

The Voice Visualized to Be: Louisa May Alcott's “A Whisper in the Dark” (1863)

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1. Introduction

The truth that Louisa May Alcott (1832-88), known for her hugely successful *Little Women* (1868), had been writing thrillers anonymously and pseudonymously was discovered in the middle of twentieth century (Rotenberg 73, 75).¹ The author carefully hid her secret while she was alive, and no one was aware of her other writings. Such thrilling tales were not to be read in public at that time, and writers were looked down upon for writing in this genre. Alcott also may have wanted to hide her work writing thrillers because eminent philosophers that she admired, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, were in the same social circles as Alcott and her family. Writing thrillers was considered immoral, but she continued to write them for two reasons: she was the breadwinner for her family in place of her father, who couldn't earn enough to support the family; and she enjoyed writing in “the ‘thrilling’ style” (*Letters* 89). John Matterson, a biographer, refers to the Alcott family's financial predicament, mentioning that they “needed a breadwinner more than a housekeeper” (240)². Moreover, as Alcott wrote in her journal, “I hope it is good drill for fancy and language, for I can do it fast” (*Journals* 109), and in a letter, “[thrillers] are easy to ‘compoze’ [sic] & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare” (79), she

was aware of the benefits of writing thrillers, as they were both lucrative and helped improve her writing abilities.

Publishers were persistent in asking Alcott to use her real name and offered her more money than publishing under a pseudonym. She continuously rejected their offers (Stern, *Mask* xxii-iii), with the single exception being “A Whisper in the Dark” (1863), a work classified as “gothic thriller,” that was published under her real name (McDonald 82).

The protagonist, Sybil, is a 17-year-old orphan living with Madam Barnard. One day, her uncle (who is also her guardian), visits her to take her to his estate, which Sybil would later inherit. She discovers a document revealing that her father promised her uncle that she was to marry Guy, her uncle’s son, when she turns 18, at which point she would receive her inheritance from her father. Staying at her uncle’s house, Sybil and Guy soon start to get along well with each other. However, Sybil refuses to accept her predetermined future and makes her feelings of anger known to her uncle. Guy misunderstands the interaction and sees this as flirting between his father and Sybil, so he leaves the house in a furor. This makes Sybil even angrier at her uncle. Sybil’s uncle has her undergo an examination by Dr. Karnac, who diagnoses her as being mentally unstable.

While drunk, Sybil is captured and taken to Dr. Karnac’s estate for treatment. She tries to flee, but she is constantly guarded to prevent her escape. A few days later, Sybil notices there is a person living in the room above hers, and she later finds out this person is her mother. This person’s incessant movements drive Sybil mad and her restless actions begin to mirror those of her mother upstairs. Sybil hears whispers and later receives a note from her mother, imploring her to escape the house. A failed experiment by Dr. Karnac causes a fire at the house, and Sybil seizes the

opportunity to escape. She meets Guy, who had found out the truth of what happened to Sybil and was on his way to save her. Sybil ends up marrying Guy but never forgets the whispered message from her mother.

The fact that Alcott published "A Whisper in the Dark" under her real name invites two questions. First, why did her real name appear on this work? Second, are there any differences between "A Whisper in the Dark" and her other thrillers? Although significant, there is very little critical discussion of this work. Madeleine Stern, for example, suggests the reason why Alcott agreed to use her real name is that the protagonist in this work "is a victim, and does no evil" (McDonald 82), unlike other Alcott heroines who are disguised as different people and try to deceive others. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser interprets the work from the feminist point of view, suggesting that the heroine exists as resistance against patriarchal society (4, 9-10). However, this work examines not only the conflict between women and men, but also the differences between one's persona and one's self that become evident when looking at human relationships. The work also explores same sex conflict, as Sybil's uncle also struggles with a more powerful man (Dr. Karnac). Because of the lack of academic discussion, "A Whisper in the Dark" is worth a deeper look.

What is a gothic thriller? Teresa A. Goddu has performed considerable research into American gothic thrillers by time and region. Gothic thrillers were initially imitations of British gothic literature, but American writers gradually began to create American-style thrillers. Goddu lists writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Toni Morrison, and Louisa May Alcott as examples of the genre (3-8). Leslie Fiedler regards American gothic as "a literature of darkness and the

grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (Goddu 4). The question in “A Whisper in the Dark” is where “darkness and the grotesque” come into play in the story. Keyser, for example, regards “the madwoman” and “the asylum” as “two staples of [Alcott’s] Gothic fiction”: “In ‘A Whisper in the Dark,’ Alcott uses two staples of Gothic fiction—the madwoman and the asylum” (4). However, evidence of “darkness and the grotesque” appears much earlier in the story than the madwoman and the asylum.

The point is where and how “darkness and the grotesque” exist in “A Whisper in the Dark.” To examine this, we should first focus on two aspects in the background of the work: firstly, Alcott led a dual life as an author of domestic novels and as a writer of thrillers under a pseudonym. Elaine Showalter remarks that *Behind a Mask: or, a Woman’s Power* (1865), Alcott’s most praised thriller³, “is the most important and suggestive of these sensation stories” (Showalter, *Choice* 50), suggesting that “the history of Jean Muir [...] seems like a metaphorical representation of Alcott’s own double life as dutiful daughter and rebellious fantasist” (Showalter 50). In most cases, Alcott was considered a domestic novelist first and foremost.

Secondly, she loved acting and wanted to be an actress, writing in her journal: “Anna wants to be an actress, and so do I. We could make plenty of money perhaps, and it is a very gay life” (*Journals* 63). Alcott and her sister Anna wrote dramas and performed them for fun. An important thing for Alcott was learning how to act in order to be perceived in the way one wants to be perceived. Because of this, sight is an important theme in Alcott’s works.

In “A Whisper in the Dark,” characters use sight to reveal the emotions of others and exert power over them. The protagonist, Sybil, observes her circumstances with keen eyes, especially when her eyes turn to other

people. She experiences fear when she sees the "dark and grotesque" aspects of other people. Also, other people like her uncle feel fear when Sybil changes drastically. Sybil is an observer, and at the same time, she is to be observed. These correlations are fundamental to this work. As such, this paper focuses on what Sybil observes, how she is observed, and how sight and observation affect the story.

2. Observer and observee

Sybil is a 17-year-old orphan who lived with Madame Barnard until Sybil's uncle took her to an estate (which later became Sybil's) that he maintained. She finds a letter which mentions an agreement between her father and her uncle that when Sybil turns 18, she is to inherit her father's property and marry her cousin, Guy.

The first scene starts with Sybil's observations of her uncle on her way to her uncle's estate: "I scanned my companion covertly, and saw much to interest a girl of seventeen" ("A Whisper in the Dark" 32, hereafter "Whisper").

As the opening illustrates, sight is an important theme of this work. Through sight, Sybil attempts to understand the characteristics of the other person and find insight into their nature. The following shows that although she admits her immaturity, it is the only time she sees both the external and internal characteristics of her uncle:

My uncle was a handsome man, with all the polish of foreign life fresh upon him; yet it was neither comeliness nor graceful ease which most attracted me; for even my inexperienced eye caught glimpses of something stern and somber below these external charms, and my long scrutiny showed me the keenest eye, the

hardest mouth, the subtlest smile I ever saw—a face which in repose wore the look that comes to those who have led lives of pleasure and learned their emptiness. (“Whisper” 32)

Sybil is attracted to her uncle, whose charm is his composure fostered by experiences. However, she is more attracted to the darker feelings under the “comeliness” and “graceful ease.” An interesting point is that she is presupposing that his “comeliness” and “graceful ease” is external—she is aware of her uncle’s dual nature. As such, she has an ability to visualize the inner emotions of others. As she “scanned” her uncle, she “gazes,” “stares,” or “surveys” other people. These sensory verbs indicate her persistency, cautiousness, distrust, and belief that observing is crucial in becoming mature.

Sybil, at the same time, is being observed. She notices that she is being watched as well when she scrutinizes her uncle: “I became aware that he was observing me with a scrutiny as keen as my own had been” (“Whisper” 33). However, she allows it, and moreover, she limits what she allows to be observed:

[...]; but I smilingly sustained it, for my vanity was pleased by the approbation his eye betrayed. The evident interest he now took in all I said and did was sufficient flattery for a young thing, who felt her charms and longed to try their power. (“Whisper” 33)

Sybil reads her uncle’s feelings while being observed. As the section “longed to try their power” indicates, she is confident of her attractiveness, which she can use to manipulate both her appearance and those observing her.

As such, Sybil is interested in not only seeing things herself, but also how she is watched and how she should behave. She initially succeeds through acting, as Keyser remarks: "Sybil, like most of Alcott's heroines, is a consummate actress [...] and her behavior more calculated than that of little women like Amy and Meg March" (6). Sybil's behavior reflects her society which, filled with ostentation, requires Sybil to be an actress to survive.

Sybil is not the only actor, however: her uncle is an actor as well. Her uncle tells Guy about the pact and makes him take interest in Sybil to fulfill the contract, which is evident in a conversation with Guy: "for God's sake be cautious, for she [Sybil] is a headstrong creature, and may refuse to fulfill her part if she learns that the contract is not binding against her will" ("Whisper" 41). In answer to this, Sybil also devises a plot: "Only I [Sybil] can assure you [uncle] that my little plot has succeeded better than your own." (43) Thus, people in this story gain the upper hand over others through acting, and they pursue offensive and defensive power through sight.

Moreover, in "A Whisper in the Dark," Alcott emphasizes her characters' places in society. For example, Sybil herself and her uncle call her "child," admitting that she is innocent and immature. This indicates that she and her uncle consider and want her to be a child, and she therefore acts like one.

As for her uncle, Sybil as a narrator never calls him by his name, which shows that Sybil sees him as an uncle only, providing and fixing his identity as uncle. This indicates an ambivalence on her part: although she is attracted to her uncle, she exhibits resistance by omitting his name. Her uncle masks her as a child, and she masks him as an uncle figure.

Sybil, her uncle and her cousin Guy are skilled at maintaining their acting personas. This is evident in Guy's line when he misunderstands communication between Sybil and her uncle regarding courtship: "Ah,

I see; the play goes on, but the actors change parts” (“Whisper” 45). Characters in the story act their parts, each for their own ends. They accept their roles and at the same time make others act. There is a game of power being played between each of the characters.

These examples suggest the characters’ beliefs that people who can read and manipulate others have superiority. Why is Sybil persistent in using sight to her advantage? It assures a liberty: when she gains superiority, she gains the power to subjugate others. The following paradoxically implies that Sybil longs for liberty: “I never had one [lover], for Madame guarded me like a dragon, and I led the life of a nun; but when I do find one I shall try his mettle well before I give up my liberty” (“Whisper” 39). “I’m too young to lose my liberty just yet; besides such compacts are unjust, unwise.” (43), i.e., marriage means giving up her liberty. At the same time, “try his mettle” shows her dignity, and if she admits her lover is worthy, she will give up her liberty. Because liberty is something Sybil must give up, this suggests freedom is what she actually wants the most. So far, she thinks she has liberty and succeeds in subjugating others. However, she is also restrained by them, because the liberty she has is fulfilled by others. What she instead needs is superiority through sight.

3. Power games through fear

There are a number of interactions between Sybil and her uncle that introduce notions of fear. Although she likes Guy, she opposes the idea of her future being decided for her. This enrages her to the point that she refuses marriage: “I’ll not be bargained away like a piece of merchandise, but love and marry when I please!” (“Whisper” 43) When Sybil gives her “declaration of independence” (43) that she will not accept the agreement

and will instead decide her future by herself, her uncle is shocked. He then asks her if she loves someone else, but she does not answer. Watching Sybil, her uncle misreads her and assumes that she is in love with him. Sybil observes her uncle change in an instant:

My uncle stood an instant in deep thought, a slow smile crept to his lips, content returned to his mien, and something like a flash of triumph glittered for a moment in his eye, then vanished, leaving his countenance earnestly expectant. Much as this change surprised me, his words did more, for, taking both my hands in his, he gravely said, "Do you know that I am your uncle by adoption and not blood, Sybil?" ("Whisper" 44)

"A slow smile crept to his lips" is an example of suspiciousness and Sybil here is very surprised at his change. This scene can be considered an example of the notions of "darkness and grotesque" suggested by Fiedler. When her uncle tells Sybil that they are not blood relatives, he implies that he can marry her. As such, she unintentionally unmasks her uncle, and now her uncle is under her control no more. She especially fears her sexuality is in peril, because her uncle is no longer just her uncle, but is instead a man who is trying to make his attraction and masculinity known to Sybil. This scene suggests that Sybil's actions affect more than she expects and also indicates that the uncle's change in heart was a surprise. As "the flash of triumph" suggests, the uncle thinks he is now in a dominant position over Sybil.

Guy leaves the estate after watching Sybil and her uncle flirt (which was a misunderstanding on his part). Sybil reacts by directing her anger at her

uncle. Witnessing this, Dr. Karnac diagnoses her as mentally ill, and he and Sybil's uncle make Sybil drink medicated wine to put her to sleep. While she is asleep, they take her to Dr. Karnac's house and keep her in captivity.

Sybil attempts to exert her power by becoming angry but is unable to overpower her uncle, which results in her unmasking by her uncle. Her anger in fact makes her feel cornered and she loses control of herself. A similar situation is depicted in *Little Women*, where Jo's temper repeatedly gets her into trouble. Stephanie Foote provides the following analysis based on the behavior of the March sisters:

[E]motions like anger, resentment or envy signal that the home, rather than being the refuge from the social, or the template for a better version of the social, is a testing ground for the pressures of the outside world, especially for the pressures of an always-evolving regime of class and status distinctions (Foote 65).

Thus, emotions should not be demonstrated in social situations. In "A Whisper in the Dark," the home is not a place of protection for Sybil, but instead symbolizes a society that forces Sybil to act. Stated differently, in much of Alcott's work, people who show emotions suffer.

The scenes covering Sybil's time in the asylum are profoundly serious. The process of Sybil going mad is connected to her sight. Not only is her freedom taken away, but the amount of visible information is also limited—her room has no furniture, the windows are barred, the door is locked—and she cannot explore inside or outside of the house. She is sometimes allowed to take a walk, but the yard is surrounded by a tall wall and she is always supervised.

In Dr. Karnac's house, Sybil's identity is captured twice: first, her name is ignored, and second, her hair is cut. Her maid Hannah, the only person with whom Sybil can communicate, never calls her by her name, instead referring to her as "miss." This is evidence of Sybil losing her identity. Similarly, her hair is cut while she is asleep. This scene parallels one in *Little Women*, in which Jo gets her hair cut in order to make money instead her father, which marks her taking over as the breadwinner for the family. Lynette Carpenter points out that "Sybil's hair is cut short in the madhouse, a symbolic gesture which signifies her loss of sexuality and wealth" (36). In "A Whisper in the Dark," the haircut is symbolic of Sybil losing her gender.

Dr. Karnac's purpose is to drive people insane, as Sybil's mother writes in a note:

If you are not already mad, you will be; I suspect you were sent here to be made so; for the air is poison, the solitude is fatal, and Karnac remorseless in his mania for prying into the mysterious human minds. ("Whisper" 55)

Sybil is Doctor Karnac's examinee, and "prying into the mysterious human minds" implies that he is interested in how stimulation affects human minds and how this is reflected in behavior.

Dr. Karnac can be compared with Helwyze in *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877, hereafter *MM*). The heroine Gladys marries Canaris, who is made into a famous poet by the rich Helwyze. Helwyze orders him to marry Gladys and live in Helwyze's house. They stay together, but Gladys gradually has

doubts regarding Helwyze's intentions and expresses her feelings to her husband. She mentions her fear and distrust toward Helwyze:

"I [Gladys] feel as if under a microscope when with him; yet he is very kind to me, and very patient with my ignorance. Felix, is he trying to discover the evil in me, when he gives me strange things to read, and sits watching me while I do it?" (*MM* 160).

The above indicates that Helwyze believes that Gladys' innocence is external and there is something evil beneath it. This illustrates the conflict between Gladys and Helwyze. Both Helwyze and Karnac put their examinees under their control and exert their power over them.

Sarah Elbert, for example, regards that "A Whisper in the Dark" and *A Modern Mephistopheles* "are treatments of romantic sexual conflict; each heroine resists possession of her soul by a more dominant masculine will" (231). However, men as well are targeted by Helwyze and Dr. Karnac, as seen when Helwyze exercises his power over Canaris as an owner, and where Dr. Karnac wants, as a doctor, to exercise his power over Sybil's uncle. As she is his examinee, Dr. Karnac tries to understand Sybil's thoughts:

Dr. Karnac appeared. I [Sybil] was so changed that I feared him with a deadly fear. He seemed to enjoy it; for in the pride of youth and beauty I had shown him contempt and defiance at my uncle's, and he took an ungenerous satisfaction in annoying me by a display of power. He never answered my questions or entreaties, regarded me as being without sense or will, insisted on my trying various mixtures and experiments in diet, gave me some strange books to read, and

weekly received Hanna's report of all that passed. ("Whisper" 52)

The above illustrates how Dr. Karnac shows his power. He presupposes that Sybil shows her emotions when he treats her as if she is not human, and he is interested in her reactions when she is made to read "strange books." As such, Sybil fears Dr. Karnac's eye:

Dr. Karnac's eye had a magnetic power over me [Sybil]; I had always felt it, but in my present feeble state I dreaded, yet submitted to it with a helpless fear that should have touched his heart—it was on me then, I could not resist it, and paused fixed and fascinated by that repellent yet potent glance. ("Whisper" 53)

She is under constant supervision. "A magnetic power over me" suggests that he is skilled at observing both Sybil's internal and external emotions, which is the thing she fears the most. He acts like Sybil, and she knows that being unmasked is the worst thing that could happen. Here, as the former "I feared him with a deadly fear" proves, Sybil's most serious experience of fear is depicted.

Moreover, a point of interest is that the uncle also experiences fear when he sees Sybil as a madwoman. A few weeks after being in the asylum, Sybil begins to mimic the crazy woman who lives above her. When he sees a very changed Sybil in the asylum, he is astonished:

I saw my uncle start and turn pale; I had never seen myself since I came, but if I had not suspected that I was a melancholy wreck of my former self, I should have known it then, such sudden pain and pity

softened his ruthless countenance for a single instant. (“Whisper” 53)

Both the uncle and Sybil had not seen each other since she entered the asylum. The uncle recognizes how Sybil changes, and at the same time, Sybil understands her transfiguration by watching the reactions of her uncle. Her uncle sympathizes with her, meaning she influences his emotions, which shows she still has power over him.

Sybil surrenders to her uncle, exclaiming “Uncle, let me go! I will give you all I have, will never ask for Guy, will be obedient and meek [...], or see the sights that terrify me in this dreadful room. Take me out! For god’s sake take me out!” (“Whisper” 53) Hearing this, her uncle flees. Then Dr. Karnac “laughed the first laugh I [Sybil] had ever heard him utter as he wrenched Hannah from my grasp and locked me in alone” (53)⁴. This implies that Dr. Karnac feels triumph in being able to overpower her. “I will give you all I have” is what her uncle wants to hear because he wants all the fortune she owns; however, he does not wish for her to be driven into madness. This is beyond what he expected. As such, Dr. Karnac is not on the uncle’s side. He wants to be superior to everyone. This reveals his ultimate intention: he wants to be an almighty observer who can see everything.

4. Sight and salvation: the voice visualized to be

At the end of the story, Sybil succeeds in leaving Dr. Karnac’s captivity. Her escape is related to her mother’s voice and sight.

In captivity, Sybil gradually notices that someone is in the room above hers. At first, she is irritated by the incessant noise the resident makes: “A peculiar person it seemed to be; for I heard steps going to and fro, hour after

hour, in a tireless march that wore upon my nerves, as many a harsher sound would not have done" ("Whisper" 51), but she gradually imitates what she hears: "I found myself pacing to and fro as those invisible feet paced overhead" (51-2). The resident above is Sybil's mother, a madwoman. Mimicking her actions, Sybil herself nearly falls into madness.

The madwoman in the room above parallels with the madwoman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a favorite book of Alcott's⁵. Many critics admit that Bertha is Jane's alter-ego, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, suggest: "on a figurative and psychological level it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another—indeed the most threatening—avatar of Jane" (359). Evidently Sybil's mother is her alter-ego in that they are related by blood—they are mother and daughter. Gilbert and Gubar also note that Bertha warns Jane not to marry Rochester: "Is she [Bertha] not, then, as many critics have suggested, a monitory image rather than a double for Jane?" (361). Sybil's mother, as well, warns her to escape from Dr. Karnac: "*What devil sent you I may never know, but I long to warn you [...] I implore you to leave this house before it is too late*" ("Whisper" 55-6).

This mother-daughter relationship gradually empowers Sybil. Alcott repeatedly depicts a similar effect in *Little Women*. The mother of the March sisters guides them to be "little women." In real life, Alcott was similarly encouraged by her mother Abigail (LaPlante 166). In "A Whisper in the Dark," too, this mother-daughter relationship plays an important role. Susan S. Williams, for example, calls Alcott's mother-daughter relations "sentimental ties" (53)⁶, which extends both to their concrete (tangible) and abstract (intangible) possessions such as inheritance and emotions.

Sybil becomes like her mother while mimicking the sound of her

footsteps. A resemblance in their features is also mentioned when Sybil learns that the resident living above her has died and Sybil looks at her: “the face I saw was a pale image of my own. Sharpened by suffering, pallid with death the features were familiar as those I used to see” (“Whisper” 55). Moreover, her mother’s room is also similar: “It was a room like mine, the carpet worn like mine, the windows barred like mine” (54), illustrating that Sybil is becoming mad like her mother. Their resemblance is not merely genetic, but also manifests itself in the way Sybil mimics her mother’s behavior. Sybil visualizes what she hears, and she grows identical to her mother. She embodies her mother at this moment, symbolizing at least that Sybil is not alone, and that they share the same plight.

After Sybil finds out that it is her mother living above her, she hears a whisper: “Find it! For God’s sake find it before it is too late!” (“Whisper” 52), which gives Sybil power to overcome her predicament. Her mother dies after leaving this message. In her notes, her mother encourages her: “*Child! Woman! Whatever you are, leave this accursed house while you have power to do it*” (56). As her mother calls her “child” and “woman;” this proves that her mother plays a motherly role in calling Sybil a “child” and at the same time admits that she is also a woman. This also implies that Sybil is going to mature from a “child” to a “woman.” As her alter-ego, Sybil’s mother takes away her past and liberates her from the small world that imprisons her, helping to create a new Sybil.

Another example is when Sybil turns eighteen and is hoping for some help at Dr. Karnac’s house: “a vague hope that my birthday might bring some change, some help, sustained me” (“Whisper” 53). Her birthday shows she is becoming older. Reading her mother’s message, Sybil finds a chance to escape and is successful. Reaching eighteen years old at the

estate is also important. This means that by escaping from the asylum, her physical and mental maturation occurs at the Karnac residence. Sybil helps herself over time through the support of her mother.

The title of this work, "A Whisper in the Dark," should also be examined. It is suggestive of the gothic thriller genre, and the "whisper" symbolizes the mother's instruction and power that helps Sybil. At the same time, the voice is heard only by Sybil, indicating the bond of mother and daughter. Also, a "whisper"—a faint voice—implies the death of the mother, and as such Sybil must remain alive instead of her mother. Considering the above, this "whisper" symbolizes Sybil's mother.

Sybil's maturing process suggests this work is not just a simple gothic thriller. Throughout the story, Alcott explores what visual information humans must manipulate to survive in society, especially for young people like Sybil. At the same time, people can utilize this to discover their true selves. When emotions exceed one's mask, this can sometimes lead to trouble. However, they can/must overcome this, although the ending of this story implies a not so happy ending. This is, however, the way life can be.

In the beginning when Sybil observes by "my inexperienced eye," she admits that she is immature ("Whisper" 32). As her uncle and Guy also call her "child," she is a child, full of youth and ignorance. She therefore attaches importance to observing and being observed. This reflects her belief that she can overpower others by manipulating their sight. However, her progress is arrested, and the asylum symbolizes her small world where her perception is limited and her identity is threatened, but she gradually overcomes it, acquiring power and growing up in the process. She emerges in a new world. As such, this work can be treated as bildungsroman, a story of Sybil's transition from child to woman in the guise of a gothic thriller.

Notes

Thanks to Jason Morgan for checking this manuscript.

- 1 For the discovery of Alcott's thrillers, see Rostenberg (73-80).
- 2 Eve LaPlante also mentions how difficult it was for Bronson to secure a job (50-1).
- 3 Showalter suggests that "'Behind a Mask' is the most skillful of the tales Alcott published under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard" (*Alternative* xxix).
- 4 This scene is associated with Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" (1843) and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), Alcott's favorite works. Both of the heroines die as a result failed experiments at the hands of scientists. Other characters then laugh at them. Alcott here criticizes human conceit.
- 5 In her journal, Alcott wrote of her fondness of Brontë's work, especially *Jane Eyre*, and the author's life (*Journal* 68, 85). John Seelye also refers to the influence of Brontë's work on Alcott and her writing. He sees the role of the "uncle" in "A Whisper in the Dark" as similar to Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (153).
- 6 Holly Jackson first uses this phrase when analyzing the American family as "the conventional economic functions of kin relations with the psychological, sentimental ties of the nuclear unit" (3, underline mine).

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