

CONFLICT AND CULTURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

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Abstract

Canadian Literature has existed long before the Canada we know was declared a self-governing nation. Over the course of its existence, it has captured the conflict of those contemporary to it, as well as now showing how Canadian citizens reflect on that past. As such, these texts are valuable when considering how the formation of Canadian culture is depicted, the novel *Alias Grace* authored Margaret Atwood is specifically valuable in considering how that past is now being portrayed to other countries. This article considers to what degree Atwood portrays the culture within *Alias Grace* to be the direct result of conflict. How much of the society she shows is reactionary and to what degree does she depict it developing independent of resistance?

Margaret Atwood is arguably the most well-known, current, Canadian author. She has published more than fifty books and novels in more than forty-five countries.¹ Her influence is worldwide, ensuring that her writing is many people's first or only encounter with Canadian Literature. The perspectives on Canada that she presents, therefore, may directly affect how Canada is understood by the rest of the world. Considering this, her novel *Alias Grace* becomes highly significant,

and so does its depiction of mid-1800's Canada. This significance is only reinforced by the reflective nature of historical fiction. The way Atwood reflects on, considers and writes about the past of her country greatly affects how that past will be understood by her readers. Her writing shapes their understanding of how Canadian culture, and by extension Canadian Literature, was formed. It is therefore intriguing to consider how much of *Alias Grace* is centred in conflict. The book

¹ < <http://margaretatwood.ca/biography/> > [accessed 9 November 2021].

frequently mentions the Rebellions of 1837 that led to the unification of Upper and Lower Canada,² as well as depicting a society that is constantly adapting to the violence that threatens it, both from external sources and from members within itself. When this is reflected upon, it can seem that Margaret Atwood is presenting Canadian culture as being solely formed by violence and conflict. As such, the question becomes: does Atwood truly just depict Canada being a result of conflict, or is there any part of society she shows to be inherent?

To understand the full extent of how Atwood shows conflict impacting upon Canadian society, it is important to first consider what conflict is present within her novel. Primarily, there are two categories of conflict she depicts; these are interpersonal conflict and larger, countrywide fighting. Out of the two of these, it is perhaps easiest to see the effects of largescale fighting within Atwood's novel, as she very much implies that it was essential to Canada's formation. Most obviously this comes through in her references to the Rebellions of 1837, which have already been mentioned. It is perhaps simplistic to state that this is an example of conflict being shown to

create Canadian society, but Atwood shows the effects of this conflict going beyond the unification of Canada. Characters in the novel are often shown to be treated differently based on their family's allegiances during the fighting. For instance, the reporter, Susanna Moodie, is shown to be disregarded because her family were 'Tories at the time of the Rebellion' (p. 148). As well as this, Atwood writes that her main character, Grace, might have been able to avoid arrest if her companion had 'thought to shout out that he was a revolutionary'(p.411). Through these examples and others like them within the novel, Atwood seems to be suggesting that some people are favoured for their allegiances during the Rebellions, whilst others are more likely to lose their freedom and voice. This implies both that there is a pressure to conform and that those favoured are more likely to end up in a position of power, both of which could be said to shape society.

Similarly, Atwood also provides other examples of largescale conflict influencing who has privilege and power. Atwood writes of Grace's time in Ireland that 'there was a house burnt down twenty miles away, of a Protestant gentleman that had taken the side of the Catholics, and another one found with his head bashed in' (p. 124). Atwood depicts stark

² Colin Read, *Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press (1985), p. 100.

conflict between Protestant and Catholic groups, but she does not write this conflict as being solely confined to Ireland. For example, Atwood writes Grace being threatened with unemployment if she is Catholic within Canada (p. 148). Unsurprisingly, the conflict in Ireland is depicted to have come with those who colonised Canada, as many of the people immigrating to Canada in the 1800's were Irish,³ and is shown to influence what opportunities are available to different groups. Furthermore, the threat of unemployment suggests again that those who were favoured, in this case people who are not Catholic, were more likely to find themselves in positions of power. Again, there is both the pressure to conform to avoid violence and one group of people who are shown to have a greater influence over the forming society; both because of conflict.

As such, Margaret Atwood depicts this violence and fighting, both inside and outside of Canada, as being significant in shaping Canadian society, but it is not just this type of conflict that Atwood shows to be significant. She also emphasises how the resistance faced each day by her characters shapes their culture, both as they adapt or are again forced to conform. Perhaps the easiest demographic to demonstrate this concept within *Alias Grace* is

that of colonial women. Women in the novel are frequently depicted as being forced to conform due to the threat of potential violence, even if the actions they take to conform actively cause harm to them. An example of this is the character of Mary Whitney. When she becomes pregnant outside of marriage, she fears future violence being done against her because of her transgression, mainly losing her job and being forced into sex-work (p. 201), and to avoid that violence she gets a risky abortion that leads to her death.

Mary Whitney is not the sole character who is written to have these fears. Margaret Atwood presents a society where there are very few options available for women to earn money and sex-work is almost always portrayed as the only alternative (p. 175). As such, her female characters are shown to fear the loss of their positions. This leads to a culture where women are forced to suppress themselves, as seen in the quotes 'She...couldn't express her anger, of course, as she'd wanted to keep her position' (p.219) and 'very bold in her speech when we were alone. But towards her elders and betters her manner was respectful and demure' (p.173). Once again, Atwood shows how women within her book are expected to conform to certain expectations, along with the

³ < [https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-](https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/Pages/irish.aspx)

[cultural/Pages/irish.aspx](https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/Pages/irish.aspx) > [accessed 1 December 2021]

potentially violent repercussions that result from non-conformity.

Atwood also shows more direct instances of the threat of violence and conflict shaping colonial women's society, specifically violence and conflict from men. That threat can be found both in the implications of a male character literally imagining one of the female characters as a slab of meat at the start of the novel (p.69), or the fact that female characters are written to be unable to travel alone. This is particularly true at the end of the story due to 'rough men about, discharged soldiers from the Civil War' (p. 518), as well as other instances of threatened violence from men. From the start to the end of the novel this threat of violence is continuously present. This is only reinforced by lines such as: 'The difference between a civilized man and a barbarous fiend – a madman, say – lies, perhaps, merely in a thin veneer of willed self-restraint' (p. 163).

Atwood makes the influence of this conflict on Canadian culture clear. For example, men can travel but women cannot due to the threat of violence from men. As such, men are shown to be able to escape their actions, whereas women are shown to have limited options to escape conflict. Atwood's character, Simon, is ultimately forced to flee Canada when his landlady threatens to make him an accessory to murder, but when Grace finds herself in a similar situation, she has no means to escape

and so becomes implicated in the murder and imprisoned. Through this, Atwood shows a clear divide between men and women's culture. She writes that men 'do not have to think ahead or worry about the consequences of what they do' (p. 249), whilst the women in her novel are shown facing extreme repercussions for their actions because they cannot escape as a result of the fear of violence. As well as this, the freedom to travel is shown to create a more interconnected culture for men than women, as is clear through the letters which Simon is shown to receive from multiple acquaintances outside of Canada. In this way, it is made clear that conflict is shaping Canadian society, both by causing a divide within it and by inadvertently causing the groups on either side of that divide to have differing levels of communication, and to experience differing levels of severity for the consequences of their actions.

It is certainly easiest to analyse the effects of conflict on colonial women's culture in *Alias Grace*. Perhaps because of Margaret Atwood's own interest in women's rights, the novel focuses most heavily on the struggles faced by colonial women in mid-1800's Canada. However, this does not cover the effects of conflict on all women in Canada during that time. It would be remiss to not mention how Atwood depicts the effect of conflict on Indigenous people during the formation of Canada. This is a difficult topic to discuss, as Atwood almost entirely focuses on the culture

formed by those immigrating to Canada. The novel is completely written from the point of view of those colonisers, with few references to Canada's Indigenous people. When these references are made within the novel, it is always from an outside perspective, with the only two characters written to have any Indigenous ancestry being isolated and removed from that culture. The first of these characters is an unnamed woman who periodically is placed in asylums and the second is Mary Whitney (p. 34), who is written to have little knowledge of Indigenous culture even though her grandmother was an Indigenous woman (p. 173). It is hard to evaluate how Atwood depicts the impact of conflict within Indigenous culture when she references it so infrequently. Yet in this case it can be argued that the silence itself is significant. Indeed, there does appear to be a precedent for this kind of significant silence, such as in the poem written by Anna Marie Sewell.⁴ Though perhaps not as deliberate as the theme of silence used by Sewell and less overt than the effects of conflict explored previously, this silence too could be interpreted to be a result of forced conformity. When Atwood writes on one of the infrequent occasions where she does mention Indigenous people that, 'They kept their faces still and you could not tell what they were thinking, but

they went away when told to' (p. 34), there is a clear comparison to be made between how she depicts Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous women in her story. Atwood's female characters are forced to keep quiet out of fear, and there is a similarity between how she portrays this, and her depiction of Indigenous people having to visually suppress their emotions and obey orders. It suggests that the arrival of a new culture has forced them into silence out of fear of conflict and violence.

When all of this is considered, it becomes clear that Atwood does depict conflict as affecting the formation of Canadian society. However, there are also instances within the novel where she shows certain aspects of that culture to exist independent of resistance and violence. Atwood seems to want to present particular aspects of humanity as inherent. Without active conflict, she depicts people as being fundamentally kind and helpful to one another. There is a sense of cooperation and diversity within the way she describes the general Canadian population, saying, for instance, that 'The people appeared to be very mixed as to the kinds of them' and all existing together (p. 143). Another example of this cooperation can be found in Atwood's description of Grace's time sailing to Canada.

⁴ < [https://prairiepomes.com/2015/01/19/the-poem-of-silence-an-open-letter-to-margaret-atwood-and-](https://prairiepomes.com/2015/01/19/the-poem-of-silence-an-open-letter-to-margaret-atwood-and-all-the-lions-of-canadian-culture/comment-page-1/)

[all-the-lions-of-canadian-culture/comment-page-1/](https://prairiepomes.com/2015/01/19/the-poem-of-silence-an-open-letter-to-margaret-atwood-and-all-the-lions-of-canadian-culture/comment-page-1/) > [accessed 1 December 2021].

She writes: ‘the passengers were Catholic and Protestant mixed, with some English and Scots come over from Liverpool thrown into the bargain; and if in a state of health, they would have scabbled and fought, as there is no love lost. But there is nothing like a strong bout of seasickness to remove the desire for a scrap; and those who would have cheerfully cut the other’s throats on land, were often seen holding each other’s heads over the scuppers like the tenderest of mothers... as necessity does make strange bedfellows’ (p. 135). This sense of cooperation and tolerance seems to contradict the conflict that she so frequently depicts between different groups, and yet both are consistent throughout the novel. When conflict is removed, Canadian culture is shown to also be formed by cooperation, if perhaps not understanding.

At other times, inherent culture can be seen in the moments of calm between significant events, at least regarding colonial culture. The most consistent of these are the quilts that Grace sews. Each of the patterns represents a significant event or story (p. 112). They are a form of preserving culture and are significant for their existence in peace. As well as the quilts, practices in relation to death are shown to be important to the culture that Atwood depicts within her novel. There is shown to be significance in what people are buried with

and in certain actions (p. 229), such as opening windows after a person dies (p. 139). All these practices have meaning and significance, irrespective of what conflict takes place around them.

And so, Atwood does not solely depict Canadian culture as being formed by conflict. There are aspects of her society that she clearly wants to depict as inherent, whether that is the way that people interact with one another, or the cultural practices found within colonial culture. However, it is also undeniable that Atwood depicts conflict as being central to the development of her society. There is little written in the novel about the impact of that conflict on Indigenous culture, but Atwood certainly suggests that, at the least, conflict has forced Indigenous people to interact in a much more guarded way around others. Furthermore, she heavily implies that conflict has caused divides within Canadian society, particularly between colonial men’s society and colonial women’s society, as well as leading to some people being silenced and placed at a disadvantage, whilst others gain a greater degree of influence. Finally, it is undeniable that conflict is shown to be crucial to the formation of Canadian culture when fighting and rebellion led to the creation and unification of Canada itself.

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