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**A PATCHWORK OF STORIES: (UN)RELIABILITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S  
*ALIAS GRACE***

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*The things I believe can't all be true, though  
one of them must be. But I believe in all of  
them [...] at one and the same time. This  
contradictory way of believing seems to me,  
right now, the only way I can believe  
anything.*

Margaret Atwood, **The Handmaid's Tale**

## RESUMO

O romance *Vulgo Grace* (1996) narra a história de Grace Marks, que, em 1843, foi acusada junto com James McDermott dos assassinatos de Thomas Kinnear, seu patrão, e Nancy Montgomery, a governanta e amante do Sr. Kinnear. Durante o julgamento, muitas histórias diferentes surgiram, e o envolvimento de Grace nos assassinatos foi questionado. Havia muitas opiniões divergentes sobre Grace: algumas pessoas a viam como um monstro, outras argumentavam sua insanidade, e havia aquelas que acreditavam que Grace era uma inocente menina de dezesseis anos, enganada por James McDermott. Grace foi sentenciada à prisão perpétua, mas, quase trinta anos depois do julgamento, ela recebeu o perdão, devido às muitas petições escritas a seu favor. Atwood introduz o personagem ficcional Dr. Jordan, que vai a Toronto investigar Grace e a verdade sobre o que aconteceu. No entanto, Dr. Jordan, como o leitor, encontra muitas versões diferentes sobre os crimes e o caráter de Grace, e a própria Grace não fornece uma resposta definitiva, alegando não lembrar de sua participação nos crimes. Em *Vulgo Grace*, a questão de (não-)confiabilidade aparece tanto como um tema quanto como um elemento estrutural, visto que o romance é estruturado como um patchwork de vozes conflitantes. Sternberg e Yacobi (2015) propõem uma teoria de (não-)confiabilidade como um mecanismo de integração. Os leitores, confrontados com as incongruências de um texto, podem atribuí-las à perspectiva do mediador (narrador ou focalizador), a fim de resolver as inconsistências e preservar a integridade do texto. No presente estudo, a teoria de Sternberg e Yacobi é aplicada a uma análise do romance, com o intuito de investigar como o leitor pode abordar tantos relatos contraditórios. Como o romance é baseado em uma história real, a relação entre história, adaptação e (não-)confiabilidade é discutida. Enfrentando discursos problemáticos, em narrativas ficcionais ou históricas, os leitores podem aplicar o mecanismo de perspectiva, julgando certos relatos como não-confiáveis.

Palavras-chave: Margaret Atwood - *Vulgo Grace* - (não-)confiabilidade - ficção histórica

## ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996) tells the story of Grace Marks, who, in 1843, was accused alongside James McDermott of the murders of Mr. Thomas Kinnear, their master, and Nancy Montgomery, his housekeeper and mistress. During the trials, many different stories emerged, and Grace's involvement in the murders was questioned. There were many divergent opinions about Grace: some people saw her as a monster, others argued for her insanity, and there were those who believed her to be an innocent sixteen-year-old girl, deceived by James McDermott. Grace was sentenced to life in prison, but, almost thirty years after the trials, she received a pardon, due to many petitions written in her behalf. Atwood introduces the fictional character of Dr. Jordan, who comes to Toronto to investigate Grace and the truth about what happened. However, Dr. Jordan, as the reader, comes across many different versions of the crimes and of Grace's character, and Grace herself does not provide a definitive answer, claiming to have no recollection of her participation in the crimes. In *Alias Grace*, the question of (un)reliability appears as both a theme and a structural element, since the novel is structured as a patchwork of conflicting voices. Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) propose a theory of (un)reliability as a mechanism of integration. Readers, confronted with the incongruities of a text, might attribute them to the perspective of the mediator (narrator or focalizer), in order to solve the inconsistencies and preserve the text's integrities. In the present study, Sternberg and Yacobi's theory is applied to an analysis of the novel, in order to investigate how the reader might approach the contradictory accounts. As the novel was based on a true story, the relationship between history, adaptation and (un)reliability is discussed. Facing troublesome discourses, either in fictional or historical narratives, readers might apply the perspectival mechanism, deeming certain accounts unreliable.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood - *Alias Grace* - (un)reliability - historical fiction

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood has written over forty books, including works of fiction, poetry and essays. The Canadian author's most famous work is *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the dystopian novel which was adapted for television in 2017. The novel *Alias Grace* was published in 1996, and it deals with themes such as gender inequality and storytelling, which had already appeared in her previous work. *Alias Grace* was also adapted for television in 2017, as a miniseries.

*Alias Grace* revolves around the character of Grace Marks, based on the real Grace Marks who, in 1843, at the age of sixteen, was accused, alongside James McDermott, of the murders of Thomas Kinnear, their master, and Nancy Montgmorey, his housekeeper and mistress. In nineteenth-century Canada, the case became very famous and was covered by national and international press. The testimonies given at the trial presented many different versions of the events, and opinions about Grace Marks were discordant: some people believed her to be an innocent girl who had been fooled by McDermott, while others saw her as the evil mind behind the crimes; besides, there were those who argued she was insane. As McDermott and Grace Marks were sentenced to death for the murder of Mr. Kinnear, there was no trial for the murder of Nancy Montgomery. McDermott was hanged. However, due to petitions on Grace's behalf, her sentence was altered, and she was punished with life in prison instead. In 1872, after almost thirty years in prison and in the Asylum, Grace was granted a pardon and moved to New York State as a free woman.

Atwood adapted this true story into a fictional novel, introducing the fictional character of Dr. Simon Jordan, a young doctor interested in the workings of the mind who goes to Toronto in order to study Grace and investigate her memory of the crimes. The novel is structured through a patchwork of points of view. Grace narrates her own story to Dr. Jordan and to an extradiegetic narratee, the reader. However, there is also an extradiegetic narrator who focalizes mostly through Dr. Jordan, showing his perspective on the encounters with Grace. Besides, the novel presents epistolary chapters, with letters from different characters in the story. Confronted with so many conflicting opinions, the reader does not know if the accounts from Grace, Dr. Jordan or any of the other characters can be trusted.

By arranging different perspectives, *Alias Grace* explores the continuous search for the truth without presenting a final answer. Similarly to what happened in real life, the reader and Dr. Jordan never discover if Grace is guilty or not. Moreover, each chapter is introduced by epigraphs which contain excerpts from real documents, reports and articles. They illustrate the many opposing things said and written about Grace. All the voices present in the novel contribute to the patchwork of inconsistencies, which must be resolved, somehow, by the reader. One possible solution is to deem some accounts unreliable, based on the perspective of the teller.

The aim of this work is to investigate the question of (un)reliability in *Alias Grace* by analysing how different accounts and perspectives are brought into the narrative and how the reader might make sense of so many divergences. Narrators' (un)reliability is a topic which has been discussed in literary studies for many years. However, the concept of (un)reliability presents many problems regarding its definition and application. In opposition to Booth's influential definition, which they criticize for being circular and inoperable, Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) propose (un)reliability as one of the many possible mechanisms of integration which readers have at their disposal in order to make sense of a texts' incongruities and inconsistencies. Making use of a perspectival mechanism, the reader explains the contradictions in a text by attributing them to the mediator's perspective, be it a narrator or a focalizer. In this work, Sternberg and Yacobi's theory on (un)reliability is applied to a reading of *Alias Grace*. The accounts presented in the novel are thus analysed with regards to their (un)reliability.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical background for this research. Concepts from narratology (story, focalization, and narration) are defined and applied to the novel. Then, the theoretical review focuses on the concept of (un)reliability and how it has been studied since Booth's famous *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). The section presents Booth's and Nunning's models, as well as Olson's review of their works, and Sternberg and Yacobi's criticism of the way (un)reliability has been conceptualized and discussed in the past. The chapter ends with a summary of Sternberg and Yacobi's theory of (un)reliability as part of a mechanism of integration.

The second chapter presents the analysis of the novel. First, there is an overview of the novel. Second, the question of (un)reliability as a theme in the novel is explored. Third, the voices in the novel are analysed in regards to (un)reliability judgments and implications. The subsections are dedicated to Grace as a narrator,

the extradiegetic narrator, the letters, and the epigraphs, focusing primarily on the excerpts from Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*. Finally, some final observations on the novel and the question of unreliability are made.

The third and final chapter provides a discussion about the novel as historical fiction, and explores how history and adaptations of history relate to the question of (un)reliability. *Alias Grace* can be read as an adaptation of history, as it was based on a "true story". However, this "true story" is not one coherent version, but rather a patchwork of contradictory accounts. Moreover, Atwood brings into the novel the different perspectives she encountered during her research, and does not present one final truth to the reader. Grace Marks's story was adapted throughout the years, since, from the moment the investigation on the murders began, many divergent things were written about her. In this sense, Atwood's fictional story and the novel's adaptation into a miniseries might have inadvertently resulted in versions closer to the truth than some of the partial accounts which circulated in the nineteenth century.

Finally, some final considerations are made regarding (un)reliability in *Alias Grace*. The process of writing this work is reviewed, and other possibilities of analysis are discussed. The question of (un)reliability lies at the centre of Atwood's novel, both as a theme and as a structural element. Analysing the different voices in the novel contributes to a reading focused on how the stories are told and how they might be perceived by the reader. Sternberg and Yacobi's theory of (un)reliability can be applied to different accounts in order to explain how the reader might make sense of their inconsistencies.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 NARRATOLOGY

Narratives lie at the centre of human life. Humans interact with each other and with the world through narratives. As Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 1) state:

No single period or society can do without narratives [...] whatever you say and think about a certain time or place becomes a narrative in its own right. From the oldest myths and legends to postmodern fabulation, narration has always been central.

Therefore, the study of narratives is of utmost importance. In the novel *Alias Grace*, narratives play an important role in creating and shaping Grace Marks' identity.

Herman and Vervaeck (2005) provide a review of narrative analysis. First, they present concepts from before and surrounding Structuralism. Then, they focus on Structuralism, which proposed a systematic way of studying narratives. Finally, they present elements of Post-Classical Narratology. Structuralists divided the text into three different levels: the story, the narrative and the narration (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 41). Other authors use different terms to refer to these same levels. The analysis presented in chapter 3 will focus on certain concepts in accordance to structuralist narratology: the story, focalization (on the level of the narrative), and narration.

Herman and Vervaeck present Gérard Genette's division of the text. Genette chooses the term *narration* to describe "the surface level", "the formulation of the story" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 41). In other words, narration consists on the "concrete and directly visible way in which a story is told" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). Analysing a text on the narration level means studying elements like "[w]ord choice, sentence length, and narrating agent" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 41). Narration is thus concerned with "linguistic formulation" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). In regard to *Alias Grace*, the study of the level of narration will focus on the narrating agents.

The second level, "slightly under the surface" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42), is called the *narrative*, an English translation for Genette's *récit* (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). According to Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 42),

narrative refers to “the story as it plays out in the text”. At the centre of the narrative lies “the organization of narrative elements” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42), “the way in which the events and characters of the story are offered to the reader” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). One of the elements in the level of the narrative refers to focalization. In the case of *Alias Grace*, focalization is an important aspect of the narrative, for it refers to the different perspectives which are presented to the reader.

### 2.1.1 The story

At the deepest level, there is the *story* (Genette’s *histoire*) (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). It is the deepest level because it “is not readily available to the reader” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). It is rather “an abstract construct” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). The story is about what lies beneath the surface; it is not about how it is told, or how it is organized, but about what happens. Therefore, “narrative elements are reduced to a chronological series” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 42). The story consists of the actions and events, the actants and the setting (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 46).

*Alias Grace* presents the story of Grace Marks, before and after the murders of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. The abstract construct that lies at the deepest level of the novel - that is, its story - might be summarized as follows: first, there is Grace’s childhood and her migration with her family to Canada. She works at Mrs. Parkinson’s and meets Mary Whitney. Mary dies, Grace works at different places and finally moves to Mr. Kinnear’s house, after meeting Nancy. Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery are murdered in 1843. Grace goes to trial and gets a life sentence in prison. She is sent to the Asylum for some time, and she returns to prison. In 1859, Dr. Jordan arrives and starts having afternoon meetings with her and listening to her story, in order to investigate her memory about the murders. They try Dr. DuPont’s neuro-hypnosis. Unsuccessful in his quest for the truth, Dr. Jordan moves back to the U.S.; he goes to war and gets injured. In 1872, Grace finally receives her pardon; she moves to the U.S. and gets married to Jamie Walsh, whom she had met during her time at Mr. Kinnear’s.

### 2.1.2 Focalization

Focalization is one of the greatest contributions of Structuralism to narrative theory (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 70). Herman and Vervaeck explain that the “term refers to the relation between that which is focalized – the characters, actions, and objects offered to the reader – and the focalizer, the agent who perceives and who therefore determines what is presented to the reader” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 70). In other words, focalization refers to “the relation between the object and the subject of perception” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 70).

Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 71) highlight that using terms such as “focalizer” and “focalized object” can be problematic, because it means anthropomorphizing textual elements, and the text might not even contain them. Genette spoke only of focalization, but Mieke Bal distinguishes between a “perceiving agent” and a “perceived object”. Although Genette did not like Bal’s revision, the division between focalizer and focalized object remains useful (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 71).

Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 71) assert that the relation between focalizer and focalized object can help explain the idea of unreliable perception:

The relation between these two is crucial for the reader to gauge the information provided by the text. If a character is constantly seen through the eyes of a single focalizer, one may wonder whether this view is reliable. Is it really true that a woman is a flirt if you only see her through the eyes of her partner? Conversely, one character might be perceived by so many focalizers that the reader has too much information to be able to arrive at a coherent and reliable image.

In *Alias Grace*, Grace is the center of perception in the chapters where she is the narrator. In the chapters with an extradiegetic narrator, Jordan is the center of perception. When Grace is the narrator, she gives the reader her perspective of events and other characters, whereas in the other chapters the reader gets Jordan’s perspective of Grace. Moreover, the letters and the epigraphs provide other points of view. Therefore, there are many focalizers in the novel, and the reader might consider their accounts unreliable. The reader’s image of Grace is constructed through a variety of sources; thus, it can result incoherent.

Herman and Vervaeck further classify focalization in types and properties. In regard to types of focalization, there are two aspects to be considered. Concerning

focalizers' position with regard to the fictional universe, the focalizer can be internal, if it belongs to the storyworld, or external, if it remains outside of the storyworld (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 71). Both Grace and Jordan are internal focalizers.

However, when Grace is the narrator, there are some moments of external focalization. Grace tells her story and makes comments about it. When the comments come from Grace as the narrating I, they constitute external focalization. However, when the comments come from Grace as the experiencing I, they represent internal focalization. In other words: "If the narrating I considers something the experiencing I did, then there is external focalization if the scene is perceived by the narrating I, and internal focalization if it is perceived by the experiencing I" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 73). For example, in the following passage Grace as the narrating I makes an observation which was not present for the experiencing I:

And they do say that cleanliness is next to Godliness; and sometimes, when I have seen the pure white clouds billowing in the sky after a rain, I used to think that it was as if the angels themselves were hanging out their washing; for I reasoned that someone must do it, as everything in Heaven must be very clean and fresh. *But these were childish fancies, as children like to tell themselves stories about things that are not visible; and I was scarcely more than a child at the time, although I thought myself a grown woman, having my own money that I earned myself.* (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 262. Italics mine)

The judgement that "these were childish fancies" comes from the narrating I, not from the experiencing I. Therefore, this observation comes from an external focalizer; external in reference to the internal focalizer who saw the clouds and thought "it was as if the angels themselves were hanging out their washing".

Regarding stability, Genette identifies three types of focalization: it can be fixed, variable or multiple (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 74). A fixed focalization occurs if "events are perceived by a single agent" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 74). If there are two characters whose perceptions "constantly alternate" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 74), the novel has variable focalization. Finally, in the case of "more than two centers of perception" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 74), the novel is structured with multiple focalization.

*Alias Grace* is organized through multiple focalization. Grace and Jordan function as focalizers, but they are not the only ones. The characters whose letters are presented in the novel are also focalizers, since the letters were written by them



and show their perspectives. Moreover, the epigraphs present other focalizers, such as Susanna Moodie, author of *Life in the Clearings*.

Focalization can also be analysed in reference to its properties. With regard to space, the focalizer can have a “panoramic, simultaneous, or limited view” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 75). A focalizer with a panoramic view “controls the entire space of the narrative” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 75). A simultaneous focalization presents the reader with events that happen simultaneously in different places (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 75). On the other hand, a limited view only explores the space in which the character moves (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 75). In *Alias Grace*, the focalizers have limited views.

The other property refers to time. There are three types of focalization, depending on their relation to time: panchronic, retrospective and synchronic (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 76). A panchronic focalizer perceives things from “all time periods” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p.76), from before and after. The retrospective focalizer “only looks back” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 76). And in the case of synchronic focalization, perception is simultaneous to the events (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 76).

In *Alias Grace*, Grace functions as a retrospective focalizer, with her narrating I considering the experiencing I, as when she is telling her story to Dr. Jordan. In the following excerpt she describes the evening before her family’s journey to Canada:

We slept at an inn which was so thick with fleas you would have thought it was a dog kennel; and we took all of the boxes into the room with us so as not to be robbed of our earthly goods. I didn’t have the chance to see much more, as in the morning we had to get on board the ship at once, and so I hustled the children along. They did not understand where we were going, and to tell you the truth, Sir, I don’t believe any of us did. (ATWOOD, 2009, 129)

And she also functions as a synchronic focalizer; for instance, when she narrates her meetings with Dr. Jordan, in the present tense: “Here Dr. Jordan asks me to pause a little so he can catch up with his writing; for he says he is much interested in what I have just related” (ATWOOD, 2009, 186). In the end, when Grace writes her letter to Jordan, there is also synchronic focalization, since she is narrating her present state. Jordan functions mostly as a synchronic focalizer:

Simon is ushered into the library. It is so self-consciously the right sort of library that he has an urge to set fire to it. Reverend Verringer rises from a leather-covered wing chair, and offers him a hand to shake. Although his hair and his skin are equally thin and pallid, his handshake is surprisingly firm; and despite his unfortunately small and pouting mouth — like a tadpole's, thinks Simon — his Roman nose indicates a strong character, his high-domed forehead a developed intellect, and his somewhat bulging eyes are bright and keen. (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 87)

Besides spatio-temporal properties, Herman and Vervaeck also highlight psychological aspects of focalization, in reference to cognition, emotion and ideology. With regard to cognition, there is an omniscient focalization when the focalizer knows everything, and limited focalization when this knowledge is limited. Grace, Jordan and the other focalizers have limited knowledge; they are only conscious of their own thoughts and feelings; they are not omniscient. They may make speculations about other characters, but they cannot know if they are right. As Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 77) put it, "Characters can also pretend to be omniscient and to look in other people's heads, but such passages will seem more speculative and less reliable than those informed by an external focalizer".

As for emotion, there is the option of a detached or an empathic focalization. A detached focalization only perceives the outside of the object, while an empathic focalization entails "constant speculation about the thoughts and feelings of the focalized object" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 77). Both Grace and Jordan can be read as empathic focalizers, because they make speculations about the thoughts and feelings of their objects, which are often each other. For instance, Grace speculates about Dr. Jordan's appearance: "Today Dr. Jordan looks more disarranged than usual, and as if he has something on his mind" (ATWOOD, 2009, 168). In the following excerpt, Dr. Jordan speculates about how Grace feels towards their conversations:

Yet he doesn't feel she dislikes their conversations. On the contrary, she appears to welcome them, and even to enjoy them; much as one enjoys a game of any sort, when one is winning, he tells himself grimly. The emotion she expresses most openly towards him is a subdued gratitude. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 422)

Finally, focalization has ideological properties, which can be implicit or explicit (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 78). In *Alias Grace*, there might be an explicit ideology in each of the focalizers, but it is difficult to establish the text's ideology, since there are many focalizers, with different positions. The text can be said to have

a “polyphonic ideology” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 78), since the perspective is divided between Grace, Jordan, the authors of the letters and the authors of the epigraphs.

As a final remark on focalization, Herman and Vervaeck point out that the separation between focalization and narration is not always clear, since textual indications are used to determine focalization. As they mention, “If word choice, for instance, is related to world-view, the boundary between narration and focalization may become fuzzy” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 79). Categorization, therefore, frequently encounters problems of this nature, because it is difficult to completely separate the elements which are to be studied; after all, it is through the narration that the reader accesses focalization.

### 2.1.3 Narration

The third level of analysis, the one available at the surface, is the narration. A study of narration is concerned with the narrating voice and the way the story is told. At the centre of the investigation lie the narrating process, by narrating agents, and the way in which these agents present a character’s consciousness (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 80). The anthropomorphization of these textual elements has been criticized (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 80) - Genette prefers the term *narrating instance* (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81) - but, in spite of this problem, the study of the types of narrator remains useful.

To define a type of narrator, the reader has to look at “the relationship between the narrator and that which he narrates” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81). The position of the narrator with regard to the events he narrates allows us to classify him as extradiegetic, if he “hovers over the narrated world” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81), or “intradiegetic”, if he “belongs to the narrated world and is therefore narrated by an agency above him” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81). According to Herman and Vervaeck, “The difference between the two is a hierarchical one. The extradiegetic narrator occupies the highest place in the hierarchy, while the intradiegetic narrator sits one step below” (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81).

In *Alias Grace*, there are two narrators: Grace is an intradiegetic narrator, and the other narrator is an extradiegetic narrator, which presents events and characters

through Dr. Jordan's perception. Moreover, the authors of the letters can be considered the intradiegetic narrators of the epistolary chapters.

Grace can be classified as an intradiegetic narrator (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 81), since she belongs to the storyworld. In terms of what is narrated, Grace is a homodiegetic narrator, because she has experienced what she narrates (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 84). Moreover, she can be classified as what Genette terms an autodiegetic narrator, since she is the protagonist of the story she narrates (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 84). Grace functions both as the narrator and the focalizer. The events are narrated from her perspective, and the reader has access to her thoughts and impressions, as long as she decides to expose them.

The other narrator can be categorized as an extradiegetic narrator, because it does not appear in or seem to belong to the storyworld (HERMAN and VERVAECK, p. 81). The extradiegetic narrator is a *narrating instance*, not a character in the story.

The audience who is addressed by the narrator is called the "narratee". Grace addresses an intradiegetic narratee (Dr. Jordan) and an extradiegetic narratee (the reader). The reader knows when Grace addresses Dr. Jordan because there are marks of this interaction in her speech, such as the way she addresses him by "Sir". However, the reader can also see that sometimes she is speaking to an undramatized narratee. Therefore, there are two narratees being addressed by the same narrator. Sometimes, the narration to both narratees coincides, since Grace tells the reader what she tells Dr. Jordan. In the following passage, this alternation in narratees is evident:

I sew in silence for a few moments more. Then I say, *I will believe you, Sir, and take you at your word; and hope such will be returned in future.*  
 Of course, of course, he says warmly. Please do go on with your story. I should not have interrupted.  
*Surely you do not want to hear about such ordinary things, and daily life,* I say.  
 I want to hear anything you may tell me, Grace, he says. The small details of life often hide a great significance.  
 I am not certain what he means by that, but I continue. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 187. Italics mine)

The sentences in italics are primarily directed at Dr. Jordan, but they are also presented to the extradiegetic narratee. The rest of the sentences are directed at an extradiegetic narratee. Some of them are direct reports of what Dr. Jordan tells Grace; the others are Grace's observations.

The extradiegetic narrator only addresses the extradiegetic narratee, but there are no visible marks of this address. The authors of the letters address intradiegetic narratees, that is, other characters who belong to the storyworld (Dr. Jordan, his friend Edward, Mrs. Humphrey, Jeremiah, Dr. Bannerling and Enoch Verringer).

In terms of its relation to time, sometimes Grace's narration is "subsequent (narration after the events)" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 86), as, for instance, when she narrates her story prior to the murders; but at other times it is simultaneous, narrating the present, as when she narrates her interaction with Dr. Jordan, for example. The extradiegetic narrator produces a simultaneous narration as well. However, this simultaneity is actually an impression created by the narrator. As Herman and Vervaeck explain: "Obviously this is only a trick – if the narration were really to coincide with the action, the narrator would be talking and experiencing at the same time" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 87).

The structure of *Alias Grace* is more complex than the alternation between two narrators, since there are chapters constituted entirely of letters. In this case, Herman and Vervaeck talk about "interpolated narration" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 87) and the existence of "more than one narrative level" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 87).

The narrator can also be analysed according to its visibility. A covert narrator, in the words of Rimmon-Kenan (apud HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 87) "quotes a lot, does not present himself in the first person, and tries to avoid evaluative descriptions as much as possible", and this is the case of the extradiegetic narrator in *Alias Grace*, which is never visible. On the other hand, the overt narrator, "will definitely talk about himself and therefore use the first person; and he will often showcase his own opinions" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, pp. 87, 88). Therefore, Grace is an example of overt narrator.

Herman and Vervaeck study reliability as the third narrator property, after the temporal properties and visibility. They affirm that "Textual indications of reliability, such as internal coherence, are [...] not sufficient to decide the matter" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 88). They argue that "the decision concerning (un)reliability largely lies with the reader" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 89). One problem they point out, in reference to attributions of (un)reliability, concerns the anthropomorphization of the narrator (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 89). This can be avoided if (un)reliability is attributed not to the narrator, but to the account

narrated, as Sternberg and Yacobi propose. This will be discussed in section 2.3. The study of (un)reliability has been recurrent and controversial; a review of the topic is provided in section 2.2.

## 2.2 A REVIEW OF UNRELIABILITY

This section presents a review of Wayne Booth's and Ansgar Nunning's models of unreliability, along with the criticism of these models. Booth's model of unreliability was highly influential, albeit controversial. In the 1961 book titled *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth wrote "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not." (apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 393). Therefore, according to Booth, unreliability can be identified when there is a perceivable distance between the implied author and the narrator. On the other hand, reliability would be the absence of such distance, or the accordance between the implied author and the narrator. According to Olson, the implied narrator is a tool which enables the critic to "talk about the values, linguistic peculiarities, and worldview of a particular text - as they can be documented in a text" (OLSON, 2003, p. 105, endnote 2), without referring to the historical author.

However, Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 17), among others, argue that "This point about the proximity between the narrator and the implied author does not hold". They assert that the implied author and the narrator's reliability are constructions made by the reader, they are "not offered in the text itself" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 17). Besides, there are no "objective procedures to derive the implied author from a narrative" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, the idea of the implied author is "highly problematic" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 18), and it is not accepted by all theorists. Genette considers this intermediate figure "entirely superfluous" (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 18).

Greta Olson (2003), in the article "Reconsidering unreliability: fallible and untrustworthy narrators", provides a review of Booth's and Nunning's models, suggesting they share "structural similarities" (p. 93). According to Olson (2003, p.93), "[b]oth models have a tripartite structure that consists of (1) a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between (2) the personalized narrator's perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author (or the textual signals)". Thus, the

main difference between the two would be the concept of the implied author in Booth's model, which can be replaced by Nunning's textual signals, according to Olson.

Booth understands reading as a communicative process, and he identifies a complicity between the reader and the implied author. Between the implied author and the narrator, there might be a distance, which will be read as unreliability. According to Olson (2003, p. 94), "Booth understands narrator unreliability to be a function of irony". The implied author distances itself from the narrator and somehow colludes with the reader, so that the speaker becomes the target. As Olson (2003, p. 94) explains, "Detecting irony and narrator unreliability comprises an interpretive strategy that involves reading against the grain of the text and assuming one understands the unspoken message beyond the literal one".

Booth proposes four steps for the detection of irony, and also unreliability: firstly, the reader "rejects a literal semantic understanding of the text and recognizes 'some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else that he knows' (10)" (apud OLSON, 2003, p. 95); secondly, "the reader tries out alternative interpretations" (apud OLSON, 2003, p. 95); thirdly, the reader "makes a decision about the implied author's probable intentions, asking: 'how were these words meant to convey a message other than their intrinsic meaning?'" (apud OLSON, 2003, p. 95); and finally, "a nonliteral meaning is settled upon, one that most sophisticated readers--'those who have the necessary information'--would agree upon and unsophisticated readers would not" (apud OLSON, 2003, p. 95).

Olson highlights the "textual markers and indications" which "force one to revise one's interpretation" (OLSON, 2003, p. 95), instead of reading literally, and include:

- (1) paratextual elements, as in titles [...] and in epigraphs; (2) direct warnings that the narrator should not be confused with the author; (3) obvious grammatical, stylistic, or historical mistakes on the part of the narrator; (4) conflicts between fictional facts; (5) and discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author in other contexts (Irony 47-86). (BOOTH apud OLSON, 2003, p. 95)

The reader, then, "concludes that the narrator's words are incongruous or incomplete" (OLSON, 2003, p. 95).

Finally, Olson differentiates between fallible and untrustworthy narrators, a distinction which was implicit in Booth's model. According to her, fallible narrators do

not present their best narration due to their circumstances; under different circumstances, they might have given more complete or less limited accounts. A fallible narrator “makes mistakes about how she perceives herself or her fictional world” (OLSON, 2003, p. 96). The problem is with their “ability to perceive and report accurately” (OLSON, 2003, p. 96). On the other hand, untrustworthy narrators would act accordingly no matter the circumstances; the partiality of their accounts does not result from external circumstances, but from within; “the narrator cannot be trusted on a personal level (OLSON, 2003, p. 96). These two types of narrators “elicit different responses in readers” (OLSON, 2003, p. 93). Therefore, for the description of such narrators, Olson (2003) proposes the use of scales of fallibility and trustworthiness (p. 93).

Ansgar Nunning criticized Booth’s model for “disregarding the reader’s role in the perception of reliability and for relying on the insufficiently defined concept of the implied author” (OLSON, 2003, p. 93). Nunning disapproves of “the vague, pseudo-anthropomorphic concept of the implied author” (OLSON, 2003, p. 97), which “serves as a repository for all the open questions about the relationship between the author and the reader but fails to answer any of them” (OLSON, 2003, p. 97). Nunning proposes a reader-centered approach, “with a cognitive theory of unreliability that rests on the reader’s values and her sense that a discrepancy exists between the narrator’s statements and perceptions and other information given by the text” (OLSON, 2003, p. 93).

Nunning focuses on unreliability as a reader’s response and speaks of textual elements which might lead to unreliability. It is, hence, the reader’s preconceptions, and not the implied author’s, that produce unreliability. Therefore, unreliability “is not a stable objective quality but a function of reader reception” (OLSON, 2003, p. 97). That is why there can be disagreement over the reliability of narrators, depending on the views and of the reader. According to Nunning, “a male pederast will not find Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert unreliable because his values are not in discord with the narrator’s” (NUNNING apud OLSON, 2003, p. 97). The divergence which results in unreliability is not between narrator and implied author, but between the reader and the narrator.

However, Nunning lists textual signals of unreliability, which would influence readers. Olson reads this as a “paradoxical moment” in his argument (OLSON, 2003, p. 97). These signals include:



(1) the narrator's explicit contradictions and other discrepancies in the narrative discourse; (2) discrepancies between the narrator's statements and actions; (3) divergences between the narrator's description of herself and other characters' descriptions of her; (4) contradictions between the narrator's explicit comments on other characters and her implicit characterization of herself or the narrator's involuntary exposure of herself; (5) contradictions between the narrator's account of events and her explanations and interpretations of the same, as well as contradictions between the story and discourse; (6) other characters' corrective verbal remarks or body signals; (7) multiperspectival arrangements of events and contrasts between various versions of the same events; (8) an accumulation of remarks relating to the self as well as linguistic signals denoting expressiveness and subjectivity; (9) an accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy; (10) syntactic signals denoting the narrator's high level of emotional involvement, including exclamations, ellipses, repetitions, etc.; (11) explicit, self-referential, metanarrative discussions of the narrator's believability; (12) an admitted lack of reliability, memory gaps, and comments on cognitive limitations; (13) a confessed or situation-related prejudice; (14) paratextual signals such as titles, subtitles, and prefaces (adapted from Unreliable 27-28). (NUNNING apud OLSON, 2003, pp. 97, 98)

As Olson points out, some of these signals are similar to the ones proposed by Booth.

According to Olson, Nunning's process of how readers attribute unreliability can be described as follows:

To begin with, the reader notes textually evident discrepancies between the narrator's actions or telling of events and other versions of the narration or of the narrator. The reader then relates these discrepancies to other frames of experience. According to theories of "naturalization" (Culler; Fludernik, *Fictions and 'Natural' Narratology*), readers relate what they read to ordinary human actions, motivations, and behavioral scripts. They impose their expectations about how texts should work and how people tell stories onto the text in order to make sense of it. A part of this process of fitting the text into one's worldview is identifying the narrator (if there is a clearly identifiable one) and deciding what sort of person that narrator is on the basis of one's referential frames. (NUNNING apud OLSON, 2003, p. 98)

Olson highlights the similarities between the processes described by Nunning and Booth. They share three steps:

(1) the reader notes inconsistencies on the narrator's part (2) and then makes sense of the initial conundrum by relating it to other world/literary experience or to what the implied author actually meant to say; (3) another reading is decided upon (OLSON, 2003, p. 98).

The only difference would be that for Nunning "the recognition of unreliability is questioned or legitimized with reference to the reader's cultural and individual referential frames that make this attribution possible" (OLSON, 2003, p. 98).

Nunning's model proposes a margin for relativization, since "every reading is limited and situational, and every reader is potentially unreliable", whereas "Booth's model assumes that the classification of a narrator as unreliable can be verified when the implied author's irony is recognized as intended and stable" (OLSON, 2003, p. 98).

According to Olson (2003, p. 99), the most important difference between the two is "where the authority to judge a narrator as unreliable lies": Booth's model relies on the authority of the implied author, while Nunning rejects the concept of the implied author and focuses on "the limited validity of subjective reader response (OLSON, 2003, p. 99). Olson (2003, p. 105) claims that Nunning's focus "ignores the discrepancy between conflicting points of view within the text as well as the reader's sense of being in cahoots with the viewpoint that differs from the narrator's".

As Olson explains, both models treat the narrators as people. She claims this is understandable, since they discuss homodiegetic narrators. For Olson (2003, p. 99), "Referring to a textual construct as a person seems justified in this case, since characteristics such as 'unreliable', 'untrustworthy', 'unconscious', and 'fallible' are ones we apply to individuals".

Sternberg and Yacobi, on the other hand, suggest a different approach: a constructivist turn which posits the hypothesis of (un)reliability as a mechanism of integration. The two authors identify problems in the history of studies of (un)reliability. Despite (un)reliability being an important concept, it is ill-defined (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 328). They criticise many theories of unreliability by exposing their circularity and contradictions. Moreover, the authors provide an extensive critique of Booth's model, explaining its limitations and conceptual problems.

Booth at times blurs the differences between the four narrative agents: author, narrator, reflector, experiencing self (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 337). Particularly problematic is the distinction between "the silent implied author and the ever-expressive narrator" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 336), which suffers from many contradictions along Booth's texts. According to the authors, "Booth all too often links 'the implied author' much too fast to the authorized or authorized-looking 'narrator' — while still generally opposing the unreliable kind — so that the two become equivalent and interchangeable" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 338). Therefore, the narrator gets "conflated with two participants in narrative transmission that are essentially distinct from him" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 336), the

implied author and the “Jamesian reflector”. However, sometimes Booth does insist on “the need to distinguish the implied author from the narrator, regardless of whether and how they may appear alike, coextensive, interchangeable” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 338).

Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) also draw attention to the fact that narrating voices cannot be mixed with experiencing agents (p. 386), as it happens in Booth’s famous assertion: “A narrator [is] reliable when he speaks for *or acts* in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not”. (BOOTH apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 380; italics mine). A confusion which also appears in Nunning:

observe how Ansgar Nunning (1999b: 64), having quoted the Boothian definition at issue and declared it “canonical,” proceeds to assert that “unreliable narrators” (typically ignoring in turn the reliable variety) are marked by “internal contradictions” or “discrepancies” arising “between utterances and *actions*.” (NUNNING apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, pp. 385, 386. Italics mine)

Even if the narrating I and the experiencing I refer to the same character, the narrating I must be deemed an unreliable narrator based on their discourse, because narrators perform only through discourse; they do not perform “nonverbal acts” as narrators (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 386).

After highlighting the circularities in Booth’s theory and in the ones which followed it, Sternberg and Yacobi conclude that Booth’s theory is not, in fact, a good model, since it proves circular and unoperational. They state that “the worst thing about Booth’s conception of (un)reliability is its lack of operational force” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 393). As Sternberg and Yacobi (2015, p. 394) explain, “the definition as given is inapplicable to narrative discourse, because its key terms and relations cannot be mapped on or matched with that discourse, so as to establish who’s who and what’s what in it”. They question how to put the theory into practice:

How to get at “the implied author,” at “the implied author’s norms,” and at the narrator’s concord or discord with both? In short, how to do the things supposed to be done with these definitional words in order to determine (un)reliable narration, let alone reflection, altogether forgotten here? One looks in vain for an answer, or so much as a clue (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 394)

According to the authors, Olson attempts to “render the definition applicable” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 397): “Olson (2003), for example, unknowingly and miscellaneously ‘operationalizes’ Booth’s approach to unreliability by projecting onto it an assortment of markers or measures that are in fact lacking, unsuitable or even downright misplaced there” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 397). For instance, they argue that, for Booth, irony would be an effect of unreliable narration, not vice versa.

Moreover, they criticize Olson’s tripartite structure of Booth’s model: “(1) a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between (2) the personalized narrator’s perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author” (OLSON, 2003, p. 93). They claim that Booth “would judge unacceptable the anchorage of the entire procedure in ‘a reader,’ and one working out of authorial control and free of constraint at that” (2015, p. 397). They state that Olson “retrojects into Booth (1961a) the reader-orientation of the alternative, constructivist approach to (un)reliability in Yacobi (1981), probably as mediated by and mixed with Nunning (1999b)” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 397).

Besides, Sternberg and Yacobi argue that this insertion of the reader in the theory would not help. The questions would remain:

how would the “(1) reader . . . [recognize] a dichotomy between (2) the personalized narrator’s perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author”? Apart from the usual absence of clues, aids, ways to such readerly recognition, part (3) compounds it with an impossibility. “The implied author,” silent, mediated, disembodied, has no “perceptions and expressions” to be contrasted with “the personalized narrator’s.” And the impersonal narrator is besides left out of (2), or else he would redouble the impossibility of “a dichotomy”: he has no “perceptions,” either, and presumably counts as reliable, like the implied author. So nothing remains for the “reader” to “recognize.” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 398)

Therefore, after exposing the problems and contradictions present in Booth’s theory and in many readings of it, the authors proceed to discuss their own theory of (un)reliability.

### 2.3 (UN)RELIABILITY AS A MECHANISM OF INTEGRATION

Sternberg and Yacobi propose a constructivist approach. For them, unreliability can be better understood as a mechanism of integration. It is one of

many mechanisms readers have at their disposal in order to make sense of texts with incongruencies and contradictions. Besides, different types of texts and of inconsistencies call for different mechanisms, and the hypothesis of unreliability is part of one of these mechanisms of integration: the perspectival mechanism. Unreliability, therefore, is a reader response to aspects of the text which might provoke confusion or doubt. It is not that the narrator is unreliable, but that the reader perceives the account as such in order to be able to process the information that is being contradictorily given. In the words of the authors:

unreliability is a perspectival hypothesis that we readers (hearers, viewers) form as sense-makers, especially under the pressure or threat of ill-constructed discourse. It is ‘an inference that explains and eliminates tensions, incongruities, contradictions and other infelicities the work may show by attributing them to a source of transmission’ (Yacobi: 1981: 119), whether narrator or informant (e.g., reflector). (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 402)

When confronted with “troublesome discourse”, the readers “devise (construct, reconstruct) and blame the mediator’s unreliability” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, pp. 402, 403).

The mechanisms seek integration, which is understood as “the overall quest for coherence” (STERNBERG, 2012, apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403), and includes “a variety of patterning and sense-making mechanisms common to all discourse, along with type-specific devices like enchainment in narrative or entailment in logic” (STERNBERG, 2012, apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403). Furthermore,

These all-discursive integrational mechanisms encompass, inter alia, assimilating troublesome or just unrelated discourse elements to syntax, co-reference, stylistic register, generic rule, or breach, analogical gestalt, hierarchical . . . sequence, ideological bias, editorial interference, memory lapse, Freudian slip, irony, and point of view” (STERNBERG, 2012, apud STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403)

The results, the “patterning and products of integration” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403), “are always hypothetical, revisable, debatable” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403).

There are many mechanisms of integration, but Yacobi focuses on five which “have a close bearing on reliability judgement, as either its perspectival operating mode or at least as strong and frequent alternatives to its integration through

(un)reliable perspective” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403). These mechanisms are: the genetic, the generic, the functional, the existential, and the perspectival.

Through the genetic mechanism, the reader refers to “causal factors that produced the text and left their mark on it” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 404) in order to explain the problems in the text. These factors could be “the historical author marring the text in the process of creation and mishaps in the product’s transmission later on (e.g., a typo or Freudian slip and a censored or badly edited text, respectively)” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 404). Therefore, the inconsistencies are referred back to the genesis of the text.

The generic mechanism explains incongruencies through the text’s genre. According to the authors, “the sense-maker grasps [a problematic discourse] as a token of a certain discourse type that regularly accommodates (neutralizes, settles, exploits, even celebrates) the problem” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 405). On the level of the storyworld, “genre encodes or enables a referential stylization, to some extent, in some part or aspect of the narrated world” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 406). The “model of actual reality, with the principles and probabilities that govern it”, (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 406) is not the same as the model of the fictional world. In this sense, “genre usually integrates (‘stylizes’) the narrated world” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 406). The authors give as examples the structure of a comedy - “progressive complication from the start and the happy resolution of the imbroglia toward the end” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 406), and the rules of a satire - “satirical unity and coherence are located, not within that represented world (as in novels), but in the attack on the outside object that is satirized in and through its various representations along the text” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, pp. 406, 407).

The functional mechanism explains incongruencies in terms of their function to the text:

A work’s aesthetic, thematic, and persuasive goals operate as a major, versatile guideline to its integration: they make functional sense of its peculiarities — clashes, breaches, dissonances — as well as of its regular features. The respective functional sense-makings, however, vary, at times even polarize, in the effort demanded, the awareness of the act or process involved, and the confidence in the outcome: difficult and easy integration, respectively. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 407)

This mechanism is opposed to the genetic principle, but it can occur alongside other mechanisms, even cooperating in their integration. Therefore, the incongruencies might be attributed to the genre or to a particular perspective, but it might also serve a functional purpose.

The existential mechanism refers to the world created by the text, the “unusual (e.g., supernatural) ontology posited by the text” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 408); “it assimilates all reality items in discourse, including the most ordinary ones, to appropriate reality frames, scripts, models, keys” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 408). This mechanism is different from the genetic, the generic, and the functional mechanisms because of “its *mimetic* (world-based, representational, or specifically fictionalizing) operation” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 408). Its logic of integration is essentially internal to the fictional world:

whether or not the elements that [the principle] brings into pattern belong to the fictional world, the integrating, explanatory, sense-making pattern brought to bear on them is necessarily fictional: a reality model or scheme within which they cohere (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 409).

#### Contrastingly, the other mechanisms

are assimilable (and often indeed assimilated) outside mimesis, by reference to nonrepresentational as well as extrafictional principles: the accidents of genesis, the ways of a specific genre, the functional ends and workings of the discourse (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 409).

The existential mechanism may operate alongside the generic or the functional mechanisms. For instance, “[r]eaders thus often look for coherence to *generic existential conventions*, such as those of science fiction or the animal fable, which involve and so justify departures from reality as we know (or believe to know) it” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 410). This mechanism is central for reading narratives because

[a]s a mimesis of action, narrativity and narrative entail, hence enforce, representation—specifically, of a world on the move—and with it existential integration (or motivation). In fictional narrative, this means the very (re)construction of the nonactual ontology: fictionalizing, with or without a functional drive behind it (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 411).

Finally, the perspectival mechanism operates through the association of the problems with the perspective of the fictional subject. As Sternberg and Yacobi explain:

The perspectival mechanism explains oddities in the discourse by attributing them to a fictional subject (mediator, narrator, reflector) through whose perspective the represented world is taken to be refracted, and so (re)constructing that mediating subject as unreliable. Inversely, to integrate the oddities in terms of some other mechanism is to (re)construct a reliable mediator. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 411)

Therefore, Sternberg and Yacobi's theory covers not only the unreliable mediator (the focus of most of the previous theories), but also the reliable one.

For the reader, there is an either/or choice between the two mimetic mechanisms, the existential and the perspectival:

Where does the better explanation for the textual oddities lie: in the mediated world or the mediating subject, in the represented action or the representer? In the existential or the perspectival mechanism? In an inference of reliability or unreliability? (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 411)

According to the perspectival mechanism, "the inferred source of tensions and hence the mechanism of their resolution are found in the mediator's deficient perspective" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 412). Moreover, "attributing unreliability to him (or elsewhere, her) brings into pattern the respective incongruities (e.g., moral, cognitive, artistic) as well as otherwise unrelated elements" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 412).

The authors highlight "the rich variety that characterizes the perspectival mechanism of unreliability" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 412). With respect to the mediators, there is a difference between two types of mediators: narrators and informants. This difference refers to self-consciousness. In the case of *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks is a "self-conscious, audience-minded" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 412) communicator; as are the senders of the letters, and the speakers in the epigraphs, such as Susanna Moodie and James McDermott. Dr. Simon Jordan is an "unself-conscious, audience-blind informant", since he is a focalizer, but not a narrator. As the authors explain, the way these two mediators are judged in terms of reliability is different:



Unaware that their words or thoughts are quoted and transmitted to an audience by a higher, communicative authority, informants or self-communers express themselves without restraint, exposing their fantasies, weaknesses, or problematic value-schemes. They are therefore more vulnerable to reliability judgments than speakers or tellers, who are in principle far more guarded and self-controlled, because they take into account their audience's response. At the same time, informants are more reliable than narrators — other things being equal — since they have no designs on any external addressee. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2003, p. 413)

With Dr. Jordan as a focalizer, the reader gets his deepest thoughts and fantasies, which he certainly would not share with anyone, as, for example, when he fantasizes about Grace

*Murderess, murderess*, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost. Hothouse gardenias. Lurid, but also furtive. He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*. He applies it to her throat like a brand. (ATWOOD, 2009, 453)

Grace has two narratees (Dr. Jordan and the reader), so this also affects the issue of reliability. The matter of nature or identity of the addressee creates a subdivision among narrating communicators, or even within the same communicator, as is the case here. As the authors postulate, “When addressing a small or intimate audience, addressers may feel free to confess what they would deny or suppress or distort vis-à-vis a different group” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 413). Grace seems to trust the reader more than she trusts Dr. Jordan. The study of this distinction in narrations will be further developed in chapter 3.

The authors establish three important axes of unreliability: aesthetics, morality, and factuality (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 415), but they argue that the role of aesthetics is often neglected by theorists. Besides, there are other factors which influence the reader's judgement of (un)reliability:

the mediator's empathy, imaginativeness, intellectual power, and actually every transmissional feature or behavior that counts as an object of judgment by some standard in some narrative framework (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 415).

A text can have explicit and implicit suggestions of (un)reliability (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 416). In *Alias Grace*, since the question of (un)reliability also appears as a theme, there are explicit suggestions. Some narratives are questioned inside the story. However, the reader cannot passively accept these suggestions, since, as Sternberg and Yacobi explain:

an explicit allegation of (un)reliability can be refuted, or at least challenged, by some other participant or somewhere later along the reading process, with the emergence of new information. Like every other element, therefore, a reliability judgment of such an explicit comment, or one based on it, gains finality only at the very end of the text, if ever. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 417)

Grace is believed to be a liar by some characters, but she claims to be telling the truth. However, Sternberg and Yacobi (2015, p. 418) remind the reader that: “a (self-)description of a mediator as lying, truth-telling, exaggerating, withholding information, and so forth can always be ironic, like any other statement”.

Sternberg and Yacobi (2015, p. 419) explain the dynamics of (un)reliability, which can have two motors: “disclosure and development”. According to the authors, one process involves a change in the reader’s judgement, while the other happens to or within the mediator:

In the one case, the reader’s judgment of the mediator changes along the narrative sequence, owing to the delayed emergence, behind time, of new information. In the other case, the change [...] occurs to or within the mediator during the process of mediation itself: the narrator (reflector, diarist) thereby becomes more reliable, or less, from that point onward. While the first case involves the dynamics of reading, the second doubles as a dynamics of speaking/writing/thinking within the represented world: a mediation plot. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 419)

Therefore, a reader’s judgement of (un)reliability can change throughout the narrative, based on new information or on changes occurring to the mediator.

When discussing the connection between the perspectival and the generic mechanisms, the authors address how, “in certain (sub)genres, the question of the global narrator’s (un)reliability is more pertinent or prominent than usual, due to some focusing factor” (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 425). The examples they present are:

confessions; the narrator’s conventional subjectivity, as in the dramatic monologue; conventional suppressiveness, as with the reports of the suspects in the detective story; or explicit reference to (un)reliability, as again in the detective story but also in a growing number of contemporary tales where tellers declare in advance their propensity for telling lies. (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 425)

*Alias Grace* has many elements of a confession. Some of the novel’s epigraphs are excerpts from the actual confessions given by the real Grace Marks and James McDermott. Moreover, Grace’s account to Dr. Jordan also follows the

structure of a confession. Besides, Dr. Jordan's pursuit of the truth can be associated with a detective story: it starts with a crime, and he seeks to understand what exactly happened and to what extent Grace was involved. However, he is not successful in his quest. Dr. Jordan, like the reader, is in a quest for integration. He tries to integrate all the incongruencies from Grace's many accounts and also from other accounts (Mrs. Moodie's, McDermott's, the doctors', the lawyer's) into a coherent narrative. He too, as a reader, finds integration through the perspectival mechanism and hypothesizes that certain accounts are unreliable. Chapter 3 explores how the question of (un)reliability and this mechanism of integration can guide an analysis of the novel.

### 3 THE ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

#### 3.1 ALIAS GRACE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

In the 19th century, the murders of Mr. Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery received great interest from the national and international press and from society in general, being an attractive “combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 537), as Atwood points out in the “Author’s Afterword”. Atwood (2009, p. 537) states that Grace Marks “was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s, having been convicted of murder at the age of sixteen”. Despite the jury declaring her guilty, there were still people who believed Grace to be innocent, and the gentleman petitioners “pleaded her youth, the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 537). Atwood (2009, p. 537) highlights that “opinion about Grace was divided from the start”.

In the novel, as it happened in real life, there are many versions of the murders, and Grace herself gave conflicting statements during the investigation. In the story, Atwood introduces a fictionalized character, Dr. Simon Jordan, who comes to Toronto to investigate Grace in 1859, after she has been imprisoned for sixteen years. He seeks to find out what lies in the depths of her mind. He wants to discover the truth about the murders, something that maybe even Grace is not consciously aware of, since she claims to have no memory of what happened. In order to do that, Dr. Jordan spends afternoons with Grace at the Governor’s house, where she works sewing, quilting and helping the servants. In the meetings, Grace relates to him (and consequently to the readers) the story of her life. Dr. Jordan claims he is interested in the whole story, and he does not wish to judge her, but to listen and to understand the mechanisms of her mind, so Grace begins her tale, from the beginning (when she was born) up to the murders and the trials.

Through Grace’s account of her life, the reader learns about her difficult childhood in Ireland, with her many siblings, her mother and her drunk and abusive father. The family has to move to Canada in search of a better life, but Grace’s mother dies on the journey. In Canada, Grace starts working as a servant at Mrs. Parkinson’s house, leaving her family behind. It is there that she meets Mary Whitney, a bright and witty girl who becomes her friend and mentor. At Mrs.

Parkinson's, Grace lives "the happiest time" of her life (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 209). But her happiness ends when Mary Whitney gets pregnant from a man who had promised to marry her. The reader is led to believe the man was Mrs. Parkinson's son. Mary gets an abortion and dies because of it. After the tragic and traumatic death of her best friend, Grace works at different houses, and finally moves to Mr. Kinnear's house, at Nancy's request. She is warned by Sally, the cook at the house she was working in, not to go, but at the time she does not understand the warning, which is given in vague terms.

At Mr. Kinnear's, Grace meets James McDermott, the stablehand, and Jamie Walsh, a young boy from a nearby farm who sometimes comes to play the flute for them. Grace's life at Mr. Kinnear's is not as pleasant as she expected it to be, because Nancy's behavior towards her is not always agreeable. She seems to be jealous of Grace. Besides, McDermott resents having to take orders from Nancy, since he thought he would be answering to Mr. Kinnear. The tension in the house gets worse, until Nancy, who seems to be pregnant from her relations with Mr. Kinnear, threatens to fire both Grace and McDermott. Because of that, McDermott plots the murders of Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, and Grace gets involved in it (although the degree of her involvement is unknown). After the murders, the pair tries to flee, but they are caught in an inn in the United States.

The novel is divided into fifteen parts, each named after a quilt pattern and further divided into chapters. Grace is the main narrator, but there is also an extradiegetic narrator, focalized mostly through Dr. Jordan. Besides, some chapters are constituted entirely by letters from different characters. Therefore, the narrative is constructed through many focalizers. Moreover, each part of the novel is introduced by epigraphs from authentic texts about the factual events and literary works (poems).

The novel is, therefore, constructed through a variety of voices, but these voices present different accounts and they do not all agree. The result is a complex patchwork of points of view and focalizers, and what Ober Mannon (2014) calls "a 'patchwork quilt' effect" (p. 552). Faced with the challenge of making sense of such a plurality of points of view, the reader must find a way to organize them and decide what can be trusted and what might be misguided. In this context, the mediators' (narrators and focalizers) unreliability might emerge as a hypothesis to explain these contradictions. (Un)reliability, then, is a judgement made by the reader, in order to

make sense of the text. The structure of the novel, with its many voices, and the hypothesis of unreliability will be analysed in section 3.3. However, the question of (un)reliability does not appear only as a possible reader response; it is also an important theme in the novel.

### 3.2 THE QUESTION OF (UN)RELIABILITY AS A THEME IN THE NOVEL

The question of (un)reliability is one of the main themes in the novel. The reader is presented with information from a variety of sources and versions. The question of whether or not Grace Marks is innocent is at the centre of the story, since there are different versions of the events at McKinnear's house. Jordan seeks to discover the truth, "to wake the part of [Grace's] mind that lies dormant - to probe down below the threshold of [Grace's] consciousness, and to discover the memories that must perforce lie buried there" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 153). He considers that Grace might not even know that she knows, but he wonders whether he can trust her to tell the truth. The reader is prompted to pose not only the question: how reliable is Grace? But, also: how reliable are the newspapers? And the lawyer? And the doctors? And McDermott? Everyone's account can be questioned or regarded with mistrust. The novel is full of incongruities. And the characters themselves wonder if they can trust each other. For instance, it is mentioned more than once that McDermott has a reputation as a liar (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 214, 265, 383, 438).

In reference to the theme, the title of the novel is very revealing, as it gives indications of the nature of the novel. At the inn, during her escape with McDermott, Grace gave Mary Whitney's name instead of her own, to protect herself. That is why below her sketch made by the police it reads: Grace Marks, Alias Mary Whitney. The title of the novel proposes Grace as an alias as well. The word "alias", as Lopez (2012) points out, "suggests that in their search for the truth about Grace Marks, both readers and characters may be frustrated by their continuously encountering duplicity and falsity" (p. 157).

Within the story, the characters are presented as unreliable. The extradiegetic narrator exposes the gap between Jordan's thoughts and his actions or words. He sometimes fantasizes about women, but rationalizes his feelings immediately after the thought emerges. As a focalizer, he also makes assumptions about people's hidden motives, such as Lydia's and his landlady's interest in himself and Reverend

Verringer's interest in Grace. Undoubtedly, Grace is the great enigma in the novel, and everyone seems to have an opinion about the murders and about her personality.

Grace Marks's identity is constructed in a complex and multifaceted way, and the readers (much like the characters) are left to figure it out for themselves. The character is not granted a unified and coherent identity. On the contrary, Grace's characterization is contradictory and her many identities do not form a very structured quilt; they rather form a composition of overlapping patches, in a mismatched pattern. Grace herself wonders at the inconsistency of her characterization made by lawyers, journalists and doctors:

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 forced 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 am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, 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 with 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 I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 25)

The reader is left with the same question: where can they pinpoint her true identity? Which account can be trusted?

In Jordan's words to Reverend Verringer:

"I can see your dilemma," he says. "It is difficult to know what to believe. Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after her death sentence had been commuted, yet a third. In all three, however, she denied ever having laid a finger on Nancy Montgomery. But then, some years later, we have Mrs. Moodie's account, which amounts to a confession by Grace, of having actually done the deed; and this story is in accordance with James McDermott's dying words, just before he was hanged. Since her return from the Asylum, however, you say she denies it." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 89)

Therefore, Dr. Jordan can function as an alter ego of the reader. He is also new to the storyworld, and he takes us through his processing of Grace's narrative. He struggles to interpret Grace and figure her out. The reader gets to see his impressions and hypothesis. He applies his knowledge of the mind not only to the

other characters, but also to himself, because he is constantly reflecting upon his stream of thoughts and the origins of the associations he makes. With Grace, he tries an association technique: he brings a different fruit or vegetable with him for every meeting, in the hopes that it can evoke some association with the murders; for instance, in their first meeting he brings an apple; later he brings a potato and a turnip, hoping that these will evoke the cellar at Mr. Kinnear's, where the bodies were found.

Grace can be compared with two literary figures, which are also mentioned by the characters in the story: Susannah (from the story of Susannah and the elders) and Scheherazade (from *One Thousand and One Nights*). Furthermore, these comparisons might lead towards a certain interpretation of Grace as a character. The mention of Susannah and the elders appears in chapter 25, and it is not explicitly connected to Grace's story by the characters, whereas Scheherazade's name appears in chapter 45, when MacKenzie explicitly compares Grace to her. These two references are relevant to the reader's construction of Grace, and, although they are each only mentioned once, the allusions remain with the reader throughout the novel - if the connections were not made by the reader even before appearing in the novel, that is.

The story of Susannah and the Elders comes into the narrative through a picture Mr. Kinnear has on his bedroom wall. Grace and Nancy have a disagreement over it, because Nancy says it is a Bible subject, but Grace does not believe it is so, since she knows the Bible and has never heard of the story. Mr. Kinnear suddenly appears and makes inquiries about their discussion. He explains that the story was not in the Bible but in the Apocrypha, and he summarizes it for Grace:

He asked if I knew the story of Susannah, and I said no; and he said she was a young lady who had been falsely accused of sinning with a young man, by some old men, because she refused to commit the very same sin with them; and she would have been executed by being stoned to death; but luckily she had a clever lawyer, who was able to prove that the old men had been lying, by inducing them to give contradictory evidence. Then he said what did I think the moral of it was? And I said the moral was, that you should not take baths outside in the garden; and he laughed, and said he thought the moral was that you needed a clever lawyer. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 259)

The story also presents questions of reliability and of women's position in society. Furthermore, the reader can trace a parallel with Grace's experiences. Grace knows that the word of a woman has less power than the word of a man.



In order to get more information about Grace, Simon decides to pay a visit to Kenneth MacKenzie, the lawyer who defended Grace and McDermott. During their talk, Simon expresses his uncertainty towards Grace's account. MacKenzie then compares Grace to Scheherazade, the famous character from the collection *One Thousand and One Nights*, who each night told stories in order to avoid her death. Her stories were so engaging that the king spared her life night after night, and in the end he fell in love with her. Kenneth suggests that Grace has hidden motives for keeping Jordan entertained:

"I must admit I've been baffled. What she says has the ring of truth; her manner is candid and sincere; and yet I can't shake the suspicion that, in some way I cannot put my finger on, she is lying to me."  
 "Lying," says MacKenzie. "A severe term, surely. Has she been lying to you, you ask? Let me put it this way — did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether. Perhaps Grace Marks has merely been telling you what she needs to tell, in order to accomplish the desired end." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 438)

However, Jordan does not understand what could be Grace's intention, since she is sentenced for life in prison. He questions what would be this "desired end":

"Which is?" asks Simon.  
 "To keep the Sultan amused," says MacKenzie. "To keep the blow from falling. To forestall your departure, and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible."  
 "What on earth would be the point of that?" says Simon. "Amusing me won't get her out of prison."  
 "I don't suppose she really expects that," says MacKenzie. "But isn't it obvious? The poor creature has fallen in love with you. A single man, more or less young and not ill-favoured, appears to one who has long been sequestered, and deprived of masculine company. You are doubtless the object of her waking daydreams."  
 "Surely not," says Simon, flushing despite himself. If Grace is in love with him, she has preserved the secret extremely well. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 438)

Kenneth MacKenzie states that he had the same experience with Grace, and after that Simon sees him with disgust. MacKenzie presents Grace as unreliable, and confesses he believes her to be guilty. By comparing Grace to Scheherazade, the lawyer implies that Grace is fabricating stories to keep Dr. Jordan amused.

The power of narratives, of knowing something and being able to tell it (and being believed for it) appears throughout the novel. Knowledge is one aspect that can shift the power dynamics that places the servants at the bottom of the social pyramid.

As Mary points out, the servants clean their master's mess and get to know their dirt, both literally and metaphorically:

In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. There were few secrets they could keep from the servants (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 183).

With the arrival of Dr. Jordan, Grace has a new opportunity to share her truth. With him, she is, for the first time, in control of the narrative. Dr. Jordan is eager to uncover the truth, but the process is not easy. Near the end of the novel, Grace is submitted to a session of Neuro-hypnosis, performed by Dr. Jerome DuPont, who is actually Jeremiah, an old friend of Grace's, whom she met at Mrs. Parkinson's when he was a peddler. During the session, another voice appears - it is the spirit of Mary Whitney who claims to speak through Grace. Mary states she was the one who orchestrated the murders, and that Grace was not aware of it. After the session, Grace seems to have no recollection of what happened in that room. And Dr. Jordan does not know how to interpret what happened. The session which was supposed to shed light on Grace's hidden memories ends up raising even more doubts.

Dr. Jordan does not have a chance to further investigate Grace, because, after getting sexually involved with Mrs. Humphrey, his landlady, who plots a way to get rid of her husband, he suddenly has to leave Canada with no answers as to what really happened in 1843. He is wounded in the war, and ends up debilitated and married to Faith Cartwright, as his mother wished. He loses part of his memory, and calls his wife "Grace". He and the reader never discover to what extent Grace participated in the murders. So another question remains: is there one truth to be found? All the narratives which originate from facts and events are biased and could be considered unreliable to some extent.

However, in spite of the remaining uncertainty, Grace finally receives her Pardon, after almost twenty-nine years in prison (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 509). She is sent to the U.S., where she marries Jamie Walsh, who begs her to forgive him for testifying against her in court, since he was the one who pointed out she was wearing Nancy's clothes. After they get married, Jamie asks to hear stories about Grace's suffering in the Asylum and the Penitentiary. The abuse to which she has been submitted enchants him. Therefore, Grace ends the novel as a Scheherazade once again, this time to entertain her husband. In spite of this, Grace has a peaceful life,

and at the end of the story she is making her own quilt (after years of quilting for other people). She is making a quilt of the pattern called “Tree of Paradise”, to which she will incorporate three patches, one representing her own life, one for Mary Whitney, and one for Nancy:

But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney’s; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy’s that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinneer’s, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away. I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (ATWOOD, 2009, 534)

At the end of the novel, Grace integrates their stories into one quilt.

### 3.3 THE VOICES IN ALIAS GRACE AND THE QUESTION OF (UN)RELIABILITY

When Grace gets to the point of the murders, in her account to Dr. Jordan, the doctor thinks he has prepared himself as best as he can, since he “has reviewed all the documents at his disposal — the accounts of the trial, the opinions of the newspapers, the Confessions, even Mrs. Moodie’s overblown rendition” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 357). This passage summarizes some of the many voices present in the novel, to which the reader has access through the narrators, through the characters themselves, or through the epigraphs. In this section, they are analysed more closely, with the discussion focusing on Grace, on the extradiegetic narrator, on the letters, and, finally, on the epigraphs.

The structure of the novel is illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: The structure of the novel

Part	Epigraphs	Chapters and narrators
I Jagged Edge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Susanna Moodie</li> <li>● Basho</li> </ul>	1 - Grace
II Rocky Road	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Toronto Mirror</i></li> <li>● Punishment Book</li> <li>● Sketch</li> </ul>	2 - THE MURDERS OF THOMAS KINNEAR, ESQ. AND OF HIS

		HOUSEKEEPER NANCY MONTGOMERY AT RICHMOND HILL AND THE TRIALS OF GRACE MARKS AND JAMES MCDERMOTT AND THE HANGING OF JAMES MCDERMOTT AT THE NEW GAOL IN TORONTO, NOVEMBER 21st, 1843. (poem)
III Puss in the Corner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Susanna Moodie</li> <li>• Emily Bronte ('The Prisoner')</li> </ul>	<p>3 - Grace (1859)</p> <p>4 - Grace</p> <p>5 - Grace</p>
IV Young Man's Fancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Susanna Moodie</li> <li>• Dr. Joseph Workman</li> <li>• Emily Dickinson (One need not be a Chamber)</li> </ul>	<p>6 - Letters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dr. Joseph Workman</li> <li>- Jordan's mother</li> <li>- From Dr. Jordan to Edward</li> </ul> <p>7 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>8 - Grace</p> <p>9 - Letter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dr. Samuel Bannerling</li> </ul> <p>10 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>11 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p>
V Broken Dishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voluntary Confession of Grace Marks to Mr. George Walton, in the Gaol, 17/11/1843</li> <li>• Robert Browning (<i>The Ring and the Book</i>)</li> </ul>	<p>12 - Grace</p> <p>13 - Grace</p> <p>14 - Grace</p> <p>15 - Grace</p> <p>16 - Letter from Dr. Jordan to Edward</p>
IV Secret Drawer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isabela Beeton (hysterics)</li> <li>• Alfred, Lord Tennyson (<i>Maud</i>)</li> </ul>	<p>17 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>18 - Grace</p>

		19 - Grace 20 - Grace (Mary is dead)
VII Snake Fence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• William Harrison (Recollections of the Kinnear Tragedy)</li> <li>• Christina Rossetti ('Remember')</li> </ul>	21 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer) 22 - Grace 23 - Grace 24 - Grace 25 - Grace 26 - Grace
VIII Fox and Geese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confession of Grace Marks, <i>Star and Transcript</i></li> <li>• James McDermott to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by Susanna Moodie, <i>Life in the Clearings</i>, 1853</li> <li>• Robert Browning, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," 1855</li> </ul>	27 - Grace 28 - Grace 29 - Grace 30 - Grace 31 - Grace
IX Hearts and Gizzards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confession of Grace Marks, <i>Star and Transcript</i>, Toronto, November, 1843</li> <li>• James McDermott to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by Susanna Moodie, <i>Life in the Clearings</i>, 1853</li> <li>• Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition,' 1846</li> </ul>	32 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer) (there is a letter from his mother inside) 33 - Grace 34 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer) AND Grace 35 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer) 36 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer) 37 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)
X Lady of the Lake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confession of Grace Marks, <i>Star and Transcript</i>, Toronto, November, 1843</li> <li>• Coventry Patmore,</li> </ul>	38 - Grace 39 - Grace 40 - Grace

	<i>The Angel in the House</i> , 1854	
XI Falling Timbers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Chronicle and Gazette</i>, Kingston, August 12th, 1843</li> <li>• Grace Marks, to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by Susanna Moodie, <i>Life in the Clearings</i>, 1853</li> <li>• Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Rappaccini's Daughter,' 1844</li> </ul>	<p>41 - Letter from Dr. Jordan's mother</p> <p>42 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>43 - Grace</p> <p>44 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p>
XII Solomon's Temple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• James McDermott, to Kenneth MacKenzie, as retold by Susanna Moodie, <i>Life in the Clearings</i>, 1853</li> <li>• Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'The Courtship of Miles Standish,' 1858</li> </ul>	<p>45 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>46 - Grace</p> <p>47 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p>
XIII Pandora's Box	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Susanna Moodie, Letter to Richard Bentley, 1858</li> <li>• Alfred, Lord Tennyson, <i>Maud</i>, 1855</li> <li>• Emily Dickinson, c. 1860 (I felt a Cleaving in my Mind)</li> </ul>	<p>48 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p> <p>49 - Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)</p>
XIV The Letter X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Warden's daybook, Provincial Penitentiary, Kingston, Canada West, 1863</li> <li>• William Harrison, 'Recollections of the Kinnear Tragedy,' written for the <i>Newmarket Era</i>, 1908</li> </ul>	<p>50</p> <p>- Letter from Dr. Jordan to Mrs. Humphrey</p> <p>- Letter from Mrs. William P. Jordan (Jordan's mother) to Mrs. Humphrey</p> <p>- Letter from Grace to Dr. Jordan</p> <p>- Letter from Dr. Jordan to Edward</p> <p>- Letter from Grace to</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i>, 1850</li> </ul>	Jeremiah - Letter from Mrs. William P. Jordan (Jordan's mother) to Mrs. Humphrey - Letter from Reverend Enoch Verringer to Dr. Bannerling - Letter from Dr. Bannerling to Reverend Enoch Verringer
XV The Tree of Paradise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History of Toronto and the County of York, Ontario, 1885</li> <li>Notes from the warden's daily journal, Provincial Penitentiary, Kingston, Ontario, The Dominion of Canada</li> <li>William Morris, <i>The Earthly Paradise</i>, 1868</li> <li>Wallace Stevens, 'The Poems of Our Climate,' 1938</li> </ul>	51 - Grace 52 - Grace 53 - Grace

This table presents the novel's division in parts, whose titles correspond to different quilt patterns, and in chapters. Besides, the table organizes how the different voices appear in the novel, and how they shift throughout the chapters. There are two narrators, Grace and an extradiegetic narrator, focalizing mostly through Dr. Jordan. There is one chapter constituted of a poem, and five chapters constituted of letters. The following table presents the number of chapters with each type of structure:

Table 2: Number of chapters per source

Narrator	Number of chapters
Grace	32
Extradiegetic narrator (Dr. Jordan as the focalizer)	16
Letters	5
Poem	1

Based on these numbers, we could state that Grace is the main narrator in the novel. However, the extradiegetic narrator controls the entire narrative, that is, the 53 chapters, and selects and presents the epigraphs, although we cannot always account for it. Therefore, this external instance introduces, and hovers above, Grace's narration and the poem in chapter 2. This extradiegetic narrator gives voice to Grace and reports those of the other focalizers. What we see in the chapters narrated by Grace is Grace's narration mediated by this extradiegetic narrator. The same thing can be said about the letters. The difference is that, in the other chapters, the presence of this narrator (or the absence of an intradiegetic narrator) becomes explicit.

The shifts in narration can be confusing for the reader. The first chapter is narrated by Grace. As early as chapter 2, there is the first shift, since this chapter is composed entirely of the broadsheet poem "The murders of Thomas Kinnear, Esq. and of his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery at Richmond Hill and the trials of Grace Marks and James McDermott and the hanging of James McDermott at the new gaol in Toronto, November 21st, 1843." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 13). At first glance, the reader might even mistake the chapter for a longer epigraph. Interestingly, this chapter is the only one in Part II. Therefore, the novel starts with Grace's narration, but immediately after chapter 1 there is a break. Grace resumes her task as a narrator in the following chapters.

However, in chapter 6 there is another shift. Chapter 6 is constituted entirely of letters, one from Dr. Joseph Workman and one from Jordan's mother, both addressed to Dr. Jordan, and one from Dr. Jordan to his friend Edward. These letters appear unmediated by a narration, and they introduce three new focalizers (the senders). The letters are all connected to Dr. Jordan.

In chapter 7, there is a regular narration again, but, without warning, the focus has changed from Grace's perspective to Dr. Jordan's, with an extradiegetic narrator, and that can be unsettling to the reader, who at first assumes Grace is narrating that part as well. The chapter begins with the following passage:

*Simon sits at his writing table, gnawing the end of his pen and looking out the window at the grey and choppy waters of Lake Ontario. Across the bay is Wolfe Island, named after the famous poetic general, he supposes. It's a view he does not admire — it is so relentlessly horizontal — but visual monotony can sometimes be conducive to thought.* (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 63 . Italics mine)



The first sign that something is different is the mention of “Simon”, since Grace refers to him as “Dr. Jordan”. Simon seems to be alone - not in the presence of Grace - and the narrator reports his thoughts (“he supposes”). The final highlighted sentences, “it is so relentlessly horizontal - but visual monotony can sometimes be conducive to thought”, are examples of free indirect speech. Whose thoughts are these? The narrator’s or Dr. Jordan’s? They are most likely Dr. Jordan’s. Therefore, this extradiegetic narrator gives the reader access to Dr. Jordan’s thoughts; he has just finished writing a response to Edward, which was presented in the previous chapter. He reflects on what he has written, and he also ponders about what he might reply to his mother. Thus, the reader concludes that he has read the two letters addressed to him which were presented in chapter 6. From then on the narration keeps shifting along the chapters, as can be seen in the table. There are four other epistolary chapters, and they will be discussed in section 3.3.3.

Grace is the narrator of thirty one out of the fifty-three chapters. Nevertheless, there is one chapter which has not one, but two narrators: chapter 34 begins with the extradiegetic narrator, but without warning there is a shift. A paragraph ends, there is a space in between paragraphs, and the next paragraph begins: “Today is the Tuesday meeting, and as Dr. Jordan is speaking at it I did not see him in the afternoon, since he had to prepare” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 351). As this switch happens in the same chapter, differently from what happens in the rest of the novel, the reader might feel lost at first. However, there are three indications that the narrator and the focalizer have changed: “Today is the Tuesday meeting” sounds strange, since the meeting has just been described by the other narrator; there is the mention of “Dr. Jordan”, while the other narrator calls him “Simon”; there is the presence of an “I” who is speaking. Therefore, through these clues, the reader grasps that this is Grace’s narration.

The shifts in narration are constant, and they might confuse the reader. In the following sections, the two narrators (Grace and the extradiegetic narrator with Dr. Jordan as a focalizer) will be analysed more closely, as well as the letters and the epigraphs which are integrated into the novel. All of these voices influence the question of - and the quest for - reliability.

### 3.3.1 Grace

In chapter 1 Grace seems to be narrating a dream she's had. She mentions that, in the dream, she sees peonies and then she sees Nancy. She says the year is 1851; she will turn twenty-four on her next birthday and she has been in prison since she was sixteen (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 6). Grace dreams she will be able to help Nancy this time, but then she suddenly realizes she is trapped in the cellar. And the chapter ends with a sentence that changes the way the reader perceives what came before: "This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 7). At that moment, the reader becomes aware that there is an account inside the account. She is reporting to the reader what she has told Dr. Jordan. Therefore, the narration occurs on these two different levels; in other words, there are in fact two narrations, and two narratives, which sometimes overlap and coincide: her narration to Dr. Jordan and her narration to the reader (which encompasses her narration to Dr. Jordan).

After the first chapter, the narrative Grace presents to the reader follows a timeline which begins in 1859, before Dr. Jordan's arrival, and continues up to when she is forty-five years old, after she has been pardoned and released from prison. Inside this narrative, there is the narrative she is telling Dr. Jordan, which covers her life before being imprisoned, as well as her years in the penitentiary and in the Asylum, before Dr. Jordan's arrival.

Grace is not simply reflecting upon her life, she is telling her story to someone. As there are two levels of narration, there are also two narratees. On one level, Grace is telling her story to Dr. Jordan, an intradiegetic narratee, since he is a part of the story. On another level, Grace is reporting her story (and the conversations with Dr. Jordan) to an extradiegetic narratee, who's not a character in the story (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, pp. 21, 92). This structure can be seen in Grace's account of their first meeting:

The young man closes the door behind him. He doesn't lock it, but someone else locks it from the outside. We are locked into this room together.  
 Good morning, Grace, he says. I understand that you are afraid of doctors. I must tell you right away that I myself am a doctor. My name is Dr. Jordan, Dr. Simon Jordan.  
 I look at him quickly, then look down. I say, Is the other doctor coming back?  
 The one that frightened you? he says. No, he is not.  
 I say, Then I suppose you are here to measure my head.

I would not dream of it, he says, smiling; but still, he glances at my head with a measuring look. However I have my cap on, so there's nothing he can see. Now that he has spoken I think he must be an American. He has white teeth and is not missing any of them, at least at the front, and his face is quite long and bony. I like his smile, although it is higher on one side than the other, which gives him the air of joking. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 42)

In this passage, Grace presents not only the actions of the characters involved in the scene (herself and Dr. Jordan) and the interactions between them (through the use of direct speech), but also her impressions and suppositions about him. The rest of the passage follows the same structure:

I look at his hands. They are empty. There's nothing at all in them. No rings on his fingers. Do you have a bag with knives in it? I say. A leather satchel. No, he says, I am not the usual kind of doctor. I do no cutting open. Are you afraid of me, Grace?  
*I can't say that I am afraid of him yet. It's too early to tell; too early to tell what he wants. No one comes to see me here unless they want something.*  
*I would like him to say what kind of a doctor he is if he's not the usual kind,* but instead he says, I am from Massachusetts. Or that is where I was born. I have travelled a good deal since then. I have been going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it. And he looks at me, to see if I understand.  
*I know it is the Book of Job, before Job gets the boils and running sores, and the whirlwinds. It's what Satan says to God. He must mean that he has come to test me, although he's too late for that, as God has done a great deal of testing of me already, and you would think he would be tired of it by now. But I don't say this. I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practised.* (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 42, 43 . Italics mine)

The italics highlight Grace's thoughts. Grace seems to trust the reader more than she trusts Dr. Jordan, because she confides to the reader what she does not say to him. According to Ober Mannon (2014, p. 555), Grace's silence cannot be mistaken for passivity, as "she shows the reader that quite a bit of analytical work takes place in those pauses". As Ober Mannon (2014, p. 555) points out, Grace's stupid look is used "in place of her most insightful thoughts and strongest reactions, beginning in her first interview".

Atwood (1998, p. 1515) comments on Grace's role as storyteller, with power to narrate and withhold, that is, to select information:

In my fiction, Grace, too - whatever else she is - is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives.

Grace selects the information she conveys to Dr. Jordan, either consciously or simply because it is what she remembers:

What is told by her to her audience of one, Dr. Simon Jordan - who is not only a more educated person than she is but a man, which gave him an automatic edge in the nineteenth century - is selective, of course. It is dependent on what she remembers; or is it what she says she remembers, which can be quite a different thing? And how can her audience tell the difference? (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515)

Grace's narration raises questions about trustworthiness and reliability:

Here we are, right back at the end of the twentieth century, with our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time. As I have said, we can't help but be contemporary, and *Alias Grace*, though set in the mid-nineteenth century, is of course a very contemporary book. In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, "Now it all comes back to me"; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that, and, if she did, would we-any longer-believe her? (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515)

The reader might find reasons not to trust Grace, since she is a convicted murderess. In terms of her authority as a speaker (HERMAN; VERVAECK, 2005, p. 89), the elements of her social identity (a young woman, an immigrant from Ireland, uneducated, unmarried and poor) might testify against her. Moreover, she knows that she is seen as insane by many people. Indeed, she is aware that other people - especially doctors, lawyers and journalists - have more power in constructing her truth than she does. The fact that she is in prison serving a sentence might be enough to lead some readers to mark her as untrustworthy. She might be read as a "cunning and devious" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 25) criminal who is manipulating her narrative. However, if she is believed to be unjustly accused, the reader will be more inclined to trust her. The reader might also think she is guilty but repentant, taking as evidence her dream in the first chapter, in which she says, "but this time it will all be different, this time I will run to help, I will lift her up and wipe away the blood with my skirt, I will tear a bandage from my petticoat and none of it will have happened" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 6). Besides, the reader might be inclined to think that Grace is mad or that she has been possessed. One important thing to notice is that the novel allows for these different interpretations.

Grace's social status is important to the narrative. As Lopez (2012, p. 163) emphasizes, Grace's identity as an Irish immigrant, raised in a Protestant family, is a

relevant aspect to be considered. And her status does not place her at the top of society's power structure, but instead at a place of oppression and discrimination, since her "gender, class, and Irishness taint her guilty before she has been convicted of any crime", in Toron's words (2011, p. 16).

The question of reliability is raised by Grace herself in the beginning, when she mentions the possibility that she might lie to Dr. Jordan, and this statement might make the reader suspicious, or, on the contrary, more trusting of her.

Perhaps I will tell you lies, I say.

He doesn't say, Grace what a wicked suggestion, you have a sinful imagination. He says, Perhaps you will. Perhaps you will tell lies without meaning to, and perhaps you will also tell them deliberately. Perhaps you are a liar.

I look at him. There are those who have said I am one, I say.

We will just have to take that chance, he says. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 46)

In this sense, one thing that influences the reader's judgment of her is that Grace seems conscious of the effect the label "murderess" produces on people. She has read what has been said about her (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 29) and she points out the incongruencies. She is aware that her identity has been shaped by other people, who have the authority to say it (and to write it down), and she is often ambiguous, taking the identity imposed on her as truth, but then stating the source of that idea, as in the following passage: "The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 25).

Grace does not know if she can trust Dr. Jordan, and the reader does not know if she does. But it is possible to identify many omissions in her narrative. There are at least three different types of omissions: out of propriety, as a refusal to give in, and a result of a desire to make her story more interesting.

Sometimes, Grace omits words or phrases out of propriety, often when she is reporting something that Mary Whitney told her. For example, one time Mary was comforting her and explaining her view on class differences. Grace reports that Mary "said that being a servant was like anything else, there was a knack to it which many never learnt, and it was all in the way of looking at it" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 182). Mary illustrated this by explaining her view on the upper class.

They were feeble and ignorant creatures, although rich, and most of them could not light a fire if their toes were freezing off, because they didn't know how, and it was a wonder they could blow their own noses or wipe their own

backsides, they were by their nature as useless as a prick on a priest – *if you'll excuse me, Sir, but that was how she put it* – and if they were to lose all their money tomorrow and be thrown out on the streets, they would not even be able to make a living by honest whoring, as they would not know which part was to go in where, and they would end up getting – *I won't say the word* – in the ear; and most of them did not know their own arse from a hole in the ground. *And she said something else about the women, which was so coarse I will not repeat it, Sir,* but it made us laugh very much. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 182,183 . Italics mine)

The fact that she asks Jordan to excuse her, and her omission of certain words, out of propriety, reinforces her cleverness in maneuvering society's morals and restrictions. As much as Grace loved and admired Mary, she distances herself from Mary in her use of language. Grace's care with language reflects a conscious construction of her image. She is presenting herself as a polite and proper woman. This care with her narrative also reflects her mediation of her story. She is aware of her interlocutor's position and also of her own position as a woman.

At another point in the novel, Grace confesses to omitting things because she thinks Jordan won't find them interesting:

Sometimes I think that Dr. Jordan is a little off in the head. But I would rather talk with him about potatoes, if that is what he fancies, than not talk to him at all. [...] I need the scissors and so I ask for them, and then he wants me to begin talking, so I say, Today I will finish the last block for this quilt, after this the blocks will all be sewn together and it will be quilted, it is meant for one of the Governor's young ladies. It is a Log Cabin. A Log Cabin quilt is a thing every young woman should have before marriage, as it means the home; and there is always a red square at the centre, which means the hearth fire. Mary Whitney told me that. *But I don't say this, as I don't think it will interest him, being too common. Though no more common than a potato.* (ATWOOD, 2009, p.112. Italics mine)

At different moments, Grace knows the answer Dr. Jordan is expecting, but refuses to give it to him. One example is from their first meeting, when he brings her an apple and asks her what it makes her think of:

I beg your pardon, Sir, I say. I do not understand you.  
*It must be a riddle.* I think of Mary Whitney, and the apple peelings we threw over our shoulders that night, to see who we would marry. *But I will not tell him that.*  
 I think you understand well enough, he says.  
 My sampler, I say.  
 Now it is his turn to know nothing. Your what? he says.  
 My sampler that I stitched as a child, I say. A is for Apple, B is for Bee. Oh yes, he says. But what else?  
*I give my stupid look.* Apple pie, I say.  
 Ah, he says. Something you eat.

Well I should hope you would, Sir, I say. That's what an apple pie is for. And is there any kind of apple you should not eat? he says.

A rotten one, I suppose, I say.

He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is; although with Dr. Bannerling all of the answers were wrong. Or perhaps he is a Doctor of Divinity; they are the other ones prone to this kind of questioning. I have had enough of them to last me for a long while.

The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil. Any child could guess it. *But I will not oblige.*

*I go back to my stupid look.* Are you a preacher? I say. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 44, 45. Italics mine)

In another moment, Grace is describing her routine with the chamber pot and the slop pail. She says "and so forth", and Jordan wants a more detailed description, but Grace refuses to give it to him:

I reached the privy and emptied the slop pail, and so forth.

And so forth, Grace? asks Dr. Jordan.

I look at him. Really if he does not know what you do in a privy there is no hope for him. What I did was, I hoisted my skirts and sat down above the buzzing flies, on the same seat everyone in the house sat on, lady or lady's maid, they both piss and it smells the same, and not like lilacs neither, as Mary Whitney used to say. What was in there for wiping was an old copy of the Godey's Ladies' Book; I always looked at the pictures before using them. Most were of the latest fashions, but some were of duchesses from England and high-society ladies in New York and the like. You should never let your picture be in a magazine or newspaper if you can help it, as you never know what ends your face may be made to serve, by others, once it has got out of your control.

*But I do not say any of this to Dr. Jordan. And so forth, I say firmly, because And so forth is all he is entitled to. Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him.* (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 251, 252. Italics mine)

Grace also presents to the reader her reflections upon her meetings with Dr. Jordan:

And that is how we go on. He asks a question, and I say an answer, and he writes it down. In the courtroom, every word that came out of my mouth was as if burnt into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never get the words back; only they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place. And it was the same with Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. But now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 79)

And she explains how she feels about the interviews:

While he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me, drawing on me — drawing on my skin — not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end. As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face, and are softly opening and closing their wings.

But underneath that is another feeling, a feeling of being wide-eyed awake and watchful. It's like being wakened suddenly in the middle of the night, by a hand over your face, and you sit up with your heart going fast, and no one is there. And underneath that is another feeling still, 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. And inside the peach there's a stone. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 79)

This excerpt points to Grace's and Jordan's search for the missing memories, the truth about the murders. The last sentence indicates something that is hidden, but the reader does not know whether Grace is consciously hiding it or if she is unaware of it.

Grace may omit things from Dr. Jordan, but she also confesses she embellishes her story for him. After he brings the radish she had asked for, she says decides to repay his generosity:

Because he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves another (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 286)

This passage might make the reader question how reliable Grace's account to Dr. Jordan is, if she makes changes to make it "interesting" and "rich in incident".

When Grace tells Dr. Jordan about the strange dream she had during the storm, in which she went outside (which she might have done while sleeping) and saw the angels (or clothes) in the trees, she seems pleased to see that Dr. Jordan reacts positively to this part of her narrative:

Dr. Jordan is writing eagerly, as if his hand can scarcely keep up, and I have never seen him so animated before. It does my heart good to feel I can bring a little pleasure into a fellow-being's life; and I think to myself, I wonder what he will make of all that. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 328)

Grace's narration to her other narratee, the reader, can be questioned as well. Ober Mannon (2014, p. 552) contrasts Grace's narration to Dr. Jordan to her narration to the reader:

Grace's guarded confession in these interviews is framed by her ostensibly more candid narration of traveling to and from the interviews, living in prison,



and working again as a servant for the prison governor's wife. In these passages Grace reflects on the stories she will tell Dr. Jordan, sometimes rehearsing her memories of entire weeks, appearing to confide in the reader the way she will shape her confession.

However, as much as Grace seems to trust the reader, she is still in control of her story, and there is one instance in which she narrates something that is not true. In chapter 27, she begins describing her morning:

Today when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 275)

The reader might think this is a simple and reliable description, until the second paragraph indicates that this is a narrative constructed by a narrator, who might manipulate it as she pleases:

In fact I have no idea of what kind of a sunrise there was. In prison they make the windows high up, so you cannot climb out of them I suppose, but also so you cannot see out of them either, or at least not onto the outside world. [...] And so this morning I saw only the usual form of light, a light without shape, coming in through the high-up and dirty grey windows, as if cast by no sun and no moon and no lamp or candle. Just a swathe of daylight the same all the way through, like lard. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 275)

Furthermore, as Grace and Dr. Jordan reach the time of the murders in their reconstruction of the events, Grace's narration becomes full of doubt. In chapter 32, she shares with the reader her thoughts on what she might tell Dr. Jordan:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? Because now we are almost there. *I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said,* for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them right into your mouth for you too; and that sort are like the magicians who can throw their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their wooden doll. And that's what it was like at the trial, I was there in the box of the dock but I might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 342. Italics mine)

In this passage, Grace ponders over the existence of many versions of the events. The fact that the real actions, the memory of the events and the narrative about them do not always coincide becomes evident: "I said that I remembered some

of the things I did. But there are other things they said I did, which I said I could not remember at all” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 343). Then, she goes on to reflect upon more specific details:

Did he say, I saw you outside at night, in your nightgown, in the moonlight?  
 Did he say, Who were you looking for? Was it a man? Did he say, I pay good wages but I want good service in return? Did he say, do not worry, I will not tell your mistress, it will be our secret? Did he say, You are a good girl?  
 He might have said that. Or I might have been asleep.  
 Did she say, Don't think I don't know what you've been up to? Did she say, I will pay you your wages on Saturday and then you can be gone out of here, and that will be the end of it and good riddance?  
 Yes. She did say that.  
 Was I crouching behind the kitchen door after that, crying? Did he take me in his arms? Did I let him do it? Did he say Grace, why are you crying? Did I say I wished she was dead?  
 Oh no. Surely I did not say that. Or not out loud. And I did not really wish her dead. I only wished her elsewhere, which was the same thing she wished for me.  
 Did I push him away? Did he say I will soon make you think better of me? Did he say I will tell you a secret if you promise to keep it? And if you do not, your life will not be worth a straw.  
 It might have happened. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 343).

These thoughts do not provide any certainty. They open up many possibilities which the narrative does not establish as either true or false. The reader might feel Grace is manipulating the story to her advantage, by pretending not to know, or that she is truly lost. Both readings are possible. The fact that there are so many doubts might lead the reader to deem this account unreliable.

At the end of the chapter, Grace reflects on how stories (the events) are different from the narratives created about and around it:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 345, 346)

Grace sees the construction of a story into a narrative as a way of organizing the events, which at first, when they are experienced, are only “a confusion”.

Moreover, the reader might find reason to doubt Grace because she tells Dr. Jordan she is trying to narrate everything as it happened, when the reader knows she is trying to tell a story which will captivate him. According to Grace, McDermott told her he wanted to murder Nancy and Mr. Kinnear, but at first she did not believe he

would do it. At one moment, she relates to Jordan that, before the murders, she thought about how the rooster would soon become a carcass, and she thought the same thing about Nancy. After saying that, she acknowledges that “these are odd thoughts to confess to” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 366), but reiterates she is only trying to tell the truth: “but I will not lie and conceal them, as I could easily do, having never told this to anyone before. I wish to relate everything just as it happened to me, and those were the thoughts I had” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 366).

Ober Mannon (2014, p. 552) points out that Grace’s confidence in the reader is only “illusory, though, as the reader is never allowed access to her meditations on her own participation in the murders. The novel presents different versions of Nancy’s murder. In real life, Grace gave three different versions, and McDermott gave two (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 538). In the novel, Grace tells Dr. Jordan that McDermott said he would kill Nancy and that she went to the garden to gather chives. She says that she heard a dull sound from within and that after that she could not remember anything for some time. The next thing she remembers is that she was in the front of the house when Mr. Kinnear arrived (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 368, 369). Jordan asks her about Walsh’s testimony, and she replies she “cannot account for it” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 372). When Jordan assures her they will “get to the bottom of it” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 372), she replies: “I hope so, Sir,” she says wanly. “It would be a great relief to me, to know the whole truth at last.” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 372). She says she does not remember being in the cellar and helping McDermott strangle Nancy. According to Moodie’s account, however, Grace confided to MacKenzie that she was in the cellar with McDermott.

Therefore, there are many aspects in Grace’s narrative that might be read as unreliable. The reader might consider her unreliable because she was convicted of a crime. Her narration to Dr. Jordan is full of omissions, and she says she has adapted it to make it interesting. Her narration to the reader is also full of doubts and incongruencies. With the hypothesis of unreliability, the reader might accept that she lies, omits or misremembers things and that her account cannot be trusted.

In the article “Sew and snip, and patch together a genius’: Quilting a virginal identity in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*”, Bailey (2007, p. 173) reads Grace’s narration as the active escape from “all textual attempts to define her”. The author highlights Grace’s refusal to being uncovered and dissected: “The very fact that Grace is conscious of the different versions of her in public circulation suggests a gap

between those ‘selves’ and the ‘self’ which lies hidden within, and the autobiographical tale which follows illustrates how this ‘real’ Grace incorporates and exceeds these versions” (BAILEY, 2007, p. 173).

Focusing on Grace’s marginal identity as an immigrant, a woman and a servant, Lopez (2012) claims that public discourse is not compatible with Grace’s truth. As Lopez (2012, pp. 173, 174) argues, “Official and public discourse, which operate according to the categories of truth and falsehood and which are complicit with the communities of power, will never be able to tell Grace Mark’s ‘truth’” which, in opposition, “can only be conveyed through a different kind of language, a language of suggestion and indirection, a language of secrecy and double meanings, which is the language of quilts and the language of literature itself”.

According to Lopez (2012, p. 157), Grace “resists being comprehended by the knowledge and discourse of [...] communities of power, namely, the scientific, religious, and legal communities and by the Foucauldian disciplinary system created by them”. Based on this, Lopez (2012, p. 157) claims that Grace belongs “to the marina communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people, who share strong bonds of solidarity based upon vulnerability and secrecy and who challenge the rigidity of social categories, together with official middle- and upper-class constructions of national identity”. This situates Grace as “the other”.

Toron (2011) analyzes Grace’s narrative as a narrative of confinement. According to her, the prison “takes on representational significance as the most literal and obvious site of confinement in a series of limiting enclosures that come to define Grace’s identity and her narrative style” (TORON, 2011, p. 12). Toron (2011, p. 18) illustrates how the power dynamics shift between Simon and Grace during their meetings, and how she manages to control her narrative:

Although Dr. Jordan has the power to bring highly meaningful objects from the outside world, giving him considerable authority in her eyes, the power dynamics existing between them are fundamentally unstable. [...] Grace imposes her own rules upon him. When he pleases her, such as when he brings the requested radish, she tailors her narrative in such a way to entertain him (p. 291) [...] Conversely, Grace consciously punishes Dr. Jordan when his simplistic interpretations insult her intelligence, such as when he fails to understand her nuanced analysis of quilts as warning flags for women (p. 187).

Ober Mannon (2014) focuses on the idea of girlhood and resistance. She explores how Grace consciously exploits her girlhood and silence to “perform her

confession on her own terms” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 555). She reads Grace as “deceptively passive” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 553), since in her narration she “appears to be not an actor but a woman who has been acted upon by people and ideologies, and one who claims not to see the larger picture into which her personal experiences fit” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 553).

Grace’s evasions and omissions are deceptive, and can be seen as a way to exercise her autonomy: “The verbal habits ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I say nothing’ maintain only a façade of feminine self-effacement, behind which the narrator-protagonist exercises a measure of autonomy and seeks to understand the complexities of guilt and innocence” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 553).

According to Ober Mannon (2014), Grace reveals great power in her refusal to be an object of knowledge to institutionalised discourses which, throughout her life, have only resulted in pain and loss. In her narration, Grace demonstrates a clever defense strategy, which is not directed primarily against the accusations of murder; rather, her defense is against the “social structures of dominance” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 552) that permeate her story and her fate. Grace’s narrative can be read as a refusal to be an object of knowledge and as an affirmation of her agency as a subject.

### 3.3.2 Extradiegetic narrator

This section focuses on the extradiegetic narrator and in the sixteen chapters narrated indirectly through Dr. Jordan, or Simon (as he is referred to by the narrator), who functions as an internal focalizer. Therefore, Simon is the agent who perceives the characters, actions, and objects which are then presented to the reader.

This extradiegetic narrator presents Simon’s point of view. The narrator grants the reader access to Simon’s thoughts and feelings, by presenting them explicitly or through the use of free indirect speech. The events narrated could be divided into two groups: Simon’s moments with Grace, seen from his point of view, and the other moments in Simon’s life, in which Grace is not present, such as when he is alone, thinking about her case, or when he interacts with his landlady.

Since Grace and Simon are focalizers, the reader gets to see their relation from their different points of view, and gets a privileged access to both sides of the story. However, this does not mean that the same scene is always narrated twice, as

the two narrators intercalate but they do not often narrate the same moment. In spite of this, what usually happens is that Grace narrates an interaction between them, and then we later get to see Simon's reflections on that moment, as he thinks about it, after it happened. In fact, chapter 35 is the first that presents their interaction through the extradiegetic narrator - as all the other chapters focalized through Simon before that show him alone or with other people, but not with Grace. In this chapter, they have come to the murders, and Simon feels he "is fully prepared, and also tense" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 357). He says he is not concerned with Grace's guilt or innocence, but he wants to know what she can remember. Then Grace's reaction is presented, through Simon's eyes:

Grace continues her stitching. She does not look up. "Nobody has cared about that before, Sir," she says. "They told me I must be lying; they kept wanting to know more. Except for Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie the lawyer. But I am sure that even he did not believe me. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 357)

After her response, Simon tries to reassure Grace of his trust in her:

"I will believe you," says Simon. It is, he realizes, a fairly large undertaking. Grace tightens her mouth a little, frowns, says nothing. He plunges in. "Mr. Kinnear left for the city on the Thursday, did he not?"  
"Yes, Sir," says Grace. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 357, 358).

Since Simon is the focalizer, the narrator presents not only his verbal response, but also his thoughts about what he says, for he realizes that saying he will believe her is "a fairly large undertaking" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 357). After that, the reader is presented with Grace's account to Dr. Jordan through the extradiegetic narrator, so her narration happens inside this other narration, and it is marked by the use of quotation marks. We also get to see Simon's reaction to her story, including his thoughts. In the following passage, Simon gets impatient, because he wants to know to what extent Mr. Kinnear took liberties with Grace:

"Did he ever touch you? Did he take liberties?"  
"Only what was usual, Sir."  
"Usual?" says Simon. He is baffled. He does not know how to say what he means, without being too explicit: Grace has a strong dash of prude in her.  
"With a servant, Sir. He was a kind enough master," says Grace primly. "And liberal when he wished to be."  
Simon lets his impatience get the better of him. What does she mean? Is she saying she got paid for favours? "Did he put his hands inside your clothing?" he says. "Were you lying down?"

Grace stands up. "I have heard enough of that kind of talk," she says. "I do not have to stay here. You are just like them at the Asylum, and the prison chaplains, and Dr. Bannerling and his filthy ideas!" Simon finds himself apologizing to her, and no wiser into the bargain. "Please sit down," he says, when she has been soothed. "Let us go back to the chain of events. Mr. Kinnear rode away at three o'clock on Thursday. Then what happened?" (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 358, 359)

The questions "What does she mean? Is she saying she got paid for favours?", reflect Simon's ponderings. The extradiegetic narrator does not appear in the story. There is no "I" narration from it, and it is not possible to identify any comments belonging to the narrator, not Simon. Rather, all of the remarks seem to be observations or feelings of the character, reported directly by the narrative voice. Thus, the reader does not have reasons to regard this narrator with suspicion.

However, the narrator shows us the discrepancy between Simon's feelings and actions or expressions, and this might lead the reader to question Simon's reliability inside the story. For instance, in chapter 6 there is a letter Jordan has written to his friend Edward, and in chapter 7 the narrator presents Simon's thoughts: "He feels none of the jaunty hopefulness he has just expressed. Instead he is uneasy, and more than a little dispirited." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 63). In that sense, the narrator's account is not questioned, but Simon's accounts to other characters are not always true. The difference between Simon's thoughts and how he rationalizes them can even sound ironic.

Alternatively, all that has been stated about this narrator's reliability can change if we consider that, perhaps, it is not an extradiegetic narrator standing outside the story after all. One could argue for the reading that this extradiegetic narrator is in fact the older Grace Marks, imagining what might have been happening with Dr. Jordan at the time of their meetings. Therefore, Jordan's thoughts and feelings would be a creation of Grace's imagination, and she would be in control of the whole narrative, not only of the parts she explicitly narrates.

However, the reader can also integrate "the oddities" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 411) by inferring the unreliability of the different focalizers, through the perspectival mechanism, but at the same time inferring the reliability of the mediating instance which stands above the focalizers, that is, the extradiegetic narrator.

### 3.3.3 Letters

The following table illustrates how the letters are distributed in the novel:

Table 3: The letters

Chapter	Letters
6	- from Dr. Joseph Workman to Dr. Jordan - from Jordan's mother to Dr. Jordan - from Dr. Jordan to Edward
9	- from Dr. Samuel Bannerling to Dr. Jordan
16	- from Dr. Jordan to Edward
32	- extradiegetic narrator, focalized through Dr. Jordan (with a letter from his mother inside)
41	- from Dr. Jordan's mother
50	- from Dr. Jordan to Mrs. Humphrey - from Mrs. William P. Jordan (Jordan's mother) to Mrs. Humphrey - from Grace to Dr. Jordan - from Dr. Jordan to Edward - from Grace to Jeremiah - from Mrs. William P. Jordan (Jordan's mother) to Mrs. Humphrey - from Reverend Enoch Verringer to Dr. Bannerling - from Dr. Bannerling to Reverend Enoch Verringer

As mentioned before, the letters first appear in Chapter 6, the first one entirely epistolary, which introduce three new focalizers. The reader is shown three unmediated letters (one from Dr. Joseph Workman, one from Jordan's mother and one from Dr. Jordan to Edward); that is, the reader does not get a character's reaction to them (only what is presented in the letter). However, chapter 7 focuses on Simon, who has just finished writing his response to his friend Edward (the last letter in the chapter). He has read the letters; the reader is granted access to his thoughts and understands his reaction to what he reads and his intentions with that communication. The letters are subordinated to the extradiegetic narrative voice. The fact that they are all related to Simon corroborates this hypothesis.

Simon's exchanges with his mother are centered in her veiled wishes for him to return home and get married. Simon, on the other hand, tries to convince her of the progress he is making in Canada, but this is hard because he does not believe it himself. With his friend Edward, the letters are updates of each others' lives. Edward has settled down and gotten married. The interactions with Simon's mother and



Edward contribute to present a view of Jordan as someone who also monitors his thoughts in order to convey the best message to his interlocutors.

Apart from these more personal exchanges, there are also the letters from Dr. Joseph Workman and Dr. Samuel Bannerling, who worked at the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, and they provide insights on how the doctors perceived Grace. Dr. Workman was a real doctor, who really worked at the Asylum, while Dr. Bannerling seems to be an invention of the author. In that sense, Atwood (2009, p. 540) explains that, “Most of the words in Dr. Workman’s letters are his own. ‘Dr. Bannerling’ expresses opinions that were attributed to Dr. Workman after his death, but which could not possibly have been his”.

The voices of these figures of authority bring different perspectives to our idea of Grace. Dr. Workman presents his opinions on medical institutions - because Dr. Jordan would like to open a clinic one day - but, as for Jordan’s inquiries about Grace, he says he cannot help, since he was not very acquainted with her: “As I myself was appointed only some three weeks prior to her departure, I had little chance of making a thorough study of her case.” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 54). He refers Jordan to Dr. Samuel Bannerling, but he presents his impression of Grace nonetheless:

As to the degree of insanity by which she was primarily affected, I am unable to speak. It was my impression that for a considerable time past she had been sufficiently sane to warrant her removal from the Asylum. I strongly recommended that in her discipline, gentle treatment should be adopted; and I believe she presently spends a part of each day as a servant in the Governor’s family. She had, towards the latter end of her stay, conducted herself with much propriety; whilst by her industry and general kindness towards the patients, she was found a profitable and useful inmate of the house. She suffers occasionally under nervous excitement, and a painful overaction of the heart. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 54, 55)

Dr. Workman’s assessment is very different from Dr. Bannerling’s, who does not believe in “gentle treatment”. He questions Dr. Workman’s impressions of Grace, and presents his own perspective:

Dr. Workman had the opportunity of examining Grace Marks for a few weeks only, whereas I had her under my care for over a year; and therefore his opinions on the subject of her character cannot be worth a great deal. He was, however, perspicacious enough to discover one pertinent fact — namely that, as a lunatic, Grace Marks was a sham — a view previously arrived at by myself, although the authorities of that time refused to act upon it. Continuous observation of her, and of her contrived antics, led me to deduce that she was

not in fact insane, as she pretended, but was attempting to pull the wool over my eyes in a studied and flagrant manner. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 81)

According to Dr. Bannerling, Grace's madness was "a fraud and an imposture" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 81), and she managed to deceive Mrs. Moodie and several doctors:

She is an accomplished actress and a most practised liar. While among us, she amused herself with a number of supposed fits, hallucinations, caperings, warblings and the like, nothing being lacking to the impersonation but Ophelia's wildflowers entwined in her hair; but she did well enough without them, as she managed to deceive, not only the worthy Mrs. Moodie [...] but also several of my own colleagues, this latter being an outstanding example of the old rule of thumb, that when a handsome woman walks in through the door, good judgment flies out through the window. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 81).

Dr. Bannerling gives a warning to Dr. Jordan in regard to Grace's powers, even comparing her with the Sirens who lured Ulysses and his sailors:

Should you nonetheless decide to examine Grace Marks at her current place of abode, be pleased to consider yourself amply warned. Many older and wiser heads have been enmeshed in her toils, and you would do well to stop your ears with wax, as Ulysses made his sailors do, to escape the Sirens. She is as devoid of morals as she is of scruples, and will use any unwitting tool that comes to hand. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 81, 82).

Therefore, Dr. Bannerling's account of Grace puts her in a rather negative light. However, the reader has reasons not to trust him, and to deem him, and not her, unreliable. In chapter 4, after Grace screams at the sight of a doctor with medical instruments, who she thinks is Mary Whitney's doctor, she is locked up again and she reflects on other moments in which she was isolated:

I've been shut up alone before. Incurrible, said Dr. Bannerling, a devious dissembler. Remain quiet, I am here to examine your cerebral configuration, and first I shall measure your heartbeat and respiration, but I knew what he was up to. Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard, Mary Whitney would have said, but all I could say was Oh no, oh no, and no way to twist and turn, not how they'd fixed me, trussed up to the chair with the sleeves crossed over in front and tied behind; so nothing to do but sink my teeth into his fingers, and then over we went, backwards onto the floor, yowling together like two cats in a sack. He tasted of raw sausages and damp woollen underclothes. He'd of been much better for a good scalding, and then put in the sun to bleach. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 38).

From this account the reader learns that Grace was abused by Dr. Bannerling. Before describing this memory, Grace also states that she was never mad, but that

they did not believe her. In chapter 10, Simon meets with Reverend Verringer, a strong advocate for Grace's pardon. The Reverend notices that Simon has heard from Dr. Bannerling. He discredits the Doctor and mentions the existence of rumours of irregularities at the Asylum.

So far, all the letters presented are either from or to Dr. Jordan. However, in chapter 50, the situation is different. Simon has returned to the U.S. The letters from Simon's mother to Mrs. Humphrey disclose Simon's fate: he was wounded in the war and lost part of his memory. Grace's letters present her reaction to Dr. Jordan's sudden departure, as she is not aware of the reasons for his leaving or of what happened to him afterwards. The exchange between Reverend Verringer and Dr. Bannerling shows the former's failed attempt to get the doctor to help in the petition for Grace's pardon. Therefore, these final letters serve to summarize Doctor Jordan's story and advance Grace's. Moreover, as the other letters, they present different focalizers, so the reader gets to see different perspectives.

### 3.3.4 Epigraphs (a different story)

The epigraphs are a very important feature of *Alias Grace*, if only for their abundance. Instead of having one or two introducing the whole novel, each of the fifteen parts is introduced by epigraphs, so that it is difficult for the reader to overlook them. Epigraphs are one example of what Gérard Genette terms "paratext", which connect the text to the outside. Genette describes the paratext as

‘An undecided zone’ between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits, either towards the interior (the text) or towards the exterior (the discourse of the world on the text), a border, or as Philippe Lejeune said, ‘the fringe of the printed text which, in reality, controls the whole reading.’ (GENETTE, 1991, p. 261)

Genette explains the relationship between the paratext and the text, and how the former affects the reading of the latter:

This fringe, in effect, always bearer of an authorial commentary either more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes, between the text and what lies outside of it, a zone not just of transition, but of transaction; the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service, well or badly understood and accomplished, of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading - more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies. (GENETTE, 1991, pp. 261, 262)

In *Alias Grace*, it is possible to distinguish between two types of epigraphs. Each part is introduced by at least one “real” document: a sketch of Grace and McDermott, excerpts from a newspaper concerning the murders, excerpts from Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings*, documents concerning the Penitentiary, an excerpt from a letter written by Dr. Joseph Workman, an entry on “Hysterics” from *Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, a letter from Susanna Moodie, an excerpt from the *History of Toronto and the County of York, Ontario* concerning Grace Marks’ release. Most of these texts seem to have been read by Dr. Jordan as part of his study of Grace, as he sometimes mentions them.

These documents establish a dialogue with the story, giving the reader access to confessions from, and reports and commentaries about, Grace and McDermott. They complicate the matter of trying to create an unequivocal image of Grace, since they also present different perspectives. The reader has to accept that these sources, instead of setting one interpretation, continue to validate many possible interpretations. A variety of different things have been written about Grace, but, as she puts it to Dr. Jordan: “Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God’s truth” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 299). According to Lopez (2012, p. 158), the epigraphs “denote a collective eagerness to translate her story into meaningful and articulate terms, although the fragmentary and incoherent result points to the impossibility of doing so.”

Some of the voices from the epigraphs condemn Grace. One example would be James McDermott’s accounts (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 273, 331, 429). Other voices question the veracity of the accusations made upon her. The epigraphs opening part XIV attest to this contradiction. The excerpts from The Warden’s Daybook, from the Provincial Penitentiary, in 1863, provide a negative view of Grace. On April 1st, the Warden writes that “Her boldness does not show that she is a sensitive person and her want of gratitude is a convincing proof of her unfortunate disposition” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 483). Four months later the picture has aggravated, for he writes that:

This unfortunate woman has become a dangerous creature, and I much fear that she will yet show us what she is capable of doing. Unfortunately, she has parties assisting her. She would not dare to lie as she does unless aided by parties near her (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 483).

Contrastingly, William Harrison's "Recollections of the Kinnear Tragedy", written in 1908 for the *Newmarket Era*, casts doubts on Grace's image as a "dangerous creature", since:

her exemplary conduct during the whole of her thirty years incarceration in the penitentiary the later portion of which she spent as a trusted inmate of the home of the Governor, and that so large a number of influential Gentleman in Kingston should think that she merited and deserved a pardon, all tend to show that there is room for grave doubts as to her having been the awful female demon incarnate, that McDermott tried to make the public believe she was. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 483).

The other type of epigraph which can be identified is the literary text. Each part is also introduced by an excerpt from a poem (or a literary essay, in one exception). These texts are not explicitly related to the story, as are the real documents, but they set the tone of the reading. Since they do not present voices that also appear inside the story, the literary epigraphs will not be analysed here.

#### 3.3.4.1 *Susanna Moodie: an example*

Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* introduces six out of the fifteen parts, and it is the most recurrent source in the epigraphs. Atwood has studied at length the writings of Susanna Moodie, and it was through *Life in the Clearings* that Atwood discovered Grace Marks. In the 1960s, Atwood wrote a poetry collection titled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, published in 1970. Besides, Atwood's television film *The Servant Girl* (1974) was largely based on Moodie's account. However, *Alias Grace* adopts a more critical approach to Moodie's report. It is interesting to analyse the case of *Life in the Clearings* as paratext because it also appears inside the story.

In her speech on writing Canadian Historical Fiction, Atwood (1998, p. 1514) commented on Moodie's text:

Susanna Moodie said at the outset of her account that she was writing Grace Marks's story from memory, and, as it turns out, her memory was no better than most. She got the location wrong, and the names of some of the participants, just for starters.

Atwood (1998, pp. 1512, 1513) summarizes Moodie's explanation of the crimes as follows:

The motive, according to Moodie, was Grace's passion for her employer, the gentleman Thomas Kinnear, and her demented jealousy of Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear's housekeeper and mistress. Moodie portrays Grace Marks as the driving engine of the affair - a scowling, sullen teenage temptress - with the co-murderer, the manservant James McDermott, shown as a mere dupe, driven on by his own lust for Grace, as well as by her taunts and blandishments.

In *Life in the Clearings*, Moodie reports not only her own experiences, but she also retells McDermott's and Grace's accounts given to Kenneth MacKenzie. Moodie meets Grace in a visit to the Kingston Penitentiary in 1851. The epigraphs to parts I, III, IV present Moodie's voice and her impressions of Grace Marks: "My chief object in visiting their department was to look at the celebrated murderess, Grace Marks, of whom I had heard a great deal, not only from the public papers, but from the gentleman who defended her upon her trial" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 3); "Grace Marks glances at you with a sidelong, stealthy look" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 21). Moodie also visits Grace at the Asylum, and describes Grace as insane:

Among these raving maniacs I recognised the singular face of Grace Marks--no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment [...] It appears that even in the wildest bursts of her terrible malady, she is continually haunted by a memory of the past. Unhappy girl! [...] Let us hope that all her previous guilt may be attributed to the incipient workings of this frightful malady. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 51).

However, in less than a year from the visit, Grace was "discharged from the Asylum as, if not perfectly sane, then sane enough to be returned to the Penitentiary" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 231).

In the epigraphs to part VIII and IX, Moodie presents the voice of James McDermott, in her retelling of what he told Kenneth MacKenzie. Therefore, it is a "third-hand account" (ATWOOD, 2009, 538). In the first epigraph, McDermott describes Grace's resentment towards Nancy:

'Grace was very jealous of the difference made between her and the housekeeper, whom she hated, and to whom she was often very insolent and saucy. ... "What is she better than us?" she would say, "that she is to be treated like a lady, and eat and drink of the best. She is not better born than we are, or better educated..." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 273)

And he mentions how Grace's beauty affected his judgement:

'The good looks of Grace had interested me in her cause; and though there was something about the girl that I could not exactly like, I had been a very lawless, dissipated fellow, and if a woman was young and pretty, I cared very little about her character' (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 273)

Despite being presented to McDermott's version, the reader is led to regard it with suspicion, since Grace and other sources mention his reputation as a liar (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 265, 383, 438).

In the second excerpt, McDermott describes the moment when he and Grace discover that Nancy is still alive in the cellar, since the blow with the axe had not killed her. He mentions Grace's participation in killing Nancy:

'I turned to Grace. The expression of her livid face was even more dreadful than that of the unfortunate woman. She uttered no cry, but she put her hand to her head, and said -  
 "God has damned me for this".  
 "Then you have nothing more to fear," says I. "Give me that handkerchief off your neck." She gave it without a word. I threw myself upon the body of the housekeeper, and planting my knee on her breast, I tied the handkerchief round her throat in a single tie, giving Grace one end to hold, while I drew the other tight enough to finish my terrible work [...]'. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 331, 332).

This event is one of which Grace claims to have no recollection, in her account to Dr. Jordan. However, in the excerpt which introduces part IX, Moodie reports Grace's account to MacKenzie. In this account, Grace acknowledges she helped McDermott strangle Nancy and mentions that Nancy's eyes haunt her:

'But though I have repented of my wickedness with bitter tears, it has pleased God that I should never again know a moment's peace. Since I helped Macdermot to strangle [Nancy] Montgomery, her terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me for a moment. They glare upon me by night and day, and when I close my eyes in despair, I see them looking into my soul - it is impossible to shut them out... at night - in the silence and loneliness of my cell, those blazing eyes make my prison as light as day. No, not as day - they have a terribly hot glare, that has not the appearance of anything in this world....' (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 403)

In the epigraph to part XII, Moodie presents McDermott's view of Grace as a devil who tempted him with her beauty:

'I looked at her in astonishment. "Good God!" thought I, "can this be a woman? A pretty, soft-looking woman too - and a mere girl! What a heart she must have!" I felt equally tempted to tell her she was a devil, and that I would have nothing to do with such a horrible piece of business; but she looked so handsome, that somehow or another I yielded to the temptation' (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 429).

The reader is helped in the interpretation of Moodie's book by the comments made about it by several characters inside the story, as Moodie's account is referenced throughout the novel. Dr. Bannerling, in his letter to Simon, states that Grace managed to deceive Mrs. Moodie, "who like many high-minded females of her type, is inclined to believe any piece of theatrical twaddle served up to her, provided it is pathetic enough" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 81). He describes Moodie's account as "inaccurate and hysterical" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 81).

Reverend Verringer, an avid defensor of Grace, says Mrs. Moodie gave "a colourful description" of the "so-called confession in the Penitentiary" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 89). In another meeting, Simon and the Reverend discuss Moodie's book. Simon refers to Moodie's account of the "bloodshot and blazing eyes" haunting Grace (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 220). Simon also mentions his thoughts about visiting Moodie and speaking to her directly, and the question of the account's veracity is discussed:

"There are discrepancies that are beyond dispute," says Simon. "For instance, Mrs. Moodie is unclear about the location of Richmond Hill, she is inaccurate on the subject of names and dates, she calls several of the actors in this tragedy by names that are not their own, and she has conferred a military rank on Mr. Kinnear that he appears not to have merited."

"A post-mortem medal, perhaps," Verringer murmurs.

Simon smiles. "Also, she has the culprits cutting Nancy Montgomery's body up into quarters before hiding it under the washtub, which surely was not done. The newspapers would hardly have failed to mention a detail so sensational. I am afraid the good woman did not realize how difficult it is to cut up a body, never having done so herself. It makes one wonder, in short, about other things. The motive for the murders, for example — she puts it down to wild jealousy on the part of Grace, who envied Nancy her possession of Mr. Kinnear, and lechery on the part of McDermott, who was promised a quid pro quo for his services as butcher, in the form of Grace's favours."

"That was the popular view at the time."

"No doubt," says Simon. "The public will always prefer a salacious melodrama to a bald tale of mere thievery. But you can see that one might have one's reservations also about the bloodshot eyes." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 221).

Reverend Verringer tries, with his comments, to interpret and to justify the discrepancies. He explains the mention of the eyes as a result of Moodie's fondness for literature. According to him, Moodie

has stated publicly that she is very fond of Charles Dickens, and in especial of *Oliver Twist*. I seem to recall a similar pair of eyes in that work, also belonging to a dead female called Nancy. How shall I put it? Mrs. Moodie is subject to influences (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 221, 222).



He concludes by disencouraging Simon to pay her a visit, and explains Moodie's changes as a characteristic of her sex:

"Nevertheless, one cannot quibble with Mrs. Moodie's morals. But I am sure you take my meaning. Mrs. Moodie is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to —"  
 "Embroider," says Simon.  
 "Precisely," says Reverend Verringer. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 223)

At another moment in the story, Simon asks Grace about Moodie. He mentions how Moodie pictured Grace at the Asylum, but Grace does not seem comfortable with that description:

And do you remember the time she visited you, just a short time after that, in the Provincial Asylum?  
 Not well, Sir, I said. But we had many visitors there.  
 She describes you as shrieking and running about. You were confined on the violent ward.  
 That may be, Sir, I said. I do not recall behaving in a violent manner towards others, unless they did so first to me.  
 And singing, I believe, said he.  
 I enjoy singing, I said shortly; for I was not pleased by this line of questioning. A good hymn tune or ballad is uplifting to the spirits. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 417).

Simon then asks her about the bloodshot eyes:

Did you tell Kenneth MacKenzie that you could see the eyes of Nancy Montgomery following you around? he said.  
 I have read what Mrs. Moodie wrote down about that, Sir, I said. I don't like to call anyone a liar. But Mr. MacKenzie put a misconception upon what I told him.  
 And what was that?  
 I said red spots, at first, Sir. And that was true. They looked like red spots.  
 And after?  
 And after, when he pressed me for an explanation, I told him what I thought they were. But I did not say eyes. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 417).

And Grace explains that they were not eyes, but peonies, the same that were mentioned in the dream-like description at the beginning of the novel:

Yes? Go on! said Dr. Jordan, who was trying to appear calm; he was leaning forward, as if waiting for some great secret. But it was no great secret. I would have told him earlier, if he'd asked me.  
 I did not say eyes, Sir; I said peonies. But Mr. MacKenzie was always more fond of listening to his own voice than to someone else's. And I suppose it's more the usual thing, to have eyes following you around. It is more what is required, under the circumstances, if you follow me, Sir. And I guess that was why Mr. MacKenzie misheard it, and why Mrs. Moodie wrote it down. They

wanted to have things done properly. But they were peonies, all the same. Red ones. There is no mistake possible. I see, said Dr. Jordan. But he looked as puzzled as ever. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 417, 418).

Grace seems to understand how information is changed in order to become more plausible.

MacKenzie corroborates Moodie's image as someone inclined to "embroider" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 223), when Simon visits him. But the doctor suspects MacKenzie's commitment to the truth should also be questioned:

"Mrs. Moodie — for whom I have the greatest regard," says MacKenzie, "has a somewhat conventional imagination, and a tendency to exaggerate. She put some fine speeches into the mouths of her subjects, which it is highly unlikely they ever made [...] As for the eyes, what is strongly anticipated by the mind is often supplied by it. You see it every day on the witness stand."  
 "So there were no eyes?"  
 MacKenzie wiggles again. "I couldn't swear to the eyes, on oath," he says. "Grace said nothing, exactly, that would stand up in court, as constituting a confession, although she did say she was sorry that Nancy was dead. But anyone might say that."  
 "Indeed," says Simon. He suspects now that the eyes did not originate with Mrs. Moodie, and wonders what other parts of her narrative were due to MacKenzie's own flamboyant tastes as a raconteur. (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 436, 437)

The excerpts from *Life in the Clearings* presented as epigraphs, therefore, are also read and discussed by the characters in the story. With such a variety of points of view to consider, the reader might apply the perspectival mechanism to make sense of contradictory information. In this respect, the reader might perceive Moodie as a colorful raconteur and thus might regard her accounts as unreliable.

### 3.4 SUMMARY OF THE OBSERVATIONS ON THE NARRATIVE AND ITS (UN)RELIABILITY

The novel manages to accommodate "all possibilities" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 542), instead of delivering one truth. Therefore, the novel is full of "textual tensions" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 402) the reader has to resolve, and in this sense, the reader might resort to the perspectival mechanism (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 411) and deem the accounts unreliable. At the end of the novel, despite receiving her pardon, Grace's true character remains a mystery. Instead of

presenting one unquestionable truth, the novel explores the ways in which different versions are consolidated as the truth.

The oddities in the text can be explained through the use of the perspectival mechanism, if the reader attributes them to the fictional “speaker or observer through whom the world is mediated” (YACOBI, 2001, p. 224); that is, Grace and Dr. Jordan, mainly, but also Mrs. Moodie, McDermott, MacKenzie, etc. In *Alias Grace*, the inconsistencies in the accounts and the impossibility to organize them into something coherent, due to their contradictions, point to the possibility that there might not be one unequivocal truth; there is only a myriad of points of view and interpretations. Those who see Grace as guilty will see everything as proof of her guilt. And those who believe her to be innocent, such as Reverend Verringer, will find evidence of that.

The fact that the novel does not present one version as the true version reflects what happened with the historical Grace Marks. Atwood highlights this uncertainty in her afterword to the novel:

Whether she was indeed the co-murderer of Nancy Montgomery and the lover of James McDermott is far from clear; nor whether she was ever genuinely “insane,” or only acting that way — as many did — to secure better conditions for herself. The true character of the historical Grace Marks remains an enigma. (2009, p. 539)

In this sense, Grace’s quilting, so present in the novel, can be a metaphor for the attempt to put all the pieces together and for the acknowledgment that even different pieces - such as the three different patches she incorporates into her Tree of Life - can be arranged together. The perspectival mechanism functions in the same way, bringing “discordant elements into pattern” (YACOBI, 2001, p. 224).

The scrapbooks, belonging to the Governor’s wife and their daughters, which Grace reads when no one is watching, can be regarded as another image of this assembly of different sources and materials and turning them into something new. The Governor’s wife scrapbook is far from conventional, as she fills it with stories from famous criminals, and that is where Grace reads what has been written down about herself. According to Lopez (2012, p. 158), this scrapbook “can be seen as a microcosm of the novel as a whole. Grace herself has looked at it many times, finding both ‘lies’ and ‘true things’”. When Grace is commenting on the newspaper articles she read on the Governor’s wife scrapbook, she mentions how the interest of the

media and of the general was centered around the nature of her relationship with McDermott:

But they called James McDermott my paramour. They wrote it down, right in the newspaper. I think it is disgusting to write such things down. That is what really interests them — the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes. (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 30).

Atwood (1998, p. 1515) recognizes that there was a truth, but it was not available to people at the time, and it remains unavailable, or, in her words, “unknowable”: “I am not one of those who believes there is no truth to be known; but I have to conclude that, although there undoubtedly was a truth - somebody did kill Nancy Montgomery - truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us”. According to Ober Mannon (2014, p. 552), “[t]he incorporation of a multitude of sources, which at times contradict and at other times corroborate each other, questions the idea of ‘knowing’ and the stability of the historical record”. Grace illustrates this reasoning behind the novel, as she “does not claim either guilt or innocence but claims that the truth is unknowable to her, with the result that she, too, can fill gaps in her recollection as she chooses” (OBER MANNON, 2014, p. 554).

#### 4 ON HISTORICAL FICTION

*Alias Grace* is a work of historical fiction. In this sense, it can be read as an adaptation of history, as history being adapted into fiction, since history itself is a narrative, as the novel reminds the reader. What “has been written down” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 25) about Grace is a series of inconsistent and contradictory accounts. Virago Press’ 2009 edition of the novel presents the following synopsis on the back cover: “Around the true story of one of the most enigmatic and notorious women of the 1840s, Margaret Atwood has created an extraordinarily potent tale of sexuality, cruelty and mystery”. The so called “true story” can be one version, one account, or it can also be a combination of different accounts, as is the case with *Alias Grace*, but this true story is not exempt from incongruities and contradictions.

However, what differentiates the “true story” from other accounts is that it is seen as an authorized, original version. It has the authority and the status of “truth”, and people do not often think of it as being created by someone. Atwood investigated the true story of Grace Marks in Moodie’s memoir, newspapers, and official reports. And all these sources are brought into *Alias Grace*.

Atwood took historical events and fictionalized them, but so did “many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 541). At the time of the trials, there were many narratives built around the murders. Atwood did not alter any known facts, but the “written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 541). Atwood presents some of the questions raised by the plurality of narratives:

Was Grace milking the cow or gathering chives when Nancy was hit with the axe? Why was Kinnear’s corpse wearing McDermott’s shirt, and where did McDermott get that shirt - from a peddler, or from an army friend? How did the blood-covered book or magazine get into Nancy’s bed? Which of several possible Kenneth MacKenzies was the lawyer in question? (ATWOOD, 2009, pp. 541, 542)

The “true story”, in this case, is actually formed by many contradicting stories and it is, thus, full of uncertainties.

Atwood made choices about what seemed plausible, and used her imagination to fill in the gaps. She stated that “[w]hen in doubt” she “tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible” (ATWOOD,

2009, p. 542). As for her inventions, they might be closer to the actual facts than some of the accounts by other participants in the story.

In the 1996 lecture titled “In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction”, Atwood presents an overview of the genre of Canadian historical fiction, focusing on how it is connected with notions of time, memory and history, and explores her process of creating *Alias Grace*. According to the author, fiction, (auto)biography and history are constructed out of “individual particulars” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1505), that is, narratives about individuals, about how they interacted with the world and with each other, on a daily basis. History seems to provide a master narrative of events, but its foundation lies on smaller narratives of the everyday life of individuals:

History may intend to provide us with grand patterns and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations, it would collapse. Whoever tells you that history is not about individuals, only about large trends and movements, is lying. (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1505)

Atwood explains that history and novels are centered on the notion of time and they rely on memory, but she questions the reliability of individual and collective memory. As she states,

Once, memory was a given. You could lose it and you could recover it, but the thing lost and then recovered was as solid and all-of-a-piece, was as much a thing, as a gold coin. “Now it all comes back to me,” or some version of it, was a staple of the recovering-from-amnesia scenes in Victorian melodramas. (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1506)

According to her, the notion of memory was central for the nineteenth century. Moreover, there was a “belief in the integrity of memory” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1506), memory was seen as something whole and unquestionable. By contrast, the twentieth century, in Europe, focuses more on the act of forgetting, “as an organic process and sometimes as a willed act” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1506). The self is constructed not by what it remembers but by what it forgets. Besides, the reliability of time is also questioned in European art, for time’s linearity gives way to fragmentation.

Memory is central to the novel *Alias Grace*. The word “remember” (and its variants) appears 108 times in the text. The anxiety resulting from the nineteenth century perspective on memory, forgetting and identity is illustrated in a dialogue

between DuPont, Reverend Verringer and Dr. Jordan, after the hypnosis session which results in the appearance of a voice who claims to be Mary Whitney's and exempts Grace from criminal responsibility, since "[s]he knew nothing" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 468):

[...] says DuPont. "[...] There may exist examples[...] of two distinct personalities, which may coexist in the same body and yet have different sets of memories altogether, and be, for all practical purposes, two separate individuals. If, that is, you'll accept — a debatable point — that we are what we remember."

"Perhaps," says Simon, "we are also — preponderantly — what we forget."  
 "If you are right," says Reverend Verringer, "what becomes of the soul? We cannot be mere patchworks! It is a horrifying thought, and one that, if true, would make a mockery of all notions of moral responsibility, and indeed of morality itself, as we currently define it." (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 471).

In this quote, the image of the patchwork, so present in the novel, is associated with identity, and the idea terrifies Reverend Verringer because of its implications on responsibility and morality.

Atwood suggests that all novels are "historical" in the sense that they "have to, they *must*, make reference to a time that is not the time in which the reader is reading the book" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1507). However, historical novels focus "The Past, capital T and P" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1507), not on the recent past of "yesterday" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1507).

Atwood first came into contact with the true story of Grace Marks through Susanna Moodie's memoir, *Life in the Clearings*, and "being young, and still believing that 'non-fiction' meant 'true', [she] did not question it" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513). Moodie's version was read as the truth. Atwood's first adaptation based on this true story was the television script for CBC. Producer and director George Jonas asked Atwood to write it, and she based it on Moodie's version, "already highly dramatic in form" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513). The process of adaptation meant a selection of what was narrated by Moodie; for instance, Atwood decided not to include the cutting of Nancy's body into pieces, as "it would be hard to film, and anyway why would they [Grace and James] have bothered?" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513). The television film titled *The Servant Girl* came out in 1974. According to Atwood, it "relied exclusively on the Moodie version and cannot now be taken as definitive" (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 545). After that, there was an attempt at adapting the television script to the theater, but Atwood gave up on the idea (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513).

The story of Grace Marks returned to Atwood's mind in the early 1990s, and she started writing the novel. Instead of following Moodie's account, as she had done before, Atwood "went back to the past" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513) and discovered many other versions of the events. She found "[r]ecords, documents, newspaper stories, eyewitness reports, gossip and rumor and opinion and contradictions" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513). This past she went back to was not one coherent version of the story, but rather many different versions which could not be blindly considered reliable. As she states, there is

no more reason to trust something written down on paper than there is now. After all, the writers-down were human beings, and are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases. (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1513)

Atwood sought to understand not only the big events, but also the everyday life of the past in which Grace Marks lived, and her research was not easy. It can be naive to trust what has been written down, but that is the way to access the past (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1514).

By studying historical documents, Atwood found out that Moodie had made some mistakes and that "the actual story was much more problematic, though less neatly dramatic, than the one Moodie had told" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1514). The documents from the trial presented conflicting statements about the crime:

the witnesses - even the eyewitnesses, even at the trial itself - could often not agree; but, then, how is this different from most trials? For instance, one says the Kinnear house was left in great disarray by the criminals, another says it was tidy and it was not realized at first that anything had been taken. (ATWOOD, 1998, 1514)

As she explains, she resorted to plausibility in order to deal with so many inconsistencies: "Confronted with such discrepancies, I tried to deduce which account was the most plausible" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1514).

Opinions on Grace, the central figure, varied greatly:

All commentators agreed that Grace Marks was uncommonly good-looking, but they could not agree on her height or the color of her hair. Some said Grace was jealous of Nancy, others that Nancy was, on the contrary, jealous of Grace. Some viewed Grace as a cunning female demon, others considered her a simple-minded and terrorized victim, who had only run away with James McDermott out of fear for her own life. (ATWOOD, 1998, 1514)



And Atwood incorporated these different opinions into the narrative. In the novel, Grace is aware of all the different and contrasting things that have been written about her (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 25). The other characters represent these various positions; they all have their own version of Grace Marks.

The accounts Atwood found in the newspapers were also biased according to political agendas. In 1843, when the murders happened, the 1837 rebellion “against the Crown and the political status quo” (BUCKNER, 2019, WEB) was still a topic of dispute, and “editorials were still being written about the badness or worthiness of William Lyon Mackenzie”, the leader of the rebellion in Canada. The divided opinion on politics influenced how newspapers wrote about Grace Marks and the crime:

as a rule, the Tory newspapers that vilified him also vilified Grace - she had, after all, been involved in the murder of her Tory employer, an act of grave insubordination - but the Reform newspapers that praised Mackenzie were also inclined to clemency toward Grace. (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1514)

And this division can still be perceived in comments about the murders until the end of the nineteenth century (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515).

Confronted with so many perspectives, Atwood “felt that, to be fair, [she] had to represent all points of view” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515). She decided she would not alter solid facts: “long as I might to have Grace witness James McDermott’s execution, it could not be done, because, worse luck, she was already in the penitentiary on that day” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515). Besides, “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” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515). However, there was still room for fictionalization and invention: “in the parts left unexplained - the gaps left unfilled - I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention.” (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515). Therefore, Atwood argues that, although based on true events, on a “true story”, *Alias Grace* is not a documentary (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515).

Atwood explains how she regarded the variety of sources and conflicting opinions at her disposal, focusing not only on their content, but also on the motivations and the ideas which supported them:

As I wrote, I found myself considering the number and variety of the stories that had been told: Grace’s own versions - there were several - as reported in the newspapers and in her “Confession”; James McDermott’s versions, also

multiple; Susanna Moodie's version; and those of the later commentators. For each story, there was a teller, but - as is true of all stories - there was also an audience; both were influenced by received climates of opinion, about politics, and also about criminality and its proper treatment, about the nature of women - their weakness and seductive qualities, for instance - and about insanity, in fact, about everything that had a bearing on the case. (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1515)

The "true story" that served as an inspiration and a foundation for the novel comes from sources written by people with different motivations and preconceptions. Therefore, it is possible to apply to these accounts which constitute the "true story" the mechanisms of integration proposed by Stenberg and Yacobi, which are also used to make sense of contradictions in the fictional narrative. The perspectival mechanism can be applied to resolve contradictions by attributing them to the perspective of the teller. By analysing the tellers, and deeming their narrative unreliable based on their perspectives (their opinions, preconceptions, and their intended audience), the reader finds an explanation to the incongruities and preserves the integrity of the story.

According to Leitch (2007), adaptations based on a true story are different from other kinds of adaptation, and they are "more problematic and more seldom treated as adaptation" (p. 281). The status of a true story is different from other source texts'. The true story functions as "a source text both is and is not a text" (LEITCH, 2007, p. 281). This source does not belong to a single author or agent. The creators of the adaptation might have gathered information from a variety of historic documents, as in the case of *Alias Grace*. Usually, films with this claim are not about well-known events, but rather about forgotten ones. As Atwood explains, "it's the very things that aren't mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. Why aren't they mentioned?" (ATWOOD, 1998, p. 1509). Therefore, many authors find in ignored or omitted events the inspiration for their work, which claims to be "based on the untold true story". Obviously, "untold" refers to the past until the moment the movie or novel comes out, but it is also a problematic notion. Indeed, these true stories are actually created by the adapted story, be it a movie, novel or miniseries; according to Leitch, the "appeal to nonexistent precursor texts has the effect of creating these texts through the very act of invoking them" (LEITCH, 2007, p. 302).

For Leitch (2007), the label "based on a true story" implies that, before the adaptation was made, "a story was circulating that was not only about actual events but was a true account of them, as if extracting a story from actual events or

imposing a story on them was unproblematic” (LEITCH, 2007, p. 283). The label carries an authority into the work; it appeals

to the master text of the true story – a secularized, authorless Book of Life not to be confused with reality or history or the truth – for specific kinds of textual authority, all of them having only an incidental relation to historical accuracy (LEITCH, 2007, p. 285).

The real events and characters which appear in *Alias Grace* generated many stories, and Atwood worked on and from them. However, she did so not by creating and imposing one coherent and homogeneous version, but by creating a patchwork of accounts which exposes their contradictions and biases. By incorporating historical sources into the novel as epigraphs, Atwood exposes the contradictory points of view that constitute what is understood as History and lets the readers interpret and make sense of the inconsistencies in these sources.

*Alias Grace* is an adaptation of a story which happened in the past, and it is set in that same past, with a historical research to represent it well. However, the novel itself is a product of its own time. As Atwood explains, “In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, ‘Now it all comes back to me’; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that, and, if she did, would we - any longer - believe her?” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 1515).

It is fascinating to see how Grace Marks’s story has been adapted ever since she became a figure of notoriety. Even when she was alive, there was a plurality of accounts about her character and motivations. Her story was told in newspapers not only in Canada, but also in the United States and Britain (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 537). Then there were Moodie’s memoir in 1853. More than one hundred years later, Atwood wrote the script for the television film released in 1974. In 1978, Ronald Hambleton’s novel about the Kinnear-Montgomery murders, titled *A Master Killing*, was published. According to Atwood, the novel “concerns itself mainly with the pursuit of the suspects” (ATWOOD, 2009, p. 545). *Alias Grace* was published in 1996. In 2017, the miniseries based on the novel premiered on CBC and later on Netflix. It was directed by Mary Harron and written by Sarah Polley.

Television narrative, in serial form, provides a different way to tell the story. The miniseries maintains the presence of Grace as a narrator (by using a voiceover) and uses some of the literary epigraphs to introduce each episode. However, instead of relying solely on the *telling* of the novel, the miniseries gets to *show* the events.

Therefore, the viewer gets to see Nancy dying in the basement and McDermott firing the gun. However, despite seeing certain scenes, viewers cannot be sure they actually happened, so the truth remains unknowable. Besides, the miniseries introduces other elements, such as the soundtrack. Moreover, the miniseries establishes a new dialogue between the story and contemporary times, as twenty years had passed since the novel's publication. And the production follows the success of the television adaptation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The public once again tries to understand the character of Grace Marks. Most critics emphasize how she remains an enigma (MANGAN, 2017), but some critics highlight how the story explores issues which remain relevant and appeared in many headlines in 2017, such as sexual abuse, white male privilege and gender inequality (CHANEY, 2017; GILBERT, 2017; PONIEWOZIK, 2017). In this scenario, heavily influenced by Atwood's success as the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Grace also emerges as a figure of resistance against oppression and abuse. For example, Anne Menta (2017) presents "27 'Alias Grace' quotes to give you the power of a celebrated murderess" (Web). The miniseries proposes a new arrangement of the events and another interpretation of Grace's character. This new version of the story might have resulted in a version closer to the actual truth than some of the accounts that constitute the "true story" around which Atwood created her tale.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996) deals with the question of (un)reliability both as a theme and as a structural element, since the novel is constructed by many contradictory accounts, coming from different voices. The aim of this work was to investigate the question of (un)reliability in the novel, by applying Sternberg and Yacobi's theory of (un)reliability as a mechanism of integration.

This work was divided into three sections: first, the theoretical background was presented, and important concepts were defined and applied to the novel; second, the analysis of the novel was discussed, and (un)reliability was investigated as a theme and as a mechanism of integration of the different accounts which constitute the novel; finally, some remarks were made on the nature of the novel as a work of historical fiction and on the relationship between history, adaptation and (un)reliability.

Concepts from narratology were important to study the various elements of the novel. Structural narratology's division of story, narrative and narration helped organize the study. On the narrative level, focalization was discussed, because the mediator's perspective is crucial to the hypothesis of (un)reliability. Besides, it was necessary to define different types of narration, since *Alias Grace* has Grace Marks as an intradiegetic narrator, an extradiegetic narrator focalizing mostly through Dr. Jordan, and many other intradiegetic narrators in the letters which constitute some of the chapters. A review of (un)reliability was conducted in order to summarize how the topic has been studied since Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, in which he first gave his definition of (un)reliability as the (lack of) accordance between the narrator and the implied author. Booth's model was studied and applied by many other theorists, but it was also criticized. Nunning's model was also presented, as it provided an alternative definition without the problematic notion of the implied author. Olson's review of both of these models and her argument that they are actually similar were also discussed. However, Sternberg and Yacobi's criticism of the way (un)reliability was studied in the past highlighted these models' circularity and contradictions. The authors deem Booth's model inoperable, and suggest a different approach.

Sternberg and Yacobi's constructivist turn proposes (un)reliability as a mechanism of integration, among others, available to the reader. With such mechanisms, the reader can make sense of a text's incongruities and contradictions.

Although there are many mechanisms of integration, Sternberg and Yacobi focus on the perspectival mode, through which the reader attributes (un)reliability to a text, and on four alternative mechanisms: the genetic, the generic, the functional, and the existential. The perspectival mechanism was at the centre of the present study. By making use of this mechanism, the reader resolves incongruities and inconsistencies in an account by attributing them to the mediator's perspective.

In applying Sternberg and Yacobi's theory to an analysis of *Alias Grace*, it was possible to investigate how different accounts might be read by the readers, and how they might make use of the hypothesis of (un)reliability to make sense of so many incongruities. It is interesting to study (un)reliability in *Alias Grace* since the topic is also discussed by the characters in the novel. Dr. Jordan wonders if Grace's narration is reliable, and other characters have their own positions in regards to her account: Reverend Verringer wants to believe she is innocent, while lawyer MacKenzie thinks she is guilty and a clever storyteller, associating her to the figure of Scherezade.

Grace's narration proves a challenge not only to the characters, but also to the reader. She manipulates the narrative she presents to Dr. Jordan, omitting things she does not want to share and selecting events she thinks will interest him. She seems to trust the reader, since she exposes what she hides from Dr. Jordan, and seems to speak more blatantly. However, this does not mean that her account is perceived as reliable, since the reader knows how skillful she is as a storyteller. Besides, she never discloses the role she played on the murders, as she claims to have no recollection of her involvement. Different versions of what could have happened are presented, and the novel does not pick one possibility among the many it presents: Grace might suffer from amnesia, she might have been forced by McDermott to help with the murders and consequently forgotten about the traumatic experience, she might have been possessed by the spirit of Mary Whitney, she might be a cunning liar and the orchestrator of the murders. The novel leaves all these possibilities open for the reader.

The extradiegetic narrator, focalizing through Dr. Jordan, presents the gap between Dr. Jordan's thoughts and his actions and speech. Dr. Jordan often fantasizes about the women with whom he interacts, especially Grace, but he rationalizes his initial thoughts and never verbalizes them. Besides, when writing letters to his mother or to his friend, he also selects the information he wants to

disclose, and elaborates a rather embellished account of his pursuit in Canada, which is actually frustrating to him, as he is not able to solve Grace's mystery. The contrast between Dr. Jordan's inner thoughts about his experience and the narrative he creates about it contributes to reinforce the idea that all narratives are constructions and that their reliability can be questioned. There is always a teller mediating a story with an audience in mind.

The epistolary chapters contribute to the plural construction of Grace's identity, as they introduce more perspectives on her character through the letters from Dr. Workman and Dr. Bannerling. Their accounts present divergent opinions. Dr. Workman was not acquainted with Grace for a long time, but he believed her to be sane and advocated for a gentle treatment. Contrastingly, Dr. Bannerling does not present such a favourable opinion, as he sees Grace as a clever impostor, who managed to deceive many people, including Mrs. Moodie, whose account he discredits. However, Dr. Bannerling's is not presented as a reliable teller, since there are indications of his abusive conduct towards Grace, from Grace's memory and from Reverend Verringer, who warns Dr. Jordan not to trust him. Therefore, these letters provide other perspectives and serve as an opportunity for the characters to discuss Grace's case.

The epigraphs, as paratexts, function as a bridge between the inside of the story and the exterior world. They remind the reader that the work was based on a true story and illustrate the different things that were circulating about Grace. The contradictory accounts complicate the effort of assembling one coherent narrative of what happened. Among the sources of the epigraphs, Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings* stands out because it appears inside the story as well. Moodie's account is perceived by Reverend Verringer and MacKenzie as colorful and imaginative; in other words, it is deemed unreliable. Moodie is said to have the female tendency to embroider.

In summary, the different and contrasting accounts which constitute the novel do not form one coherent narrative. Instead, the novel is constructed as a patchwork of conflicting voices. In order for the inconsistencies to be resolved, they can be attributed to the perspective of the tellers, through the perspectival mechanism of integration. In a sense, this is what the characters in the novel do, as readers of the accounts they are confronted with: Mrs. Moodie's, the doctors' reports, the testimonies. They attribute the incongruities in these accounts to the faulty

perspective of the tellers. And the reader might do the same thing, in order to make sense of so many disparities and to preserve the integrity of a text which does not provide one final truth, but a myriad of possibilities.

In this sense, the novel mimics what happened in real life, as the truth of what happened was never uncovered. Grace was pardoned, but the fact remains that Mr. Kinnear and Montgomery were murdered, and Grace's involvement is unknown. *Alias Grace* was based on this true story, but the true story, although regarded with the status and authority of the truth, is one story, among others, and it can have the same type of incongruities that are found in fiction. Grace's true story was, indeed, formed by many stories, and it fascinated many people. Consequently, it was amply reported, commented and adapted throughout the years; the most recent examples being Atwood's novel in 1996 and the miniseries in 2017. Presenting a new arrangement of the events, the miniseries might have inadvertently gotten closer to the "truth" than some of the biased accounts given in 1843.

(Un)reliability is an important element of Atwood's novel. Further research could focus on how it appears in the miniseries adaptation, as it is a different medium. The process of adaptation could be studied in depth, analysing how this new version of the story presents the different voices introduced by the written narrative. The way the interwoven accounts from the novel are shown in the miniseries might affect the way the story is interpreted. Besides, the reception of the miniseries *Alias Grace* and even of the novel itself, after the release of the miniseries, has been largely influenced by the success of Hulu's 2017 adaptation of Atwood's celebrated novel, so the connection between the two works could be further explored as well. Moreover, Sternberg and Yacobi's theory of (un)reliability can be applied to other works by Atwood. Their mechanisms of integration explain how readers approach texts' incongruities and search for a way to make sense of them, attributing them to different factors and elements such as conventions of the genre, the function of the contradictions, or, in the case of the perspectival mechanism, the perspective of the teller.



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