

# The Fall of Victorian Heavenly Family: Subversive Femininity and the Rise of the Female Villains in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866) and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind A Mask* (1866)

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## Abstract

The Victorian ideal of the “heavenly family,” centered on the selfless, pure woman as moral guardian, dominated mid-19th-century literature and culture. However, by 1866, Wilkie Collins’s *Armadale* and Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* challenged this myth through the rise of the female villain, embodying what this article theorizes as “subversive femininity” — a strategic performance of conventional womanhood weaponized to infiltrate and dismantle patriarchal structures. Rather than rejecting femininity, figures like Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir master its codes—modesty, charm, emotional intelligence—and deploy them as deception, ambition, and control tools. Their villainy is not mere deviance but a calculated response to systemic constraints on women’s agency, marriage, and class mobility. Operating within the domestic sphere, they expose the family not as a sanctuary, but as a site of power struggles, economic negotiation, and repressed desire. Through sensation fiction’s scandalous aesthetics—secrets, disguises, and psychological manipulation—Collins and Alcott reveal the performative nature of gender and the fragility of domestic idealism. The woman at the heart of the home becomes its greatest threat, not because she is inherently evil, but because she exploits the virtues imposed upon her. This article argues that subversive femininity is a literary critique, unveiling the Victorian family as an unstable construct sustained by illusion, repression, and the silencing of women’s autonomy.

**Keywords:** Wilkie Collins, Louisa May Alcott, Victorian era, sensation novel, female villains.

Viktorya Dönemi Aile Yuvasının Çöküşü:

Wilkie Collins’in *Armadale* (1866) ve Louisa May Alcott’un *Behind A Mask* (1866) Romanlarındaki Karşıt Kadınlık ve Kadın Kötülerin Yükselişi

## Öz

Viktorya döneminin özverili ve saf kadını ahlaki koruyucu olarak merkeze alan “cennet gibi aile” ideali 19. yüzyıl ortalarında edebiyat ve kültürü domine etmiştir. Ancak 1866’da Wilkie Collins’in *Armadale* ve Louisa May Alcott’un *Behind a Mask* adlı eserleri, bu miti kadın kötü karakterlerin yükselişiyle sorgulamıştır. Bu eserler “karşıt kadınlık” olarak tanımlanan teoriyi somutlaştırmıştır: geleneksel kadınlığı, ataerkil yapılara sızmak ve onları yıkmak için bir silah

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olarak. Lydia Gwilt ve Jean Muir gibi karakterler kadınlığı reddetmek yerine, onun alçakgönüllülük, çekicilik, duygusal zekâ gibi kodlarını ustaca kullanır ve bunları aldatma, hırs ve kontrol araçları olarak kullanır. Onların kötülüğü, sadece sapkınlık değil, kadınların iradesi, evlilik ve sınıf hareketliliği üzerindeki sistemik kısıtlamalara karşı hesaplı bir tepkidir. Ev içi alanda faaliyet gösteren bu kadınlar, aileyi bir sığınak olarak değil, güç mücadelelerinin, ekonomik pazarlıkların ve bastırılmış arzuların yaşandığı bir yer olarak ortaya koyarlar. Collins ve Alcott, sansasyonel kurgunun sınırlar, kılık değiştirme ve psikolojik manipülasyon gibi skandal estetiği aracılığıyla cinsiyetin performatif doğasını ve ev içi idealizmin kırılmasını ortaya koyarlar. Evin merkezinde yer alan kadın, doğası gereği kötü olduğu için değil, kendisine dayatılan erdemleri kendi çıkarları için kullandığı için evin en büyük tehdidi haline gelir. Bu makale, yıkıcı kadınlığın edebi bir eleştiri işlevi gördüğünü ve Viktorya dönemi ailesinin, yanılısına, baskı ve kadınların özerkliğinin susturulmasıyla ayakta duran istikrarsız bir yapı olduğunu ortaya koyduğunu savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Wilkie Collins, Louisa May Alcott, Viktorya dönemi, sansasyon romanı, kadın kötüler.

## INTRODUCTION

The year 1866 stands as a pivotal moment in the literary representation of gender, class, and domesticity in the Victorian era. In that year, two seemingly disparate authors—Wilkie Collins, the pioneering sensation novelist, and Louisa May Alcott, best known for her domestic moral tales—published works that, upon closer examination, converge in their radical critique of the idealized Victorian family. Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask* both feature female characters who transgress the boundaries of acceptable womanhood, infiltrate the sanctity of the domestic sphere, and ultimately dismantle the myth of the "heavenly home"—a concept central to Victorian ideology that idealized the family as a moral sanctuary presided over by the pure, self-sacrificing, and spiritually elevated woman. This essay argues that the emergence of the female villain in both novels represents a deliberate literary strategy to expose the fragility and hypocrisy of the Victorian heavenly family. Through the figure of the cunning, manipulative, and often sexually assertive woman, both Collins and Alcott dramatize the collapse of domestic idealism, revealing it not as a natural or divinely ordained order, but as a constructed and deeply unstable social edifice vulnerable to subversion from within.

This theory rests on the premise that the female villain—often dismissed in literary criticism as mere melodrama or sensational excess—functions as a critical agent of ideological disruption. Rather than simply serving as a narrative antagonist, the female villain in *Armadale* and *Behind a Mask* embodies the repressed anxieties of a society grappling with shifting gender roles, class mobility, and the contradictions of domestic ideology. Her presence destabilizes the patriarchal order not through overt rebellion, but through infiltration, performance, and psychological manipulation—methods that mirror the very tools women were expected to wield in the service of domestic harmony, now turned against the system itself. In doing so, these characters expose the performative nature of femininity and reveal the Victorian family as a site of power struggles, emotional repression, and economic exploitation, rather than spiritual refuge. To understand the significance of this dual literary phenomenon in 1866, it is essential to contextualize the cultural

moment. The mid-Victorian period consolidated what historian Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987, pp. 33, 416) have termed the “separate spheres” ideology—the belief that men belonged to the public world of work, politics, and commerce. At the same time, women were confined to the private, moral realm of the home. The ideal Victorian woman, epitomized in Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1866), was passive, pious, pure, and devoted to her family. The home, in turn, was mythologized as a haven from the corrupting forces of industrial capitalism and urban life—a “heavenly family” where love, morality, and self-sacrifice reigned supreme. However, this ideal was increasingly at odds with social realities. The expansion of the middle class, the rise of female education, and the early stirrings of the women’s movement (including campaigns for property rights and suffrage) created tensions around women’s roles. At the same time, the growing popularity of sensation fiction, a genre that thrived on scandal, secrets, and moral ambiguity, reflected public fascination with the dark undercurrents beneath domestic tranquility. Collins, often regarded as the father of the sensation novel, exploited these anxieties in *Armadale*. At the same time, Alcott, writing under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, used the genre to explore the constraints and contradictions of femininity in a more covert but equally incisive manner.

In *Armadale*, the character of Lydia Gwilt emerges as a quintessential female villain whose actions systematically unravel the Armadale family. A beautiful, intelligent, and morally ambiguous woman, Lydia is spurned by Allan Armadale’s father, who chooses a wealthier, more socially acceptable bride. Consumed by vengeance, Lydia manipulates her into the family, marries Allan’s friend and rival, Ozias Midwinter, and plots to secure the Armadale fortune through deception, bigamy, and murder. What makes Lydia particularly threatening is not merely her criminality, but her mastery of performance. She assumes multiple identities, writes anonymous letters, and exploits the emotional vulnerabilities of those around her. Her villainy is not brute force but psychological warfare—she weaponizes the traits associated with ideal femininity: charm, empathy, and emotional intuition. Lydia’s role in the novel is not simply to oppose virtue; she exposes the hypocrisy of the moral order she infiltrates. The Armadale estate, ostensibly a bastion of patriarchal stability and inherited virtue, is built on a foundation of guilt and secrecy—the original Allan Armadale murdered his friend and namesake in a fit of jealousy. Though framed as the destroyer, Lydia becomes an agent of truth, forcing the family to confront its moral corruption. Her presence reveals that the heavenly family is not immune to sin but perpetually haunted by it. Moreover, Lydia’s intelligence and agency contrast with conventional female characters’ passivity. She is not a victim of circumstance but an active architect of her fate, challenging the notion that women are naturally inclined toward self-effacement and domestic duty.

Similarly, in *Behind a Mask*, Alcott presents Jean Muir, a governess who enters the Coventry household under pretenses and gradually manipulates her way into power. Ostensibly humble and virtuous, Jean is a calculating actress who uses her position to seduce the young heir, Edgar, and secure her social advancement. Like Lydia Gwilt, Jean employs performance as a tool of subversion. She adopts the mannerisms of the ideal Victorian woman—modest, nurturing, morally upright—while secretly orchestrating a campaign of emotional manipulation. Her famous declaration, “I have always been an actress—ever since I was a child,” underscores the constructed nature of femininity

and how women must perform to survive in a patriarchal society. Jean's villainy is particularly potent because it arises from her marginal position. She occupies an ambiguous social space as a governess—neither servant nor family, educated but economically dependent. Her actions reflect the limited avenues available to women of her class: marriage or service. By exploiting the emotional and moral expectations placed upon women, Jean turns the ideology of domesticity against itself. She uses the language of love and duty to mask her ambition, revealing how the heavenly family functions as a marketplace for female labor and emotional capital. The Coventry family, with its idle patriarch, frivolous daughters, and emotionally repressed matriarch, is portrayed not as a moral sanctuary but as a dysfunctional unit ripe for exploitation.

The convergence of these two narratives in 1866 suggests a broader cultural reckoning with the myth of the heavenly family. Both Collins and Alcott use the female villain to entertain and interrogate the assumptions underpinning Victorian domestic ideology. The female villain becomes a mirror, reflecting the contradictions of a society that idealizes women while denying them autonomy, that venerates the home while exploiting the labor within it, and that demands purity while fostering repression and secrecy. This leads to the core of the proposed theory: the female villain in mid-Victorian literature functions as a necessary agent of deconstruction, exposing the Victorian heavenly family as a fragile ideological construct rather than a natural or moral given. Her villainy is not an aberration, but a logical response to the constraints imposed by a system that offers women no legitimate path to power, agency, or self-determination. By infiltrating the domestic sphere and weaponizing the tools of femininity, the female villain reveals the performative and contingent nature of gender roles. She demonstrates that the "angel in the house" is not an innate identity, but a role that can be adopted, discarded, or perverted for strategic ends. Furthermore, the female villain's success—however temporary or self-destructive—challenges the notion of male control over the domestic realm. In *Armadale* and *Behind a Mask*, the male characters are portrayed as emotionally immature, morally weak, or intellectually outmaneuvered. Allan Armadale is naive and easily deceived; Edgar Coventry is infatuated and impulsive. The true power in these households lies not with the patriarchs but the women who manipulate them—whether through overt villainy or quiet subversion. This inversion of power dynamics suggests that the heavenly family is not a stable hierarchy, but a site of constant negotiation and struggle.

The theory of subversive femininity also accounts for the sensational form of both texts; that is, sensation fiction, emphasizing secrets, disguises, and moral ambiguity, provides the perfect vehicle for exploring the instability of domestic life. The genre thrives on the revelation of hidden truths—the bigamous wife, the forged will, the secret past—all threatening to collapse the face of respectability. The female villain is thus not an anomaly within the genre, but its logical centerpiece. She embodies the repressed desires, anxieties, and injustices the Victorian family seeks to conceal. Moreover, the timing of both novels in 1866 is significant. This was the year of the Second Reform Act in Britain, which expanded the male franchise and intensified debates about citizenship, rights, and social hierarchy. In the United States, Reconstruction was beginning, and discussions about gender and racial equality were gaining momentum. The portrayal of ambitious, transgressive

women in literature can be seen as part of a larger cultural conversation about who belongs in the domestic and public spheres, and on what terms.

It is also noteworthy that both authors use the female villain to critique not only gender norms but also class structures. Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir are women of uncertain or lower social standing who use their intelligence and charm to ascend the social ladder. Their villainy is inextricably linked to their economic marginality. In a society where a woman's value is tied to her marriageability and social connections, their actions can be read as resistance against systemic exclusion. The heavenly family, far from being a refuge for all women, is revealed as an exclusive institution that benefits only those who conform to its rigid moral and class expectations. The theory proposed here positions the female villain in *Armadale* and *Behind a Mask* as a revolutionary literary figure who dismantles the myth of the Victorian heavenly family from within. Through deception, performance, and psychological insight, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir expose the moral contradictions, emotional repression, and structural inequalities that underlie domestic idealism. Their characterization is not merely personal corruption, but a symptom of deeper societal malaise. By giving voice to the repressed and the marginalized, Collins and Alcott use the sensation genre to challenge Victorian morality's foundations and imagine a world where women might claim agency, even if only through subversion and transgression. This dual portrayal in 1866 marks a turning point in the literary representation of women—not as passive angels or helpless victims, but as complex, desiring, and dangerous subjects capable of reshaping the domestic sphere on their own terms. The fall of the heavenly family, as dramatized in these two novels, is not a tragedy, but a necessary reckoning, a moment of truth in which the illusions of domestic perfection are shattered, revealing the turbulent realities beneath. In this light, the female villain emerges not as a monster to be feared, but as a truth-teller to be reckoned with, a harbinger of the changing roles of women in the modern world.

Wilkie Collins and Louisa May Alcott are selected for comparison not only because both published groundbreaking works featuring transgressive female villains in the same pivotal year—1866—but also because their novels exemplify the transnational reach and ideological resonance of the sensation novel genre. As a central figure in British sensation fiction, Collins directly challenged Victorian domestic ideals from within the cultural heart of the genre, using complex narratives of crime, identity, and female agency to expose the fragility of the “heavenly family.” Alcott, writing in the United States under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, adopted a British setting and sensation-style tropes in *Behind a Mask*, demonstrating how the critique of Victorian gender and class norms transcended national borders. Her deliberate choice of an English aristocratic household as the stage for Jean Muir's rise underscores the global influence of British domestic ideology and its susceptibility to subversion, even by authors outside the imperial center. This cross-cultural parallel reveals that anxieties about femininity, marriage, and social mobility were not confined to Britain but were shared concerns in the broader Anglophone world.

The significance of comparing these two authors lies in their convergence on subversive femininity despite differing national contexts and authorial identities. Collins, a male writer, frames female transgression through a lens of moral ambiguity and psychological suspense. At the same time, Alcott, a woman writing covertly in a male-dominated literary market, infuses her narrative

with sharp feminist irony and class critique. Nevertheless, both depict heroines who manipulate the performance of femininity to gain power in a system that otherwise denies them autonomy. Their shared focus on the domestic sphere as a battleground for gender and class control highlights the genre's capacity to serve as a vehicle for feminist resistance. By juxtaposing a canonical British sensation novelist with an American female writer engaging with British forms, this comparison reveals how the female villain became a transnational symbol of rebellion—a figure who, through cunning and performance, laid bare the contradictions of an idealized domestic order on both sides of the Atlantic.

The conservative, nationalist, and Evangelical-Christian Victorian values dominating the Victorian Period emphasized the concept of “heavenly family” and “women as angels” not only in culture and daily life but also in the narrative realm and traditions of the period. Symbolizing the heroic Queen Victoria, the women were attributed to angelic purity in morals and domestic duties in real life and fiction. Women were essential in domestic life because of their sacrifices, angelic purity, understanding, and roles. Culture and fiction reflectively dictated this norm. The Industrial Revolution, however, created a conflict and paradigm shift in female roles and social structures that started to include out-of-standard female characters portrayed in fiction (Armstrong, 1987, pp. 260-262). The new female characters were more complex and did not fit the Victorian cultural format. The sensation novels especially gave the first signals of the modernist novel and female characters as villains that horrified the readers and the public. They subverted the conservative expectations and included new perspectives and critiques of the deserved women model.

The Victorian Era in the history of English culture is famous for its emphasis on happiness in family life and women as angels in the house. The family was the source of refreshment and a reflection of heaven on earth. The hardship of the day for all family members was forgotten at home. This vision of the family was also apparent in literature. Peace in the family was portrayed in novels by authors with care and detail of compassion. However, in the middle of the century, sensation fiction emerged as part of a broader cultural and publishing trend in the 1860s. Wilkie Collins's novels were among the first examples of this tradition in literature, and they were called ‘sensation novels.’ This genre collapsed the view of angelic women in the house: Intrigues, murders, poisoning, ambition, and all the evil were unleashed in society. In her book *The Sensation Novel*, Lyn Pykett summarizes the relevant scene as such:

The plots and central preoccupations of sensation novels embodied and explored the hopes and fears of the Victorian middle classes. They were generated by anxieties arising from contemporary social changes. These anxieties concerned the nature and status of the family, generally considered the cornerstone of Victorian society. Sensation novels are stories of family, and their plots reveal and exploit the fear that the respectable Victorian family had some dark secret at its core. (Pykett, 1994, pp. 9-10)

The quote suggests that sensation novels, a genre popular in Victorian literature, reflected the hopes and fears of the Victorian middle classes. The plots of these novels often revolved around the anxieties stemming from the social changes occurring during that period. Specifically, these anxieties were centered on the concept of the family, which was widely viewed as the cornerstone of Victorian society. In Victorian England, the family was considered a crucial and fundamental

institution (Wright, 1988, pp. 1-7, 118). It represented stability, morality, and societal order. However, as society underwent significant changes during the 19th century, such as industrialization, urbanization, and shifts in gender roles, there was a sense of unease and insecurity regarding the traditional family structure. Sensation novels, through their narratives, explored and embodied these societal anxieties. The stories typically focused on families, unraveling plots that hinted at hidden secrets or scandals within the supposedly respectable Victorian households. The novels exploited the fear that families might harbor dark and scandalous secrets beneath the facade of respectability and virtue. The genre often included mystery, suspense, and sensationalism to captivate readers. The revelation of hidden family secrets in these novels was a way to address and grapple with the uncertainties and anxieties surrounding the changing social landscape of Victorian England. By delving into the darker aspects of family life, these novels engaged with the collective fears and hopes of the Victorian middle classes, providing both entertainment and a reflection of the societal concerns of the time (Tusan, 2005, pp. 10-13). Journalism and scandalous events were the sources of these sensational and scandalous stories, meaning they were the Victorian family's dark side (Mangham, 2013, p. 5). In the 1860s, personal affairs were transformed into public events in the theatre of the courtroom: these were divorce courts, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, Yelverton Bigamy, crimes of passion, and tales of domestic violence (Pykett, 1994, p. 2).

This paper aims to compare and contrast *Armadale* by Collins and *Behind A Mask* by Alcott in terms of their creation of villains, style, and attitude towards the corruption in Victorian families, marriage, and class issues. With their plots and evil characters, *Armadale* and *Behind A Mask* successfully "harrow [our] minds, make our flesh creep, give shocks to our nervous systems, and destroy the conventional moralities" (Pykett, 1994, p. 3). After publication, *Armadale* and *Behind A Mask* received controversial and negative criticism. While Collins asserted that the book is telling the truth despite the censorship of the Christian faith, the magazines and analyses at its publication condemned it for dark powers and plots apparent in the storyline. According to Lyn Pykett, the novel features were duplicity, intrigue, deception, disguise, jealousy, and adultery (1994, p. 4). All these elements are present in *Armadale* and *Behind A Mask*. The novels' main female characters, Jean Muir, Lydia, and *Armadale* cousins, have double identities. They disguise themselves throughout the stories until they reach their aims or their plans are foiled. Intrigue is all that Jaen Muir and Lydia do in the novels. Their jealousy, adultery, and seduction are combined with marrying, taking revenge, or gaining power and status in social life.

In the novel *Armadale*, the main female character is Lydia Gwilt, and in *Behind A Mask*, Jean Muir challenges the Victorian model of "angels in the house," threatening the patriarchal and order-driven Victorian society. The narration of the stories, their outcomes, and the motivations of the female characters that will be analyzed in the text will prove how this was reflected in the fiction and novel tradition of the period. Collins and Alcott critique the social norms and discuss the freedom of the female characters and their choices, which seemed a revolt and outrage at the time, and a shocking act for female types. Another remark that the analysis will make is to look at the impact of British sensation novels and narrative tradition on the American writing concepts of

female roles, conservative society, and discourse. It will associate the villainy as innovatively applied to and attributed to the female characters in the century of novel traditions.

### **Ambition and Women: *Armadale's* Lydia Gwilt**

Focus on Wilkie Collins's biography as a writer risks diverting attention from the central thematic concern of the article: the representation of female villainy and the subversion of the Victorian heavenly family in *Armadale* and *Behind a Mask*. While Collins's role as a pioneer of the sensation novel is contextually important, excessive biographical detail about his literary career or personal life does not directly advance the article's core argument about subversive femininity and the destabilization of domestic ideology. The focus is not on authorial intent or literary genealogy, but on how female characters like Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir function as agents of critique against prescribed gender roles, marriage, and class structures. Therefore, the relevance of such background information should be tightly calibrated to serve the comparative analysis—emphasizing how Collins's narrative techniques enable the portrayal of ambitious women, rather than celebrating his status in literary history. In a study centered on female transgression and ideological critique, the spotlight must remain on the female figures who dismantle the myth of the angel in the house, ensuring that authorial biography does not overshadow the thematic and symbolic significance of the women who, through ambition and performance, expose the fragility of the Victorian family ideal.

Wilkie Collins's books were translated into French and greatly appreciated, which is one reason for his vast popularity during the era. Collins asserted that he was writing for the commoner but was compared to Dickens and other prominent literary figures in terms of literary quality (Rollyson, 2008, p. 372). He has contributed much to the English detective genre and stories. His contribution to English literature and the mystery genre is vast. Collins is accepted as the father of English mystery and sensation fiction. In the course of his literary career, his stories were called "sensation stories," and with the works and contributions of Wilkie Collins, sensational mystery fiction reached a standard and vast characterization, magnitude, and milieu. He expanded the scope of mystery fiction by turning it into full-length novels, choosing commonplace settings populated by stable characters who act logically, pioneering in advocating for "scientific exactitude and rigorously accurate detail" (p. 372). Wilkie Collins transformed sensational stories of mystery into detective novels. About Collins, Carl Edmund Rollyson stated that it is possible to "mark his famous mystery novels; in fact, everything is there except the detective" (p. 373). In *Armadale*, Collins features upper-middle-class life in splendid estates, the life of the lower classes in modest lodges, and vivid descriptions of nature. The story takes place in the coastal parts of Cornwall, which were occasionally portrayed by Collins's father, who was a painter. Letter exchanges and diaries are the main narrative style of the lengthy novel, which resembles the 18th-century novel writing traditions of the English. Ultimately, the story concludes with a positive resolution: the villain's demise, the mystery's unraveling, and the happiness of all virtuous individuals. Collins's exceptional narrative

craftsmanship seamlessly translated these elements into his detective novels, introducing the concept of the amateur detective.

*Armadale* is a novel written by Wilkie Collins in 1866. It was serialized in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1864 and is Collins's longest novel. It combines the themes of the supernatural, identity, murder, and detection. It is a mystery story about two distant cousins whose names are identical. Their names are both Allan Armadale, and the father of Allan murdered the other Allan's father. They do not know each other, but later in life, their roads intersect. One of the cousins' names is now Ozias Midwinter. He inherits a manor, meets Miss Milroy, and loves her. However, Lydia Gwilt, Milroy's governess and the story's antagonist, tries to murder and separate them. Lydia is the reason behind the murder of Allan Armadale I. In the end, Lydia commits suicide, and the Armadales are now pleased. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues that the characterization of Lydia Gwilt is based on a rebellious application of cosmetics: Lydia Gwilt shares similarities with Madeleine Smith, who faced accusations of murder and asserted that she purchased arsenic for cosmetic use (2007, p. 13).

Lydia Gwilt is presented as a wicked female agency that shocked and scandalized the novel readers of the Victorian Period. In the novel's plot, she is not afraid to lie in public, poison her husband, and also commit adultery, unlike the expected angel in the house. She is not an angel, domestic friend, or dutiful Victorian female mother and companion. To the point that Lydia Gwilt is not fond of the other female characters in the story, destroying the image of the sisterhood of the new independent women. Wilkie Collins portrays her as an independent woman who makes plans and puts them into action for her own good and ambition. She is not afraid of the men or women around her, nor the social judgments or institutions. Unlike the pure women respected by Victorian society, Lydia represents ambition and autonomy, which are usually used and narrated for male characters. Her portrayal as a femme fatale challenges Victorian fiction's moral dichotomies, making her both appealing and menacing. Lydia's biography suggests that she is a victim of societal restraints. Lydia's experiences, which began in poverty and led to early exploitation, highlight the institutional oppression of women in Victorian England.

Her journey into villainy might be interpreted as a reaction to these injustices. Lydia maintains her individuality in a society where she is denied legal paths to power by manipulating affluent men, faking documents, and organizing murders. Collins's portrayal of Lydia prompts readers to examine their moral judgments. While her acts are wrong, they result from a survival instinct fashioned by social neglect. Lydia's dual character as both victim and villain exemplifies Collins's condemnation of a culture that appreciates women only if they fit the "heavenly family" ideal. Collins subverts the stereotype of the one-dimensional female adversary by giving Lydia a rich interiority, portraying her as a sad woman caught up in a web of Victorian hypocrisy. It is hypocrisy because Lydia is not alone in her journey of seduction and shenanigans. To help Lydia with her schemes, Mother Oldershaw urges her to take bold action and marry Allan Armadale, exclaiming, "Take the bull by the horns—and marry him!" (Collins, 1995, p. 151). She reassures Lydia that her age, though 35, should not be a concern. Mother Oldershaw emphasizes her expertise in such matters, confidently stating that Lydia does not look her real age, at most 30. With proper attire and some secret beauty treatments she recommends, she guarantees that Lydia could appear even

younger, no older than 27, in the eyes of any man (1995, p. 152). To reinforce her confidence, she even offers to forfeit the money she plans to lend Lydia for the scheme if the transformation fails (Niles, 2010, p. 88).

In the article "Wilkie Collins's Villainous Miss Gwilt, Criminality, and the Unspeakable Truth," Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox analyze themes of sexuality, criminality, and moral transgressions in Wilkie Collins's novel *Armadale* (2022, pp. 320-329): Lydia Gwilt and the adulterous relationship between the protagonists, Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter. Midwinter, who initially had no particular feelings for Miss Gwilt, finds himself unexpectedly drawn to her in a way that is both unsettling and difficult to explain (Collins, 1995, p. 301). His emotional pain when he first heard Allan's confession revealed something new within him. When he next encountered Miss Gwilt, he realized he saw her differently, with a fresh perspective and deeper curiosity (p. 302). He became increasingly captivated by her company and more appreciative of her beauty. However, it was only now that he fully understood the depth of the passion she had stirred in him.

Gwilt is depicted as a femme fatale and a symbol of transgression in Victorian society, embodying the fears of moral and social decay. She is a murderer, forger, and manipulator, highlighting her role as an antagonist and a disruptor of "angelic" Victorian norms. Gwilt is a criminal and also an adulterer, which was mainly attributed to the male characters in the novels. Unexpectedly, at the end of the story, she commits suicide, signifying that she gave up her ambitions at the end with great disillusionment. Bachman and Cox (2002, pp. 334-336) state that *Armadale's* Miss Gwilt is a daring embodiment of taboo subjects and challenges Victorian moral standards; while Collins stops short of overtly legitimizing same-sex relationships, he destabilizes traditional perceptions of love and criminality, leaving the "unspeakable truth" open to interpretation.

### **Power and Women: Jane Muir in *Behind A Mask***

Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 in Pennsylvania. Her father was a famous transcendentalist, and she was raised in Massachusetts. She is best known for her novel *Little Women* (1868). It was rather unconventional that she wrote on subjects like transvestitism, drugs, and feminism. She was an active defender of women's rights. Louisa May Alcott is widely known for her enduring and commercially successful work, *Little Women*; she also took pleasure in crafting suspenseful novels that provided her with creative satisfaction to "push the narrow boundaries that were set for her as a Victorian woman" (Rollyson, 2008, p. 11). One of these works in which she pushes the limits of society is *Behind A Mask or A Woman's Power* (1866). *A Long Fatal Love Chase* and *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) are two of her works in which she displayed the evils of humanity, portraying "female heroines who either succumbed to the pressures of propriety, conforming to the angelic ideal of womanhood, or triumphed over adversity, using society's expectations of them to outwit their adversaries and escape confinement" (Rollyson, 2008, pp. 11-12). Louisa May Alcott, recognized as a leading feminist and pioneer, brought attention to women's persisting challenges regarding property and political influence in late nineteenth-century America. In expressing her opinion, Alcott playfully remarked that if women were given a voice, she strongly advocated for

International Copyright, implying a broader endorsement of women's rights and recognition in society (Homestead, 2005, p. 252).

*Behind A Mask or A Woman's Power* (1866) is a work that gives us the thoughts of an American woman writer about Victorian Britain and society. In her book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860*, Jane Tompkins confirms the feminist background of the literary work of the mentioned period and the effect of Victorianism in the US (1986, pp. 127, 167). The story was first serialized in the weekly story paper *The Flag of Our Union* (Shealy, 2005, p. xxiii). Elizabeth Lennox Keyser states that the theme of the novel, its characters, and its outlines owe much to *Jane Eyre* (1993, p. 47). It is somewhat surprising that Alcott sets her book in England, and her characters are very English, too. It is a fast-paced thriller with a feminist background. Alcott's feminist vision is wonderful; she manages to cover the contemporary problems of feminist women. The novel's title is also unique because it gives an idea about its plot and characters. It conveys that a woman is powerful and can achieve her goals in disguise, a mask. Behind her mask is her disguise, and the villain tries to achieve her goals. The villain of the novel, Jean, looks like an ideal Victorian female; however, she turns out to be a vicious individual with ambition. Reflecting the title of the novel, behind the mask is the dangerous, evil woman that sensationalists portray; however, on the lookout, she is the proper feminine that every man desires. In the novel *Behind A Mask: Or, A Woman's Power*, two standout characters, Rosamond Vivian and Jean Muir, defy attempts by others to confine them to specific roles: Rosamond as a devoted wife and Jean as an innocent governess. What captivates readers is their adeptness at successfully avoiding such categorizations. The means of escape employed by these heroines are both physical and psychological. They venture beyond the confines of their familiar homes, embarking on new territories to forge different lives for themselves. In doing so, they skillfully evade capture or the revelation of their true identities, navigating their journeys while renegotiating the societal roles imposed upon them. Rollyson praises the heroines of Alcott as such:

Two of her most striking characters, Rosamond Vivian [...] and Jean Muir in the novella "*Behind A Mask: Or, A Woman's Power*," elude the attempts of others to pigeonhole them into certain roles (devoted wife for Rosamond and guileless governess for Jean). It is their successful escapes that thrill the reader. These escape methods are both geographical and psychological, as the heroines leave the homes they are familiar with to enter new territory and create new lives for themselves, eluding capture or discovery of identity as they travel and renegotiate their roles. (2008, p. 13)

In *Behind A Mask*, the Coventry family meets a mysterious governess called Jean Muir. She is in her thirties, quits the stage, and becomes a governess. The Coventry family interviews her and accepts her. She aimed to meet the rich, handsome man she had been looking for. At the Coventry house, she uses her charms and beauty to attract the three male characters in the story. Bella, the family's young daughter, loves Jean at the house. Jean seduces all three male members of the Coventry house: Gerald, Edward, and Sir John. Gerald and the females of the family soon discover Jean's true identity. However, it is created too late. She marries Sir John and becomes the new Lady Coventry. Jean Muir appears as another rebellious personality who achieves her aims by taking action and using sneaky ways to avoid detection. While Lydia Gwilt commits crimes through illegal acts, Jean Muir deceives people and characters to upgrade society and gain financial gain. Jean acts

like she has the Victorian qualities of being an angelic woman, reflecting the idealized picture of virtue and obedience. Jean regularly lies and plots schemes to evade people and get what she wants. She plays the role of a governess and wins people's trust to show herself charming, lovely, and trustworthy. She is looking for a social upgrade and a wealthy marriage. She is intelligent enough to play this role and get into communication with both upper and lower classes and their cultural and interest topics. Jean is a master of manipulation, and her behavior highlights the limitations placed on women by social norms. Jean experiences a happy ending, in which she succeeds and gets away with it, which Alcott aimed to give the narration a subversive conclusion and message. Alcott challenges the moral dichotomies of Victorian fiction by letting her villain thrive and implies that women's existence frequently requires defiance of social expectations.

In the novel, the author describes Jean's intense hatred, particularly toward hypocritical aristocrats (Alcott, 2004, pp. 39-42): Her sternly beautiful face reflects a profound and bitter hatred, while her "gaze radiates courage"; the slender hand gripping the weapon reveals her strength and her unwavering determination is evident in every aspect of her demeanor, even in the firm press of her small foot, partially concealed by the "tiger skin." Jean skillfully manipulates the men around her, particularly a character named Coventry, demonstrating her cunning nature. Alcott describes how she deliberately dishevels Coventry's appearance, messing up his hair, pulling his lace collar out of place, discarding his gloves and sword, and loosening the cloak on his shoulders. Jean then directs him confidently, saying, "That's better; your paleness is perfect—do not ruin it. We are to recreate the portrait in the Hall. No further instructions are needed. Now, Roundheads, take your positions, and raise the curtain" (2004, p. 42).

Mary Chapman states that Jean is a master of deception and double identity: She carefully crafts her appearance to gain power over those who observe her, seizes opportunities to appear unaware of being watched, creating the illusion that the observer is seeing her "true self" (1996, p. 39). At other moments, Jean purposely positions herself out of sight by hiding behind a curtain or moving to another room to heighten Gerald's desire to see her. In these actions, Jean reveals her ability to manipulate and challenge the male gaze. By intentionally presenting herself as a spectacle, she controls how her employers perceive and desire her (Alcott, 2004, pp. 164-168). The Coventry men's fascination with Jean stems from their curiosity to see the "real" Jean behind her professional facade. Still, they cannot uncover it, as she is concealed by a wig, makeup, false teeth, and a series of fabricated stories about her past (Chapman, 1996, p. 40). Unlike the traditional view in *tableau vivant* manuals that women are transparent signs of virtue, Alcott presents Jean as complex and deceptive. Jean even questions the existence of a single true self beneath her constructed appearance and acting (Alcott, 2004, p. 106). At the end of the first chapter, after her evening with the Coventry, she reflects on her ability to be genuine for a few hours if actresses ever truly are.

### **Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir as Female Villains**

How did Alcott reach these subject matters, although she was in the US then? Did she inspire Wilkie Collins to write about sensational events and women in the 1860s? The answer is that Alcott was well-informed about the literary genre prevalent during her time, as she closely followed the

works of English sensation novel masters. Notable best-sellers of the 1860s included *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, the popular *East Lynne*, *Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. These novels, characterized by tales of deliberate crimes and scandals featuring plots involving incest, bigamy, and double identity, were popular at the time. They faked deaths, deviations from Victorian norms that encompassed deception and dual personas. Ann Douglas highlights that Alcott did not merely imitate British writers but brought something innovative to the genre: Though she owed much to her English contemporaries, she developed the genre in her distinctive way (Cited in Keyser, 1993, p. 61). Alcott explored the criminal mindset while examining and exposing it, diverging from the intricate details that captivated other authors. In her view, emotional deception, manipulation, and roleplaying are the keys to a woman's upheaval in society, which was somehow and disturbingly attributed to females at the time (Keyser, 1993, p. 62).

The sensation novels were unique because they were "by women, about women and from the standpoint of women" (Pykett, 1992, p. 5). Especially the villains of the two novels, Jean and Lydia, are the point of interest in this study. Alcott created Jean, and she fits into the depiction of Pykett above. Jean is a social outcast in Victorian society. However, Lydia Gwilt is a unique creation, a beautiful lady of a suspicious background. She uses her looks to influence men and is very ambitious. Her immorality results from her treatment as a child and adult. A feminist reading of *Behind A Mask* is possible; more than that, it is the primary function of the story. Jean Fagan Yellin's article "From Success to Experience: Louisa May Alcott's Work" reaffirms Alcott's feminist views and her personal and literary interaction with feminism (1986, pp. 527-39). From this viewpoint, Alcott created a world in which females are the inferior gender. Moreover, Jean is of the lower class by birth, and her acting job is a profession overlooked at the time. The male members of the Coventry family only show their respect and interest after Jean presents herself as a daughter of a noble family. Therefore, class differences are also present in the novel. According to Sarah Elbert, Alcott elaborated on the common and ethical issues linked to the relationships between the sexes (1984, p. 102). Similarly, Alcott's characterizations, themes, and literary sources for her sensational story are unique and well-managed (Stern, 1995, p. xi).

The sensation novel focused on the tension concerning the "actual female experience and the domestic, private, angelic feminine ideal 'the angel in the house'" (Pykett, 1992, p. 32). The women characters in sensational novels were central, and they were "neither passive nor angelic nor femme fatale; they were 'assertive (bad), transgressive (mad) or a creature of passion (dangerous)" (Pykett, 1994, p. 7). In this perspective, one of the differences between Collins's and Alcott's attitudes towards women characters is that Alcott tries to establish that women are forced to provide their own security, which may sometimes push the limits. Women are pressured and look for other ways to ensure their economic and social well-being. However, Collins's treatment of women is rather harsh. It is the woman who chooses to become a villain. One reason for this difference is Alcott's experiences in her private life. She had economic problems and worked as a governess to survive. Moreover, she was writing under pseudonyms to make a living. This implies that her villain, Jean, carries some autobiographical elements of Alcott's professional career. While Collins's women do evil with choices, Alcott's characters see their actions as necessary, not evil. Ambition and

seductiveness are reasonable mischiefs, according to Alcott. It was hard for women to claim high societal positions within the laws and natural ways, so they tried to get it through the little games they played. Jean is an example of such a woman: forced to ensure her security by using her role-play skills and beauty. She expresses in the novel her unwillingness to marry, her entrapment in marriage, and her obligation to marry (Alcott, 2004, p. 47). Interestingly, a critic states that Jean Muir is perhaps the heroine most aligned with Alcott's imagination and explores how anger could be the ultimate source of a woman's strength (Carpenter, 1986, p. 39). Moreover, Judith Fetterley claims Alcott's *Behind A Mask* is radical. Its villain, Jean Muir, is an introduction or pre-production to the female characters in her most famous novel, *Little Women* (1983, pp. 1-2). One of the main aims of sensation heroines is to gain security through wealth and prosperity. As a result of society's traditions and lack of education, women were delicate, and they wanted to marry and get financial and social security. They could not work in every job, so finding a suitable job every time was impossible.

A similarity between the two novels is the depiction of their villain-heroines. Jean Muir and Lydia Gwilt are similar to each other both in physical and psychological terms. They both look young, but they are in their thirties. They seduce men to get to their ends; they are after marriage, which will secure them and their position in society. They are also both victimizers of men. Jean is after revenge and marriage to the family's father, while Lydia becomes a murderer. They are both fortune hunters and manipulate men after each other. In *Armadale*, Collins deploys what Sigmund Freud described as "narcissistic identification as a way of writing into being the primary affective bond between his two male protagonists" (Taylor, 2006, p. 115). In this way, Lydia Gwilt secures her bond with the males and tries to apply her evil quests. At first glance, Collins appears to be an unlikely advocate for fostering a more compassionate understanding of women's societal roles, especially when considering the creation of female villains in his works alongside those of Alcott. According to some recent analyses, "he enjoyed a hedonistic bachelor lifestyle, a good deal of which revolved around the male-dominated world of London's club-land. He could be contradictory in his views of women's roles, ambitions, and responsibilities – at times radical, at others reactionary" (Law & Maunder, 2008, p. 83). The primary concern with *Armadale* is not the portrayal of Miss Gwilt as excessively sinful. Instead, the question raised is the value and nature of the depiction itself and what the resulting picture represents once it is fully presented. This statement proves that the contemporary literary scene was not interested in the fact that the authors unjustly portrayed women as evil. Nevertheless, according to Virginia Morris (1990, p. 105), Collins depicts criminal actions by women as a form of rebellion against domestic violence. By portraying female characters as "intelligent, normal, and rational" instead of being perceived as simple-minded, deviant, or depraved, Collins challenges traditional Victorian gender roles. Additionally, he undermines established and acceptable motives for murder in Victorian fiction.

A difference between Alcott and Collins is the treatment of the upper classes in their novels. Alcott's Jean is rebellious against the ruling class in society. She shows her feelings and disgust whenever possible, but in disguise and with caution. She does not like the Coventry family and their attitude towards herself and other servants, governesses, and workers. In some of her letters in the

novel, she says that the Coventry family is rude towards her and that they are cold and prideful. Moreover, she accuses the family of patronizing (Alcott, 2004, p. 40). While Collins's villain does not show her emotions, her actions are themselves a rebellion against these parts of society. According to Frick, Collins's villains were "fallen angels" whose deeds are justified but punished as accustomed in Victorian society (1984, p. 343). Marriage was an essential institution in Victorian society, and both Alcott and Collins's novels argue that marriage is strictly tied to financial constraints and status. The female characters in the stories are after marriage for financial relaxation and social roles. They know that women are supposed to marry and raise children for the family. Marriage was a natural result and career prospect for Victorian women. It was also an economic necessity because women were not employed enough at the time. Marriage, in *Armadale* and *Behind A Mask*, is both an escape from loneliness and family life, and earning a secure financial status. Unmarried women were doomed to live by themselves or with their families. Jean and Lydia escape this end with marriage.

In sensation novels, the transgressive nature of self-assertive heroines challenged the conventional portrayal of women; sensation heroines were "criminals, madwomen, and domestic fiends" (Pykett, 1992, p. 9). In Collins's *Armadale* and Alcott's *Behind A Mask*, the male characters are simultaneously portrayed as victims and victimizers. They are victimizers because they see women as objects to conquer and desire them for their physical beauty or wealth. They are victims because women trick them into marriage, or they are deceived by the woman they love. Moreover, the code of dress in the Victorian period forced women to be physically beautiful. Their beauty and dresses judged them. This was an exploitation of the nature of women; therefore, young women were forced into such conditions and situations, and they became the target of abusive men. In *Behind A Mask*, male characters like Gerald, Ned, and Edward are mainly the victims. Jean establishes fake relationships with others, and they are fooled at the end.

In terms of style and genre, the sensation novels were multi-layered. The writers of this genre combined dominant female forms of the early nineteenth century: female gothic, melodrama, and domestic realism (Pykett, 1992, p. 6). In *Armadale*, the Gothic settings, isles, abandoned ships, and manors, the style of both epistolary and omniscient narrators, the melodramatic death of Lydia and others' reactions, and the social realism inside the book prove that the novel is a combination of these forms. Moreover, we can say that the mystery-solving in the story also provides us with thriller and detective elements. According to Peter Thoms, in *Armadale*, Collins prompts his readers to reconsider social connections and their impact on individuals. Upon making unsettling discoveries, the protagonists are compelled to reassess the foundations of their lives, recognizing them as deceptive and confining (1992, p. 15). Consequently, the characters strive to redefine themselves. Rejecting the previous societal norms, they grapple with establishing a fresh personal identity grounded in heroic principles such as duty, truth, and love.

Despite being in remotely distinct cultural circumstances, Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir's characters and stories are remarkably similar. Both characters display dominant agency and ambition, qualities considered unsuitable for women in Victorian culture. The limits and hypocrisies of the "heavenly family" and "angelic women" ideal are shown by their exploitation of patriarchal

systems, which also emphasize the double standards that control gender stereotypes and interactions. Their story resolutions represent one of the main distinctions between the two. Jean triumphs, but Lydia suffers a terrible demise, giving in to sorrow and remorse. The writers' different methods for challenging social norms are reflected in this inconsistency. The limitations of Victorian moral standards may be reflected in Collins's choice to punish Lydia, but Alcott's more progressive viewpoint enables her protagonist to triumph in defying expectations. When taken as a whole, these depictions provide a sophisticated examination of female villainy as a reaction to and critique of patriarchal tyranny.

Sensation novels and the female villains mirror the change in the perception of gender roles in society in Victorian culture and novel tradition. Evil is the opposite of angels, and the figures of Jean and Lydia portray two distinct features of the evil acts in fiction. They embody the vices of evil by their acts and in the disguise of angelic virtues. Victorian womanhood is challenged by these two. Collins and Alcott present us with two female characters who violate the norms of contemporary writing traditions and introduce them as sneaky ones that terrify the readers the most. The family was under attack by such figures, which also triggered scandals and reader interest in those books. Their experiences highlight the psychological costs of these expectations and the fortitude and resourcefulness needed to defy them. By doing this, Collins and Alcott add to a larger conversation about gender inequality that is still relevant in today's debates over feminism and literary representation.

Through literary depictions of female villains, Louisa May Alcott's *Behind A Mask* and Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* provide powerful criticisms of Victorian conceptions of femininity. The scandalous portrayals of Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir act as disruptive individuals who challenge and trespass on the social and moral norms of their day. This article has demonstrated how these people challenge the repressive ideals of the family and provide insight into the complicated relationships between gender and power in the 19th century by analyzing their stories, motives, and consequences. Collins and Alcott reveal the hypocrisies of a culture that exalted women while depriving them of agency and autonomy through their nuanced depictions of feminine villainy. Their writings remain important as timeless critiques of the limitations of gendered expectations and literary masterpieces. Thus, readers are prompted to reevaluate the limits of morality, agency, and identity by Lydia Gwilt and Jean Muir, who remain timeless representations of the struggle against patriarchal domination.

## CONCLUSION

The female villains in sensation novels served as effective critiques of women's limits by defying traditional norms. Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866) and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind A Mask* (1866) are essential works that challenge the Victorian ideal of women by depicting female adversaries who control, lie, and dominate their surroundings unexpectedly for Victorian readers. In sensation novels, the unconventional and assertive nature of the heroines challenged the traditional portrayal of women. These heroines were portrayed as criminals, madwomen, and domestic villains, starkly contrasting the Victorian societal ideal of the angelic woman.

Consequently, the foundational element of the family, the woman, was depicted as malevolent, posing a threat to the stability of Victorian society.

In conclusion, as well as other literary products, these two writers produced sensational stories in which the customs and traditional moral views were turned upside down. In writing such stories, Alcott aimed to emphasize women's societal problems, while Collins saw the novels' themes as usual and as a way of producing literary works. The women they created were the opposite of Victorian society's portrayal of the angelic woman. The Victorian era in English culture is renowned for emphasizing familial happiness and idealizing women as angels in the home. Family life was considered a source of solace and a reflection of earthly heavenly bliss. The challenges faced by family members during the day were forgotten within the confines of home. This idealized vision of the family was prominently depicted in literature, especially in novels from the early Victorian era. These novels deviated from the conventional portrayal of angelic women in the house, introducing plots filled with intrigues, murders, poisonings, and other forms of evil within society. The fears and aspirations of the middle class were explored in these novels, drawing inspiration from ongoing social changes and sensational court cases that exposed the darker aspects of the seemingly idyllic Victorian family. *Armadale* and *Behind A Mask* depict villains, their writing style, and their stance on corruption within Victorian families, marriages, and class issues.

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