



Gender Stereotyping in *Little Women*: “Let Us Be Elegant or Die!”

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Abstract

Using various autobiographical letters, biographies, and feminist articles, this essay explores feminism and gender stereotyping (or rather, the lack of) in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women. My research conclusions lead to a new perspective on Little Women and a better understanding of feminism. When I originally read the novel, I thought it was a sweet, charming story; however, when I explored it through a different lens, I discovered that Louisa May Alcott was a staunch feminist, and this ideology often came through in her stories. An example of Alcott’s feminist belief system includes the way the characters of Laurie and Jo are portrayed as nonconforming to their gender-stereotypical roles. Jo vacillates between a feminist character and a more traditional role, while Laurie is given more stereotypically feminine attributes. Through Little Women, Alcott explores the various roles of women of that time period, but she does so with respect and empathy. I believe that there is much to be learned from Alcott’s novel. It is not a mere children’s novel; rather, it is a strong affirmation of feminist beliefs.

When Louisa May Alcott wrote her bestseller, *Little Women*, it seemed to neatly fit in the genre of literature for young girls, yet, surprisingly, the novel transcends many of the gender stereotypes ideals of the nineteenth century. In *Little Women*, Alcott challenged society’s definition of stereotypical gender roles and pushed the boundaries of expectations that were placed on both men and women to conform to society’s standards. At the time the novel was published, the audience may not have recognized the boundaries that Alcott was testing. Whether or not Alcott intentionally challenged gender stereotypes, they remain evident throughout the novel, and it seems likely that Alcott primarily endeavored to compose a meaningful and lucrative piece of literature. Alcott’s past writings addressed various sensitive and bold topics, such as abolition and feminism. For example, Alcott’s story “M.L.” was rejected because of its so-called offensive material, which was the interracial marriage between a white woman and a former

slave (Reisen 154). Also, in stories such as *Rose in Bloom*, there are feminist ideas. Due to her past works, Alcott desired that her writing should speak out on the injustices placed upon humanity and encourage society to end the repression. Alcott breaks many stereotypes by giving two of her main characters, Jo and Laurie, names that would usually denote someone of the opposite gender. Also, Alcott uses Beth's death to symbolize the death of the ideal woman. In doing so, Alcott is challenging the idea that such a role is the only acceptable female lifestyle. Finally, the character of Jo changes the most of all, becoming more feminine and less tomboyish by the end of the novel. Alcott's surprising evolution of Jo's character makes a statement that women can be not only married and feminine, but also happily independent and self-sufficient.

Through the characters of Jo and Laurie, Alcott challenges gender stereotypes. Their relationship is not only funny and genuine, but it is also the vehicle through which Alcott breaks many gender stereotypes. First, by giving Jo and Laurie names that would usually belong to the opposite sex, Alcott is breaking gender-stereotypical expectations. In doing this, she is removing gender expectations based on the characters' names. Consequently, she bestows Jo with more masculine attributes and Laurie with more feminine attributes. When Jo and Laurie first meet, neither one seems concerned or surprised by the other's name. The characters themselves do not seem bound by society's gender expectations. At the Gardiners' New Year's Eve party, Jo, escaping from an overly-zealous boy, finds refuge in a curtained alcove. There, she bumps into Laurie, who is also seeking refuge. After they talk about the Marches' runaway cat that Laurie rescued, they commiserate over their names. Their exchange is quite revealing.

‘How is your cat, Miss March?’ asked the boy, trying to look sober, while his black eyes shone with fun.

‘Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence; but I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo,’ returned the young lady.

‘I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie.’

‘Laurie Laurence,—what an odd name!’

‘My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead.’

‘I hate my name, too—so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo, instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?’

‘I thrashed 'em.’

‘I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it;’ and Jo resigned herself with a sigh. (Alcott 30)

Again, neither character is surprised by the other's atypical name. Of course, names are important, but this lack of gender-stereotyped names not only fits their roles in the book, but it also shows the reader that people should be careful not to categorize people into particular groups because of their names. Moreover, Laurie states that he prefers the nickname *Laurie* rather than *Dora*. Both names are equally feminine sounding, emphasizing the idea that Laurie's

character represents a more feminine side (Keyser 66). Laurie states that he thrashed the boys to stop them from calling him Dora, yet he replaced it with an equally feminine-sounding name. Was the name *Laurie* considered less feminine at that time? Then again, if Laurie was able to thrash the boys once, they might have decided that it would be best not to make fun of the name *Laurie* at all so as not to be thrashed again. According to Ancestry.com, the name *Laurie* was primarily a girl's name or pet name (Evans). The U.S. Census states that in 1860 there were 396 females and nine males listed under the name of Laurie (Evans). Since Laurie was considered a pet name, it would be more likely that girls would be listed under pet names more so than boys (Evans). The general fact that Laurie was not a prominent boy's name implies that Alcott meant to endow Laurie with feminine qualities.

Also, it is notable that although Laurie beat the boys in order to make them stop their teasing, Jo believes herself unable to do anything about her predicament. The fact is not so much that Jo should not thrash her aunt, but rather that she cannot thrash anyone because she is a girl. This exchange further emphasizes that women were unable to escape the gender-stereotyping prison, thus resigning themselves to being treated in ways they disliked. For instance, Jo must accustom herself to being called Josephine, a name she dislikes, in order to accommodate her aunt's preferences. In *Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography*, Susan Cheever notes pediatrician Berry Brazelton's assessment of twenty-first century girls that would have applied to the March sisters: "Girls in our society learn early on that they are expected to behave in certain ways" (qtd. in Cheever 81). He continues, "Girls are expected to be compliant, quiet and introspective. They soon learn that they should suppress any open expression of aggression or even strong non-compliant feelings. They also learn . . . to value relationships more than rules" (Brazelton, qtd. in Cheever 81). Jo would have been under the same pressures; she must repress any feelings of anger or resentment towards other people, such as Aunt March, in order to maintain the attributes of a proper woman. Therefore, Laurie was able to take action in his situation by forcing people to treat him in the way that he wishes, whereas Jo must repress her feelings and succumb to other people's expectations.

Additionally, Jo would have felt the expectations and repression of how one is presented in society. When Meg and Jo are preparing for the Gardiners' party, they endure all sorts of struggles to make themselves presentable. Because they only have one pair of gloves, which are soiled, they compromise and decide that each shall wear one clean glove and hold the stained one. Furthermore, Meg's shoes pinch her toes, and Jo's hair-pins are "stuck straight into her head" (Alcott 28). The girls are dressed uncomfortably, all in the name of being presentable in society. The girls feel the pressure of society's eyes watching them. When Jo admits her gloves are stained, Meg laments, "'You must have gloves, or I won't go,' cried Meg decidedly. 'Gloves are more important than anything else; you can't dance without them, and if you don't I should be mortified'" (Alcott 26).

Even though this scene is conveyed in humorous tones, there is evidence that without the proper appearance, the girls will be looked down on and considered inferior. The narrator senses this dilemma but only cries, “but, dear me, let us be elegant or die!” (Alcott 28). This comment further emphasizes, satirically, the importance of how one was viewed in nineteenth-century society.

Confusion regarding names persists in contemporary entertainment. For instance, on the popular show *Friends*, the characters Rachel and Joey decide to read each other’s favorite book. Rachel reads Stephen King’s *The Shining*, while Joey reads *Little Women*. Joey is surprised and confused to learn that Jo is, in fact, a girl, and Laurie is a boy. The following excerpt from *Friends* shows Joey’s confusion:

Joey: ‘These little women. Wow!’

Chandler: ‘You’re liking it, huh?’

Joey: ‘Oh yeah! Amy just burned Jo’s manuscript. I don’t see how he could ever forgive her.’

Ross: ‘Umm, Jo’s a girl, it’s short for Josephine.’

Joey: ‘But Jo’s got a crush on Laurie. [. . .]’

Chandler: ‘No, actually Laurie’s a boy.’

Joey: ‘No wonder Rachel had to read this so many times.’

Alcott does such a good job with assigning masculine attributes to Jo and feminine qualities to Laurie that it would be easy to assume by their names that Jo is a male and Laurie is a female. As the audience progresses through the book, they discover that these characters do fit their given names. Laurie shows interest in feminine-coded activities, such as writing music and playing piano, while Jo shows more masculine interests, such as joining the war. The fact that society remains confused by this switching of names demonstrates that names do mean something and give a sort of first impression of people. Clearly, Joey is confused, and though he may not be the most-clever character, perhaps he still represents society’s quick judgment of people based on their name and gender.

Additionally, both characters’ roles and actions transcend normal gender stereotypes. Laurie embodies the role of a typical nineteenth-century woman, because he is often locked away in the mansion and is drawn toward female-coded activities, such as playing piano. For example, when speaking about Mr. Laurence and his grandson, Laurie, one of the March guests states, “He keeps his grandson shut up, when he isn’t riding or walking with his tutor, and makes him study very hard. We invited him to our party, but he didn’t come. Mother says he’s very nice, though he never speaks to us girls” (Alcott 24). Laurie is “shut up” like many women who stayed home, while their husbands were working or traveling. Elizabeth Keyser states, “Ironically, Mr. Laurence’s efforts to ensure that his grandson prove his manhood by taking over the family business keep Laurie as sheltered from the world as any girl” (66). Likewise, many young women would not be comfortable speaking to those of the opposite sex, similar to how Laurie was initially uncomfortable interacting with the girls. By highlighting

Laurie's discomfort with women, Alcott is still defining Laurie as a man with typical shyness around women, and yet at the same time showing that he, as a man, is interested in piano playing and music, emphasizing that they are not just for females.

In "Chasing Amy: Mephistopheles, the Laurence Boy, and Louisa May Alcott's Punishment of Female Ambition," Holly Blackford cites Elizabeth Keyser, who states, "Confined, almost imprisoned, in the big house next door, Laurie is freed by Jo in a reversal of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale" (qtd. in Blackford 8). This reversal of the tale further emphasizes that the roles that Jo and Laurie should play according to their gender are switched. Jo is the one to free Laurie from his stiff grandfather. Additionally, in *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott*, Elizabeth Keyser notes that Jo seems to be "appropriating male power" and "freeing a part of her own nature" when she confronts Mr. Laurence (66). Keyser states that the mansion and the March home are symbolic of masculine and feminine spheres (66). By combining their two different worlds, the barrier between men and women's gender-stereotypical roles is weakened, as seen in Jo and Laurie's relationship. Each gender group is no longer confined to their societal sphere of expectations; they can cross those boundaries and interact with each other. When Jo and Laurie begin their friendship, the spheres connect and widen; Keyser suggests that they become "a whole, androgynous person" (Keyser 66). However, rather than being a whole, androgynous person, they are a whole because they fit together in perfect symmetry. Together, Laurie and Jo's attributes complement one another's. Gender is important, and it does help define a person. Alcott does not expect the audience to ignore gender but rather to look past the stereotypes that have confined the genders. Biological sex is not what confines a person; society's gender expectations and stereotypes confine a person. Laurie enjoys feminine-coded activities such as writing music and playing piano, but these activities are not specifically a girl's pastime. Both men and women should be free to enjoy these pastimes, and doing so should not be considered unusual. When society has placed such gendered expectations on particular activities and how a man or woman should act, that is when stereotypes emerge.

Rejecting such stereotypes, Laurie frees Jo's inner tomboy (Blackford 8). Through Laurie, Jo can live vicariously as he is able to travel to Europe and attend college. Blackford states, "Laurie embodies Europe and college for Jo—everything she wishes to experience but cannot because of class and gender" (8). Blackford remarks that Laurie acts out Jo's tomboyish side (8). Together, Jo and Laurie comprise "a whole person" and their "friendship represents the best of masculine and feminine spheres" (8). Jo's rejection of Laurie's marriage proposal signifies that "a whole person cannot exist in nineteenth-century society" (8). If "a whole person" could not exist in that era, it was because nineteenth-century society would not accept or recognize that there is more to people than their gender-identified roles.

Furthermore, the character of Beth embodies the idea of the ideal woman, who is content to stay at home and please people. Beth has usually been labeled a flat character. Her character neither changes nor has any aspirations other than to be kind, sweet, and pleasing. Like many other women of her day, Beth's sacrifice for domesticity seems ultimately to bring her to her death. During the nineteenth-century era, women were encouraged to give up their art and pastimes and instead serve others. Additionally, women in general were told that home was their place. Home supposedly functioned as a place of safety and protection. But, in the end, home's effect on women sometimes produced negative results, as it did for Beth. In her article, "The Artist at Home: The Domestication of Louisa May Alcott," Veronica Bassil states, "Yet home is not safe, and the character of the dying younger sister, Beth in *Little Women* and May Dean in 'Psych's Art,' reveals the artist's sacrifice, the stunting and starving of her potential under the demands of domesticity" (187). Unlike her sisters, Beth has no hopes for the future. She confides in Jo:

'I only mean to say that I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up; I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there.' (Alcott 383)

Beth's description of herself is also concerning. She describes herself as stupid and little and seems unconcerned about her demeaning language toward herself. Judith Fetterley states, "One also sees in Beth that negative self-image which is the real burden of the little women" (380).

Again, Beth states that she believes she was never meant to live long. This statement brings up the question of what Beth represents or symbolizes. If Beth symbolizes the "ideal woman," then does her death symbolize the end of that typical female stereotype?

According to Fetterley, *Little Women* is based on a paradox (379). Fetterley states:

[T]he figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman is the most attractive and the figure who most succumbs to it dies. Jo is the vital center of Alcott's book and she is so because she is least a little woman. Beth, on the other hand, is the least vital and the least interesting. She is also the character who most fully internalizes the overt values of *Little Women*: she is the daughter who comes closest to realizing the ideal of imitating mother. Like Marmee, Beth's devotion to her duty and her kindness toward others are never-failing and, like Marmee, she never expresses needs of her own. (379)

Fetterley notes that Beth, as the "perfect little woman," is the only one to truly suffer the cost (379–380). Both Meg and Jo fail to follow Marmee's instructions to

assist the Hummels, leaving Beth to help them by herself, and thus she contracts and eventually dies of complications of scarlet fever. Fetterley declares, "In Beth one sees the exhaustion of vitality in the effort to live as a little woman" (380). In her book *Louisa May*, Martha Saxton notes Harriet Martineau's observations: "While women's intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weakness encouraged, and her strength punished, she is told that her lot is cast in the paradise of women: and there is no country in the world where there is so much boasting of the 'chivalrous' treatment she enjoys" (qtd. in Saxton 65).

Even in Alcott's life, there were strong examples of what and how a woman should behave. For instance, Abba (also known as Abby), Alcott's mother, often repressed her aggression and anger in order to be granted the label of the "ideal woman." According to Saxton, Abba viewed "marriage as improvement, and improvement meant working on her submission, docility, and gentleness" (66). Alcott must have recognized the negative outcomes that becoming an "ideal woman" brought, and thus it inspired her to incorporate them into the character of Beth. For example, when the Alcotts lived at Fruitlands with Mr. Lane, young Louisa Alcott wrote of how her mother was "so tired" (Myerson and Shealy 47). Additionally, Harriet Reisen states:

Even Lane agreed that the fledging community needed more women to do women's work. Abby complained that she and the girls were wearing themselves out entertaining ungrateful community members and curiosity seekers. She wrote to her brother that she felt like 'a noble horse harnessed in a yoke and made to drag and pull instead of trot and canter.' When Lane decided that Abby was not to take part in any discussion apart from so-called carnal matters, that is, food, shelter, and clothing, she refused to eat with the others until Anna [Louisa's sister] begged her to come back. (76)

Alcott would have seen the injustice that was placed on Abby's shoulders. Even though Abby bore all the cleaning and upkeep, she was told she could not participate in discussions, other than those of domestic topics, simply because of her gender.

Furthermore, Beth is ill for most of the book before dying from her illness. Saxton states that illness was a result of the many domestic burdens placed on women (66–67). Devoid of a way to express themselves, women became emotional and physical invalids (Saxton 67). Rather than encouraging women to seek out appropriate medical attention, women's illnesses were praised, especially if their illness designated them as delicate and "interesting" (Saxton 67).

Considering that Alcott based Beth on her own sister, Elizabeth, with whom she was very close, it seems unlikely that Alcott held such a negative view of women who pursued a domestic lifestyle. Alcott seems to address the fact that this lifestyle could have negative results, as it did for both her sister and Beth. Perhaps she was not trying to use Beth to change society's minds against that role but rather desired that society could be more open-minded about women's roles.

It is unlikely that Alcott would have viewed her own sister as a one-dimensional character. Rather, it seemed that Alcott greatly admired the attributes that Beth and Elizabeth possessed. For instance, the novel's narrator states, "There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind" (Alcott 42). Alcott, through the narrator, seems to appreciate the self-sacrificing role that these women played in society while at the same time trying to show that there are more to women than the one domestic dimension typically followed by nineteenth-century women.

Alcott attempted to be a docile woman who exhibited Beth's attributes. In 1845, the Alcotts lived at Fruitlands with Mr. Lane, who tutored the Alcott girls. Louisa wrote in her diary about their lessons. Mr. Lane would ask questions, that Louisa would then answer. She wrote the following lesson down: "How gain love? By gentleness. What is gentleness? Kindness, patience, and care for other people's feelings. Who has it? Father and Anna (Louisa's sister). Who means to have it? Louisa, if she can" (Myerson and Shealy 56). Years later, humorously, Alcott commented on her diary entry: "She never got it." As a child, Alcott desired to conquer her anger and become submissive, but she learned that she would never fit those character traits; however, she admired the people that did possess them.

At the beginning of the novel, Jo is a tomboy, but by the end, she is content to marry Professor Bhaer, take on more domestic responsibilities, and set her writing dreams to the side. Initially, Alcott describes Jo in this way: "Round shoulders [. . .], big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it" (6). Additionally, Jo despises social calls, wearing gloves, and would rather behave like a boy. Paradoxically, by the end of the novel, Jo's character has changed drastically. Jo becomes far more feminine and no longer seems to mind the female-labeled tasks she once despised. For example, after Jo witnesses Professor Bhaer darning his own socks, she writes in a letter to home, "I laughed all the way downstairs; but it was a little pathetic, also to think of the poor man having to mend his own clothes. The German gentlemen embroider, I know; but darning hose is another thing, and not so pretty" (Alcott 347). Later, Jo writes home of how she volunteers to mend Professor Bhaer's clothes. Jo insists that she would not mind and would be glad to do it (Alcott 349). Now she seems to be embracing domestic duties.

Is Alcott saying that it is silly for men to do "women's work"? In her article, "'Little Women': Alcott's Civil War," Fetterley states:

But more important than the revelation that women's work is ugly and degrading when done by men is the implication that women's work is not real work. Before their marriage, John Brooke says to Meg, 'You have only to wait, *I* am to do the work.' (262)

This statement implies that a woman has nothing important to contribute to the marriage; rather it is the man's work that will be the most supportive. After their marriage, "Meg is 'on the shelf,' still waiting" (Fetterley 375). Again, Meg's work is basically unnecessary. Either she spends too much time on chores around the household, or they could be done better by John (375). John brings discipline into the household, especially with the children, resulting in harmony, while Meg's actions are viewed primarily as just doting on the children, rather than really contributing to the child-rearing process and guiding the children.

Furthermore, another topic woven into Alcott's story is that women are often encouraged to repress their emotions, such as anger. Early in the story, Jo attempts to control her rashness and fits of anger. Practicing self-control and perfecting oneself were normal attributes that Transcendentalists encouraged. Alcott's father, Bronson, was a firm Transcendentalist, as were members of the March family. Sarah Elbert states in her introduction to *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery*: "Self-control, in uneasy tandem with self-reliance, became adaptive hallmarks of earthly progress" (xviii). After Amy almost drowns, Jo laments that because of her anger and her stubborn refusal to forgive Amy for burning her stories, she is afraid she will do something terrible one day. Jo states, "'You don't know, you can't guess how bad it is! It seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion; I get so savage, I could hurt any one, and enjoy it. I'm afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me. O mother, help me, do help me!'" (Alcott 82). Of course, such feelings should not be defended, but no one admonishes Laurie for expressing anger over Jo's rejection of his marriage proposal. Ruth K. MacDonald states, "But Jo, Alcott's re-creation of herself, has the real burden a real character deserves, and her wrestling with her anger is felt throughout the book" (21). Out of all the March sisters, Jo is the most interesting and the one to whom readers can most easily relate because of her normal human struggles and failings. Stephanie Foote says, "Alcott's novel, in this reading, finally tells its readers that women must learn to repress or redirect their anger, even if their anger is, in the world of the novel, just and reasonable" (67). Additionally, not only are women encouraged to repress their anger, but they must conform to men's anger in order to be accepted into society. Women are meant to be agreeable, or else society will have nothing to do with them (376). Amy states, "'Women should learn to be agreeable'" (Alcott 330). Regarding their marriage, Marmee advises Meg to accommodate John's anger (Fetterley 376):

'John is a good man, but he has his faults, and you must learn to see and bear with them, remembering your own. He is very decided, but never will be obstinate, if you reason kindly, not oppose impatiently. He is very accurate, and particular about the truth — a good trait, though you call him 'fussy.' Never deceive him by look or word, Meg, and he will give you the confidence you deserve, the support you need. He has a temper, not like ours,—one flash, and then all over,—but the white, still anger, that is seldom stirred, but once

kindled, is hard to quench. Be careful, very careful, not to wake this anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err, and guard against the little piques, misunderstandings, and hasty words that often pave the way for bitter sorrow and regret.’ (Alcott 287)

In other words, John has male anger that must be accommodated and that must fit into their life together, but Meg (and the other female characters) exhibit female anger that must be suppressed. Marmee seems to suggest that John’s love is conditional (Fetterley 376). Fetterley states:

With no legitimate function in life, women will not be tolerated unless they are agreeable; only through a life of cheerful service to others can they justify their existence and assuage the guilt that derives from being useless. Women must watch themselves because they are economically dependent on men’s income and emotionally dependent on their approval. (376)

John’s love seems to be contingent on the idea of Meg respecting him and bearing the burden of maintaining the peace. Women must be careful. Even after Meg had amassed debt, she was afraid of her own husband and his anger. Alcott recognizes that women are expected to repress their anger. Alcott, therefore, reveals this unfairness in her novel, in order to show the different and unfair expectations placed on men and women.

Alcott also addresses women and their writing. Jo writes sensational fiction, the genre which is viewed as dangerous by Professor Bhaer. After Jo reassesses her sensational stories, she laments:

‘They *are* trash, and will soon be worse than trash if I go on; for each is more sensational than the last. I’ve gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money; I know it’s so, for I can’t read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it; and what *should* I do if they were seen at home, or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them?’ (Alcott 365)

Jo then proceeds to burn her work. According to Linda Grasso, when Jo burns her work, “she symbolically destroys her anger and independence” (180). By destroying her sensational writing, she is accepting a more submissive role and relinquishing independence.

In that time, a woman writing sensational fiction was often seen as sinful, but that was not the case for male writers who wrote sensational fiction. For financial reasons, Alcott herself wrote sensational fiction, but these stories were written under her pseudonym, A. M. Barnard. After *Little Women* was published and Alcott became known for her wholesome girls’ story, she especially did not wish to be known for her racy tales (Reisen 208). Perhaps Alcott’s embarrassment over her own sensational writing is portrayed in Jo’s admonishment of herself. Some scholars argue that Jo’s writing becomes at times darkly spiritual. Holly

Blackford argues that Alcott portrays women's writing as demonic and that Jo is not only risking her own soul, but those of her readers (3). Although it is true that Jo is ashamed that she has compromised herself and others, it seems a bit excessive to deem women's work "demonic." Jo's dilemma is a typical one with which all writers should wrestle. When someone is a writer, he or she has the power to wield words that could influence others either negatively or positively. Whether or not it was wrong for Jo to write sensational fiction, she realized that this genre was not consistent with her values and knew that her family would be disappointed. By destroying her own work, Jo was ultimately taking charge of her own fate and her writing career, as she realized that she desired her work to inspire goodness. In contrast to Grasso's argument that Jo is relinquishing her independence, she is actually taking charge of her life by aligning her work of writing with her values.

Much of *Little Women* was influenced by Alcott's family of strong suffragists. Alcott herself encouraged women to stand up for themselves and vote. She did this by encouraging women to register and facilitating reading groups to raise awareness about the importance of voting (Reisen 266). Her reading sessions were not popular among women, who often came up with excuses. Alcott states, "[I] gave them a good scolding and offered to drive the timid sheep to the fatal spot where they seemed to expect some awful doom" (qtd in Reisen 266). Alcott proudly wrote, "[I] was the first woman to register my name as a voter" in her journal (qtd. in Reisen 266). Unfortunately, not many women followed her lead.

Clearly, because of Alcott's history with women's rights, she was not seeking to repress her female characters. Alcott used her books as platforms to address controversial topics, such as feminism, as seen in *Little Women*. In Nancy Porter's film, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*, Geraldine Brooks declares, "Louisa really was an early feminist. It's underappreciated how she was able to [use] her success to make her really a megaphone for feminist issues" (Porter). Another reason Alcott crafted the direction of Jo's life in this way was because she seemed to want to marry but never did. It seems likely, however, that she did have at least two different love interests in her life. Perhaps Alcott decided to give Jo what she herself always wanted: marriage and a family. More likely, Alcott felt encouraged by her father, Bronson, and her publisher to compose a novel that would ultimately please the public. The readers would likely have desired that Jo marry (Reisen 218). During that era, most people would agree that spinsterhood was not exactly romantic. Alcott disliked the idea of Jo marrying and vowed that she would make Jo a "funny match" (Reisen 218). In the end, even though Jo married, Alcott got the last laugh by marrying her to an unromantic character.

Also, Jo is Alcott's literary persona, and perhaps through Jo, she decided to achieve what she could not in her own personal life. According to Charles Strickland, nineteenth-century society did not find much good in feminism. They condemned feminism because it challenged their way of life. Strickland states:

It is evident that sentimentalists had little or no sympathy with the slogans of nineteenth-century feminism. The cause of women's rights received no votes among most sentimental novelists, who held up passivity as an ideal and who regarded any imitation of masculine traits as a surrender of the woman's claim to superior moral virtue. (10)

Ultimately, it seems that Louisa's intention was to grant Jo the perfect blend of maintaining her true self but also balancing that with femininity. For instance, Jo can now run the school for boys while maintaining a marriage and a family. Her loneliness is gone, and she may always pick up her quill and write another novel if she desires. In *A Hunger for Home*, Sarah Elbert writes that Jo hopes to accomplish "woman's special mission," and she "adds the feminist postscript: 'I'm to carry my share Friedrich and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go'" (164).

According to Elbert, Jo and Friedrich's marriage contract differs from Meg and John's. Both Friedrich and Jo are willing to wait and work in order to marry and support themselves together, side by side. In contrast, John tells Meg that he will earn the money and that she must only sit and wait. Alcott seems to suggest that there are many types of marriages; there is no right or wrong way to approach it. She is not trying to admonish the couples who have a more traditional marriage; rather, she is suggesting that marriage can be a place where both people have equal partnership.

Throughout *Little Women*, Alcott breaks traditional gender stereotypes, encouraging her readers not to label themselves or others simply based on gender. By transcending the normal rules of the time, Alcott encourages people to see each other as equals. Through the character of Beth, Alcott emphasizes the danger to which being the stereotypical woman could lead. Through Jo, Alcott exemplifies her ideas about feminism fairly well. She provides a picture of a woman who can be not only feminine but also strong and vocal. This imagery of a strong, independent woman is what provides readers a connection to and a love for Alcott's timeless novel.

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