

New Horizons in English Studies 10/2025

MIGRAMEDIA



Eda Hacısağır

ERCIYE UNIVERSITY, TÜRKİYE
EDAHACISAGIR@ERCIYES.EDU.TR
[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0005-5270-424X](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5270-424X)

Betül Ateşci Koçak

ERCIYE UNIVERSITY, TÜRKİYE
BATESCIKOCAK@ERCIYES.EDU.TR
[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-7937-953X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7937-953X)

Exploring Relational Dynamics of Grace Marks in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* Through Relational-Cultural Theory*

Abstract. Considered one of the most esteemed contemporary authors in Canada and the twentieth century, Margaret Atwood's ninth novel *Alias Grace* is a historical fiction based on a real murder case that occurred in nineteenth-century Canada. This study explores the relational dynamics of the protagonist, Grace Marks, with her fellow servants Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery through the lens of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). Founded by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jean Baker Miller, RCT posits that humans are inherently relational and grow only through mutual connections across the lifespan. RCT considers the Western ideal of an independent, self-sufficient individual harmful, as it fosters isolation and disrupts mutuality. Additionally, patriarchal and classist structures are criticized as they reinforce hierarchy, control, inequality, and power-over dynamics, hindering the potential growth-fostering relationships. Through close textual analysis, this article indicates that Grace's connection with Mary embodies five outcomes of a growth-fostering relationship. In contrast, Grace's connection with Nancy is marked by chronic disconnections, resulting in the reversal of five good things: decreased energy, an inability to take action, a low sense of worth, confusion, and isolation. By portraying Grace's relational experiences, the study also elucidates how the male-dominated and hierarchical society of the nineteenth century obstructs the potential growth-fostering relationships for her because within this society, mutuality and empathy are often replaced by fear and control. Therefore,

Grace adopts strategies of disconnection to protect herself, but they also deepen her isolation. Viewed through the lens of RCT, *Alias Grace* becomes more than a narrative of crime and mystery, given its focus on the transformative potential of growth-fostering relationships and the detrimental effects of disconnections on psychological growth, particularly for women living within restrictive social systems.

Keywords: Relational-Cultural Theory, connection, disconnection, growth-fostering relationships, relational paradox, psychological development, mutuality, patriarchy, Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

Introduction

Humans are inherently social creatures who “have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary 1995, 497). Numerous findings in neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology elucidate the profound impact of relationships on physical and psychological well-being. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp’s 1978 study and Lieberman’s Cyberball research revealed that separation and exclusion trigger physical pain, whereas reconnection acts like a painkiller (Davis and Montag 2019, 2; Lieberman 2013, 67). Relational neuroscience explains that our bodies and brains are inherently structured for emotional connection through four primary neural pathways, which deteriorate when these connections are disrupted (Banks and Hirschman 2015, 11). The modern concept of neuroplasticity, which describes the brain’s ability to change by creating and adjusting neural pathways, further highlights the importance of our relational experiences (Cherry, 2024). Literary narrative captures this relational aspect by portraying the connections between characters. Through their bonds and conflicts, characters transform, break, and heal. Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) posits that “we grow through and toward relationships throughout the lifespan and that we need relationships in the same, life-sustaining ways that we need air and water” (Jordan 2018, 4). Accordingly, RCT provides a framework for examining relational dynamics and their effect on psychological development within literary works.

Originated from psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jean Baker Miller’s seminal work *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), RCT was refined further through discussions of clinical case examples drawn with her Stone Center colleagues (Schwartz 2021, 0:48-2:05). Many traditional models equate separation, independence, and individuality with maturity and psychological health (Comstock et al. 2008, 279; Jordan 2001, 92). In contrast, RCT posits that growth is not a movement toward separation, independence, and self-sufficiency but instead toward connection and mutuality. Miller and Stiver (1997, 22) assert that “our fundamental notions of who we are are not formed in the process of separation from others, but within the mutual interplay of relationships with others”. That is, our sense of self is not fixed or isolated; instead, who we are is continuously reshaped by our connections (Siegel 2012, 35; Spencer 2002, 2; Miller 1986, 4). Psychological development, therefore, is viewed as a collective, interactive, and lifelong process rather than an individual journey with fixed stages. Growth

occurs within the context of mutually empowering relationships (Miller et al. 1991, 3). There is no next stage to reach since the focus is on increasing our capacity to engage in growth-fostering relationships. Thus, RCT criticizes Western culture for idealizing self-sufficient and independent individuals because “the bounded, separate self is a metaphor built on a model of separation rather than connection” (Jordan 2003, 7). As a result, RCT considers this pursuit not only an unattainable goal but also eventually harmful, leading to suffering, stress, isolation, and health problems for both sexes. In a culture grounded in individualism and competition, it is clear that a focus on separateness and self-interest often replaces the core values of RCT. As Judith Jordan clarifies, the theory’s relational emphasis makes RCT a community-oriented model rather than a self-oriented model (Schwartz 2021, 12:20).

RCT regards women as significant because of their relational strengths, yet they are devalued and frequently pathologized within patriarchal structures (Fletcher and Ragins 2007, 378). Their empathy, emotional expression, and desire for connection are perceived as signs of weakness. Jean Baker Miller (1976, 1) contends that “humanity has been held to a limited and distorted view of itself precisely by virtue of its subordination of women”. Consequently, women play a key role in achieving a broader understanding of human psychology. RCT acknowledges the central role of society and culture in shaping human relationships. Therefore, it heavily criticizes patriarchal systems for inhibiting the development of relationships grounded in mutual empathy and empowerment and also reinforcing oppressive structures and legitimizing inequality, particularly for women. Despite its feminist origins, the scope of the theory broadened to include marginalized individuals of all genders, races, classes, and sexual orientations.

Developed from clinical practice, RCT is mainly used in therapy and counselling; however, its application to literary analysis remains unexplored. Amy Makice¹, relational-cultural therapist and founder of the Bloomington Center for Connection, affirms the theory’s adaptability: “It is quite available to adapt the theory into literature, so it somehow merges with it.” (Amy Makice, pers. comm. 2025). Therefore, this essay introduces a fresh framework for literary analysis by demonstrating the applicability of RCT to fiction, which strengthens the interdisciplinary connection between psychology and literature.

Margaret Atwood is regarded as one of Canada’s and the twentieth century’s greatest living novelists. As an influential voice in contemporary literature, her work is categorized into three distinct literary traditions: feminist, Canadian nationalist, and postmodern (Cooke 2004, 19). Encompassing all three, Atwood’s 1996 novel *Alias Grace* is based on a mysterious real-life murder case that took place in Ontario, Cana-

¹ With over three years of experience with RCT, Amy Makice is a relational-cultural therapist, clinical supervisor, family therapist, and the founder of Blooming Center for Connection. For more information: <https://www.bloomingtoncenterforconnection.org/meet-the-bcc/amy-makice-msw-lcsw/>

da, in 1843. Grace Marks, a 16-year-old Irish immigrant servant girl, and her likely accomplice James McDermott were convicted of murdering their employer, Mr. Kinnear, and his housekeeper and alleged lover, Nancy Montgomery. Grace got life in prison, while McDermott was hanged (Young 2021). During her imprisonment, she was also sent to the Provincial Lunatic Asylum because of her alleged madness (Katz 2017). After spending thirty years in prison, thanks to the support of those who believed in her innocence and questioned her sanity, Grace was pardoned in 1872. Inspired by this murder case, the novel narrates the story of Grace Marks from childhood to her release. Drawing from conflicting historical records and gaps, Atwood fictionalized the story, noting that “*Alias Grace* is very much a novel rather than a documentary” (Atwood 1998, 35).

Alias Grace is particularly apt to be examined from the perspective of RCT due to the emphasis of the narrative on relationships, power dynamics, and Grace Marks’ relational experiences. Applying RCT to the novel, the study explores Grace’s relationships with Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery and how these connections shape her psychological development and sense of self. Key concepts of RCT, such as growth-fostering relationships, mutual empathy and empowerment, disconnection, power-over vs. power-with relations, and relational images will be explored in this study through Grace’s interactions with Mary and Nancy. In accordance with RCT’s focus on social and cultural context, this essay also reveals how patriarchal structures inhibit growth-fostering connections and perpetuate disconnection for Grace.

Growth-Fostering Relationship with Mary Whitney

During her first position as a servant at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s household, the protagonist Grace Marks, establishes a deep friendship with Mary Whitney, her fellow maid and roommate. Grace’s earlier family relationships are crucial to understanding how valuable the connection for Grace is. Prior to Mary, Grace was repeatedly denied the emotional safety, empathy, mutuality, and genuine connection required for psychological growth due to her abusive and neglectful father and passive, emotionally absent mother. Marked by trauma, her early relational experiences create a negative relational image that equates relationships with vulnerability, powerlessness, and invisibility. In RCT, relational images are “the inner pictures we devise out of what’s happened to us, [and] once created, we carry them in us. They become the framework by which we determine who we are, what we can do, and how worthwhile we are” (Miller and Stiver 1995, 214). Mary’s friendship disrupts Grace’s early relational image by offering mutual empathy and empowerment.

Empathy, one of the two essential components to promote growth, is described as “the process through which one’s experienced sense of basic connection and similarity to other humans is established” (Jordan 1984, 5). Mutual empathy goes beyond simple reciprocity; it is a dynamic process in which both participants grow and contribute to

the growth of each other and to the relationship (Jordan 2017, 235). As the slightly older and more experienced figure, Mary empathizes with Grace's naivety and ignorance by comforting Grace when she has her first menstruation. Recalling her mother's death, which began with stomach pain, Grace panics. Mary explains everything to her affectionately, as Grace recalls: "She did not laugh at me; but explained all ... comforted me, better than my own mother could have done" (Atwood 1997, 190). Grace demonstrates her empathy for Mary by offering her support throughout Mary's pregnancy. She does not judge Mary, but instead she helps hide her pregnancy. Concerned about Mary's future with a baby, Grace happily donates her savings. Their mutual connection not only enhances their growth and togetherness but also empowers them, fostering recognition and validation.

The other essential component for growth is *mutual empowerment* that arises from genuine connection and a shared sense of being valued and understood that are fostered by empathy. In RCT, empowerment does not involve being in control nor winning against others, but as Surrey explains, "[It is] power that is experienced as beyond the individual yet available to the individual. Neither person is in control; instead, each is enlarged and feels empowered, energized, and more real" (Surrey 1987, 4). Mary's empowerment is evident when she challenges Grace's abusive father, who comes to confiscate Grace's earnings, and in her comforting words to Grace for Mrs. Alderman's reprimands. Mary's friendship provides Grace with the support and strength she lacks. Grace exemplifies empowerment when Mary becomes pregnant with the employer's son under false promises. Feeling empowered, she guards Mary's secret, and she even leaves the house discreetly in the evening to accompany Mary to the doctor for the abortion. Thanks to this bond, she feels up to disobeying Mrs. Alderman and to conceal the man's identity despite her insistence. This relational empowerment allows them to assert their agency and resist the oppressive power dynamics.

The presence of mutual empathy and mutual empowerment makes this connection a *growth-fostering relationship*, characterized by what Miller and Stiver (1997, 30) term "five good things": zest, sense of worth, clarity, creativity, and desire for more. These manifest themselves within Mary and Grace's bond in many ways, enhancing their psychological well-being, growth, and progress toward healing. *Zest* refers to "an increase in vitality, aliveness, [and] energy" that arises from authentic connection (Miller and Stiver 1997, 30; Banks 2011, 170). Overall, their bond has zest—the energy and vitality—because both experience safety, emotional strength, and a sense of happiness and liveness despite the harsh conditions and oppressive environment during their domestic servitude. Mary makes fun of her employers by mimicking their expressions and walks, while Grace finds it amusing and enjoys being with her. Their shared laughter and confidentiality reflect the zest that arises from their connection. Grace confirms that with Mary's death, "the happiest time of [her] life was over and gone" (Atwood 1997, 209). The second outcome is *the increased sense of worth*. It describes the increase in "relational confidence experienced as feeling good about one's relational capacities and one's ability to affect others." (Comstock, Duffey, and St. George 2002). Upon discov-

ering Grace's remarkable talent for sewing, Mary sincerely compliments her rather than responding with jealousy or rivalry, saying "she was wasted as a servant, and ought to set up as a dressmaker" (Atwood 1997, 177). Mary's appreciation and recognition increase Grace's self-worth. It allows Grace to see herself as a valuable and capable individual worthy of deserving genuine connection. Likewise, being the protector and guide of Grace increases Mary's confidence and gives her a sense of purpose, affirming her agency and intelligence despite the social limitations imposed by class and gender.

Creativity, also known as productivity or action, is "a continuous process of bringing forth a changing vision of oneself, and of oneself in relation to the world" (Miller 1976, 116). For Grace, feeling seen and appreciated for her talent and personality removes the distorted self-image of her. It creates a possibility to reshape her vision of self and her place in the world. Mary says, "Being a servant was not a thing we were born to, nor would we be forced to continue at it forever..." (Atwood 1997, 181–182). The creativity is evident in Mary's words when she imagines a life beyond servitude, which encourages Grace to pursue an independent, better life. Fostered by creativity, *clarity* indicates a greater understanding about oneself and others, encompassing one's own feelings and early experiences. It denotes "being more in one's truth or in real self" leading to clarity and a sense of relief (Jordan 1986, 3). Their sincere conversations reflect the clarity they have, which results from the deep emotional trust and authenticity their relationship embodies. Their bond provides an emotionally safe place, which allows both to have an authentic engagement. This allows Grace to gain a deeper understanding of herself, others, and relationships. Mary's open criticism of the upper class when she comments, "People dressed in a certain kind of clothing are never wrong," reflects her understanding of upper-class hypocrisy (Atwood 1997, 35). Through Mary's openness, Grace gains clarity about social hierarchy and injustice.

Finally, *a desire for more connection* comes along with the previous four elements. A good connection makes us open and confident for more connection with the aim of "deepening existing bonds and seeking new ones" (Christner 2025). In the context of RCT, both Mary and Grace exhibit a strong desire for more connection, stemming from their experiences of zest, clarity, increased sense of worth, and creativity. However, this longing ends in trauma and loss. Mary's death following the unsuccessful abortion causes a profound rupture in Grace's psyche, leading to withdrawal, memory loss, and emotional numbness. Recognizing Mary as the growth-fostering figure she had long been deprived of, Grace admits, "Without her, it would have been a different story entirely" (Atwood 1997, 75). During her sessions with Dr. Jordan, her remarks, "It was difficult to begin talking... I had not talked very much for the past fifteen years, not really talking the way I once talked with Mary Whitney" underscores the extent of her isolation (Atwood 1997, 75). Mary's desire for more drives her to engage in a relationship with her employer's son even though she is well aware of patriarchal and hierarchical exploitation. Their bond is marked by deception and power-over dynamics. According to RCT, the experiences of both women exemplify the fundamental human need for connection and the harmful effects of social structures—classism and patriarchy—that obstruct the

establishment of growth-fostering relationships. In these structures the dominant avoids mutual empowerment to maintain control and in this mindset, power is regarded as a limited entity that cannot be shared (Miller and Stiver 1997, 49).

The gender- and class-based hierarchy of the society severely impairs Mary and Grace's mutuality and growth. When Mary becomes pregnant, the same society that subjects Nancy to condemnation, blame, and shame as an unwed woman shields the man involved from facing any consequences. Upon learning about Mary's unsuccessful termination, Mrs. Alderman initially insists that "the scoundrel should be exposed, and made to pay for his crime" (Atwood 1997, 206). However, upon discovering that the father is her son, Mrs. Alderman reverses her position. Compelling Grace to swear on the Bible not to disclose his name and promising a good reference in return, she uses her social status to silence Grace. Mrs. Parkinson's hypocrisy suggests that classism and power are at stake; even among women, there is no solidarity. The power-over dynamic she embodies reinforces control, privilege, and self-interest rather than mutual empathy. As a result, this social structure fosters disconnection. Mary's tragic death reveals how the patriarchal structure restricts and silences women. As a young woman, Mary defies the traditional obedient and vulnerable female figure. She is fearless, aspires to be her own mistress, and criticizes social injustice, and she even challenges patriarchal conventions. With Mary's loss, Grace internalizes the belief that women who defy patriarchal norms are judged, silenced, or punished, but never men. This insight is revealed in her statement to Dr. Jordan: "Saying what you really want out loud brings bad luck... you may be punished for it. This is what happened to Mary Whitney" (Atwood 1997, 111). Grace's reflection reveals how women are under constant patriarchal control, inflicting fear and danger. This internalization causes Grace to withhold her true thoughts, which undermines a possible authentic connection and creates isolation.

The magnitude of Grace's loss following Mary Whitney's untimely death is so profound that Mary Whitney remains an enduringly internalized figure even after her death. While fleeing with McDermott after the murders, Grace uses Mary's name, adopts her voice and persona during the hypnosis session, and later makes a memorial quilt from one of Mary's dresses. From an RCT perspective, it is called *strategies of disconnection*, which are "efforts to remain connected to others in the face of repeated relational disconnections" (Sparks 2004, 236). Although they are protective behaviours that are often unconsciously acquired to evade pain, rejection, and shame, they paradoxically contribute to one's sense of isolation and feeling unseen (Jordan 2018, 33–34). In short, when we have a natural need for connections but also fear them due to chronic disconnections, we tend to avoid connection. This is called a *relational paradox*. "The paradox is that these strategies... mask both the longing for and the terror of connection" (Walker 2004, 9). The "strategies of safety or survival" Grace engages in include withdrawal, people-pleasing to avoid conflict, and emotionally numbing herself (Jordan 2003, 6). To survive in an environment where authentic connection is impossible or unsafe, Mary's ongoing presence allows Grace to feel genuine connection in a world defined by power-over dynamics and relational disconnection. That is, this enables Grace to "carry that

growth-fostering relationship inside her and still nurture the things that that relationship nurtured" (Amy Makice, pers. comm.).

From Growth-Fostering Relationship to Chronic Disconnection: Grace's Search for Relational Healing

Following Mary's tragic death, Grace longs for a meaningful connection that once again might nurture her growth and facilitate healing. With this hope, she establishes a connection with Nancy Montgomery, the housekeeper and one of the murder victims. Drawn to Nancy's similar appearance, Grace accepts the position at Mr. Kinnear's household. She admits that more than the salary, "what weighed even more heavily was Nancy Montgomery herself" (Atwood 1997, 236). In RCT, relationships serve as "vehicles for our growth and our healing" (Banks and Hirschman 2015, 21). Grace's choice to befriend someone who resembles Mary is shaped by her need for connection that can lead to healing from trauma by Mary's sudden loss. Thus, Grace longs for Nancy's closeness and approval, aspiring to become "like sisters or at least good friends" (Atwood 1997, 263).

Even though mutuality and connection are essential for growth, RCT recognizes that the relationships are not always based on mutuality. Miller (1976, 14) writes, "Growth requires engagement with difference and with people embodying that difference". Therefore, in RCT, empathic failures and disconnections are regarded as inevitable elements of growth, as they offer an opportunity to learn more about oneself and the other person, which can lead to reconnection and mutual empowerment (Fletcher and Ragins 2007, 382; Frey 2013, 182). Although Grace realizes establishing a connection similar to the one she shared with Mary "was not the way things were going to be," she still hopes to gain some closeness, trust, and recognition from Nancy by complying with her orders and suppressing her resentment (Atwood 1997, 263). Grace's compliance is a strategy of disconnection that allows her to avoid harm and preserve some connection even if it is exploitative and one-sided. Despite her efforts, this bond does not evolve as Grace hoped because it is rooted in power-over dynamics rather than mutual empowerment and empathy due to Nancy's changeable and hostile attitude towards Grace. Her adoption of a stance of dominance and superiority hinders any potential for mutuality, instead fosters hierarchy. Grace observes, "Nancy was very changeable, two-faced you might call her... One minute she would be up on her high horse and ordering me about and finding fault, and the next minute she would be my best friend, or pretend to be..." (Atwood 1997, 264). Her inconsistency creates a power-over relational dynamic that disempowers Grace, reducing her to a passive role with a sense of insecurity. Moreover, Nancy's deliberate concealment of her intimate relationship with Mr. Kinnear underscores the absence of transparency and trust in their relational dynamic, deepening the distance between them. The absence of mutuality and authenticity prevents any chance of reconnection but perpetuates disconnections, which are regarded as "the primary source of human suffering, resulting in paralyzing psychological isolation and impaired relational

functioning” (Walker 2004, 6). Disconnections are “the pattern of immobilization, fear, and self-blame [that] leads to a heightened sense of isolation” (Jordan 1995, 3).

When disconnections persist, they become *chronic disconnections*. When not addressed properly, they lead to isolation, powerlessness, and self-blame, making growth impossible (Miller 1998, 5). Marked by acute disconnections, Grace and Nancy’s bond results in the reversal of five good things: “a lack of zest, low self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness, a lack of understanding of why things go wrong, and a turning away from connection” (Miller and Stiver 1997, 106). This passage from *Alias Grace* offers a rich and deeply emotional glimpse into these opposite outcomes. Nancy gives Grace the afternoon off on her sixteenth birthday, but the day becomes a painful reflection on her suffering. While sitting under a tree, she reflects on her lack of reliable friendships:

I had no friends here except Nancy, if she could be called a friend, being such as weathervane, a friend one day and the next quite turned against me; and perhaps Jamie Walsh, but he was a mere boy. There was Charley, but he was a horse, and although a good listener and a comfort, of not much avail when I needed advice. I did not know where my family was, which was the same as having none... I was indeed alone in the world, with no prospects before me except the drudgery I’d been doing; and although I could always find a different situation, still it would be the same sort of work, from dawn to dusk, with always a mistress to be ordering me about (Atwood 1997, 308).

Reflecting on her lack of connections, she says her only true friend Mary is gone; Nancy cannot be her friend due to her shifting moods. She does not consider Jamie as someone she can depend on for emotional support, as he is “a mere boy.” Ironically, she names the horse Charley as her only source of comfort and confidant despite its inability to speak. This points to the severity of her isolation from human connection. Her remark that “the very birds were strangers to me” highlights her isolation from nature itself (Atwood 1997, 308). Furthermore, she cannot envision a life beyond domestic servitude. This reflects her decreased self-worth, lack of creativity, and sense of powerlessness in the absence of growth-fostering relationships. Unable to take action, she cannot even decide where to go and what to do on her birthday due to a lack of vitality and clarity. Thus, she avoids connections and turns towards condemned isolation. As a result, Grace does not experience healing and growth, which can only occur in growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al. 2008, 279).

According to RCT, patriarchal social structure is the major cause of disconnections, which is revealed in Grace and Nancy’s relationship in various ways (Spencer 2002, 7). Nancy Montgomery is a potential ally for a growth-fostering relationship, given that both women are close in age and share the vulnerable position of being a female servant. Yet, once again, the gender and class hierarchy rule out this possibility. Nancy is aware that when she attends church with Grace on Sunday, she is despised and avoided by the community members, while her employer Mr. Kinnear, a wealthy bachelor rumoured to be a womanizer, preserves his respect. To overcome this double standard, she wants to ascend socially through her affair with Mr. Kinnear. However, Nancy views Grace as a rival due to youth, beauty, and intelligence. Therefore, Nancy asserts dominance over

Grace, especially when Mr. Kinnear is present. In his absence, Nancy behaves in a sisterly manner, inviting Grace to share her room and belongings. McDermott's remark, "when the cat was away the mice would play" refers to Nancy's mood swings and her assumed authoritative attitude (Atwood 1997, 271). This situation shows how patriarchal and class-based hierarchies can obscure the possibility of growth-fostering connections by replacing mutuality and safety with rivalry and dominance. When ignored by Mr. Kinnear, Nancy directs her anger at Grace instead of him. She cannot afford to challenge him directly, as it would risk her status in the house and accordingly diminish her chance to ascend social ladders. Additionally, being emotionally and economically dependent on him leaves her powerless. This dynamic demonstrates how patriarchal structure can turn females against one another, especially when social status and power are involved.

Mr. Kinnear exploits his social status and economic power to benefit from his servants, reflecting how dominance is normalized in patriarchal society. When Dr. Simon Jordan asks if Mr. Kinnear took advantage of her, Grace's response, "only what was usual," suggests that such behaviours were normalized (Atwood 1997, 367). Within this environment, Grace and Nancy are constantly objectified and subordinated. During a dinner scene, his friends dehumanize Grace, comparing her to something "growing on the tree" and refer to Nancy as a part of Kinnear's "Turkish harem" (Atwood 1997, 297). Mr. Kinnear's passive compliance and smirking response expose his hypocrisy despite his outward respectability. Moreover, his friend's advice to Grace about protecting her "fine blue eyes" from Nancy's scratch further reveals his awareness and likely encouragement of this tension between Mary and Grace (Atwood 1997, 297). He turns this power-over-play between the two women into an amusement among his friends, disregarding the physical and emotional damage it causes. As her male employer, he intrudes on Grace's privacy under the guise of authority. Instead of apologizing, his comment "A cat may look at a queen" shows his use of witty language to disguise exploitation behind the mask of civility and charm and to rationalize violations (Atwood 1997, 32).

Conclusion

The analysis of the protagonist Grace Marks' relationships in *Alias Grace* from the perspective of RCT highlights the fundamental human need for connection and the impact of relationships on psychological development. Grace's connection with Mary Whitney exemplifies a growth-fostering relationship characterized by mutual empathy and empowerment. Through their bond they experience the five outcomes: zest, creativity, sense of worth, clarity, and desire for more connection, which also promote their growth and healing. Their bond allows Grace to reshape her negative relational images she formed as a result of her earlier disconnections within her family. However, Mary's sudden death from a failed abortion disrupts this growth and leads Grace to establish a connection with Nancy Montgomery with the hope of nurturing her

growth and healing. In contrast, this bond lacks mutuality and authenticity, resulting in chronic disconnection. The reversal of the five outcomes in this bond leads Grace to experience a diminished sense of zest and self-worth. The violations and hurts leave her feeling powerless and confused. As connections become a source of pain, trying to avoid them, she adopts strategies of disconnection, such as silence, withdrawal, and compliance, to protect herself in her connection to Nancy and Mr. Kinnear. Although these strategies provide short-term protection, they also suppress her natural need for connections. These relational experiences also reveal how social hierarchies and patriarchy obstruct the formation of growth-fostering relationships, particularly for women, but instead promote disconnection by replacing empathy and mutuality. The gender- and class-based hierarchy of the society severely impairs Mary and Grace's mutuality and growth by leaving them struggling with survival, exploitation, fear of judgment, and inequality. Patriarchal and hierarchical social structures limit their capacity for connection and cut their relationship short, causing Mary's death and leaving Grace in relational trauma and grief. Nancy and Grace's relationship also discloses how patriarchal structure can turn females against one another and can obscure the possibility of growth-fostering connection by replacing mutuality and safety with rivalry and dominance. Mr. Kinnear's behaviours further represent how patriarchal structures maintain the exploitation and silence them using their gender, social status, and economic power. His attitude demonstrates how civility and language mask power-over dynamics. Viewed through the lens of RCT, *Alias Grace* becomes more than a narrative of crime and mystery, given its focus on the transformative potential of growth-fostering relationships and the detrimental effects of disconnections on psychological growth, particularly for women living within restrictive social systems.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. 1997. *Alias Grace*. Toronto: Seal Books McClellan-Bantam Inc.
- . 1998. "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction." *The American Historical Review* 103 (5): 1503–1516. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649966>.
- Banks, Amy. 2011. "The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual." In *Developing the Capacity to Connect*. *Zygon* 46, no. 1 (March): 170–185.
- Banks, Amy, and Leigh Ann Hirschman. 2015. *Wired to Connect: The Surprising Link Between Brain Science and Strong, Healthy Relationships*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Baumeister, Roy F., and Mark R. Leary. 1995. "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117: 497–529.
- Cherry, Kendra, MSED. 2024. "Your Experiences Can Change How Your Brain Functions." *Verywell Mind*. Accessed May 5, 2025. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-brain-plasticity-2794886>.
- Christner, Ray W., Psy.D., NCSP, ABPP. 2025. "The Five Good Things That Emerge From Supportive Relationships: How Connection Transforms Us." *Living Psyched, Psychology*

- Today, September 12, 2025. Reviewed by Monica Vilhauer, Ph.D. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-psyched/202509/the-five-good-things-that-emerge-from-supportive-relationships>.”
- Comstock, Dana L., Thelma Duffey, and Holly St. George. 2002. “The Relational-Cultural Model: A Framework for Group Process.” *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 27 (3): 254–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193392202027003002>.
- Comstock, D. L., Hammer, T. R., Strentzsch, J., Cannon, K., Parsons, J., & II, G. S. 2008. Relational-Cultural Theory: A Framework for Bridging Relational, Multicultural, And Social Justice Competencies. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86(3), 279–287.
- Cooke, Nathalie. 2004. *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Davis, Kenneth L., and Christian Montag. 2019. “Selected Principles of Pankseppian Affective Neuroscience.” *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 12, Article 1025. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2018.01025>.
- Fletcher, Joyce K., and Belle Rose Ragins. 2007. “Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory: A Window on Relational Mentoring.” In *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy E. Kram, 373–399. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976619>.
- Frey, L. L. 2013. “Relational-Cultural Therapy: Theory, Research, And Application to Counseling Competencies.” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 44 (3), 177.
- Jordan, Judith V. 1984. “Empathy and Self Boundaries.” *Work in Progress*, no. 16. Wellesley: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- . 1986. “Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality.” *Work in Progress*, no. 29. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women.
- . 1995. “Relational Awareness: Transforming Disconnection.” *Work in Progress*, no. 76. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women.
- . 2001. “A Relational-Cultural Model: Healing through Mutual Empathy.” *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 65 (1, Special Issue): 92–103.
- . 2003. “Valuing Vulnerability: New Definitions of Courage.” *Work in Progress*, no. 102. Wellesley, MA: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- . 2017. “Relational–Cultural Theory: The Power of Connection to Transform Our Lives.” *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 56 (3): 228–243. DOI: 10.1002/johc.12055
- . 2018. *Relational–Cultural Therapy*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Katz, Brigit. 2017. “The Mysterious Murder Case That Inspired Margaret Atwood’s ‘Alias Grace.’” *Smithsonian Magazine*. Published November 1, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mysterious-murder-case-inspired-margaret-atwoods-alias-grace-180967045/>.
- Lieberman, Matthew D. 2013. *Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Jean Baker. 1976. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Great Britain: Penguin Books.
- . 1986. “What Do We Mean by Relationships?” *Work in Progress*, no. 22. Wellesley, MA: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.

- Miller, Jean Baker, Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Irene P. Stiver, and Janet L. Surrey. 1991. "Some Misconceptions and Reconceptions of a Relational Approach". *Work in Progress*, no. 49. Wellesley, MA: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- Miller, Jean Baker, and Irene Pierce Stiver. 1995. "Relational Images and Their Meanings in Psychotherapy." *Work in Progress*, no. 74. Wellesley, MA: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- . 1997. *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships In Therapy and In Life*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1998. "Connections, Disconnections and Violations." *Work in Progress*, no. 33. Wellesley, MA: Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- Schwartz, Harriet. 2021. "Exploring Relational Cultural Theory: In Conversation with Dr. Judith V. Jordan Ep 1 Early History." YouTube video, 35:57. Posted January 25, 2021. https://youtu.be/T8BpKzK8qpk?list=PLW2VafMCJ_yHzS2GhKHxKtvM3N3YNYhqk.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 2012. *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Sparks, Elizabeth. 2004. "Relational Experiences of Delinquent Girls: A Case Study." In *How Connections Heal: Stories from Relational-Cultural Therapy*, edited by M. Walker and W. B. Rosen, 236. New York: Guilford Press.
- Spencer, Renee M. S. S.W., Ed.M. 2002. "A Comparison of Relational Psychologies." *Work in Progress*, no. 5. Wellesley, Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women.
- Surrey, Janet L. 1987. "Relationship and Empowerment." *Work in Progress*, no. 30. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women Publications.
- Walker, Maureen. 2004. "How Relationships Heal." In *How Connections Heal: Stories from Relational-Cultural Therapy*, edited by M. Walker and W. B. Rosen, 9. New York: Guilford Press.
- Young, Jessica. 2021. "Grace Marks." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Published January 21, 2021. Last edited August 23, 2021. Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/grace-marks>.