

# The Language of Truth, Memory and Madness in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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**Abstract:** In 1843, a 16-year-old Canadian housemaid named Grace Marks was tried for the murder of her employer and his mistress. The jury delivered a guilty verdict and the trial made headlines throughout the world. Nevertheless, opinion remained resolutely divided about Marks in terms of considering her a scorned woman who had taken out her rage on two, innocent victims, or an unwitting victim herself, implicated in a crime she was too young to understand. In 1996 Canadian author Margaret Atwood reconstructs Grace's story in her novel *Alias Grace*. Our analysis probes the story of Grace Marks as it appears in the Canadian television miniseries *Alias Grace*, consisting of 6 episodes, directed by Mary Harron and based on Margaret Atwood's novel, adapted by Sarah Polley. The series premiered on CBC on 25 September 2017 and also appeared on Netflix on 3 November 2017. We apply a qualitative (corpus-driven) and qualitative (discourse analytical) approach to examine mood and modal verbs for what they can reveal about the language of truth, memory and madness in the language of the miniseries. Findings reveal that epistemic modal verbs highly correlate with a somewhat manipulative narrative surrounding Grace's recall of events leading to the murder, when she is under hypnosis. The dynamic nature of epistemics also allows us to reason along the lines of agent- vs. subject-oriented modality when assessing the 'truth', particularly in what may be considered the denouement in the miniseries.

**Keywords:** Modality, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics, Memory, Truth, Madness, Margaret Atwood.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1843, a 16-year-old Canadian housemaid named Grace Marks was tried for the murder of her employer and his mistress. The jury delivered a guilty verdict and the trial made headlines throughout the world. Nevertheless, opinion remained resolutely divided about Marks in terms of considering her a scorned woman who had taken out her rage on two, innocent victims, or an unwitting victim herself, implicated in a crime she was too young to understand. Marks spent the following 30 years in various jails and asylums. In 1996 Margaret Atwood reconstructs Grace's story in her novel *Alias Grace*. Her unsettling portraits of 19<sup>th</sup> century prison and asylum life are meticulously detailed. In her novel Atwood introduces Dr. Simon Jordan, a physician who was retained to assess her degree of madness, who listens to the prisoner's tale with sympathy as well as disbelief (Atwood 1996: 4). Victorian ideology did not allow for women's voices to be heard and in Atwood's novel Grace is found guilty of murder in the court of public opinion. Yet, Grace Marks is given the opportunity to find her voice during her sessions with Dr. Jordan, who affords her the opportunity of freedom through the narration of events surrounding the murder.

Our analysis probes the story of Grace Marks as it appears in the Canadian television miniseries *Alias Grace* directed by Mary Harron and based on Margaret Atwood's novel, adapted by Sarah Polley. The series premiered on CBC on 25 September 2017 and also appeared on Netflix on 3 November 2017. We need to acknowledge that when storytelling is transferred from one medium to another, inevitably the basic issue of whether rendition in the other medium results as being 'faithful' to the source arises and we question whether something is lost in the process. In his *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone (2003) discusses issues of difference in audience perception of cinematic and literary forms, stemming from the differences in their raw materials. He distinguishes the effect a camera has on our visual perception, along with the fundamental role of editing in the process of adaptation (*ibid.*: 20). Bluestone also hones in on the two media's ability to manage time and space and defines language as a medium consisting of "three characteristics of time – transience, sequence and irreversibility" (*ibid.*: 49), but in film "the camera is always the narrator, we need concern ourselves only with the chronological duration of the viewing and the time-span of narrative events" (*ibid.*: 49).

Further, in terms of audience reception, we espouse the view put forward by Garzone (2002) who suggests looking beyond the texts or the situation in which the texts are framed and using norms as a principle to assess text reception. She goes on to distinguish norms as “internalised behavioral constraints which govern [...] choices in relation to the different contexts” (*ibid.*: 110). She clarifies that this definition of norms has its counterpart in text reception, and reminds us that users’ expectations can also be seen as norm-based. She stresses that the concept of norms can be used as a guide, not necessarily as regularities to be extracted from texts, but as prevailing normative and cognitive expectations.

For the purposes of this analysis, our view contemplates that a good majority of TV viewers may not have ever read Margaret Atwood’s novel and this fact alone may bring with it the expectation that – at the very least – what we view on screen would be the suggestion of a period piece whose context would portray credible themes as backdrop for the main protagonist’s plight, without necessarily ever even considering that what we are viewing is the end product of an adaptation from another medium. This ensues in the spirit of entertainment. That said, ours is indeed a study and we shall side with Desmond and Hawkes in considering that “...the story is the what in the narrative that is depicted, discourse is the how” (2015: 39). As a point of reference, we here intend to examine the discourse in the TV miniseries *Alias Grace*.

Atwood’s novel explores issues of truth, and the nature of memory. Our analysis examines how the two – truth and memory – relate to an assessment of Grace Mark’s mental state and her alleged madness when considering to either further incarcerate her or commit her to an insane asylum. This study examines grammatical keywords to consider the truth and attitude of speakers in relation to their context (mood and modality) in order to see how the language in *Alias Grace* narrates both Grace Mark’s predicament and any shifts in her stance vis-à-vis other protagonists in the miniseries based on Atwood’s novel. Section 2 defines our corpus, outlines our methodology and analytical tools. Section 3 discusses power and ideology in relation to madness, while section 4 examines the language in the miniseries and presents our findings. Finally, section 5 discusses our findings and offers concluding remarks.

## 2. CORPUS, METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Our corpus is comprised of both transcripts and audiovisual content of the TV miniseries *Alias Grace* which consists of six episodes. We use the corpus manager and analysis program Sketch Engine<sup>1</sup> to seek single- and multi-word keyness to understand whether this has an impact on the use of mood and modality (Groom 2010, Stubbs 2010). The meaning of keywords and their keyness (Bondi 2010) derives from comparative quantitative corpus analysis, which identifies words which are statistically prominent in particular texts and text collections (*ibid.*: 22).<sup>2</sup> Mood and modality are quantitatively detected in texts in order to assess what they may reveal in relation to events unfolding in the miniseries narrative that specifically relate to issues of truth, memory and madness. A discourse analytical approach then ensues to correlate our quantitative findings.

### 2.1 Mood and modality:

Modality and hedging cut across the grammar and discourse of a language, in response to unfolding pragmatic needs and textual constraints. It is concerned primarily with the social negotiation of meaning. In current linguistics, there are two major approaches to the definition of modality. One is in terms of ‘speaker attitudes’ or ‘subjectivity’, and the other in terms of ‘factuality’, ‘actuality’, or ‘reality’ (Narrog 2012: 5).

We analyze the author's attitude towards the truth of a proposition, in the Gricean sense (Grice 1975). In other words, we assess how committed the speaker is to what he or she is saying, i.e. a facet of illocutionary force that expresses the general intent of the speaker, signaled by grammatical expressions (moods). A basic distinction within linguistic modality is the distinction between epistemic and deontic modality. Epistemic modality is generally concerned with possibility and necessity with regard to knowledge, whereas deontic modality has to do with permission and obligation in relation to some system of rules (Furmaniak and Larreya 2015: 107). In §2.2 we link the construct of ‘truth’ to the issue of subjectivity and discuss agent- vs. subject-oriented modality. In order to do so we expound on these and other modality modes, following Biber *et al.* (1999), von Wright (1951), and others.

The choice to examine mood and modality in our corpus is linked to issues of Grace’s memory and how it is distinguished in language. We speculate that shifts in mood and modality may correspond to Grace’s recall of events surrounding the death of her former employer and his mistress, as well as of the events that lead to their deaths and her subsequent incarceration and confinement in an insane asylum.

<sup>1</sup> <https://the.sketchengine.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on how the keyness score of a word is calculated, see <https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/documentation/statistics-used-in-sketch-engine/>

## 2.2 'Truth' and agent- vs. subject-oriented modality:

Biber's three categories of modal verbs (Biber *et al.* 1999: 485) are: permission/possibility/ability (*can, could, may, might*), obligation/necessity (*must, should, (had) better, have (got) to, need to, ought to, be supposed to*), volition/prediction (*will, would, shall, be going to*). Of those listed, we have found in our corpus (Table 2) a high incidence of both the first category of permission/possibility/ability, specifically the modal 'may' and the third category of volition/prediction, specifically the modal 'would'. Of extreme value to this study, of course, is precisely the third category because it would shed light on the distinction between intentionality and madness. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the first category ('may') allows us to better comprehend the denouement in the *Alias Grace* narrative and opens a window into how the protagonist Grace Marks moved along a double-edged sword, at once suffering the consequences of her predicament, while exploiting it to earn her freedom.

Expounding on other modes of modality, von Wright (1951: 1-2) describes 4 modes of modality: alethic, epistemic, deontic, and existential. Alethic (or logical) modality is concerned with the degree of certainty of a proposition. Alethic modality is a category of modal logic, but clear cases of this mode do not occur frequently in everyday discourse (von Wright 1951: 1-2). We have already mentioned epistemic modality, that is basically concerned with matters of knowledge and belief. It is related to the speaker's belief or opinion about the validity of the proposition (Kärkkäinen 2003: 150). It can modify the truth of a semantic proposition (Lew 1997: 146) and represents a truth-oriented "attitude" (Jacobsson 1994: 167). It is concerned with the speaker's assumptions or assessment of possibilities and generally indicates the speaker's confidence (or lack of confidence) in the truth of the proposition. Through the use of our senses and intellect, epistemic modality makes a representation that matches the world in a sort of 'theoretical' modality (James 1986: 13). The uses of epistemic modality corresponds to "logical" uses of modals (Bailey 1981: 182). For Biber (1999: 485) epistemics also include dynamic modality, i.e. another subdivision is between 'subjective' and 'objective' epistemic modality. Further, epistemic modality may also be subdivided according to: the speaker's judgments of necessity and possibility (including the two above categories), and evidentiality. Evidentiality is a grammatical category with the source of information as its primary meaning, in the sense of whether the speaker saw the event happen, did not see it but heard it, made an inference based on general knowledge or visual traces, or was told about it.

Also mentioned previously, deontic modality is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by 'agents' concerned with obligation and permission (Trask 1997). It relates to duties in terms of social or institutional laws (Kärkkäinen 2003: 150) and involves the issuing of directives and is associated with notions of such as permission or obligation' (Lew 1997: 146). It is 'discourse-oriented', non-epistemic modality. Palmer (1990) sees deontic modality as discourse-oriented since it refers more to the speech-act). Existential modality, the last of the four types of modality listed by von Wright (1951: 2), as Palmer highlights (1990: 6-7, 107-9) is more the concern of logicians rather than linguists, similar to alethic modality.

Before proceeding to the analysis of our corpus (§4), we discuss power and ideology in relation to madness in narratives (§3) in an attempt to fully grasp – if at all possible – the role of madness in miniseries *Alias Grace*.

## 3. POWER AND IDEOLOGY IN RELATION TO MADNESS IN STORYTELLING

Before Grace was imprisoned she had been incarcerated in an insane asylum as a 'madwoman'. This experience offers Grace insight into the society of her day. Her discourse of madwomen's stories is not only a challenge to Victorian ideology but also a disclosure of the hypocritical essence of the asylum (Xiaoxiao 2014: 175). According to Susanna Pauly (1999: 138-39), madness relates closely to the Victorian ideas of femininity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada, with Darwin's theories of biological sexual difference serving as scientific backing. Morgan (1996) stresses that temperance was a province-wide movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada. The movement "would rescue families from degradation, as well as improving social, economic and political conditions" (*ibid.*: 163). In the context of temperance language, "the drunkard was rarely constructed as female" (*ibid.*: 164) because women were always considered to portray morality and virtue. However, once women deviated from social norms, they would be characterized as insane by society (Xiaoxiao 2014: 175-6).

As to how madness is categorized, some feminists think of madness as a category constructed and imposed by society onto the 'other', the figure who does not conform to the social norm. Rigney (1978), for instance, argues that "sanity and insanity [...] are designed as polarities only by a society, largely masculine in its assumption of power, whose own 'sanity' depends on such distinction" (*ibid.*: 62).

Grace Mark's narration about madwomen also extends to the matrons in the asylum, who were all fat and strong like men and rude towards the psychological patients. Grace complains that they would provoke the patients, particularly before they were to receive visitors because they wanted others to see how dangerous patients could be and, at the same time, to show visitors how well they could control patients. The matron's violent attitude towards madwomen reflects the essence of the insane asylum, an issue that is highlighted by Michel Foucault (1988) in his *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault maintains that asylums were instituted under the guise of offering appropriate medical attention to those individuals categorized by 'humanity' as 'mad', but in reality to contain them. This period was deceptively termed "that happy age when madness was fully recognized" (Trigg 2003: 5). Tina Trigg pushes the argument further by pointing out that "such cant, however, smacks of insincerity and hints at the questionable motivations shadowing the practice of segregation" (*ibid.*). This brings us to suggest that madness was a condition arbitrarily determined by the ruling power. The asylum was part of a social apparatus to marginalize and segregate the 'other'.

In our discussion on the theme of power we lean on Cixous's (1997) distinction of power-to and power-over, which is related to the symbolic construction of gender in society. Masculinity being the gender principle underlying the norm of reason in patriarchy, the construction of gender implies a correlation between femininity and madness (Özdemir 2003: 66).

In *Alias Grace* there is use of the mirror and the camera as symbols of the split self and alienation, capturing people in an objectified and distorted form (Rigney 1978: 94). In this respect, storytelling seems to be pivotal, because it harnesses a creative power that can overcome potential linguistic restrictions. Indeed Grace Marks 'finds her voice' in her sessions with Dr. Jordan, when afforded the opportunity to tell her story. However, unlike other modes of linguistic reasoning, personal narration is essentially a social activity and, as a strategy for survival, storytelling seems to be at its most powerful when teller and hearer, thus Grace and Dr. Jordan, work together in constructing a narrative (Shepard 1995: 356). Powerful agency, i.e. who overcomes or is affected by whom, is crucial to these narratives because they demonstrate plots which center on the recognition of a conflict and they develop until the difficulty is totally resolved and obstacles are overcome (*ibid.*: 361), in most cultures. Sarbin (1986: 89) adds that in hero myths of the Western world "heroes and heroines brought under duress, undertake tasks which resolve their problems". Such is Grace Mark's fate.

As to discourse 'mimes', Fairclough (2003) explains that discourses, or the language we habitually use to speak of different aspects of society, carry with them the dominant ideologies of our society. We hear these discourses and take their implications for granted, accepting them as common sense and we reproduce them in our own language. This is the way in which dominant power is able to exert authority without coercion (Shepard 1995: 363-4). But reproduction also implies modification, similar to what occurs in the game of 'telephone' or 'Chinese whispers', where players form a line and the first whispers a message to the second who, in turn, whispers it to a third player, and so on. When the message reaches the last player it inevitably has undergone modification. This process leads those who have power to modify their own discourses in order to keep pace with changing society. Phenomena of this kind may happen through what Fairclough (*ibid.*) calls 'extension through combination' – the combination and successive modification of existing discourses. Sometimes, however, power shifts are more radically grounded and make for more striking changes of discourse to occur, thus shaping new ways of thinking. One example is the women's movement that has been able to introduce and disseminate revised views of gender roles and relationships in many parts of the world, allowing women the freedom from mental institutions when they seem to stray from social norms.

#### 4. THE LANGUAGE OF TRUTH, MEMORY AND MADNESS: FINDINGS

This section presents findings from our corpus-driven approach. Table 1 lists salient modal verbs extracted from the processing of scripts using Sketch Engine. The table highlights in bold the frequency of marked lexis in relation to the list of average frequency calculated for all 6 episodes (also indicated in bold) of each lexical item. The table indicates episodes along the first row as AG (*Alias Grace*) followed by the number of each episode. We shall use this system throughout this paper to refer to specific episodes. Marked modal verbs are further specified with an arrow and both 'would' and 'may' emerge as being marked in AG6.

We shall discuss 'truth' as distinguished during recall in AG6, the miniseries finale. In so doing, we will examine the grammar of 'would' in epistemic contexts (see Furmaniak and Larreyra 2015) that are contexts in which "some doubt is expressed or implied either concerning the truth of a proposition or concerning some semantic element inherent in it" (*ibid.*: 105).

Table 1: Modality wordlists

Episodes	AG1	AG2	AG3	AG4	AG5	AG6	Average
<b>Modality</b>							
Would	29	23	29	43	29	46	33
Will	57	67	38	44	54	36	49
Can	17	20	20	26	22	21	21
Must	8	21	8	7	28	16	14
May	10	3	2	3	2	12	5
Could	15	8	18	19	20	10	15
Should	11	7	14	11	13	4	6
Might	3	1	4	9	9	1	5

Prior to AG6 Grace had met a peddler, Jeremiah, who turned up at the Governor's mansion in AG6 as Dr. Dupont, offering to attempt to hypnotize Grace in order to get to the underlying truth of her role in the murder of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy. After giving it some thought, in AG6 Dr. Jordon tells Grace that she will be hypnotized the following day. Jeremiah-Dr. Dupont hypnotizes her at the Governor's mansion amidst a group of observers. Once in a semiconscious state, Grace takes on the persona and voice of her friend Mary Whitney who had passed away following an abortion. After witnessing another woman among the onlookers grab hold of Dr. Jordon's hand, Grace demonstrates jealousy (through the persona Mary), calling her a 'slut'. Dr. Jordon asks Grace if she ever had relations with McDermott, the boy implicated in the murders. She, again as Mary, claims the two had kissed passionately, attempting to anger and provoke Dr. Jordon, making him jealous. She further claims she tried to string along both McDermott and Mr. Kinnear (murder victim). Grace-as-Mary reveals she murdered Nancy (Mr. Kinnear's mistress) and that Grace does not know of Mary's existence within her, implying Grace's innocence in the matter. When Dupont brings her out of her trance, Grace appears not to have any awareness of what she had said. Dupont tells the observers that it looks as if there were be two, separate personalities in the same body. Dr. Jordon is personally offended by the turn of events and decides to leave town, refusing to write a report about Grace's case because he was unable to discern whether Grace was deceiving everyone by faking her hypnosis or not.

We have chosen a series of text samples from the AG6 'would' concordance lists illustrated in Figg. 1-3 from AG6 to illustrate how the construct of truth, when enmeshed in a context of elicited memory and purported madness, is scrutinized in a series of different categories of epistemic contexts, ranging from 'would' expressing a high probability of the truth of a proposition, to contexts which presuppose the truth of the modalized proposition and can be called factual, to contexts in which 'would' is constructed with a verb of epistemic judgement and qualifies a speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition (*ibid.*:105-106).

Figure 1 illustrates the first of three Sketch Engine video displays of concordances with 'would' in AG6.

Query **would** 46 (7,940.62 per million) ⓘ

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doc#0 or later, we will get to the bottom of it. It **would** be a relief to me, sir, to know the whole truth at  
doc#0 the noose very firmly around his own neck, as he **'d** have to admit to the ax play and so forth. Whereas  
doc#0 ) That woman has nerves like flint to me. She **'d** have made a good lawyer, if a man. So, you've met  
doc#0 your departure, and make sure that you **'d** stay in the room with her for as long as possible.  
doc#0 with her for as long as possible. What on Earth **would** be the point in that? Amusing me won't get her out  
doc#0 spun out her yarn for me to as great a length as it **would** go. I mean, she was besotted with me. One hand  
doc#0 with me. One hand placed on hers, and she **would** have thrown herself into my arms. Indeed, and, I  
doc#0 of Nancy Montgomery. And if she had been? Well, I **would** n't have got her off. Public opinion would have  
doc#0 , I wouldn't have got her off. Public opinion **would** have been too strong for me. She would have  
doc#0 opinion would have been too strong for me. She **would** have hanged. But in your opinion, she was  
doc#0 to people, trying to find out if I was guilty? You **would** n't find it out that way. You don't understand  
doc#0 go to sleep when Dr. DuPont tells you to do so. How **would** (SNIFFS) How will Dr. DuPont put me to sleep? He  
doc#0 I wonder if she wanted you to find it? SIMON: What **would** you put in a keepsake album, Grace? A piece of  
doc#0 after the hymn. I hope I was named after it. I **would** like to be found. I would like to see. Or be seen. I  
doc#0 I was named after it. I would like to be found. I **would** like to see. Or be seen. I wonder if in the eye of  
doc#0 . Your arm is an iron bar, which no one can bend. **Would** anyone care to try? No one? So be it. (STRAINING)  
doc#0 paramour, is that it? Yes. Whether I did what you **'d** like to do with that little slut who's got hold of  
doc#0 hold of your hand? (GASPS) (LAUGHS SOFTLY) You **'d** like to know that, so I'll tell you. Yes. I would  
doc#0 ) You'd like to know that, so I'll tell you. Yes. I **would** meet him outside, in the yard. I'd press up  
doc#0 you. Yes. I would meet him outside, in the yard. I **'d** press up against him, and let him kiss me, and

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Figure 1: Concordances of 'would' in AG6 – page 1

Of extreme interest is the first text sample listed in Table 2, that starts at 6 min. and 55 seconds into AG6.<sup>3</sup> Grace's switching of modal 'would' (prediction, subjective) to 'will' (volition, objective) denotes her intention to allow Dr. Dupont's to hypnotize her.

Table 2: Text samples from 'would' concordance list Fig. 1

Speaker	Time lapse in episode	Text
Grace	@6:55	How <b>would</b> (SNIFFS) How <b>will</b> Dr. DuPont put me to sleep?
Grace (SINGING LYRING TO 'AMAZING GRACE')	@8:29	I once was lost. But now I'm found. Was blind but now I see. (HER VERBALIZED THOUGHTS FOLLOW) I wonder if I was named after the hymn. I hope I was named after it. I <b>would</b> like to be found. I <b>would</b> like to see. Or be seen.
Grace-as-Mary	@15:29	<b>I would</b> meet him outside, in the yard. <b>I'd</b> press up against him, and let him kiss me, and touch me all over, Doctor, the same places you'd like to touch me, because I can always tell.

The second text sample listed in Table 2, starting at 8 min. and 29 seconds contains two cases of 'would', both of which may be distinguished as the speaker's judgments of necessity and possibility. Conversely, the third text sample, beginning at 15 min. and 29 seconds contains two cases ('I would' and 'I'd) that can be described as agent-oriented modality.

Figure 2 lists the second Sketch Engine video display of concordances with 'would' in AG6. Four text samples have been extracted from this to also include co-text (Table 4).

Query **would** 46 (7,940.62 per million) ⓘ

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**doc#0** touch me all over, Doctor, the same places you 'd like to touch me, because I can always tell. I

**doc#0** with me. But that was all, Doctor. That was all I 'd let him do. I had him on a string. Mr. Kinnear as

**doc#0** the two of them dancing to my tune. Ask her why. I **would** breathe like this. (MOANING SOFTLY) I would

**doc#0** . I would breathe like this. (MOANING SOFTLY) I **would** twist and twine. After that, he'd say he'd do

**doc#0** SOFTLY) I would twist and twine. After that, he 'd say he'd do anything. But why? Oh, Doctor. (

**doc#0** ) I would twist and twine. After that, he'd say he 'd do anything. But why? Oh, Doctor. (SCOFFS) You

**doc#0** should have taken it off Nancy's neck. But James **would** n't let me have it, nor her gold earrings,

**doc#0** , neither. There was blood on it, but that **would** have washed out. LYDIA: You killed her. I always

**doc#0** she's never known. They almost hanged her, that **would** have been wrong. I only borrowed her clothing

**doc#0** to open the window, so I couldn't get out. But I **would** n't want to hurt her. - You mustn't tell her. - Why

**doc#0** share things. But they didn't believe me. They **would** n't listen. I was not heard. Grace. Stop playing

**doc#0** dizzy. Frequently the case. Mrs. Quenell, **would** you see that Grace is brought to a bedchamber

**doc#0** perjuring myself. The safest thing to do **would** be to write nothing at all. But there are all

**doc#0** , Dr. Jordan. I could not understand it, that you **would** go without a goodbye, after all the talking we

**doc#0** , to set me free, and I became afraid that now you **would** not do so. I remembered when Jeremiah claimed to

**doc#0** after looking at my palm, and said that all **would** come out well in the end. I wondered if he was only

**doc#0** . (SOBS) GRACE: It was strange to realize that I **would** not be a celebrated murderess anymore. But seen

**doc#0** . Here's our man. Grace, don't you know me? I **would** have known you anywhere. Jamie Walsh. We'll

**doc#0** , and the scene before me is so peaceful. You **would** think it was a picture. We have white and red

**doc#0** Walsh wanted to employ a girl as well, but I said I **would** prefer to do the work of the house myself. I would

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Figure 2: Concordances of 'would' in AG6 – page 2

The first text sample listed in Table 3, starting at 16:05 min. into AG6, also includes 4 cases of agent-oriented modals, in the sense that these actions were indeed taken and, through her speech act, Grace-as-Mary thus intended to provoke a reaction in Dr. Jordan.

<sup>3</sup> Transcription: **bold** for ease of reference when examining text samples; @6:55 signifies the sample begins at 6 min. and 55 seconds into the episode; (UPPER CASE LETTERS) denotes any added contextual information, such as suprasegmentals or other sounds.

Table 3: Text samples from 'would' concordance list Fig. 2

Speaker	Time lapse in episode	Text
Grace	@16:05	I <b>would</b> breathe like this. (MOANING SOFTLY) I <b>would</b> twist and twine. After that, <b>he'd say he'd do</b> anything.
Grace	@18:41	But <b>James wouldn't let me have it</b> , not her gold earrings, neither. There was blood on it, but <b>that would have washed out</b> .
Grace	@32:05	(SOBBING) It was strange to realize that <b>I would not be a celebrated murderess anymore</b> .
Grace	@36:21	You <b>would think</b> it was a picture.

The second text sample in Table 3, stating at 18:41 min. contains one agent-oriented modal ('James wouldn't let me have it'), alongside a prediction/possibility modal ('that would have washed out'). The third text sample, beginning at 32:05 min., is an interesting case, since it can indeed be considered subject-oriented modality. This means Grace is the subject of the modal. However, since she had been on trial practically all her life, where others judged her, and now she is no longer considered a murderer<sup>4</sup>, the case straddles object-oriented modality. The last sample in Table 3, starting at 36:21 min., comes under the category of 'prediction', i.e. Grace is surmising what others would think when viewing a scene in the countryside surrounding her new home.

The last text sample in Table 3, involving the use of the epistemic modal 'would', is listed in part in Figure 3, the last concordance, and in part in Figure 4, the first concordance. Table 4 offers us a wider co-text.

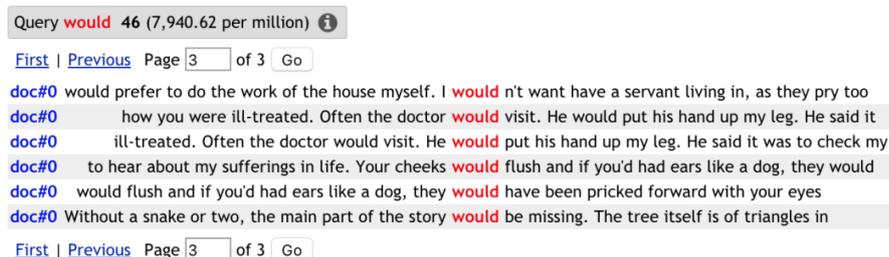


Figure 3: Concordances of 'would' in AG6 – page 3

The text sample starting at 36:49 minutes (Table 4) shows two cases where Grace 'is given a voice' for her thoughts and they comprise modals "I would prefer to do the work of the house myself" and I wouldn't want to have a servant living in, as they pry too much and listen at doors". Both cases can be distinguished as subjective epistemic modality since it is Grace who confirms to text receivers that she indeed has these preferences. In other words, we can deduce here that she is telling us the 'truth' about what she prefers. Her ultimate truth is also expressed in this last text sample: she is guarding her secrets, secrets that only Jeremiah (Dr. Dupont) knows, adding that Jeremiah's secrets – notably that he is not at all a physician but a peddler – are safe with her.

Table 4: Text sample from 'would' concordance list Fig. 2-3

Speaker	Time lapse in episode	Text
Grace	@36:49	(HER THOUGHTS VERBALIZED) Mr. Walsh wanted to employ a girl as well, but I said <b>I would prefer to do the work</b> of the house myself. <b>I wouldn't want</b> to have a servant living in, as they pry too much and listen at doors. I know my secrets are safe with Jeremiah, as his are safe with me.

<sup>4</sup> Use of the term 'murderess', marked for gender, gives us insight into Grace's view of her social stance in the context of Victorian social norms.

As can be seen in Fig. 4, the concordance list of ‘may’ in AG6, the only instance when Grace herself uses ‘may’ is in the last case of the concordances listed.

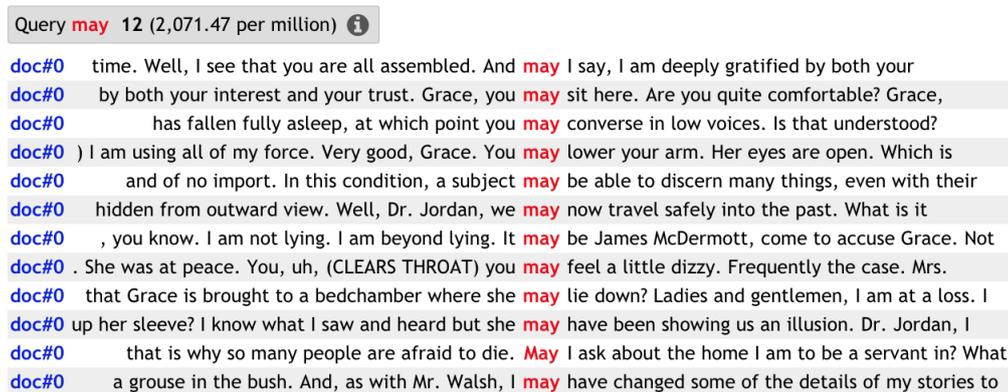


Figure 4: Concordances ‘may’ in AG6

Table 5 illustrates the last of the concordances listed in Figure 4 with relative co-text. The narration has become a long letter Grace starts writing to Dr. Jordan. Grace declines her husband Jamie’s offer to hire help. She was also troubled about his constant questioning of her life in the asylum. She tells him her reminds her of Dr. Jordan. Unbeknownst to Grace, Dr. Jordan was severely injured in the American Civil War and was left in a semi-catatonic state. The miniseries draws to a close when his mother reads him Grace’s letter and Jordan, who had not uttered a word in years, emits a single word: Grace. The narrative ends with the image of Grace sewing a quilt representing her life story.

Table 5: Use of ‘may’ in AG6

Speaker	Time lapse in episode	Text
Grace	@39:08	And, as with Mr. Walsh, <b>I may have changed some of the details</b> of my stories to suit what I thought you wanted to hear.

In Table 5 Grace blatantly admits to having ‘bended’ the truth to suit her needs (“I may have changed some of the details”) as she writes to Dr. Jordan. The ‘may’ used here relates to possibility or probability (Biber *et al.* 1999: 485).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper analyzes the miniseries *Alias Grace* (premiered on CBC in 2017 and successively on Netflix the same year), adapted from Margaret Atwood’s novel of the same name (1995). It aimed to understand the language of the main protagonist, Grace Marks, in terms of her purported madness and how her memory is evoked, in order to assess the truth behind her role in the murder of her employer and his mistress. This study uses both a quantitative, corpus-driven approach (Sketch Engine) to understand the most important forms of mood and modality employed by the protagonist, and a qualitative approach (discourse analysis) to assess the degree of ‘truth’ in relation to Grace’s talk. Findings show that, in line with our understanding of power and ideology in relation to madness in storytelling, it emerges that masculinity is the gender principle underlying the norm of reason in patriarchy Victorian ideology in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada. In terms of the construction of gender, this implies a correlation between femininity and madness, as we have argued in §3. Specifically, our micro-analysis reveals that epistemic modal verbs highly correlate with a somewhat manipulative narrative surrounding Grace’s recall of events leading to the murder, when she is under hypnosis. The dynamic nature of epistemics also allows us to reason along the lines of agent- vs. subject-oriented modality when assessing the ‘truth’, particularly in what may be considered the denouement of the miniseries. I have published elsewhere (Monacelli 2018) a study examining the role of a TV series female protagonist who presented with bipolarity, working in U.S. intelligence couched in a post 9/11 context. It would be of interest to carry out diachronic studies of female protagonists in the media (TV series, films, etc.) in terms of their mental state, in order to correlate trends in time relating to the power-ful or power-less depiction of their roles, thus potentially reaching an understanding of any modifications in gender equality in relation to power in society, as reflected in the media.

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