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Dismantling Gender Roles and Redefining Womanhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract

Jo March is a feminist icon. But, while her feminism may not resemble that of the modern day, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women offers a thoughtful inspection of the female struggle to redefine womanhood and gain financial independence in a world of men. The beginning of this paper will compare Jo March to her sisters, Meg and Beth, and her mother, Marmee, who all offer Jo potential, and undesirable, routes into womanhood. This paper will also use Jo's affinity towards masculine traits in childhood to prove that it is Jo's blending of both the feminine and the masculine that propel her writing career forward and ultimately win her the financial independence she craves. Furthermore, some believe that there is a discrepancy between Jo's character and her ending. This paper will demonstrate that Alcott's amended ending of Little Women further exemplifies the constraints that Victorian women suffered, and that Jo's marriage reveals a harsh reality that many women were forced into marriages. Additionally, this paper reminds readers that both Jo and Alcott's stories advance feminist discourse.

1. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's Jo March, in her novel *Little Women*, is a model for dismantling the narrow barriers between masculinity and femininity. She teaches young girls—and adult women—that being masculine or valuing masculine traits, such

as ambition and financial independence, does not prohibit a woman's potential for happiness and success in life. Jo, within the confines of this section of *Little Women* provided by the *Anthology of American Literature*, resists conforming to the gender norms of her time, and achieves success outside of the feminine sphere. Jo's tomboy mannerisms empower her to challenge the compulsory social norms by which women must abide. Within the world of *Little Women*, Alcott equips readers with the prescribed notions of femininity within Meg March, Jo's oldest sister, who also provides Jo a glimpse into her future if she concedes to a traditional female role. Additionally, Alcott imparts upon Jo two unobtainable versions of womanhood, one through her sister, Beth, who dies before maturing and the other through her mother, Marmee, who displays the consequences of relying on a man. Alcott's character Jo broadens the meaning of femininity and encourages a more diverse definition of what it means to be a woman. Through this newfound womanhood, Jo finds the freedom, independence and success that is barred to the conventional woman. To evade the limitations that she fears come with traditional womanhood, Jo relies on attributes usually reserved for men. Once Jo indulges in her natural proclivity for tomboy ways, it is through her writing that she gains the financial independence necessary to redefine what it means to be a woman. Alcott's blending of femininity and masculinity within Jo March critiques the stiff gender roles of antebellum America that cultivated acquiescent woman-

hood, equips Jo with the masculine attributes necessary to redefine womanhood and gain independence, all while mirroring Alcott's own journey to success as a female writer in the nineteenth century.

2. Confronting Traditional Womanhood

Of all the March sisters, Meg and Jo are the most diametrically opposed because they sit as separate poles of femininity. Alcott uses Meg as an example of strict femininity. Through Meg's criticism of Jo's constant displays of masculinity, Alcott aligns Meg as the correct and respectable version of young womanhood and forces Jo to inhabit the opposite. Nicole Maruo-Schröder expresses, in her paper, "Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868)," that "men were supposed to be active and aggressive, managing the harsh world of politics and the marketplace, while women 'ruled,' submissively and tenderly, at home" (401-02). This strict separation between masculine and feminine spheres forces Meg and Jo to choose one realm over the other. Alcott describes Meg as "very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain" (Alcott 2004). She values her beauty and possessing feminine qualities, both of which present her as a good match for a future husband. Meg is the prototypical 'little woman,' representing women who strictly adhere to society's depictions of how to correctly be a woman. Jo, contrarily, has "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and [did not] like it" (Alcott 2004). Jo embraces masculine manners that separate her from her sisters and utilizes these mannerisms to resist suffocating forms of femininity. While Meg slides into her feminine position easily, Jo refuses to relinquish her masculine traits. Mauro-Schröder claims that the distinction between male and female roles "restrict[s] women to responsibilities associated with the private sphere" and is "used by women in a number of ways to

question the strict separation of spheres" (402). Jo herself questions these divisions, and by refusing to adhere to Meg's version of femininity, Jo pries open the door between femininity and masculinity. According to Kristen Proehl, author of "Sympathetic Jo: Tomboyism, Poverty, and Race in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," "Jo subverts gender norms...primarily through 'boyish' clothing, outdoor activity, aggressive outbursts, and even physical violence" (107). As a child, Jo's actions are typical of those of young boys and foreshadow her inclination towards a more masculine trajectory in life. In one instance, Jo "put[s] her hands in her pockets, and [beings] to whistle" which prompts a scolding from Meg (Alcott 2003). Meg asserts that Jo is being "boyish" and a "rude, unladylike" girl (Alcott 2003). Meg synonymizes this 'rude' behavior with being 'unladylike' and further enforces that there is a certain way that girls should act, and that Jo violates this sacred code. Meg recognizes that her adherence to feminine ideals may provide her with a comfortable life, should she attract a wealthy, respectable man. Jo defies the rules of femininity in girlhood because she fears that her childhood freedom will end with her eventual transition into womanhood. Unlike Meg, who wishes to marry a man who can provide for her, Jo wishes to be, metaphorically, that man.

Alcott provides Jo with an additional representation of the perfect woman in the form of her younger sister, Beth, who demonstrates ideal feminine traits and an unobtainable femininity. In her article, "Gender Stereotyping in *Little Women*: 'Let Us Be Elegant or Die,'" Clare Bender argues that "Alcott uses Beth's death to symbolize the death of the ideal woman" (141). Within the excerpt of Alcott's novel, Beth's death demonstrates the restricting and impossible goal of the nineteenth-century womanhood. Having been selfless in life, it is only fitting that Beth remain so in death. In her death bed, "cherished like a household saint in its shrine, sat Beth, tranquil and busy as ever" because "one of her pleasures

was to make little things for the school children daily passing to and fro” (2030). Beth’s tranquility and selflessness represent an ideal of womanhood that is unobtainable to Jo, who is impatient and more self-centered than Beth. By situating not only Meg, but Beth as preferred versions of womanhood, Alcott provides Jo with two foils that show the progression from Meg’s acceptable womanhood to Beth’s. Where Meg is the archetypal woman of the time, Beth is the unattainable ideal that occurs when a woman not only displays the correct form of feminist but internalizes the virtues to which women must aspire. While Meg is beautiful, but vain, Beth is entirely selfless. Not even death “could change the sweet, unselfish nature” of Beth, who, “even while preparing to leave life...tired to make it happier for those who should remain behind” (2030). Beth is entirely composed of characteristics that women of the nineteenth century should possess. Beth gives herself completely over to others, which Bender cites as the reason for her death. “Both Meg and Jo fail to follow Marmee’s instructions to assist the Hummels,” explains Bender, “leaving Beth to help them by herself, and thus she contracts and eventually dies of complications of scarlet fever” (146). Despite being the perfect example of femininity by society’s standards, Meg also fails this pivotal test of womanhood. Alcott uses Beth not only to reveal the superficial morals of her society’s preferred form of womanhood, but to also prove that the perfect woman is an impossibility. Jo “recognized the beauty of her sister’s life—uneventful, unambitious, yet full of genuine virtues” which contrasts sharply with the life Jo wishes to live (Alcott 2031). While Alcott emphasizes that Jo desires the opposite of these traits, she also underscores that the corresponding masculine traits—active and ambitions—are not inherently virtuous. Through Beth’s death, Alcott reveals that possessing only masculine traits detracts from the humility and selflessness encouraged within women. Thus, Jo blends her masculine ambition with her feminine altruism to not

only find individual success, but to aid her family. Beth performs the ideal womanhood which, solidified by her death, remains otherworldly and unobtainable to Jo. Jo may admire Beth’s virtues, but she also recognizes that this route is not tangible for Jo, or other women who exhibit traits outside of the allotted range of femininity.

Jo’s mother, Marmee, also demonstrates a feminine ideal for Jo, but Alcott distorts this ideal with the burdens of having fulfilled traditional womanhood with a man who is unable to fulfill his own role. As Anne K. Phillips asserts in her paper “Biography of Louisa May Alcott: Delineating Fiction from Memoir in *Little Women*,” “Alcott’s parents inspired.... Mrs. and Mr. March” (21). Alcott synthesizes her own life lessons into her novel, including those she has learned from her own mother. Abigail May Alcott, or Abba, “was a reformer who strived throughout her life to help others, as Marmee delivers aid to the Hummel and others in *Little Women*” (Phillips 21). Like Marmee, Abigail prioritizes selflessness and frugality because her husband could not financially support the family. Although the family received help from relatives, Phillips recounts that “Abba and her daughters, more than the March women, struggled to stay solvent” (22). Both Marmee and Abba represent the limited financial protection afforded to women who must rely on marriage. Alcott emphasizes that Marmee’s financial situation is a direct result of her husband’s lack of financial competence. When Marmee is first introduced, Alcott describes her as “not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman” whose “gray cloak and unfashionable bonnet” disguises “the most splendid mother in the world” (2006). The clothing Marmee wears displays the March’s class status, which offers a sharp contrast to the materialistic complaints of the March sisters over insufficient Christmas presents. This implies that the Marches had been wealthy but have since declined into the middle class due to their father’s failure to provide for his wife and family. While their father is away at war, it is Marmee who must listen to

the complaints of her children and keep the family financially secure. Although Mr. March enlists the girls to help levitate Marmee's burden, asserting that "they will be loving children to you" and "will do their duty faithfully," his efforts fall short at fulfilling the masculine role of provider (2007). Initially, Marmee fulfills her role as a woman and marries well. But her potential for a life of comfort, a reward for adhering to gender roles, is revoked because of her reliance on a man. Alcott uses the March women's predicament to show how traditional marriage exposes women to the burdens of their husbands. Marmee is left to satisfy the roles of mother, father, and provider. Upon realizing Marmee's burden, Jo professes that she will bypass this version of womanhood and strive for financial independence, a status only permitted to men.

3. Blending the Feminine with the Masculine

Due to Jo's limited exposure to so few types of womanhood and femininity, she realizes that she does not fit these ideals and begins to despise them. Jo does not yet see herself as a 'little woman,' and because she links adulthood with strong femininity, doubts that she will ever progress into womanhood. When Meg scolds Jo and asserts that she is "old enough to leave off boyish tricks," she reinforces the relationship between maturity and femininity (Alcott 2003). Meg represents Jo's potential future, reminding her of the desired outcome of young womanhood and cultivating Jo's defiance of that outcome. Meg believes that Jo's tomboy ways are a phase to be discarded once she matures and thus forces the strict gender binary onto her sister. In nineteenth-century society, women are only allowed to display the corresponding traits of femininity, such as beauty, self-sacrifice, and contentment, and thus Meg warns Jo that to be a woman is to discard her affinity for masculine attributes. Shawna McDermott, in her paper "The Tomboy Tradition: Taming Adolescent Ambition from 1869 to 2018," ex-

plains that "the tomboy's gender defiance is acceptable to society as long as she is culturally and biologically understood as a child" (135). To the outside world, Jo's refusal to relinquish her 'tomboy ways' equate to her lack of maturity. So long as Jo is a child, her desire to perform masculine qualities is ignored as a small hindrance rather than a defiance towards the structure of society. Meg discloses that Jo "should remember that [she is] a young lady," which prompts Jo to redefine what it means to be a 'little woman' (Alcott 2003). Jo exclaims to Meg that she is "not" a young lady and that "if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty" (Alcott 2003). Jo internalizes an unhealthy relationship between femininity and adulthood and, instead of surrendering her childlike masculinity as Victorian society would prefer, decides to forfeit a traditional womanhood.

Although Victorian society forces young girls to become more feminine with age if they are to be accepted, masculinity becomes attractive to girls like Jo who desire the privileges it provides. McDermott confesses that once Jo matures, "American culture requires the tomboy to leave her queer aspects behind and grow into heteronormative femininity" (135). A woman's maturity is calculated by how well she can confine herself to the role predestined for her. Jo understands this limitation, exclaiming that she "hates to think [she has] got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster" (Alcott 2003). Jo does not despise her inevitable maturity, but rather loathes aspects of conventional womanhood such as women's fashion and the dainty demeanor assigned to proper women. In her paper, "Inheriting Traditional Roles of American Female Growth: From Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* to Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*," Marta Miquel Baldellou affirms that Jo "feels reluctant to grow up female, since the values and traits that characterise proper ladies are precisely those that she despises" (Baldellou 131). Because Jo despises the limitations of woman-

hood, Jo demonstrates her resistance by performing her masculinity through her tomboyish tendencies. Meg represents Jo's fears about femininity, more specifically the idea of marriage and leaving one's family. Mauro-Schröder reasons that Jo "fears the gender-specific limitations that come with growing up, particularly the prospect of marriage" (406). Jo proclaims that she detests "the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away" and thus disapproves of the limits marriage impose on women (Alcott 2021). She views Meg's eventual marriage as her abandonment of the family, which Jo values most in the world. This domineering form of womanhood, and the prospect of leaving her family, are the primary reasons why Jo refuses to grow up. Alcott's expresses Jo's independent nature through allusion. Laurie refers to Jo as, "his Atlanta," who "came panting up with flying hair, bright eyes, ruddy cheeks, and no signs of dissatisfaction" (Alcott 2021). Through her use of Atlanta as a descriptor for Jo, Alcott defines the relationship between Jo and Laurie. Jo is Atlanta, a goddess who would dismiss any suitor who failed to outrun her. Similarly, Jo refuses to marry because she believes that marrying a man would diminish her independence. Alcott insinuates that if Jo were to marry someone, they would have to be her equal, an impossibility should any man force marriage upon her. Thus, Jo transfigures her childish, masculine characteristics into adult ambition and autonomy, using her talent for writing to escape the confinement of womanhood and marriage and gain independence.

Through her masculinity, Jo explores the limits of both femininity and masculinity, and examines what it means to be a little woman who longs to be a 'boy.' The pervading notion that women are unequal to men because they act and think differently than their male counterparts encourages Jo to continue her childhood masculinity into adulthood. As Mauro-Schröder highlights, "Jo is the one character in the novel who most consistently questions gender roles and norms," and in doing so, "she draws attention to the restric-

tions that surrounded women in Victorian America" (406). Even as a child, Jo understands that her interests are discouraged ignored for the sole reason that she is a girl. "It's bad enough to be a girl," she exclaims, "when I like boys' games and work and manners!" (Alcott 2003). Jo assigns her dissatisfaction with being a girl to society's treatment of women. Jo unfortunately blames her own gender for the hinderances created and sustained by the patriarchal society. She also highlights her own internal struggle to accept her gender. She tells Meg that she "[cannot] get over [her] disappointment in not being a boy" because she recognizes the freedoms men enjoy (Alcott 2003). Jo witnesses the limitations that her gender is subjected to early in life and works to eliminate these restrictions on herself. When the girl's father goes off to war, Jo asserts that she is "the man of the family now" and that she will "provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone" (Alcott 2005). Jo refers to herself as "the man of the family" because, until now, only men have fulfilled this role. While she does mourn her father's absence, Jo enjoys performing her masculinity uninhibited by the presence of an actual man. Mauro-Schröder affirms that Jo "lives happily in a world of women, in which she can take over traditionally 'masculine' roles" (407). Living without their father exposes Jo to the potential independence she can gain in adulthood, if she denies her feminine side. To achieve this independence, Jo acknowledges that she can make money through her writing, a privilege prohibited to many women.

4. A Woman's Quest for Financial Independence

As a child, Jo aspires to overcome the limitations of womanhood and believes that her writing is the solution to obtaining financial, and thus physical, independence. Along with her desire to fulfill masculine roles within society, Jo aspires "to be independent," a privilege only re-

warded to men (Alcott 2024). Due to the enforcement of strict gender roles, Jo equates independence and financial stability with masculinity. Baldellou explains that the March sisters' "path towards adulthood" lacks "independence and liberty" (130). For the girls to enter womanhood, they are required to shed the independence that they are allowed as children. Baldellou also claims that "they never really grow up, they just merely grow up female and so they always remain *Little Women*" (130). Jo's womanhood is stunted before she matures. In a society where "values such as independence and freedom [are] associated with youth," gendered traits such as "submissiveness and confinement in the domestic household are signs of" womanhood (Baldellou 130). It is Jo's writing that provides her the freedom to overcome, albeit temporarily, this predetermined path towards womanhood. When Jo first publishes her work, she does not receive payment but the confirmation that her work is worthy of praise excites her. Jo asserts that she is "'so happy, for in time [she] may be able to support [herself] and help out the girls'" (Alcott 2023). Jo's passion for writing furnishes her happiness in life and the potential to make money from her publications proves that the life she desires, one where she can afford to remain unmarried and support her family, is obtainable. As Mauro-Schröder states "in addition to being an outlet for her own creativity and passion, literature becomes important as a means to independence" (406). Jo knows that she can make money from her writing and thus support herself in a way that would usually require a man's help. "For Jo writing means self-realization and is," according to Mauro-Schröder, "an escape from the social restrictions that come with her role as a young woman" (406). Jo's writing provides her control over her life that is absent from traditional womanhood. Because she chooses to retain her masculine traits in adulthood, Jo fulfills her wish to financially support her family and escapes her childhood fears that with womanhood comes dissatisfaction. She "claims the role of

provider," explains Mauro-Schröder, "substituting her father on a number of occasions with money coming from her publications" (406). Jo realizes that her preference for masculine traits does not ruin her prospects in life as she has been previously led to believe. Jo desires "to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved," which are "the dearest wishes of her heart" (Alcott 2024). This emphasizes that Jo equates success in life to happiness and love. She understands that performing the masculine tasks of work and publishing her writing offers her "the first step toward that happy end" (Alcott 2024). Jo defies the binary. While using her masculinity to earn an entrance into the male sphere and gain independence, Jo also respects the feminine ideal of service to family.

Alcott utilizes class and wealth to explain Jo's inclination for financial independence and reveal what is at stake for husbandless women in Victorian America. Stephanie Foot outlines in her paper "Resentful 'Little Women': Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott" that "the March girls...are confronted and addressed by the dense social and economic world of their surrounding community" (67). Their community is made up of the rich Lawrences, who financially aid the Marchs, and of the poor Hummels, who, to survive, must rely on the Marchs. While the Lawrences remind the Marchs of the wealth they lost due to their father's inability to care for them, the Hummels' situation warns the girls of what is to come should they remain unwed. Alcott's contrasting descriptions of the opposing versions of Christmastime for the Marchs and the Hummels emphasizes the wealth disparity between the two families. Alcott describes the Marchs' living room as "a comfortable old room...books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and the pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it" (2004). In contrast, the Hummels are starving in a "poor, bare miserable room... with broken windows, no fire, ragged bed-clothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children huddled

dled under one quilt trying to keep warm” (Alcott 2012). Their family homes illustrate that they belong to vastly different social and economic classes. While one family lounges in comfort in a beautifully decorated room full of love and peace, the other huddles together in a dilapidated one-room house that is cold and uninviting. As Foote explains, the Marchs’ “contact with the greater world emphasizes their material poverty...that provoke them to feel a sort of objectless resentment intimately related to their gender but also to their somewhat uncertain class status” (65-66). Although Victorian America offers marriage as the solution to class uncertainty, Alcott’s descriptions highlight that marriage is not always a permanent solution. Within the novel, marriage is proven to be unsubstantial by both the Hummels’ situation and that of the Marchs’, who both lack capable, male providers. Alcott reveals the almost capricious nature of marriage and the risks of relying on a man to provide. Although Jo’s desire to be the man of the house is formed in childhood, it is shaped by the very real fear of poverty. Out of necessity, the fear propels Jo to work to secure her own security and that of her family’s.

Jo March represents girls and women who refuse to adhere to the restraining gender standards forced upon women and who vow to deliver themselves from the tragic fates of submission or destitution. She is also a prime example for the longstanding tomboy figure in literature. McDermott recognizes the “long tradition in American texts...of self-willed, passionate, often deeply earnest girl characters whose aspirations go beyond the roles prescribed them by their societies’ conceptions of gender” (McDermott 134). This tradition reveals that women like Jo exist and have existed for centuries. Tomboy characters long to surpass the gender barrier and accomplish great successes, proving the immeasurable potential women possess. As *Little Women* illustrates, maturing as a woman means “transition[ing] from relative childhood freedom to the ever more restricted world of female adulthood”

(Mauro-Schröder 410). The patriarchal society Jo lives in restrains women by reducing their rights. Their fear of losing their financial security by not marrying keeps women in submissive and vulnerable positions. Stories like Jo’s awaken in women their potential to become equal with men in intelligence and determination. Not only are women burdened by the misogynistic depictions of their gender, but they also must deal with being considered lesser than to men. Women like Jo, who realize that their status in life is crafted by men, have twice as many obstacles to conquer. Women who “[feel] as a tomboy feels [and] desires as a tomboy desires” must “[take] action frequently coded as ‘masculine’ to fulfill those desires” (McDermott 136). Women who aspire to do more or be more are forced to relinquish their femininity—whether they want to or not—to fulfill their desires. Subjecting women to the gender binary and forcing them to choose masculinity or femininity reinforces the notion that women who occupy a spectrum of traits must conform and lose a part of themselves to succeed in society. Jo’s story both highlights this unfortunate conformity into masculinity while creating a character who remains loyal to family.

5. A Realistic to Feminism

Although Jo represents the unconventional woman through her tomboy tendencies, her ending offers the sad realization that most women—awakened to the truth or otherwise—succumb to the conveniences that married, accommodating women enjoy. McDermott explains that literature has a “long tradition of taming [tomboy] girls into more culturally appropriate versions of femininity” (McDermott 134). Alcott’s revised ending is a perfect example of this. The taming of unconventional women reinforces the idea that a defiant woman will eventually fail. McDermott observes that “[t]ime and time again, authors choose to give their tomboys dreams beyond what their gender will allow, and then they shatter those

dreams” (138). The pattern discourages young girls and questioning women who feel justified by these tomboy characters. As a way of pushing the boundaries within the predestined society structure, Alcott allows her Jo character to experience success before she is married. Jo receives admiration and payment for her writing but must marry to please nineteenth-century publishing standards. Alcott’s ending accentuates the limitations female authors must endure. McDermott divulges that female writers who provide a voice for the suppressed must also “demonstrate that [tomboy ambitions] were not the correct ambitions” in order to please the men outside of the narrative (McDermott 138). These endings convince young girls that their desire for freedom “should be replaced with the joys and benefits of traditional womanhood” and that they cannot afford to lose the few rights they possess (McDermott 138). While Alcott’s *Little Women* does employ feminist ideas, it must do so in a way that is palatable to the larger audience in a male dominated world. According to McDermott, literature interprets that the aspiration of the untamed tomboy is “impossible, an enigma, an oxymoron, not to be realized” (138). While her ending is considered stifling to a feminist audience, Jo’s story is worth more than its ending and proves that women who enjoy masculine coded traits are valid. Jo’s examination of her status as a woman has opened the door for women to question their own statuses, and to reclaim control over their own fate, even if this control must be within the confines of the patriarchy.

Jo March’s proclivity towards masculine traits conflicts with her amended storyline ending, illustrating the contradictory ideology of Alcott’s feminism in the novel. While Jo offers a striking deviation from the traditional womanhood of the time, Alcott’s altered ending is criticized for curtailing its original feminist ideals. In her article “The Conflicted Feminism of *Little Women*,” Janey Tracy argues that Alcott’s “ambitious, independent tomboy Jo” and “her notable resistance to the conventional ‘marriage plot’ of her time, have

afforded the novel a long-lasting, if conflicted, relationship to feminist thought.” Jo March’s aversion to traditionally feminine activities, such as marriage and children, paint her as the perfect disrupter of nineteenth-century society. Additionally, her ambition to be a writer and desire to provide for her family exemplify Alcott’s theme that there is no one right way to progress into womanhood. As Tracy asserts, “[i]f *Little Women* has a rebellious, feminist spirit, it’s contained in the character of Jo March,” which, while providing a rich role model for young girls, also demonstrates the limitations women endure. *Little Women* emphasizes female independence and ambition but must do so within nineteenth-century societal standards. Alcott herself received criticism for her rejection of marriage and “wrote a sequel...which shows all of the girls meeting more conventional, domestic fates” (Tracy). Alcott’s frustration with marriage within her novel mirrors her frustration in real life, thus it is only fitting that, like in real life, women are limited in the amount of control they can have over their lives. As Tracy explains, “Alcott didn’t want to marry Jo off at all. But, since her hand was forced, she did so in the most unconventional way possible.” Although Jo’s marriage to the older professor Friedrich Bhaer is not within the exert being analyzed, his confirmation as Jo’s love interest solidifies that even within literature, women must follow strict, patriarchal rules. Alcott uses this censor to her advantage, asserts Tracy, and denies readers the traditional love story between Jo and Laurie and instead has Jo choose “Bhaer, an open-minded professor with whom she has a profound intellectual connection.” Because traditional marriages represent the ultimate accomplishment for women in the nineteenth century, women are not encouraged to pursue success outside of married. Jo’s marriage to Bhaer not only rejects the idea that women cannot be intellectually stimulated in marriage, but also rejects the love-match ideology of literature at the time. Alcott’s resourcefulness allows Jo “to carve out a space for strong, independent women within the already-established

patriarchal structures” (Tracey). Although *Little Women* is criticized for not being feminist enough, it offered its original readers a more practical and period reflective form of feminism that feel limited to modern readers.

6. *Little Women*: A Memoir?

Jo March’s literary journey to womanhood mirrors that of Louisa May Alcott’s, authenticating that Jo, although fictional, reflects a deeper truth about nineteenth-century women. Although *Little Women* is not a memoir, Alcott’s life experiences influence the plot and characters in the novel, most importantly the character of Jo. Phillips states that, “[w]hile it should be recognized as constructed fiction...autobiographical elements certainly add to the authenticity, vivid characterizations, and compelling themes of *Little Women*,” such as Alcott’s role as provider for her family and her resistance to marriage (19). According to Phillips, the Alcott family inspired the dynamic of the Marches and Alcott modeled Jo off herself. The *Little Women* of the novel learn lessons about self-reliance and selflessness that the Alcott sisters learned themselves. Phillips asserts that “the strains of self-denial and sacrifice” in the novel “stem from the deprivations the Alcott’s endured” (23). Because Alcott’s father “was philosophically opposed to acknowledging financial obligations,” the Alcott sisters and their mother had to support themselves (Phillips 21). Alcott’s experiences with poverty not only shape the class dialogue within the novel but motivate her belief in financial responsibility and independence. After Jo gets a job as a teacher, Jo experiences financial stability and “tak[es] great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny” (2027). It is not marriage that supplies Jo with the joy of financial independence, but her intelligence and passion for writing. Like her original ending for Jo, “Louisa never married” (Phillips 20). Jo’s achievements were meant to be entirely her own,

detached from any man. Jo states that she “only wrote [her story] for the pleasure and the money” because she recognizes that through her writing, she can be independent from the limitations of traditional womanhood and delay marriage (Alcott 2029). Like Jo, Alcott’s “success of *Little Women* provided for her family and established her as a popular and enduring American writer” (Phillips 24). Alcott understood that writing meant self-determination in a society where women could not own property or work traditional, well-paying jobs. Writing also afforded her a legacy and security to continue to do the work she loves, a gift that Alcott wanted Jo to experience as well. While Jo’s marriage remains controversial, Alcott did live the life she had meant for Jo. It is her life story that continues to inspire generations long after the book is closed.

7. Conclusion: A Lesson for all Ages

Little Women portrays a rich coming-of-age story of four young girls and offers a realistic perspective on “what it means to become a ‘proper’ woman in Victorian America” (Mauro-Schröder 411). Meg’s beauty, Beth’s humanity, and Jo’s ambition hint at the limitless forms of womanhood in a society where young girls can aspire to be married or to remain independent. Alcott’s novel confesses that women must fulfill certain society expectations to be considered women and attract a husband. Thus, Alcott gifts Jo with the aspirational ambition to rebel against this fate, and through her writing, prepares Jo for the financial freedom and independence that should be permitted to all adults, regardless of gender. Alcott supplies Jo and her readers with the ultimate lesson of womanhood: that one must find a way to acquire and protect their own happiness, especially in a world determined to restrain female potential. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* is not just a children’s story. The misnomer implies that adults have nothing to learn from it, but this could not be farther from the truth. It is the adult woman

that has the most to gain. Alcott's portrait of young girls and their worries about growing up is timeless, and her loyalty to depicting the true inevitability of their circumstances enlightens readers to the bitter, but honest fate of women living in a man's world. The women who read this story are reminded of their infinite desire as child to conquer the world. It promotes introspection and the examination of the gender binary. Women must decide what it is to be a woman. Jo's refusal to adhere strictly to constructed femininity and her adoption of masculinity actively dismantle the binary between the two. Alcott's *Little Women* declares that once women are supplied with the tools to access and achieve what they want in life, women can disrupt the constraints of gender roles. *Little Women* is an awakening for women—young and old—that signals a call to action, driving them to fight for all the *Little Women* of the world who, like Jo, wish to be something greater than themselves.

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