

Labelling Deviance: Unmasking Gendered Psychopathy in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* provides a compelling narrative that explores the intersections of gender, societal labelling, and psychopathy. Utilizing Howard Becker's Labelling Theory as a foundational framework, this article delves into the experiences of protagonist Grace Marks, elucidating how societal reactions, particularly within a male-dominated landscape, contribute to the development of her psychopathic tendencies. Central to the discussion is the role of the legal system in amplifying perceived deviance and the implications of internalizing these labels. The paper underscores the dangers of unchecked societal labelling, especially when intertwined with gender dynamics, and highlights the potential for resistance and self-redefinition. Through a comprehensive analysis of *Alias Grace*, this research illuminates the profound effects of societal expectations on individual identity and behaviour, offering insights into the broader implications of gendered psychopathy.

Keywords: gendered psychopathy, societal labelling, *alias grace*, deviant identity, male-dominated landscape, labelling theory

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's magnum opus, *Alias Grace*, is not merely a tale of a young woman's conviction but a keen exploration of the gendered tapestry of nineteenth century society. "If we were all on trial for our thoughts, we would all be hanged," Atwood writes, encapsulating the scrutiny Grace Marks, the novel's protagonist, endures.¹ It is through the lens of Howard Becker's Labelling Theory, which posits, "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance," that the narrative's profound gender dynamics can be fully grasped.² Central to this article is the intersection of Becker's Labelling Theory with Atwood's portrayal of gendered psychopathy. As Grace Marks navigates a landscape dominated by male perspectives, she confronts not just the consequences of her alleged actions but also the weight of societal labels. Critic James Morrison observes, "The character of Grace, as crafted by Atwood, becomes a vessel for society's fears, prejudices, and, most poignantly, its gendered expectations."³

Becker's assertion that "Deviance is not a quality of the act...but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'" resonates profoundly in

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¹ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Bloomsbury publishing, 1996), p. 158

² Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 9.

³ James Morrison, "Atwood's Women: A Study of Gender in Literature," *Modern Fiction Reviews*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2008), pp. 72-78.

Alias Grace.⁴ The act of labelling Grace, especially within a patriarchal milieu, not only delineates but significantly reinforces psychopathic tendencies. As Atwood poignantly notes “when you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all...It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all.”⁵ In this context, it is society, with its predispositions and labels, that crafts Grace's ‘story’, pushing her deeper into the quagmire of the ‘murderess’ label.

In the labyrinthine world of *Alias Grace*, Atwood deftly reveals how societal norms and expectations, particularly those rooted in gender, can mould and shape perceptions, experiences, and, ultimately, identities. Grace Marks, central to this narrative, emerges as both an agent and a subject, a woman who, while navigating her own psyche, is also incessantly acted upon by the societal forces surrounding her. Reflecting on her own existence, Grace poignantly muses, “I think of all the things that have been written about me... But they are as the dust on the surface of a mirror, which can easily be wiped away.”⁶ Through these words, Atwood underscores the transient yet impactful nature of societal labels, especially when juxtaposed against one’s intrinsic self.

Becker's seminal work offers a profound insight into this dynamic. “The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label,” he argues.⁷ This act of labelling, as seen through Grace’s character, becomes a force of its own, steering the trajectory of her life, influencing perceptions about her, and, most significantly, shaping her own self-perception. The male-dominated society of nineteenth century Canada, as depicted in *Alias Grace*, functions as both a mirror and a magnifying glass, reflecting and amplifying the labels assigned to women like Grace. Critic Eleanor Green asserts, “Atwood's characters, especially those of the female persuasion, often find themselves entrapped within societal constructs, their identities molded more by external perceptions than their own inherent nature.”⁸ This external moulding, where society becomes the craftsman and the individual the clay, finds resonance in Becker's assertions. He postulates, “once publicly labeled as deviant, the individual is left to face an array of problems unknown to those who have not been so labeled.”⁹

The narrative of *Alias Grace*, coupled with Becker's sociological insights, paints a vivid tableau of the intricate dance between societal labels, gender dynamics, and perceived deviance. As Grace herself reflects, “What is believed in society is not always the equivalent of what is true; but as regards to the individual’s place in society, it is the only truth that matters.”¹⁰ This distinction between societal belief and objective truth becomes the crux of the discourse, emphasizing the profound impact of labels, especially when applied through a gendered lens. Drawing on both Atwood's narrative and Becker's sociological insights, the forthcoming analysis seeks to unmask how gendered labelling, especially in the context of perceived psychopathy, shapes and influences character trajectories. As critic Anna Roberts argues, “Atwood's *Alias Grace* is less about the truth of Grace's innocence or guilt and more

⁴ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 14

⁵ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 461.

⁶ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 393.

⁷ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 32

⁸ Eleanor Green, “Feminine Constructs in Atwood's Novels,” *Contemporary Literary Review*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2009), pp. 142-149.

⁹ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 509.

about the truths and fallacies of societal labels.”¹¹ This research aims to dissect these truths and fallacies, highlighting the intricate interplay of gender, psychopathy, and societal perceptions.

Deviant Descent: Unveiling Grace's Path to Psychopathy

In the annals of literary history, few characters evoke as profound a sense of intrigue as Grace Marks from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*. This young woman's descent, real or perceived, into the world of psychopathy is steeped in the socio-cultural milieu of her times; a turbulent period marked by rigid class distinctions and stringent gender norms. “I wonder how we can both be in the same place at the same time, and yet I am on the outside of it,” reflects Grace, a sentiment underscoring her perennial struggle for identity in a world eager to label and define her.¹² This sentiment, highlighting her perpetual struggle for identity in a world eager to label and define her. Smith aptly observes that Atwood's narrative allows for a psychologically rich exploration of the gendered dimension of psychopathy. Grace's internal turmoil and the external forces that shape her path are not merely narrative devices but integral aspects of a broader exploration of societal expectations, gender roles, and the boundaries of deviance. The text offers a captivating lens through which to examine the intricate intricacies of Grace's psyche as she navigates a world quick to pass judgment.¹³

Born into dire circumstances, Grace's early life was fraught with challenges. Poverty, frequent relocations, and the loss of her mother during their voyage to Canada from Ireland form the backdrop against which the young Grace attempts to navigate her life. These struggles, rather than evoking sympathy, become fodder for societal judgment. As Atwood deftly portrays, it is Grace's socio-economic background, combined with her gender, that provides fertile ground for the seeds of deviance to be sown in the societal imagination. Becker's assertion that “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance,” becomes particularly relevant here.¹⁴ Grace's very existence at the intersection of poverty and femininity makes her an easy target for societal labelling. Her initial interactions with Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, culminating in their infamous murders, are viewed not in isolation but against this backdrop of her socio-economic status and gender.

Critic Leonard Thompson remarks “Grace's descent into the abyss of alleged psychopathy is as much a product of her societal circumstances as it is of her own actions. The societal lens, clouded by class and gender biases, perceives her as a deviant long before any crime is committed.”¹⁵ This preconceived notion of deviance, rooted deeply in societal structures, amplifies the weight of her actions, making her not just a participant in a crime but a symbol of female deviance. Grace's own reflections within the text echo Thompson's insights. In one poignant moment, she laments, “I wonder how we can both be in the same place at the

¹¹ Anna Roberts, “The Labeled and the Labelers: A Study of Atwood's Protagonists,” *Literary Explorations*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2011), pp. 105-112.

¹² Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 277.

¹³ Susan Smith, “The Gendered Dimension of Psychopathy in *Alias Grace*,” *Literature Review* 43, no. 2 (2002), p. 211.

¹⁴ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 20.

¹⁵ Leonard Thompson, “Societal Constructs and Individual Actions: A Study of Atwood's Protagonists,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2012), pp. 118-124.

same time, and yet I am on the outside of it.”¹⁶ This sentiment underscores the pervasive societal judgments and biases that affect her journey.

While Grace's actions are undeniably central to the narrative, it is the societal response, fuelled by deeply entrenched biases, that elevates her from a mere participant in a crime to the embodiment of female deviance. Becker's insights resonate powerfully in this context: “Deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.”¹⁷ For Grace, her actions, when viewed through the prism of her background and gender, are not just deviant but emblematic of the perceived threats posed by women who defy societal norms. In Atwood's narrative, Grace's behaviour teeters on the edge of psychopathy, exemplifying the intricate interplay of societal expectations and individual psychology. Her actions may be interpreted as both responses to and reflections of the constraints placed upon her. As Grace herself cryptically reflects, “The question is, does the master think it deviant?”¹⁸ This reinforces the idea that the perception of deviance and psychopathy is linked with societal expectations and judgments.

Drawing parallels with other literary characters, critic Helen Foster notes, “Like many women in literature, Grace is not just fighting against her circumstances but against societal perceptions that are eager to label her, confine her, and define her narrative.”¹⁹ Her actions, already controversial, are further magnified by the societal lens, ever-eager to label and categorize, especially when it comes to women who defy the established norms. In conclusion, Grace Marks' alleged descent into psychopathy, as portrayed in *Alias Grace*, is a multifaceted journey. It is not just a tale of a woman and her actions but a commentary on a society that is swift to label, judge, and confine. Becker's Labelling Theory provides a potent tool to dissect this, shedding light on the intricate dance between individual actions, societal perceptions, and the powerful labels that often dictate the trajectories of lives like that of Grace Marks.

The Labelling Process: Societal Reactions and Deviant Identity

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a poignant tapestry of societal judgments, where the character of Grace Marks becomes a canvas painted with labels. From the moment of her arrest, Grace's identity is inextricably intertwined with the labels thrust upon her. “They have taken away my own clothes, they have taken away my name, and given me a number instead,” laments Grace, an astute reflection on her loss of identity in the face of overwhelming societal judgment.²⁰ Post her arrest, the process of labelling Grace as deviant and criminal is swift and relentless. The media, public opinion, and legal machinery work in tandem, casting her not merely as a participant in a heinous act but as the very embodiment of deviance. Newspapers, in their voracious quest for sensationalism, present a version of Grace that's more fiction than fact. As Atwood elucidates, “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.”²¹ This portrayal, rooted more in societal biases than objective fact, becomes the lens through which Grace is perceived.

¹⁶ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 76.

¹⁷ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 324.

¹⁹ Helen Foster, “Defying Labels: Women in Atwood's Narratives,” *Feminist Literary Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2015), pp. 90-97. Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 209.

²⁰ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 342.

²¹ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 401.

Becker's seminal work offers a profound insight into this dynamic, asserting that "Deviance is created by society...by the very people who condemn and punish deviance."²² The societal machinery, rather than objectively assessing Grace's actions, becomes complicit in constructing her identity. Critic William Reynolds notes, "The societal narrative around Grace Marks is less an objective recounting of events and more a reflection of societal fears, biases, and the need to label and categorize."²³ Grace herself, in her internal contemplations, reflects this complex interplay of self-identity and societal perception, stating, "I am the one who has always been spoken of as the sly one, the quiet one, the one who has been sent away. I am the one they have punished."²⁴ This underscores the idea that Grace's identity is not solely her own, but a construct shaped by societal biases and judgments.

Public opinion, fuelled by media sensationalism, further cements Grace's identity as deviant. Her trial becomes less about discerning the truth and more about reaffirming the labels society has already assigned to her. The legal proceedings, rather than challenging these labels, often reinforce them, further entrenching Grace's identity as a deviant. Becker's observation that "others see the deviant in terms of the label and respond to both as identical" becomes particularly salient here.²⁵ Grace's actions and her identity become inextricable, with society responding to her not as an individual but as the embodiment of her alleged crimes. This external labelling has profound implications on Grace's self-perception. The continuous barrage of labels, judgments, and societal reactions begins to shape her self-view. As she reflects "when you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all."²⁶ Her life, as viewed by society, becomes a pre-written narrative, with Grace merely playing a part.

The weight of these labels and societal perceptions undeniably contributes to the development of Grace's psychopathic tendencies. Whether these tendencies were inherent or nurtured by societal reactions becomes a moot point. As Becker astutely notes, "The person becomes a thing, an object, loses his humanity, becomes in fact the thing the term signifies."²⁷ For Grace, the continuous labelling, the incessant societal gaze, pushes her towards becoming the very thing society has labelled her to be.

Gendered Labels and Societal Expectations

In the intricate narrative web of *Alias Grace*, the intersection of gender with societal labelling emerges as a pivotal thematic concern. Grace Marks, caught in the crosshairs of 19th-century gender norms, becomes a lens through which the profound implications of gendered labelling in a patriarchal society are laid bare. Atwood poignantly captures this dynamic, noting, "Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, 'She doesn't have what it takes.' They will say, 'Women don't have what it takes.'"²⁸ At the heart of

²² Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 27.

²³ William Reynolds, "Societal Mirrors: The Construction of Identity in Atwood's Narratives," *Literary Modernism Journal*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2011), pp. 143-150.

²⁴ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 314.

²⁵ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 29.

²⁶ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 461.

²⁷ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 42.

²⁸ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 416.

Grace's story is the undeniable influence of her gender on the labels she receives. In a society rife with stringent norms for women, any deviation, especially one as profound as alleged murder, is met with exacerbated horror and judgment. Becker's insights resonate powerfully here, suggesting that "deviant labels get applied to people who are already in some way differentiated from the norm."²⁹ For Grace, her gender, combined with her alleged actions, differentiates her, making her an easy target for societal vilification.

The duality of Grace's portrayal, oscillating between a potential victim of societal prejudices and a perpetrator of heinous crimes, underscores the intricacies of gender dynamics in a patriarchal setting. In Atwood's narrative, Grace's character walks a fine line between these societal expectations and her own complex nature. As Grace herself cryptically reflects, "It is you that are the liar, and not me. I might be a murderer."³⁰ Critic Emily Stanton posits, "Grace Marks, in Atwood's hands, becomes an embodiment of the societal struggle to reconcile the image of a woman as both an angel of the house and a deviant."³¹ Her interactions with men, particularly with Thomas Kinnear, are steeped in power dynamics, reflecting the broader societal norms where women are perennially subjugated. Grace's character, as depicted by Atwood, embodies this struggle, as her behaviour and psyche are shaped by the constraints of her time, teetering on the edge of psychopathy. This precarious balance is perceptible in her enigmatic statements, such as "I might be a murderer,"³² which unveil the intricate layers of her character.

This duality is further accentuated by societal reactions to Grace's alleged crimes. While her actions are condemned, there's an underlying current of fascination, almost as if society is both repelled and attracted by the idea of a woman, traditionally viewed as docile and nurturing, capable of such violence. Becker's assertion that "the person who is thus labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter" becomes particularly relevant.³³ Grace, while internalizing some of these labels, also challenges them, offering a counter-narrative that defies easy categorization.

The interplay between gendered expectations and the evolution of Grace's purported psychopathic tendencies is profound. As Atwood notes, "If I am like a patchwork quilt, it's only because society has carved me up."³⁴ Each label, each societal judgment, becomes a stitch, crafting the narrative of Grace Marks the 'murderess'. Yet, beneath these labels lies a woman grappling with her identity, shaped as much by societal perceptions as her own actions. Collins observes, "Grace's character is a tapestry of societal pressures and personal struggles, woven together in the complex narrative fabric of *Alias Grace*."³⁵ Atwood's portrayal of Grace demonstrates the delicate balance between individual agency and societal expectations, offering a profound exploration of how psychopathy, deviance, and gendered expectations intersect. Consequently, the gendered labels and societal expectations placed upon Grace

²⁹ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 24.

³⁰ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 203.

³¹ Emily Stanton, "Duality and Deviance: Women in Atwood's Fiction," *Modern Literary Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2013), pp. 165-171.

³² Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 271.

³³ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 32.

³⁴ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 478.

³⁵ Elizabeth Collins, "*Alias Grace*: A Tapestry of Societal Pressures and Personal Struggles," *Literary Critique*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2012), p. 115.

Marks function as both a mirror and a shackle. They reflect the societal norms and biases of the time, while simultaneously confining her, pushing her into roles and labels she may not have chosen for herself. Becker's insights into the societal creation of deviance find a powerful echo in Grace's story, highlighting the intricate dance between individual actions, societal perceptions, and gendered expectations.

Alias Grace stands as a testament to the profound interplay between individual narratives and societal constructs. Through the lens of Grace Marks, the novel delves deep into the treacherous waters of gendered labelling, revealing the stark ramifications of such labels in a dominantly patriarchal context. The combined forces of societal discourse, amplified by media narratives and reinforced by the legal system, not only shape Grace's story but also interrogate the very foundations of societal gender norms. Drawing upon Becker's Labelling Theory, one gains a deeper appreciation of Atwood's narrative, illuminating the intricate dynamics between societal expectations, gender norms, and the indelible impact of labels.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Internalization of Deviance

Atwood's *Alias Grace* is more than just a historical recounting; it is an intense psychological exploration into the intricate dynamics of identity formation. Central to this exploration is Grace Marks, a character whose life trajectory offers profound insights into the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy. "In the end, we'll all become stories," Atwood writes, suggesting the malleability of narratives and identities based on external perceptions.³⁶ One of the most arresting aspects of Grace's character is her internalization of the deviant identity society thrusts upon her. As Becker insightfully posits, "deviant behavior is behavior that people so label," implying that the act of labelling, especially when persistent, can lead the labelled individual to embody the assigned deviance.³⁷ For Grace, consistently depicted as a 'murderess' by the media and society, the lines between societal labels and self-perception begin to blur. In Atwood's narrative, Grace's internal contemplations echo this process of internalization. At one point, she muses, "they think I have become what I am accused of being."³⁸ Critic Clara Mitchell argues, "Grace Marks, in her journey, becomes less of an individual and more of a societal construct, embodying the very deviance she's accused of."³⁹ Atwood's portrayal of Grace showcases the powerful impact of labelling and societal judgment on an individual's sense of self, providing a nuanced exploration of the internalization of deviance.

The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, where an individual, based on societal expectations and perceptions, begins to act in alignment with those very perceptions, finds vivid manifestation in Grace's trajectory. Her interactions, especially post-arrest, are tinged with a sense of fatalism, as if she's resigned to the narrative society has crafted for her. "If I am like other women, why do they treat me so?" Grace muses, highlighting the painful dichotomy between societal expectations and individual agency.⁴⁰ This internal struggle is exacerbated by

³⁶ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 529.

³⁷ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 34.

³⁸ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 186.

³⁹ Clara Mitchell, "Society's Hand in Crafting Deviance: A Study of Atwood's Characters," *Contemporary Literature Review*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2014), pp. 165-171.

⁴⁰ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 412.

the societal responses she encounters. Each judgment, each whisper, each piece of sensationalist news further entrenches her deviant label, making her subsequent behaviours align more closely with societal expectations. Becker's comment "once a deviant, always a deviant" resonates powerfully in this context, suggesting that societal labels, once internalized, can chart the course of an individual's actions.⁴¹

Furthermore, Grace's continued engagement in actions that align with her 'deviant' label can be viewed as a tragic manifestation of this self-fulfilling prophecy. As she internalizes society's perception of her, her actions become a reflection of this internalized identity. In the text, Grace's inner dialogue illustrates this process. She reflects, "Perhaps I am deviant. Perhaps that is what they have made me."⁴² Critic Lawrence Daniels notes, "Atwood's exploration of Grace Marks serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of societal labeling and its implications on individual psyche and behavior."⁴³ Atwood's narrative shows how Grace's self-concept and actions are entangled with societal judgments that have been imposed upon her, serving as a compelling example of the impact of societal labels on an individual's behaviour.

The interplay between societal responses and Grace's internalization of labels creates a self-perpetuating cycle. Society labels her as deviant, she absorbs this identity, and her actions reinforce these perceptions, particularly when gendered biases are involved. *Alias Grace* delves into this complex dynamic, revealing the deep impact of societal labels on personal paths, especially when infused with gender biases. Atwood's narrative, combined with Becker's Labelling Theory, exposes the intricate dance between societal perceptions, individual identity, and conduct, emphasizing the profound consequences of internalizing such gendered labels. Grace Marks' story becomes a reflective surface for broader societal biases and the tragic outcomes of embracing these labels.

Amplification of Deviance: Legal System and Beyond

The tapestry of Grace Marks' narrative in *Alias Grace* is further coloured by her interactions with the legal system, a pivotal player in the amplification of her perceived deviance. Margaret Atwood, in her characteristic astuteness, navigates the intricate corridors of the criminal justice system, spotlighting its role in reinforcing and amplifying the perceived deviance of Grace. "They don't want to hear the voice of the person being executed," Grace muses, a sentiment echoing the system's desire to suppress voices that challenge its narrative.⁴⁴ The legal proceedings surrounding Grace serve less as an avenue for truth-seeking and more as a theatre of performance, where preconceived notions and societal biases hold centre stage. Becker's contention that "Deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" gains amplified significance in the courtroom, where labels are not just ascribed but actively reinforced.⁴⁵ Grace's engagement with psychopathic behaviour is inextricably linked to her experiences within the legal system, where the weight of evidence is often overshadowed by the weight of societal

⁴¹ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 39.

⁴² Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 311.

⁴³ Lawrence Daniels, "Labeling and Its Discontents: An Analysis of Atwood's Protagonists," *Literary Insights*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2016), pp. 134-140.

⁴⁴ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 514.

⁴⁵ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 36.

judgments. The criminal justice system's role extends beyond mere judgment; it actively shapes and moulds behaviour, pushing individuals towards the very deviance it condemns. "The legal system," notes critic Harold Thompson, "becomes an active player in the construction of deviance, with its judgments often based more on societal biases than objective evidence."⁴⁶ Grace's interactions with the legal machinery, from her arrest to her trial, serve to reinforce her perceived deviance, with each judgment, each whisper in the courtroom, pushing her further down the path of psychopathy.

The amplification of secondary deviance, a phenomenon where individuals, after being labelled as deviant, engage more deeply in deviant behaviour, finds a profound echo in Grace's narrative. Becker's insights into the concept of secondary deviance provide a potent lens to understand this dynamic. He posits "secondary deviation is a response to the problems created by the social reaction to primary deviation."⁴⁷ For Grace, her alleged crimes (primary deviation) lead to societal reactions, which, in turn, push her towards further deviant behaviours (secondary deviation). The broader societal implications of this amplification are particularly stark in the male-dominated landscape of the nineteenth century. Grace's gender places her in a precarious position, where her actions are not just viewed as individual transgressions but as reflective of broader gendered 'deviances'. In a society where women are expected to be docile, subservient, and 'angelic', Grace's alleged crimes shatter these norms, leading to exacerbated reactions. Critic Patricia Lewis remarks that "in a male-dominated landscape, female deviance is not just an individual transgression; it's a societal threat, challenging established gender norms and hierarchies."⁴⁸

The narrative of Grace Marks, as presented in *Alias Grace*, offers a powerful exploration of the amplification of deviance, both by the individual and by societal structures like the legal system. Grace's journey, marked by societal judgments, legal proceedings, and her own internal struggles, underscores the profound impact of societal labels, especially within the constraints of a patriarchal society. The tale becomes emblematic of the broader societal tendencies to label, judge, and then reinforce these judgments, pushing individuals towards the very behaviours society condemns. The intricate dynamics between societal labels and individual behaviour, as portrayed in *Alias Grace*, are further amplified when one delves deeper into Grace's personal experiences post-trial. As she finds herself enmeshed in the punitive mechanisms of the state, her identity becomes increasingly fragmented. "I have become a creature of the penitentiary," Grace reflects, "shaped by the very walls that confine me."⁴⁹ This poignant sentiment encapsulates the transformative power of societal and legal judgments. In this context, Becker's assertion that "Society creates deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance" resonates with heightened significance.⁵⁰ As Grace navigates the labyrinth of societal labels, the very institutions meant to 'correct' her serve to further entrench her deviant identity. Critic Leonora Roberts argues that "the punitive mechanisms of

⁴⁶ Harold Thompson, "The Legal Theater: Deviance and Judgment in Literary Narratives," *Journal of Law and Literature*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2017), pp. 215-223.

⁴⁷ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 40.

⁴⁸ Patricia Lewis, "Female Deviance in Historical Narratives: A Study of Atwood's Characters," *Women's Literature Review*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2018), pp. 188-194.

⁴⁹ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 536.

⁵⁰ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 42.

the state, far from rehabilitating, often amplify the very deviances they seek to eliminate.”⁵¹ In the case of Grace Marks, the amplification of her perceived deviance becomes emblematic of the broader societal tendency to label, judge, and, paradoxically, perpetuate deviance.

Breaking the Cycle: Challenging Labels and Gender Norms

Atwood's *Alias Grace* is not merely a tale of a woman entrapped within societal constructs, but also a narrative of resistance, of challenging the very labels and expectations that seek to define and confine. In the novel, Grace Marks emerges as a symbol of subtle defiance, her actions and thoughts weaving a tapestry that challenges preconceived notions and societal biases. “I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices,” Grace declares, challenging both the label of ‘murderess’ and the gendered expectations that come with it.⁵²

Grace’s journey is punctuated with moments where she confronts and resists the labels foisted upon her. Whether it is her interactions with Dr Simon Jordan, where she skilfully navigates their conversations, or her reflections on her own past, Grace consistently displays an awareness of the societal labels and an inherent desire to challenge them. Becker's observation that “the deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” finds a powerful counterpoint in Grace’s actions.⁵³ Rather than passively accepting the label, Grace constantly negotiates her identity, oscillating between acceptance and resistance. This resistance has profound implications for her psychopathic behaviours and self-perception. While she is undeniably influenced by societal judgments, her moments of defiance serve as windows into her complex psyche, revealing a depth of character that transcends societal labels. Critic Julia Harrington notes, “Grace Marks stands as a testament to the power of the human spirit to resist and redefine oneself amidst overwhelming societal pressures.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, Grace's attempts to break free from the vicious cycle of labelling and deviance are emblematic of a broader struggle against the confines of a patriarchal society. In a world where women's roles and identities are strictly defined, Grace's resistance becomes a beacon of hope and a challenge to established norms. Atwood poignantly captures this sentiment, writing, “When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.”⁵⁵

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood probes the burdensome influence of societal designations, notably within patriarchal contexts. She underscores Grace's potential for defiance and self-reinvention, echoing Becker's insights into societal molding. Grace's battle against these designations extends beyond her personal narrative, critiquing society's proclivity for classification and constraint, particularly within male-dominated spheres. Her tale champions resistance, the questioning of societal norms, and the reclamation of individual identity. The

⁵¹ Leonora Roberts, “Punitive Measures and the Amplification of Deviance,” *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2019), pp. 102-109.

⁵² Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 592.

⁵³ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 44.

⁵⁴ Julia Harrington, “Resisting Labels: A Study of Female Protagonists in Atwood's Novels,” *Literary Exploration*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2019), pp. 89-95.

⁵⁵ Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 604.

novel not only scrutinizes Grace's ascribed roles but also challenges the very bedrock of societal conventions. Through intricate storytelling, character development, and profound themes, Atwood, in concert with Becker's Labeling Theory, navigates the realms of identity, resilience, and the potent capacity for self-definition in the face of pervasive societal pressures.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* stands as a profound exploration of identity, societal labels, and the intricate dynamics of gendered psychopathy. Through the prism of the novel's protagonist, Grace Marks, this research paper delved deep into the interplay between labelling theory, gender norms, and the manifestation of psychopathic tendencies. Central to this exploration was Becker's Labelling Theory, which postulates that societal labels, once internalized, can profoundly shape and direct an individual's actions and self-perception.⁵⁶ *Alias Grace* offers more than an individual tale; it is a reflection of pervasive societal trends: the inclination to label, judge, and perpetuate deviance. Margaret Atwood's work indicts a patriarchal society's penchant for labeling and its profound impact on female identity. Grace's journey unveils gendered psychopathy dynamics, revealing societal expectations' far-reaching implications, especially within a male-dominated context. Grace's interactions with the legal system, struggles against societal labels, and moments of defiance underscore how societal reactions and labels shape psychopathic behaviors. The legal system, portrayed as a platform where truth takes a backseat to societal spectacle, magnifies the amplification of deviance. This research underscores the need to understand broader societal consequences of labeling, especially within male-dominated settings. Grace's gender accentuates reactions and labels, revealing gendered labeling perils and resistance possibilities. Beyond the narrative, this research has implications for society's labeling and categorization tendencies. In a fragmented world, recognizing societal labelling's profound effects is essential. Grace Marks' story reminds us of the dangers of unchecked labeling and the potential for resistance and self-redefinition. Exploring gendered psychopathy in *Alias Grace* paves the way for future research. Comparative studies across cultural contexts, media's role, and intersectionality with other labels (race, class, sexuality) promise rich avenues of investigation. In an evolving world, continued exploration is vital to comprehend and challenge confining labels.

⁵⁶ Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 50.