

ABSTRACT

NANCY EILEEN HEYES. *Madness, Confession and the Cultural Moment: How Two Victorian Tales Seized Their Day.* (Under the direction of Professor Leila May.)

Love and murder, power and madness, deception and guilt: These elements converge in the dramatic catharsis of the confession scene. In Victorian novels, the confession narrative typically presents a high-stakes performance of identity in which confessant and interrogator wrestle for dominance and sexual charge is a given. As a genre, confession scenes hold up a high-definition mirror to the cultural environment in which they are released. Two tales set in the British Empire of the 1860s offer a case study. The 1862 novel *Lady Audley's Secret*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, centers on a supposed killing that occurs within an aristocratic estate, and, in keeping with contemporary norms, the transgressive woman is dead by the end of the story. Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace* reproduces many conventions of the 1860s sensation novel. Like Lady Audley, Grace Marks is accused of murder and makes her own drawing room confession. Each character claims that she is mad and therefore not responsible for any crimes. This analysis looks at the cultural, ritual and performative aspects of confession. Calling on the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault and other critics, I examine the texts of Braddon and Atwood to evaluate the confessing characters' theatrical self-production amid the battles for control of both physical bodies and the psychosexual narrative. I argue that Atwood builds parallels to *Lady Audley* and its ilk, while using the mental illness charade to disturb the model of her literary antecedents. By foregrounding sexuality, Atwood reimagines the female-as-killer-and-confessant trope, inscribing a different set of boundaries for erotica and patriarchal power suited to the era of Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey. The result in *Alias Grace* is a steamy scene in which the male interrogator is bound and beaten and the female confessant emerges as an emotional dominatrix in a drab prison dress.