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Reporting Clauses as Quilt Metaphors in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: The Visible Stitches of a Split Character

Aurélie Ceccaldi ♦

This paper investigates the use of reported speech (RS) and reporting clauses (RC) in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) from a linguistic and stylistic perspective in the context of discourse analysis.

Alias Grace is a multiple viewpoint novel. Atwood uses the technique of dual ("split") narrative: first-person and third-person narrators alternate chapters to construct the story of Grace Marks, a young Irish immigrant convicted of a double murder, and her interactions with Simon Jordan, a young doctor interested in mental illnesses. Most of the novel is about him trying to find the truth of Grace's character and eventually, the truth of the novel.

The paper focuses on first-person chapters, where Grace gives precise (and unlikely) detail of her and other characters' past and present conversations. The study targest the "explicit modes" of reporting: direct speech (DS) and indirect speech (IS). The proportion of final, medial and front RCs varies significantly, either from one chapter to another or within a single chapter. For Marnette (2005: 1), speech and thought presentation[1], their categories and respective frequencies are essential factors in defining a particular type of "discourse". Different patterns[2] of speech presentation produce different meaning-effects, such as creating the illusion of oral speech in writing (Salvan, 2005).

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1 For Marnette, whose study is mainly about oral discourse in French, it means "How people quote themselves or others" (2005: xi). In this paper, speech presentation will refer to the presence of RCs as "reporting speech" and their position within the sentence.

2 Traditional categories of RS are direct speech (DS), indirect speech (IS), free indirect

RCs of DS in final and medial positions - within or after the quote - are mostly found in written communication whereas oral "real life" conversations typically require that reported speakers be mentioned first, with a higher frequency of reporting clauses in front position (*she said, "I will")* or of indirect speech (*She said that she would*). What are the meaning effects of these variations and is there a pattern to them? Murray considers that in *Alias Grace,* "one metaphor emerges as the privileged motif in Atwood's construction of history: that of the patchwork quilt" (2001, online). For her, the metaphor is "crafted into Atwood's version of the story of Grace Marks to a multitude of meaning-producing effects" (*Ibid.*).

In the novel's first-person chapters, RCs in medial, final and front positions and different types of RS alternate with meaning-producing effects to reveal aspects of Grace's split personality as well as her dominant position as one of the main narrators of the story. Grace is the common factor through narrative heterogeneity, a duality which verges on duplicity.

Narrative choices and "the metaphor of the patchwork quilt"

Alias Grace alternates a third-person narration closely focused on Simon Jordan (1) and a first-person point of view, where Grace is either by herself in the Governor's wife's parlour reflecting on her own fate or sitting in the sewing room, recounting her memories to Dr. Jordan in long interviews while quilting patchworks. RS, direct (RCs in bold type) or indirect (*italics*) is found both in her interactions with Simon Jordan (2) and the oral storytelling of her past (3):

> (1) Reverend Verringer's housekeeper greets him with a disapproving nod. If she were to smile, her face would crack like an eggshell. There must be a school for ugliness, **thinks Simon**. (218)

> (2) Dr.Jordan looks up from the notes he is making. **So you did not believe him at first, he says.**
> **Not at all, Sir, I say. Nor would you, if you yourself had been listening. I took it all for idle threats.**
> Before he was hanged, McDermott said that[3] you were the one who put him up to it, **says Dr. Jordan** […]
> Who told you such a lie, **I say.**
> It is written in McDermott's confession, **he says.**

speech (FID) and free direct speech (FDD). We will focus on the forms introduced by a reporting verb, namely IS and DS and see how they work in first-person narrations.

3 This occurrence of IS takes place within a character's DS, a case that will not be addressed in this paper.

> (3) I put on the fresh milk in a little jug, and the sugar, and picked up the tray. I will take it up, **said Nancy**. *I was surprised and said that* at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's, the housekeeper would never have thought of carrying a tea tray up the stairs, as it was beneath her position and a job for the maids. (255)

Although the use of a third-person narrator and "the" past tense are considered traditional features of written "historical" narratives (Benveniste, 1966), first-person narratives are also a very popular writing approach in fiction. They share with (or borrow from) oral speech and conversations the presence of a narrating "I" which, contrary to the "he who is absent", explicitly stages a form of otherness (addressing someone, as in correspondences, memoirs, etc.).

But even if communication in novels occurs *in absentia*, the pragmatic model of conversation still applies, "not only to character-character discourse, but also to the way in which authors convey messages to the readers" (Short & Leech, 1981: 302).

In this context, RCs function as pragmatic signals, i.e. "expressions that signal the narrator's awareness of an audience and the degree of his/her orientation towards it[4] (Jahn, 2017: online). The use of the simple present as narrative tense will also be considered as an example of author-reader implicature (Short & Leech 1981: 303) as it seems to open up a space of trust for Grace's "conversations"[5] with the reader, contrary to the use of the simple past in her oral story-telling.

Following Murray, who studied the patchwork quilt as "the privileged motif in Atwood's construction of history" (2001: online), this paper will study how embedded storytelling is a breeding ground for a linguistic exploration of what Murray calls "an extended metaphor informing all aspects of the novel's construction, from the typographical layout of the pages to the details of its narrative organisation" (online). Indeed, each of the novel's fifteen sections is named after a traditional quilt pattern and includes a corresponding illustration. An assortment of quotes, poems, epigraphs, letters and historical documents appears at the beginning of each section, forming a *pattern* reminiscent of patchwork quilts. They bring additional voices which set the stage and provide counterpoints for Grace's own voice(s), as narrator and as a character.

Multiple voices are woven into the novel throughout, which constitutes an important aspect of its construction. Atwood plays a fine line, showing Grace's duplicity by granting her a double status: nothing happens outside her narrative(s).

4 These signals function in any "communicative setting comprising a speaker and an audience (or, a bit more generally, in order to account for written communication as well, an addresser and an addressee)" (Jahn, 2017: online)

5 Short & Leech use quotation marks in this context.

"A celebrated Murderess"

Most of the novel is about Dr. Jordan (and the reader) finding the truth of Grace Marks's character. In the first few pages, before Simon Jordan is even introduced as a character, Grace, who has been in prison for over ten years, starts describing herself through what she has read in newspapers or through what has been said about her:

> It was my own lawyer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., **who told them** I was next door to an idiot**.** *I was angry with him over that*, but **he said** it was by far my best chance and I should not appear too intelligent. (25)
> The Governor's wife cuts these crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in (…)
> So I have read what they put in about me (…) *A lot of it is lies.* **They said in the newspaper that** I was illiterate but I could read some even then. (30)
> *They did say some true things*. **They said I had a good character**; and that was so, because nobody had ever taken advantage of me, although they tried. (30)

These are examples of IS (in bold type). Traditionally, indirect reporting structure ("embedding") indicates that what someone said or wrote is not reported *verbatim*, but in the speaker's own words rather than in the words they actually used (Short & Leech, 1981: 318, Quirk, 1985). Grace has no control over what people write about her but as a narrator, she is in a position to report "in her own words" while commenting on what people say (*I was angry / A lot of it is lies / They did say some true things*). The pronoun *they* works as a common factor of general opinion and is also semantically close, in these examples, to a singular plural referring to "someone". What is reported is also being toned down by Grace's comments as well as the choice of the reporting mode.

The following passage occurs at the beginning of the novel. Grace has been in prison for over ten years. Sitting alone in the Governor's wife's parlour, she reflects upon her current situation and her "status" as a celebrated murderess:

> The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess […] *murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you (25)**.**

Looking at herself in the mirror, she remembers what was written or said about her after the murders for which she was tried with her accomplice, Dean McDermott:

> Sometimes, when I am dusting the mirror with the grapes, I look at myself in it, although I know it is vanity […] *I think of all the things that have been written about me.*
> —**that** I am an inhuman female demon, **that** I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, **that** I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, **that** I am fond of animals, **that** I am very handsome with brilliant complexion, **that** I have blue eyes, **that** I have green eyes, **that** I have auburn and also brown hair, **that** I am tall and also not above the average height, **that** I am well and decently dressed, **that** I robbed a dead woman to appear so, **that** I am brisk and smart about my work […] **And I wonder,** how can I be all of these different things at once? (25)

The layout of the text mirrors the unconventional syntactic pattern of this passage, a combination of narrated discourse[6] (*I think of all the things that have been written about me*) and IS introduced by *that*, the presence of which signals a reference to past events[7] (Lapaire & Rotgé, 2002: 611). From a semantic point of view, the narrated discourse "introduces" the description that follows although from a syntactic point of view it does not function as a main clause, which leaves the embedding[8] structure of IS incomplete. A very fragmented portrait emerges (*blue eyes / green eyes, auburn hair / brown hair, tall / not above the average height*, etc.) through the syntactic accumulation of *that*- clauses and contradictory descriptions.

A portrait is being stitched together which makes it impossible to draw conclusions about Grace—a recurring theme throughout the novel. Grace's rhetorical question at the end of the passage (*and I wonder, how can I be all these different things at once*) only reinforces that impression.

In theory, first-person narrators who are also characters come with limited omniscience. The following example, however, seems to extend Grace's privileges:

> When I have gone out of the room with the tray, the ladies look at the governor's wife's scrapbook. Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, **they say**, and You let that woman walk loose in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it. Oh well one must get used to such things in our situation, we are virtually

6 A reference to an enunciative event, without mention of its precise contents by way of a completive or an infinitival clause (Marnette, 2005: 85).
7 Real or fictional.
8 IS is composed of a main clause and a subordinate clause embedded in the first one. For example, in *he said that it was too late*, *he said* [*something*]*"* is the main clause and *"that it was too late"* the embedded clause (Lapaire & Rotgé, 2002: 555-556).

> prisoners ourselves, you know, although one must feel pity for these benighted creatures […] (26)

The conversation between "the ladies" and the Governor's wife is supposed to take place after Grace has left the room. Yet, she is still able to give a detailed account of what is being said behind her back. Whether she is used to listening through doors or is just imagining the whole scene, she does not say. But part of the illusion of "hearing" these conversations nonetheless is built through a very specific use of DS. The conversation starts unannounced just after Grace leaves the room. In the absence of quotation marks[9], the "I" in *I feel quite faint* could still be referring to Grace but for the medial RC.

The pronoun *they* makes "the ladies" disappear behind a collective discourse. *They say = the sort of things that they say*. Again, the use of a collective subject causes the whole message to be understood as general information, more like a comment, if not a judgement. The conversation then continues as DS for the rest of the page, but without any more RCs, which could be considered a dramatization of Grace's "absence".

Both as a character and as a narrator, Grace is in a privileged position to be a historian of her own past although, of course, two images are built in parallel: a complex character trying to make sense of her own condition and a controlling narrator. Indeed, nothing happens outside her narration:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? Because now we are almost there.

> I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. Mackenzie said I should say, and what I did not say even to him, and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. **And what McDermott said I said**, and what **others said I must have said** for there are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own […] (295)

At this point, it is impossible to tell whether Grace is only play-acting an innocent version of herself in search of some kind of truth in the discourse of others or hiding her true personality behind said speeches. The illusion of omniscience might in fact be achieved through omnipresence. In between the lines of RS, Grace-narrator may "supply the reader" with a reporting discourse of her own. Which version is the "real" Grace?

9 A recurring feature that will be discussed further in the present study.

A Controlling Narrator

In this second part, we will try to show how conversations between characters may take a different turn according to the position of the RC or the type of RS. From chapter eight onwards, Simon begins interviewing Grace on a regular basis, hoping to retrieve her lost memories of the murders.

The use of the first person creates the illusion of "opening up a space of trust" with the reader, a very powerful dramatic resource throughout the novel. The reader is given a more intimate view of Grace's thoughts and a front row seat to their interactions.

The following conversation, reported in DS, occurs after Dr. Jordan has given Grace an apple which he hopes will help conjure up some lost memories:

> *What is he thinking? I stand holding the apple in both hands. It feels precious, like a heavy treasure. I lift it up and smell it. It has such an odour of outdoors on it I want to cry.*
> Aren't you going to eat it, **he says.**
> No, not yet, **I say.**
> Why not, **he says.**
> Because then it would be gone **I say.**
> *The truth is I don't want him watching me while I eat.* (44)

We can see in this passage that Grace's thoughts (in italics) do not coincide with her words, reported in DS. As the reader learns something that Simon Jordan does not (Grace is lying to him about the reason why she does not want to eat the apple), a form of dramatic irony starts to build. RCs (in bold type) occur after quotations, thus allowing the conversation to go on uninterrupted and placing the focus on its contents—the apple. As a narrator with two privileged audiences—Dr. Jordan and the reader—Grace stages two parallel stories and the duality character-narrator turns into duplicity as she stages both her thoughts and her words.

The presence of RCs can of course be interpreted in a very different way and speech presentation is sometimes more of a confrontation, not always with equal arms. Later in the novel, Dr. Jordan asks Grace about any dream she might have at night:

> I do, Sir, **I say.**
> **He says,** What did you dream last night?
> […]
> **But what I say to him is very different. I say,** I can't remember, Sir.
> I can't remember what I dreamt last night. It was really confusing.
> And he writes that down.

> *I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of and I need to keep something for myself; and in any case, what use would he have for my dreams, after all?*

She then proceeds towards a very detailed account of her dream but not "out loud", only for herself—and the reader. Although a space in the text layout suggests that something has changed, it is in fact made explicit by the IS that follows (*But what I say to him is very different*). Retroactive reading and interpretation show that associating a narrating *I* may very well shift from "speech" to "thoughts" unknown to the audience, at least for a time. When the conversation starts again, most of the RCs in DS are in front position and coordinated with the conjunction "and":

> **Then he says**, Well there is more than one way to skin a cat. *I find that an odd choice of words and* **I say**, I am not a cat, Sir.
> **And he says,** Oh I remember, nor are you a dog, and he smiles. **He says,** the question is, Grace, what are you? Fish or flesh or good red herring?
> **And I say**, I beg your pardon, Sir?
> *I do not take well to being called a fish, I would leave the room except I don't dare to.*
> **And he says,** let us begin at the beginning.
> **And I say**, The beginning of what, Sir.
> **And he says**, The beginning of your life. (116)

DS builds up tension through an odd association between narrative discontinuity (every character is re-introduced at the beginning of each line with a front RC) and plurisyndetic coordination[10]. The whole scene therefore appears "fragmentary, yet unified" (Murray, 2001: online), yet another illustration for both quilt metaphors and the quilting process.

Grace Also "stitches" together different voices through RS as in the following scene, where she is alone in the parlour and the settee reminds her of what her former employer and friend used to say:

> But I have never sat down on the settee before, as it is for the guests. **Mrs. Alderman Parkinson said** a lady must never sit in a chair a gentleman has just vacated, though she would not say why; **but Mary Whitney said,** Because you silly goose, it's still warm from his bum; which was a coarse thing to say. (23)

10 Plurisyndetic coordination is a reiteration of the linking process (Lapaire & Rotgé 2002: 299).

Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's words are reported in IS. Even in the absence of a syntactic link with the previous sentence, it is suggested that the reason Grace has never sat down on the settee is not only because it is for the guests, but also because this might be considered improper. Yet, when she reports what Mary Whitney said, she uses DS and a quote. Mary Whitney voices what is left unsaid in a very dramatic, "coarse" way. Grace happens to quote Mary Whitney back to life quite often after her death. Since Grace uses the *alias* Mary Whitney when she flees with James McDermott, this, although a detail, echoes the hypnotism scene at the end of the novel where it is revealed, or so it seems, that "Mary possessed Grace, either literally or figuratively". Not all voices are given the same importance.

Every occurrence of RS is carefully crafted into the text, Grace organizes her narratives so as to dramatize what was actually said in the very structure. Every single line of DS or IS has a meaning-effect of its own or in relation with the other, Grace maneuvering her "narrative needle" up and down through the different layers of the text.

A crafted Seamstress/ "The illusion of oral speech in writing" (Salvan 2005)

RCs in DS in final and medial positions - within or after the quote - are mostly found in written communication, oral "real life" conversations typically require that reported speakers be mentioned first. Salvan explains that the reporting speaker(s) being "physically" present, they would need to start by imitating the voice(s) of the reported speaker(s) before naming them, which requires very specific contexts.

In *Alias Grace*, the embedded narrative situation and the narrating *I*, who is also a character, are one way of interpreting the absence of quotation marks, the omnipresent narrator equating, up to a certain point, the physical presence of the speaker in real life. Everything is filtered through Grace's perception, another frontier between reported and non-reported speeches (a role usually played by quotation marks). Embedding an oral story telling in a first person-narrative may be considered as way of staging "orality" in fiction but if so, how is this achieved?

As pragmatic signals, RCs are direct addresses from the narrator(s) to the reader(s). The following interactions between Grace and her employer (also one of the victims of the future murders) alternate DS with front-clauses (in bold type) and IS (in italics):

> Mr. Kinnear had the ostler put my bundle in the back of the carriage—there were some packages in it already- **and he said**, Well, you have not been in town for five minutes and you have

> managed to attract two gentleman admirers; *and I said they were not*, **and he said**, Not gentlemen or not admirers? *And I was confused and I didn't know what he wanted me to say*. **Then he said**, Up you go, Grace, **and I said**, Oh do you mean me to sit at the front and he said, Well, we can hardly have you in the back like a piece of luggage and he handed me up to sit beside him. I was quite embarrassed […] (240)

Mr. Kinnear's words are reported in DS while Grace uses IS to answer as a way of eluding his embarrassing questions. The presence of the conjunction "and" associates their reported words in the syntax, creating a conversation-like continuity in spite of the very different modes of RS. It also gives the illusion of an uninterrupted rhythm and a sense of urgency as well, as if Grace actually *sounded* eager to get away from him (as she does not want to go in the carriage).

Finally, Grace as a narrator will also give a voice to speeches that have not been said, or not said "out loud":

> Where there's a doctor, it's always a bad sign […] But this doctor will not hurt me, the Governor's wife promised it. All he wants is to measure my head. He's measuring the heads of all the criminals in the Penitentiary to see if he can tell from the bumps on their skulls what sort of criminals they are pickpockets or swindlers or embezzlers or criminal lunatics or murderers, **she did not say** Like you, Grace. (31)

The Governor's wife explains to Grace, who has a phobia of doctors from previous experiences, that "this Doctor" (Simon Jordan) simply wants to measure her head as he does for criminals. Although she does not say that Grace is one of them, the RC (in bold type) being in the negative form, the unsaid ("like you Grace") is being voiced all the same.

The following example is yet another manifestation of Grace's ability to give a voice, this time her own voice, to written speech:

> The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down [...] *murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word - musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes, at night, **I whisper it over to myself**: *Murderess, Murderess.* It rustles like a taffeta skirt across the floor. (25)

This portrait goes through several stages: first a label ("*celebrated murderess*") then people's opinion (*what has been written down*) and finally what she herself

stages through DS. The words that have been written are brought to life, said out loud and even "felt" in a synesthetic association (sound-touch) of the word and the fabric rustling across the floor although the adjective is left out. She is just a murderess, and after reading it comes the illusion of "hearing" her say it for the first time.

Conclusion

Just like actual quilts "tell stories" about the time period in which they were made and the people who made them, Grace Marks starts stitching together a story, bringing together voices from both her present and her past. But is *Alias Grace* telling the story of a murderess, a victim or a manipulative narrator verging on schizophrenia? Probably all three at a time.

In spite of all the different voices coming together to construct the story of Grace Marks, her character remains elusive. Through reporting speech, her own and that of other characters, Grace reveals herself as a victim, a murderess, a narrator, a character, a liar and a model of virtue. At the end of the novel, she ends up actually looking like the broken portrait conjured up at the beginning of the novel.

Even Simon Jordan, as Grace's privileged audience who comments on and reformulates Grace's words, bringing certain unacknowledged aspects of her discourse to Grace's and the reader's attention (Murray, 2001: online,) cannot make sense of the stories she tells him.

In a way, *Alias Grace* is "like a hall of mirrors, each mirror capable of replicating the image in another, a discourse can embody narrators within narrations, reflectors within reflections, and so on *ad infinitum*. (Short and Leech, 1981: 348).

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