

44. Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood *Alias Grace* (1996)

A problem of identity 178

Grace Marks is in prison serving a life sentence for her involvement in the murders of her employer and his housekeeper and mistress. Some believe Grace is innocent; others think her evil or insane. Grace claims to have no memory of the murders. Dr Simon Jordan, an expert in mental illness, is engaged by a group of reformers and spiritualists who seek a pardon for Grace. He listens to her story while bringing her closer and closer to the day she cannot remember. What will he unveil? In the passage below the protagonist shows herself as others see her.

The reason they¹ want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down. When I first saw it I was surprised because they say Celebrated Singer and Celebrated Poetess and Celebrated Spiritualist and Celebrated Actress, but what is there to celebrate about murder? All the same, 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.

Murderer is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices.

Sometimes when I am dusting the mirror with the grapes I look at myself in it, although I know it is vanity. In the afternoon light of the parlour my skin is a pale mauve, like a faded bruise, and my teeth are greenish. 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 a 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, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? 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 to be too intelligent. He said he would plead my case² to the utmost of his ability, because whatever the truth of the matter I was little more than a child at the time, and he supposed it came down to free will and whether or not one held with it. He was a kind

1. **they:** refers to the ladies who meet in the Governor's wife's parlour to sip their tea and chat
2. **plead my case:** defend me

gentleman although I could not make head nor tail³ of much of what he said, but it must have been good pleading. The newspapers wrote that he performed heroically against overwhelming odds⁴. Though I don't know why they called it pleading, as he was not pleading but trying to make all of the witnesses appear immoral or malicious, or else mistaken.

I wonder if he ever believed a word I said. . . .

The Governor's wife cuts these crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in; she will even write away for old newspapers with crimes that were done before her time. It is her collection, she is a lady and they are all collecting things these days, and so she must collect something, and she does this instead of pulling up ferns or pressing flowers, and in any case she likes to horrify her acquaintances.

So I have read what they put in about me. She showed the scrapbook to me herself, I suppose she wanted to see what I would do; but I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person, and would she wish me to remove the tea things now; but I've looked in there since, many times, when I've been in the parlour by myself.

A lot of it is lies. They said in the newspaper that I was illiterate, but I could read some even then. I was taught early by my mother, before she got too tired for it, and I did my sampler⁵ with leftover thread, A is for Apple, B is for Bee; and also Mary Whitney used to read with me, at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's, when we were doing the mending; and I've learnt a lot more since being here, as they teach you on purpose. They want you to be able to read the Bible, and also tracts, as religion and thrashing are the only remedies for a depraved nature and our immortal souls must be considered. It is shocking how many crimes the Bible contains. The Governor's wife should cut them all out and paste them into her scrapbook.

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. But they called James McDermott my paramour⁶. They wrote it down, right in the newspaper. I think it is disgusting to write such things down.

That is what really interests them – the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes.

3. **could not make head nor tail:** could not understand

4. **he performed ... odds:** nobody believed in his chance of winning the case

5. **sampler:** piece of embroidery (it. *imparaticcio con il filo rimasto*)

6. **paramour:** lover

Margaret Atwood

Murder in the Dark (1983)

Happy endings 179

Atwood's postmodernist taste for relativity and metafictional techniques is exemplified in the following short story.

John and Mary meet.
What happens next?
If you want a happy ending, try A.

A.

- 5 John and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and remunerative jobs which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children, to whom they are devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life and worthwhile friends. They go
10 on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story.

B.

- Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary. He merely uses her body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind. He comes to her
15 apartment twice a week and she cooks him dinner, you'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out, and after he's eaten dinner he fucks her and after that he falls asleep, while she does the dishes so he won't think she's untidy, having all those dirty dishes lying around, and puts on fresh lipstick so she'll look good when he wakes up, but when he wakes up he doesn't even notice, he puts on his
20 socks and his shorts and his pants and his shirt and his tie and his shoes, the reverse order from the one in which he took them off. He doesn't take off Mary's clothes, she takes them off herself, she acts as if she's dying for it every time, not because she likes sex exactly, she doesn't, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he'll get used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get
25 married, but John goes out the door with hardly so much as a good-night and three days later he turns up at six o'clock and they do the whole thing over again. Mary gets run-down. Crying is bad for your face, everyone knows that and so does Mary but she can't stop. People at work notice. Her friends tell her John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good enough for her, but she can't believe it. Inside John, she thinks,
30 is another John, who is much nicer. This other John will emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a prune¹, if the first John is only squeezed enough.

1. **pit from a prune:** *it. nocciolo da una prugna secca*

One evening John complains about the food. He has never complained about her food before. Mary is hurt.

- 35 Her friends tell her they've seen him in a restaurant with another woman, whose name is Madge. It's not even Madge that finally gets to Mary: it's the restaurant. John has never taken Mary to a restaurant. Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirin she can find, and takes them and a half a bottle of sherry. You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey. She leaves a note for John. She
40 hopes he'll discover her and get her to the hospital in time and repent and then they can get married, but this fails to happen and she dies.
John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.

C.

- John, who is an older man, falls in love with Mary, and Mary, who is only twenty-two,
45 feels sorry for him because he's worried about his hair falling out. She sleeps with him even though she's not in love with him. She met him at work. She's in love with someone called James, who is twenty-two also and not yet ready to settle down.
John on the contrary settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him. John has a steady, respectable job and is getting ahead in his field, but Mary isn't impressed by
50 him, she's impressed by James, who has a motorcycle and a fabulous record collection. But James is often away on his motorcycle, being free. Freedom isn't the same for girls, so in the meantime Mary spends Thursday evenings with John. Thursdays are the only days John can get away.

- John is married to a woman called Madge and they have two children, a charming
55 house which they bought just before the real estate values went up, and hobbies which they find stimulating and challenging, when they have the time. John tells Mary how important she is to him, but of course he can't leave his wife because a commitment is a commitment. He goes on about this more than is necessary and Mary finds it boring, but older men can keep it up longer so on the whole she has a fairly good
60 time.

- One day James breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid
and James and Mary get higher than you'd believe possible and they climb into bed. Everything becomes very underwater, but along comes John, who has a key to Mary's
65 apartment. He finds them stoned and entwined. He's hardly in any position to be jealous, considering Madge, but nevertheless he's overcome with despair. Finally he's middle-aged, in two years he'll be as bald as an egg and he can't stand it. He purchases a handgun, saying he needs it for target practice – this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later – and shoots the two of them and himself.

- Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man called Fred
70 and everything continues as in A, but under different names.

D.

- Fred and Madge have no problems. They get along exceptionally well and are good at working out any little difficulties that may arise. But their charming house is by the seashore and one day a giant tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down. The
75 rest of the story is about what caused the tidal wave and how they escape from it. They do, though thousands drown, but Fred and Madge are virtuous and grateful, and continue as in A.

E.

80 Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you like, it can be 'Madge,' 'cancer,' 'guilty and confused,' and 'bird watching.'

F.

85 If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A, though in between you may get a lustful brawling saga² of passionate involvement, a chronicle of our times, sort of. You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to
90 deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality. The only authentic ending is the one provided here:
John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.
So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with.
95 That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.
Now try How and Why.

2. a lustful brawling saga: a story of fist-fights and sex