

The art of acting: character and social class in behind a mask



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Louisa May Alcott's novella "Behind a Mask" portrays a protagonist who uses her acting skills to move up in society from a governess to a lady of British aristocracy. An article written by Elizabeth Schewe titled, "Domestic Conspiracy: Class Conflict and Performance in Louisa May Alcott's 'Behind a Mask'", brings to light the implications surrounding the governess's actions within in the Coventry home. Jean Muir, the governess, uses her talent as an actress and her knack for reading peoples character, seeing behind their "masks", in order to achieve her own goals of financial security and a respectable title. By first understanding the role of the governess in the household, one can see how Muir artfully carries on her act, while, at the same time, showing how the Coventry family performs in much the same manner.

It is important to first draw attention to the role of the governess in the household. The job itself reveals the act aristocrats and high society perform to those of a lower caste. As Schewe states, "It is the governess who teaches...manners, speech, and demeanor—the markings of the upper class that is supposed to be innate" (Schewe 581). Therefore the upper class, though not openly, acknowledges that they in fact are no more superior to Muir, for she is the one teaching young Bella how to be a proper lady. Mrs. Coventry even admits the necessity of a governess for her daughter stating, "My daughter has never had a governess and is sadly backward for a girl of sixteen...get her on as rapidly as possible" (Alcott 10). The importance of Muir "getting her on rapidly" is so the family can start parading Bella in society, showing she is a proper and high class lady, ready to marry someone equal in class.

Muir's role as a governess is, by description, an act. Schewe argues that a "governess is required—in order to perform her job play two discrepant roles, that of authority and that of inferior" (Schewe 580). Not only is she, as a governess, acting, but she also is teaching Bella how to act, teaching her how to behave in society. The fact that her career as an actress can be utilized in her role as a governess makes the transition into performing for the family easier. Her goal for financial stability depends on her skills to win over each member of the family so she can seduce one of the males. "She must seduce the entire family, for she must be liked and trusted enough to interact with the men without interference" (Schewe 582). This proves to be a seemingly simple task for the talented governess. She easily sees through the members of the Coventry house, revealing their weaknesses and capitalizing on them. She states in her confiscated letters at the end, "Having caught a hint of the character of each, [I] tried my power over them" (Alcott 99). Her power is shown by her ability to manipulate her surrounds, including the Coventry family, in order to continue her act.

Indeed, Muir's ability to create a scene and emotion for a person is perfectly seen during and after the faux tableau. Her participation in the theatre captivates everyone there, especially that of Gerald. In front of the audience, "she felt his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek, knew that she had touched him at last, and when she rose it was with a sense of triumph" (Alcott 53). This triumph is not short lived, but drawn out as they escape to the garden. Here, still in costume, one can see the cunning deception of Muir. She recreates the scene they had just performed; only this time they are alone. Schewe suggests that, "Muir seduces Gerald, not by convincing

him that she is genuine, but by letting him join in her performance. Gerald is seduced by the generic conventions of romance into playing a part..." (585). Therefore, this feeling Muir creates in Gerald is merely by continuing her act from the faux tableau. She even jokes about it to Gerald stating, " We are acting our parts in reality now" (Alcott 61). Gerald is so caught up in this private performance that he fails to notice the hidden truth behind this statement.

The clever governess is not the only one putting on an act. Alcott shows how the other characters act to achieve their own agendas. When Gerald desires to see Muir more often, he enlists Bella to conspire against Lucia, saying, " I wish you'd just settle things with Mamma and then Lucia can do nothing but submit" (Alcott 46). This secretive plotting against their own family member can be related to Muir's deception to the family. Schewe says it best: " Their willingness to act a part in order to deceive each other shows that they are not genuine even within their own family but, instead, are always performing. In addition, Gerald's and Bella's willingness to conspire against Lucia demonstrates that they are not by nature superior to Muir in spite of their class advantages."

Muir is able to see through the façade of the upper class and their performances, creating a sense of equality of morality. Both parties deceive others, even within the family, to achieve their own wants and desires. The same technique is used in the conclusion of the novel. On finding out Muir's agenda, and too late to stop it, the Coventry family " chooses to maintain a conspiracy of silence...rather than risk besmirching their own name"

(Schewe 588). Had news got out about this incident the Coventry family
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would be cast out of the beloved upper class system, for they failed to distinguish this conniving woman's inferiority until it was too late, tainting their aristocratic family.

Louisa May Alcott's thriller " Behind a Mask" represents the ironies of the upper class society. Schewe's article also helps bring to light the class structures and societal performances throughout Alcott's work. Using Muir to show the true characters in this caste system, she effectively shows how everyone acts in order to gain what they want, even superior people. By understanding the role of Muir as a governess in this household, one gains insight on the performances of the governess character, and of the upper class family.