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# Women's Control of Passion: Louisa May Alcott's Revision of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and Societal Restrictions of Passion in the Nineteenth-Century

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WOMEN'S CONTROL OF PASSION: LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S REVISION OF  
CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S *JANE EYRE* AND SOCIETAL RESTRICTIONS OF  
PASSION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

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Bachelors of Arts and Science

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MASTERS OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

**We hereby approve this thesis**

**For**

Erica Eileen Cicero-Erkkila

**Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English**

**For the department of**

English

**And**

**CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S**

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Student's Date of Defense: 8 April 2014

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, especially my mother Lydia and my grandmother Mary, for always being supportive during the writing process and throughout my life.

Thank you to my aunt Eileen for her encouragement in my feminist passion which lead to my study of Louisa May Alcott's *Blood and Thunder* novels. Also thank you to Sebastian for always being his wonderful self and brightening my day.

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**ABSTRACT**

Louisa May Alcott's revision of the representation of passion in *Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power* (1866) in connection with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is something that has not been widely discussed in scholarly studies since the reintroduction of these *Blood and Thunder* novels by Madaline Stern in 1975. Both Bronte and Alcott demonstrate in their novels that passion is a positive attribute, but, through Jane, Bronte demonstrates that hysterical passion must be sincerely controlled and internalized in order to positively contribute to a woman's life. Alcott, on the other hand, suggests that women merely need to act as proper gentlewomen and use their passionate ways in assisting them to do so. *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask* are two texts that represent women with very passionate personalities, which are portrayed as positive aspects of these characters. Alcott's suggests through Jean, that passion should be a tool used by women to achieve happiness; which is very different than Bronte's demonstration of controlled passion and proper Christian, gentle behavior. Through the analysis of passion and the different representations of passion in these two texts we can see that Alcott's work is revising the idea of passion compared to Bronte's earlier representation of internalized control in *Jane Eyre*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER I.....	1
CHAPTER II.....	8
CHAPTER III.....	17
CHAPTER IV.....	32
WORKS CITED.....	50

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf (1929) moves the discussion of passion forward in *Jane Eyre* (1847) that has long since been a topic of scholarly debate. Woolf argues that there are many “drawbacks of being Jane Eyre” which include: “Always to be a governess and always to be in love is a serious limitation...She does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist; all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, ‘I love,’ ‘I hate,’ ‘I suffer’” (facstaff.edu). Through “‘I love,’ ‘I hate,’ ‘I suffer,’” we can see the beginning of the more modern discussion of passion and the affect that passion has on the text of *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Bronte depicts Jane’s control over her passion as a positive, learned, aspect of Jane’s personality. Passion, in this instance, is depicted not typically as a type of sexual desire, but as an hysteria, madness, (sometimes manipulative, and often anger) characteristic that women were not expected to exhibit during the nineteenth-century. It is important to understand that in the nineteenth-century, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “passion” often referred to “A fit, outburst, or state marked by or of strong



excitement, agitation, or other intense emotion. In early use also: a fit of madness or mental derangement.” Women who did not properly conform to the gentle, selfless, and almost angelic Christian behavior, or gentlewomanly behavior, were considered outcasts by society. The understanding of gentle behavior naturally connects with the unrealistic nature of femininity during this era; and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* gentle refers to a person “Well-born, belonging to a family of position; originally used synonymously with *noble*, but afterwards distinguished from it, either as a wider term, or as designating a lower degree of rank.” This gentle behavior not only referred to ones place within the order of society, but also the way that one acted according to their rank and gender.

As Jane matures and learns to control her passionate impulses the reader is lead to assume that she escapes the possibility of becoming passionately out of control as Bertha (nee Mason) Rochester is represented as too mad and hysterical. Bronte’s representation of passion through Jane demonstrates that women’s passion can be dangerous and lead to life outside of the confines of social propriety; however, passion, if properly exhibited and controlled, can create enough room for women to live properly within society while still allowing room for their own happiness. *Jane Eyre* is a novel that allows for passionate women to not be seen as evil or improper all of the time. When Jane controls her hysterical impulses she is able to find happiness without compromising for others. During this era, the sociological expectations regarding women’s behavior did not allow much room for passionate women who did not control these fits of madness or hysteria (Bertha). These women often stepped outside of the bounds of social propriety. Passionate women did not have to be clinically mad to sometimes represent fits of

madness. Women do not have to allow passion to destroy their reputations within society as long as they do not go too far. Bronte depicts women's submission to their passion as something that they do not necessarily have to completely succumb to; but they must learn to control. From a sociological perspective, both Bronte and Alcott examine the cultural ramifications that suppression and control of passion have for women of the time period. Without this control, women risked social isolation, as Bertha is isolated. However, the means by which women subdue their maddening impulses are portrayed differently in these two texts.

Although Woolf does not discuss Louisa May Alcott's work in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the representation of passion that Alcott demonstrates in her novel, *Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power* (1866), makes it clear that passion is something to be discussed in this American text as well. Woolf's discussion of the limitations that society placed on passionate impulses is also relevant to Alcott's *Behind a Mask*. Alcott's text examines passion, although differently than Bronte does, throughout her novel. Alcott's representation of different forms of this trait is valuable to the understanding of the sociological ramifications of too-passionate women throughout Britain and America. Alcott creates Jean as an anti-heroine whom the reader seems to want to succeed, even though Jean is very different than the innocent, gentle Jane. By creating Jean as a foil of Jane and demonstrating the difference between Bronte's heroine and her own, Alcott manipulates the reader's understanding of passion. Through the demonstration of Jean's anti-heroine antics in using her manipulative passion with the Coventry's, the reader begins to support Jean's tricks, and wants her to succeed. We cannot help but sympathize with Alcott's anti-heroine, as we do with Bronte's Jane; although we sympathize with

Jane for very different reasons due to Bronte's more didactic message. Jane behaves frequently in accordance with the feminine expectations of the nineteenth-century. Jean is a social deviant who simply pretends to be gentle as Jane is; yet the reader seems to yearn for Jean's success in her manipulative endeavors. Since Alcott does not allow the reader to be fooled by Jean's manipulation, we are allowed insight into her schemes, which creates a desire for Jean's success because we can see beyond her shaded past and discover why there is such a desperation to marry well. This support of Jean that Alcott manipulates the reader into feeling demonstrates the difficult situation that women of the time period were in. Also, Alcott's text illustrates an unspoken understanding of women's need to act their way through the expectations of gentlewomanly behavior.

In *Behind a Mask*, Alcott also describes Jean as a woman who understands the prejudices that people in society place on women's behavior and outward demonstrations of passion. Unlike her foil Jane, Jean uses her maddening passion to contribute to her manipulation of the Conventry family. This manipulation, resulting from Jean's passion, allows her to create the false persona of the governess in order to encourage Sir John's affections for her, and eventually result in their marriage. Alcott's representation of manipulative passion through Jean demonstrates that passion is not necessarily something that needs to be destroyed—as Jane was encouraged to control, or practically eliminate, her passion. Jean, after all, is an actress. This profession demonstrates the nature of gentle behavior and demonstrates Alcott's revision of Bronte's text. For Jean, being a proper gentlewoman is simply an acting role. Jean's play acting suggests that proper gentlewomen during the nineteenth-century could act their way through the part of the proper, virtuous, gentlewoman. The absence of passion, or extremely successful control

over passion, is not something that all women are born with, according to both Bronte and Alcott, but that they can learn to pretend to be. Jean is able to put her acting skills to use in pretending to be a virtuous gentlewoman. Alcott demonstrates that women, such as Jean, can manipulate the social system and improve their positions by understanding their passion in all of its forms, as well as the views that the people around them have regarding passion.

Through Bertha and Celine, Bronte demonstrates that when women do not control the maddeningly passionate parts of themselves they risk social isolation. Jane grows up at Lowood and learns to control her madness under the tutelage of Helen and Miss Temple. Jane is able to use this as a positive attribute that allows her to recognize what will contribute most to her own happiness, and not compromise her happiness and reputation in society for anyone. Jane is sincerely a representative of the proper feminine behavior expected of women of the nineteenth-century. She must learn to behave this way during her childhood, but once she learns to control her passion, her gentle behavior is sincere. Alcott's more radical text, *Behind a Mask*, revises Bronte's message of controlling passion and learning to behave properly according to the standards of society. Through the anti-heroine, Jean, Alcott suggests that women only need to pretend to be proper gentlewomen and not necessarily be sincere as Jane is in their behavior. Alcott suggests that women do not need to embrace the standards that Jane learns to live by during her time at Lowood because they can simply act the part of a gentlewoman and not internalize the behavior. For Jean, passion is a significant part of her personality that, like Jane, contributes to her happiness and place within society. Unlike Jane, Jean uses her hysterical passion as a manipulative tool to allow her to assume a figurative and literal

mask. Through this text, Alcott suggests that all passionate women need to don a mask of virtuous and seemingly controlled behavior in order to behave within the expectations of proper society. This mask, created by a passionate impulse of manipulation, allows Jean to pretend to be a gentlewoman and proper governess. According to Alcott, women simply need to understand the rules of the society they exist within and learn to pretend to conform to those rules.

Both Bronte and Alcott demonstrate in their novels that passion is a positive attribute, but, through Jane, Bronte demonstrates that hysterical passion must be sincerely controlled and internalized in order to positively contribute to a woman's life. Alcott, on the other hand, suggests that women merely need to act as proper gentlewomen and use their passionate ways in assisting them to do so. *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask* are two texts that represent women with very passionate personalities, which are portrayed as positive aspects of these characters. Alcott's suggests through Jean, that passion should be a tool used by women to achieve happiness; which is very different than Bronte's demonstration of controlled passion and proper Christian, gentle behavior. Through the analysis of passion and the different representations of passion in these two texts we can see that Alcott's work is revising the idea of passion compared to Bronte's earlier representation of internalized control in *Jane Eyre*.

## CHAPTER II

### ALCOTT, THE REVISIONIST

Christine Doyle is one of the few critics who have addressed some of the connections between Charlotte Bronte and Louisa May Alcott. Doyle suggests that there are many biographical links between Alcott and Bronte, which she argues was the initial reason why Alcott was so interested in modeling and revising Bronte's work. These connections coincidentally include their experiences as governesses in England. Bronte and Alcott's lives present many parallels, but so do their works. Doyle's extensive analysis of the works of these two female authors initiated scholarly study of the works, which has unfortunately been relatively neglected. Many scholars have hinted at the associations between *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask* but none have addressed the way in which Alcott's work appears to be a response to Bronte's novel through intricate displays of the control (or lack thereof) of passion.

There has been very little research done on the links between *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask*—essentially nothing has been written on the topic of passionate impulses that Alcott utilizes in connections with Bronte's novel. This is not to say that nothing has

been written on Bronte's depiction of passion in *Jane Eyre*; this subject has been extensively discussed for many years. Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar even made Jane and Bertha's passion famous in their book *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). Several of Alcott's *Blood and Thunder* novels, including *Behind a Mask*, have been discussed after Madeline Stern reintroduced these stories in 1975. There is a general lack of scholarly research and discussion on the topic of passion, however. Critics such as Elizabeth Schewe, Miriam Lopez-Rodriguez, and Christine Butterworth-McDermott all analyze *Behind a Mask*, but do not discuss the links that Alcott makes to Bronte's work. These connections allow for more insight into the control, and means of control, that both authors depict women to exert over their sometimes hysterical, maddeningly passionate impulses. By investigating the revision of the control of passion that Alcott makes to Bronte's work we can develop a deeper understanding of the social and cultural attitudes towards passion during the nineteenth-century and how these attitudes affected women in both the United States and Britain.

Alcott centers her text in England and focuses on the importance of the British nobility and how Jean uses Sir John's wealth and status to achieve her goals of attaining a comfortable life. The setting of the novel does not necessarily mean that Alcott is making a commentary on the cultural differences between the United States and Britain. Rather, Alcott is demonstrating the connectedness between women's situations in two different countries, and how women are forced to control or mask their outward displays of passion in both countries. It is evident that Alcott is manipulating the more obvious social hierarchy of Britain to depict the desperate situation that women could find themselves in if they did not control or mask their passionate ways. In the United States it is more

difficult to define or narrate the social statuses of characters due to the lack of nobility. Therefore, setting her novel in England allows Alcott to not waste space in her short novel explaining a character's social status since she is able to simply give Sir John a knighthood which indicates to the reader his social superiority.

Interestingly, men in nineteenth-century novels are not usually described as negatively passionate, but rather as having angry outbursts that were considered socially acceptable. Gilbert and Gubar further explain the conundrum of the nineteenth-century notion of passion as "characteristic of male life" which was considered "'monstrous' in women precisely because" it was "'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (819). Alcott demonstrates that in Jean's case, she controls her passion only far enough to fit into the gender expectations of the time period. These expectations were radically different from the gender expectations for men because men could acceptably have angry outbursts, and they would normally not become social pariahs for doing so.

The sociological and cultural anxiety about passionate women in both nineteenth-century United States and Britain is depicted by Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1862), which famously details the behavioral expectations for women and the conduct which women were taught to follow regarding the expected female behavior during this era. Patmore's myth expected women to be "the summ'd sweetness of the earth,/Her soul the glass of heaven's grace...She is both heaven and the way"(Patmore 4. 1-4). Patmore reveres the angelic sweetness that women were expected to embody and demonstrates the difference between the expected behavior for men and women. This



poem encourages women to attain an angelic status of behavior that no woman can achieve, which demonstrates the unrealistic nature of the gender expectations of the era.

Woolf demonstrates the unrealistic nature of Patmore's expectations in *A Room of One's Own* when she suggests that all women need to rise up and "kill" the angel that society expected them to be (Thackeray). Gilbert and Gubar support Woolf's assertions about metaphorically killing the angel when they explain that "the spiritualized Victorian woman who, having died to her own desires, her own self, her own life, leads a posthumous existence in her own life time" (817). Many critics argue that the suggestion of the embodiment of feminine ideals through Patmore's angel, depicted through Jane, Bertha, and Jean, can often result in the destruction of a woman's inner passionate personality. According to Bronte's representation of passion in *Jane Eyre*, if a woman is like Bertha and chooses to completely embrace her hysterical, maddening passion (even if she is mentally deranged as Bertha is) she can expect total social isolation as a result. Jean, through her acting and masking of her manipulative, hysterical passion, is not forced to completely outwardly display allow the societal notion of the proper behavior and suppress her passion. Jean is able to maintain her passion as fervently as ever, while wearing a temporary mask of expected femininity. This mask demonstrates Alcott's revision of Bronte's text because Alcott suggests that women do not need to become educated in proper gentle behavior as Jane was, they simply need to mask their outward displays or passionate behavior. Alcott demonstrates her commentary on the sociological effect of this feminine idealization of behavior by suggesting that women only need to don a mask of gentility. She shows that women can rarely embody the traits expected of them and must therefore pretend to be something they are not. Alcott furthers her revision

of Bronte's work because Jean demonstrates that any woman can seemingly become a virtuous gentlewoman, absent of passion, if they are able to act. Alcott's work suggests that this extremely tight control of passion is not reserved for the upper echelons of society, but something that anyone can perform. Alcott revises Bronte text by suggesting that women do not need to be educated as thoroughly as Jane was in ways of internalizing meek femininity, they simply need to act the part of the angelic gentlewoman and mimic the behavior expected of them.

Jean's acting does not require her to ever symbolically kill her inner angel because that socially constructed complex never develops within Jean. Although Woolf does seem radical when she suggests that women need to kill their inner figurative angels, both Alcott and Bronte demonstrate that women devoid of passion are also dangers to themselves. A woman who does not have passion risks potential ruin by allowing a man to manipulate her into improper behavior that will also result in her becoming a social pariah—such as Jane becoming Rochester's mistress. If the idea of the angel, or over-feminized gender expectations of the nineteenth-century woman, did not exist, then women would be free to embrace their passionate impulses. Alcott, unlike Bronte, suggests that women are free to embrace these impulses, as long as they have control over their outward displays of passion.

Ellen Jordan denotes that the expectations of behavior in nineteenth-century Britain and America did not allow room for female passion because "by the 1850's the Angel in the House myth can be found embedded in almost all public representations of women and their positions" (51). She further explains that myth describes a woman devoid of passionate impulses because these expectations include "the physical and

practical providing of comforts but spiritual inspiration which was their main contributions” (51). Jordan elaborates on her discussion of women and the domestic expectations of the angel: “women were shut up in the house not just to do the housework and bring up the children but to be a sort of externalized consciousness for men” (51). Jordan illuminates the social significance of men in the nineteenth-century being who were expected to naturally embody passion although women were forced to control or face social isolation. Jordan, however, does not further her discussion through the idea of social isolation as a result of passionate impulses which are enacted through Bertha’s literal isolation after she embraces her passionate hysteria. Before Jean masks her passionate past and has control over her passion, she is figuratively imprisoned from society, as Bertha is literally imprisoned.

Jordan explains that women, who had to learn to govern their own passions, were expected to spiritually mentor the men in their lives who were straying from the Christian gentle path that was expected of them. Jordan presents an argument that allows the reader to conceptualize what a distrusted taboo society viewed passionate women as during this time period. Passionate women could not embody the meek characteristics that she was expected to exhibit while embracing her passionate impulses outwardly. The unrealistic expectations that the angel myth, and the social expectations of feminine behavior demonstrate the difficulty that women faced in fulfilling their gender roles. These expectations could not realistically be achieved by any woman. Jane and Jean are both attempting to fit into a society that expects them expected to be generic feminine shells.

Jean’s control of her passionate impulses is different than Jane’s because Jean has not grown up within the confines of a boarding school where they taught her how to

control her outward displays of hysterical passion. Jean is able to embrace her acting skills to substitute for her lack of a proper gentle upbringing. Alcott suggests that women in the nineteenth-century were raised to suppress their passionate personalities enough that they could convincingly behave as women absent of passion. This form for suppression, or almost acting through their mimicking of expected behavior, presented a more refined education behind it. Bronte suggests, through Jane, that women had to be trained in order to behave properly within society if they exhibited passionate behavior. Alcott, however, suggests that women only need to act as proper gentle women, and not change their inner personalities. Jean only needs an understanding of what is considered proper behavior and she can use her acting skills to behave as a well-trained gentlewoman by masking her hysterical self-serving passion. It is clear to the reader that Jean is not a gentlewoman by nature. She enjoys going to her room and becoming intoxicated while planning out her manipulation of the family. Alcott allows the reader to see this side of Jean that is not gentle in order to further her argument that women cannot fully embody the ideals of femininity expected of them by society in the nineteenth-century.

Alcott describes Jean's control over her passion under her masked self when she states, "When alone, Miss Muir's conduct was decidedly peculiar, Her first act was to clench her hands and mutter between her teeth, which passionate force, 'I'll not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!'" (11). Although Jean is expressing her passionate impulses, Alcott allows her to demonstrate these impulses privately. Jean's control demonstrates that she understands what she needs to do in order to portray herself as a proper gentlewoman. Alcott's portrayal of Jean's passion in her bedroom draws a

connection to the control of passionate impulses in *Jane Eyre*. Both Jane and Jean retain their passion within societies that discouraged passionate women; however, both Jane and Jean are able to exert control over themselves enough to appear as women absent of passionate impulses. Bronte does not suggest that Jane is acting; she is still in control of her behavior enough that Jane's understanding of the behavior expectations placed on her sex within British society of the time are clearly shown to the reader. Jean, on the other hand, does not desire to control her passion beyond the mask that she dons to fit into the Coventry family. She enjoys her passion and only controls it outwardly in order to achieve her aims. Jane controls her passion and allowing it to help her make decisions that will lead to happiness eventually; Jean controls her passion under her mask in order to reach her goals. Both women control their outward displays of passion with the understanding that it will contribute to their lives in some way: happiness, and future goals. Jane must use her passion to help her refuse Rochester's proposal to become his mistress. Jean must control her passionate impulses enough to mask her manipulation of the Coventry's.

The very intricate ability that these characters exhibit in the control of passionate impulses that is represented in both *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask* demonstrates the delicate situation that gentlewomen of the nineteenth-century experienced regarding their behavior. Women could not be completely absent of passion or they risked becoming social outcasts because men could ruin their reputations. On the other hand, women could not be consumed by their hysterical, maddening, passionate impulses because that would distract from the cultural view of femininity. Alcott, however, offers a revision of Bronte's suggestion that women needed to conform to the absence of passion that was

expected by those in proper society. Jean is consumed by her inward passionate impulses but is able to maintain her mask gentle behavior without attending a school, such as Lowood, that would teach her a new way of seeing the world. Alcott suggests that women do not need to change their inner passionate impulses, such as Jane is expected to do when she attended school, but learn to control their outward displays of passion enough that they can act as women that society expected them to be. Bronte's Jane embodies many of the social expectations of femininity. Jane is never found planning her manipulation of others, or unveiling her mask of gentility, she is sincere. By Alcott creating an anti-heroine who does not internalize the ideals of femininity, but simply mimics the behavior, Alcott suggests that the expectations placed on women were too high in regard to their behavior. These two different views of women's representation of gentle, proper, femininity that are represented through *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask* allow us to understand how some women could be like Jane and internalize some of the lessons of proper behavior without losing passion. On the other hand, Alcott, through Jean, suggests that women only needed to mask their passionate behavior with play acting.

### CHAPTER III

#### *JANE EYRE*, ALCOTT'S INSPIRATION FOR REVISION

Bronte's didactic demonstration of passion plays a significant role in the development of Jane's character. The importance that is placed on society's attempts to suppress Jane's (and all young women's) passionate personality is significant in the novel and make her learn to control this passion (represented through many different means of characterization, but initially as Mrs. Reed). Tony Tanner is one of the more modern critics to discuss the passion that is represented throughout *Jane Eyre* and how passion is something that "Jane Eyre has to learn to control" in order to fit into societal expectations and embody the myth of the Angel in the House (17). Tanner further elaborates on "wildness, abandon, the unhindered release of accumulating emotions" that Jane experiences throughout the novel which is a representation of her "passion...[and] the need for control and containment" of that passion before she becomes too much like Bertha and can no longer be considered acceptable within society (17). Tanner concludes his argument with the connection between Thornfield Hall being the symbolic fire of

Jane's passionate nature being extinguished, in a sense, through her self-control and containment of passion (22). In regards to Bronte's thesis, he does go too far when he suggests that Jane's marriage to Rochester allows her to permanently control her hysterically passionate ways. Jane would not have been expected to attend school, and learn to suppress her youthful and impulsive passion if marriage were the obvious solution for control. For Tanner to compare Jane's passion to the fires of Thornfield, which were extinguished, suggests that Jane no longer has a passionate personality after the fire dies. Jane's lack of passion after the fire is simply not true. The control that Bronte demonstrates Jane must exert over her passion even after the fire demonstrates that although Jane does continue to have her passionate nature under control it is still present. If Jane were to have lost her hysterical, passionate self it would not have been in the fires of Thornfield, but at Lowood where she learned proper feminine behavior.

From the beginning of the novel Jane's passion causes her problems with the Reeds and is one of the many reasons why she is sent to Lowood Institution to reform her behavior, to embody more of the gentle femininity expected of her. Bronte demonstrates the sociological expectations regarding women's behavior during the nineteenth-century through Jane's banishment to Lowood. Mrs. Reed views her youthfully passionate niece as destructive and dangerous. As the myth surrounding Patmore's poem attests, women were expected to control their passionate impulses or simply not have them. The adult Jane narrates: "I was a precocious actress in her [Mrs. Reed's] eyes: she sincerely looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity" (14). Significantly, Bronte uses "precocious actress" which is what women in the nineteenth-century were expected to behave as according to Alcott—they were forced to pretend that



their passion did not exist, and fight against it in order to fit into social expectations of gentle behavior. Furthermore, the adjectives: “virulent...mean...and dangerous” support the idea that in the nineteenth-century passion was viewed as a poison— dangerous to all women. Although passionate behavior does not have a physiological underpinning, it is suggested through these texts that passionate women of the nineteenth-century were feared and shunned because they could “poison” or negatively influence other women into discovering, or displaying their passionate behavior. Hysterical, youthful passion that is represented throughout *Jane Eyre* connects to Bronte’s depiction of how much control an individual has over this part of herself. By creating Jane as a young woman who has very little control over her hysterical passion initially, Bronte demonstrates the general fear of passionate women in British society. Jane (or non-fictional, passionate women in general) could influence other young women into embracing their passions and risk destroying the social expectations of femininity. We cannot know if all women of the nineteenth-century had passionate personalities; but Bronte and Alcott suggest that the only way for women to exist within proper society is to exert control (in different forms—through embracing the lessons of social decorum, or through acting) over their passionate personalities.

The first instance that the reader is shown of Jane’s passion is very significant to Bronte’s work because it allows the reader to understand that although we may have supported Jane’s rebellion against the Reed’s, it demonstrates a part of Jane’s rebellious personality that is not part of the feminine idealization of the time. After Jane’s quarrel with John Reed, one of the nurses describes Jane in her fury as ““a picture of passion!”” (9)<sup>i</sup>. The shock that Bessie or Abbot express over Jane’s passion is further supported

when Abbot scolds Jane: ““For shame! for shame!...What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son! Your young master”” (9). Abbot’s assertions allow for the understanding of how Jane, as a young and hysterically passionate girl, is scorned for her behavior. Not only are her passionate impulses “shocking,” but for her to “strike a young gentleman” whose mother financially supports Jane crosses the lines of gentility. Young girls were not ever supposed to express maddening passion, and especially not use this aspect of themselves against gentlemen—their social superiors. During this scene, John Reed suggests: ““you are a dependent...you have no money...you ought to beg”” (8). She is not raised as a gentlewoman alongside her cousins because she is a dependent, which her aunt resents, so Jane does not learn to control her passionate ways until she goes to Lowood. At school she is forced, and later encouraged by example, to conform to the gentle behavior expected of her. Although the reader knows that Jane is in fact a gentlewoman by birth, the Reeds attempt to shame her and her position as a dependent in order to humiliate her. By asserting Jane’s class, or her dependency, Bronte suggests that women who were not born into the gentry, or trained as gentlewomen, were more understandably passionate. Although Mrs. Reed and the nurses are shocked by Jane’s behavior due to her actual birth as a gentlewoman, Bronte suggests, that Jane’s financial dependence on the Reeds and her separation from the Reed children would understandably make her more passionate. Therefore, Bronte, through Jane, suggests that women of lower social and financial groups than the gentry would be expected to have less of an understanding regarding control of passion.

When Jane expresses her passion beyond the boundaries of social convention she is separated from her cousins by Mrs. Reed: “she had drawn a more marked line of

separation than ever between me and her own children” (22). It is significant that Bronte uses “marked line of separation” because this blatant division between the gentle children and the wildly passionate Jane demonstrates the negative attitude toward women who allowed their passionate impulses to be represented in their speeches and actions in an uncontrolled manner. If Jane is separated from her cousins then she will no longer be able to influence them into deviating from their gentle upbringing.

Jane’s outbursts do not end with her fight against John Reed. One of the most plot-changing instances of Jane’s maddeningly passionate impulses is when she tells Mrs. Reed exactly what she thinks of her. Bronte informs the reader that Jane “would fain exercise some better faculty than that of fierce speaking; fain find nourishment for some less fiendish feeling than that of somber indignation” (31). Jane’s fierce speaking and fiendishness, for some readers, may not seem like a shocking thing for a young child to do—yell at their elders in adolescent angst, but Jane does step out of her expected gender role. This outward demonstration of passion demonstrates how far Jane is separated from the gentle behavior she was expected to embody. The absence of control over her passion is perhaps one of the reasons that Mrs. Reed resents Jane’s outburst and accusations so much that she tells Mr. Eyre that Jane has died of consumption at school. The shocking lack of control that Jane has over her passion further asserts Bronte’s representation of young women of the nineteenth-century and the restraint they were expected to learn over their madness, or risk shocking those around them.

Mrs. Reed even asks Mr. Brocklehurst if Jane’s education will ““tra[n] her] in conformity to her position and prospects?”” (29). Although it may at first appear that Mrs. Reed is concerned that Jane will not be educated in a way that is befitting an extremely

impoverished gentlewoman. Lowood must allow Jane an education that will prepare her to control her outward youthful and hysterical tendencies if she wishes to engage herself in any acceptable form of employment as an adult. The education that Mr. Brocklehurst prides himself in providing at Lowood involves ““how best to mortify in them the worldly sentiments of pride”” (28). An education of mortification, during the nineteenth-century would be a way of manipulating young girls into believing that they must rid themselves of their outward passionate personalities. Therefore, the education that Mrs. Reed wants Jane to experience will allow her to understand the alleged evils of her passion and conform to the rigorously controlled behavior expected of her.

Although Mrs. Reed may be trying to deceive Jane when she explains her reasons for sending Jane to school, Mrs. Reed nevertheless attempts to persuade Jane in her belief that ““children must be corrected for their faults”” (31). Jane’s faults include her willingness to embrace the passionate part of her personality when she confronts Mrs. Reed. Mrs. Reed says this during Jane’s outburst. Jane tells the reader: “Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy: its after-flavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned” (31). The vengeance that Jane experienced is as a result of her passionate behavior towards Mrs. Reed. Bronte connects Jane’s youthful passion to wine, a beverage of intoxication, which further asserts the view of the nature of passionate personalities in women of the nineteenth-century—they were not behaving as representatives of their inner selves when they allowed maddening passion to impair their behavior.

Jane’s outburst against her aunt, according to Michael Vander Weele, demonstrates how “in order to resist domination by Gateshead-hall, not just be its outcast

or scapegoat, Jane must find a different tradition and a different society to live by. She must construct a different memory and learn a new anticipation...Jane learns, apart from one community or another” (3). The different tradition that Vander Weele’s discussion allows the reader to understand explains why Jane and not her two female cousins, Eliza and Georgiana, had an hysterically passionate personality. Jane was separated from the Reed children. If Jane were allowed to associate with the Misses Reed, then she could have potentially poisoned these girls into learning how to be too outwardly passionate. We cannot know if Georgiana and Eliza have hysterical, maddening personalities that they are hiding, or if they have passion at all. It is irrelevant, nevertheless, because Bronte is demonstrating the type of feminine, gentle behavior that Jane (and women in general in the nineteenth-century) is expected to exhibit through these young girls. Their training in proper nineteenth-century feminine behavior has been successful because they do not behave as uncontrolled as Jane does. Since Jane’s passion is described in the scene with Mrs. Reed as poison, one can only begin to understand the views that nineteenth-century British society had regarding passionate women—that they could influence, or poison, other young women into embracing uncontrolled personalities.

Vander Weele furthers his discussion by suggesting that there is a tradition of self-assertion in *Jane Eyre* that is absent in young girls and women who were brought up within the myth of the “Angel in the House.” Jane is separated from her cousins and receives a similar, or better, education to them, after she goes to Lowood Institute. Self-assertion, or passionate traits do appear to be absent in many young women of the nineteenth century; however, Vander Weele does not discuss the idea that many young women were taught to control their passion, or simply did not have passion. This passion-

lessness was equally dangerous as passion was dangerous to young women during the nineteenth-century because if they were too submissive they also risked ruining their reputations in society because of men taking advantage of them. The reader is given two examples of young women seemingly absent of passion: Eliza and Georgiana. From what we are shown these two characters do not have hysterical or mad personalities, or have learned to control their inner personalities. This absence of passion is either organic to them or is as a result of proper nineteenth-century education for young women, and the separation from their deviant cousin Jane.

In order for Jane to live a life that is true to herself yet live within social expectations of femininity, she must not allow other people's perception of her "as some false self or distorted role that other people try to impose on her" to affect the control of passion that she develops, even if Mrs. Reed believes Jane is dangerously passionate (Tanner 16). When Jane returns to Gateshead Hall, Mrs. Reed reasserts her belief in Jane's out of control, hysterical disposition when she states: "so much annoyance as she caused me, daily and hourly, with her incomprehensible disposition" (197). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* hysteric suggests a "morbidly excited condition; unhealthy emotion or excitement" that women like Jane could experience. The annoyance from Jane's hysteria in this situation resulted from Mrs. Reed's inability to understand that since Jane was not included in Eliza and Georgiana's proper education, she did not learn to control her passion.

Mrs. Reed continues describing her confusion regarding Jane's youthful, and hysterical passion when she states: "her sudden starts of temper...she talked to me once like something mad, or like a fiend—no child ever spoke or looked as she did; I was glad

to get her away from the house” (197). The temper that Jane has as a child goes against the norm of young women of the time because, as Bronte allows Mrs. Reed to describe, this behavior is viewed during the nineteenth-century as madness or fiendish behavior and women, such as Mrs. Reed, would not know how to handle another woman acting in that manner. As a result of this socially deviant behavior, Mrs. Reed was “glad to get her away” not only for her sake, but also so Jane could not influence the Misses Reeds. Bronte represents passion as something that society, in the form of Mrs. Reed, thought could be contagious, that women could catch if they were exposed to it. Although Mrs. Reed is clearly exaggerating when she states that “no child every spoke or looked” in the provoking and passionate manner that Jane allowed herself to behave in, it is very unnatural for a child raised within the social elite to behave in the manner that Jane does. Nineteenth-century gentle girls were taught to control their passion and not have “sudden starts of temper.” Through Jane, Bronte demonstrates that temper in young women was not acceptable and created distrust between these hysterical women and those who controlled their inner passions.

Jane learns the extent that Mrs. Reed’s hatred of her went when she is told: ““I disliked you too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting you to prosperity”” (203). Mrs. Reed goes so far as to claim that Jane has died when John Eyre wants to make Jane his heir. Mrs. Reed, however, expresses her vindictively passionate behavior when she does not allow Mr. Eyre to know of Jane’s whereabouts, and instead tells him she had died. This revenge that Mrs. Reed seeks suggests passionate behavior and demonstrates that Mrs. Reed has allowed herself to exhibit hypocritically behavior. If Jane had not learned to control her hysteria by that time and she were to go to Maderia as

a passionate young woman, then Mrs. Reed risked social scorn because she did not enforce the popular views of femininity upon her young niece. This could suggest that Mrs. Reed herself did not control her impulses. As Bronte shows us, Mrs. Reed does not always succeed in controlling her outward displays of passion. Therefore, if Jane were to go to Madera with her uncle, as a passionate girl, Mrs. Reed could be negatively affected by this due to her inability to properly teach her ward obedience to social expectations.

Jane demonstrates her change from an hysterically passionate child to controlling this passion when she tells Mrs. Reed: ““My disposition is not so bad as you think; I am passionate, but not vindictive”” (204). In this instance, Jane is fighting against the popular social attitude of passionate women by suggesting that it is not “so bad as you think” to be hysterically passionate. She does not mean to cause anyone pain from this passion—she simply needed to learn what was acceptable within society and how to control her impulses. With an understanding of passion, Bronte suggests that women were not ignorant of their passionate ways; they knew (like Jane) that they needed to control their outward displays of passion. Too much passion in women is not something that is acceptable during the nineteenth-century. Bronte suggests that passion is an important aspect for all young women to have because in the absence of passion women would potentially risk ruining their reputations.

For Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha Rochester embodies the passionate personality that Jane tries so hard to control. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the connection between Bertha and Jane exists in order to show the reader Jane’s alter ego is Bertha who tries to prevent Jane from becoming a fallen woman. We learn in the novel that Bertha is considered fallen due to her promiscuous past. Although Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bronte is



utilizing the Ciceronian idea of the alter ego through the depiction of Jane and Bertha, it seems that Bronte has allowed Bertha to show what could happen to Jane if she chose to give up the control that she learns to use with her passion. This representation suggests that Bertha is a shadow of Jane, she frightens Jane; and frequently, before Jane even knows of her real existence, Jane is made uneasy by her hysterical, maddeningly passionate laughter. For Gilbert and Gubar, the connection that Jane has to Bertha, is used as a lesson—control over passion is necessary in order to not become the “monster” or social outcast. Gilbert and Gubar make a groundbreaking argument in *Mad Woman in the Attic* regarding *Jane Eyre*, through the lenses of passion as a cultural norm and socially-prescribed necessity for young women. However, there is not actually textual evidence that Bertha is Jane’s alter ego, but rather, Bertha is a representation of what Bronte was demonstrating most young women (including Jane) could become if they did not control their outwards displays of passion.

Rochester describes Bertha as ““mad; and she came from of a mad family;—idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard...Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points”” (249). In this instance, Bronte utilizes the very common nineteenth-century use for the word passion—madness. Rochester asserts that Bertha’s family had been passionate, or mad, for three generations, and that she is the copy of her mother’s behavior. Significantly, Rochester is the one to narrate this passion. Bronte demonstrates through this scene that although men in nineteenth-century society were considered naturally, and acceptably passionate, gentlemen did not find it acceptable for young women to demonstrate these same characteristics. Mrs. Mason was supposed to be a gentlewoman and train her

daughter in the gentle behavior expected of women of the era, yet she failed. The blame for Bertha's behavior is not only on Bertha herself, but also with her mother. Rochester's narration and his blaming Mrs. Mason for Bertha's behavior is reminiscent of Mrs. Reed's fear that Jane's bad behavior would not only negatively influence her children, just as Mrs. Mason influenced her daughter into embracing her maddening passion; but also, this behavior reflects negatively on Mrs. Reed herself for her less-than-adequate ability to enforce proper gentle behavior in Jane as a child. Through her mother's influence Bertha becomes insane and is later imprisoned in the attic for her own safety and that of others. Bertha's imprisonment is sensational and is perhaps symbolic of women being socially shunned if they embrace their passionate impulses—they will be sent away from popular society and not treated as even human. Bronte's symbolic imprisonment of Bertha for her maddeningly passionate behavior demonstrates the type of treatment that young women could expect during the nineteenth-century, even if their passion was not as a result of insanity. Bronte uses Bertha to show Jane, and female readers in general, the worst case that life could become if they chose to allow passionate impulses to become out of control.

Bronte furthers the connection between Jane's social standing and Bertha's when Rochester refers to the idea of purity: "I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. —I went through the rich scenes! Oh! My experience has been heavenly, if you only knew it!" (249). This description of the "charming partner" that Rochester was tricked into believing Bertha to be reasserts the social stigma of women with passionate personalities were assumed to be. Bertha is shown to be so much of the other—a person so separated from the angelic, gentle behavior expected of

women. Bronte exemplifies the concept of Bertha as a monster, far from the angelic ideal of a gentlewoman, through Rochester's explanation of her: "You shall see what sort of being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human...bad, mad, and embruted partner!" (249). Rochester's assertions that Bertha is not even human demonstrate the full impact of Bertha's lack of control. Bronte depicts Bertha as a monster and shows the reader that women who became social deviants by embracing outward displays of maddening passion were viewed as others, social outcasts, and women must control their passion in order to avoid this fate.

Although Bertha's life reflects the consequences of Jane's actions if she were to allow her hysterically passionate personality to take control of her, there are also two very influential characters in Jane's young life who demonstrate models for Jane if she keeps her passion under control—Miss Temple and Helen. Although Miss Temple is not represented as a character without passion, she does represent the control over passion that Jane must learn if she is to become an accepted member within society. When Miss Temple tells Jane: "I know something of Mr. Lloyd; I shall write to him...you shall be publicly cleared from every imputation" (60). Miss Temple's statement represents a subtle expression of her controlled passion. Instead of allowing Brocklehurst to ruin Jane's reputation at Lowood, Miss Temple allows Jane to go to Mr. Lloyd and provide a character reference to clear herself of Brocklehurst's accusations. Through Miss Temple, Bronte demonstrates that passionate women do not necessarily have to become othered as Bertha is. Rather, women in the nineteenth-century can learn to control their passion and even use it as a tool for their own personal and social happiness.

Miss Temple defends herself to Mr. Brockelhurst when he accuses her of extravagance which represents another example of her controlled, acceptable, and assertive passion: “I must be responsible for the circumstance, sir...the breakfast was so ill-prepared that the pupils could not possibly eat it; and I dared not allow them to remain fasting till dinner-time” (53). This subtle rebellion against Mr. Brockelhurst’s dangerously frugal policies regarding Lowood’s expenses demonstrates that Miss Temple is in control of her passion, but she is assertive enough to not be ashamed of helping her pupils. Miss Temple’s assertive passionate impulses allow her to fulfill her task of assisting her young, hungry pupils. Purposefully disobeying Mr. Brockelhurst’s authority while behaving as a proper gentlewoman represents the kind of control of passion that Jane learns from Miss Temple. Bronte depicts the idea that young women can also learn to control their passion without destroying allow their assertive, sometimes hysterical, impulses.

The control of passion in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is not something new to critics. Jane is a young woman who, for the first eight years of her life, is raised outside of the teachings of a proper, feminine model due to her separation from her cousin’s education. When Mrs. Reed can no longer associate with Jane because of Jane’s hysteria, Jane is sent to Lowood. During her time at Lowood, Jane is able to learn the proper behavior expected of a gentlewoman. Although Jane does not lose her passionate personality, she does learn to control this side of herself that is not considered socially acceptable. The control of passion, not the absence of passion is something that Bronte emphasizes throughout her novel. This emphasis demonstrates the cultural concentration of passion and women’s proper feminine behavior, along with the sociological construct regarding

the means of exerting control over one's inner passions. Bronte illustrates that passionate women must embody some of the gentle expectations of society as Jane learns to do at Lowood. Bronte demonstrates through her novel that women of the nineteenth-century did not have to completely lose their maddeningly passionate personalities to the expectations ideal femininity; but rather, they needed to learn to temper these impulses.

## CHAPTER IV

### *BEHIND A MASK, OR A WOMAN'S POWER* ALCOTT'S REVISION

Alcott “is well known for having led a sensationally double literary life” due to both her gothic-thrillers and the semi-autobiographical *Little Women* and *Little Wives* (Hackenberg 435). Yet, there is still an absence of literary discussion of Alcott’s depiction of passion and the response she makes to Brontë’s works regarding passion—that women only need to control their passionate personalities to a certain point in order to fit into society. Alcott suggests that to conform to the gentle expectations of femininity through acting, or embracing, a mask proper behavior. Christine Doyle suggests in her book *Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Brontë: Transatlantic Translations* that Alcott did in fact read Brontë’s works in 1857 along with Brontë’s biography written by Elizabeth Gaskell (278-283). With the understanding that Alcott did in fact read Brontë’s works, and her biography (which revealed their striking similarities in life), nine years before Alcott composed *Behind a Mask*, it is not out of the question to suggest that Alcott is responding to Brontë’s representation of passion in *Jane Eyre* through her less-didactic *Behind a Mask*. Sara Hackenberg in her article “Plots and Counterplots: The Defense of

Sensational Fiction in Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*" enlightens her reader on the nature of Alcott's role as the author of such sensational works. She also discusses the issue of Jean's position as "a consummate master of disguise with a troubled past" and how the disguises that Jean assumes allow her to become a part of the aristocracy (435). Hackenberg does not discuss Alcott's depiction of Jean's passion. This discussion can further the understanding of the response that Alcott makes in her novel to the representation of passion in *Jane Eyre*, and the narrow boundaries that societies in both Britain and America place on women's control of passion.

Jean is like Jane in that she has to learn to control her passion in order to achieve a life of comfort within gentle society. Alcott, however, suggests that Jean is merely pretended, while Bronte shows the reader that Jane does not need to pretend to control her outward displays of femininity because she has learned to embody these ideals through her education at Lowood. Although Jean is not like Jane who learns to control her passionate impulses before her reputation is ruined as a result of her acts of hysteria, Jean does assume a mask that allows her temporarily, and falsely, to have a clean reputation. Jean, unlike Jane, learns manipulation through passion is the easiest way to achieve a comfortable life of luxury. Jean's passionate impulses of manipulation contribute to the creation of her new personality that allows her to appear as a meek, nobly-connected governess in order to create a marriage that will secure a more comfortable life. Through the representation of manipulative passion, Alcott demonstrates that women do not need to fully embrace the lessons of suppression as Jane does in regards to passion; rather, women can use passion as a manipulative tool in achieving a comfortable life.

Jean's passionate nature allows her to become a manipulative actress within the Coventry household in order to achieve her goal to never again be disappointed financially. The false mask of an impoverished gentlewoman is something that contributes to Jean's success. If Jean were not a gentlewoman, although destitute, she would not be able to marry Sir John because he is of the lower ranks of nobility. This focus on social rank and financial status along with Jean manipulatively masking her actual identity in order to create a false persona demonstrates Alcott's argument that women do not necessarily need to be gentlewomen by birth if they wish to successfully mask their passionate behavior and earn a comfortable situation. "Indeed, her dangerous and vindictive side surfaces strongly" when Jean is close to her goal of achieving social and financial stability through her manipulations of the Coventry's (Hackenberg 445). Jean learns that Sir John did not in fact perish in the train accident that would seal Jean's fate as a discovered manipulator making her, in essence, a social pariah again. Her passionate manipulation, according to Hackenberg, is directly reflected in her skills as a governess, which shows her ability to perform her role well and deceive even the high born and well-educated Coventry's. Alcott suggests through Jean's ability to deceive the gentry that masking one's less-than-gentle behavior and identity is something that can be successfully accomplished even among the most critical of judges. Hackenberg explains that Jean, "is indeed 'fitted to teach music, French, and drawing,' she demonstrates her musical abilities, and the power of her playing utterly ensnares the family's attention" (439). She puts on her final performance as a governess and in doing so not only controls her passionate manipulation of the entire Coventry family but to: "she acts...to achieve her own ends" (Hackenberg 440). Jean uses her reasoning in order to create her fictitious



tale of her connection to nobility. Alcott never allows the reader to be deceived by Jean's false persona. This openness allows the reader to sympathize with Jean and understand why she is forced by the sociological restrictions surrounding her gender and social status to behave the way she does. By allowing the Coventry's to be fooled by Jean throughout most of the novel, Alcott is able to demonstrate that although these people may be the judges of feminine behavior within the sociological order of society, they are not representative of the Christian behavior expected of gentle society. These people are so willing to turn a destitute, desperate, woman out simply because she is pretending to be better socially than she was born to be. By demonstrating the hypocrisy of the Coventry's Alcott demonstrates that women in the nineteenth-century were not necessarily hurting virtuous people through their manipulative masking, they were beating these people at their own game.

Hackenberg suggests that "The first chapters of *'Behind a Mask'* move conspicuously between Jean's manipulation of the poetics of theater to those of story-weaving;" which further asserts Jean's manipulative acting, and how her experience with the Coventry's is like a play that she must perform in order to achieve her passionate goals (440). Hackenberg, however, does not discuss how the manipulative part of Jean's personality was originally encouraged by the lack of control she once had over personal impulses. Hackenberg's argument is very valid; she however, does not mention the connection that Alcott makes to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Through the assistance of Hackenberg's argument in connection with the passion that is found in both novels, the reader can develop a deeper understanding of the work's significance.

Through Jean, we see a woman who understands how to manipulate society, through her behavior, in order to achieve the life that she wants by masking her outward passionate impulses. Although Alcott does not blatantly copy Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in her text, she shapes a new idea through a similar plot in *Behind a Mask*. Though Jean's appearance as the orphaned gentlewoman/governess coming to a wealthy family and marrying the master, the very basic plot points are similar between Alcott and Bronte's works. Alcott, however, demonstrates her commentary regarding passion through the aspects of the novel that are dissimilar from *Jane Eyre*. Through the development of Jean as a divorced, virtue-less, former actress, Alcott demonstrates, ironically, that women do not need to be born and raised in a certain socially-appropriate atmosphere to fit into the gentry as Jane Eyre was. Instead, Jean is able to manipulate her success among the Coventry's through acting and an understanding of the behavior expected of gentlewomen. Control over passion, according to Alcott's novel, does not need years of training, as Jane receives at Lowood, only an understanding of what society expects of women and the will to manipulate one's way into the gentry. Alcott's revision of Bronte's work demonstrates the nature of societal expectations surrounding the feminine ideals because these expectations simply asked women to pretend, and not necessarily internalize the lessons of gentle behavior. Alcott demonstrates through this manipulation that women of lower social ranks and desperate financial situations were practically forced into utilizing their passionate manipulation of the gentry in order to survive in a society that did not allow women much opportunity for advancement except through marriage.

The ease in which Jean manipulates those around her into initially believing her masked personality demonstrates Alcott's commentary regarding the artificial nature of British society of the nineteenth-century. Although Alcott is writing *Behind a Mask* as an American writer setting the story in England, the expectations placed on women's behavior were very similar in these two countries. Rather than making a social commentary on the differences between Britain and America, Alcott's revision of Bronte's *Jane Eyre* suggests that it is easier to illustrate to the reader the differences in the social class structure in Britain where there are titles, rather than in America where there is no aristocracy. The use of the aristocracy allows Alcott to demonstrate to the desperate situation that many women found themselves in if they did not embrace a mask proper feminine gentility.

Both novels represent women who learn to control their passions in order to fit into proper society; but with Jean, Alcott suggests that this control involves a mask that women must assume because proper femininity was an unrealistic expectation for many women to embody. Jean learns that one can control passion and use one's inner passion as a manipulative disguise that can fool people in society. Alcott demonstrates that women with passionate personalities who wish to fit into proper, gentle society must manipulate others through their mask of gentlewomanly behavior.

The way that Jane and Jean go about achieving their happy endings are very different. The control that Jane learns over her passionate impulses appears to be very natural and part of a process many young women must go through when growing up. Jean is a character that never pretends to enjoy the control that she is forced to exert over her passionate personality. This control is literally, and figuratively a mask. Although

Bronte does not go so far as to suggest Jane is figuratively masking her inner passionate personality, the control that Jane is forced to exert and learn through her education in femininity of the era suggests a figurative mask. Jean is an actress, and Alcott uses this former occupation to further her point that women had to be actresses in order to fit into gentle society. Alcott's creation of a character whose life, on the surface, appears to be so like Jane's, but is manipulative and vindictively passionate demonstrates the commentary that Alcott is making through the novel. This commentary suggests women are not organically in control of their passionate natures and can only pretend to lose their passionate natures in favor of proper gentle behavior. The behavior and control expected of women can only be on the surface. By responding to Bronte's work regarding the control that women were expected to exert over their passionate impulses, Alcott demonstrates the unrealistic expectations that the idea of a passion-less woman. These expectations could not be achieved without acting, as Jean so clearly does throughout the novel.

Through her representation of Jean's passionate personality, Alcott demonstrates the type of "actress" that Mrs. Reed thought Jane was as a child. It is important to note that Mrs. Reed, in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, actually refers to Jane as a "a precocious actress." Alcott uses this assumption of Mrs. Reeds and connects Jean to Jane through the role of the actress. Although Jane was not an actress on the stage as Jean was, Mrs. Reed's suggestion allows for the understanding of the importance of pretending and acting in connection with passion. Jean writes, "Sydney was more wily than I thought. All was going well, when one day my old fault beset me, I took too much wine, and I carelessly owned that I had been an actress" (97). Coincidentally, Jean is a former

actress who is using her talents to manipulate the Coventry's into believing she is an impoverished gentlewoman. In her letter to Hortense, Jean discusses how she allowed her past as an actress to accidentally be revealed in her manipulation of Sydney. In the nineteenth-century, acting was considered a scandalous occupation for women, as we learn in *Jane Eyre* through Celine Verons. For both Jane and Jean to be accused of acting, or to actually be a former actress, demonstrates the suggestion that both Bronte and Alcott make in their novels. Women are not allowed to admit that they have to pretend, or act, that they have not internalized the lessons of gentility. Women, during this time period, were forced to constantly perform as proper feminine models of gentility.

Jean's former passionate life is explained by Gerald. He tells his family that Jean: "took her fate into her own hands, and became an actress. She married an actor, led a reckless life for some years; quarreled with her husband, was divorced, and went to Paris; left the stage, and tried to support herself as governess and companion" (102). Gerald's explanation of Jean's life represents Alcott's depiction of Jean as the type of actress that Mrs. Reed accused Jane of being. If women were not in control of their passionate impulses then they risked becoming as Jean was—a social pariah. Jean, however, learns to control her passion and begins to behave as a seemingly proper gentlewoman. Alcott furthers her commentary of *Jane Eyre* through the depiction of the actress. By creating a connection between these two works through the idea of actresses, Alcott shows the similarities of Jean and Jane's situations through their passionate personalities. Since Jane is accused of being an actress by Mrs. Reed, and Jean is actually a former actress, both authors touch upon the idea that women have to pretend to embody the traits of a gentlewoman through embodying traits of a suspect profession. Therefore, Alcott

demonstrates that women, in order to embody the feminine expectations of the time, had to separate themselves from those expectations through suspect means of acting. Alcott, however, goes a step farther than Bronte and demonstrates that women have to be like Jean and actually be actresses (the stage, of course, being their very lives) in order to behave properly as gentlewomen.

Alcott allows Jean to be a representative of women who never controlled their passion, and who must learn to mask their passionate behavior through manipulation. This is represented when Jean becomes a governess to attain a socially acceptable position as Lady Coventry. The pretense of Jean's intent behind her manipulation creates the idea that women must control their passionate impulses, as Jane does, if they wish to live as acceptable members of society. The only way Jean is able to attain this marriage is through trickery. Alcott illuminates the difficult sociological situation that women were in during the nineteenth-century in regards to their social and financial situations because there was no chance for improving one's life except through marriage. Therefore, Alcott suggests that women had to mask their real identities, and use passionate trickery in order to merely live a comfortable life within the confining social structures assigned to their gender. Jean admits using trickery when she writes to her equally passionate friend Hortense: "The enemy has surrendered! Give me joy Hortense; I can be the wife of this proud monsieur, if I will. Think what an honor for the divorced wife of a disreputable actor. I laugh at the farce and enjoy it, for I only wait till the prize I desire is fairly mine" (101). Jean boasts about her potential to marry Gerald, and she even goes a step above and marries his titled and distinguished uncle. Jean's marriage shows the nature of the social order as based on appearances and "masks" because a woman with Jean's past

would not normally be able to attain such an advantageous match. Alcott, however, uses this convenient marriage to further her commentary on nineteenth-century expectations for women because if a woman with such a troubled background, is able to rise to wealth and nobility simply through acting, then Alcott is suggesting that all women need to learn the right type of skills in manipulation and acting since one of the few ways for women to improve their lives in the social system was through marriage.

Jean's marriage proves the "farce" to be even more intricate than the reader was originally told because Jean goes above the gentry and marries into the lower ranks of nobility. Jean's marriage demonstrates the almost comical nature of Alcott's anti-heroine who is able to defeat the sociological constraints of her society and improve her life beyond anyone's expectations. Alcott separates her anti-heroine from Brontë's more didactic, gentle heroine and demonstrates the seriousness of women's situation within the gender barriers of the nineteenth-century through Jean's comically fulfilling success. The rise to nobility brings Alcott's point full circle because if a woman like Jean is able to pretend to be the ideal mate for Sir John, then all gentle female behavior can simply be attained through acting and manipulation. Alcott allows Jean to admit "what an honor" it is for her to make this social climb, even though the Coventry's, at this point, are completely in the dark as to her identity and motives. She knows it is still a great honor, an almost comical honor that a woman with such a troubled past would marry into the Coventry family and gain a title. This almost comical situation further demonstrates Alcott's argument that women did not need to completely succumb to the feminine ideals of the time, they simply needed to act the part of a gentlewoman in order to attain a comfortable situation in life.

Jean explains through her letter to Hortense her understanding of the taboo that her marriage to Sir John is: “He is a worthy old man, simple as a child, honest as the day, and generous as a prince. I shall be a happy woman if I win him, and you shall share my good fortune” (100). This passage not only demonstrates that Jean understands the generous character of Sir John, but she also understands that fallen women like herself, and presumably Hortense, would rarely find themselves in a position to even hope for a man, who is “generous as a prince” with the money and title to provide princely gifts, choosing to marry them. This scene depicts financial difficulties that women in the nineteenth-century experiences if they did not control their passionate impulses and mask them. Although Alcott may not have been going so far as to suggest that women actually follow in Jean’s theatrical example, her commentary regarding women’s behavioral expectations within the confining gender barriers of society allows her point to be conveyed: the expectations regarding women’s behavior was unrealistic and not attainable. Jean has used her passion to attain her “generous... prince” and the “good fortune” that she knows she will have after she has married Sir John. Alcott illuminates the difficulties for a woman to enter into society as a proper gentlewoman if she were to allow her passion to consume her, as is the fear with Jane who must learn to control her passion before it makes her go too far. Although Jean learns to control her passion much later in life than Jane, the significance of Jean’s control is not lost. Alcott demonstrates that this control is through the guise of manipulation and acting, it is not about conforming internally into feminine expectations of the time.

Jean’s passion is discussed by the narrator frequently throughout the novel and is often understood by the Coventry’s as a negative trait, but Alcott narrates her personality



in a way that encourages the reader to like Jean and want her to succeed. Alcott demonstrates the type of behavior that women were expected to embody through Jean's mask. Hackenberg describes Jean as: "a sweet, wan nineteen-year-old Scottish governess who, newly arrived at her post in the sylvan English countryside with the titled Coventry family, proves well able to delight her employers with her graceful attentions and abilities" (Hackenberg 435). This very outwardly controlled depiction of passion begins to demonstrate the connection that Alcott makes to Bronte's depiction of Jane's maturation and how Jane rules her passion within *Jane Eyre*. Alcott presents this response through the difference between Jean and Jane's inner personalities. Jean is a woman who outwardly acts and appears as a proper gentlewoman who conforms to the social feminine norms of the time period. Bronte depicts Jane as sincere, unlike Jean, through Jane's internalizing many of the lessons of gentility. By creating this character that is so much like Jane Eyre, and the proper English gentlewoman, but allowing her true nature to be manipulatively passionate, Alcott responds to the unrealistic expectations that society places on women and their internalization of ideal femininity and how these expectations could only be achieved through pretending.

Alcott allows a description of Jean's real appearance through her letter to Hortense. In this letter, Alcott describes Jean as: "My glass shows me an old woman of thirty, for my false locks were off, my paint gone, and my face was without its mask" (99). The depiction of Jean's appearance demonstrates the stark contrast between the mask that she creates of a meek Scottish alias and her actual self. Jean's appearance as a haggard woman of thirty would make it very difficult to establish herself in the home of gentry like the Coventry's in the hopes of marriage. By allowing Jean's physical

appearance to symbolically represent what society thought of passionate women's personalities as ugly, Alcott allows us to see the response that she is making to Brontë's depiction of Bertha as a "monster." Bertha, like Jean in her past, allows her passionate impulses to control her. Although, Jean is not mentally deranged as Bertha is, the symbolism of the haggard appearance is not lost. As a result of Jean's former passionate life, she is physically representative of her lack of virtue, her separation from feminine norms. When Jean controls her passionate personality, however, she wears her mask of beauty and appears young, innocent woman.

The mask that Jean assumes, both figurative and literal, assists her when she allows her passion to overtake her when manipulating the Coventry men, especially Sir John, into marriage for financial and social security. The connection between the make-up that Jean uses in order to make herself appear younger again relates to the idea of the actress in *Jane Eyre*. Alcott also demonstrates the significance that Jean's mask has as part of her passionate personality, not just her physical appearance: "Her first act was to clench her hands and mutter between her teeth, with passionate force" (11). The support that "Jean is the consummate master of disguise with a troubled past" and is easily able to transition from one persona as the meek governess, to her real self who is the divorced and haggard-looking actress (435). The "passionate force" that Jean exhibits when she is alone after arriving in the Coventry household; which supports that Jean's connection to Jane is not merely seen through her role as an actress. Their connection is also seen through the hysterically passionate aspects of Jean personality that she must keep tamed while in the company of others—much as Jane was expected to do.

Throughout the novel, Alcott shows that Jean is no longer interested in living the life she once lived. She wants to be financially stable with a prominent position within society. Alcott explains Jean's appearance and allows the reader to understand the desperation to manipulate—"She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender; 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" (12). Alcott's description of Jean creates a subtle connection between Jean and Bertha; who also was pretty once, before her insanely passionate nature was discovered. Although Jean's manipulatively passionate nature is discovered, she is still able to maintain her disguise because of her social protection as Lady Coventry, and of course, her seeming lack of mental illness that Bertha undoubtedly has. Alcott suggests that the only way for passionate women like Jean and Bertha to succeed within society while maintaining their passion is through acting and manipulation. Through Jean's manipulation, she is able to attain a higher ranking position within society than most of the Coventry family. Jean's title secures her protection from further discovery because the Coventrys would not want to risk the social scorn they would receive if people knew whom their uncle married.

Although Alcott does not narrate the divide between women of passion (Jean) and those whose personalities have either been tamed by society, or they simply do not possess passion (the Coventry women), she does allow for an understanding of the distinct divide between these two groups of women, which Bronte also depicts in *Jane Eyre*. Once the Coventry's discover Jean's plan to marry Sir John, Mrs. Coventry creates the dividing line between her family and Jean as distinctly as Mrs. Reed does: "Send for

Sir John! I am mortally afraid of this creature. Take her away; do something to her. My poor Bella, what a companion for you” (102). The fear that is expressed over Jean’s manipulative passion and the impulse to “do something to her” more literally demonstrates the ways in which these women were treated if they were not able to tame their passion in order to fit into societal expectations—with fear that those without passion (Bella) could have influenced to develop this type of personality, and a call for punishment. Mrs. Coventry’s fear of her daughter’s exposure to a passionate governess demonstrates Alcott’s commentary that society, represented through Mrs. Coventry, assumes passion is like a contagion that can be caught if a seemingly passion-less woman are exposed to a passionate woman. Alcott shows, through the Coventry’s reaction to Jean’s true identity that passionate women are considered social contagions and are shunned, just as Jane was as a child. Alcott’s response is shown through Mrs. Coventry’s fear for her daughter when she suggests that “poor Bella” was under a manipulatively passionate woman’s influence. Alcott demonstrates that the expectations that society place on women are unrealistic; and in the end, all women are forced to mask their true selves if they do have passions. Furthermore, the idea that Mrs. Coventry is “mortally” in fear of Jean shows the importance that is placed on passion during this era.

Mrs. Coventry, Bella, and Lucia appear to be foils that Alcott uses to demonstrate the passionate nature of Jean’s personality. The depiction of these women’s reaction to Jean’s betrayal of her passionate personality allows for the understanding of how these women, most likely, have allowed the idea of the angelic expectations of gentility to destroy their passion. Their complete destruction of passion for inner conformity to the feminine ideals of the gentry is demonstrated through their horrified response that a

woman, like Jean, could be so manipulative. Since these women do not recognize Jean's mask, we may assume that they do not have passionate personalities that they too must mask with acting and manipulation which allows their offense at Jean's behavior to become more understandable. Lucia's "bowed her face upon her hands, weeping, as if the pangs had been sharper than even Jean foresaw" (102). The imagery of the weeping maiden who was so hurt by Jean emphasizes the vast difference between the passionate Jean and the proper gentle lady that Lucia is. By creating this divide between Jean, a woman with a manipulatively passionate personality, and the Coventry women who do not appear to have passionate personalities, Alcott is able to show the type of social contagion that women like Jean are considered to be.

Bronte and Alcott create two very different female characters because Jane, throughout the majority of the novel, focuses her energies on maintaining the gentle behavior expected of women during the nineteenth-century. She does this in order to remain within the social construct of proper female behavior. Through this behavior, Bronte demonstrates her didactic message of controlling one's passions, yet not allowing society to destroy this aspect of oneself through the ideals of femininity. On the other hand, Jean is a woman who masks her manipulative passion but she intelligently uses it in order to achieve a higher social and financial status. Although these two characters' experiences with passion are very different because Jane must go through extensive education to learn to control her hysterical passion, and Jean merely masks her passionate personality, Bronte and Alcott illuminate the importance of the idea of passion in the nineteenth-century. Due to the nineteenth-century nature of the word passion as a form of insanity, it becomes apparent that the double standard for women and men in regard to

gender roles and socio-economic stability is an overwhelming aspect of these author's points. *Jane Eyre* and *Behind a Mask*, however, are not simply proto-feminist commentaries demanding the reform of the social structure and attitudes, they also demonstrate the difficult ways in which women's passionate impulses and the depiction of control is represented in these novels.

Alcott revises Bronte's depiction of controlling passion by demonstrating that women like Jean can fit into society by assuming a mask of proper feminine behavior, and not losing any of their inner passionate personalities. Through Jean, Alcott depicts a woman who is manipulative because society's notion feminine behavior is unrealistic and women were forced into manipulation if they wanted to fit into the expectations of female behavior. Alcott's revision of *Jane Eyre* is significant to the understanding of passion in the nineteenth-century because she demonstrates that if a young woman does have a passionate personality she need not go through years of education to change herself internally. She must merely learn to assume a mask in order to survive within the confining social structure of the era. Nineteenth-century England allowed very little opportunity for women beyond marriage. Alcott offers a different understanding of the passionate women. She demonstrates that women did not need to go to schools such as Lowood to change their internal feelings of passion, but simply mask their outward displays of passionate impulses by understanding the expectations surrounding their behavior. Women had to pretend to be virtuous, almost inhumanly so because this virtuousness was unrealistic for anyone to attain, creates who would behave in a way that would encourage men to control their passionate personalities also. By revising Bronte's commentary regarding passionate women, Alcott demonstrates that women can be

passionate but do not need to become like Jane and conform to the Christian, seemingly gentle behavior of the time period, but rather mask their outward displays of passion through acting and manipulation since the gender expectations of society were too unrealistic, according to Alcott, for any woman to achieve.

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