Rage and Rebellion in Louisa May Alcott’s
“A Whisper in the Dark”

Abstract
This article discusses the feminist implications of Louisa May Alcott’s 1863 Gothic story “A Whisper in the Dark,” which not only expresses the anxieties that the author experienced in response to her upbringing and her social reality, but also provides an extensive critique of patriarchal culture. The essay explores the subversive nature of the story by presenting it as a dark double to Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre as well as by showing how the author mocks nineteenth-century sentimentality throughout.

When Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers Publishing asked Louisa May Alcott to write a book for girls in the spring of 1868, the author unwillingly agreed. She chose to use her own family as an inspiration and began working on a novel despite being doubtful of its success – a sentiment she recorded in her journal at the time (Cheney 198). To the author’s great surprise, the March sisters instantly won the hearts of readers when the first volume of Little Women was published that same year. The novel – a coming-of-age story about a rebellious, outgoing young girl becoming a “little woman” – was Alcott’s first bestseller. The tale of Jo learning to control her temper with the help of her mother, her angelic sister Beth, as well as her intellectual mentor – and later husband – Friederich Bhaer, must have seemed touching and inspiring to Alcott’s nineteenth-century audience. However, the same theme – a young heroine struggling to subdue what could generally be referred to as female passion – took on a much more sinister form in Alcott’s sensational story “A Whisper in the Dark,” which was published only a few years prior to Little Women. In this story, the attempts of the female protagonist to gain the freedom of self-expression and to decide about her own life are brutally thwarted by an authoritative male figure. Unlike Jo, rather than willfully submitting to the positive influence of those around her, this young girl learns of the severe consequences that await women who rebel. Here, the process of becoming a “little woman” is violent and painful. Reading “A Whisper in the Dark,” as Little Women is often read, through the prism of Louisa May Alcott’s
early years, offers insight into the anxieties and desires that accompanied the author throughout her childhood, which she too spent laboriously mastering the art of self-control and striving to live up to the prevalent expectations regarding womanhood. In turn, reading the story as a dark double to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is equally insightful for this allows one to appreciate its subversive nature and feminist implications. In fact, besides being riddled with Alcott’s subtle mockery of nineteenth-century sentimentality, the story provides an extensive critique of patriarchal culture.

It is perhaps best to begin by looking at the relationship between Louisa and her father. The birth of Amos Bronson Alcott’s second daughter coincided with a change in his views on education:

> An educational reformer, he had just been converted by Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* from a Lockean view of the child as tabula rasa to a romantic vision of the child’s innate divinity. Education, Alcott now believed, should simply turn the child’s mind inward to recognize that divinity. By cultivating the child’s higher nature and subduing the animal appetites that threatened to gain supremacy of the weak infant mind, the right teacher could prevent the child’s lapse from her or his perfect spiritual origins into faulty material existence. (Halttunen 235)

However ideologically appealing these theories may have seemed to the philosopher, his own child undermined them with her moodiness and bold personality. Teaching his daughters how to achieve moral perfection became one of Bronson’s primary concerns, but while “Anna lovingly obliged, little Louisa rebelled” (Seelye 163). Ednah D. Cheney sheds much light on this aspect of Louisa Alcott’s childhood in her book *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. She explains that the Alcott family had weekly discussions concerning the behavior of the girls (29) and the children were encouraged to keep journals, which were then read by their parents (23). The young Louisa May Alcott’s journal is an account of her daily attempts at self-improvement and the repeated failures to live up to her father’s expectations. On her eleventh birthday, when her father asked about her greatest fault, Louisa indicated her bad temper (Cheney 38). In 1839, she received a letter from him about her conscience, to which she added a note many years later saying: “L. began early, it seems, to wrestle with her conscience” (qtd. in Cheney 22). Throughout her entire childhood “Louisa continued to frustrate all of her father’s attempts to ‘vanquish’ her spirit” (Carpenter 38) and “wrestling with her conscience” evolved into a lifelong struggle for Alcott, who could never fully subdue her rebellious nature, despite her father’s desperate attempts to tame her.

In the introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, Elaine Showalter claims that Bronson’s upbringing had “left the naturally ebullient Louisa with permanent feelings of guilt and worthlessness; she could never be gentle, loving or meek enough to please her father, and these were the traits he associated with femininity” (xii). These tensions, which formed the basis of Louisa May Alcott’s psychological
make-up, contributed to the choice of subject matter in her sensational stories, which she wrote between the years 1863 and 1869. Sacrifice, the art of self-control, and the repression of emotions are recurring themes in these Gothic tales. Young heroines must learn to lead passionless lives and strive for ideal womanhood as understood by Bronson Alcott. In a more general sense, they have to adjust their behavior to nineteenth-century standards, which are presented as oppressive and even threatening to the female identity.

“A Whisper in the Dark,” published in 1863 in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, begins with a young heroine, an orphan who has never known her parents, being removed from the safe environment of the only home she has ever known, where she has been cared for by an elderly lady Madame Bernard. Sybil is then placed in the care of a handsome uncle, who gradually emerges as the Gothic villain of the tale. While she acknowledges her attraction to him and admits that she “saw much to interest a girl of seventeen,” Sybil perceives “something stern and somber below these external charms” (223). From the outset, there is a haunting sense of imminent danger.

As the girl and her guardian travel together in a carriage to Sybil’s new home, she initially has a feeling of power and advantage over her uncle because, although he had preferred for her “to remain ignorant of the matter for the present” (223), she is aware – unbeknownst to the uncle – of his plan to marry her off to his son: a union planned by the man and his brother, Sybil’s father, before the latter’s death and described in her father’s will. However, the reader quickly realizes why Madame Bernard was justified in her feelings of anxiety upon discovering that Sybil was to be taken from her care. The conversation that ensues between the man and his niece makes apparent who really has power over whom. Sybil asks about her cousin Guy, but the uncle refuses to answer. Her flirtatious appeals to his kindness and generosity prove futile. The girl’s attempts to charm her uncle become bolder, only to have him assert his physical power and sexual dominance over her:

And pleased with the daring of the thing, I put my arm about his neck, kissed him daintily, and perched myself upon his knee with most audacious ease. He regarded me mutely for an instant, then, holding me fast, deliberately returned my salute on lips, cheeks, and forehead, with such warmth that I turned scarlet and struggled to free myself, while he laughed that mirthless laugh of his till my shame turned into anger, and I imperiously commanded him to let me go. (225)

This command is ignored and Sybil responds by biting her uncle’s hand. At this point she “felt perfectly powerless. All [her] little arts had failed, and for the first time [she] was mastered” (225). Nonetheless, her “spirit was rebellious still” (225).

Briefly after this incident, the uncle begins to tell the girl tales of his many adventures abroad. His numerous experiences and the fact that he has seen the world again emphasize his superiority over Sybil, who has hitherto led a very
sheltered life. Having had no such adventures of her own, Sybil cannot help but listen with fascination to her uncle’s stories. When she is “recalled to [her] self” (225) and tries to move away, the man offers Sybil a cigarette, which has a “narcotic influence” over her (225). It seems that towards the end of their journey, although Sybil does not willingly submit to the uncle’s authority, her own ignorance and lack of personal experience render her incapable of resisting the narcotic influence of his stories and “[crying] out in admiration” (225) at the sight of his beautiful cigarette case. The uncle has succeeded in showing the girl her own vulnerable position.

Terrifying as this first encounter with her uncle should have been, Sybil does not remain discouraged for long. Upon arrival, Sybil is eager to meet her cousin and enjoys his company once they are introduced to one another. Due to their mutual attraction, the idea of marriage even appeals to the seventeen-year-old girl, yet she feels uncomfortable complying with decisions concerning her future which have not been consulted with her. It is interesting to note that Sybil also begins to take an interest in her financial affairs at about this time. She admits to Guy that she is “as ignorant as a baby about [her] own affairs” because thus far all her needs had always been satisfied, but presently she becomes “intensely curious to know how matters stand” (231). In doing so, Sybil seems to be questioning her uncle’s authority because up until this point he has been responsible for her affairs – she now wishes to take matters into her own hands.

Meanwhile, eager to test her power over the two men in the household, Sybil coquets with the father in order to make the son jealous. She is determined “to be the manipulator, not the manipulated” (Carpenter 32). Her persistence is strengthened when she discovers – by eavesdropping on her uncle and his son – that not only have they both been counting on Sybil’s marriage to Guy in order to gain her fortune, but she also learns that “the contract is not binding against her will” (235). Sybil learns that although Guy may be reluctant about keeping secrets from his “poor little cousin” (236), he is nonetheless convinced that “she likes [him] already” (235) and his confidence that she will gladly accept his proposal infuriates her. She attempts to reverse their situation: “to make Guy love [her] in spite of himself, and then say yes or no, as [her] heart prompted [her]” (236).

Sybil’s plans backfire when her uncle, motivated by a misinterpretation of her actions, proposes the girl, whom he believes is interested in marrying him. After rejecting her uncle’s proposal and an outburst of anger caused by the misunderstanding, she is deemed mad and consequently locked in an asylum. In this ominous Gothic setting, she is exposed to the cruelty of the dreadful Doctor Karnac: a friend of her uncle’s, whose disturbing experiments contribute to Sybil’s gradual descent into madness. Meanwhile, the girl becomes aware that within the walls of the room above her own lives another female prisoner. Sybil grows increasingly fascinated with the mysterious patient only to discover that it is her own mother, the former victim of the cruel uncle’s greed and revenge.
One of Dr. Karnac’s experiments eventually leads to an explosion within the asylum. As the dreaded building burns to the ground, Sybil takes advantage of this opportunity to escape; her trials come to an end with her marriage to the beloved cousin Guy.

In order to fully appreciate the feminist implications of Alcott’s story, one must realize that “in important ways, ‘A Whisper in the Dark’ is a re-imagining Jane Eyre” (Carpenter 33). It is worth noting that in 1852, twenty-year-old Louisa included the English novel on a list of her favorite books (Cheney 68). Observing the ways in which Alcott copies some ideas while modifying others, allows the reader to better understand the subversive quality of the Gothic tale as well as the nature of its author’s own repressed anger.

The similarities between Charlotte Brontë’s novel and Louisa May Alcott’s story are perceptible from the very beginning of “A Whisper in the Dark.” The uncle bears a striking resemblance to Rochester; he “is old enough to be the heroine’s father, yet it is obvious from her description that she is attracted to him by the same stern and secretive manner that draws Jane to Rochester” (Seelye 153). Both men assume positions of authority in relation to the young heroines; the uncle is a guardian and Rochester is an employer. The similarities between the two men do not end there.

In her discussion on speech and silence in Jane Eyre, Janet H. Freeman describes Rochester’s speech as false and manipulative. Jane’s employer “specializes in partial truths, in half-said exclamations of love or despair, in obscure references to nameless horrors out of the past only dimly revealed” (694). The same description could be applied to Sybil’s uncle, whose most unforgivable “partial truth” is the one he tells Sybil about her mother. Lynette Carpenter writes that “like Jane and Bertha, Sybil and her mother are kept apart by a father-husband figure, a suitor old enough to be the protagonist’s father, who segregates them physically on different floors of a house and separates them emotionally by denying to one the existence of the other” (34). Both Rochester and the uncle overwrite female stories with their own narratives; female characters are silenced only to have distorted versions of their stories told by their male oppressors.

While Bertha makes no attempt at verbal communication with the young girl, leaving Jane with no choice but to accept Rochester’s story, Alcott’s madwoman does reach out to the young heroine. Throughout the story her presence is marked by a haunting voice, a disembodied hand, a corpse, a lock of hair or a letter, so that she seems to be more of a supernatural phenomenon than a fully developed character. Still, this does not prevent her from making a strong impression on Sybil, who learns the meaning of the woman’s messages and is partially able to decipher her story.

Sybil first hears about her mother when she asks her uncle about a miniature she noticed in his house. He tells her a story of skillfully interwoven lies and half-truths:
Just before your birth your father was obliged to cross the Channel, to receive the last wishes of a dying friend. There was an accident; the vessel foundered, and many lives were lost. He escaped, but by some mistake his name appeared in the list of missing passengers; your mother saw it, the shock destroyed her, and when your father returned he found only a motherless little daughter to welcome him. (234)

Sybil discovers that not only is her mother alive, but she had also been falsely diagnosed as insane and placed in the asylum. This woman “[tries] to help in [her] poor way” (253) and in her letter she begs Sybil “to leave this house before it is too late” (254). Although the woman is not aware that Sybil is her daughter, she wants to save her. She feels compassion for the girl because of their shared experience.

In this sense, Alcott’s revision of *Jane Eyre* is radical; the woman in the attic, previously deprived of her identity by the authoritative male voice, now speaks to another female character. While Bertha’s acts of violence and aggression prevent the reader from questioning Rochester’s diagnosis regarding her madness, in the case of Sybil’s mother, Alcott “is careful not to allow her [this] destructive power” (Carpenter 38). Her rage is mitigated by the author, allowing her story to be told and heard. “Alcott recreates the Bertha-figure as a sympathetic and loving mother” (Carpenter 34) because this transformation is a necessary requirement that adds to the credibility of what she has to communicate. Her experience exemplifies the injustice inherent in a world that permits female anger to be attributed to madness in order to invalidate it. Her story provides an explanation and justification for the rage experienced by female characters who have been denied their own will and voice like *Jane Eyre’s* Bertha. Yet her story also carries a warning: “Sybil responds to her mother with much of the same horror Jane feels towards Bertha: if Sybil sees herself in her mother, she also sees a presentiment of what she may become” (Carpenter 34). Sybil’s mother figures as a type of missing link between the silenced female victims of male tyranny and the young women who have yet to learn that rage and rebellion come at a price.

This mother-daughter figuration makes apparent that “A Whisper in the Dark” is about repeated trauma: a cycle of abusive masculine power and female victimization. Sybil and her mother represent two generations of women undergoing the same injustice; the clues of a shared history are scattered throughout the story. According to Lynette Carpenter, “Alcott takes great pains to develop an identification between mother and daughter, and even to intimate that their fates are parallel” (33). The picture found in the uncle’s house is an example:

I looked again, and saw a face delicate yet spirited, with dark eyes, a passionate mouth, and a head crowned with hair as plenteous and golden as my own; but the whole seemed dimmed by age, the ivory was stained, the glass cracked, and a faded ribbon fastened it. My eyes filled as I looked, and a strong desire seized me to know what had defaced this little picture of the mother whom I never knew. (234)
The image of cracked glass reappears later in the story when Sibyl rejects her uncle’s proposal and simultaneously accuses him of being a liar and speaks out her hatred for him. She throws the offered ring at a mirror, which cracks in the middle. The picture of the mother behind the cracked glass and the reflection of the daughter in the broken mirror are identical images. Lynette Carpenter observes that this imagery may suggest “that Sybil re-enacts a previous scene of passionate rebellion between her uncle and her mother” (35). This act of rebellion, performed first by the mother and later by the daughter, leads to the incarceration of both women. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser draws attention to another scene, in which Sybil, sitting in her room briefly after the rejection of her uncle’s proposal, observes her reflection, described as a “ruinous image” (242). Keyser writes that “the blurred reflection connects Sybil with the blurred likeness in the miniature and suggests that she, like her mother and perhaps most women in their society, will undergo diminution and distortion of identity” and that “if she continues to rebel, her mirrorless cell warns, she will suffer its obliteration” (8). The male tyrant, symbolizing patriarchal oppression, has the power to deprive his female victim not only of her freedom, but also of her identity.

The long golden hair that characterizes both Sibyl and her mother is also significant because, in much of Victorian literature and art, it functions as a symbol of both “wealth and female sexuality” (Gitter 936). Lynette Carpenter, who also quotes Elizabeth Gitter’s essay “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination,” makes the observation that both “wealth and sexual attractiveness are factors in the victimization of both women” (34). At the beginning of the story, the description of Sybil’s hair as “unruly” signifies her passionate nature (227). Upon discovering her uncle and cousin’s intentions towards herself, she goes to her room and brushes her hair “a good deal” (236), which, if we indeed understand her hair as a symbol of her wealth and sexuality, can be interpreted as a symbolic act indicating that she now means to take full control over these aspects of her life. Shortly after, when she refuses to surrender to her uncle’s will and accept his proposal, she is drugged and has her beautiful golden hair cut off. The uncle’s desire to possess Sibyl sexually and to claim her fortune is symbolized in this violent act which can be understood as figurative rape: “folk, literary and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness. Anthropological literature, too, makes little distinction between the sacrifice of the genitals, or sexual surrender, and the sacrifice of the hair” (Gitter 938). This “symbolic gesture which signifies [Sybil’s] loss of sexuality and wealth” (Carpenter 36) emphasizes the power of the uncle and the vulnerability of his niece’s position. Another equally symbolic gesture that occurs in the story is when a lock of hair, considered “intrinsically valuable, as precious as gold” in nineteenth-century literature (Gitter 943), is given to Sibyl by her mother as a symbol of not only their familial relationship, but also their shared experience of suffering (Carpenter 34).
The painful experiences of the mother and the daughter testify to the power of a flawed system that allows such a cruel treatment of women. Initially, Sybil challenges the authority of the men whose power in a male-dominated world she underestimates. She questions her father’s right to decide whom she should marry and refuses to “be bargained away like a piece of merchandise” (238). Her uncle’s overbearing manner during his proposal annoys Sybil immensely and Doctor Karnac’s “assumption of authority” is a strain on her patience (243). In a moment of passionate anger, she cries out that she hates her uncle, who, she says, “deserves neither respect nor obedience from [her]” (243). This rebellion against male authority is brutally penalized.

Sybil’s downfall could, therefore, be attributed to a chain of decisions made by a group of men. To her own father, Sybil is simply a part of a business transaction, a deal made between two brothers. Her father’s brother abuses his role as a guardian by using trickery, cunning, and lies in his attempt to deprive the heroine of her money. The villainous Doctor Karnac is largely responsible for her imprisonment because, as a medical specialist, it is his professional opinion that confirms and validates the uncle’s false claims that the girl is mad. He is a figure of authority due to his profession; his dominance is related to both gender and the fact that he is a representative of the medical system. There is a brief mention of a legal representative as well, whose decision has the power to save or destroy the supposedly mad girl he sees. Although the last one pities Sybil, he “has been prepared to expect a madwoman by two men, one of them a doctor, whose opinions he respects” and so “to no one’s surprise, a madwoman is what he sees” (Carpenter 36). The lawyer belongs to and is inseparable from an environment that allows such an unjust fate to befall young women.

The excesses of patriarchal oppression within an intricate web of male dominated social structures appear in numerous Gothic tales written by women. Michelle Massé, in her analysis of The Yellow Wallpaper, points to this state of affairs as something many heroines must face: “the impasse of Gilman’s narrator between individual insight and unchanging social codes is one faced by all Gothic heroines. The web of authority that constructs their social reality is first perceptible to most in family relationships, but they discover it to be finely and inextricably linked to religious, legal, medical, and educational systems as well” (707).

The will, power, and decisions of the male characters lead to the imprisonment of Sybil in the madhouse. The room Sybil lives in is described as “small, plainly furnished, and close, as if long unused,” and everything she sees is “utterly unfamiliar” (245). It is here that the heroine first feels very poignantly her loss, loneliness, and helplessness. In a locked room with grated windows, in a strange building surrounded by a high wall, she is completely deprived of her freedom. The described room stands in stark opposition to the beautiful setting from which she has been taken. When she looks from her window she no longer sees “the lovely gardens, moors, and the forest stretching to the sea” (231). The open space
is replaced with a cage-like environment and firs take the place of fields of heather. The description of the garden as “dreary” and “somber” also reflects the state of Sybil’s predicament (245). The madhouse has a dreadful influence on her mental health, for “the air is poison, the solitude is fatal” (253) and so the building itself plays a significant role in Sybil’s psychological decline. Although the experiences of the mother and the daughter show that defective structures dictate their as well as other women’s lives, Sybil, upon leaving the asylum, willingly enters those structures by forgiving her uncle, marrying Guy, and finding the fault to be her own. Repeated trauma emerges as a key theme of the tale, but the issue is left unresolved in the “happy” ending.

Sybil believes she is beginning her life anew, without the “clouds [that] had darkened [it] for a time” (257), but her husband’s disposition is not without ambivalence. Although a victim of his father’s gambling and scheming, he nonetheless agrees to take part in his father’s plan and, in doing so, to act against Sybil’s freedom. Moreover, one cannot help but notice the similarities between the father and the son. These are not limited to appearance only, but are also manifested in the attitude both men maintain towards Sybil. Both men speak of her in diminutives and objectify her; Guy refers to her as an “ornament” before he even meets her (228). Like his father, Guy is calculating. He is aware that he will find himself in a very difficult situation should Sybil refuse to marry him. Nonetheless, he boldly states that she will probably accept his proposal because he is already confident of her feelings for him. Furthermore, “she has never had a lover” and the young man has learned from his father that “a girl’s first sweetheart is apt to fare the best” (235). Towards the end of the story, Guy comes to Sybil’s rescue after she has already managed to escape from the asylum on her own. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser writes about “the dubious nature of [Guy’s] protection,” which she claims “is indicated by parallels between the ending of Sybil’s story and its beginning. Once again Sybil finds herself in a closed carriage with a male guardian, and once again, after their violent struggle, she allows herself to be soothed into forgetfulness” (10). Ultimately, bearing in mind Guy’s warning to Sybil at the beginning of their friendship – “I’d rather you didn’t see me in a rage, for I’m not a pleasant sight, I assure you” (231) – it would seem that Guy is a potential Gothic villain in disguise, who needs only to be provoked in order to reveal his true nature.

It also seems that Louisa May Alcott uses Sybil and Guy to mock sentimental notions regarding courtship and marriage. Their relationship begins as a conventional love story. Sybil looks forward to meeting her cousin and once she does they both fall in love at first sight:

Guy’s glance of pleased surprise was flatteringly frank, his smile so cordial, his “Welcome, cousin!” such a hearty sound that my coldness melted in a breath, my dignity was all forgotten, and before I could restrain myself I had offered
both hands with the impulsive exclamation “Cousin Guy, I know I shall be very happy here! Are you glad I have come?” “Glad as I am to see the sun after a November fog.” (228)

Their courtship ensues. The following morning Guy takes Sybil for a ride on the moors on his horse Sultan. He collects flowers for her and when Sybil complains that she is cold, he offers her his coat—a love story cliché that is still popular both in literature and on screen over a century after the publication of Alcott’s tale.

The seventeen-year-old girl seems to imagine herself and her cousin as fairy-tale characters. Guy, as described by Sybil, is Prince Charming. Although the reader can sense that he feels uncomfortable in his father’s presence, once alone, Sybil claims that “his natural self appeared. A very winsome self it was, courteous, gay, and frank, with an undertone of deeper feeling than I thought to find” (229). During their ride on the moors, she asks him to “Play young Lochinvar” (230). Sybil, on the other hand, is the Princess, who has never had any lovers before because, to use her own words, “Madame guarded [her] like a dragon” (232).

It would be fitting if, following such descriptions, Guy were the one to protect Sybil from his father or to save her once she was locked away in the asylum. However, at the most crucial moment, he runs away, much unlike the brave Lochinvar to whom he is compared. His jealousy blinds him to the reality that the girl is in love with him. Once this damsel in distress is locked away in a tower, Guy fails to live up to the part of knight in shining armor. During her stay in the madhouse, Sybil “felt that [her] health was going, [her] mind growing confused and weak; [her] thoughts wandered vaguely, memory began to fail, and idiocy or madness seemed [her] inevitable fate; but through it all [her] heart clung to Guy, yearning for him with a hunger that would not be appeased” (250), but unfortunately, throughout her entire ordeal, Guy is simply absent.

Louisa May Alcott uses the character of a naive teenage girl to expose the inherent absurdities and potential dangers of the cult of romantic love. This was one of the “sentimental cults” that “provided the cultural context within which Alcott came of age and the literary heritage with which she had to come to terms in working out her own views of family life” (Strickland 6). Before their first meeting comes to an end, Sybil believes she has found the love of her life: “I watched him covertly, and soon owned to myself that he was all I most admired in the ideal hero every girl creates in her romantic fancy; for I no longer looked upon this young man as my cousin, but my lover, and through all our future intercourse this thought was always uppermost, full of a charm that never lost its power” (229). The author of “A Whisper in the Dark” made it clear in her journal and in many of her literary works that the preoccupation of young girls with “romantic fancies” was something that bothered her immensely. While working on the second part of Little Women, she wrote in her journal: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim
of a woman’s life. I won’t marry Jo to Laurie to please any one” (Cheney 201). The author also expressed her disappointment in a short story entitled “Happy Women,” written in the same year that Little Women was published. It begins as follows: “One of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid. To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Miss’” (203). Bearing in mind the author’s contempt for young girls whose main concern in life is the prospect of courtship and marriage, the reader can only understand Sybil’s resolution “to charm [her] cousin slowly, and enjoy the romance of a genuine wooing, without which no woman’s life seems complete – in her own eyes at least” (232) as a testimony of her own foolishness.

In “A Whisper in the Dark,” like in many of her other stories, Alcott also comments on the doctrine of womanly influence, which promulgated the idea of female moral superiority. Guy tells Sybil that he is as proud “as Lucifer, to most people,” but also “I think I should not be so to you, for you understand me, Sybil, and with you I hope to grow a better man” (232). Many of Alcott’s heroines have been vocal in their criticism of the idea that women should save the men in their lives. In Little Women, Jo’s younger sister, Amy, reproaches Laurie by saying that “men tell us we are angels, and say we can make you what we will; but the instant we honestly try to do you good, you laugh at us, and won’t listen, which proves how much your flattery is worth” (435). According to Christine Doyle, Alcott “suspected that Victorian culture’s admiration of woman as long as she stayed in her ‘sphere’ did not create for woman a role that was separate but equal, but separate and powerless” (137). In “Gender and Influence in Louisa May Alcott’s A Modern Mephistopheles,” Mary Chapman writes that since Alcott’s time, “feminist historians such as Ann Douglas, Joy Kasson, and Nancy Cott” have, in fact, convincingly argued “that designating the domestic realm the sphere of women’s influence rationalized women’s exclusion from other spheres of influence gendered male” (22). She agrees that the promise of moral, domestic influence served as a justification for the denial of “legal, political, and artistic influence” (22). Chapman claims that the doctrine of womanly influence contributed to the objectification of women by reinforcing the oppressive concept of passive femininity. However, Sybil does not comply with nineteenth-century standards of femininity and it seems that she is cruelly punished for the ridiculous crime of being unable to play the part of moral role model for her uncle and cousin.

There is a memorable conversation in Louisa May Alcott’s Work: A Story of Experience between the protagonist Christie Devon and her employer’s brother Mr. Fletcher, during which Christie expresses the opinion that “a man should have energy enough to save himself, and not expect ‘the weaker vessel,’ as he calls her, to do it for him” (293). Interestingly, this conversation begins when Christie is caught reading Jane Eyre and Mr. Fletcher asks her what she thinks of Rochester:
“What is your opinion of Rochester?” he asked, presently.
“Not a very high one.”
“Then you think Jane was a fool to love and try to make a saint of him, I suppose?”
“I like Jane, but never can forgive her marrying that man, as I haven’t much faith in the saints such sinners make.”
“But don’t you think a man who had only follies to regret might expect a good woman to lend him a hand and make him happy?”
“If he has wasted his life he must take the consequences, and be content with pity and indifference, instead of respect and love. Many good women do ‘lend a hand,’ as you say, and it is quite Christian and amiable, I’ve no doubt; but cannot think it a fair bargain.” (293)

It is safe to assume that Christie’s opinion are actually those of Alcott herself, but this further problematizes the happy ending of “A Whisper in the Dark.”

On the one hand, it seems that conflict between the uncle and his niece has been resolved. Alcott makes use of the sentimental literary trope that includes characters who are on the verge of death either, in the case of angelic heroines, providing moral guidance for the close ones they are to leave behind, or, in the case of villains, admitting to their sins and asking for forgiveness. The author was aware of the redeeming quality of the deathbed confession for evil characters and in the end the uncle is presented as a man gone astray who eventually learns to regret his mistakes. Sybil forgives him and her willingness to do so allows her to be identified with true womanhood. She even goes so far as to blame herself for her painful experiences: “I was taken to my future home, approved by my uncle, beloved by my cousin, and, but for my own folly, might have been a happy wife on that May morning when I listened to the unveiling of the past” (256).

On the other hand, Alcott’s other works indicate that she herself looked upon such miraculous transformations with doubt and so the sincerity of the uncle’s confession and his desire to save Sybil are questionable. After he has put her through tremendous suffering, he seems to expect his niece to look upon him as a savior and a saint, which the reader knows he is not. How, then, is the reader to understand Sybil’s decision to forgive her uncle’s wrongdoings? How to understand her decision to take the blame for what has happened? After all, “if [the uncle] is a ‘devil’ who has destroyed one woman and attempted the destruction of another, a deathbed repentance is, if traditional for the nineteenth century, entirely too convenient, a heroine’s forgiveness, if true to Christian ideals, entirely too generous” (Carpenter 37).

One must remember that, like the protagonist of her story, the young Louisa May Alcott also struggled with learning the lesson of self-control. Her inability to live up to the standards set up by her father led to a sense of guilt, which could be one reason for why she leaves Sybil, who is much like herself, with a sense of regret at the end of the story. When asked as a child which vices she would want less of, Alcott wrote in her journal: “Idleness, Wilfulness, Vanity, Impatience,
Impudence, Pride, Selfishness, Activity” (Cheney 42). Years later, she added a note to this entry claiming that she had not been successful in conquering these personal flaws (Cheney 43). Not surprisingly, these are the very vices for which Sybil is punished. Perhaps one could conclude that the author projected her own sense of failure and guilt onto the character of the teenage girl and that is why, in the end, Sybil accepts that her own “folly” has stood in the way of her happiness.

Yet even if one assumes that Sybil is not entirely blameless – she truly is vain, proud and impudent – the punishment simply does not fit the crime. While Sybil may sincerely regret trying to manipulate the two men, she must realize that their own behavior was far from innocent. There is something disquieting about the fact that she feels absolutely no anger towards her oppressor, for “to end the story as a modern reader feels it deserves to be ended would be to unleash the full measure of Alcott’s rage against masculine dominance” (Carpenter 31).

Instead, “Sybil has submitted to her uncle’s domination, shifting blame from her uncle to herself and lamenting her own foolishness as she re-tells and revises her story” (Carpenter 36). This mental transition, a redirecting of negative emotions that were previously aimed at the oppressor to oneself, can be understood as a transformation of sadism into masochism – a process explained in Sigmund Freud’s “The Economic Problem of Masochism”: “the turning back of sadism against the self regularly occurs where a cultural suppression of the instincts holds back a large part of the subject’s destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life. We may suppose that this portion of the destructive instinct which has retreated appears in the ego as an intensification of masochism” (283; original emphasis). In the context of the Gothic plot, this cultural suppression is specifically related to expectations regarding women, who are required to demonstrate obedience, passivity, meekness: in short – femininity. The male figure of authority, which enforces laws and demands submission, functions as the super-ego. The female ego must incorporate these expectations, which emanate not only from the guardian, husband, or lover, but also from the reality that surrounds her like a “nightmare from which the protagonist cannot awaken and whose inexorable logic must be followed” (Massé 682). In her discussion of the psychoanalytic implications of the Gothic plot Michelle Massé writes that “the prohibition of female autonomy” is “the originating trauma” (681). The story of Sybil and her mother prove that any rebellion provoked by this state of affairs must be stifled. Because the heroine’s longing for freedom – and her anger should this freedom be denied – will always be met with punishment her only viable option is the internalization of the restrictions imposed by male authority.

It seems, then, that Alcott does not necessarily value passivity, obedience or silence as such. Rather, she suggests that a woman’s inability to acquire these traits may lead to dire consequences for herself. One could draw an analogy between this idea and Freud’s description of the relationship between ethics, the suppression of instincts, and conscience in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.”
The founder of psychoanalysis puts forward the theory that, contrary to the common belief that “ethical requirements [are] the primary thing and the renunciation of instinct [follows] from them,” ethical sense is a result rather than a cause: “first instinctual renunciation is enforced by external powers, and it is only this which creates the ethical sense, which expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of instinct” (283). The formation of ethical sense as described by Freud is analogous to the lesson of self-control which both Sybil and Alcott are forced to learn. Their guardians, who embody “external power,” attempt to tame the spirited natures of the stubborn young women. In Sybil’s case this attempt takes a drastic form, which includes actual imprisonment. In the case of Alcott’s childhood, “opposed to corporal punishment, Bronson usually disciplined [his] children by withholding affection” (Showalter, “Introduction” to Alternative Alcott xii). Both women learn to restrain their emotions, repress their anger, and live by the codes imposed on them. In the end, “just as the heroine comes to learn the dangers of anger and the wisdom of self-control, so does her creator” (Carpenter 31). Ultimately, as satisfying as it would have been for the contemporary reader, Alcott could not allow Sybil to be angry or to seek revenge because her own Gothic tale “illustrates the folly and danger” of unleashing one’s rage against male dominance (Carpenter 31) no matter how justified that rage and rebellion might be.

The transformation that the heroine undergoes leaves her, therefore, with an unconquerable anxiety – an inevitable consequence of becoming a “little woman” it would seem. Her reality of marital bliss is a haunted one: “Home received me, kind Madame welcomed me, Guy married me, and I was happy; but over all these years, serenely prosperous, still hangs for me the shadow of the past, still rises that dead image of my mother, still echoes that spectral whisper in the dark” (257). It is important to note that Sybil’s anxiety takes the form of her mother’s voice: it is the voice of a woman wronged, punished for rebelling against abusive male dominance. The moral at the end of the story is not about “ethical requirements,” such as the intrinsic value of self-control, but a warning for those who refuse to renounce passion, for girls who resist male dominance and dare to be angry when their freedom is threatened. Sybil’s passivity is not the result of a healthy learning process, but the “only response [a Gothic heroine has] to the uses and abuses of authority.” She has successfully “incorporated what society tells her is properly feminine […] [and] has repressed the contradictory evidence of her mother’s own life” (Massé 693), although the memory of her mother does not cease to haunt her.

“A Whisper in the Dark” is a revolutionary re-imagining of Jane Eyre during the brief moment when Sybil’s mother is allowed to “speak.” Although this voice is ultimately diminished to a barely perceptible whisper, leaving the issue of repeated trauma unresolved, it is this scarcely existent sound that provides the story with its title. It would be a mistake to underestimate the symbolic potency of the mother’s whisper, which represents the shared anxiety of two
generations of women trapped within a system of restrictive structures. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser even compares the mother figure to Louisa May Alcott herself: “in an early sensation story entitled ‘A Whisper in the Dark,’ Alcott seems to have anticipated her fate as a lost foremother whose feminist voice would be barely audible to successive generations of readers” (3). By reading between the lines and seeking the authors “barely audible” whispers, the reader can appreciate the feminist implications of Louisa May Alcott’s Gothic tale “A Whisper in the Dark.”

References


