY: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 130.

61 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 45.

62 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 45.

63 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 46.

64 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 534.

65 Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 124.

see who they would marry. Clearly, the apple is not only associated with the biblical fall but also with eroticism and freedom. In this line, miniature green apples function as a representation of the innocent, immature temptation when Jamie Walsh asks Grace to be his sweetheart in a quasi-Paradise scene. Grace is presented as innocent: not only does she not take any apple, she is also ignorant of gossips in Mr. Kinnear's household.

The apple frames the narrative as Grace returns the apple to Dr. Jordan at the end of the novel. Here, Grace offers her very own version of Dr. Jordan's riddle. By suggesting that Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life are a single tree, she implies that death will be the inevitable result of human life and that it is better to die less ignorant. She dreams of her own quilt of the Tree of Paradise which would include snakes. Her version of Tree of Knowledge clearly shows that, in her view, victims are culpable: "they are the ones who cause all the trouble."[66]

Atwood portrays Grace as a victim of her own past and history, yet Grace struggles to claim her own appetite and cook-up and serve her own nourishing and tasty story. She never admits her part in the crime, but by controlling her hunger and her appetite, she usurps responsibility for her life (story).

Grace performs stupidity as a defensive strategy, encouraging her opponent to delude himself into believing he is smarter than she is and thereby exposing his vulnerability to her manipulation: "and he says, Let us begin at the beginning. And I say, The beginning of what, Sir? And he says, The beginning of your life. I was born, Sir, like anyone else, I say, still annoyed with him."[67] This also implies that Grace is in charge of her narrative and she refuses to give up this power. She feeds him only enough bits and pieces of her narrative to keep him coming back to ask again. Thus, she exercises her own power to cook up her own story.

Grace is simply having a laugh at his awkward struggle to open her memory. Bethany Ober Mannor observes that "Grace's autobiographical account maneuvers between a performance of ingenious confession that can establish her credibility and a silence that preserves her control over her narrative."[68] Similarly, Atwood, on purpose, cooks with ingredients of genres that are traditionally associated with a search for truth or simply, offering a true account (detective story, autobiography, historical novel) but avoids falling into her reader's expectations. Just as the novel offers the semblance of truth – it is after all based on newspaper articles, historical facts, historical figures and on actual crime, but is, in fact, no more than a series of texts and writings – so too Grace's narrative is shaped by her audience – Dr. Jordan, her husband Jamie Walsh, the reverend and the reader. Just like Dr. Jordan, the reader assumes the role of the detective and has to sift through Grace's account looking for clues that never declare the unambiguous truth.

There is a clear clash of perspectives on Grace's involvement in crimes in historical documents and Atwood similarly presents a clash of discourses in *Alias Grace*. Dr. Jordan's sophisticated and scientific methods clash with Grace's responses that are safely contained within a world of food, kitchen, handiwork and domestic service. Grace Marks, the notorious murderess, cooks up her identity. She serves her story to please her audience. To Dr. Jordan, who comes to study

66 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 531.

67 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 116.

68 Ober Mannor, "Fictive Memoir and Girlhood Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," 554.

her possible madness, she appears as "a nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon."[69] The novel is preoccupied with the reflexive process of narrative strategies. Grace consciously rethinks her story: "What should I tell him when he comes back?"[70] As we have access to Grace's inner thoughts, it shows that she is intelligent and she knows very well how to avoid bad impressions and arouse appetite: "I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person."[71] Grace's construction of the new self is a performance. Grace selects details, performs her role, and Dr. Jordan, together with readers and the other characters, such as the naive daughter of the warden, become her audience and spectators.[72] She admits: "I could see that she felt some tears were in order, and I shed several."[73] By keeping her audience hungry for more details, she keeps control over her story.

Despite Dr. Jordan's authority and determination to uncover what exactly Grace was doing when Mr Kinnear and Nancy were murdered, he never succeeds. It is rather Grace who takes control over the narrative and thus destabilizes the truth. When Dr. Jordan asks her to tell her story because he intends to restore her possibly erased/faulty memories, she replies: "Perhaps I will tell you lies."[74] Margaret Atwood emphasizes the multiple possibilities of selection when reconstructing historical events.

Grace refuses the passive status of a hungry prisoner's victimhood. She comments that "[i]t is not the culprits who need to be forgiven"[75] Grace recognizes her chance to win Dr. Jordan's assistance in setting her free from prison.[76] Hence she keeps narrating her story, making sure there is always a gap, one more sip, Dr. Jordan desires to taste: if and how active she was in the murders.

Conclusion

Atwood points to the many ways that eating and non-eating can function as symbols. She seems to use items of food and eating/non-eating as a means of communication. Food can be rich in symbolic meanings: Dr. Jordan's associating women with food and eating represents his sexual appetites. At the same time, food can play a part in reinforcing the existing conventions and rules of (Victorian) patriarchal society through the rituals and rules for its cooking, serving and

69 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 68.

70 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 353.

71 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 22.

72 Darroch also suggests that "Dr. Jordan attempts to be Grace's ideal listener, but he comes to feel like a voyer" ("Hysteria and Traumatic Testimony: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace,*" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 81 [2004]: 110). Clearly, Grace offers up seductively interesting stories not only to Dr. Jordan but also to her husband.

73 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 512.

74 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 46.

75 Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 531.

76 In "Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in Alias Grace," Amelia Defalco discusses Dr. Jordan's need to find "some fundamental truth." (Amelia Defalco, "Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in *Alias Grace*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 2 [2006]: 780. Accessed 4 April 2018. doi:10.1353/utq.2006.0247.
Defalco suggests that "[i]t is not surprising that Grace's first experience of Simon's psychological investigation is manifested in a distinctly physical sensation" Defalco, Amelia, "Haunting Physicality," 780).

eating. In this line, excessive appetites are criticized against what is accepted as a social norm. That is why Atwood pays particular attention to prisoners' hunger as an extreme regulation of normative society. The article shows that Grace refuses to be controlled by hunger, she resists Dr. Jordan's attempts to find the truth and she uses it to empower herself by feeding him lies instead. To reinforce these motifs of food, eating, and hunger, Atwood uses a similar technique of cooking up the *Alias Grace* from many intertexts and the way the text has incorporated (or eaten) other texts. Atwood's postmodern, richly intertextual writing combines ingredients and methods from a variety of genre recipes.

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