Behind a Mask Short Guide

Behind a Mask by Louisa May Alcott

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Behind a Mask Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....5

Techniques....6

Themes....7

Adaptations....8

Key Questions....9

Literary Precedents....11

Related Titles....13

Copyright Information....14

Characters

The central character of Behind a Mask is Jean Muir. Jean is not merely the ruthless, vengeful perpetrator of a plot to get ahead. She is also a remarkably observant woman, with keen powers of analysis and judgment that can turn disadvantages into steppingstones. Jean draws upon what talents she has, and these are superlative. Her consummate acting skills become obvious at the end of the first chapter, when after convincing a group that she is an innocent nineteen-year-old, she adjourns to her room and adopts an expression of fierce disdain. "Come, the curtain is down," she declares, "so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves."

Jean undergoes an amazing metamorphosis. She takes from her head "the long abundant braids," wipes "the pink" from her face, takes out "several pearly teeth" and undresses to emerge "a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least." Jean is a remarkable fictional creation partly because she is nothing like the sentimental, domestic Victorian she impersonates, and partly because she has an unknown past.

During her private unmasking, the reader becomes aware of a "newly healed wound" that seems to symbolize a psychological one. Jean creeps to bed "like one worn out with weariness and mental pain."

Jean is remarkable, too, for her ability to play to each member of her audience. She times her words and gestures perfectly, staging songs, swoons, tears, silences, or ecstasies which draw out the best or the worst in each Coventry, as well as entrap. "The arrival of Miss Muir seemed to produce a change in everyone, though no one could have explained how or why." Among those changed are shy, sixteen-year-old Bella, a "rosy little creature," who is enchanted by the tutor who sings so well.

Bella's mother, Mrs. Coventry, sickly and peevish, is "quite won by the modest, domestic graces of the new governess."

Bella's cousin Lucia Beaufort, who oversees the servants with great care to assure they pay due respect to rank, is subdued by Jean's art but still hostile.

Lucia is upset by Jean's power over Gerald, the man she loves and heir to the family fortune. Lucia is Jean's foil, not brilliant or accomplished, merely jealous and passive. When a letter is discovered in which Jean writes, "Bah!

how I hate sentiment," Lucia refuses to believe a woman could write such a thing.

Edward, the younger son, aged twenty-one, is the first man drawn to Jean. "Poor little woman! She has had a hard life." Since she sees that he will not be attracted by a "silly coquette," Jean blends a sisterly friendliness with quiet dignity. In one episode she impresses Edward by charming his horse, a distrustful beast, by calmly ignoring it. Jean

energizes Edward to pursue the commission he desires in government service. Edward grows love-struck, and at one point physically attacks his brother Gerald as a rival for Jean's affections, explaining afterward in remorse: "She would make a man of me. She puts strength and courage into me as no one else can."

Gerald is indolent, cool, snobbish, a tougher target. He suspects Jean's swoon upon arrival may well be staged. Eventually Jean uses the same stratagem that worked on the horse, charming Gerald by her neglect and enlivening him by her dislike of his indolence. He falls before "the indescribable spell of womanhood" after she casts him in the tantalizing role of her lover during an evening of amateur home theatricals. Having managed to her advantage the simple natures of Bella and Mrs. Coventry, the passion of Edward, the romantic side of Gerald, Jean moves on to the title-holding uncle.

Sir John Coventry is a hale, handsome, distinguished man of fifty-five, who lives in lonely splendor on his estate. His slighting manner toward Jean when she is believed a "mere" governess, at which Jean bites her lips "with an angry feeling at her heart," turns into good will at the mention of her supposed rank. Jean flatters the man, evokes his curiosity with "a charming air of maidenly timidity and artlessness." Still his basic decency slows the process. His reticence, and the threat of imminent exposure, reveal Jean's very human side. "Has all my skill deserted me when I need it most?"

Yet her nerves of steel prevail. Jean finds a way to "make him understand, yet not overstep the bounds of maidenly honesty."

Jean's deception of Sir John peels away some of the layers of ambiguity in her character, the effect of her acting. Her true self feels "a touch of genuine remorse" in the presence of his offer. Despite her unscrupulous methods, Jean possesses a real sense of fair play. It shows in her dealings with those family members shattered by the knowledge of her duplicity. Jean rewards democratic Edward and Bella with true "grateful warmth" and promises to repay their kindness. "To you I will acknowledge that I am not worthy to be this good man's wife, and to you I will solemnly promise to devote my life to his happiness." She reproves snobbish Gerald and Lucia, whom she leaves to themselves. Jean does not scheme to rob or disgrace the family, but to expose false attitudes and show the good offices an intelligent, freespirited woman can contribute.

Social Concerns

In Behind a Mask, Alcott explores women's issues through the character Jean Muir and her relationships with the Coventry family, members of the English gentry. Jean enters the sumptuous Coventry household in the role of a meek, black-clad governess, to take up duties with the sixteen-year-old Bella. Upon her arrival, Jean tells her employers that she is nineteen, of Scotch descent, has "not a relation in the world," and was dismissed from the hospital "only a week ago." Actually, the reader soon learns, Jean is a thirtyish, vengeful, divorced ex-actress from Paris, determined to secure her future among the titled class. Privately, she vows: "I'll not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!"

Jean, although intelligent and talented, is not of aristocratic birth, which adds to her limited opportunities as a woman. Hard experience has taught her that if she wants to get ahead in this patriarchal, stratified society, her best chance lies in using her wellhoned histrionic talents. Thus, among the Coventrys Jean dons a mask of pretense. She tutors, flatters, plays the piano, sings, arranges flowers, all with the downcast eyes and maidenly blushes that display conventional feminine docility. Jean wins her way into the Coventry household and engages its men, by the calculated playing of a role.

Techniques

Behind a Mask is a fast-paced thriller, remarkable for forward-looking feminist themes. These are developed through the interplay between vivid, varied characters. Bella's simplicity and Edward's good-heartedness serve to balance Gerald's distrust and Lucia's dislike. Haughty Lucia embodies the dullness of docility in contrast to Jean, and Sir John a moral uprightness. Jean is a skillfully crafted character, interesting for what she does and what she stands for. A one-dimensional, scheming, bitter, and entirely malicious Jean would have worked against Alcott's feminist purpose.

To engage the reader quickly, Alcott opens with a touch of intrigue. Jean Muir may not be merely a pale, thin, governess in a plain dress. "Something in the lines of the mouth betrayed strength," and her voice "had a curious mixture of command and entreaty in its varying tones." The reader is fascinated with Jean by the time she unmasks in the privacy of her room. "She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender," the reader learns, "but nothing of all this remained to the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss, or disappointment which had darkened all her life."

Jean exemplifies the realism that is typical of Alcott's fiction. In fact, many critics see Jean's character as modeled from tensions within Alcott herself.

Like Jean, Alcott felt rage at the limited opportunities, underpaid work, and domestic role-playing demanded of women in her day. Critics generally see Behind a Mask as an important reflection of its author's "double life" as a writer of lurid thrillers forced to hide the truth behind a mask of respectability.

In the narrative, Alcott handles by means of theatrical references the contrasts between Jean's pretended submissiveness and her actual fiery side.

Examples include the exchange after Jean swoons upon arrival. "Scene first, very well done," Gerald comments, and Jeans responds: "The last scene shall be still better." Later, the family's evening of tableaux vivants — in which members pose in costume for each others' entertainment — allows Jean the opportunity to show something of the hatred, courage, power, and indomitable will she must otherwise conceal. By the technique of repetitious use of related words, like "witch," "spell," "charm," "enchant," Alcott reinforces the reader's sense of Jean's power.

Other techniques employed by Alcott are some often used in the lurid writing style of sensational magazine fiction, which she secretly favored. Included are a complicated intrigue with a forged letter, secret accomplice, mysterious background, and growing threats of discovery that build and sustain suspense. Jean's natural, human fear of loss increases as the plot proceeds. Alcott injects a suspicious maid, Mrs. Hester Dean, who functions as an extension of Gerald's distrust and Lucia's dislike. Injected toward the end are letters that cleverly serve to confirm Jean's scheming intentions, as well as threaten imminent disaster. The three days allotted Jean by Edward heighten the tension until a crisis is reached, justice is served, and the ends are conveniently tied up.

Themes

Jean Muir is on a quest for prosperity and security in a male-dominated society rife with class antagonisms.

Jean is alone and past the prime of youth. She is an actress, the daughter of a nonentity, the ex-wife of a reckless actor. She is a social outcast in Victorian elite society by gender, by birth, and by profession. Jean, outraged at the injustice, is willing to take risks and rise by means of subterfuge. As she writes to her co-conspirator Hortense, she intends to humble this "intensely proud family" of Coventrys by "captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, cast them off, and marry the old uncle, whose title takes my fancy."

One by one, the Coventry brothers Edward and Gerald, and finally their uncle, the estimable Sir John, do fall under Jean's sway. Initially though, despite her charms, the two older men merely acknowledge Jean's presence "by the sort of bow which gentlemen bestow on governesses." Jean knows that only the rank and "gentle blood" they value can win them. She therefore plants the misinformation that she is the daughter of a deceased noblewoman, Lady Howard. At once Gerald begins to view Jean anew as his social equal, one whose unfortunate poverty offers no serious obstacle to his courting her. Old Sir John sees things the same way, and the upshot, by the novella's end, is that Jean is a bride after a brush with near disaster.

Edward has purchased incriminating letters from the financially strapped Hortense, and the family is aghast at the ruse in spite of the good Jean has done. She has drawn Gerald from his indolence, Sir John from his isolation, and the whole household from dullness. Jean has helped Edward embark on his chosen career, and by rejecting a romance with Gerald, restored him to his suit with his cousin Lucia Beaufort.

In any case, regardless of adverse reactions, Jean triumphs over limitations of gender and class, as the outwitted Sir John stands gladly by his "little Lady Coventry." The reader sees that a woman can get what she wants if she is ruthless and determined enough to manipulate patriarchal injustices to her ends. A corollary to this obviously feminist theme is that sham and harm are inherent in snobbish conventions.

Adaptations

Behind a Mask was adapted for the stage by Karen L. Lewis and performed in New York in 1983.

Key Questions

Alcott's fiction should stimulate vigorous discussions because of her themes and her techniques, including her reliance upon her autobiography.

Her stories and novels generally reflect a feminist understanding that critics recognize as remarkably wide-ranging in scope. Behind a Mask clearly links the role of actress with a woman's means to establish herself in society. A good line to take in discussion is whether the feminine pretenses Jean Muir adopted to gain her ends are essential for women today.

Besides the feminist aspects of the novella, critics see it as a crucial expression of Alcott herself. Another good avenue to pursue is the degree to which readers agree with critics on this point, particularly in the light of Alcott's reputation as "the children's friend" — the author of Little Women (1869), Little Men (1871), and Eight Cousins (1875). Readers might also consider whether Alcott merely used the conventions of "sensation" fiction to create an entertaining story. In any case, a comparison with one of Alcott's favorite novels, Jane Eyre, might be useful to establish the degree to which Behind a Mask represents innovation in theme and technique.

1. Alcott gives two contrasting views of women in the characters of Jean and Lucia. How do they differ? What do their differences tell us about Alcott's views on women?

2. Alcott utilizes an epistolary technique as the plot proceeds to crisis.

How effective is the device in the unraveling of Jean's past and present intentions?

3. What is the "mask" Jean hides behind? What does it symbolize in Victorian society?

4. What symbolic role does Sir John's house play in the novella?

5. What are Jean Muir's attitudes toward men in general? Toward women?

6. Alcott constructs a complex character in Jean Muir, especially in terms of the multiplicity of dramatic skills she uses on the Coventrys. Can you distinguish them all?

7. Is the ending a happy one for Jean? Is Sir John the man she really needs? Does she abandon her feminist independence by marrying him?

8. Consider the outcome for characters other than Jean and Sir John.

Which are better off for her coming among the Coventrys? Worse off?

9. What methods does Alcott employ to heighten tension and build suspense?

10. Is Jean a sympathetic character?

Do her ends justify her means?

Literary Precedents

Behind a Mask has specific ties to Gothic literary tradition. Alcott read and admired the Gothic novels of the eighteenth-century authors Ann Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, and Charles Brockden Brown, all of whom wrote under the influence of Horace Walpole, whose The Castle of Otranto (1764) launched the Gothic tradition. Radcliffe's popular The Mysteries of Udolpho, published in 1794, featured elements of intrigue and horror. Her The Italian of two years later depicted a romantic villain who repelled, yet attracted the reader at the same time.

Lewis incorporated horrific and supernatural elements into The Monk (1796). Brown's Wieland (1798) and Arthur Mervyn and Ormond (1799) reflected the Radcliffe school of horrors.

By the nineteenth-century, works influenced by the tradition were being produced by Alcott's Concord neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Scarlet Letter (1850) treated themes of guilt and secrecy, and their psychological effects, through a strong female character.

Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe depicted his own favored variety of horrors, those of the human mind, in settings of a twilight world.

Critical commentary especially relates Alcott to the tradition of English authors whose sensational fiction was enormously popular in the early 1860s.

These include Charles Dickens, whose popular Little Dorrit (1857) was followed by the best-selling Great Expectations (1861). Little Dorrit features the strong-willed, determined Mrs. Clenham, a woman with secrets. Great Expectations also portrays a scheming and vengeful woman, Miss Havisham, who seeks to act by manipulating her adoptee. Alcott knew the work of Dickens well and had drawn upon his novels for her amateur theatrical works. Author Wilkie Collins was another influence, known for The Woman in White (1860) which involved evil machinations, and for Armadale (1866).

Another sensational writer, Mrs. Henry Wood, portrayed in her East Lynne (1861) an aristocratic woman engaged in a struggle to win back her family. Mary Elizabeth Braddon was especially known for lurid novels, and critics see her Lady Audley's Secret, published in 1862 after serialization in 1861, an important key to Alcott's concept in Behind a Mask. Braddon's novel involves the attempt of an unbalanced, manipulative governess Lucy Grahame, who becomes Lady Audley, to win love and the social position denied her by birth. The narrative tells of "fatal necessities of concealment," and "how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life."

Critical commentary also points to parallels between Behind a Mask and Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre published in 1847, a novel Alcott was particularly drawn to. The discussion of governesses by the Coventry family at the beginning of Behind a Mask resembles a scene in Jane Eyre. Jean arrives at the Coventry home dressed in similar

fashion to Jane, and participates in tableaux vivants like the performances which occur in Jane Eyre. Yet Jane's spontaneous displays of emotion are merely play-acted by Jean, and Jean's marriage involves no enslavement to a Rochester-type hero.

Behind a Mask falls both inside and outside the traditions of nineteenthcentury sensational and women's fiction. Jean's bondage to her situation in life and her deceit involve typical devices like secret letters and a country house. Yet the character of Jean has an innovative complexity because of Alcott's blend of moral ambiguity with subterfuge. Certainly the particular relationship Alcott depicts between deceit and power is not typical of the domestic-novel type of women's fiction. Any traditional horrific or secretive elements that appear in Alcott's work have been transformed into very practical and clearly stated themes about a woman's democratic right to place and expression.

Related Titles

Alcott's Gothic thrillers typically display strong-willed heroines who suffer difficult lives and renounce the prescribed, subjugating gender role of docile sentiment. Two examples of manipulating, vengeful women like Jean Muir include Pauline Valery of the short work "Pauline's Passion and Punishment." In the novella V. V.: or, Plots and Counterplots, the orphan and victimized widow Virginie Varens is a Parisian dancer who assumes a disguise to try to land an estate and title by remarriage.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994