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Through The Eye of Her Needle:
Examining Needlework in
Contemporary Fiction

Who can find a virtuous wife?
For her worth is far above rubies...
She seeks wool and flax,
And willingly works with her hands...
She stretches out her hands to the distaff,
And her hand holds the spindle.

Proverbs 31: 10-19

Needlework, an image almost uniquely associated with women, appears first in the Bible and recurs throughout literary history. In each new epoch of literature, the theme is translated and amended into a modern version, but the basic premise remains the same—a woman character knits or sews or quilts throughout the novel, thus evoking the symbolic image of a woman weaving, and controlling, the pieces of her story. This theme, this examining a woman through the eye of her needle, is a prominent and widely discussed topic in literary criticism. Lynn M. Alexander suggests the image of the seamstress exists as a symbol for the working class, and thus acts as a vehicle for escape through social reform. “By choosing women to represent the suffering of the working classes, an author was more likely to strike a sympathetic note with her reader” (Alexander 37). In contrast, Ozzie J. Mayers argues that sewing is “a kind of rootedness, a pinning oneself down” (Mayers 666). Rather than a means of escape, Mayers posits that “sewing can be understood as a symbolic act of survival” (667). Perhaps the reason for this extensive discussion of needlework lies in its universality. Even today, many women still sew, quilt, knit, embroider, cross-stitch, or crochet. Although needlework has trans-

ferred from necessity to aesthetic hobby, it still unites women across different backgrounds, social classes, and cultures.

While both Alexander and Mayers, along with countless others, present appealing and plausible theories, I offer yet another explanation. Needlework exists for female literary characters in what I term a “paradoxical barrier;” the women construct a metaphorical wall to distance themselves from a circumstance, but then straddle the wall, remaining mired in the situation they wish to avoid. For example, if an angry husband approaches his wife about a credit card bill, she may pick up her knitting to distance herself from his wrath. She still listens and replies, still involves herself in the conversation, but her knitting acts as a barrier, or a buffer, to isolate her from the situation. Mayers, citing an example from Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” says “Sewing . . . is a defense against the invasion by the masculine into the feminine sphere” (Mayers 670). My thesis propels this statement one step further: women use needlework as a barrier not only to isolate themselves from men, but also to distance themselves from any situation they must face against their will. This idea, therefore, applies to more than disengaging from cranky husbands. The woman could want to distance herself from nosy neighbors, holier-than-thou townspeople, even other women. In this paper, I will explore this thesis, this paradoxical barrier, first in three eminent classics—*Homer’s Odyssey*, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and Walker’s *The Color Purple*—and then in two contemporary novels—Marguerite Duras’s *Moderato Cantabile* and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*.

Perhaps the most palpable and notorious example of this theme exists in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In this Greek epic, Odysseus departs to fight, leaving his wife, Penelope, at home to dissuade suitors. Penelope accomplishes this task with wit rather than warfare; she also does so with weaving. She tells the young suitors, “Wait, though you are eager to marry me, until I finish this web, so that my weaving will not be useless and wasted. This is a shroud for the hero Laertes. . .” (Homer 42). Penelope continues to weave on her loom for three years, working in plain sight during the day, but secretly unraveling the garment at night. By doing this, she creates her barrier; she distances herself from the daft suitors and the imminent obligation to choose one of them. Her hope, of course, is that Odysseus will return before

she finishes, eliminating the need to choose at all. But even though she slyly deceives the men, she also stays involved by exemplifying their conception of her; they see her weaving and assume she is making progress on both her garment and her verdict. A. Mary Murphy says, “Stitchery has a noticeable presence in literature as a kind of supporting text within a text” (Murphy 643). In the *Odyssey*, the epic is the text, Penelope’s weaving the subtext. Penelope knits her story as ingeniously as she knits her shroud.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is an example of needlework playing a major role in literature. When Hester Prynne commits adultery, the town sentences her to wear a letter ‘A’ for the rest of her life. Since she is allowed to fashion the ‘A’ herself, she sews it in “fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread” (Hawthorne 39). Hester injects her own skill and personality into the ‘A’ not to display pride in her sin, but to display acceptance. Instead of denying her sin, she recognizes it and accepts it as a symbol of her life experiences. According to Murphy, “needlework has always been a form of self-writing” (Murphy 646). All needlework, therefore, contains biographical evidence about the woman who stitches it; much like Hawthorne writes the story of Hester, Hester writes her story through stitchery. Later in the novel, when Chillingworth invites Hester to remove the ‘A,’ she refuses. “It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge...Were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport,” she replies (Hawthorne 115). She stitches both skill and shame into the ‘A,’ and to absolve the sin by removing the symbol would deny a part of herself. A symbol meant to denote shame becomes Hester’s identity, perhaps even her success story. It is through her needlework that Hester rises above this sin, scorn, shame.

In addition to displaying this fabric scrapbook upon her chest, Hester also “encloses herself in her own handiwork to survive emotionally and physically” (Mayers 674). After the town banishes her, she moves to the outskirts to shield herself from sneers and scorn. The townspeople, however, still respect her skill and hire her to do their elaborate needlework. “While sewing allows Hester to turn her vision inward and thereby to shut out the outside, it ironically links her to this

outside” (674). In this sense, my thesis parallels Mayers’s perspective. As previously mentioned, he believes needlework exists as a symbol of survival, and Hester does indeed survive by offering her needlework as a service, but she also creates the paradoxical barrier of my thesis. Even though she has isolated herself from the town, she is completely dependent on and involved with the thing she isolates.

In a segue to contemporary literature, the next example comes from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. The needlework in this novel is not as ubiquitous as in *The Scarlet Letter*; in fact, it does not surface until halfway through the story. But once it does, it transforms the main character, Celie. After betraying Sophia, Celie begins to feel convicted. When Sophia confronts Celie about it, they bond over their mutual survival, their poor experiences with men. To solidify this bonding experience, Sophia suggests they begin sewing a quilt together. Celie plans to keep the quilt for herself, but later decides against it. “At the last minute I decide to give Sofia the quilt. I don’t know what her sister place be like, but we been having right smart cold weather long in now” (Walker 66). Later in the novel, when Celie is depressed, Shug suggests they sew pants together to combat her misery.

By bonding with women this way, Celie shuts out the men and the pain she endures. According to Mayers, “sewing. . . begins as an almost inconsequential activity that emerges, by the end of the novel, as a redemptive act” (Mayers 671). As her skill increases from hobby to obsession to occupation, however, she ironically finds herself sewing pants for men as well as women. She begins sewing the pants to isolate and protect herself from Mr. _____, but she also cannot avoid his presence. Celie, therefore, uses the pants as a barrier, but still has contact with Mr. _____. Celie confirms this self-made barrier while speaking to him. He asks about her pants-making business, and she says, “That’s right. . . But I really started it right here in your house to keep from killing you” (Walker 253).

The historical and critical context of needlework in literature connects with two contemporary novels as well. Duras’s *Moderato Cantabile* is a short novel that centers on a female character named Anne Desbaresdes. As the wife of a successful businessman, she is wealthy and upper-class. But something in her life is missing, and she attempts to discover that something by meeting with a man named

Chauvin at a local café to discuss the investigation of a recent murder. Here, the needlework theme plays only a minor role: a secondary character—the patronne at the café—knits throughout the story.

The presence of needlework in *Moderato Cantabile*, although subtle, is worth noting. The patronne at the café watches the mental and emotional, if not physical, affair between Anne and Chauvin progress. At first, the patronne is not affected by it, but once she realizes the nature of their visit, she grows uncomfortable and begins knitting a red sweater in order to distance herself from the conversation. But, as she constructs this barrier between herself and the couple she becomes intimately involved in their affair. When men enter the café, shooting the patronne questioning looks, she gives “a barely perceptible shrug, indicating that she didn’t much understand what was going on” (Duras 49). Completely entangled in their plot, she only wishes to appear detached from it. Like a housewife watching a soap opera, she justifies watching the decadence by accomplishing another task at the same time.

The patronne resembles neither Hester nor Celie, and she does not exist as a symbol for survival, female bonding, or class consciousness. But she does resemble Penelope: “The patronne picked up her red sweater. . .As she knitted, she followed the tugboat’s every maneuver. It was obvious in her opinion things were taking an unfortunate turn” (41). While focusing intently on a tugboat outside, she comprehends enough of their conversation to judge its direction. The patronne, like Penelope, acts as the storyteller in this novel, and as she watches Anne and Chauvin, she also knits together the fragments of their story.

As the novel progresses, so does the red sweater, and so does the patronne’s involvement with Anne and Chauvin. She knows all the details of Anne’s life; she is even able to hum the sonatina Anne’s son plays at his piano lesson. One day, when Anne is late, the patronne involves herself directly by suggesting to Chauvin that “Sometimes. . .I seem to remember that she goes the long way around, by the second dock. She doesn’t always come this way” (77). As the relationship grows stale, the patronne’s attitude dampens along with it. She mimics Anne and Chauvin’s uninterest; she “did not lift her eyes from knitting when [Anne] came in. . . Chauvin had not shaved that morn-

ing . . . Anne Desbaresdes' face was not as carefully made up as usual" (112). At the climax of the novel, the patronne's engrossment increases to such a level that it destroys the barrier she has constructed. Her interest is so great that she can no longer hide behind the façade of knitting. In fact, she actually walks to their table to hear their conversation, pours them wine they did not ask for, and stands there expectantly, waiting for the climax and living vicariously through their drama.

In contrast to *Moderato Cantabile*, Atwood's *Alias Grace* employs a more apparent, and thus easier to analyze, quilting theme. The reader can't miss it; the names of quilt patterns head each section, and the events or images in the chapters of that section relate to the heading. *Alias Grace* is the story of Grace Marks, a young woman accused and convicted of murdering a woman named Nancy. The story consists of Grace relating the details of her testimony to Dr. Simon Jordan, a man who is attempting to prove her innocence. Although she lives in prison, she works at the Governor's house as a servant and a seamstress during the day. As she speaks with Jordan in the sewing room at the house, Grace always sews or quilts.

Since Grace lives in prison, she is even lower than working-class status, but she is admired and respected by the upper-class women for her abilities as a seamstress. The Governor's daughter, Lydia, repeatedly looks to Grace to fashion her fancy dresses, an occupation Grace silently resents: "I spent the morning mending some blonde lace of Miss Lydia's . . . she does tend to be careless about her clothes, and ought to be told that such fine clothes as hers are do not grow on trees. It was delicate work and a strain on the eyes" (Atwood 242). This relationship with the upper-class women demonstrates Mayers's perspectives about survival and bonding. Just as Hester relies on her sewing abilities to connect with the town, so Grace relies on hers to connect with the upper-class. While Grace does not receive money for her sewing, she does gain freedom from the prison walls, and a chance to tell her story to Jordan. Thus, she survives through hope, the hope of Jordan aiding in her release. In addition, it is Grace's sewing that rescues her from her father's abuse; she obtains a job working as a seamstress for an upper-class woman named Mrs. Alderman-Parkinson. In working for these women, she garners

respect from them, and thus establishes a bond. While Grace does not bond with women in the same way Celie bonds with Shug, she does form relationships with upper-class ladies by doing their sewing, mending, and quilting. It is only through her abilities as a seamstress that she achieves this honor; normally, women of a high station do not associate with convicted murderers.

This idea of sewing as a distinction between classes appears several times throughout the novel. Although the upper-class ladies treasure Grace for her sewing abilities, she is not permitted to attend the event in which the quilt is put together. "The quilting is in the evening, and it is a party, and I am not invited to parties," Grace explains (Atwood 98). In addition, Grace stitches quilt after quilt for the Governor's wife, but is never allowed to work on any needlework of her own. When Grace is interviewed for a job at Mrs. Alderman-Parkinson's, the woman asks to see her hands, wanting to make sure they are working hands, red and rough. Grace's hands do indeed match this description, a physical trait that reveals her status, and one she wishes she could cover with gloves that are "smooth and white, and would fit without a wrinkle" (21). Grace's preoccupation with gloves continues throughout the novel; she notices and comments on the gloves of Lydia, Nancy, and Mr. Kinnear, but she does not receive a pair of her own until she is free from prison and married to Jamie Walsh. The distinction is clear: the rich own gloves, the poor do not. Grace must rise from her lower-class status to be worthy of gloves.

My thesis, I think, works best to explain Grace. She clearly is not a member of the upper-class. When evening approaches and her work is done, Grace returns to prison to sleep. There is, therefore, a quite literal wall between her and the women she wishes to emulate. Through her sewing, however, she is able to enter the walls of the Governor's house, dabbling in the activities of the upper-class. Once she crosses these walls she is able to speak with Dr. Simon Jordan, her only hope for release. More importantly, throughout the novel, when Grace relates her story to Jordan, she is sewing. In fact, the two never speak without Grace sewing. The needlework serves as her paradoxical barrier; she is completely involved in telling Jordan the details of the events leading up to the murder, but she does not participate in intimate contact with him. She instead hides behind the veil of her

latest project, revealing only what she wishes. Grace ponders, “What should I tell him. . . Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour” (353). Likewise, Grace picks which embellishments she will relate to Jordan, which pieces of the story will entertain him.

In this sense, Grace resembles Homer’s Penelope. Using her wit, she weaves together the pieces of the story that will construct the precise exterior she wants to convey, that will contribute to her eventual release. Perhaps she omits the boring details because they reveal incriminating evidence. Perhaps she exaggerates the antics of Mary Whitney because she knows what Jeremiah has in mind. When Jordan enters the room “she stitches away . . . she is all the while exerting her passive stubborn strength against him. A prison does not only lock its inmates inside, it keeps all others out. Her strongest prison is of her own construction” (Atwood 362). The prison she constructs keeps Jordan right where she wants him—away from her innermost thoughts. Even with the restrictions placed upon her, such as Jordan controlling the scissors, she finds a way to control her own fate. “If I want to cut a thread or trim a seam I have to ask Dr. Jordan, who takes [the scissors] out of his vest pocket and returns them to it when I have finished . . . Although sometimes I just bite the thread off with my teeth” (62).

Once Grace is released from prison and married to Jamie Walsh, she is free to begin her own needlework—the Tree of Paradise pattern she has dreamed of quilting. Upon beginning, Grace debates which parts of her life to include in her project. She wonders, “Should it be only the good things in your life, or should it be all of the things?” (Atwood 382). Grace, like Hester, decides to be truthful to her own life, denying nothing. She includes a white piece, from a petticoat belonging to Mary Whitney, a yellow piece, from her prison night-dress, and a floral piece, from the dress belonging to Nancy Montgomery. She no longer has to shield herself, so she does not have to construct a barrier. She is finally free to choose what pieces of her life she wishes to include in her patchwork quilt. “I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to

blend them in as part of the pattern. And so we will all be together” Grace explains (460).

When we examine these female literary characters through the eyes of their needles, we see the fragments that piece together to form a woman. We see their hopes, their fears, their struggles, their pain, their wit, their achievements. Grace uses bits and pieces, little scraps of fabric, and sews them together into an exquisite patchwork quilt. Knitting takes a limp lump of monochromatic yarn, and spins into a swanky sweater. Sewing takes fabric and thread, and connects two previously unrelated pieces. Embroidery and cross-stitch take a plain, drab garment and embellish it with minute details. Similarly, writers create women characters using this same process. They use bits and pieces and scraps, and weave them seamlessly into beautiful, complicated, embellished characters. Writers use this corresponding needlework imagery often, both in the events and the structure of their stories. Perhaps they use it to prompt social change or to make a point about class consciousness and social hierarchy. Perhaps they use it to explore the bonds between women or appeal to a wide variety of readers. Perhaps they use it as a symbol of survival, of picking up the scattered pieces and moving on. Perhaps, as I like to think, they use it to construct paradoxical barriers between women and their circumstances. Whatever the approach, when we examine women and their needlework, we see pieces of them stitched into their work. Although Penelope, Hester, Celie, the patronne, and Grace are five different women with five different circumstances, they all share one common thread: they create their needlework for an outside purpose, but they stitch themselves into it.

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MITCH HARDEN

Chimps Don't Read Kant

It was in *Soul Made Flesh: The Discovery of the Brain—and How it Changed the World* by Carl Zimmer that I was first introduced to the work of Dr. Joshua Greene. In the final chapter of the book Zimmer begins to look at the implications of a sub-branch of evolutionary psychology that has been dubbed by some as neuroethics. Actually, this emerging line of research has not yet cemented a name for itself at this time, and some refer to it as moral neuroscience. The main thrust of this field, or at least Greene's role in researching ethics, may have been inspired by chimpanzees. The fact that chimpanzees make ethical choices seems to show that there is a biological basis for our ethics that isn't entirely dependent on our conscious reasoning—or as Zimmer put it, “Chimps may be smart, but they don't read Kant” (2004).

Dr. Greene's Academic Background

Joshua Greene began his academic career at the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 with the intention of studying business. However, he became involved with a psychological research project run by Jonathon Baron studying the valuation of environmental goods (Baron & Greene, 1996). Greene also enrolled in a seminar-style introductory psychology class taught by Paul Rozin, which left a lasting impression.