Anna Czarnowus

Graceful Pre-Raphaelites and Pre-Raphaelite Grace : Victorian visual arts in Margaret Atwood's "Alias Grace"

Romanica Silesiana 3, 68-81

2008

ANNA CZARNOWUS
University of Silesia

Graceful Pre-Raphaelites and Pre-Raphaelite Grace: Victorian visual arts in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

ABSTRACT: The visual imagery of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* might have as one of its sources the "graceful", hence popular, art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Grace's beauty veils her emotional torment in the mode similar to the comely faces of Pre-Raphaelite models: theirs are the faces disguising suffering and insanity. Moreover, during her confinement in the asylum Grace is even compared by one of the characters to the raging Ophelia, a theme recurrent in the Victorian art. In her "psychoanalytic" sessions the servant reveals her obsession with the gothic image of her dead mother drowning in the sea, metamorphosing into another woman, perhaps Mary Whitney or Nancy Montgomery. In the dream vision of doctor Simon Jordan in turn, Grace overcomes the Ophelia-like death in water and lives on despite the difficult past. Consequently, Pre-Raphaelite paintings constitute another Victorian element in the novel's dense texture, which has already been interpreted by the critics as the one involving Dickensian orphans and Coventry Patmore's "angels in the house".

KEY WORDS: Pre-Raphaelite visual arts, victorian sensation novel, symbolic corruption of female body, representing Ophelia, rewriting Victorianism.

Alias Grace, Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel narrating the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear committed on July 23, 1843, skillfully entangles diverse Victorian tropes and images within its dense texture.[1] Some critics have already compared the narrative to a quilt, similar to one of those that its central character, Grace Marks, produces in order

[1] For Atwood's discussion of her sources see Margaret Atwood's "Afterword" to her novel (ATWOOD, M., 1999: 537—545) and her commentary from *In Search of "Alias Grace". On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction* (ATWOOD, M., 1997).

to both dispense with the time she has on her hands as a result of incarceration and prove suitable for re-incorporation into the society of the colonial Canada (LABUDOVA, K., 2005: 259—268). The novel, where names of quilt patterns even play the role of chapter titles, indeed resembles a Victorian quilt due to the variety of genres it exploits and topics it touches upon, not to mention the vastness of sources, literary and those belonging to the domain of visual arts, that must have inspired its author. In this article it will be argued that Pre-Raphaelite art with its exploration of female beauty, degeneration, and finally death, constitutes an adequate visual background against which *Alias Grace* could be read.[2] Pre-Raphaelites' art appears involved in representing beautiful women only at first sight. Upon deeper inspection it reveals it preoccupation with the women's (hidden) suffering and even their imminent death, and fascination with such physical and/or mental condition. Torment seems to endow the female figures with sophisticated beauty, while similar ideas are considered by the characters of Atwood's novel. Even the figure of Grace herself could be perceived as another representation of that kind: according to other characters her suffering while imprisoned gives her the air of superior beauty.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, formally established in 1850, firstly became subject to extensive criticism due to its representatives' "perverted taste" (TAYLOR, T., quoted in: BUKKEN, J.B., 1998: 6) manifested in what was viewed as ugliness of the works, the anachronism of the scenes the painters presented, archaism of the content (primarily because they created a new version of medievalism), and the group's fascination with deformity (BUKKEN, J.B., 1998: 6—48). Particularly that latter quality should be of interest for us here, since the paintings that could be comparable with textual female figures from *Alias Grace* center on the female body as degenerate, that is in the Victorian discourse "fallen": an object of guilty pleasure or that of rejection due to its corruption (BUKKEN, J.B., 1998: 49). Particularly Rossetti's art pertains to such a description of Pre-Raphaelite representations of women. Hence his female figures are painted as those who suffer themselves, physically, morally, or both, which endows them with an air of superior beauty, and as those who inflict suffering on others. What Atwood appears to be doing in *Alias Grace* is to situate her heroines

[2] One of the epigraphs for chapter 32 of the novel is Edgar Allan Poe's famous citation from *The Philosophy of Composition*, "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic of the world" (ATWOOD, M., 1999: 332); it has to be remembered that Poe's works were a lasting influence on the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to mention only Rossetti's illustrations to *The Raven*.

against the backdrop of such representations, only to question female suffering as a condition leading to the sublime variety of beauty.

The general reception of Pre-Raphaelite art has changed since the time that elapsed since the mid-1850s. The paintings became almost icons of popular culture. Women from the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Edward Burne-Jones, and Ford Maddox Brown already firmly entered the popular imagination due to the accessibility of their highly aestheticized faces and their whole bodies similarly pleasing to the eye, seemingly Madonna-like in their innocent beauty and decorative postures. The identity of the models has long been known and their relations with representatives of the Brotherhood investigated. The shopkeeper's daughter Lizzy Siddal, posing for Rossetti's paintings most often as Dante's Beatrice, was discovered to have been an unfulfilled artist herself, rejected by both her own family and Rossetti's, addicted to laudanum and finally committing suicide due to her inability to overcome grief after the child born dead she had by her lover. Fanny Cornforth was in turn a live-in companion of Rossetti after Siddal's death. Jane Morris, née Burden, remained the source of lasting fascination both for her husband William Morris and her lover Rossetti. Such inside knowledge, sounding at times like the summary of a sensation novel or rather of the entire, slightly mawkish, saga about love and death, introduces another perspective to our outlook on the Pre-Raphaelite art. The paintings, superficially smoothly conveying the symbolism intended by their authors and thus attractive for vast audiences, may also be seen as the site of multivalent meanings. The faces of the models, after all, do not demonstrate exclusively meekness, fragility, and mildness. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *The Blessed Damosel* (1875—1878) portrays the woman's silent despair rather than mere calm sadness that should be expected from an illustration of the poem by the same title that Rossetti had written. An earlier picture by John Everett Millais, his famous *Ophelia* (1852), in turn offers an insight into a similar instance of grief, here also tinged with insanity. Beauty comes disconcertingly close to suffering, which may in turn presage premature death. The faces of women in Pre-Raphaelite art frequently represent cruelty, surrender, and even the urge to self-destruction, the qualities perhaps not even fully realized by the Victorian popular audience as extant in those representations. Similarly, physically attractive Grace Marks from Atwood's novel, apparently an innocent young servant searching for maternal care in her surroundings, proves a possible murderer, or at least a person mature in her hatred of other women or even of the whole social order she constitutes a part of. The social expectations towards women, urging them to stay calm and passive regardless of the circumstances, are therefore disrupt-

ed by the negativity that lies within the women represented either in the artistic movement in question or in the post-Victorian novel. That is one of the qualities that *Alias Grace* shares with Pre-Raphaelite art, which, contrary to stereotypes, did not concern itself only with aesthetic representations of beautiful women, but also with the psychological torment humans suffer and, even less expectedly, with the social evil of the Victorian era. In Pre-Raphaelite paintings, it seems that many women's lives are inalienably bound with pain: that of humiliation, of life in inhuman conditions unless the human ones are guaranteed by men, or that associated with (often unwanted) motherhood.

Atwood creatively used the chapter devoted to Grace Marks from Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings*, which constituted an attempt to demonstrate the "cultured" side of the colony, and she demonstrated how stereotypical Moodie's presentation of the topic was. The author perhaps even put her own doubts about the truthfulness of Moodie's account into the mouth of doctor Simon Jordan:

> […] [Mrs Moodie] 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 service as butcher, in the form of Grace's favour.
> "That was a popular view at the time."
> "No doubt," says Simon. "The public will always prefer a salacious melodrama to a bald talk of mere thievery."
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 221

Susanna Moodie is exposed here as an entirely unreliable source, a person unconsciously influenced by the expectations of her audience, easily grasped by the atrocities typical of sensation novels profusely published at the time. As for the portrayal of Grace's physicality Moodie gives in *Life in the Clearings*, it comes close to the mysterious figures of women in Pre-Raphaelite art. Grace is portrayed primarily through her outward qualities: she is beautiful, pale, and innocent-looking, but with a certain hint of cruelty or at least ruthlessness visible on her still young face. *Life in the Clearings* presents McDermott as the one regretting the deed directly afterwards, while Grace is the person who, according to him, remained disconcertingly calm after Nancy's strangulation: "She came in with her

pails, looking as innocent and demure as the milk they contained. She turned pale when her eye met mine. I have no doubt but that I looked at the fiend her taunt had made me" (Moodie, S., 1989: 201). The young girl emerges from the account as a beast posing as an innocent. She uses her pulchritude in order to ruthlessly lure McDermott to murder Nancy and their employer and she does it since she is smitten with Mr Kinnear and jealous of the housekeeper. A fiendish temptress, Grace would not flinch from anything to achieve her iniquitous goal, using the manservant enamored with her as an efficient tool for performing the slaughter. Accordingly, McDermott is hanged, while the lawyer proves Grace's (relative) innocence and her life is saved for humanitarian reasons. Even if Moodie's narrative is criticized as highly subjective due to her willingness to please the audience, Atwood perceives the figure of Grace from a similar perspective: as a quiet and obedient girl and simultaneously as already a young adult overcome with negative emotions towards Nancy and Thomas Kinnear. Pre-Raphaelite representations of women also include images of temptresses, alluring through their pale-faced beauty, but ultimately bringing about the fall of those who were attracted to them, to mention only Rossetti's famous *Bocca Baciata* (1859), presenting Fanny Cornworth as a "fallen" women, glacial in her look of ruthless indifference. She appears firstly innocent, only to reveal her hidden immorality while the observer attempts to identify her real position in life and discovers she may simply be somebody's mistress, unpredictable in her actions due to the fact that she lives on the margins of the cultured society.

Similar aspects of Grace's nature, superficial innocence and the violence dormant within her, have also been noted by the critics of the novel, who explored the many faces of the heroine, "a young immigrant girl, a maid-of-all-work, a criminal, a prisoner, a patient, an experimental subject… subaltern, annihilated, unremarkable, yet also infamous, extraordinary, deviant, as the novel assembles established explanatory scripts that would 'fix' and stabilize her" (Godlin, J., 2006: 208). Grace's story that is narrated by her to Simon Jordan during her incarceration is therefore a narrative of rebellion, told by one of social (and ethnic) others in the Victorian colony. She lives in the world in which few women can, like real-life Elizabeth Siddal back in Britain, abandon the social class in which they were born and, through emotional involvement with somebody from superior circles, change their lives for the better. What happened to Nancy Montgomery, at least firstly, since we know she would never have married Thomas Kinnear, was very likely an object of Grace's own aspirations: to be treated like a lady by the master, wear elegant clothes, and not to be compelled to hard work. Grace develops an obsession with Nancy, who adopts an air of superiority in relation to ordinary servants, while the younger

girl acutely feels her underprivileged position. The rebellious urge engraves a certain sternness on her face, a quality that Susanna Moodie might indeed have observed while visiting real Grace in prison. In the novel, Simon perceives Grace as a delicate beauty whose face has been, like those of Pre-Raphaelite women, ennobled by her suffering:

> Her complexion is pale, the skin smooth and unwrinkled and remarkably fine in texture, perhaps because she's been kept indoors, or it may be the sparse prison diet. She's thin now, less full in the face, and whereas the picture shows a pretty woman, she is now more than pretty. Or other than pretty. The line of her cheek has a marble, a classic, simplicity; to look at her is to believe that suffering does indeed purify.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 103

The girl's physicality becomes here as aestheticized as those of the models of Rossetti and other Brotherhood painters: she symbolizes penance, regardless of whether she did repent or not. Characteristically, again beauty is closely related to suffering here; the latter becomes indispensable for the emergence of the former, as if female body constituted an entity imperfect without the chiseling that it undergoes while subjected to pain. The suffering of Ophelia, caused by the indifference of those who once declared their devotion to her, foregrounds the idea that women are even more beautiful when tormented. Pre-Raphaelites must have learnt that lesson well and (perhaps unconsciously) presented Shakespeare's heroine as a model of attractive femininity: what made her interesting for them must have been the insanity ravaging her mind and her subsequent suicidal death. Ophelia, discussed here as a possible background for one of the novel's recurring images, became a prisoner of her own mind, while Grace was literarily imprisoned for being an accomplice in a brutal murder. Still, the theme of possible premature death connects those two figures: Ophelia killed herself in the end, while Grace's participation in terminating the life of another female servant could lead the titular heroine of Atwood's novel to the gallows.

As for the Pre-Raphaelite topic of social exclusion, Grace, a girl of Irish origin, like other members of her family cherished certain hopes in relation to their arrival in Canada. Immigration did not prove to be a remedy for social injustice of the Victorian era and discrimination against certain social groups on the grounds of class, but also those of ethnicity and religion (even though, fortunately for her, Grace is Protestant rather than Catholic). Once in Canada, Grace has to toil inadequately for her very young age in order to provide for herself. She realizes her inability to change the social status she was born with. What is more, she feels dou-

bly underprivileged due to being a woman and therefore having to suffer what other maidservants call "Eve's curse": possible seduction by a dishonest social superior, unwanted pregnancy, and ensuing prostitution or death that are exclusive options under the circumstances (ATWOOD, M., 1999: 190). Thus *Alias Grace,* a novel about female servants in the Victorian society, or rather in its replica constructed in one of the British colonies, obsessively centers on pregnancy, abortion, the plight of illegitimate children, and female deaths. Also in that respect it approaches the subject matter of Pre-Raphaelite art, where women were portrayed as sexual objects and simultaneously figures always remaining on the verge of (holy) motherhood, ailing due to mysterious diseases of the body and soul, and even slowly dying as a consequence. The deathly pallor of Rossetti's models presented as Dante's Beatrix, to mention only Elizabeth Siddal in his *Beata Beatrix* (1863), already dead at the time when the painting was created, signals their physical and mental suffering that is very close to agony. If we consider the biographic aspects, Rossetti presents here not only a literary character, but a woman who could not mentally recover after her infant's death, a condition which ended with what looked like Siddal's suicide. That is the possible plight of all women, as the Pre-Raphaelite representation appears to suggest. For Atwood's Grace each woman she is surrounded by may get ill like her own mother and die prematurely, or at least suffer after a secret abortion and die as a result, not to mention the possibility of death in labour. Femininity means being constantly imperiled with death and the strict religiousness that Grace develops becomes her only defense against the vision of extramarital sexual intercourses and their dreadful results, the prospects similar to becoming one of Rossetti's sexualized women (BULLEN, J.B., 1998: 49—107).

Sensation novel, the nineteenth-century genre which Atwood creatively used in *Alias Grace,* typically defined femininity through maternity. As Lyn Pykett claims, the tendency was transferred to the literary form in question from the entire Victorian culture:

"Maternity is in a sense the key to the representation of femininity in virtually all forms of Victorian discourse. The ideological constructs of femininity, womanhood and womanliness were all defined through the maternal function of biological female… Motherhood is the constant subtext of the women's sensation novel: absent (dead) mothers, neglectful mothers, over-invested mothers who neglect their husbands, mothers who spoil their children with an excess of indulgent love…, mothers who are also murderers (unthinkably to middle-class ideologues, despite the examples of history and of classical tragedy)… Along with the mother, the motherless girl is the most important figure in the women's sensation novel…" (PYKETT, L., 1994: 50).

Grace, a motherless girl tormented with the gothic memory of her mother's dead body, afterwards becomes the chief suspect in the case of the murder committed on pregnant Nancy Montgomery. While still in the Parkinsons' house, she dreams of what she thinks is her mother's dead body and the dream appears in her mind instead of the image of her future husband, as her friend Mary Whitney predicted it would happen after the fortune-telling:

> […] and when I did go to sleep myself, I did not dream of husbands at all. Instead I dreamt of my mother in her winding sheet, drifting down through the cold water, which was blue-green in colour; and the sheet began to come undone at the top, and it waved as if in the wind, and her hair floated out, rippling like seaweed; but the hair was over her face so I did not see it, and it was over her face so I could not see it, and it was darker than my mother's hair had been; and then I knew that it was not my mother at all, but some other woman, and she was not dead inside the sheet at all, but still alive.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 193

The identity of the woman remains shrouded like her body initially was. Was it Mary Whitney, still alive at the time when Grace dreamt it but dead soon afterwards, or Nancy Montgomery, to whose death Grace contributed while already living in the house of Thomas Kinnear? The image of the woman she paints with her words resembles the picture of Ophelia's body listlessly floating on the surface of a green stream, even if what Grace expects to be her mother's body is immersed in sea water, since the mother died during the passage to Canada and was buried in the ocean. Lizzy, posing in a tub full of water as Millais' Ophelia, is not an exclusive trace of Pre-Raphaelite's fascination with that literary subject: in 1852, Arthur Hughes, considered to be an imitator of Pre-Raphaelites, painted Ophelia as still alive but close to drowning in the water she leans over; her face mirrors grief over the love of Hamlet she lost, utmost despair, and acutely experienced loneliness. The mysterious woman from Grace's dream remains, like Hughes' Ophelia, still alive, but her death is imminent and seems unavoidable. The vision repeats itself when in Thomas Kinnear's house Grace looks at Nancy with hatred, provoked by her superciliousness:

> I thought about throwing the scrubbing bush at her, and the bucket too for good measure, the dirty water and all. I pictured her standing there, with the hair streaming down over her face, *like someone drowned* [emphasis mine].
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 320

Nancy as a more probable real-life equivalent of the nearly dead woman from Grace's dream appears before the eyes of the reader. During Grace's imprisonment Nancy, this time soaked in blood, haunts her possible murderess: "Then up ahead I see Nancy on her knees, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes" (Atwood, M., 1999: 6). Nancy, still alive, but symbolically drowning in her own blood, begs for Grace's mercy. Her long hair symbolizes dejection not uncommon in representations of women from the epoch's visual culture.

Grace ostensibly considers sudden death as an inseparable part of female predicament. The painful experience of being orphaned by the mother and then by the friend acting as her mother's substitute, Mary Whitney, leaves her apparently indifferent to the death that closes the cycle, that of Nancy. Mary, functioning as her substitute mother, turns out to be much more caring than the biological parent was: as Grace narrates, once she "put her arms around me, and comforted me, better than my own mother would have done, for she was always too busy or tired or ill" (Atwood, M., 1999: 190). Still, the perfect relationship between the two is marred by Mary's liaison with a man whose identity remains hidden, even though we have the reasons to suspect him of being young George Parkinson, and by her consequent pregnancy. Female body degenerates as a result of pregnancy, Grace thinks, since then it starts to produce a mysterious smell that will always give away the woman, at least to the young maidservant, puzzlingly obsessed with that form of degeneration. Grace, herself an object of what Sharon B. Wilson terms "a dehumanizing Gaze" throughout her entire life, is able to smell things that others cannot, as if she was granted a sensory privilege to make up for the scrutiny she remains under.[3] Female body starts reeking once pregnant, since the smell of Mary's body "changed, from nutmegs to salt fish" and Grace "knew the milky smell of it" (Atwood, M., 1999: 200). The diagnosis concerning the smell only confirms Grace's observations on Mary's different behaviour: Grace must feel she is losing her friend, the only person acting as her parent, in contrast with her biological father constantly trying to take advantage of her, this time through depriving her of the earnings. Pregnant Mary Whitney views abortion as the only solution to her problem, since any other life, that is the life of a prostitute, "would soon be the end of her" (Atwood, M., 1999: 201).

[3] Wilson writes: "As a child, she is subjected to [the gaze] of her alcoholic, possibly abusive father. Then she attracts the attention of Kinnear, James, Jamie, Simon, prison and mental ward personnel, and other dignitaries, including Susanna Moodie, Canada's most important early writer" (Wilson, Sh., 2006: 185).

Grace's strict religiousness produces within her a revulsion at the thought of Mary undergoing abortion. As she confesses later,

> It began to dawn on me that what the doctor had cut out of her was the baby, which I thought a most wicked thing; but I also thought that it was either one corpse that way or two the other, because if not, she would certainly drowned herself.
>
> ATWOOD, M., 1999: 203

Mary's body is wasted after the medical procedure and it abruptly degenerates into that of a dying person, since she bleeds herself to death. The sight of Mary's blood possibly determines Grace's future indifference towards dying Nancy: what the maidservants see after Mary's death are "the nightdress and petticoat… soaked through the blood, and the sheet was all red with it, and brown where it had dried" (ATWOOD, M., 1999: 204). Her own menstrual blood, which terrified Grace at first, now metamorphoses into the blood of her substitute mother, overcome by the "curse of Eve". The smell of Mary's dead body is viewed by Grace as yet another stage of olfactory degeneration of female bodies:

> [Mrs Honey] did not look sad, she looked angry, and also disgusted, as if she could smell a bad smell. And there was indeed a smell in the room; it was the smell of wet straw, from the mattress, and also the salty smell of blood; you can smell something very similar in a butcher's shop.
>
> ATWOOD, M., 1999: 205

Female body becomes literally meat-like here, while Grace constantly observes that such indeed is its metaphoric position in the world: for Mary's lover she mattered no more than a piece of meat after she died. Death under such circumstances cannot be subject to any discussion: "the way in which Mary died was hushed up as much as possible", as Grace painfully recollects (ATWOOD, M., 1999: 228). If the nineteenth-century sensation novel revolved around the hushed-up secrets to be revealed, in *Alias Grace* the game of hiding and revealing secrets about motherhood and death already starts at this point. After Mary Whitney's passing away the central character might be fully convinced that concealing women's deaths is a regular practice in the society she lives in. Similarly, the aestheticized representations of women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings appear to disguise the physical aspects of femininity about which the Victorian bourgeoisie kept mute, while the spectators might have simultaneously enjoyed the spectacle of imminent female deaths in the representations in question.

Grace's religious obsession, gradually leading to her revulsion with any eroticism altogether, becomes a practical realization of the appearance of angelic quality that was demonstrated by women in Pre-Raphaelite art. Still, the Brotherhood's models only posed as angels and embodiments of diverse virtues in the pictures, while Grace puts the principles of religiously-motivated purity and impeccability into practice. She abhors the lewd remarks that McDermott repeats in reference to her:

> [McDermott] said that was a pity [that I did not want to be his sweetheart], but there was a time for everything, and I only needed breaking in, like a colt, and then I would go as good as the rest of them, and he was the man for the job. I was very annoyed by this, and got up at once and began to clear the dishes with a great clattering, and said I would thank him to keep such offensive remarks to himself, as I was not a mare.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 265

Any demonstration of sexuality renders female body filthy according to Grace, who very likely unconsciously avoids any hint of "trouble" that may happen to a working-class girl. Quoting Susanna Moodie's remark concerning extramarital pregnancies in the colony: "A girl becoming a mother before marriage is regarded as a dreadful calamity by her family, and she seldom, if ever, gets one of her own countrymen to marry her with this stain on her character" (Moodie, S., 1989: 27). Such a situation requires mercy on the part of those who participate in the shameful motherhood. Nancy Montgomery is posthumously discovered as not only pregnant, but also as someone who already gave birth to another child in the past. Quoting the letter from Grace's lawyer, MacKenzie, referring to "the unfortunate Montgomery woman": "She'd had a child previously… — which died, I presume of midwives mercy…" (Atwood, M., 1999: 435). Giving birth to a child did not, then, necessarily mean allowing it to live, since others usually considered it to be better-off dead rather than the source of destitution for its mother. Grace's thoughts that she addresses to Mr. Kinnear after he returns home and is searching for Nancy, "You won't find her there, you will have to look below, she is a carcass" (Atwood, M., 1999: 370), well exemplify not only Grace's disgust with any female body, but also the prevailing social attitude to a pregnant unmarried servant. Grace becomes frightened with her own words, but they adequately reveal both her inner thoughts and the social position of Nancy, alive or dead.

The girl, according to Susanna Moodie, suffering bouts of insanity during her imprisonment, not only envisions other women as Ophelia-like victims of human cruelty but, at least according to Dr. Samuel Bannerling,

the prison house physician, also enacts her own madness, in order to convince others about her innocence. Quoting Dr. Bannerling:

> She is an accomplished actress and a most practiced 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 the hair…
>
> Atwood M., 1999: 81

The woman appears to be a part of the (visual) culture she is surrounded by also through her unconscious imitation of Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia, or at least that is how she is seen by those who do not believe in her innocence. Thus the image of Ophelia occurs to belong to the domain of representations known to individuals not directly involved in visual arts, hence a part of what we might call the collective imagination of the time.

Later in life Grace deeply begrudges the fact that in the world of colonial Canada other maidservants allow themselves to be killed by doctors during secret abortions or by other members of the society, perhaps only frenzied with the prospect of robbery. Already a middle-aged lady and out of jail, Grace conducts a moving psychoanalysis of her own motivation in participating in Nancy's murder:

> I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 531

What causes the woman's rage is the passive victimization that women are subjects to and their lack of resistance to the patterns of behaviour that were imposed on them by the repressive society. Docility, subjection, and passiveness, so attractive in the figures of Pre-Raphaelite women, become the features that in reality lead to unjustifiable suffering or even premature death. The view on female disease and consequent death as a source of fascination that the painters must have to a certain extent shared, is transferred onto the pages of the novel in the form of Simon's reaction to the female body he is to dissect:

> It's a woman, under the sheet; he can tell by the contours. He hopes she isn't too old, as that would be somehow worse. A poor woman, dead of some unknown disease.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 407

Even the dead woman is viewed as an aesthetic object: she should not be too old and her unfathomable body is treated as the site of medical secrets. Simon projects his own obsession with the secrets dormant in female bodies onto the women he knows: he claims middle- or upper-class women are interested in him primarily since he knows their physical insides.

Grace uses the name of Mary Whitney directly after the murder and then during spiritualist meetings not only because it is a case of the medical condition of "two persons, as it were, in one brain" (Atwood, M., 1999: 471). She lives on as if she also continued Mary Whitney's life, since she was the only one to survive out of the three women, Mary, Nancy, and herself. Grace has been no angel throughout her life, since the Victorian "angel in the house" had to die prematurely, as Gilbert and Gubar once noticed (Gilbert, S., Gubar, S., 1998: 602). In the manner of Dickens' orphaned characters Grace survives everything, contrary to all expectations, in order to reveal her own secret: that she was guilty.[4] On the other hand, her ultimate confession to the reader occurs when she is either pregnant or simply ill, a condition which might end with her imminent death. At the end of the narrative she gets closer to Mary and Nancy, since the two experienced both pregnancy and premature death. To a certain extent throughout her life Grace becomes another woman tormented with vehement emotions, whose anguish was immortalized by Pre-Raphaelite painters in their pictures so pleasing to the eye that they may be suspected of kitsch-like aura. The novel, another "narrative homage to Victorian culture", to quote Julie Godlin, inscribes itself into that culture, which also means the domain of the visual representations it produced (Godlin, J., 2006: 211). It exploits the more uneasy aspects of Pre-Raphaelite art, proving to be not as digestible as it could be otherwise thought. At the end of their sessions Grace becomes for Simon yet another woman from the visual representations of the time: in his dream vision she is the one who survives despite being surrounded by water, since she does not drown. He symbolically dreams about the Pre-Raphaelite Grace as

> […] coming towards him across a wide lawn in sunshine, all in white, carrying an armful of red flowers: they are so clear that he can see the dewdrops on them. Her hair is loose, her feet bare; she's smiling. Then he sees that what she walks on is not grass but water; and as he reaches to embrace her, she melts away like mist.
>
> Atwood, M., 1999: 480

[4] Another similarity between Grace and Dickens' characters has been observed by Frank Davey, who writes: "Atwood comes close to not making Grace a working-class child at all, but rather, a lost middle-class child of the kind one finds in Dickens- one whose gradual displaying of intelligence and refinement is attributable to a lost birth identity" (Davey, F., 2006: 236).

Bibliography

ATWOOD, Margaret, 1997: *In Search of "Alias Grace". On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

ATWOOD, Margaret, 1999: *Alias Grace*. London, Virago.

BULLEN, J.B., 1998: *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

DAVEY, Frank, 2006: "Atwood and Class: *Lady Oracle, Cat's Eye,* and *Alias Grace*". In: MOSS, John, KOZAKEWICH, Tobi, eds.: *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press: 231—240.

GILBERT, Sandra, GUBAR, Sandra, 1998: "The Madwoman in the Attic". In: RIVKIN, Julie, ed.: *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing: 598—611.

GODLIN, Julie, 2006: "<Lurid Yet Mute>: Narrative and the Sabotage of Dissident Voice in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*". In: MOSS, John, KOZAKEWICH, Tobi, eds.: *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press: 207—215.

LABUDOVA, Katarina, 2005: "Houses, Clothes, and Pregnant Women. Re-Construction of Memory and Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*". In: PALUSZKIEWICZ-MISIACZEK, Magdalena, RECZYŃSKA, Anna, ŚPIEWAK, Anna, eds.: *Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives. 3rd Congress of Polish Association for Canadian Studies and 3rd International Conference of Central European Canadianists. Proceedings*. Kraków, Polska Akademia Umiejętności: 259—268.

MOODIE, Susanna, 1989: *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*. Toronto, The Canadian Publishers.

PYKETT, Lyn, 1994: *The Sensation Novel. From "The Woman in White" to "The Moonstone"*. Plymouth, Northcote House.

TAYLOR, Tom, 1850: "Exhibition of The Royal Academy: Third Notice". *Times*, 9 May.

WILSON, Sharon, R., 2006: "Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's Major Novels". In: HOWELLS, Coral Ann, ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 176—190.