

An Archetypal Analysis of the Displacement of Western Mythological Characterization in *Alias Grace*

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Abstract: One of Canadian author Atwood's acclaimed masterpieces, *Alias Grace*, re-explores the dusty years of a murder case by stringing together women's self-talk with the evaluative perceptions of others. The multi-dimensional image of Grace is presented through the heroine's memories, the doctor Jordan's searching thoughts on the truth, and the words of others pasted with real historical information. This paper intends to explore the archetypes of the characters in it through the lens of archetypal criticism, and explore Atwood's mythological underpinnings for characterization and plot writing by comparing it with Western mythology. This paper at first briefly introduces the works of the writer and archetypal criticism. It is followed by an archetypal reading and comparison of some of the characters in *Alias Grace*, one by one, and finally a conclusion. This process of comparing the mythological elements that appear in *Alias Grace* with Western myths using archetypal criticism allows readers to better appreciate the mythological elements embedded in the work, increases the breadth of understanding of the work, and compares the two to gain further insight into Atwood's modern thought.

Keywords: *Alias Grace*; Frye; Archetypes; Displacement; Characterization; Western Mythology

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood stands as a polymathic force in global literature, and her six-decade career interrogating humanity's precarious dance with power, gender, and ecological fragility. Eschewing genre constraints, she crafts speculative futures that refract contemporary anxieties through mythic and historical lenses, cementing her role as both cultural archivist and ethical provocateur. Atwood's narratives orbit two gravitational centers: the politicized female body and collapsing ecosystems. While avoiding direct didacticism, her works map how institutionalized oppression metastasizes—whether through reproductive slavery in theocratic regimes or corporate-driven biotechnological disasters. This dual focus positions her as a pioneer of “speculative realism,” where fictional extrapolations adhere rigorously to observable societal trajectories. Her cultural imprint transcends textual boundaries. Central to her oeuvre is feminist revisionism. *The Handmaid's Tale*, her seminal dystopian novel, envisions Gilead—a theocratic regime reducing women to reproductive chattel—its iconic red cloaks becoming global symbols of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Works like *Alias Grace* interrogate historical erasure of female voices, reconstructing marginalized perspectives through hybrid narratives blending fact and fiction.

Alias Grace is a novel about a “murderess” based on historical events and adapted by Atwood. Margaret Atwood chose to retell the story by combining historical sources, adding virtual

truth-seeking characters, and imaginatively filling in the blanks so that marginalized and voiceless women could have their own voices in the novel. The author also uses many symbols of mythological archetypes to add thickness to the story. The novel is about a female murderer sentenced to life imprisonment, Grace Marks, who, through conversations with her psychotherapist Simon Jordan, traces the missing memories of the killings in her recollections, and in the process remembers her life since childhood, completes the marginalized women's self-speech, and finally obtains the parole, while Simon is gradually going crazy in the process.

The development of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism originated in the early 20th century with anthropological investigations into the nexus of myth and ritual by the Cambridge Ritualists. Absorbing Carl Jung's analytical psychology, particularly his theories of the collective unconscious and archetypes, this critical approach gained prominence in 1957 with Northrop Frye's seminal work *Anatomy of Criticism*, marking its formal inception. As a pivotal school of literary criticism that flourished in the 1950s–60s, it prioritizes the identification of recurrent imagery, narrative structures, and character typologies in literary texts, excavating their underlying archetypes to interpret and evaluate works. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye posits that archetypes constitute typical, recurring images, with myth serving as the foundational literary archetype—a formal structural model from which all literary genres emerge as continuations and transformations. Archetypal literary criticism evaluates works by examining recurring myths, symbols, imagery, and character types, positing that a text's meaning is shaped by these universal patterns. Rooted in collective human experience, this approach identifies foundational archetypes—recognizable motifs that transcend cultural boundaries. Character tropes such as the trickster or hero, symbols like the apple or serpent, and recurrent images such as the cross or labyrinth exemplify archetypal constructs [1]. These elements function as narrative DNA, encoding shared psychological and cultural truths that resonate across time and space. By decoding such patterns, critics illuminate how texts unconsciously mirror humanity's mythic substructure, revealing connections between individual works and broader symbolic traditions. Ye Shuxian, in his monograph *Exploring the Irrational World*, observes: "The evolutionary trajectory of literary history is governed by the 'displacement' of archetypes." [2]. This process of archetypal displacement remains indispensable in concrete archetypal analysis. Ye further systematizes archetypes as "autonomous communicative units within literature, analogous to words as linguistic units. Archetypes may manifest as images, symbols, themes, characters, plot motifs, or structural frameworks, provided they recur across literary works and evoke conventional associations" [2]. In *Center and Labyrinth*, Rao Jing elaborates: "Displaced myths, after undergoing cultural censorship, increasingly approximate verisimilitude in writing. Displacement functions to dilute mythic elements, reconstituting their implausible fictive components to align with the credibility principle of quotidian experience." [3].

Northrop Frye, a master of mythological archetypal criticism, influenced Atwood as her college teacher, especially in the field of poetry. Atwood, who was familiar with biblical allusions since childhood, was even more skillful in using them, referring to a variety of biblical allusions through the mouth of the Christian heroine of the work, and using the means of "substitution" to make the symbols of the mythological archetypes reflected in the novel more in line with the social realities described in the novel.

Biblical mythology is a series of myths and stories recorded in the Christian classic document - The Bible, which is divided into Old Testament and New Testament, with the Old Testament mainly recording the relationship between God and the Israelites, while the New Testament mainly describes

the life of Jesus Christ and the activities of the apostles. The myths and stories in the Bible have had a profound impact on Western culture and religion.

In general, whether it is Western or Eastern mythology, they are all explanations and expressions of ancient people's understanding of nature, social life, and religious beliefs. They reflect the wisdom and cultural characteristics of ancient people.

This paper attempts to find out the character archetypes and plot archetypes in *Alias Grace* about the Bible as well as other mythological stories, comparing the two, and analyzing them to highlight Atwood's knowledge of the past and the present, her use of mythological rewritings to infuse new ideas into the classics, presenting the contemporary ideas and mythological underpinnings, and displaying the splendor of her writing style.

2. Grace as the Displacement of Eva in Her Own Words

The frequent imagery of Eve and the apple in Grace's self-references in the text of the novel, as well as the great similarity between the experience of sinning and being judged later on and Eve, are then explored in detail below.

In The Bible, the book of Genesis says that Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, but later Eve was seduced by the serpent and disobeyed God's will by stealing the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then letting Adam eat it as well, and the two of them were then found by God and expelled from the Garden of Eden from then on. In Milton's *Paradise Regained*, Adam and Eve were redeemed by God and allowed to return to Paradise after they atoned for their sins on earth.

In *Alias Grace*, it is discovered through Grace's own words that Grace is very similar to Eve. They both started out in a state of innocence and ignorance, and after some temptations and lessons, they gradually became something else. After committing transgressions, they are also banished from the Garden of Eden, which is at least superficially a good place, to a more miserable place, and in the end, they also go through the episode of *Paradise Regained*, and return to the good again.

Grace's violation of the injunction manifests itself when she suffers a crisis of confidence from Nancy (who is jealous of Grace's growing closeness to her master and wants to drive Grace out into exile on the streets), encounters McDermott's hostility and coercion to lure her foolish heart, and later participates in a murder and helps to escape it, leading to punishment. What begins as an apparent gain of money and hope for freedom and a new life is followed by thirty years of banishment from prison and the confines of a mental institution. McDermott, as an accomplice, is like the serpent that seduces Grace, and they commit murder, go into exile, and are arrested and punished in the same way that Eve was expelled from the Garden of Eden in violation of God's rules.

What makes Grace's portrayal of Eve similar but not quite the same is that Eve breaks away from her original state of ignorance by eating the fruit of wisdom and gaining social knowledge about shame and other things. In contrast, Grace learns lessons about marriage through her female predecessors. For example, she learned from her mother, who was abused by her father; she learned from Mary, who was seduced and deceived by a man into a pregnancy that led to her death; she also learned from Nancy, who allowed herself to become alienated for the sake of her male masters; The experiences of these women who came before her forged a psychological foundation of self-reliance and independence, which led her to approach the promises made by figures like McDermott and Jeremiah with measured skepticism. Rather than blindly relying on their aid to escape her predicament, she consciously preserved her autonomy. And from the image of an ignorant,

submissive maid to the image of the hard-working, innocent Grace who is able to persuade them to believe in her innocence by speaking to Dr. Simon Jordan and to the warden's wife while at the sanatorium. In the end, Grace received petitions from the public, successfully left prison, and built a new family with the young man she had met, embarking on a fulfilling life. Meanwhile, Eve, through her diligent efforts on Earth, moved God and ultimately regained access to paradise. Grace proved herself to be inherently good through her actions, demonstrating that her past crimes were coerced and partly wrongful, thereby earning widespread sympathy and understanding. After years of imprisonment and labor, she was finally released, leaving behind the confines of her past and embracing a fresh start. Both characters—innately virtuous yet inexplicably trapped in adversity—renewed their lives through kind and industrious deeds. However, compared to Eve, Grace exhibits greater subjective agency in her redemption.

3. Grace as the Displacement of Siren in the Eyes of Some Male Characters

The image of Siren, the Western mythological figure, from the perspective of some male characters in the novel, is used to skewer the image of Grace in their minds from their hearts and compare it with the real Sirens.

Originating in Mediterranean Bronze Age lore, Sirens first emerged as avian-human hybrids whose hypnotic songs lured sailors to perish on rocky shores. Homeric epics framed them as keepers of forbidden wisdom, their melodies promising cosmic truths while causing maritime destruction. Hellenistic adaptations emphasized their liminality between aerial and aquatic realms, foreshadowing medieval metamorphosis. By the 8th century, bestiaries reimagined them as piscine-tailed creatures, blending Greco-Roman myths with Northern water spirits. Renaissance cartography cemented this mermaid iconography, transforming ancient death omens into symbols of oceanic mystery. Across eras, their enduring duality embodies civilization's tension between artistic inspiration and destructive obsession—beauty masking peril, knowledge entwined with doom.

To some of the characters in the novel, Grace is the embodiment of the Sirens. Both Dr. Banarin and Dr. Simon have had such thoughts about Grace. Dr. Banarin reminds Dr. Simon that "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." Besides, after hearing the words of Dr. Banarin, in the end of the novel, Dr. Simon thought, "he has an uneasy sense that the very plenitude of her recollections may be a sort of distraction, a way of drawing the mind away from some hidden but essential fact, like the dainty flowers planted over a grave."; "I may have drawn up a mermaid, neither fish nor flesh but both at once, and whose song is sweet but dangerous." [4].

It can be seen that some of the male characters believe that Grace is an incarnation of Siren and is full of lies, using rhetoric to gain the trust of those around her and potentially creating some bad outcomes.

In the novel, Grace uses her voice to self-present for herself, including intentionally omitting some details, deliberately playing dumb, and self-presenting in the language she wants others to hear so that she can be more favorable to herself. The end result of this invocation is compelling those around her to believe in her, to petition for her, and to get the people who should be nice to her to be nice to her. And Simon, too, in listening to her over and over again, feels backlash from Grace's mouth telling Mary's story, and is skeptical when he hears others speak ill of Grace. But he is clearly attracted by Grace, develops some affection for her, and eventually goes mad because of her words

and his own doubts. The Siren lured people by singing, in this case by displacing and transforming the songs into words that make people believe in themselves, empathize with themselves, and think they are harmless, while objectively causing Dr. Simon to fall into his own confusion in the process of listening to the words, leading to insanity, matching the irrationality of the people whom the Siren has seduced. Simon himself was trying to find out the brain-neurological workings that existed behind the amnesia, and then because Dr. Banarin and Reverend Vellinger's exhortations made himself feel that it was in that Grace was being deceptive, and also because he felt that there was an explanation for everything Grace had narrated: a dual personality. But proving a dual personality would be tantamount to admitting Jeremiah's unreliable mental hypnosis, which defies scientific logic. If it's a dual personality, the coincidence of listening to mental hypnosis is too much of a coincidence. So he thinks Grace should be a liar, but ultimately chooses to remain silent and leans toward insanity because he is moved and has no evidence to directly suggest she is a liar. Thus, for the Siren image, Grace is a perfect match in their minds, but the difference is that this image of Grace is only their subjective assumption and there is no actual evidence that it is true. Therefore, this is a demonized image of Grace in some male characters, and Grace is not as harmful as compared to the demonic figure of Sirens.

4. Doctor Simon Jordan as the Displacement of Apostle Simon Peter

Dr. Simon himself describes himself as being very much like the Apostle Simon's experience, yet not quite the same. Both of their characterizations are explored in depth below.

Simon Peter, also known as Peter the Apostle, Saint Peter, Simeon, Simon, or Cephas, was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ and one of the first leaders of the early Christian Church. He appears repeatedly and prominently in all four New Testament gospels as well as the Acts of the Apostles. One of the main plots of the Apostle Simon in The Bible is that he has been fishing for fish, casting net after net without much success, and finally, with God's help, he fishes up a great mass of fish.

The following clip is a self-portrait of Simon Jordan, a doctor, who feels that he, like the Apostle Simon, is doing something futile, with the difference that the fish caught, i.e., the result obtained, is not the same as that of the biblical story of the wonderful harvest obtained by God's divine power, but rather, it reaches an ending that is not very satisfactory to Dr. Simon. "Perhaps I have been well repaid, as in the whole affair, I may have been engaged on a wild goose chase, or a fruitless pursuit of shadows, and have come near to addling my own wits, in my assiduous attempts to unpick those of another. "Like my namesake the apostle, I have cast my nets into deep waters; though unlike him, I may have drawn up a mermaid, neither fish nor flesh but both at once, and whose song is sweet but dangerous." [4].

In the novel, Dr. Simon, who has his own ideas about wanting to make a name for himself in the medical profession, takes on a commission from the Reverend to investigate Grace's critical time memory loss; the Reverend simply wants a psychiatric evaluation that she is mentally ill to prove her innocence and thus apply for early release from prison. He keeps inducing her to recall the missing memories and recount the crime in the process. Eventually it seems to achieve a filling in of the memory logic line, but the conclusion is that Grace may be suffering from the mental illness of dual personality. In response to this result, Simon feels as if he has done a lot of work in vain, and that his previous experiments to try to find out the causes and pathways of the missing memories have not been completed. At the same time, the process of proving mental illness was done with the help of a

psychiatric hypnotist, which was not the same as the medical field he was pursuing. Moreover, he felt that Grace was more of a liar than mentally ill, believing her to be a "siren" who caused mental confusion. In other words, the results were not satisfactory to him. From this point of view, he is not satisfied with his final result, because he is studying the functioning of the brain in the context of the memory loss part of psychiatry, and he is not satisfied with the final result, which is similar to the fish that the apostle Simon could not catch. Dr. Simon Jordan ultimately come to a conclusion that passes muster on the surface, which in turn seems like one that can be easily disproved, with an implied irony. While Simon the Apostle and Simon the Doctor are very similar in terms of their futility in the early part of the story, they are replaced in the later part of the story where God gives the answer, which changes to form a storyline that is in line with contemporary logic. And such a contrast shows the fullness of the characters in order to promote the readers to carry out the philosophical thinking of the moment, rich in depth.

5. Doctor Simon Jordan as the Displacement and Subversion of Quest Hero Archetype

Frye posits that the Quest Hero undertakes a journey in search of truth, often facing trials and undergoing transformation. In this context, Jordan is constructed as a nominal "Quest Hero" archetype, but his odyssey subverts the conventional paradigms of this archetype.

According to Frye [5], the Quest Hero's journey typically culminates in the acquisition of transcendent truth and the restoration of cosmic order. However, Jordan's epistemological pursuit exposes the epistemological fissures and methodological aporias within 19th-century scientific rationality. He ostensibly embodies Enlightenment rationality as a proto-Freudian agent, attempting to unlock the cryptomnesia of Grace Marks. Yet, his investigative trajectory leads him into an epistemic entrapment, transmuting him from a diagnostician into a symptomatic subject of modernity's epistemological crisis.

Jordan's initiation into the "quest" reveals a hermeneutics of evasion. While he claims to adhere to scientific rigor in his psychiatric vocation, textual subtexts unveil his unresolved trauma. The spectral reverberations of Civil War atrocities manifest as nocturnal auditory hauntings of trench-bound agonies. This wounded epistemology drives his objectification of Grace as a clinical specimen, a deviation from the heroic pursuit of truth. In the context of archetypes, this shows how Jordan fails to live up to the ideal of the Quest Hero, whose journey should be guided by a pure pursuit of knowledge.

The prison visiting room, functioning as a Bakhtinian chronotope of interrogation, stages Simon's performative deployment of the Freudian talking cure to reconstruct Grace's narratives. His pursuit of hermeneutic mastery collides with Grace's subaltern semiotics. For instance, her account of quilt-making, which could be seen as an archetypal symbol of creation and preservation in a domestic or feminine context, undergoes violent reduction in his pathologizing taxonomies. Atwood materializes this epistemic violence through chiasmic reversals of scopic power dynamics. This not only shows the power struggle between the two characters but also how Jordan's understanding of Grace's experiences is skewed, further distancing him from the archetype of the Quest Hero who should be able to understand and respect the wisdom of others on his journey.

The protagonist's failed homecoming is a radical subversion of Frye's archetypal recognition. In the classical Quest Hero archetype, as exemplified by Oedipus' resolution of the Sphinx's enigma, the hero achieves communal reintegration through revelatory closure. However, Simon's denouement enacts fugitive erasure—his pyric annihilation of clinical records leaves linguistic fragments scattered

like orphaned selvedges. This epistemic collapse not only represents his personal failure but also serves as an allegory of 19th-century scientism's epistemological crisis. From an archetypal perspective, Simon's failure to complete his quest in a traditional sense shows how Atwood is challenging the very concept of the Quest Hero in a modern and complex world.

Through Simon Jordan's trajectory, Atwood engineers a postmodern palimpsest of the Quest Hero archetype. The collision between positivist rationality and gendered narrativity in the story demonstrates how heroic truth-seeking is not as straightforward as the archetype suggests. Instead of leading to a clear-cut revelation of truth, Jordan's journey becomes a complex negotiation of power and knowledge. Atwood's use of textile semiosis, such as Grace's quilt-making, as an alternative form of knowledge and creation, contrasts with Simon's logocentric narrative. This contrast challenges the traditional male-centered understanding of the Quest Hero and suggests that in a postmodern context, the pursuit of truth is a more inclusive and less hierarchical process.

In summary, Atwood uses the character of Simon Jordan to deconstruct and reimagine the Quest Hero archetype. By highlighting his flaws and the epistemological challenges he faces, she shows how the traditional archetype needs to be reevaluated in the context of modernity, where gender, power, and knowledge are intertwined in complex ways.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the character image and the archetypes in western mythology, it can be seen that Grace is a multi-faceted character through displacement, and she desperately portrays herself as a harmless and forced female victim through self-speech, accomplishing the transformation of her self-talk, while others' impression of her makes this character rich. With her words, Grace portrays herself as the image of an ignorant Eve, and is more innocent and grown-up than Eve. To some male characters, Grace is the Siren figure, full of nonsense. The difference between them is that Grace is not as threatening as the legendary Siren, but both share the same seductive qualities. As for Simon, the doctor, Atwood uses the character to connect with Apostle Simon Peter. The futility of Simon as a doctor reveals a similarity between the two in this light against what happened to the Apostle Simon before he met God. However, compared to the Apostle Simon, who is able to catch a large basket of fish by sacrificing his conduction for God, the doctor Simon is only able to obtain an answer that he is not very satisfied with. Beyond this, Simon also serves as a displaced and transformed iteration of the quest hero, which the author reconstructs through a modernist lens, imbuing the archetype with profound depth. This is a contemporary rewrite that borrows from the biblical story, giving the character a mythic underpinning as well as a contemporary spirit. By portraying such an image and even taking the initiative to mention its archetype in Western mythology, Atwood, through displacement, presents readers with a rich characterization and a wonderful reading experience, rich in mythological connotations and literary underpinnings.

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