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Atwood's Incredulity

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). A metanarrative is a word coined by Lyotard that describes certain narratives among society that have become legitimized over time. Postmodernism works to swerve away from these metanarratives and prove that they ought not be accepted as the norm within society.

Within her works, Margaret Atwood challenges specific metanarratives including the patriarchy, Capitalism, and Christianity. The fictionalized characters within *Alias Grace*, *The Penelopiad*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* exist as victims of the aforementioned metanarratives. Atwood uses the personal narratives of her characters to alert readers to the dangers of these metanarratives and warns humanity against accepting these grand narratives as truth.

Arguably the most noticeable metanarrative that is exposed and combated within Atwood's works is the patriarchy. Unlike Christianity, the patriarchy as a metanarrative is a tad more ambiguous of a term. In short, a patriarchal society is one that is ruled by men and only male members of the society may hold the power positions within the society. Of course, in the base sense of the term, modern day America is not considered a patriarchal society. However, the male dominance and quest for power that stems from past patriarchal times have trickled into today's common mindsets.

Atwood writes the novel *Alias Grace* not only to share the perspective of the celebrated murderer, Grace Marks, but also to expose some of the more disturbing aspects of the patriarchy. Atwood uses Grace and her situation as a means to show the dangers faced by women who attempt to combat this metanarrative in a time before it was regularly being questioned. One aspect of *Alias Grace* that shows how the patriarchy oppresses Grace is how she is consistently reduced to a piece of entertainment, news, or study for all the men in the novel. In a first-person reflection about the newspaper coverage of the Kinnear murders, Grace recounts, “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” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 27). Grace is noticeably disturbed that the public has reduced her to McDermott’s secret lover. In addition to being labeled as a paramour, Grace is also given other labels and Dr. Jordan reduces her to edible bits as their relationship forms.

As the novel continues, it becomes apparent that Grace may have a psychological disorder. Arguably, Atwood chooses to give Grace a complex personality disorder in order to show readers how a poisonous patriarchal society could negatively affect a woman’s sense of identity. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon provides some reasoning that may help to explain Grace’s personality disorders, “She destabilizes or de-centres the ‘normal’ notions of subjectivity – female subjectivity: becoming defines being” (Hutcheon 142). Although Hutcheon is discussing *The Edible Woman* here, the analysis can be applied to *Alias Grace* as well. Grace loses her sense of self as the novel continues; every man in her life has had a different perception of her and, therefore, a different expectation of her. To Dr. Jordan she is a subject of study, “As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I’m doing well. While he writes, I feel as if he is drawing on me.” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 69). Grace

is a victim of the patriarchy because she allows Dr. Jordan to partake in the fashioning of her own identity. In agreeing to work with Dr. Jordan, Grace's individuality, or sense of being, is at risk of being overpowered by patriarchal society's recreation of her and her story.

Even though Hutcheon doesn't directly use the term "metanarrative" within this chapter, she is pointing to a toxic commonality found in society that Atwood directly addresses within *Alias Grace*. Hutcheon outlines the negative repercussions that this metanarrative has had on women for centuries, "Both Atwood's feminist and postmodernist impulses work to question the very nature of selfhood as it is defined in our culture: that is, as coherent, unified, rational...women have traditionally been denied access to this definition of self" (Hutcheon 144). Atwood's *Alias Grace* accurately depicts a woman who was denied her sense of self dually because of her gender and her questionable sanity. However, it can be argued that Grace's questionable mental state directly stems from her inability to maintain a sense of self due to her unfavorable place in a patriarchal society.

Similarly, in Atwood's novella, *The Penelopiad*, the problematic patriarchal tendency to reduce females to a one-dimensional level is openly addressed. In the introduction, Atwood notes that *The Odyssey* depicts Penelope as the, "quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xiii). The key word "quintessential" must be noted as a sign for readers that Atwood will be working to debunk this typical metanarrative in society by using her characterization of Penelope. The novella is narrated in part by Penelope herself as well as by her twelve servant maidens who are also subjects of exploitation in the patriarchal society, "Subverting the standard version, *The Penelopiad* reveals the hidden gender-stereotyping in the older narrative, deconstructing the narratives of patriarchal culture and thus challenging the very basis of meta-narratives of male ideology." (Khalid & Tabassum 27). It is

unlikely that anyone during Homer's time had an issue with *The Odyssey*'s gender-stereotyping. However, now that *The Odyssey* has become known as a work that supports the patriarchy, Atwood takes it upon herself to deviate from the old narrative in order to present the female characters' views of the story.

The Penelopiad recaps the harsh decision made by Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, to hang the twelve maids. In Atwood's version of this myth, readers learn that the maids were nothing but loyal to Penelope, therefore, their murders were tragic and unnecessary. In the Underworld, Penelope is constantly haunted by the injustices done to her maids because an affirmative word from her may have changed their fate. The maids liken themselves to shadows that follow those who have done them wrong, "We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row." (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 193). The shadow imagery and continuous themes of haunting within the novella point to the way metanarratives tend to stick around within society. Although the patriarchy is less oppressive than it once was, Atwood uses *The Penelopiad* to expose the way patriarchal views still hang in the air today.

Another metanarrative that Atwood continually works to deconstruct within her works is Capitalism. With Capitalism comes class divisions between those who are wealthy and those who are poor as well as the extreme examples of those two classifications. In Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* there are characters that represent the upper-class and there are characters that represent the lower-class. It is in the novel within the novel where readers see two characters, one from each end of the socioeconomic ladder, come together in a romantic relationship.

During the romantic relationship, of what later is revealed to be between the lower-class citizen Alex and the upper-class citizen Iris, Alex tells her a story of a young blind assassin.

Within one of these installments, Alex explains what can be interpreted as the ideologies of those belonging to the lower-class:

Some of the best things are done by those with nowhere to turn, by those who don't have time, by those who truly understand the word *helpless*. They dispense with the calculation of risk and profit, they take no thought for the future, they're forced at spearpoint into the present tense. Thrown over a precipice, you fall or else you fly; you clutch at any hope, however unlikely; however – if I may use such an overworked word – miraculous. What we mean by that is, *Against all odds*. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 256).

Through the character of Alex and in his narrative, Atwood is calling attention to the failures of Capitalism. As an economic system, Capitalism always requires that there be a bottom of the totem pole.

The Blind Assassin works to demystify the Capitalist system by showing the financial struggles and hardships faced by the lower class through the character of Alex. As he works on another sci-fi piece to publish Alex thinks to himself:

Why does he crank out this junk? Because he needs to – otherwise he'd be stony flat broke...He had bigger ambitions once, more serious ones. To write a man's life the way it really is. To go in at the ground level, the level of starvation pay...To expose the workings of the system, the machinery, the way it keeps you alive just so long as you've got some kick left in you, how it uses you up, turns you into a cog or a souse, crushes your face into the muck one way or another. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 280).

Alex's thoughts here can be likened to Atwood's own; Atwood is working to discredit the system of Capitalism by giving readers a tragic figure through her characterization of Alex. The

biggest critique of Capitalism as a metanarrative is that it eats away at artistic expression; if monetary gain is the driving factor of a society, humanlike qualities will cease as we all become more machinelike over time. Alex longs to expose the disillusionments of Capitalism within his works, unfortunately, desperation drives him to produce works that will sell. This is the supply and demand nightmare of Capitalism that Alex, and all authors, must face. Atwood attempts to uncover this failure of Capitalism by detailing Alex's lifelong struggle, anguish, and eventually his tragic demise.

While Alex is made to represent the lower-class within *The Blind Assassin*'s commentary against Capitalism, the characters Richard and Winifred are meant to embody the attitudes of the upper-class. When it is discovered that Laura was working at a waffle stand at the Sunnyside Amusement Park, Iris offers a critical aside about the type of people Richard and Winifred are:

Sunnyside was where people went in the summer, then. Not people like Richard and Winnifred – it was too rowdy for them, too sweaty...Richard and Winifred would not have wished to be in such close proximity to other people's armpits, or to those who counted their money in dimes. Though I don't know why I'm being so holier-than-thou, because I wouldn't have wanted it either. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 324).

Although, throughout the novel, Richard and Winifred are depicted as arrogant, snobby members of the upper-class, Iris recognizes that she herself has developed a pretentious air about her as well. Of course, this denotes just how intrusive this corrupt metanarrative of Capitalism can become.

Years before Atwood directly addresses the topic of Capitalism through Alex's narrative, she touches on the issue of Capitalist class structure through Grace's experience in *Alias Grace*.

In *Reading, Learning, Teaching Margaret Atwood*, P.L. Thomas expertly ties in the exposure of both metanarratives, the patriarchy and class divisions, within *Alias Grace*:

Alias Grace also does not fail to raise issues about class and gender, both literally in the 1800s setting of the novel and indirectly in our lives today. Grace is imprisoned by her life circumstances long before she finds herself in prison, for example. Having come from Ireland, Grace is denied education and expected to subjugate herself to both men and her employers. (Thomas 91).

Thomas draws attention to Atwood's depiction of Grace as a victim of the Capitalist hierarchy. She is already low on the social totem pole because she is a woman, but her status as an Irish immigrant adds to her subjugation. Atwood includes other characters within this novel that further exemplify the issues of Capitalist class structure.

Arguably, one of Mary Whitney's main roles as a character within *Alias Grace* is to symbolize those who participated in rebellions against harmful class structures. Grace describes Mary's beliefs on the subject, "it angered her that some people had so much and others had so little, as she could not see any divine plan in it" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 150). Mary's anti-Capitalist sentiments can be compared to those of Alex's from *The Blind Assassin*. It is implied in *The Blind Assassin* that Alex's rebellious passions against Capitalism were powerful enough to thrust him into the Spanish civil war, which leads to his death.

In comparison, Mary Whitney is exploited by a man, whom she thought to be a lover, and was left by him to solve her unexpected pregnancy on her own; she passes due to a botched abortion. Mary warns Grace, and indirectly, warns readers against upper-class men, "The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to anything they want" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 165). It is implied here that the attitude of entitlement derives from the pampered life of the

upper-class. In this passage, Atwood is suggesting that the upper-class greed and entitlement does not stop at monetary gain, but rather, this toxic mindset seeps into other aspects of society such as romantic or sexual interaction, which can lead to the exploitation of women; this exploitation is detailed by Mary's emotional and physical suffering.

After Mary's passing, Grace makes the decision to leave Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's. The short scene speaks volumes about the importance of reputation for the upper-class citizen:

Mrs. Alderman Parkinson did not protest, but instead had me into the library and asked very earnestly once more if I knew the man; and when I said I did not, she asked me to swear on the Bible that even if I did, I would never divulge it, and she would write me a good reference... [She] gave me a present of two dollars upon leaving. (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 198).

This interaction with Mrs. Alderman Parkinson highlights the upper-class members' obsession with maintaining a dignified reputation. Additionally, the gifts of a good reference and the two dollars represent Mary's worth being reduced, by Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, to nothing more than a slight monetary inconvenience. Although Alex's and Mary's deaths are different by nature, they were both indirect victims of exploitation by the Capitalist class structure.

Class comparisons are also a prominent theme within *The Penelopiad*. The twelve maids draw a direct comparison between the affluent Prince Telemachus' birth to their own, "Helpless as he was helpless, but ten times more helpless as well, For his birth was longed-for and feasted, as our births were not. His mother presented a princeling." (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 67). These lines within the chorus reflect the differences between socioeconomic classes that were apparent long before Capitalism was named. The twelve maids also represent victims of Capitalist class

structure as they recognize they will never be as welcomed or respected within society as a wealthy prince.

The third metanarrative that is displayed throughout Atwood's works is Christianity. Atwood does not attempt to claim there is no God, however, she exposes the hypocritical and political problems of Christianity and its followers. This metanarrative is uncovered most noticeably throughout *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

There are multiple passages within *Alias Grace* that suggest a disdain toward Christian practices. After Mary Whitney's death, Grace makes a claim that would be in contention with Christianity, "But surely the form of prayer does not matter, and the only distinction God makes is between good will and ill; or so I have come to believe." (Atwood *Alias Grace* 197). Christianity harbors many specific rules and practices, which followers are expected to comply. Through Grace's personal comments about religion and Christianity, Atwood suggests that this aspect of Christianity is nonsense.

Additionally, Grace's commentary is used to expose the hypocritical thoughts and actions of the followers of Christianity:

They are hypocrites, they think the church is a cage to keep God in, so he will stay locked up there and not go wandering about the earth during the week, poking his nose into their business, and looking into the depths and darkness and doubleness of their hearts, and their lack of true charity; and they believe they need only be bothered about him on Sundays when they have their best clothes on and their faces straight, and their hands washed and their gloves on, and their stories all prepared. (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 254).

Through Grace's experience and unfavorable commentary, Atwood is sharing common critical views about Christians. As Atwood points out throughout her works, people will consistently

rely on Christianity and use it to justify their prejudices toward others who do not share the same faith.

To expose Christianity as a toxic metanarrative is not to prove God's inexistence, but rather, it is to expose the unjustifiable weaponizing of the religious belief. In the introduction of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood clarifies the religious theme of her work, "So the book is not "anti-religion." It is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny; which is a different thing altogether." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* xviii). Atwood works to expose this misuse of Christianity, and the issue of taking Scripture out of context, within her 1986 novel.

Within *The Handmaid's Tale*, the new society, Gilead, represents as a dystopia where Christianity is forced upon the public at a time when humankind is fighting to survive. In an essay titled *Life without certainty: Margaret Atwood's ambiguous words*, Rachel Thorpe agrees that Atwood is working to debunk the misuse of the Christian metanarrative within *The Handmaid's Tale*:

Atwood's works, and her personal beliefs, appear to reject entirely the Christian metanarrative...Echoes of Scripture run throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, but they are twisted and obscured...Atwood is simply echoing the message that the postmodern world has imbibed from a misrepresented and distorted reading of the Bible. (Thorpe 3).

Atwood uses the dystopic setting of Gilead to reveal a possible future for society if Scripture isn't kept within its context as a work of literature.

Atwood's warning against taking Scripture out of context can be seen by the repetition of "Context is all." throughout Offred's narrative. The first time she uses the phrase is in reference to her description of the first time the Commander asks her to play scrabble, "This is one of the most bizarre things that's happened to me, ever. Context is all." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

144). In this instance of the phrase, Offred is asserting the idea that context is everything and can be likened to Atwood's warning to avoid taking Scripture out of context. Later in the novel, she remembers a conversation with Moira and thinks to herself, "Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 192). Offred's uncertainty the second time she makes use of the phrase has a strong implication: her uncertainty could be the result of the brainwashing effects of the Gileadean regime, which values the "ripeness" of fertile women above all else. Furthermore, this mental breech into Offred's original thought of "Context is all." and its' resulting muddled version proves how the toxic belief system of Gilead has negatively influenced Offred. It is though this aspect of Offred's experience that Atwood warns against taking Scripture out of context and not letting others' ideologies infiltrate one's own beliefs.

The Christian metanarrative becomes debunked by *The Handmaid's Tale* as Atwood reminds readers that Scripture, and Christianity as a whole, began as nothing more than linguistic constructs. At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred is unsure whether she is being saved or taken to her death, she summarizes this ideology, "That is what you get in the end. Faith is only a word, embroidered." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 292). Here Offred is calling attention to the strength of Christianity as a metanarrative. If people kept Christianity within the context of its own literary realm, then it would not hold the power to continuously impose itself on humanity as a metanarrative. Therefore, Christianity would no longer provide people the right to endorse religious prejudices against others.

Although it may be uneasy for some to think of a world where Christianity is diminished to a simple story, Lyotard offers some semblance of peace on the matter of forgotten metanarratives. He philosophizes that humans exist only within the limits of their linguistic interaction, "That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia

for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity.” (Lyotard 41). To agree with Lyotard, Atwood’s ability to deflate Christianity as a metanarrative would not push humanity back to a time of barbarity. However, as seen in the creation of Gilead, taking religious claims out of context would, in fact, set back basic human rights for women.

Throughout the personal narratives of her characters, Atwood exposes multiple toxic metanarratives within her works. It is through her characters that she provides examples of how people may choose to combat these metanarratives within their own lives. At the very least, she attempts to get readers to notice and think critically about the metanarratives at play within today’s society, for if these metanarratives were to be completely abolished, what would be left for Atwood to write about?

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