

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In the EN 120 course “Masked Women and Handsome Sailors: Gender and Sexuality in 19th Century America,” we read a range of literary texts that illuminate the complexities of gender and sexual identities. As we investigated how nineteenth-century Americans understood gender and sexuality alongside race, class, and other facets of identity, we also considered how the intersections among these categories shape contemporary individuals’ self-conceptions. For their third paper, students were asked to develop an argument about how particular characters from our course readings perform their gender and sexuality—and what these performances reveal about the fluidity and peculiarity of these seemingly stable and familiar categories.

Although several students in the course produced strong papers in response to this challenging prompt, Ai Hue’s paper on Louisa May Alcott’s “Behind a Mask” and Zitkala-Sa’s “A Warrior’s Daughter” stood out as truly outstanding. I was so impressed by her incredibly precise and nuanced analysis of the texts’ main characters as well as her ability to use these two different tales to support a compelling argument about femininity as a powerful tool that can be used to outsmart and overpower men. I am always particularly delighted when students write papers that teach me new things about texts I have taught many times before; in that respect, Ai Hue’s paper was a true pleasure for me to read!

Heather Barrett
EN 120: Freshman Seminar in Literature

FROM THE WRITER

I've often felt that in modern society, girls and women face a pressure to reject traditionally feminine activities, interests, and roles in order to avoid appearing shallow or superficial. In addition, I've noticed that girls and women who demonstrate strength, assertiveness, or independence are often compared to their male peers while simultaneously held in contrast with other members of their gender—typically with the use of the phrase “not like other girls.” As a result, I've often sensed that our society treats femininity as a natural sign of weakness and ineffectiveness and masculinity, conversely, as a symbol of success and power.

While reading Louisa May Alcott's “Behind a Mask” and Zitkala-Sa's “A Warrior's Daughter” for my EN 120 class, I was intrigued by how the female leads of these stories harnessed their traditionally feminine traits to achieve their goals, as if they recognized their femininity as a unique gift rather than a hindrance. I was also struck by the irony in how these characters played upon oppressive norms and expectations of women to outwit their opponents. My essay, motivated by these ideas, strives to highlight the notion that strength, courage, and independence are every bit as fundamental to a woman's nature as to a man's.

AI HUE NGUYEN is a rising sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences, currently majoring in English. From Washington Township, New Jersey, she chose to attend college in Boston in order to fulfill her dream to live in a major city. She enjoys running, playing tennis, playing the guitar, reading, and writing. She would like to thank her family, especially her parents, for their constant support and guidance, as well as her awesome English professor, Ms. Barrett, for all of her constructive feedback, encouragement, and positivity.

AI HU NGUYEN
Prize Essay Award

REDEFINING WOMANHOOD: *BEHIND A MASK AND "A WARRIOR'S DAUGHTER"*

In nineteenth-century America, men were undeniably the more advantaged sex, endowed with a greater range of legal, political, economic, and social rights than women. In addition, empowering characteristics, such as bravery, fierceness, and assertiveness, were often associated with masculinity, whereas inhibiting characteristics, such as submissiveness, passiveness, and vulnerability, were frequently associated with femininity. As historian Barbara Welter states in her article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860", "...men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were the passive, submissive responders....Man was 'woman's superior' by God's appointment, if not in intellectual dowry, at least by official decree" (159). As a result, to accomplish their goals and to feel empowered, many women deemed it necessary to reject traditionally feminine traits and to adapt more stereotypically masculine roles and behaviors; men, on the other hand, rarely assumed traditionally feminine qualities in order to achieve their goals or to feel empowered. However, Jean Muir, the main female character in Louisa May Alcott's novella *Behind a Mask*, contradicts this standard in her clever manipulation of the Coventry family. In regards to Jean's ploy, scholar Judith Fetterley states, "Jean acts out of necessities and on motives that are precisely the same as those of the men, and she evinces emotions and desires that would be considered quite ordinary and acceptable in a man" (11). Fetterley then claims that Jean's materialistic goals are "hardly surprising...in an age of rampant capitalism" and that her emotions—"the desire to win; the desire for revenge; the desire to manipulate, dominate, and control"—are "normal" and "human" (11). Summing up Jean's motives, Fetterley states, "Obviously, Jean is no different from the men" (11). Though I agree with Fetterley's implication that Jean's goals, emotions, and desires are normal and merely reflect human nature, I believe that Fetterley's argument strives too much to equate Jean to a man. Though Jean's motives may be the same as a man's, her means of achieving her goals are notably different, as they rely on a display of traditionally feminine characteristics. By drawing on her sense of femininity to manipulate and undermine her targets, Jean redefines femininity, portraying it as a dangerous weapon instead of an inherent weakness. Another text from the time period, Zitkala-Sa's "A Warrior's Daughter," similarly illustrates the power of femininity by showing how a woman, Tusee, uses her feminine charm to bring about her enemy's downfall. By reading these two texts alongside each other, we can begin to view femininity as a unique power and to see the ways in which women can become empowered through their own gender, rather than by resorting to masculinity.

In *Behind a Mask*, Jean performs gender through both her physical appearance and her mannerisms. To create an illusion of youth and loveliness, Jean assumes a physical disguise, which the reader becomes aware of as Jean undresses in the privacy of her bedroom on her first night in the Coventry house: "Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress

appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least” (Alcott 123, 124). The attributes of her disguise give her a soft, traditionally feminine appearance—a contrast to the “weary, hard, [and] bitter” features of her natural expression (Alcott 124). Besides performing gender through her physical appearance, Jean performs gender through her actions and behaviors. Fulfilling the nineteenth-century American ideal of a true woman, she displays a “meek, modest, faithful, and invariably sweet-tempered” air (Alcott 137). Her mannerisms charm the Coventry family, particularly the Coventry men. Alcott states that Jean “amused, interested, and won Edward with her wit and womanly sympathy,” “piqued indolent Gerald by her persistence and avoidance of him,” and “charmed [Sir John] with her respectful deference and the graceful little attentions she paid him in a frank and artless way” (Alcott 136, 137). Furthermore, to appeal to Sir John and Gerald, Jean depicts herself as a stereotypical damsel in distress. To Gerald, she provides a false account of Sydney’s relentless pursuit of her, casting Sydney as a threat and herself as a victim. Gerald becomes mesmerized by her tale, “unconscious of the dangerous power which the dusky room, the midsummer warmth and fragrance, the memory of the ‘romantic nonsense,’ and, most of all, the presence of a beautiful, afflicted woman had over him” (Alcott 168). He responds by “heartily [doing] his best to console the poor girl who needed help so much” and declaring, “Miss Muir—nay, I will say Jean, if that will comfort you—listen, and rest assured that no harm shall touch you if I can ward it off” (Alcott 169). Likewise, to accomplish her marriage to Sir John, Jean expresses a false fear that Sydney will attempt to destroy her newfound happiness and peace with Sir John. “As soon as he hears of this good fortune to poor little Jean, he will hasten to mar it,” she frets. “Let me go away and hide before he comes, for, having shared your confidence, it will break my heart to see you distrust and turn from me, instead of loving and protecting” (Alcott 191). In response, Sir John rushes to comfort and protect her. “Be easy. No one can harm you now, and no one would dare attempt it,” he reassures (Alcott 192). He goes on to announce, “I will make you my wife at once, if I may. This will free you from Gerald’s love, protect you from Sydney’s persecution, give you a safe home, and me the right to cherish and defend with heart and hand” (Alcott 192). In each of these interactions, Jean appeals to each man’s sense of masculinity. Her helpless, vulnerable state evokes the traditional masculine characteristics of protectiveness, assertiveness, and gallantry within each man, causing each of them to fall into her ploy. Overall, by maintaining a traditionally feminine appearance, displaying traditionally feminine behavioral traits, and appealing to especially to the inner senses of masculinity of Gerald and Sir John, Jean successfully manipulates the Coventry family and reveals femininity to be a powerful, unique weapon.

In addition to illustrating the power of femininity to readers, Jean’s behavior causes other characters in the novel to reconsider their conceptions of gender. At the end of the novel, Jean’s seemingly meek, modest, and submissive demeanor is proven completely false as the members of the Coventry family discover that they have been blind victims in her plot to reap Sir John’s fortune by becoming his wife. This discovery challenges their notions of womanhood and manhood. Upon hearing the first of Jean’s letters to Hortense read aloud, in which Jean states that she intends to humble the Coventry family by “captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, cast them off, and marry the old uncle, whose title takes my fancy,” Lucia reacts with denial and shock (Alcott 206). “She never wrote that!” she exclaims. “It is impossible. A woman could not do it” (Alcott 206). Clearly, Lucia’s view of women is in line with the nineteenth-century American definition of true womanhood, which paints women as sweet, nurturing, compassionate creatures. Jean’s actions invalidate this view and prove that women are as capable of being calculated and cold-hearted as men. In a following letter, Jean recounts her manipulation of Gerald, proclaiming

triumphantly, “What fools men are!” (Alcott 209) Upon hearing these words read aloud, Gerald mutters, “She is right,” and “[flushes] scarlet with shame and anger, as his folly became known” (Alcott 209). Whereas, earlier, Gerald considered Jean a poor, defenseless girl and himself her valiant protector, he now finds that the imbalance of power is reversed—Jean has proven herself to be the dominating manipulator and him to be her hapless victim. By challenging Lucia’s definition of womanhood and Gerald’s view of his own masculinity, Jean contradicts notions of gender that were prevalent in nineteenth-century America.

The power of femininity is reaffirmed “AWarrior’s Daughter” by Tusee, a Dakota woman whose lover is captured by the enemy during battle. To rescue her lover, Tusee uses her feminine charm to lure out the man who captured her lover and slays him. Like Jean, Tusee performs her gender through both her physical appearance and her actions. With her “finely penciled eyebrows and slightly extended nostrils” that cause her to resemble her mother, Tusee’s physical appearance is traditionally feminine (Sa 61). When she stands among the crowd at the enemy’s camp, surveying the dancers in the arena, her appearance is described as alluring and beautiful: “The dancing center fire shines bright into her handsome face, intensifying the night in her dark eyes. It breaks into the myriad points upon her beaded dress” (Sa 64). Thus, like Jean, Tusee has a stereotypically feminine appearance that makes her appealing and that she uses to her advantage. As the man that she has deemed her “vile foe” leaves the center of the arena and goes to sit at his resting-place momentarily, she catches his attention and smiles at him (Sa 64). This gesture appeals to his inner masculine senses of pride and vanity; he believes that he has impressed her with his bravery and battle prowess: “Ah, she would speak to a hero!” thumps his heart wildly” (Sa 64). When she asks him to follow her away from the arena and into the darkness, he willingly goes, eager to “know what sweet words of praise the handsome woman has for him” (Sa 65). Here, Tusee exemplifies the role for women described by Welter’s article on True Womanhood. By pretending to be an admiring bystander, she fulfills the role of a “passive, submissive responder,” while her enemy, fancying himself a mighty and capable warrior, fulfills the superior masculine roles of a “mover,” an “actor,” and a “doer” (Welter 159). Deceived, the man follows Tusee out into the darkness, where his conceit proves to be his downfall; Tusee promptly kills him and ultimately manages to rescue her lover. Thus, by acting towards her enemy in the reverential manner that women were expected to display towards men and appealing to his masculine ego, Tusee portrays masculinity as a fatal weakness and femininity as an effective tool; she illustrates the power of femininity much in the way that Jean does.

One may argue, however, that Tusee takes on a masculine role in this story rather than a feminine one. Certainly, by venturing into the enemy’s camp, confronting her foe, and delivering death swiftly and mercilessly, Tusee displays characteristics that are more commonly associated with masculinity than with femininity. The comparisons that are frequently struck between Tusee and her father also suggest that Tusee represents a masculine role. Initially, Tusee is presented to readers as the “wee black-eyed daughter” of an exalted warrior, who is well known for his bravery and “had won by heroic deeds the privilege of staking his wigwam within the great circle of tepees” (Sa 59). Prior to embarking on her mission to rescue her lover, Tusee prays for the Great Spirit to instill her father’s courageous spirit in her, pleading, “All-powerful Spirit, grant me my warrior-father’s heart, strong to slay a foe and mighty to save a friend!” (Sa 63) Though Tusee’s visage resembles her mother’s, Zitkala-Sa also notes that “in her sturdiness of form she resembles her father” (61). This observation seems to imply that sturdiness, like courage, is a masculine trait that Tusee has inherited from her father that contradicts her female essence. Despite these implications, I believe that the story’s final scene depicts Tusee’s strength as a feminine quality that comes to her naturally, rather

than a masculine quality that has been gifted to her by her father or by a greater power: “The sight of his weakness makes her strong. A mighty power thrills her body. Stooping beneath his outstretched arms grasping at the air for support, Tusee lifts him upon her broad shoulders. With half-running, triumphant steps she carries him away into the open night” (Sa 66). The empowerment and motivation that Tusee feels upon seeing her lover “numb and helpless” indicate that her strength is not something that has been borrowed from her father or merely put on as a costume or act, but something that comes from within her and is intrinsic to her nature as a woman—rather than a contradiction to it (Sa 66). In addition, the sharp contrast between the weak physical state of Tusee’s lover and the power and strength that Tusee exudes during this scene casts women as the stronger of the two sexes. Like Jean, Tusee illustrates a triumph of femininity over masculinity and redefines nineteenth-century American conceptions of womanhood by showing that women are as capable of displaying strength, calculation, and resolve as men.

In conclusion, by juxtaposing *Behind a Mask* with “A Warrior’s Daughter,” we notice a multitude of similarities between the two texts. In performing gender both physically and psychologically, Jean and Tusee both demonstrate the appeal of traditionally feminine characteristics as well as how these characteristics can be strategically used to achieve a goal. Jean and Tusee also both show that the widely held perception of women as frail, delicate creatures and men as strong, valiant protectors can be ironically used to exploit men. Finally, Jean and Tusee both redefine womanhood, showing that the distinctions between masculine traits and feminine traits are not clear-cut and that such traits as courage, fierceness, and strength can belong to the feminine category as well as the masculine category. Emerging from an age in which women were strictly defined by the ideology of True Womanhood, *Behind a Mask* and “A Warrior’s Daughter” challenge both nineteenth-century and modern perceptions of gender and provide an innovative perspective on femininity.

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