

Symbols reflected in Behind a Mask Or A Woman Power by Alcott

Indra¹, Syamsurrijal²

Master of English Literature, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Bumigora

E-mail: andraputrapradana@gmail.com¹, syamsurrijal@universitasbumigora.ac.id²

Abstract

Behind a Mask Or A Woman's Power by Louisa May Alcott is a novel that tells the story of Jean Muir, a governess who is both cunning and mysterious. Jean manipulates the members of the wealthy Coventry family to secure her position and achieve her personal goals. The data source are taken from a novel titled Behind A Mask Or A Woman's Power by Louisa May Alcott. The primary data are dialogues, quotations, conversations and narrations from each character which represent symbols in the novel. The concept of symbol by Pierce is used to analysis symbols in the novel. In Peirce's semiotic theory, symbols are signs that represent objects through a conventional or arbitrary relationship. A symbol is a type of sign that relies on a learned or agreed upon connection between the and the signified. Unlike icons or indexes, symbols do not have a direct resemblance or causal link to their objects. The research problem are what are symbols appeared in the novel ? what do symbols mean in the novel ? the result of the research find out several symbols such as mask, blue, dog, face, chair, dark, sweetheart . The mask serves as a means for the character to conceal her true self, while the dog serves as a distraction from her confusion when interacting with others. The sweetheart represents an intimate and desire, the dark suggests strange things and perilous situations, and the face announces his appearance to convey his reaction.

Keywords : *Alcott, Behind A Mask Or Woman Power Symbol, Pierce*

1. INTRODUCTION

Through analysis symbols help to explore and reinforce the themes of the novel, making abstract concepts more tangible and relatable. Symbols, the reader can uncover deeper layers of meaning within a novel, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the text. This analysis helps to reveal the author's intentions, societal influences, and the broader implications of the narrative, making it a crucial aspect of literary studies. Symbols add layers of meaning to a narrative, enriching the reader's experience and understanding of the themes and messages. They often reflect the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the time when the novel was written,

providing insights into the society's values, beliefs, and issues. The research study of "The Green Light in *The Great Gatsby*: A Critical Analysis of Symbolism" This study explores the various symbols in "*The Great Gatsby*," particularly focusing on the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future. The analysis connects this symbol to the broader themes of the American Dream and the pursuit of happiness. Symbols are powerful in communication because they can convey complex ideas and concepts through shared understanding (Muhid, 2022). Their meanings can evolve over time as cultural contexts change. Symbols are powerful in communication because they can convey complex ideas and concepts through shared understanding. Symbols function based on social conventions (Colleen Hoover Zuhroni, 2023). Their meanings are not inherent but are established through usage and collective understanding (Ariska et al., 2021). For example, words and languages are symbolic systems where meanings are agreed upon by communities. Symbols are dynamic; their meanings can change over time as societal norms and cultural contexts evolve.

This flexibility allows symbols to adapt and convey complex ideas across different contexts. Symbols are crucial for human communication as they enable the expression of abstract concepts and ideas (Syamsurrijal, Abdussamad, et al., 2023). They allow for nuanced and sophisticated exchanges that go beyond mere physical resemblance or direct association. The interpretation of a symbol involves an interpretant, which is the mental concept or understanding that connects the symbol to its object. This interpretant is shaped by the user's experiences and cultural background.

Peirce's early account is intriguing because of his eagerness to link signs to cognition. Peirce specifically asserts that all mind is represented by signals. Peirce's seminal theory that each interpretant is a new sign of the signified object helps us to understand this (Syamsurrijal & Arniati, 2024). It would appear to follow naturally that all thoughts are signs, or as Peirce refers to them, "thought-signs," since interpretants are the interpreting thoughts we have of signifying relations, and these interpreting thoughts are themselves signs. An intriguing outcome of this is that Peirce quickly discounts the significance and applicability of icons and indices in the early account (Arniati, 2023).

The understanding's objects, regarded as representations, are symbols, or signals that have the capacity to be general (Soegiarto & Alawiyah, 2023). However, the principles of logic apply to all symbols, whether they are spoken, written, or conceptual. They apply to all symbols, but they have no immediate bearing on similarity (icons) or indices because no argument can be built using them alone.

This limits the breadth of Peirce's early description of signs, which focuses mainly on the common and generic signs that make up our language and intellect (Satya et al., 2023). This restricted concentration has a straightforward explanation: Peirce saw symbols as a suitable subject of study for his main area of focus, logic, since they are "potentially general" and lie under the purview of general rules. Therefore, the primary focus of this early description is on universal and conventional signs - signs that Peirce classified as symbols (Syamsurrijal, Hadi, et al., 2023). Despite being mentioned at this early point, icons and indices are seen as having secondary philosophical significance. This restrictive focus is something that Peirce was subsequently to revise, as we shall see.

The number of women writers who overcame patriarchal restrictions to get their voices heard significantly increased in the 19th century. They provided a distinctive viewpoint on politics, gender roles, and relationships while also challenging social standards. The literary works of exceptional women writers have been scrutinized and analyzed because of their exceptional accomplishments, which have become a vital part of the literary canon.

According to Showalter (Abril & Cortiella, 2023), women writers of that era created a literary heritage apart from the prevailing literary culture of men. Furthermore, she claims that female writers developed a "feminine style" that highlighted societal themes in addition to sentimentality, feelings, and family life. The challenges that women encounter in a patriarchal society, such as little access to higher education and poor job prospects, are also represented in the works of female writers.

In response, Armstrong (Durrans, 2022) looked at the social and political environments in which women poets of the Victorian era wrote. She contends that because these poets' works questioned the patriarchal presumptions that shaped Victorian society, they served as a vehicle for feminist protest. They frequently expressed their opinions on topics like women's employment,

suffrage, and education through their poetry, which was full of subversive devices like sarcasm, humor, and satire.

The intriguing female lead in Alcott's short story *Behind a Mask* (1866) evokes conflict emotions in readers due to her ambivalence. Recently, Mrs. Coventry, an affluent widow living in the English countryside, hired Jean Muir as a governess to take care of her small daughter, Bella. The young woman agrees graciously when Mrs. Coventry asks her to perform a tune on the piano, but all of a sudden she passes out from weakness. When she wakes up, she can be heard murmuring a few words in Scottish. But soon enough, we discover that this is all a really sophisticated role play. Beneath this exterior of purity, obedience, and vulnerability, the crafty young governess is revealed to harbor malevolent intentions.

Alcott makes it abundantly evident that the governess's good intentions have been severely damaged by unfavorable events. It's interesting to note that Alcott places this revelation early in the story. Because they learn the truth about the cunning governess, readers take on a role like to that of conspirators, even if they naturally anticipate that she would have her just desserts at the book's conclusion. But rather than having her exiled, destroyed, or otherwise punished, Alcott deftly convolves this story and subverts these expectations by rewarding her villain and giving her the position she has been longing for. The old order, upset irreversibly, is replaced with a new one.

Jean approaches her new position as if it were a role, playing the part of a gentle and kind governess to win over every member of the family with the ultimate goal of obtaining the Coventry money. The majority of the family is easily tricked by Jean, who enchants Edward by showing concern for his horse's well-being, attracts Bella with her gentle demeanor and thought-provoking lessons, and thrills Mrs. Coventry by artfully arranging flowers. With her clever repartee, she also succeeds in winning over Bella, Gerald, and Edward's old uncle, Sir John Coventry.

She does encounter some opposition, though. Gerald, who rejects her as socially inferior, seems to be much more conscious of the display she puts on all the time. Lucia, his cousin, is envious of Jean's good looks and wants to marry him. However, for Jean's scheme to succeed, every man in the family must begin to feel lust for her, which implies that she must be able to make them all fall in love. Edward falls head over heels in love with Jean right away. Because he is the youngest

son and has little prospect of inheriting a sizable fortune, she does not want him as her husband. However, she enjoys using him as a pawn to get close to Gerald.

Several research relate with the symbol analysis such as Cultural Identity and Symbolic Interactionism in Karma Brown'S Novel "Recipe for a Perfect Wife": Anthropology of Literature Study(Widyastuti et al., 2022) two types of housewives are shown by this research. They are a full-housewife, a housewife who works. Using Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory, this research uses two female characters in the novel to reflect five cultural identities from the past and present that are tied to being a housewife. Based on George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism, this study also demonstrates the symbol and memory even of the three ideas of symbolic interactionism, mind, self, and society. Second is Semiotic Interpretation of Female Images in the Novel Shuihu Zhuan (Xiong et al., 2022) from this analysis reveals Shi Nai'an's genuine perspective on the female characters in the book, which is one of honoring women's virtues rather than misogyny or women-hatred. These timeless women elevate the work to a new level. It is hoped that the results will clarify some aspects of the research on women in classic literature and other literary works. The Relationship Between The Protagonists and Theme in the Novel "THE TREE OF MAN" By Patrick White As Australian Best Seller Author (Zalzulifa & Riseley, 2024)White has been preparing Amy's traits through the use of three items that the Parson's wife gave her at the wedding reception. A bible, a brand-new shirt, and a tiny silver nutmeg grater are those three items. Naturally, Amy receives them, but it seems like Stan and Amy will have to take on those traits throughout their lives.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This is qualitative descriptive research. The sole emphasis of the researcher's analysis is the symbols that are depicted in the novel. The research's primary source of data is Louisa May Alcott's book *Behind Mask Or Woman Power*. Dialogues, discussions, quotes, and narrations that depict the symbols are the main sources of data. This study used the observation method to obtain its data. Reading Louisa May Alcott's *Behind Mask Or Woman Power*, pay close attention to the narrations and discussions, and make important notes such quotations that are connected to the novel's symbols are some of the observations that are utilized to gather data.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher shows data to be analyzed in this part. Data are analyzed by using theory of symbol according to Peirce.

“You are right! I am not what I seem, and my indolent indifference is but the mask under which I conceal my real self. I could be as passionate, as energetic and aspiring as Ned, if I had any aim in life. I have none, and so I am what you once called me, a thing to pity and despise.” (Alcott 61)

In the quotation, the term "mask" symbolizes the persona that the character presents to the world. According to Peirce, symbols represent objects through conventional meanings, and here, the mask symbolizes the façade that conceals the nature of this character. The mask serves as a symbol of concealment, illustrate how individuals often hide their authentic selves behind socially acceptable personas. This aligns with Peirce's notion of symbols as arbitrary yet meaningful, shaped by societal conventions. Peirce's theory emphasizes that meaning arises from the interaction between the symbol or the mask and the interpretant, revealing deeper layers of the identity of the character.

The character mentions become capable of passion and energy, traits not visible through the symbolic mask. This emphasize the dynamic nature of symbols, that can shift based on context and interpretation. The phrase "indolent indifference" functions as a symbol of the behavior character. It reflects the conventional expectations that people might interpret through the lens of social norms, aligning with Peirce's idea of symbols have learned associations. The use of "pity and despise" as descriptors of the character's perceived identity underscores the symbolic weight of societal judgment. According to Peirce, symbols convey complex ideas, and these terms reflect the interpretant's potential response to the speaker's mask.

“Another chair stood near her, and as Coventry went up and down, a strong desire to take it possessed him.” (Alcot 76)

The chair symbolizes Coventry's contemplation and introspection. It represents a physical space where he can pause and reflect, serving as a potential anchor amidst his restless pacing. The strong desire to take the chair indicates Coventry's yearning for engagement with the girl. It

symbolizes his attraction to her and his interest in exploring the dynamics of their interaction. The chair also symbolizes the role of an observer, where Coventry can sit and study the girl's expressive face and varying voice tones. This position highlights his curiosity and the allure he finds in her presence. Chair took by Coventry, physically moves closer to the girl, symbolize his emotional inclination to connect with her despite his initial resistance. The chair becomes a bridge between his solitary thoughts and the possibility of shared experiences.

“He was tired of his thoughts and wished to be amused by watching the changes of the girl’s expressive face, listening to the varying tones of her voice, and trying to discover the spell which so strongly attracted him in spite of himself “ (Alcott 76)

The expressive face symbolizes the ability of this character to convey emotions non verbally. In Peirce's terms, it functions as a sign that communicates her inner states, capture Coventry's attention and curiosity. The changes in her facial expressions engage Coventry's interpretant, the process by which he derives meaning from her expressions. This aligns with Peirce's idea that the interpretant evolves as new information is perceived, deepening his interest in her. Her expressive face symbolizes the spell that attracts Coventry. It embodies the mystery and complexity of her character, prompting him to seek deeper understanding and connection, despite his initial resistance. The expressiveness contrasts with Coventry's introspection and fatigue with his thoughts. It symbolizes the liveliness and unpredictability of human interaction, offering him a break from his solitary reflections. Expression of the character serve as a symbol of authenticity and genuineness. They suggest a depth of character that intrigues Coventry, encouraging him to explore the subtleties of her personality and the reasons behind his attraction.

“More than once he swerved from his course to gratify his whim, but Lucia’s presence always restrained him, and with a word to the dog, or a glance from the window, as pretext for a pause, he resumed his walk again” (Alcott 76)

In Peirce's semiotic theory, the dog represents a distraction or an excuse. It symbolizes Coventry's desire to divert his attention from his internal conflict or discomfort. The dog acts as a convenient external focus, allowing him to avoid deeper engagement with his emotions or the situation with Lucia. Similarly, the window serves as a symbol of escape and observation. It

represents a barrier between Coventry and the outside world, symbolizing his inclination to distance himself from immediate interactions.

The window allows him to look outward, diverting his attention from internal tensions, and provides a pretext for breaking eye contact or conversation. Both the dog and the window serve as symbols of avoidance in the narrative. They highlight Coventry's reluctance to confront his feelings or engage directly with Lucia. In Peirce's framework, these symbols rely on conventional interpretations of distraction and detachment, reinforcing Coventry's emotional distance. These symbols contrast with Coventry's internal struggle, emphasizing his desire to escape from the complexities of his relationship with Lucia. They underscore his reluctance to face the underlying issues, illustrating the broader theme of evasion and emotional disengagement.

“Something in his cousin’s face reproached him, but her manner of late was so repellent that he felt no desire to resume their former familiarity, and, wishing to show that he did not consider himself bound, he kept aloof. It was a quiet test of the power of each woman over this man; they instinctively felt it, and both tried to conquer” (Alcott 76)

The face symbolizes emotional communication. It reflects reproach and judgment, serving as a non verbal sign that conveys complex feelings and tensions between Coventry and his cousin. The interpretant, or the meaning derived by Coventry, involves feelings of guilt or regret. The cousin's face acts as a catalyst, prompting him to reflect on their past relationship and the current distance, aligning with Peirce's notion that meaning is constructed through interpretation. The face also symbolizes the conflict and emotional distance that has developed. Its reproachful expression represents the unresolved issues and strained dynamics, reinforcing Coventry's decision to remain aloof. It influences his behavior, prompting him to maintain emotional distance. This interaction exemplifies Peirce's concept of the dynamic interpretant, where meaning evolves through ongoing interpretation.

“Letting a ball of silk escape from her lap, she watched it roll toward the promenader, who caught and returned it with an alacrity which added grace to the trifling service. As she took it, she said, in the frank way that never failed to win him, “I think you

must be tired; but if exercise is necessary, employ your energies to some purpose and put your mother's basket of silks in order. They are in a tangle, and it will please her to know that you did it, as your brother used to do" (Alcott 76)

The ball of silk symbolizes the initiation of interaction between the characters. Its movement toward the promenader creates an opportunity for engagement, represent a catalyst for communication and connection. Letting the ball escape can be seen as a deliberate act to draw attention and foster interaction. This aligns with Peirce's idea that symbols convey meaning through conventional or intentional associations. The promenader's response to catch and return the ball reflects the dynamic interpretant. His alacrity and grace in perform the act signify his willingness to engage, indicate the evolve interpretation of the gesture. The ball of silk also shows the nuances of their relationship. It acts as a physical representation of the back and forth dynamic, stress the balance between initiate contact and respond to it.

"Hercules at the distaff," said Coventry gaily, and down he sat in the longdesired seat. Jean put the basket on his knee, and as he surveyed it, as if daunted at his task, she leaned back, and indulged in a musical little peal of laughter charming to hear" (Alcott 77)

Hercules at the distaff is a symbolic reference to a well known mythological image of Hercules, a symbol of strength and heroism, performing a traditionally feminine task of spinning at a distaff. It represents a reversal of traditional gender roles, emphasizing Coventry's willingness to engage in a task typically associated with women, suggesting a departure from conventional masculinity. The reference is used humorously and ironically, as Coventry acknowledges the incongruity of his situation with a sense of amusement, highlighting his playful acceptance of the task. The symbol underscores the shifting power dynamics between Coventry and Jean, with Coventry take on a submissive role in this domestic setting, add complexity to their relationship.

"A momentary glisten shone in Jean Muir's steel-blue eyes as the last words left the young man's lips; but it was gone instantly, and her voice was full of reproach" (Alcott 34)

The color steel-blue suggests a sense of hardness and resilience. It reflection of Jean's ability to maintain composure and control over her emotions, presenting a façade of strength. The momentary glisten in her eyes indicates a fleeting revelation of emotion or insight, symbolizing depth beneath her exterior. This aligns with Peirce's idea that symbols carry complex meanings understood through interpretation. The combination of "steel" and "blue" pictures duality strength coupled with underlying emotion. It represents the intricate balance between vulnerability and toughness that defines Jean's character. The eyes serve as a sign to be interpreted, reflecting Jean's inner world. This highlights Peirce's concept that meaning is derived through the interpretant, shaped by context and cultural associations.

“Miss Muir pressed her hands together, with a dark expression on her halfaverted Face” (Alcott 116)

The action of pressing hands together symbolizes internal tension and self-restraint. It suggests that Miss Muir is experiencing a conflict within herself, holding back emotions or reactions that she does not wish to reveal. This gesture can also be seen as a way of containing her feelings, representing a need to maintain control over her emotions. It reflects a disciplined or calculated approach to managing her responses in a challenging situation. This gesture can also be seen as a way of containing her feelings, representing a need to maintain control over her emotions. It reflects a disciplined or calculated approach to managing her responses in a challenging situation. The "dark expression" on her face symbolizes underlying negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, or sadness. This expression reveals the complexity of her feelings, indicating that she is dealing with something troubling beneath the surface. The darkness in her expression adds depth to her character, suggesting that she is not simply a surface-level persona but has hidden layers of emotion and potential turmoil that influence her actions and interactions. The act of averting her face partially symbolizes avoidance or concealment. It indicates that Miss Muir may be hiding her true feelings from those around her, creating a barrier between herself and others. The combination of the dark expression and the half-averted face creates an air of mystery and intrigue around Miss Muir. It suggests that there is more to her character than meets the eye, inviting speculation about her true intentions and feelings.

“Something in her tone, her manner, touched Coventry; he fancied that some old wound bled, some bitter memory awoke at the approach of a new lover” (Alcott 116)

Tone and manner of Miss Muir representation of the subtle communication of emotions. They reflect the character’s inner turmoil and hint at a deeper, unspoken narrative. This tells that her past experiences shape her current demeanor and interactions. The impact of her tone and manner on Coventry indicates a profound emotional resonance. It symbolizes the ability of unspoken feelings to affect others, highlighting the complexity of human interactions where words are insufficient to convey true emotions. Old Wound shows past trauma or unresolved emotional pain. It represents experiences that continue to influence her present life, suggesting that these wounds may still be raw and impactful. The metaphor of a wound bleeding symbolizes the re-emergence of past hurts. It suggests that these memories are not just dormant but can be reactivated, causing emotional distress and vulnerability in the present.

“When shall it be, little sweetheart? I leave all to you, only let it be soon, else some gay young lover will appear, and take you from me,” said Sir John, playfully, anxious to chase away the dark expression which had stolen over Jean’s face” (Alcott 119)

Little Sweetheart images affection and intimacy. It reflects Sir John’s emotional attachment to Jean and his desire to create a close bond with her. Anxiety about time as the urgency in Sir John's request symbolizes his fear of losing Jean. It highlights his awareness of potential rivals and the fleeting nature of opportunity, emphasizing the pressure to solidify their relationship quickly. Whereas The dark expression on Jean's face symbolizes hidden emotions or concerns. It indicates that beneath her surface demeanor lies a depth of feeling or unresolved issues that affect her interactions.

“At dark a sudden cry rang through the house, and Jean rushed down to learn the cause. Bella was standing in the hall, holding a letter, while a group of excited servants hovered near her” (Alcott 96)

The setting of "dark" symbolizes mystery and potential danger. It sets a somber and suspenseful mood, indicating that something significant and possibly troubling is about to unfold. Sudden cry as alarm and urgency. It represents a disruption of normalcy and conveys a sense of

immediate crisis, drawing attention and eliciting a reaction from the characters. Jean rushing down, it shows her proactive nature and concern. It has her role as someone who is quick to respond to crises, suggesting leadership or deep involvement

4. CONCLUSION

After all data were shown and discussed, it could be concluded that several symbols appear in the novel. They were mask, blue, dog, face, chair, dark, sweetheart and others. Mask shows the character hide the real of her, dog represent of distraction to encounter her confusion with other people around. Face declares of his appearance to signal of his reaction, dark refers mysterious things and dangerous situations whereas the sweetheart depicts an intimate and desire. Hopefully other researchers in the future could show more deep analysis with other data of the novel. There are so many symbols that is used by the writer in this novel because this is still has correlation with the spirit of feminism in that era when the novel was published.

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