

Discussion Questions: Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

Sections 1–4

1. How is truth defined in the novel? How is Grace defined in the novel? How is she deprived of her own voice? What does Grace mean when she talks about “collectors”?
2. What might the name “Grace Marks” symbolize? How should we interpret Grace’s hallucination/dream/vision (pp. 5-6)?
3. “But when you go mad you don’t go any other place, you stay where you are. And somebody else comes in.” What does this reveal about Grace’s mental illness? How does this relate to the idea of Grace’s “alias”?
4. What do the letters between Simon and others reveal about 19th C. social prejudices concerning mental illness? What do you make of Jordan’s method of analysis?

Sections 5 & 6

1. In Sections 5 and 6, we are given Grace’s narrative of her childhood. How much of this do you think is true? What kind of self-image or character is she attempting to present to Simon? Why is Mary Whitney an important friend for Grace? What virtues does she possess?
2. At the end of Section 6, Grace hears voices and experiences amnesia upon waking up. Why does she have this extreme reaction to Mary’s death? What else do you think is happening in this scene? Is it a form of hysteria, madness, or something else?
3. Why does Mrs. Alderman Parkinson plan to hide the source of Mary’s death? How has Grace seen others lie or enter a state of denial to protect their status? How is the idea of “popular truth” versus “God’s truth” explored here? How does this connect to ambiguities in Grace’s character and memory?

Sections 7 & 8

1. How does Atwood portray 19th Century class relations? How do servants see their employers and how do the employers view their servants? How do Grace and Nancy view their class status? To what extent do their attitudes create conflict and/or tension between them?
2. What does Grace’s initial belief about Nancy’s potential friendship say about her? What does Nancy’s behavior say about her view of their relationship? What signs of Nancy and Mr. Kinnear’s relationship does Grace overlook before McDermott explains the relationship?
3. Now that we’ve read further, who are Grace and Simon? How do they represent themselves? How do they view each other? What is revealed about them through their internal thoughts?
4. How do premonitions and hunches heighten the suspense in the story? What is the literal and symbolic significance of the cellar?
5. In Grace’s world, why is pregnancy such a difficult state? How do her mother’s pregnancy and the illicit pregnancies of Mary and Nancy affect Grace’s view of men?

Sections 9–15

1. Section 9 raises quite a few questions about the nature of memory. Can we trust Grace's memories when even she doesn't seem to find them reliable? Again, do you believe her when she says she can't remember? Why is Simon determined to dig up the truth of the night of the murders? In what ways are his own memories and character becoming unstable?
2. What is the importance of dreams in this section? Do you believe Grace's dream about Mary was a real dream or has she made it up? What might Grace's dream about Mary appearing to her predict? What is significant about the story of Amina in relation to Grace's case? How does Grace's sleepwalking connect to Simon's dream?
3. Simon believes, "in dreams everything is permitted," which contradicts the Victorian attitude that most desires must be repressed during conscious life. How does this contradiction parallel Grace's life? What parts of what happened at Kinnear's house were a dream? Of what was she actually conscious? Who is permitted to act when she is dreaming? Again, do you believe Grace's story?
4. In what ways does Simon's relationship with his landlady, Mrs. Humphrey, parallel Grace's experiences after she leaves Mrs. Alderman's and goes to Kinnear's?
5. How do you interpret the hypnotism scene? Do you think Grace is a murderer or a victim of circumstances? Is she innocent or guilty? What about Simon Jordan? Is he a victim or monster?
6. Grace says that "my true voice could not get out" at the time of her trial. Now, many years later and with Simon listening, "the story must go on with me." What does she mean and what does this indicate about Grace's role in her own story? What happens when Simon is no longer there to listen? How does Grace react to his abrupt and unexplained absence? In what ways does Simon fail and succeed in helping Grace?
7. Why do you think the book is titled *Alias Grace*? What does this title say about Grace's character? How does it relate specifically to her story? By the end, is she truly free or has she become just another kind of prisoner?