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Little Women,
a *Feminist* study

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I. Introduction

After viewing the 1994 film version of Little Women, directed by Gillian Armstrong and written by Robin Swicord, based upon the American Classic novel, I became fascinated by these little women. To use Simone de Beauvoir's words, "There was one book in which I believed I had caught a glimpse of my future self."(Showalter, VII) I was particularly intrigued with Amy, for I strongly recognised myself in her. Even today, as a grown-up, my attraction to *my* Little Women is still overwhelming. Yet, at the age of eight, I could only see the sweet and sentimental story of Jo and Amy, the fighting sisters. They reminded me of my own sister and me and our little fights. It is only now that I recognise the feminist subtext. So I decided to write my Master dissertation on Jo, Amy, Meg and Beth.

I soon discovered that over the past decades, this story has enticed more than one little girl. Indeed, Louisa May Alcott has been studied, examined and praised for her feminist writing by many feminist critics. Her writing influenced a great number of female writers and intellectuals. Though it has only been accepted as an American classic in the 1950s, its influence is not to be underestimated. Thanks to the critical studies of Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins, who investigated American literary history and its patriarchal assumptions, Little Women has been re-evaluated as a feminist novel or, as Madelon Bedell so adequately concluded, "*the* American female myth."(Showalter, VIII) Since Tompkins and Baym's groundbreaking work, many Americanists have explored this story of female development. One of them, Nina Auerbach, described Little Women as novel about the self-sustaining communities of women. As such, according to Elaine Showalter, reading this novel is "to engage with contemporary ideas about female authority, critical institutions and the American literary canon, as well as with the nineteenth-century ideas of relationship between patriarchal culture and women's culture."(Showalter, VIII)

As such, I chose to explore this aspect of the novel. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate how Alcott, as a female writer and dutiful daughter of the American patriarchal community, was able to encourage and influence so many girls so as to have them assert their own identity, as Jo March did. With this study, I hope to uncover the feminist subtext enclosed in Alcott's text. By means of a close reading of the novel, I shall try to reveal its feminist implications.

In the first chapter, I chose to explore the social context of the author. I believe that one should first learn about the author's social background in order to reach a true understanding of his or her work. In the case of Louisa May Alcott, this seems even more crucial, as this novel can be read as a personal account of her life. First, I tried to explore the nineteenth-century republican womanhood. This will, I hope, provide a better frame for this novel. I also investigated Alcott's personal life and her interaction with the changing American society.

In the second chapter, I deal with the feminist reading of the novel, the real literary investigation of my dissertation. I start with an elaborate discussion on the Women's fiction, the Sentimental novel and the Domestic novel. After having defined these genres, I briefly explore a sentimental reading of Little Women. I then present the novel's heroine, Jo, as an introduction to the two main themes of my discussion: the tension between the true self and the patriarchal assumptions and the marriage theme. In my discussion of the tension between the true self and the patriarchal assumptions, I want to investigate whether Louisa May Alcott and Jo March suffer from an anxiety of authorship, as such I will investigate Jo's literary career. I include a brief discussion on Alcott's lost novels. I then move on to discuss the marriage theme incorporated in this novel. I would like to demonstrate that this theme was built into the main theme of the novel, the quest for female individuality. And finally, I decided to discuss Beth, for I believe that she can be analysed as the subdued heroine. In fact, sometimes I seem to forget Beth as well, for she is not a true heroine such as Jo or Amy. So, I chose to take a closer look at this silent, timid and often forgotten character.

In the final chapter, entitled *Little Women's Regeneration*, I chose to explore the novel's legacy. First I investigate Little Women's place in children's literature. Secondly, I discuss the interaction and intertextuality between this novel and Geraldine Brooks's Pulitzer Prize winning March. And finally, I include a brief discussion of the numerous adaptations of this novel, resulting in Little Women's rejuvenation. The main focus will be on the 1994 film version, which led to my infatuation with these little women. However, as the central aim of my dissertation was to reveal the feminist subtext in the novel, this final discussion will be rather concise.

II. Socio - historical Background

In order to understand the author's world completely, one must take into consideration Louisa May Alcott's background. Therefore, I intend to examine and explore her world, the American society of the nineteenth-century.

Indeed, America changed and evolved significantly during that particular century and Louisa's work mirrored these new movements. Louisa's writing will not only echo this changing society. She also achieved to offer her contemporary readers warmth, love and comfort through her writings during these harsh times. In this chapter, I will analyze the American society in which Louisa May Alcott grew up. I will try to explore the position she, as a woman, must have had in this society.

1. The Position of Women in Alcott's Time

1.1 Republican Womanhood

As the American society grew and changed, so did the households. The American nineteenth-century family often consisted of a man working outside the home, while the woman took care of the house and the family. According to the old English Common laws, men had absolute power over the family. This meant that they were the legal owners of their wives' personal belongings and were the sole guardians of the children. Women were victims of this patriarchal society, in which they were entirely dependent upon their father or husband. This would change, though. Women began to question the male authority in religion, and soon female societies were founded. Due to these societies new roles for women were possible. In 1848, a Woman's Right Convention at Seneca Falls, New York was arranged. Hundreds of female and male reformers had come together to claim social, political and economical equality. With their 'Declaration of Sentiment' – in which they denounced the injustice they suffered – they hoped to receive the vote for women, so as to gain total independence. However, very few men were prepared to support them. After the Civil War the National Woman Suffrage Association was formed in 1869. They strongly opposed and reacted against the 15th Amendment, as it simply ignored women. Later this group would be known as the National American Woman Suffrage. The guaranteed right to vote was not granted to women until 1920, with the passage of the 19th Amendment. However, prior to the 19th Amendment, women's suffrage had been granted in some states during the nineteenth-Century.

Until women had secured the right to vote, their father had the legal authority over their daughters. This implied that they could oppose their daughter's choice of husband. Nevertheless, most American families were progressive, and women were often free to choose their own partners, with their parents' blessing (Constable 210). Although women had no real legal rights, as they were denied the right to vote, they did receive property and spousal rights in the 1830's (Constable, 210). This was soon followed by the liberalization of divorce, yet this remained very rare. Though women were allowed to work, this was seen or experienced as a brief intermission before marriage, as the domestic ideal was still marriage. The only occupation which was respected and truly a possibility, was teaching. However, true independency was still very difficult to obtain. Indeed, to reject marriage and the domestic life was complicated in a patriarchal society, which considered family as the appropriate foundation of a moral life for women. Truly independent white women were uncommon, but they were able to participate in the market economy, thus creating new opportunities for their own sex.

1.2 Women's Education

The British novel was important for the education of American women. Indeed, the transatlantic literary canon defined an American woman's education. There was no international copyright law, so British literature was easily available. Copies of English classics were sold at very low prices (Gould 36). The average middle-class women were familiar with the canonical and religious British literature. Women's reading was quite elaborate, including theology, philosophy, poetry and novels. Female academies, such as the South Carolina Female Collegiate Institute, strongly encouraged the reading of philosophical and religious works. The eighteenth-century notion of a Female Salon, where women would come together and discuss literary and cultural matters, did not disappear as such, but instead of a Salon, a schoolroom for women was created. Female academies were founded during the nineteenth-century, but literary societies had been present since the American Revolution. Such societies were not attached to any official institution and dealt with the production and reproduction of knowledge. One of the most famous and impressive literary societies was the Boston Gleaning Circle, founded on 23 March 1805 (Kelley 8). The girls who participated were often young single élite girls.

Authors of women's fiction were often middle-class women who had often received a reasonable education, giving them the knowledge to write a book. All of these authors were always in the need of an income. As already stated before, the only decent professions for women were teaching or authorship, both resulting from the rise of standard of living, which provided education and self-improvement for women. Teaching and authorship also gave them a new opportunity to influence others and gain independence. Female authors always advertised women's education. Indeed, most heroines always have a great thirst for knowledge and reading the canonical books. According to Nina Baym, cultivation of the mind was seen as the only way to independence and freedom (31). From 1820 onwards the number of female writers increased. In the 1850s the book became the dominant mode of literary packaging. However, these authors did not look upon their work as art as their male colleagues often do, but as a profession providing an income. They only started to perceive themselves as such in the 1870s. This lack of artistic justification combined with this rather practical approach often affected their writing. To be sure, aesthetic seriousness, dimension of formal self-consciousness and the attachment or break with grand traditions are missing. Instead, female writers often renounced their membership of the patriarchal artistic and aesthetic traditions (Baym 32). This common phenomenon has been described by Gilbert and Gubar, as the anxiety of authorship. This anxiety of authorship will be further elaborated and examined in the following chapter. Some important names for women's fiction were Catherine Sedgwick, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Foster.

2. Louisa May Alcott

I scrambled up to childhood, fell with a crash
into girlhood and continued falling over fences,
up hill and down stairs, tumbling from one year to
another till, strengthened by such violence exercise,
the topsy-turvy girl shot up into a topsy-turvy woman.
- Louis May Alcott

2.1 Biography

Louisa May Alcott may well have been destined to become a writer. Indeed, she was born in quite an impressive milieu and grew up into a unusual young girl. Her young, joyful and peculiar childhood – surrounded by the most prominent intellectuals of her time – would later on define her writing.

Louisa May Alcott is the second daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail May, born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on 29 November 1839. She was the sister of Anna Alcott Pratt, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott and May Alcott Nieriker. Her father, Amos Bronson, was the son of a flax farmer in Connecticut. He was an autodidact, as he taught himself to read by forming letters in charcoal. Amos Bronson had a strong will-power, which made him pursue his ideal with dedication. He eventually became a progressive educator and devotee of the Transcendentalists.

He was quite distinctive as a Transcendentalist and as an educator he thought that knowledge and morality are shaped by a student's inner sources and that it is the teacher's responsibility to help develop these as much as possible. He founded the Temple school where he introduced subjects such as art, music, nature study and physical education. However, many parents were neither familiar nor happy with these subjects and the school was closed. His teaching methods were unconventional, as were most of his subjects. Due to this setback, the young family was forced to move on several occasions. However, some pupils did enjoy and appreciate his methods and genius, as Louisa – educated by her father – once wrote "my father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature, as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasbourg goose, with more than it could digest" (Alcott 29).

In 1840, the family moved to Concord, thus joining major American authors who resided there. Amos quickly befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These two great minds would later on be of great importance to the young Louisa May. Though Amos worked hard, he was often unable to provide his family with a steady income and he brought his family on the verge of poverty. Nevertheless, Louisa – and her sister as well – was taught that self-reliance, a sense of duty, self-sacrifice and charity were the most imperative values. She became a strong-minded, cultivated and open-minded young girl. Her father encouraged writing and at the age of eight Louisa kept a diary in which her moods, her passions, her feelings and anxieties were recorded.

Her young absorbing mind was not only shaped by her father's teaching, but also by his Transcendentalist friends. Louisa enjoyed lessons by Thoreau and accompanied the latter on his famous nature walks. She received guidance and help from Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller. She would later describe her childhood years in a newspaper sketch, later on reprinted as The Silver Pitch, published in 1876. She also included her experiences of Fruitlands[1], an experiment her father enlisted his family in.

Louisa was distressed by her family's recurrent poverty and as she grew older, she felt more responsible to do her part for the family. At the age of 15 she wrote in her diary: "I will do something by and by. Don't care what, teach, sew, act, write anything to help the family and I'll be rich and famous and happy before I die, see if I won't" (Showalter XII). Indeed, she would do what she could for her family. Louisa and her sister both took on teaching jobs. Her true aspiration was to become an actress; this was encouraged by her writing, directing and performing plays. However, she soon tried poetry and drama. At the age of 17 she wrote her first novel, The Inheritance[2] which was influenced by Brontë's Jane Eyre. She herself called this her "Sentimental period."

By her 20's she realised that her talent lay in writing. She gave up her idle aspiration of acting and decided to – as she said to her father in a letter – "Turn my brains into money by stories"[3] In 1852 her first poem, Sunlight, was published in Peterson's Magazine under the pseudonym 'Flora Fairfield'. She rapidly understood the reading market and managed to shape her writings to the market. As she started to experiment with various styles of fiction, she quickly developed into a more confident and accomplished author.

In 1855 she published her first book, Flower Tables. Three years later Elizabeth Alcott, Louisa's younger sister, died on 14 March 1858, having developed scarlet fever. She would later be portrayed as Beth in Little Women. Elizabeth's death was the first break in the household, from which mother Alcott never really recovered. In 1860 the eldest Alcott daughter, Anna, married John Bridge Pratt, who was a member of the Concord Dramatic Union, which Louisa and Anna helped to form. Sadly, John died, leaving Anna with two sons.

During the Civil War, Louisa felt responsible and chose, like many young women at the time, to carry out her duty. So she enrolled herself as an army nurse in Washington D.C in 1862. Her father had always been an Abolitionist and had joined the Antislavery society[4]; Louisa strongly shared her father's opinion on this matter. This is what she wrote in her diary when the war broke out:

> *April*. – War declared with the south and our Concord company went to Washington. A busy time getting them ready and a sad day seeing them off; for in a little town like this we all seem like one family in times like these. At the station the scene was very dramatic, as the brave boys went away perhaps never to come back again. I've often longed to see a war and now I have my wish. I long to be a man, but I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can. From this excerpt, we understand that she was not like any other young woman. (Alcott 127)

She was quite restless, maybe even trapped in her life, as she "longed to be a man" and was somehow forced to "content herself."

During her services as a nurse she developed typhoid fever, and would later suffer the poisoning effects of mercury for the rest of her life, weakening her young constitution. Due to her fever, she only stayed at the hospital for six weeks. Yet, her stay as a nurse – however short it may have been – had deeply influenced the young woman. Indeed, "The experience of life, the observation of men under the excitement of war, […] and sometimes bitterness and hate brought her a deeper insight into human life, […] and gave to her writings greater reality" (Alcott 138). She recorded her experiences as a nurse in Hospital Sketches, published in 1863. A year later Moods was published.

Though she had – by now – established a promising literary career, she still didn't earn enough. A job offer as a travel companion to Europe was welcome. It was also the realization of a lifelong dream. She returned from Europe in 1866.

At this point her Bostonian publisher Thomas Niles would have asked her to write a novel for girls. The writing of this novel took up two and half months and was a fictionalized record of her childhood, Jo March was born. Indeed, Little Women was based upon her and her sister's coming of age, set in the Civil War. The novel was an instant success, earning her eternal fame and fortune. It was translated into 50 languages.

A sequel, Good wives, followed with as much success as Little Women. These successes were followed by the publication of Old Fashion Girl in 1870. Another trip to Europe followed. In 1871 Little Men was published, in 1873 came Work, in 1874 Eight cousins and finally in 1876 Rose in Bloom. She also wrote dedicated pieces for The Woman's Journal, as she was active in the women's suffrage movement.

In 1879 she was the first woman to register to vote in her village and she was among the 20 women to cast their votes. Meanwhile, two years after losing their mother, her younger sister, May, married a wealthy European, Ernest Nieriker. However, shortly after the birth of her first born, May Alcott Nieriker died, leaving the care of her baby girl Louisa to her sister, Louisa May Alcott.

In 1886 Louisa published Jo's Boys. Her father died on 4 March 1888. Two days later, Louisa May Alcott died in Boston, aged 56. Her funeral was attended by the Rev. Dr. Cyrus A. Bartol, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mrs. Edna D. Cheney, Messrs. F. B. Sanborn, Samuel E. Sewell, Frederick May, George May, John May, Mrs. George B. Bradford, Walter Blanchard, Walton Richardson, Mrs. John May, Prof. Shackford, the Rev. J. S. Bush, the Rev. Dr. E. G. Porter, Maria Porter, Col. Henry Stone, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, Dr. Emerson, Mrs. Allen Emerson, President Warren, Dr. H. I. Bowditch, Dr. M. Green, and many others. All were important figures in her personal and professional life, whom she had met through her father.

Her life was not to be compared to most young girls of her time. She was intimate with the great intellectuals of her time; she engaged in the women's suffrage movement and was a strong abolitionist. She never married or came close to an engagement, although many proposals were made, as – some say - she did not agree with marriage. Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son - befriended with Louis - later said about her love life: "Did she ever have a love affair? We never knew; yet, how could a nature so imaginative, romantic and passionate escape it?"[5] Indeed, one cannot imagine that she did not know love. In an undated

poem Louisa would have described herself as a woman whose love never appeared. In a society dominated by men, she would "rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" (Alcott 122) as she wrote in her diary.

Indeed, she had no real inclination to marriage, as she realized that a wife could have no economic or legal identity. According to Louisa May Alcott: Life, Letters and Works, she "could not cherish illusions tenderly and she always said that she got tired of everybody and felt sure she would get tired of her husband if she married" (94). She had no desire to marry and did not wish her heroines to marry. However, under the pressure of a patriarchal society which desired the recognition of this great joy, she integrated these love affairs in her novels. Though she did not care much for these love trials, they are imperative in her writing and prove to be grand representations of true and natural love within the realistic framework of her time, charming and often homely, unpretentious but equally true.

Her passions, her dreams and her goals were all achieved. Her choice to be "a free spinster" and her life made of her a true feminist. Working hard to achieve some long desired comfort for her and her family, she proved to be capital for the rise of American women fiction. She was – and still is – remembered, as Madeleine B. Stern said, for her accurate description of the domestic life of a young nation, for her accurate studies of adolescent psychology and finally for her ability to appeal to youthful readers (497). With her writing she proved herself a true novelist, taking her rightful place in literary history, with novels of both local and universal value. The commemoration and celebration she received in The New York Times at the time of her death emphasise the capital place she earned for herself in literary history. "There was probably no writer among women better loved by the young than she. Her fame rested chiefly on her first successful story, "Little Women," […] Its merit lay in its pretty pictures of the simple home life of the author and her little sisters." [6]

III. *Little Women*, a Feminist Reading

In this second chapter I intend to examine both Little Women and Good Wives. However, as both books have often been published as one complete story, I am not going to examine them separately but as a whole.

The following assessment of the novel will be a feminist reading – as the title already suggested. Since its publication this novel has constantly been read and remembered for its feminist spirit and it has received its rightful place along the 'Women's Fiction' list. However, this book also belongs to the tradition of the Sentimental novel. I will therefore include this aspect of the book in my assessment.

I am going to examine the form and ideology behind women's fiction and the sentimental novel first. Then I will apply my conclusion to our main subject of examination, the novel Little Women. For it is my intention to investigate this novel fits into these genres or sometimes subverts them.

1. Women's Fiction and the Sentimental Novel

1.1 Women's Fiction

According to Nina Baym, author of Woman's Fiction, A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870[7], women's fiction can be defined as fiction that was written for women, about women and which tells a specific story concerning the female sphere. Often they deal with the "trials and triumph" of a heroine who "beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them" (Baym, 22). The genre as such would have started in America with Maria Sedgwick.[8]

Nina Baym believes that Women's fiction finds its roots in the novel of manners with its "mixed heroines" and in the fiction of English moralists (Baym, 29). However, of the major female authors in England, only a few influenced the American female writer. Indeed, Baym does not believe that authors such as Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters greatly influenced the American female writer. American heroines often seek independence, whereas British heroines

do not seek true independence, but often a dominant place, such as is the case in Brontë's Jane Eyre.

The stories are always developed with regard to the laws of probability and actuality. The novel depicts broad and detailed regional and local characteristics, giving us an inside look in the homes, the manners of the home, dress, occupations, local dialects, celebrations, and so on, resulting in realism. This local colour is well-designed and gives us a good observation and understanding of the everyday life in the middle-class home in nineteenth-century America. Moreover, because of its realistic setting, the story often indulges in social commentary, in an implicit or explicit way. Women were taking a stand and started to think about social issues. Women's fiction excelled in the portrayal of the rural-urban tensions and the class divisions in nineteenth-century America. Personal opinions on a wide range of issues were expressed. A good example of such an explicit novel, taking a stand and actually judging American society and its huge flaws is Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Although this book does not fit into the conventions of women's fiction, it was written by a woman expressing her views on political and social issues. Indeed, a female author, belonging to the heart of society, was much more in touch with this society and with its flaws; they "recognised country vices"(Baym, 45).

Two heroines are always present, the "flawless" and the "flawed." The former already possesses what the latter needs: emotional strength and stability. According to Baym, the novels were often Victorian in their depiction of the self as a "social product," tightly embedded within society and its norms, which could destroy the heroine or form her (36). More than once, the novel would elaborate the growing and evolving of the self-negotiating social possibilities (Baym 36). The heroine always grows from "child" to "adult" and is always confronted with a certain problem (Baym 37). These problems can come in many forms: parental neglect, orphanhood, exploitation and so on. The most sympathetic character is mostly the mother. She functions as a powerful tool of guidance and hope for the young girls. However, the loss of one's mother often sets off the heroine's problems and it is only the memory and love of the mother that helps her overcome her new and often pitiful situation (Baym 37). Characters who are often cruel to the heroine can be her guardian, an administrator, "owners of the space within which the child is legally constrained" and even an aunt (Baym 37). Indeed, aunts, as Baym puts it, are often the guiltiest ones, to whom many heroines are sent. These aunts symbolise the alternative of the mother (37).

Next to the heroine's family, a "surrogate" family is formed (Baym 38). A "network" of friends is created to help and support her (Baym 38). This network, present in almost all of these novels, will gradually define itself around the heroine, which means that her story becomes theirs, resulting not only in the story of the "self-made woman" but also the story of the "surrogate" family, as Baym says (38). The men in these stories are often minor and unimportant characters (Baym 39). Their main purpose is to control the heroines, which ultimately forms their life. And often, with the death of the father, financial supports fail and leaves the heroine into destitution or as Nina Baym puts it: "an embarrassed state of affairs" (Baym 39). This new state of affairs often ends with the heroine searching and finding a job.

Religion, an important factor, is not always truly present and imperative in the heroine's life. This depends on the personal beliefs of the author. Some novels are secular while others are very religious (Baym 41). If indeed that is the case, these religious values are, according to Baym, considered within the domestic environment (41). Each heroine is permitted to find her own God, her own beliefs, without the intervention of religious institutions. This means that religion becomes something personal, taken out of its patriarchal social setting (Baym 42).

1.2 The Sentimental Novel

The sentimental novel, a label often applied to Little Women, is a genre that came into vogue in America around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century. As a genre it may be contrasted with the novels of great American authors such as Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne.[9] According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, this particular genre can be described as "any novel that exploits the reader's capacity for tenderness, compassion or sympathy to a disproportionate degree by presenting a beclouded or unrealistic view of its subjects." It emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, as a reaction against the strong rationalist movement of the Neo-classical period. Indeed, they preferred true feelings above reason and rationality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas of the natural goodness of Man and his belief that moral development can only be achieved through the experience of true sympathy would have been at the base of this movement. According to Philip Fisher, sentimentalism seems to include all the moral flaws that the honesty, sobriety and objectivity of realism were designed to correct (92). He believes that both genres are closely linked, as they both seek to point out the flaws of the moral and emotional reality. Fisher also adds that the novel owes a great deal of its popularity to the sentimental novel, simply because this genre "depends upon an inward and empathic

emotional bond, it connects in its intimate presentation of ordinary life, in particularly rich ways to the possibilities of the novel: a private, domestic, intimate form"(92). Moreover, Fisher believes that the sentimental novel functions as a moral evidence of the dominance of the middle-class, just as the epic genre functioned as the morals of the aristocracy(92). Jane Tompkins explains in her study The Popular Novel in England that this genre is a product of the new modern society, providing security, leisure and education resulting in human sympathies expanded towards the less fortunate and in a social conscience, which was impossible in prior times (Fisher 94).

The American Sentimental novel was mainly influenced by the English novel of sentimentality. Indeed, authors such as Richardson excelled in this genre. Works such as Pamela or virtue rewarded[10] greatly influenced American authors. It tells the story of a young virtuous servant, Pamela, seduced by her master. She refuses him, which eventually results in his recognition of her true virtues and qualities and in their marriage. Not only did they use the key theme, they also intensified it.

The Domestic novel, the American sentimental novel emerging in the late nineteenth-century added other conflicts to this theme and enlarged the number of protagonists. The reason for this minor adjustment lies in the fact that America, as a new nation, faced unique social, spiritual, political and economical circumstances, especially for women.[11] These novels were pleasing women more than men. American sentimental narratives are often more didactic than their British models. The novel stresses the usefulness of their fiction by providing upright moral examples and positive social values to the new republic. The novel centres on the female authority banned to the domestic spheres, represented as the guardians of spirituality and virtue. Indeed, an idealised version of the domestic life is told, often including idealised versions of Christian families. However, in their representation of women as spiritual guardians of the family, the novel often raises the issues of abolitionism and others socio-political problems.[12]

In her book Woman's Fiction, A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870, Nina Baym distinguishes the sentimental novel from what she labels "Woman's Fiction", for she believes that the terminology of sentimentality or domestic fiction may be misleading (24). Indeed, she fears that such a terminology may stress a "presumed ambiance in the fiction" and is often understood as a "judgment rather than a description" (Baym 24). She

acknowledges the cult of domesticity and rejects its criticism. She does not understand this domesticity as a trap – as many critics do – but as "a simple injunction for a woman willing to turn the key on her own prison" (Baym, 27) To Baym, this fiction implies that both men and women find true happiness in the domestic sphere, not simply the parental core, but also the entire network of attachments based on love and friendship, thus "domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail American society" (Baym, 27). Female authors often created heroines centred in the home, yet forced to support themselves (Baym 28). In these novels, the heroine will always be contrasted to the typical domestic woman. The passive woman and the modern woman, the belle, are used as counterparts to the heroine, thus revealing the heroine's true independence within the domestic sphere (Baym 28).

Twentieth-century critics such as Perry Miller and Richard Chase have taught students to understand this fiction as an inferior one, believing that these novels written by women created false stereotypes and writing "weak-minded pap to nourish the prejudice of an ill- educated and underemployed female readership"(Tompkins, 124). Jane Tompkins reacted against these harsh critics, believing that:

> the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by the better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville (124).

The domestic novel, the sentimental novel and what Baym calls 'women's fiction' have often been wrongly accused of being inferior to authors who advocated models of intellectual daring and honesty. Indeed, of all these great authors active in the nineteenth-century only two authors survived the – as Baym calls it – 'winnowing process,' Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott (23). And, as she remarks, both authors were not remembered for their strong works of woman's fiction, but in the case of Stowe for her anti-slavery and regional-religious literature and in Alcott's case for her so-called literary work for children (Baym 23). Even these two authors were forgotten in the twentieth-century, until recently. Scholars have finally created a context in which it becomes possible to re-examine this forgotten yet significant feminist literature.

2. *Little Women*, Form and Ideology

2.1 "Little Women" as a Sentimental novel within the Domestic Spheres

Nina Baym is right in placing Alcott's novel, Little Women into the category of Woman's Fiction. Louisa Alcott wrote this novel in less than three months after her publisher Thomas Niles, representing Roberts Brothers, urged her to write a novel for girls about girls. In many regards we can say that this is a book meant for children. However, the March family saga does not tell the story of four young girls stuck in puberty and childlike adventures. They develop into grown-up, learned women. Louisa May Alcott wrote about the intimate process of female development, including all its woes and triumphs. Therefore this book can be categorized as Women's Fiction; for it does indeed tell us a story especially written for female readers, about a highly female topic and it was written by Louisa May Alcott, a female author.

However, when writing this sentimental novel for women and about women, I believe that Alcott toyed with the conventions of the Sentimental novel by duplicating the heroines and adjusting the key themes. As this novel is partially based upon the author's life, it is not strange that we find four heroines instead of one. Growing up with four girls, Louisa created a parallel home in this novel, strongly related to her own.

The theme is quite simple and is introduced in the very first chapter. We get to know four girls, Meg, Josephine, Elizabeth and Amy. The book does not open with a detailed description of the theme or the landscape in which the story is set or with philosophical talks. It starts with a private discussion between the four March girls. In this discussion the key theme is immediately covered and their personality is sketched. In this genre, the themes usually focus on a heroine embodying either the angel type or the practical type, who is contrasted with the passive type or the belle type. During her private struggle for independence, she will also learn to balance society's demands of self-denial with her own desires for independence and often suffers at the hands of some kind of higher authority (Baym 37). The tale generally ends in marriage (Baym 38), with the heroine either reforming the bad male seducer or marrying a respectable man, already reformed. Now, if we are to apply this to the novel, we cannot but conclude that Little Women corresponds to this definition.

2.2 The theme, "Playing Pilgrims"

As we have already stated, the book centres around the coming of age of the March girls. So, we might speak of a *Bildungsroman*. The first chapter, 'Playing Pilgrims', refers to the well-known Christian allegory Pilgrim's Progress from This World to that Which Is to Come by John Bunyan. Twenty-first century readers may not be familiar with this novel and will probably not understand the allusion in the title. However, in the nineteenth century, this allegorical tale was very popular and loved. The book has been regarded as one of the most successful religious allegories. It was written during Bunyan's imprisonment. The allegory, very simple in its narrative, tells the story of Christian, a common man, on his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. To arrive at the Celestial City, Christian must pass through the Slough of Despond, the Place of Beautiful, Vanity Fair, the river of Death, and many other such places. With his writing Bunyan challenges the idea that literary judgment is untouched by personal belief. His narrative is plain and pure, so as to save souls. The book was not written for children. Nonetheless, due to its immense popularity, it was quickly adapted for children.

As a child Louisa May Alcott received her very own copy at the age of eight. And she made sure that her fictional sisters receive their own copies, for Alcott used this motif of a pilgrimage in her novel, as the sisters "bear their character flaws as burdens" on their journey towards self-improvement (Lundin 138). And on this journey they are forced to pass through their very own Valley of Humiliation, the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair and the Valley of Shadow to finally reach the Celestial City, which serves as a metaphor for the place in which they achieve and acknowledge self-improvement. However, Alcott uses Bunyan's motif not once but twice, as is revealed in the first chapter. The girls were familiarised with the story from very early on for they "used to play *Pilgrim's Progress* when they were little things" (LW, 14). Amy's comment on how she would still like to play it but cannot for she is too old for such childlike games, unconsciously introduced the idea of playing Pilgrims, as they all recognised their burdens. Marmee lectures that it is never too late to play this game, as it is a play we all play "all the time in one way or another" (LW, 15). Indeed, "our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get

before Father comes home" (LW, 15). The book, which the girls received as Christmas presents, will serve as a stand-in father figure, leading them on the right path.

The burdens are different for each of the girls; they must overcome their personal flaws. Meg must deal with her vanity, Jo with her dreadful temper, Beth must defeat her shyness and little Amy her selfishness. And so the theme is set, for they must conquer their own flaws in order to live up to their parents' expectations as wives, mothers and as citizens.

Throughout the novel other chapters allude to Pilgrims Progress in their title; *Burdens, Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful, Amy's Valley of Humiliation, Jo meets Apollyon, Meg goes to Vanity Fair* and *The Valley of Shadow*. Indeed the coming of age novel seems to be constructed partly following Bunyan's novel.

2.3 The Sentimental Plot of Little Women

Using Pilgrim's Progress as a thread throughout the novel, the actual plot of the novel is quite sentimental.

If we are to focus solely on Josephine March – the central character of the novel – we can see her as the young innocent girl defying society's demands. She is suddenly 'orphaned', as her father leaves to the front, to fulfil his manly duty during the war. Generally, in fiction it is the mother who disappears – mainly through death – and it is the memory and love for the late mother that helps the heroine to endure her new situation (Baym 37). In this novel, it is not the mother, but the father who leaves, and it is her father's memory and Jo's love for him that helps her to overcome and endure her situation. This situation is made worse for she is forced to go working. She has to work for her Aunt March. Throughout the novel she is depicted as a stubborn, old, childless and rich lady. Her treatment of the family seems at times too harsh, but in the end, the old lady always comes round. However, working at her aunt's, surrounded by all the luxury, reminds Jo of what they once had and lost, thus reminding her of her father's failures. During these harsh times she makes the acquaintance of her neighbours, who quickly become part of the family. They function as the surrogate family Baym talked about (38), helping Jo throughout this ordeal. After some crucial events in her family home, she decides it's time to leave her sanctuary and she leaves for New York. There again – through her own social capacities – she creates a surrogate family, when she finds a surrogate mother in the

person of Mrs Kirke, as Jo herself suggests in her letters. In New York, she meets Pr. Bhaer, who will guide her to her true self as he advises her not to write silly stories but real ones. As such, she finally finds her true voice – as is displayed in the poem "In the Garrett." Eventually Pr Bhaer is the man she will marry.

However, her sisters' stories also fit into this sentimental construction. They are all temporarily orphaned as their father leaves for the war, they all fall into poverty and all have to struggle to overcome this trial. In fact, throughout the story it is made clear by the narrator that for Meg and Amy this newly impoverished state of affairs is much more painful as they truly suffer humiliations, whereas Jo is able to take advantage out of this condition. Indeed, it encourages her to write and actually publish her stories so as to finance the family.

Amy and Meg however, have to be painfully humiliated before they can learn from this trial and rise above it. Indeed, Amy suffers from her new class condition, as is made clear in the chapter, *Amy's Valley of humiliation*. Meg also suffers from class distinction as is made clear in the chapter *Meg goes to Vanity Fair*. As Stephanie Foote said in her essay, these two girls have to learn the ways of the social world, concerning class and status, through deeply negative emotions. Both chapters refer to Bunyan's allegory.

Indeed, the Valley of Humiliation is a valley which Christian – the original allegory's protagonist – must pass on his way to the Celestial City. There Christian meets Apollyon, the lord of the City of Destruction and one of the Devil's companions, who forces Christian to go back to his domain. *Amy's Valley of humiliation* takes place in her school, where she punished, for she had sneaked contrabands into the school. Pickled limes are the forbidden items much longed for by little Amy, who still owns her classmates "debts of honour" (LW 101), in the form of these pickles. Now Meg, who understands her sister, lends her some money in order to buy the forbidden items. Indeed, Amy seems to understand social conventions and is "happily enslaved by it", as Foote mentions. Nevertheless, the narrator is very critical of little Amy and her "grandiose desires of social advancement" (Foote, 74). Amy symbolises how easily a woman's desires for such advancement can become tragic, as is the case in this chapter. The word of Amy's limes gets out and Amy is punished. The narrator describes her punishment as a dreadful ordeal little Amy has to undergo;

> For the first time in her life she had been struck and the disgrace, in her eyes, was a deep

> as if he had knocked her down. […] That was dreadful. It would have been bad enough to go to her seat, and see the pitying faces of her friends, or the satisfied ones of her few enemies; but to face the whole school with that shame fresh upon her, seemed impossible, and for the second time she felt as if she could only drop down where she stood, and break her heart with crying. A bitter sense of wrong, and the thought of Jenny Snow, helped her to bear it; […] During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. (LW 106)

Amy's severe punishment will never be forgotten and she learns a very valuable lesson concerning these social advancements, as Marmee lectures her for her disgraceful behaviour:

> You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need for parading them, for conceit spoilt the genius. There is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long; even if, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty. (LW 109)

And so Amy is punished, due to social conventions, but through this little trial – though not so little for Amy – she will learn to play out the social conventions for her own advancement, as she learns her lesson well.

In *Meg goes to Vanity Fair* – referring to the city through which the King's Highway passes and where the annual fair is held in Pilgrim's Progress – Meg is invited to the Moffats, rich friends of hers. She perceives the class distinction and though she is able to judge them, she cannot help but fall into temptation and lets her friends dress her up. It is true that she feels better cultivated as the narrator observes: "Perhaps Meg felt, *without understanding why*, that they were not particularly cultivated or intelligent people and that all their gilding could not quite conceal the ordinary material of which they were made"[13] (LW 132). But, as the narrator cunningly mentions, Meg did not understand why she felt so, for: "It was certainly agreeable to fare sumptuously" and "The more she saw of Annie Moffat's pretty things, the more she envied her, and sighed to be rich. Home now looked bare and as she thought of it, work grew harder than ever, she felt that she was a very destitute and much-injured girl" (LW 132). Though she feels that she is the most cultivated one, she still envies Annie Moffat. At the ball, as she feels ashamed of her own gown, she lets Annie Moffat and her friends dress her up. Throughout the novel, Meg is undoubtedly portrayed as the most conventional and domestic sister, but she too has her pride and vanity, which are her major character flaws. She voluntarily proposed to work outside the home, as a governess at the Kings, a rich family, where she is constantly reminded of what she too should have. Evidently, she immensely enjoyed the ball in her new

gown. However, she is the victim of gossip and feels mortified. Furthermore, Laurie, her close friend, whom she looks upon as a brother, severely judges her for her frivolous behaviour:

> The queer 'feeling' did not pass away, but she imagined herself acting the new part of a fine lady, and so got on pretty well, though the tight dress gave her side-ache, the train kept gutting under her feet, and she was in constant fear lest her earrings should fly off, and get lost or broken. She was flirting her fan, and laughing at the feeble jokes of a young gentleman who tried to be witty, when she suddenly stopped laughing, and looked confused; for just opposite, she saw Laurie. He was staring at her with undisguised surprise, and disapproval also, she thought, for, though he bowed and smiled, yet something in his honest eyes made her blush, and wish she had her old dress on. (LW 142)

Despite the fact that she clearly feels uneasy in her new role, as her dress gave her an ache, she still manages to enjoy herself in this imaginary role of being "Annie Moffat". In fact, it is not until she perceives Laurie's disapproving look that she realises her mistake and feels ashamed. Later, she confesses her silly behaviour to her mother and says, looking half ashamed: "I'll not be sentimental or dissatisfied, Mother; I know I'm a silly little girl, and I'll stay with you till I'm fit to take care of myself. But it *is* nice to be praised and admired, and I can't help saying I like it" at which she receives a valuable lesson from her mother, guiding her to true happiness, "That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion, and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things. Learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty, Meg." A little further, Marmee goes on saying: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished and good, to be admired and loved and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send" (LW 150).

Thus Meg just received one of the most valuable lessons ever, for now she finally knows what is expected from her and she knows now how to behave. With her words, Marmee shaped her daughter's identity, which is to be beautiful, good, accomplished, loved, respected, admired and wisely married – just as the patriarchal society's convention expects – but Marmee expects even more. Certainly, she wants her daughter to lead *useful* lives and not idle ones like Annie Moffat certainly will. In her speech Marmee also acknowledges the importance of a good marriage, believing that money is indeed "needful and precious". Nevertheless, she also stresses the fact that money must be wisely used and is not a "prize" or something to "strive

for" as she would prefer to see her daughters "poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace."

Marmee admits the importance of currency, but believes that self-respect, peace and true love are more important than money, even in marriage. Thus she encourages her daughters to become more than just beautiful, beloved, admired and accomplished and so on, but to be at peace and to know the pleasures of self-respect. As Foote observes, Marmee relies on a vocabulary of sentiment and domestic thoughts concerning marriage but valorises the idea of a happy home (72).

These two occurrences are well befitting for a sentimental novel. However, more can be said. Indeed, Meg has her deal of trials but finally leaves home to marry and form her own family. Amy will literally be orphaned as her mother leaves to attend to her injured husband. She will be looked after not by her sisters, but by Aunt March. This "exile" as the narrator calls it, again a distinctive motif of the sentimental novel, will terrify the young child, but Amy will persevere as she says so herself: "I don't think I *can* bear it, but I'll try" (LW 282). Surely, the strong-minded Amy does bear it and becomes aunt March' permanent companion, taking Jo's place. As she grows up, Amy does indeed become a much loved, admired, respected and accomplished young woman and she also marries.

3. The Heroine Jo

Jo, the much beloved little woman, is often perceived as *the* heroine of the novel. Jo, who has been created by Alcott as her own literary counterpart, deserves this title. However, as we have already seen, Jo's sisters are all heroines and should not be dismissed as domestic, idle and shy.

Nevertheless, it is Jo who stands out most when reading the novel. Unlike her sisters, she challenges the normative patriarchal society and does not try to fit in, as Amy and Meg so splendidly do, nor does she flee from it as Beth does. Instead she defies society. She does not want to be a girl; she wants to be a man, just as she does not want to be with Laurie. She wants to be Laurie (Quimby 1). Alcott seizes every opportunity to stress Jo's masculine attitudes and aspiration. She constantly describes Jo as being more masculine than feminine and Jo herself openly admits her wishes to be a man:

> "Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in *a gentlemanly manner*[14] (LW 2)

> "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over *my disappointment in not being a boy*.[15] And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (LW 4)

In Alcott's physical description of Jo, we also recognise masculine traits, as she has "round shoulders," "big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes" (LW 6), furthermore she was bestowed with "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (LW 6) Her masculine traits, which make of her the archetypical tomboy, are not only emphasised by Alcott and asserted by Jo herself. They are also recognised by her family. On Mr March's coming home he refers to his beloved daughter as his "son Jo" (LW 348), Meg advises her sister not to behave as a boy, whereas Amy despises her sister's boyish manners.

Jo's male aspirations are, according to Michelle Ann Abate, caused by the suffocating society she finds herself in (72). Indeed, she does not wish to be confined within the home and does not want to be feminine, as she associates women with the domestic confinement, submission and restraint, whereas men are independent, empowered and can be writers.

Elizabeth Janeway[16] defined Jo as the representative of "the dream of growing up into full humanity with all its possibilities instead of into limited femininity"(Quimby, 6). Though she assets femininity, resulting in her rebellion, she fails to understand society's rules. Jo focuses on what she cannot do or what she is not allowed to do, instead of recognising the possibilities at hand for women. As such she often behaves in a manner she believes to be unfeminine. Evidently, Jo realizes that she should behave as a perfect lady. However, this meant that she should behave according to the manners and customs of the middle and upper class to which she belongs. Yet, in her attempts to defy her community, she behaves not so much as a man, but as someone belonging to the working class, very common (Abate 72). According to Abate, it is not so much a transgression of gender, but more a transgression of class (72). Indeed, Jo's rebellion seems much more aggressive towards the unequal class distinctions than towards the unequal gender distinctions.

Jo's gender transgression becomes a strong part of who she is. She does not like to wear dresses, she does not want to *have* to wear gloves, she would rather fight instead of her father, she longs to go to college, she hates needle work and other domestic chores, and she loves to run wild and cherishes independence. Her rebellion will determine her character and her life. Indeed, Jo becomes the democratic and independent heroine.

One of Jo's most striking characteristics is her famous temper. Her anger will first rise to the surface in Chapter 8, *Jo Meets Apollyon*. The title of the chapter wisely refers to John Bunyan's allegory, in which Christian fights Apollyon, the destroyer. Indeed, Apollyon comes to Jo in the figure of her little sister, seeking revenge. The small child has been forced to stay at home while Jo and Meg visit the theatre. After the incident Jo wonders if her sister would try to "make her sorry for it" as apparently she usually does. Evidently, both girls do not always get on as they should, for they are both quick of temper: "Amy teased Jo, Jo irritated Amy, and semi-occasional explosions occurred." Yet, though Amy – still a child – may at times fail her innocence, Jo as the oldest has the biggest temper and "had hard times trying to curb the fiery spirit"(LW 114). On coming home from the theatre Jo discovers that Amy has – as a retribution – burned her book, containing all her little unfinished stories, which infuriates Jo:

> Amy got no further, for Jo's hot temper mastered her, and she shook Amy till her teeth chattered in her head, crying in a passion of grief and anger... "You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never forgive you as long as I live." Meg flew to rescue Amy, and Beth to pacify Jo, but Jo was quite beside herself, and with a parting box on her sister's ear, she rushed out of the room up to the old sofa in the garret, and finished her fight alone. The storm cleared up below, for

> Mrs. March came home, and, having heard the story, soon brought Amy to a sense of the wrong she had done her sister. Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise. It was only half a dozen little fairy tales, but Jo had worked over them patiently, putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print. She had just copied them with great care, and had destroyed the old manuscript, so that Amy's bonfire had consumed the loving work of several years. It seemed a small loss to others, but to Jo it was a dreadful calamity, and she felt that it never could be made up to her. Beth mourned as for a departed kitten, and Meg refused to defend her pet. Mrs. March looked grave and grieved, and Amy felt that no one would love her till she had asked pardon for the act which she now regretted more than any of them. (LW 116)

Destroying the manuscript is indeed an act worthy of Apollyon. Little Amy soon realises her wrong and asks for forgiveness; however, no pardon will be granted. Certainly, this act of vengeance is not punished by the narrator, despite the fact that until now Amy has severely been judged for her countless little faults, such as vanity, idleness and greed. Instead, the narrator will focus on the grave consequence of Jo's temper and refusal of forgiveness. Jo, who refuses to acknowledge Amy's remorse, consciously ignores her sister. When Amy joins Jo and Laurie for skating – Jo had promised Amy that they would go together – Jo does not warn her sister that some of the ice may be too thin to skate on: "No matter whether she heard or not, let her take care of herself," resulting in Amy's near-drowning as she did fall through the thin ice. Realising her mistake, Jo is paralysed: "She tried to call Laurie, but her voice was gone. She tried to rush forward, but her feet seemed to have no strength in them, and for a second, she could only stand motionless, staring with a terror-stricken face at the little blue hood above the black water"(LW 120). It is only after almost losing her sister that Jo admits that she fears this anger of hers, for she could lose herself when in rage: "I get so savage." (LW 122). Indeed, this savage rage is quite foreign to most ladies, and is part of Jo's tomboyish ways.

Yet, Jo is not the only one who must learn to temper her anger; her mother has also been forced to manage her anger. Evidently, Marmee has been fighting her anger for forty years, but she has learned to repress her anger and she encourages her daughter to do the same, repress her feelings. Though it is not explicitly said, it is implied that this anger is a result of the sickening and suffocating treatment women knew in the nineteenth-century. As Jo will indeed learn to control her fury, she will not do so as an act of repression, but as an act of true feminine patience and intellect. As I have already mentioned, Jo will become the democratic and independent heroine. Though she strongly fought against the domestication of women, Jo herself will experience it. Yet, she will refuse the typical dim-witted role of the belle; she will be the empowered domesticated woman. Unlike her sisters, she will - even in courtship - refuse to obey the silly rules a lady was expected to respect. As such, a new kind of heroine was born.

In the following two sections, I will investigate Jo's writing ambition and her struggle for gender equality. After this section about the anxiety of authorship, I will look into the marriage theme, which constitutes an important part of the plot. As there are two key plots in this novel, the quest for independence, liberated from the suffocating imprisonment typical of the nineteenth-century – well exemplified in Jo's character and writing ambition – and the marriage plot, both should be explored. Additionally, through their marriage the girls prove themselves to be liberated, cultured and accomplished domestic heroines.

4. Authorship and Anxiety of authorship

4.1 Jo's Authorship and her Anxieties

Like Amy, Jo has grand artistic aspirations, writing. Indeed, Jo has become best known for her writing and can thus be analysed as a model of literary achievement. From the first pages it is clear that Jo is the bookworm of the family, which is the first characterisation of Jo in the novel: "said Jo, who was a bookworm" (LW 2). It is only later that she is characterised as being gentleman-like. Indeed, her writing aspiration is more crucial for her own personal development than her gender transgression.

It is my personal opinion that her rebellion against the typical Victorian womanhood should be treated as a logical result of her literary ambitions. Jo is constantly writing wild stories, plays and poetry. Moreover, what attracts her most in Aunt March's mansion is the large library, where she "devoured poetry, romance, history, travels and pictures, like a regular bookworm" (LW 57). Yet, Jo realises that as a woman she can never achieve true authorship, equal to male authorship. Indeed, as Abate remarked, her gender rebellion is caused by the traditional role that is requested of women within her class, or to quote Abate: "Jo's embrace of masculinity largely emerges from her critique of femininity" (67). As such she functions as the exact opposite of Amy. In the first part of the novel Amy has deluded and silly ideas about society and seems as Foote says: "happily enslaved by it" (74). However, through pain and humiliation, Amy will learn how to adjust and behave within this society and still be independent, true to oneself and respected. As Foote points out, Amy's understanding of the complex working of society and her acceptance of that society, will be rewarded (78). Jo, on the other hand, will defy society.

As an author, Jo will suffer from what Gilbert and Gubar call anxiety of authorship (49). This anxiety has been observed in most eighteenth and nineteenth-century female authors. Harold Bloom has analysed the Western literary history and has come to the conclusion that all authors must suffer an *anxiety of influence* (Gilbert and Gubar 46, 47). Evidently, the author suffers from the fear and realisation that his own creation is in fact not his own, but is partially created by his literary predecessors, who have greatly influenced him. Hence, the author must engage in a battle with his predecessors. However, Bloom does not include female authors in his analysis. The battle Bloom talks of is a battle between fathers - the literary predecessors- and sons - the challenged authors (Gilbert and Gubar 47). Yet, it would be hard for Bloom to

include female authors as they are indeed rare. The literary scene has been dominated by men and as a result our Western literary history is patriarchal. If a woman would want to write, she would not face her predecessors, as there are none, but she would have to challenge the entire patriarchal literary tradition (Gilbert and Gubar 48).

Furthermore, this patriarchal literary tradition has not only excluded female authors, it has also created an image of the woman in its writing. Indeed, they have defined the woman in two extremes, the passive Victorian angel in the house or the madwoman, the monster (Gilbert and Gubar 48). As Gilbert and Gubar have remarked, the male author symbolises authority, yet he fails to accurately define how the woman experiences her own identity (48). As such, the woman writer is contradicted in her own gender definition. Consequently, what the male authors experience as anxiety of influence, becomes an anxiety of authorship for his female colleague; for she is overcome with "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her"(49). Certainly, the female author must first struggle against the image her male precursors have created of her (Gilbert and Gubar 49). As such, the female battle to write becomes a battle of self-creation, against her male precursors reading of her. Her writing becomes a "revisionary process" (Gilbert and Gubar 49).

Through the patriarchal reading of the woman, defining her in two extremes, the woman is thus victimised and feels inferior. This feeling of inferiority will influence her struggle for artistic self-definition and will distinguish her writing from that of her male colleagues (Gilbert and Gubar 50). As such a new, different literary subculture is created, which helps create a new viable tradition for future female authors (Gilbert and Gubar 50). Nevertheless, her feeling of inferiority will stain her writing, resulting in a unique style and structure. This is what Gilbert and Gubar call the "infection in the sentence" (50).

As Showalter observed, the female author was forced to take second place to her male colleagues (Gilbert and Gubar 61). She had to be modest, subservient, almost apologetic for her writing, otherwise she ran the risk of being ignored, attacked or to be judged as mad. Due to the economical and moral conventions, no female author could risk to be labelled mad, indecent, or worse, promiscuous (Gilbert and Gubar 63). Female authors consequently chose to diminish their own accomplishments, chose the domestic, and chose what they considered to be safe (Gilbert and Gubar 64). According to Gilbert and Gubar this emphasizes just how sickening

this anxiety was both in England and in America (64). Indeed, the female author was forced to either weaken her work or to publish her work anonymously or under a pseudonym (Gilbert and Gubar 65). Louisa May Alcott herself was forced to publish a different kind of literature anonymously or under a pseudonym to increase her earnings. As literary thrillers were quite popular and were bought by editors of popular magazines, she published hers anonymously or under a pseudonym. These works are not known to most of her readers and are more passionate, sensational and gothic inspired novels, often published under her pseudonym A. M Barnard. This genre was indeed very lucrative for Alcott. Other pseudonyms were used, such as Aunt Weedy, Flora Fairfield, Oranthy Bluggage and Minerva Moody.

Assuming a male identity was a popular technique for female authors in order to gain the "male acceptance of their intellectual seriousness" (Gilbert and Gubar, 65). This newly assumed identity protected these women from their male colleagues' judgements, as they were now free to write without constraints. Yet, in taking on the male identity, they deny their own identity, which can only end in an identity crisis (Gilbert and Gubar 66). Louisa May Alcott did not risk such an identity crisis, as she published her stories under clear female pseudonyms. In the case of A. M Barnard, the gender could not be deduced.

This anxiety of authorship is clearly visible in the character of Jo and can be seen as a reflection of Alcott's personal anxieties. Jo, who has a clear talent for writing, seems to excel when it comes to passionate tales. Indeed, their little play; "The Witch's Cures"" (LW 10), at Christmas, including exotic characters as Don Pedro, Rodrigo and Zara, is described as the "*operatic tragedy,*" full of suspense, drama and heightened passion. Jo loves to write and is at her best at home, with her sisters as readers and audience. As they are all girls, Jo does not feel in the least inferior, she is proud of her writing. When she writes for her father, things are different, as she then labels her writing as "silly little things" (LW 268), that could only amuse him; "I made a 'pome' yesterday, when I was helping Hannah wash; and as Father likes my silly little things, I put it in to amuse him"(LW 268). As such, when writing for a man – even if that man is her father – Jo unconsciously feels the need to highlight the silliness of her writing in an almost apologetic sense. Yet, if we are to take a closer look at the poem, we can conclude, that though the poem is indeed amusing, it is also a proof of her literate mind:

A Song From the Suds

Queen of my tub, I merrily sing,
While the white foam rises high,
And sturdily wash and rinse and wring,
And fasten the clothes to dry.
Then out in the free fresh air they swing,
Under the sunny sky.

I wish we could wash from our hearts and souls
The stains of the week away,
And let water and air by their magic make
Ourselves as pure as they.
Then on the earth there would be indeed,
A glorious washing day!

Along the path of a useful life,
Will heartsease ever bloom.
The busy mind has no time to think
Of sorrow or care or gloom.
And anxious thoughts may be swept away,
As we bravely wield a broom.

I am glad a task to me is given,
To labor at day by day,
For it brings me health and strength and hope,
And I cheerfully learn to say,
"Head, you may think, Heart, you may feel,
But, Hand, you shall work alway!" (LW 268)

Though very simple and conventional, using assonance and a clear rhyme scheme, different for each sestet, the message enshrined in the poem is quite peculiar. Due to her father's illness, Jo is now forced to domestic chores. She will use the process of washing clothes for her own pain and she hopes that their hearts and souls can be washed out. Though it may be quite silly, the poem clearly refers tot the necessity of leading a useful life. The poem may be quite childish – as it was written by a young girl – it is nonetheless sad, yet sweet and meaningful, and should not be dismissed as just *silly little thing*.

However, Jo is encouraged at home to pursue a literary career. So the next step would be to publish her stories. In chapter 14, *Secrets*, Josephine March is challenged, yet decisive, as she says: "I've done my best! If this won't suit, I shall have to wait till I can do better" (LW 231). She is proud of her work, yet conscious of the fact that her work will be judged. That may be why she slips out of the house, unnoticed, so that no real expectations are created. What follows clearly illustrates how tormented Jo must feel, as a young female author:

> If anyone had been watching her, he would have thought her movements decidedly peculiar, for on alighting, she went off at a great pace till she reached a certain number in a certain busy street. Having found the place with some difficulty, she went into the doorway, looked up the dirty stairs, and after standing stock still a minute, suddenly dived into the street and walked away as rapidly as she came. This manoeuvre she repeated several times, to the great amusement of a black-eyed young gentleman lounging in the window of a building opposite. *On returning for the third time, Jo gave herself a shake, pulled her hat over her eyes, and walked up the stairs, looking as if she were going to have all her teeth out*. […]In ten minutes Jo came running downstairs with a very red face and the general appearance of a person who had just passed through a trying ordeal of some sort.[17] (LW 232)

Later, Jo confesses to Laurie that she should at least try, but she seems somehow certain of her failure. When she does succeed and her two stories are published in *Spread Eagles*, her secret is finally revealed. Her story, "The Rival Painters" – still unknown to her sisters – is read out loud and described as "romantic, and somewhat pathetic, as most of the characters died in the end"(LW 243). Jo only reveals to her sister that she wrote this story, after having received her sister's gratification and approval of the story. Though her stories are published under her own name, she is not paid for them. To see them published is more precious to Jo:

> And when I went to get my answer, the man said he liked them both, but didn't pay beginners, only let them print in his paper, and noticed the stories. It *was good practice*, he said, and when the beginners improved, anyone would pay. So I let him have the two stories, and today this was sent to me, and Laurie caught me with it and insisted on seeing it, so I let him. And he said it was good, and I shall write more, and he's going to get the next paid for, and I am so happy, for in time *I may be able to support myself* and help the girls." Jo's breath gave out here, and wrapping her head in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears, *for to be independent and earn the praise* of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end.[18] (LW 245)

For Jo, "that happy end" means to be independent and self-sufficient and she can achieve this with her writing. This trivial publication is indeed quite significant to achieve her goal. However, this tale is described as passionate and pathetic. Jo's stories are indeed quite sentimental, often ending in multiple deaths and seem to resemble the stories Louisa May Alcott herself wrote and published pseudonymously.

In the fourth chapter of Good Wives, the second part of the novel, *Literary Lessons*, the reader discovers that Jo has indeed evolved into a more mature writer, with a real passion for writing. Certainly, writing seems to have become pure bliss for Jo and may even be categorised as a ritual, adorned with some peculiar attributes, such as the cap, which was experienced by its owner as good fortune, for if she fell into despair, she abandoned the cap, as if this little cap was to be held responsible for her failures. Yet, she found the discipline to write;

> "Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex', as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace […]This cap was a beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family, who during these periods kept their distance, merely popping in their heads semi-occasionally to ask, with interest, "Does genius burn, Jo?" (GW 40)

This inquiry made by her loved ones, "does genius burn," is something Louisa herself was quite familiar with. And indeed, Jo seems to be gifted with the same passion and genius as Louisa. Looking at Louisa's personal journal, we observe these very words: "*August.* – "Moods." Genius burned so fiercely that for four weeks I wrote all day and planned nearly all night, being quite possessed by my work. I was perfectly happy and seemed to have no wants. Finished the book, or a rough draught of it, and put it away to settle" (Alcott 122). Both Jo and Louisa experience the same feelings when it comes to their writing, and go about it in an almost identical manner.

Discovering the financial aspect of literature, "she knows just what folks like, and gets paid well for writing it" (GW 43) Jo decides to leave her "mild romances" for what they are, and taken with great ambition, to have a go at this style. This decision, to adjust her writing to the audience's desires, can only be seen as a choice of independence. Indeed, when her story – "full of desperation and despair" – is published and paid for with a hundred dollar bill, Jo does not only discover that she has finally learned to do something well, she also enjoys the taste of real independence as she "ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants and need ask no one for a penny" (GW 46). As such we could conclude that one of her trials has finally triumphed. As first indicated, if we are to read the story of the March girls as the story of Jo, a sentimental plot can certainly be found, as Jo falls into a financial destitution and is thus victimised by her class and eventually gender. Publishing her story and earning money helps her to gain financial independence and the strength not to pine away in envy of rich girls.

Nonetheless, Jo may have indeed acquired financial independence and she may have transgressed her gender disabilities in the publishing of stories which are not bound to the convention of the patriarchal Victorian literary constitution. Evidently, Jo freely chooses the grandness over the simplicity, the dramatic over the domestic, the public over the private and the glory over the obscurity, as "she resolved to make a bold stroke for fame and fortune" (GW 46). Yet, the narrator gently describes those stories: "the usual labyrinth of love, mystery and murder, for the story belonged to that class of light literature in which the passions have a holiday and when the author's invention fails, a grand catastrophe clears the stage of one half

the dramatis personae, leaving the other half to exult over their downfall," cunningly approving of those stories, only to take them down afterwards as "trash" (GW 42). This does indeed reflect upon Louisa Alcott's own state of mind, as she too was torn between her wild fantasies and imaginations and what she ought to think of such stories. Sadly, we must witness how even Jo will be *tamed* into writing more conventional stories, suited to the morals of the Victorian reader, with conventions and morals created by Jo's male colleagues. Though she publishes one sensational story after another – in order to pay the bills – Jo will be torn between her own conscience, strongly influenced by the patriarchal conventions and her desire to be self-sufficient and to support her family. The first critique comes from her father, a male paternal voice, after having read her first published story: "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest and never mind the money" (GW 45). Unconsciously he urges her to write more appropriate stories, as aiming at the highest would be aiming at the constitutionalised conventions she ought to be aiming at as a woman. And indeed, Jo will do so, as she ruthlessly amends her own writing to the need of others: "So, with Spartan firmness, the young authoress laid her first-born on her table and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre. In the hope of pleasing everyone, she took everyone's advice and like the old man and his donkey in the fable suited nobody" (GW 48). The words used illustrate the "sickening anxiety of authorship inherent in the situation of almost every woman writer in England and America" (Gilbert and Gubar, 64) Words such as "chopped," "ruthlessly," "first-born," and "ogre" would be more appropriate in another context, yet by applying this vocabulary Alcott clearly accentuates this anxiety.

And indeed, Jo will regret this, realising that she should stick to her writing and should not change it to please others: "I wish I'd printed it whole or not at all, for I do hate to misjudged." (GW 49) Evidently, by adjusting her work to gratify others, she changed her true self, resulting in misjudgement. In a next chapter, *A Friend*, she looks upon this event as a disaster and she has no courage to try again. However, as the narrator literally compares Jo to an immortal hero – as such Alcott already immortalises *her* Jo before anyone could and actually emphasises her as the central figure of the novel – Jo forces herself to try again. Realising that "even all-perfect America read rubbish" (GW 148) Jo decides to write again as she: "scrambled up, on the shady side this time, and got more booty, but nearly left behind her what was far more precious than the money-bags" (GW 148). Most peculiarly in this sentence, the narrator will now categorise this literature as "shady," thus seemingly judging this genre. When women did not try to hide their femininity or apologise for their writing, they were often

considered as bad or simply ignored (Gilbert and Gubar 63). One of those few women, who found the courage to act as such, was Aphra Behn. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this rebel – first real professional authoress – has always been considered as a "shady Lady" (63). Alcott unmistakably takes a stab at these sad convictions which a female author faced. Still affected by her anxieties, Jo ventures in the world of thrilling tales, and presents her stories to Mr Dashwood, editor of the Weekly Volcano. If we take a closer look at this little excerpt, we observe this anxiety for writing:

> She told no one, but concocted a 'thrilling tale', and boldly carried it herself to Mr. Dashwood, editor of the Weekly Volcano. She had never read Sartor Resartus, but she had a womanly instinct that clothes possess an influence more powerful over many than the worth of character or the magic of manners. So she dressed herself in her best, and trying to persuade herself that she was neither excited nor nervous, bravely climbed two pairs of dark and dirty stairs to find herself in a disorderly room, a cloud of cigar smoke, and the presence of three gentlemen, sitting with their heels rather higher than their hats, which articles of dress none of them took the trouble to remove on her appearance. Somewhat daunted by this reception, Jo hesitated on the threshold, murmuring in much embarrassment... (GW 148)

Once again, Louisa May Alcott slyly criticises the patriarchal society of the nineteenth-century, as she indulges Jo to feel that her physical look would be of more importance than her writing. Indeed, Jo who once proudly and boldly said in chapter 6; *Calls*, "If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don't wish to see them" (GW 172), now feels the need to dress herself up, so as to please the need of men. By putting her strong liberated Jo in this position, Alcott seems to accuse this chauvinistic prejudice too much present, even in the world of editors and intellectuals, who prefer money and good looks over morals and good writing. Once Jo is faced with the editor and two male colleagues, she will now plainly feel this anxiety of authorship, already foreshadowed in the word *daunting*. As the scene evolves, poor Jo suddenly feels the need to relinquish her rights as the author of her own manuscript:

> Feeling that she must get through the matter somehow, Jo produced her manuscript and, blushing redder and redder with each sentence, blundered out fragments of the little speech carefully prepared for the occasion. "A friend of mine desired me to offer—a story—just as an experiment—would like your opinion—be glad to write more if this suits." While she blushed and blundered, Mr. Dashwood had taken the manuscript, and was turning over the leaves with a pair of rather dirty fingers, and casting critical glances up and down the neat pages. "Not a first attempt, I take it?" observing that the pages were numbered, covered only on one side, and not tied up with a ribbon—sure sign of a novice. "No, sir. She has had some experience, and got a prize for a tale in the *Blarneystone Banner*." "Oh, did she?" and Mr. Dashwood gave Jo a quick look, which seemed to take note of everything she had on, from the bow in her bonnet to the buttons on her boots. "Well, you can leave it, if you like. We've more of this sort of thing on hand than we know what to do with at present, but I'll run my eye over it, and give you an answer next week." (GW 148)

The matter of giving her manuscript for publishing now seems indeed to have turned into a rather unpleasant ordeal causing Jo to blunder and blush. Furthermore, she literally abandons her authorship, as she talks of *a friend of mine*, with this method she seeks the same results as any author publishing under a pseudonym. Indeed, by presenting herself as just the messenger, she tries – even though it is a weak attempt – to attain male acceptance, by distancing herself, a woman from the manuscript. After this unsettling meeting, realising her faults, Jo will once more be overcome with her typical anger – often caused by the typical Victorian gender discrimination (also present in Marmee). Jo, who may appear dignified at times and who is a proud woman, now felt – due to Mr Dashwood's opinionated treatment – abashed and nettled, as is said in the book. Additionally, Jo seems to regret her refuge in the persona of her friend, realising that the editor saw through this protective mask. As such, Jo is compelled to acknowledge a sad failure of male recognition and approval. On reading the first meeting with the editor, the reader is forced to admit that Jo was right in her conviction that "clothes posses an influence more powerful over many than the worth of character or the magic of manners" (GW 148), something Amy had always understood. Certainly, Mr Dashwood would have been more impressed if Jo had looked radiant or quite as dashing as her sister Amy. Instead, Mr Dashwood took note of her clothes, from bonnet to buttons and rudely concluded: "Well, you can leave it, if you like," not persuaded that she may actually be able to write. However, on their second interview, after having read her manuscript, his treatment of her is much more respectful.

Mr Dashwood is willing to publish her manuscript, if she is prepared to accept his comments; again Alcott uses a strong metaphor to express the painful job of altering one's writing, as she now compares these corrections as the cutting of a baby's leg, so as to "fit into a new cradle" (GW 150). To Jo's frustration, all the moral reflections are to be left out, turning her story into second rate literature or as she says so herself, "rubbish." Jo, who had previously been confronted with her own conscience when writing her wild stories of passion, had now desired to include a morality, "as ballast for much romance" (GW 150) which was needed to soothe her own conscience and would allow her to write such fiction. Interestingly, as a consequence, Jo unconsciously reveals herself as the true author:

> "But, Sir, I thought every story should have some sort of a moral, so I took care to have a few of my sinners repent." Mr. Dashwoods's editorial gravity relaxed into a smile, for Jo had forgotten her 'friend', and spoken as only an author could. "People want to be amused, not preached at, you know. Morals don't sell nowadays." Which was not quite a correct statement, by the way. "You think it would do with these alterations, then?" "Yes, it's a new plot, and pretty well worked up—

> language good, and so on," was Mr. Dashwood's affable reply. "What do you—that is, what compensation—" began Jo, not exactly knowing how to express herself. "Oh, yes, well, we give from twenty-five to thirty for things of this sort. Pay when it comes out," returned Mr. Dashwood, as if that point had escaped him. Such trifles do escape the editorial mind, it is said. "Very well, you can have it," said Jo, handing back the story with a satisfied air, for after the dollar-a-column work, even twenty-five seemed good pay. "Shall I tell my friend you will take another if she has one better than this?" asked Jo, unconscious of her little slip of the tongue, and emboldened by her success. […]What name would your friend like to put on it?" in a careless tone. "None at all, if you please, she doesn't wish her name to appear and has no nom de plume," said Jo, blushing in spite of herself. "Just as she likes, of course. The tale will be out next week. Will you call for the money, or shall I send it?" asked Mr. Dashwood, who felt a natural desire to know who his new contributor might be. "I'll call. Good morning, Sir." (GW 150)

In this scene Jo seems to have finally become a true author, as Alcott stresses. Jo does not only defend her own writing, feeling proud, Alcott actually refers to Jo as someone who spoke "as only an author could" (GW 150). Though Jo acts as an author and reveals herself as the author, she does not wish to officialise her authorship, as she rejects any possible *nom de plume*, as such she rejects both the male and female identity.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, if a woman takes on the male identity by means of a male pseudonym, she denies her own gender and often risks an "identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship"(66). By rejecting both the male and female identity of her work, Jo seems to reject her own work, which will indeed eventually lead to a small identity crisis, which will ultimately be caused by the same person that will help her overcome this crisis, Pr Bhaer. Indeed, now that Jo "took a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature" (GW 151), she repeatedly used the sensational plots and started to write as a professional author, screening newspapers for intrigues, observing her environment for new characters. As such she consciously wrote stories about the male hero saving the damsel in distress, typical of the melodramatic mode. However, when writing such stories, the female author will "secretly realise that her employment of (and participation in) patriarchal plots and genres inevitably involves her in duplicity or bad faith" (Gilbert and Gubar, 69). Consequently, when Jo writes her stories, using these sensational plots, "she is exploiting a story that implies women cannot and should not do what she is herself accomplishing in writing her book" (Gilbert and Gubar, 69). Jo is ashamed and though enjoying her new work, she did realise that both her parents will not approve of her writing:

> She thought she was prospering finely, but unconsciously she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its *influence affected her*,[19] for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us. She was

> beginning to feel rather than see this, for much describing of other people's passions and feelings set her to studying and speculating about her own, a morbid amusement in which healthy young minds do not voluntarily indulge. Wrongdoing always brings its own punishment, and when Jo most needed hers, she got it. (GW 153)

Clearly, this literature is now conceived as dangerous for the innocent Josephine and she should somehow be rescued from this "premature acquaintance with the darker side of life." She certainly will be *rescued*, as was already announced: "Jo rashly took a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature, but thanks to the life preserver thrown her by a friend, she came up again not much the worse for her ducking" (GW 150). Pr Bhaer will strongly influence Jo. In his character, Jo recognised a paternal love, in which she found comfort. The Professor strongly reminded her of what she had been taught at home, for when he talked, "the world got right again […] she felt as if she had solid ground under her feet again" (GW 158). She strongly valued his opinions above others and she needed his friendship. Pr Bhaer will teach Jo German and in one of their classes, Jo's secret will be revealed. Strangely, her secret is revealed through the interference of a cap. Indeed, Jo who had her own little cap, and valued it as a charm while writing, would now be betrayed by another cap. The professor is wearing a cap, made of old newspapers, revealing stories such as she wrote. What is most interesting is that the same object that helps Jo write her sensational stories will now not only betray her, but will make a fool out of the single person she values the most. On finding out the sensational stories, the Professor strongly condemns these stories and theirs authors:

> "Yes, you are right to put it from you. I do not think that good young girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash." "All may not be bad, only silly, you know, and if there is a demand for it, I don't see any harm in supplying it. Many very respectable people make an honest living out of what are called sensation stories," said Jo, scratching gathers so energetically that a row of little slits followed her pin. "There is a demand for whisky, but I think you and I do not care to sell it. If the respectable people knew what harm they did, they would not feel that the living was honest. They haf no right to put poison in the sugarplum, and let the small ones eat it. No, they should think a little, and sweep mud in the street before they do this thing." Mr. Bhaer spoke warmly, and walked to the fire, crumpling the paper in his hands. Jo sat still, looking as if the fire had come to her, for her cheeks burned long after the cocked hat had turned to smoke and gone harmlessly up the chimney. (GW 160)

Jo feels personally accused and realises that she is in the wrong – something she had known from the start but had denied – yet, she still tries to defend herself so as to gain his consent. In her defence, she applies to the economical and business side of writing, which may be right, but the professor simply compares her economical reasoning to that of drinking. As such, the professor asserts that these stories are immoral, and not fit for young ladies, just as drinking

would be wicked for young ladies. Jo is now forced to acknowledge what she had been denying and she feels a deep shame, as is clearly implied through the metaphor of the fire.

This forced recognition will eventually lead to an identity crisis, both as an author and as a young lady. She decides to burn all her stories, for she could not bear the idea that her parents or Pr Bhaer would see them, yet she still seems torn as she admits: "I almost wish I hadn't any conscience, it's so inconvenient. If I didn't care about doing right and didn't feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I should get on capitally. I can't help wishing sometimes, that Mother and Father hadn't been so particular about such things" (GW 163). To which the narrator or better yet, Alcott retaliates by addressing Jo directly: "Ah, Jo, instead of wishing that, thank God that 'Father and Mother were particular', and pity from your heart those who have no such guardians to hedge them round with principles which may seem like prison walls to impatient youth, but which will prove sure foundations to build character upon in womanhood" (GW 163). This morality check, so sweetly given to us, functions as a remedy for Jo's anxieties and little crisis. For as we read on, Jo decides to quit what she is best at, only to try the other extreme, following the examples of Mrs Sherwood[20], Miss Edgeworth[21] and Hannah More[22]. Yet, when the narrator talks of the other extreme, she suggests that this is not a better option. And indeed, those three authors are characterised by highly didactic works, often emphasizing the Victorian prescription of gender roles. To the reader, the reference of Mrs Sherwood is quite intriguing, as she is most famous for her children story, in which she strongly emphasizes moral messages, such as the importance of Christian values, the value of charity and the evils of slavery. Moreover, in her stories, Sherwood strongly joins the Victorians in their prescription of gender roles, which seem very inflexible, rigid and narrow.[23] For Alcott, as a strong devoted feminist, to urge *her* Jo to follow such an example is quite peculiar. Yet, Alcott comforts Jo as she reasserts the importance of good education, as the parents are indeed guardians, but only to raise Jo to become a strong independent woman. Though she uses words such as "guardians," "imprisonment" and "impatience", which are rather negative, reminding us of the Victorian emplacement of women, Alcott puts a twist to it, concluding that they can only be good in the long run, as they "will prove sure foundations to build character upon in womanhood" (GW 163). Alcott will use this patriarchal view on education to her own ends.

4.2 Louisa May Alcott's Own Authorship

However, though Jo will abandon her sensation stories and undertake the morality, as we see her writing essays which are described as sermons; she then takes on children literature –

probably following Mrs Sherwood's footsteps – but without success. Finally, she decides to "cork up her inkstand" (GW 164), believing that: "I don't know anything. I'll wait until I do before I try again, and meantime, 'sweep mud in the street' if I can't do better, that's honest, at least" Which decision proved that her second tumble down the beanstalk had done her some good" (LW 164). Though Jo wisely decides to quit her writing, until she can write and truly be content with her writing and be approved of as well, she has been taught to forsake her gothic thrillers – which did please her but, were not approved of – and learns to write sermons and juvenile literature. Yet for Alcott to teach *her* Jo to abandon her gothic thrillers does indeed seem hypocritical as she herself engages in such stories (Gilbert and Gubar 70). Indeed, Louisa Alcott was able to support her family with her sensational tales for ten years, from 1857 to 1867, just as Jo was supporting hers, and had hoped to do so for a long time. Yet Jo has been *tamed*, while Louisa engages herself in stories more passionate, sensational and controversial than Jo could ever have written. Alcott's Long Fatal Love chase, telling the story of a man stalking a woman, ending in the death of both, had been given to her publishers under her often used pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, but was rejected. After some alterations – such as a new title Fair Rosamond – the manuscript was still rejected and was never published. The book was laid aside and ended up in the Harvard's Houghton Library. It was finally published in 1995 by Random House under its original title. The novel centres on Rosamond, who lives with Phillip Tempest as his wife, although she's not married to him. Rosamond knows that her so-called husband is a liar and a deceiver, but she is too sexually attracted to him to actually care. Yet, his true past - including his still existing marriage to another woman, making theirs illegal and turning Rosamond into a mistress - forces Rosamond to leave him. What follows is indeed a fatal love chase, as he chases her and will eventually murder her by accident.[24]

When this novel was written, it was unacceptable to actually be published. But this novel reveals Alcott's own interest in the obscure, shady matters. The novel explores the boundaries of domestic abuse, ending in murder, but it also investigates a woman' sexuality. Rosamond is strongly tempted to marry her prince charming, due to her sexual desires. Furthermore, after having left her fraudulent husband, she develops a desperate but passionate affair with a Catholic priest, Father Ignatius. Though their union is but strong passion, the priest will assert his love for Rosemond, as he states that they will truly be united in the hereafter upon her death.[25] And finally, after accidentally killing Rosamond, Phillip kills himself dramatically, declaring "Mine first – mine last – mine even in the grave."[26] Another story worth mentioning is Behind a Mask: Or, A Woman's Power, describing the story of a woman fighting the

patriarchal society. The female protagonist, Jean Muir, appears to be a gentle and sweet governess at the home of the wealthy Coventrys. However, as is soon revealed, she is nothing but a fraud, planning to marry the old and foolish Coventry. While the reader awaits her downfall in suspense, he has to witness her success.

These two stories clearly exemplify that Alcott was indeed drawn to the obscure and shady, maybe because in this style she was free to be as opinionated as she wanted. These stories portray men as fools and women as free of mind and quite independent. When asked what her dreams and hopes are, Rosamond answers: "I hope to be free as air, to see the world, to know what ease and pleasure are, to have many friends and to be dearly loved." When asked what she would do if abandoned, suggesting that she should do as all heroines do, die as tender slaves always do, Rosamond boldly replies: "No, live and forget you."[27] The same feministic and liberated spirit can be observed in Jean Muir's story. Jean Muir seems to have been duped in her past and she is now somehow taking revenge on men, asserting her own power: "I'll not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!"[28] In letters to her confident, Hortense, Jean admits her charade and constructed plans. In one of those letters, Jean clarifies that when women become what all men desire most, a daughter, actress, servant and lover – which she all is – women can master men, as they become a woman's slave. Indeed, her sexual power over the old man is implicitly but nonetheless noticeably suggested: "After this the evening closed with strictly private theatricals, in which Monsieur and myself were the only actors. To make sure that he received my version of the story first, I told him a romantic story of S.'s persecution, and he believed it. This I followed up by a moonlight episode behind a rose hedge, and sent the young gentleman home in a half-dazed condition. What fools men are!"[29] Though the family will discover her true identity, her plan is still successful: marrying Sir John and becoming Lady Coventry: "Hands off, gentlemen! You may degrade yourselves to the work of detectives, but I am not a prisoner yet. Poor Jean Muir you might harm, but Lady Coventry is beyond your reach."[30] As such, the allusion of being a prisoner demonstrates that she was indeed imprisoned by the society dominated by men. Through her own free will, she has escaped and she is now Lady Coventry, in full power over her poor blind husband and no longer imprisoned.

Though these two stories may be good, but they cannot be compared to Little Women, as this book is taken out of real life, while those sensational stories are but Alcott's imagination at work, which she too might have felt ashamed of, just as *her* Jo might have.[31] According to the

New York Times review of A Long Fatal Love Chase, the book does indeed confirm Alcott's position as the most articulate feminist of her time, but would offer more than just a feminist reading as it reveals "a fascinating look into a divided mind that was both attracted to themes of violence and sexuality and ashamed by its own interest."[32] I agree and believe that Louisa Alcott was indeed suffering from an anxiety of authorship, just as Jo was. For no female author would actually feel ashamed of writing such stories today. However, unlike Jo, Alcott desperately needed the income provided by such stories. But to avoid any unnecessary shame, she published her stories under the grateful mask of pseudonyms.

Finally, I would like to remark that Jo and her sister also take on a male identity, though they may be fictionalised. Indeed, the girls enjoy the power a man's name and happily "play men" upstairs. Moreover, they all write and contribute to their very own "Pickwick Paper." In admiration of Charles Dickens, the girls founded their own paper and regarded it as their secret society. The paper was viewed as an outlet for the girls, in which they did not need to hide their personal feelings, fears and desires. Each girl had her own fictional counterpart and used his name in the paper:

> Meg, as the eldest, was Samuel Pickwick, Jo, being of a literary turn, Augustus Snodgrass, Beth, because she was round and rosy, Tracy Tupman, and Amy, who was always trying to do what she couldn't, was Nathaniel Winkle. Pickwick, the president, read the paper, which was filled with original tales, poetry, local news, funny advertisements, and hints, in which they good-naturedly reminded each other of their faults and short comings. (LW 154)

Most peculiarly, in one of the advertisements published in this little paper, Alcott cunningly refers to her own personae, as her pseudonymous other self, Miss Oranthy Bluggage will appear at Pickwick Hall to lecture the girls on 'Woman and her Position.'

> ADVERTISEMENTS
>
> MISS ORANTHY BLUGGAGE, the accomplished
> strong-minded lecturer, will deliver her
> famous lecture on "WOMAN AND HER POSITION"
> at Pickwick Hall, next Saturday Evening,
> after the usual performances. (LW 160)

In doing so, Alcott may have cunningly confessed her true implication in writing this novel, which was to teach young girls what was to be valued and sought after. As such, we might say that the novel itself becomes *the* lecture on 'Woman and her Position.'

5. Love and Marriage

5.1 The Marriage theme

As we have already observed, these novels, including Little Women, told stories about "the emergent self-negotiating amidst social possibilities" (Baym, 36). Certainly, they told the story of the successful and accomplished *self-made woman*. However, most of these novels end in marriage. Evidently marriage represented the final domestication of the women, institutionalizing the family life. Though the female authors – who often decided to stay single - did marry off their heroines, they rarely defined marriage as motherhood. Instead, a heroine's marriage is much more defined by her relationship with her husband.

In the nineteenth-century, these authors often lacked the courage to keep their heroine unmarried, because they were writing for a certain audience. But the stories always emphasize that a husband and motherhood are not compulsory for a woman's identity, though they may be necessary for her happiness. Due to Mr. March's absence, the March family home has become a matriarchal space where the mother has become committed to the education of the four girls. The final part of this upbringing is to see that they are well married, as is revealed in her *Plans*. Her plans are – like all plans of good and wise mothers – to have her daughters content, wisely married and leading useful lives.

Furthermore, the novels affirm the fact that marriage should not be a goal to strive for in one's life, for as Baym phrases it – "neither its inevitability nor its permanence can be assumed"(39). In addition, the novel strongly opposes the idea of a "commercial marriage," believing that a marriage of love is more valuable than a marriage of convenience or to use Mrs March's words: "Right, Jo, better be happy old maids than unhappy wives or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands"(LW 152).

This idea is usually reinforced or well portrayed by a widow or an unmarried woman in the novel. There are several widows in the novel; however, Mrs Kirke best exemplifies this capital notion. Her husband's whereabouts are not mentioned; it is only made clear that she runs the boarding house by herself, with the help of a few maids. She is the mother of two young children, Kitty and Minnie and she is constantly surrounded by strangers. She is described as a dear friend of Mrs March, as "the kindest soul that ever lived" (GW 128).

Though she leads a very busy life, she is concerned for the well-being of her two young girls and she is quite cautious:

> I'm on the drive from morning to night, as you may suppose, with such a family; but great anxiety will be off my mind if *I know the children are safe with you*. My rooms are always open to you, and your own shall be as comfortable as I can make it. There are some pleasant people in the house if you feel sociable and your evenings are always free. Come to me if anything goes wrong and be *as happy as you can*. There's the tea-bell; I must run and change my cap' and off she bustled, leaving me to settle in my new nest.[33] (GW 133)

As such she is indeed a strong-hearted woman and a great example, showing that marriage need not be a woman's goal and happiness. It can also be an episode in a woman's life.

Evidently, women within these novels often recognized themselves as living surrounded by other women and realised that the relationship with their own sex was indeed the "texture of their lives". This is also clearly the case in Little Women. The first part of the novel focuses on the intimate bond that defines their sisterhood and their relationship with their mother. In the second part of the novel we see how this sisterhood is tested, as Meg marries, Amy leaves for Europe and Jo for New York. Nonetheless, within their close surroundings they still relate chiefly to other women and to each other. Marriage and men are often less important.

Marriages of convenience are, as we have already stated, disapproved of in these novels. Nevertheless, society was – and still is – based on money, controlled by men. If a woman wanted to have power over her own money, she could do so only if she chose celibacy. This state of affairs could not be ignored by female authors. Consequently, every encounter with a man is economically charged, as the financial considerations cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, in most stories the power relations are reversed, proving her better judgment than men.

In these novels the lovers are less important, since these novels advocated the development of independent women. As such the traditional prince-charming who rescues the damsel in distress, typical of the melodramatic genre, is not at work in this type of fiction. The heroine will marry, but she is wise and prudent in her choice. Evidently, the true "conventional hero" will be a solid, ethical, generous, frank, hard-working, energetic man, a man who admires and respects women. Moreover, he will like the heroine more than he will lust for her.

In fact, lust is never mentioned or actually suggested. The love shared and portrayed in this fiction is rarely a physical love.

As such, these novels were celebrating the woman's personal identity and idealizing a marriage of equal partnership.

At this point, I shall go through all of the love matches chronologically and I will examine the various relationships, as all relationships in the novel are unique and will identify the character's final persona. Though the March sisters do marry, except for Beth, they are able to make fine and wise unions, keeping their own true identity.

Alcott's personal views on marriage are not straightforward. She never married, though she had the opportunity. In her novels she does not stress upon the marriage theme, for she cared more to describe the story of independent and respected women. In her novel Moods, she speaks almost freely of marriage. Though the marriage theme is not investigated or really condemned, it is questioned as the protagonist marries the wrong man. In Little women, the theme of marriage is less important, but it is present in a more positive way, as the three marriages taking place are presented as the right union for each of the sisters involved. However, Alcott did, though very subtly, defy the question of marriage as it is always placed under the shadow of death (Auerbach 21).

5.2 Meg and Mr Brooke

Meg, the eldest sister, is the first one to truly fall in love. Her love and marriage are a result of the close friendship and bond between the March household and the Laurence's. Indeed, the introduction of Laurie in the novel results in multiple marriages. Meg marries Mr John Brooke, Laurie's tutor, Jo flees to New York because of Laurie and meets her future husband, Pr Bhaer and Amy marries Laurie. The romance of Meg and John is one of great love and great patience. The author does not pay much attention to the match. Their love is overshadowed by other concerns, such as Mr. March's illness, Marmee's departure for Washington and Beth's illness.

Mr. John Brooke is casually introduced as the tutor of Laurie; and is of little importance in the beginning of the novel. The romance of the two young adults only literally announces

itself at the end of the first part. However, in the chapter *Camp Laurence*, their romance is foretold in a very subtle way. In this chapter Mr John Brooke is described as a kind man. This description as such is not surprising, if it had not been asserted by Beth. Beth, who is always shy in company and especially afraid of male company, only agrees to accompany her sister – on the little trip with Laurie and his friends – if they solemnly promise that no boy will talk to her. Yet, she describes Mr Brook as being "so kind."

Indeed, Meg is conscious about his presence and quickly understands that he favours her. This happens in a rowing-boat:

> Meg, in the other boat was delightfully situated, face to face with the rowers, who both admired the prospect, and feathered their oars with uncommon 'skill and dexterity'. Mr. Brooke was a grave, silent young man, with handsome brown eyes and a pleasant voice. Meg like his quiet manners, and considered him a waling encyclopedia of useful knowledge. He never talked to her much, but he looked at her a great deal, and she felt sure that he did not regard her with aversion. Ned, being in college, of course put on all the airs which freshmen think it their bounden duty to assume; he was not very wise, but very good-natured, and altogether an excellent person to carry on a picnic. (LW 193)

In this excerpt, Mr. Brooke's presence does not pass unnoticed, as young Meg understands how he feels about her. This is emphasized by the presence of Ned. His presence serves as a reminder to Meg of how special Mr. Brooke is, as compared to Brooke; he is not unwise and just "an excellent person to carry a picnic." She enjoys his company and appreciates his character.

Mr. Brooke evidently fits the description of the "true conventional hero." On this picnic a crucial conversation takes place between Meg and one of Laurie's distinguished British friends, Miss Kate. After having proudly revealed that she works as a governess to Miss Kate, Meg immediately feels ashamed as Miss Kate very clearly seems to disapprove:

> "I forgot young ladies in America go to school more than with us. Very fine schools they are, too, Papa says. You go to a private one, I suppose?" "I don't go at all. I am a governess myself." "Oh, indeed!" said Miss Kate, but she might as well have said, "Dear me, how dreadful!" for her tone implied it, and something in her face made Meg colour, and wish she had not been so frank. (LW 207)

Again, Meg's pride is hurt, again because of differences in class and status. However, if she had wanted to defend herself, that would not have been necessary, as Mr. Brooke gently rescues her from in her distress and shame:

> Mr. Brooke looked up and said quickly, "*Young ladies in America love independence* as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves." "Oh, yes, of course it's very nice and proper in them to do so. We have many most respectable and worthy young women who do the same and are employed by the nobility, because, being the daughters of gentlemen, they are both well bred and accomplished, you know," said Miss Kate in a patronizing tone that hurt Meg's pride, and made her work seem not only more distasteful, but degrading. "Did the German song suit, Miss March?" inquired Mr. Brooke, breaking an awkward pause. "Oh, yes! It was very sweet, and I'm much obliged to whoever translated it for me." And Meg's downcast face brightened as she spoke.[34] (LW 207)

Alcott wisely comes to the defence of young American girls who proudly seek independence by working outside the home through the character of Mr. Brooke. He would not have done Meg more justice if he had tried harder. By saying these words, John proves himself to be the right man for Meg, as he recognises her need to work and applauds the pride she takes from her work. He truly admires and respects her supporting herself, which is typical of the suitable male suitor in women's fiction. Nevertheless, he does come to the rescue of Meg. In this scene she is portrayed as the damsel in distress, needing rescuing. However, his actions are seen as a proof of his affection for Meg. Yet, in some way their love is much more conventional than one might expect in this type of fiction, but it is very fitting to the character of Meg, as she is without any doubt the most conventional sister in the novel.

After having rescued her, a new mutual appreciation is set, as he looked at her "looking as if he did, indeed, 'love to teach." Meg is not quite conscious of her true loving feelings for Mr. Brooke, but Jo and Laurie are. Indeed, in chapter 13, *Castles in the air*, in which the girls each reveal their true hopes and dreams for the future, Meg reveals her appreciation for Mr. Brooke to Jo and Laurie, as she refers to Mr. Brooke as what Laurie ought to become, "as good Mr. Brooke has, by being respected and loved" (LW 126). In the next chapter *Secrets*, Meg proves to be more than just a domestic soul, as she tells Laurie; indeed not, Meg would not marry idly, but wisely. Jo, who disagrees with marriage, sees John as an intruder in her family, someone who might 'steal her sister away, and starts behaving as such, even before any words of affection are spoken:

> "I shall never 'go and marry' anyone," observed Meg, walking on with great dignity while the others followed, laughing, whispering, skipping stones, and 'behaving like children', as Meg said to herself, though she might have been tempted to join them if she had not had her best dress on. For a week or two, Jo behaved so queerly that her sisters were quite bewildered. She rushed to the door when the postman rang, was rude to Mr. Brooke whenever they met, would sit looking at Meg with a woebegone face, occasionally jumping up to shake and then kiss her in a very mysterious manner. Laurie and she were always making signs to one another, and talking about 'Spread Eagles' till the girls declared they had both lost their wits. On the second Saturday after Jo got out of the window, Meg, as she sat sewing at her window, was scandalized by the sight of Laurie chasing Jo all over the garden and finally capturing her in Amy's bower. What went on

there, Meg could not see, but shrieks of laughter were heard, followed by the murmur of voices and a great flapping of newspapers. (LW 241)

The real romance only announces itself at the end of the first part, but is cast under the shadow of Mr. March's illness, Ms March's forced departure and Beth's illness. Yet, the romance blooms. John does not reveal his feelings to Meg, but he confesses them to Mr. and Mrs March. Marmee questions Meg about how she feels, yet nothing is decided. It is not until chapter 23 *Aunt March settles the question* – which was originally the last chapter of the book – that Meg finally understands and realises that she will indeed marry John Brooke. Meg decides to refuse John's proposal, enjoying the power of her gender (Foote, 73), crushing his heart:

He seemed to think it was worth the trouble, for he smiled to himself as if quite satisfied, pressed the plump hand gratefully, and said in his most persuasive tone, "Will you try and find out? I want to know so much, for I can't go to work with any heart until I learn whether I am to have my reward in the end or not." "I'm too young," faltered Meg, wondering why she was so fluttered, yet rather enjoying it. "I'll wait, and in the meantime, you could be learning to like me. Would it be a very hard lesson, dear?" "Not if I chose to learn it, but. . ." "Please choose to learn, Meg. I love to teach, and this is easier than German," broke in John, getting possession of the other hand, so that she had no way of hiding her face as he bent to look into it. His tone was properly beseeching, but stealing a shy look at him, Meg saw that his eyes were merry as well as tender, and that he wore the satisfied smile of one who had no doubt of his success. This nettled her. Annie Moffat's foolish lessons in coquetry came into her mind, and the love of power, which sleeps in the bosoms of the best of little women, woke up all of a sudden and took possession of her. She felt excited and strange, and not knowing what else to do, followed a capricious impulse, and, withdrawing her hands, said petulantly, "I don't choose. Please go away and let me be!" Poor Mr. Brooke looked as if his lovely castle in the air was tumbling about his ears, for he had never seen Meg in such a mood before, and it rather bewildered him. (LW 357)

However, it is only when Aunt March forbids her to marry the young man that she accepts to marry him. When Aunt March threatens to disinherit Meg, she realises her true feelings for John.

"Brooke? That boy's tutor? Ah! I understand now. I know all about it. Jo blundered into a wrong message in one of your Father's letters, and I made her tell me. You haven't gone and accepted him, child?" cried Aunt March, looking scandalized. "Hush! He'll hear. Shan't I call Mother?" said Meg, much troubled. "Not yet. I've something to say to you, and I must free my mind at once. Tell me, do you mean to marry this Cook? If you do, not one penny of my money ever goes to you. Remember that, and be a sensible girl," said the old lady impressively. Now Aunt March possessed in perfection the art of rousing the spirit of opposition in the gentlest people, and enjoyed doing it. The best of us have a spice of perversity in us, especially when we are young and in love. If Aunt March had begged Meg to accept John Brooke, she would probably have declared she couldn't think of it, but as she was peremptorily ordered not to like him, she immediately made up her mind that she would. Inclination as well as perversity made the decision easy, and being already much excited, Meg opposed the old lady with unusual spirit. "I shall marry whom I please, Aunt March, and you can leave your money to anyone you like," she said, nodding her head with a resolute air. "Highty-tighty! Is that the way you take my advice, Miss?

> You'll be sorry for it by-and-by, when you've tried love in a cottage and found it a failure." "It can't be a worse one than some people find in big houses," retorted Meg. […]"He knows you have got rich relations, child. That's the secret of his liking, I suspect." "Aunt March, how dare you say such a thing? John is above such meanness, and I won't listen to you a minute if you talk so," cried Meg indignantly, forgetting everything but the injustice of the old lady's suspicions. "My John wouldn't marry for money, any more than I would. We are willing to work and we mean to wait. I'm not afraid of being poor, for I've been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him because he loves me, and I..." Meg stopped there, remembering all of a sudden that she hadn't made up her mind, that she had told 'her John' to go away, and that he might be overhearing her inconsistent remarks. Aunt March was very angry, for she had set her heart on having her pretty niece make a fine match, and something in the girl's happy young face made the lonely old woman feel both sad and sour.[35] (LW 359)

As is made clear in this passage, Meg – though at times quite conventional – does indeed answer the criteria of a typical heroine of women's fiction. Facing disinheritance, she chooses love and independence, for she knows that any marriage with John Brooke would be a marriage of equals and true love. Yet, her ability to refuse a life of fortune – though all she ever wanted was "a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things – nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people and heaps of money,"(LW 223) – in times were daughter should fulfil some duties such as marrying wealthy – make of her a true feministic character. Furthermore, on her wedding day, the first kiss of the newly married woman does not go to John, as tradition wishes, but to Marmee. As such Little Women can easily be read as the tale Meg.

Finally, I would like to discuss the incident of the glove, which is crucial in their courtship. Gloves symbolize the separation of a girl's flesh from the outside world, for a naked hand can only be given in marriage and sexuality, as Holly Blackford points out in her essay (19). From the very beginning of the novel, it is made clear that gloves are of great importance to Meg. The significance of gloves for Meg is a sign of her great femininity, for Jo – who is too boyish to be feminine – could care less for such *girlish* items. When John steals one her gloves, he is actually taking her hand, taking her from the family, or as Blackford said, from the female community (19). Indeed, the glove represents Meg – to some extent –as it is a part of her. She is symbolically stolen from her parents.

5.3 Amy and Laurie

After the first publication of Little Women, the readers begged Alcott for a sequel and strongly hoped that Jo and Laurie would tie the knot. However, Alcott was very reluctant to

marry *her* Jo, but she could not afford to ignore her faithful readers. She had other plans for Laurie and Jo, as she herself wrote in her journal:

> *November* Ist. – Began the second part of "Little Women." I can do a chapter a day, and in a month I mean to be done. A little success is so inspiring that I now find my "Marches" sober, nice people, and as I can launch into the future, my fancy has more play. Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one. (Alcott 201)

This passage clearly demonstrates that Alcott is indeed disappointed that her readers only care about who will marry who. Alcott decided that Laurie was not suitable for Jo, but would be good enough for Amy. Yet, this romance between Amy and Laurie, which seems so unnatural and so surprising, is quite charming. For someone who disapproved of marriage, Alcott had been bestowed with the gift of writing great love stories. Nevertheless, this sudden turn in the plot – although very surprising – had somehow already been negotiated by Jo after having rejected Laurie, as she says to Beth "Amy is left for him, and they would suit excellently, but I have no heart for such things, now" (GW 186). Jo knew that these two certainly suit each other.

Their love grew slowly and very much unconsciously. Laurie was too much in love with Jo to notice anyone else, though he too had witnessed how young Amy had grown into "the flower of the family; for at sixteen she has the air and bearing of a full grown-woman – not beautiful, but possessed of that incredible charm called grace"(GW 19). Amy had always declared she would marry a rich man. So she became the hope of the family according to Jo, aunt March and Amy herself, as is revealed in their correspondence. And indeed, Amy seems to have found her perfect man in the character of Fred Vaughn. Amy describes him in her letter as "altogether the most agreeable young man I ever knew"(LW 111), and when reading her letters, we witness the beginning of a romance between both. However, though she finds him the most perfect young man she ever met, she can still fault him, as he is too "light," but as the "Vaughns are very rich" she is prepared to forgive him. What is most peculiar though is that she compares him to Laurie, and finds him less charming than Laurie. Though she likes him, our Amy is not in love with him; yet, she understands how powerful and important their match would be for herself and her family as she writes to her mother:

> Now I know Mother will shake her head, and the girls say, "Oh, the mercenary little wretch!", but I've made up my mind, and if Fred asks me, I shall accept him, though I'm not madly in love. I like him, and we get on comfortably together. He is handsome, young, clever enough, and very rich—ever so much richer than the Laurences. I don't think his family would object, and I should be very happy, for they are all kind, well-bred, generous people, and they likeme. Fred, as the

> eldest twin, will have the estate, I suppose, and such a splendid one it is! A city house in a fashionable street, not so showy as our big houses, but twice as comfortable and full of solid luxury, such as English people believe in. I like it, for it's genuine. [..] One of us *must* marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all round. I wouldn't marry a man I hated or despised. You may be sure of that, and though Fred is not my model hero, he does very well, and in time I should get fond enough of him if he was very fond of me, and let me do just as I liked. So I've been turning the matter over in my mind the last week, for it was impossible to help seeing that Fred liked me.(GW 113)

Amy proves to be idler than she would admit, as she would be prepared to favour money before true love. In her eyes, she would help her family and fulfil her duty by not marrying her *hero* and save her family from more poverty.

Laurie, on the other hand, is clearly besotted with Jo, but cannot tell her how he feels for as he himself says:

> "Don't be alarmed. I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family." "You won't give anyone a chance," said Laurie, with a sidelong glance and a little more color than before in his sunburned face. "You won't show the soft side of your character, and if a fellow gets a peep at it by accident and can't help showing that he likes it, you treat him as Mrs. Gummidge did her sweetheart, throw cold water over him, and get so thorny no one dares touch or look at you." "I don't like that sort of thing. I'm too busy to be worried with nonsense, and I think it's dreadful to break up families so. Now don't say any more about it. Meg's wedding has turned all our heads, and we talk of nothing but loversand such absurdities. I don't wish to get cross, so let's change the subject;" and Jo looked quite ready to fling cold water on the slightest provocation. Whatever his feelings might have been, Laurie found a vent for them in a long low whistle and the fearful prediction as they parted at the gate, "Mark my words, Jo, you'll go next."(GW 15)

It is clear to the reader that Laurie is referring to him, to his feelings for her, but that is not clear to Jo, as she is too stubborn to recognise love. She has convinced herself that a marriage would not suit her as it ruins families: “I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family” (LW 319). Yet, Laurie will pluck up courage and will propose to Jo, only to be crushed and broken-hearted:

> Something in his resolute tone made Jo look up quickly to find him looking down at her with an expression that assured her the dreaded moment had come, and made her put out her hand with an imploring, "No, Teddy. Please don't!" "I will, and you must hear me. It's no use, Jo, we've got to have it out, and the sooner the better for both of us," he answered, getting flushed and excited all at once. "Say what you like then. I'll listen," said Jo, with a desperate sort of patience. Laurie was a young lover, but he was in earnest, and meant to 'have it out', if he died in the attempt, so he plunged into the subject with characteristic impetuousity, saying in a voice that would get choky now and then, in spite of manful efforts to keep it steady... "I've loved you ever since I've known you, Jo, couldn't help it, you've been so good to me. I've tried to show it, but you wouldn't let me. Now I'm going to make you hear, and give me an answer, for I can't go on so any longer." "I wanted to save you this. I thought you'd understand..." began Jo, finding it a great deal harder than she expected. "I know you did, but the girls are so queer you never know what they mean. They say no when they mean yes, and drive a man out of his wits just for the fun of it," returned Laurie,

> entrenching himself behind an undeniable fact. "I don't. I never wanted to make you care for me so, and I went away to keep you from it if I could." "I thought so. It was like you, but it was no use. I only loved you all the more, and I worked hard to please you, and I gave up billiards and everything you didn't like, and waited and never complained, for I hoped you'd love me, though I'm not half good enough..." Here there was a choke that couldn't be controlled, so he decapitated buttercups while he cleared his 'confounded throat'. "You, you are, you're a great deal too good for me, and I'm so grateful to you, and so proud and fond of you, I don't know why I can't love you as you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't." "Really, truly, Jo?" He stopped short, and caught both her hands as he put his question with a look that she did not soon forget. "Really, truly, dear." […] "They do sometimes," said a muffled voice from the post. "I don't believe it's the right sort of love, and I'd rather not try it," was the decided answer. There was a long pause, while a blackbird sung blithely on the willow by the river, and the tall grass rustled in the wind. (GW 169)

By rejecting him, Jo stays true to her personal beliefs and sacrifices a possibility to end her family's poverty. She chooses independence. Laurie is left broken-hearted and changes for the worse. Indeed, he cannot face Jo after her rejection and leaves for Europe. Jo herself is quite shattered, as she felt "as if she had murdered some innocent thing, and buried it under the leaves." In some way, she did indeed kill some part of him, as she herself "knew that the boy Laurie never would come again" (GW 182).

Certainly, the *boy Laurie* had disappeared, both literally and figuratively. Laurie fled to Europe hoping to forget Jo and met Amy in Nice. Though he appeared to be a gentleman, he did not appear himself for "something was missing in his manners" (GW 193). Amy and Laurie, now reunited in a country strange to them, found comfort in each other's company, as they both reminded each other of home. However, Amy, who has grown much during her stay in Europe, cannot approve of the new Laurie, as he behaved himself "feeling that all women owed him a kind word because one had been cold to him" (GW 225).

Laurie, who was the perfect hero when courting Jo, has now turned into an idle, lazy man strongly in the need of a reformation. In chapter 16 of the second part of the novel, *Lazy Laurence,* it becomes obvious that Laurie has decided to sulk forever in the name of his broken heart, much to Amy's dismay. When Laurie crosses the line by criticising her alliance with Fred Vaughn; "I understand. Queens of society can't get on without money, so you mean to make a good match, and start in that way? Quite right and proper, as the world goes, but it sounds odd from the lips of one of your mother's girls"(GW 232), Amy retaliates by expressing her disapproval of his new manners or lack of real manners, his extravagance, his laziness and lack of ambition:

> "Stir away, it won't hurt me and it may amuse you, as the big man said when his little wife beat him. Regard me in the light of a husband or a carpet, and beat till you are tired, if that sort of exercise agrees with you." Being decidedly nettled herself, and longing to see him shake off the apathy that so altered him, Amy sharpened both tongue and pencil, and began. "Flo and I have got a new name for you. It's *Lazy Laurence*. How do you like it?" She thought it would annoy him, but he only folded his arms under his head, with an imperturbable, "That's not bad. Thank you, ladies." "Do you want to know what I honestly think of you?" "Pining to be told." "Well, I *despise you*." If she had even said 'I hate you' in a petulant or coquettish tone, he would have laughed and rather liked it, but the grave, almost sad, accent in her voice made him open his eyes, and ask quickly... "Why, if you please?" "Because, with every chance for being good, useful, and happy, you are faulty, lazy, and miserable." "Strong language, mademoiselle." "If you like it, I'll go on." "Pray do, it's quite interesting." "I thought you'd find it so. Selfish people always like to talk about themselves." "Am I selfish?" the question slipped out involuntarily and in a tone of surprise, for the one virtue on which he prided himself was generosity. "Yes, very selfish," *continued Amy, in a calm, cool voice, twice as effective just then as an angry one. "I'll show you how, for I've studied you while we were frolicking, and I'm not at all satisfied with you. Here you have been abroad nearly six months, and done nothing but waste time and money and disappoint your friends*." "Isn't a fellow to have any pleasure after a four-year grind?" "You don't look as if you'd had much. At any rate, you are none the better for it, as far as I can see. I said when we first met that you had improved. Now I take it all back, for I don't think you half so nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you like gossip, and waste time on frivolous things, you are contented to be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and beauty, ah you like that old Vanity! But it's the truth, so I can't help saying it, with all these splendid things to use and enjoy, you can find nothing to do but dawdle, and instead of being the man you ought to be, you are only..." there she stopped, with a look that had both pain and pity in it. […]But the lecture began to take effect, for there was a wide-awake sparkle in his eyes now and *a half-angry, half-injured expression* replaced the former indifference.[36](GW 233)

In spite of her inferiority in wealth and sex, Amy has the courage to lecture Laurie and she does so in an up most calm manner, yet using strong words, such as "selfish," "lazy" and "despise." However, her lecture is successful, as she receives a letter from him the very next morning, revealing his departure to his grandfather, so as to make himself useful again:

> My Dear Mentor, Please make my adieux to your aunt, and exult within yourself, for 'Lazy Laurence' has gone to his grandpa, like the best of boys. A pleasant winter to you, and may the gods grant you a blissful honeymoon at Valrosa! I think Fred would be benefited by a rouser. Tell him so, with my congratulations. Yours gratefully, Telemachus "Good boy! I'm glad he's gone," said Amy, with an approving smile. The next minute her face fell as she glanced about the empty room, adding, with an involuntary sigh, "Yes, I am glad, but how I shall miss him."(GW 241)

Amy's lecture was an awakening for Laurie and he realised his mistakes. As such he is *saved* by Amy. Consequently, he became the one who needed rescuing, instead of the heroine. According to Foote, Amy's lecture asserts her mastery over Laurie, thus enabling her to "construct a world in which desire, feeling and injury can be converted into something more emotionally productive" (77), as is the case here.

However, now that Laurie has been reformed, he becomes the eligible young man he once was and could now be a perfect match for Amy. And indeed, this would evolve into something more "emotionally productive," as the correspondence between Laurie and Amy grew and flourished. And though Amy still sees him as a brother, she cannot but remember his words concerning Fred Vaughn. Indeed, Fred Vaughn did propose, but Amy refused:

> Fred Vaughn had returned, and put the question to which she had once decided to answer, "Yes, thank you," but now she said, "No, thank you," kindly but steadily, for when the time came, her courage failed her, and she found that something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart so full of tender hopes and fears. The words, "Fred is a good fellow, but not at all the man I fancied you would ever like," and Laurie's face when he uttered them, kept returning to her as pertinaciously as her own did when she said in look, if not in words, "I shall marry for money." It troubled her to remember that now, she wished she could take it back, it sounded so unwomanly. She didn't want Laurie to think her a heartless, worldly creature. She didn't care to be a queen of society now half so much as she did to be a lovable woman. She was so glad he didn't hate her for the dreadful things she said, but took them so beautifully and was kinder than ever. (GW 258)

Her decision to refuse Fred has been unconsciously influenced by Laurie. After her conversation with the latter, she now regrets her words and finally realises the importance of love above money. So, Amy finally becomes a true gentlewoman, as she wanted to be before leaving for Europe: "but I mean a true gentlewoman in mind and manners, and I try to do it as far as I know how. I can't explain exactly, but I want to be above the little meannesses and follies and faults that spoil so many women. I'm far from it now, but I do my best, and hope in time to be what Mother is" (GW 99). By deciding to refuse Fred and his inheritance, she chooses independence and self-respect, thus proving to be a feminist. Amy, who used to be criticised and represented as the typical idle and spoiled woman, or the archetypal 'belle', would have become the Victorian belle, had she married Fred Vaughn. Indeed, Amy and Laurie both need rescuing; as such they complement each other. Her brave choice of independence will be rewarded, as she will find true love and wealth in the character of Laurie (Foote 78).

However, their union can only exist when Beth dies. According to Nina Auerbach, Laurie functions as a surrogate son and brother, as well as the "squire" of the March family (20). Laurie is first linked to Meg by Jo and the Moffats, scandalizing poor Meg. He will then be rejected by Jo after his proposal. Jo herself hopes that he could learn to love Beth. However, Beth must die and; as Jo herself said, Laurie should turn to Amy. However, he can only be with Amy when death "makes a place for him" (Auerbach, 21). This occurrence reveals – once more – Alcott's personal views on marriage, as she consciously links marriage to death.

Furthermore, in spite of the rich vocabulary of romance at her disposal, Alcott seldom uses the typical sentimental rhetoric in the girl's romances. As we have already seen, Meg confesses her love for John not to him, but when scolding her aunt. In Amy's case, their love is finally materialised on the lake, with the following words:

> Feeling that she had not mended matters much, Amy took the offered third of a seat, shook her hair over her face, and accepted an oar. She rowed as well as she did many other things, and though she used both hands, and Laurie but one, the oars kept time, and the boat went smoothly through the water. "How well we pull together, don't we?" said Amy, who objected to silence just then. "So well that I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?" very tenderly. "Yes, Laurie," very low. Then they both stopped rowing, and unconsciously added a pretty little tableau of human love and happiness to the dissolving views reflected in the lake. (GW 266)

The word "love" is not said, but mutually felt and expressed. Their union will keep the original family together and will – as Amy had hoped for in marriage – get the family out of its destitution.

5.4 Jo and Pr Bhaer

As I have already observed, Jo's rebellion against femininity is caused by her anxieties towards the domestication of the woman. As such, she rejects the idea of marriage whenever it rises. Indeed, when the blooming romance of her elder sister Meg and her John announces itself, Jo will fight it, by any means possible. Her behaviour towards John changes abruptly:

> For a week or two, Jo behaved so queerly that her sisters were quite bewildered. She rushed to the door when the postman rang, was rude to Mr. Brooke whenever they met, would sit looking at Meg with a woe-begone face, occasionally jumping up to shake and then kiss her in a very mysterious manner. (LW 242)

Furthermore, when questioning Meg about her feelings for the young gentleman, Jo seems to judge her sister for her loving feelings; "If he did speak, you wouldn't know what to say, but would cry or blush or let him have his own way, instead of giving a good, decided no" (LW 354). Additionally, Jo strongly believes that marriage, as we have already seen, ruins family. She sees the nuptial union as something unnatural;

> "She'll see those handsome eyes that she talks about, and then it will be all up with her. She's got such a soft heart, it will melt like butter in the sun if anyone looks sentimentlly at her. She read the short reports he sent more than she did your letters, and pinched me when I spoke of it, and likes brown eyes, and doesn't think John an ugly name, and she'll go and fall in love, and there's an end of peace and fun, and cosz times together. I see it all! They'll go lovering around the house, and we shall have to dodge. Meg will be absorbed and no good to me any more. Brooke

> will scratch up a fortune somehow, carry her off, and make a hole in the family, and *I shall break my heart, and everything will be abominably uncomfortable*. Oh, dear me! Why weren't we all boys, then there wouldn't be any bother." Jo leaned her chin on her knees in a disconsolate attitude and shook her fist at the reprehensible John. Mrs. March sighed, and Jo looked up with an air of relief. "You don't like it, Mother? I'm glad of it. Let's send him about his business, and not tell Meg a word of it, but all be happy together as we always have been." "I did wrong to sigh, Jo. It is natural and right you should all go to homes of your own in time, but I do want to keep my girls as long as I can, and I am sorry that this happened so soon, for Meg is only seventeen and it will be some years before John can make a home for her. Your father and I have agreed that she shall not bind herself in any way, nor be married, before twenty. If she and John love one another, they can wait, and test the love by doing so. She is conscientious, and I have no fear of her treating him unkindly. My pretty, tender hearted girl! I hope things will go happily with her." "Hadn't you rather have her marry a rich man?" asked Jo, as her mother's voice faltered a little over the last words. "Money is a good and useful thing, Jo, and I hope my girls will never feel the need of it too bitterly, nor be tempted by too much. I should like to know that John was firmly established in some good business, which gave him an income large enough to keep free from debt and make Meg comfortable. I'm not ambitious for a splendid fortune, a fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures. I am content to see Meg begin humbly, for if I am not mistaken, she will be rich in the possession of a good man's heart, and that is better than a fortune."[37] (LW 318)

As is clear from this passage, Jo has a misguided idea of romance, an idea nourished by sentimental literature which she reproduces in her own stories. Indeed, in her description, Meg is suddenly turned into a foolish, senseless and idle girl while John is turned into the typical new, selfish hero. Yet, what is most striking in her speech is how much she will lose if her sister does engage in the nuptial union, for then she will end up with the broken heart. This is indeed a quite unusual choice of words to express her disappointment. Later on Jo elaborates on her feelings, claiming that she had hoped for a match between Laurie and Meg. Nevertheless, the words "broken heart," are more appropriate in a lovers quarrel. This expression, her conviction that a union between a man and a woman is unnatural and her boyish manners, have led many critics to believe that Jo might be a lesbian.

In her essay, the story of Jo, Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire, Karin Quimby explores the possibilities of Jo's homosexuality. Evidently it seems quite difficult to categorise Jo's gender transgression as being either heterosexual or homosexual. One thing is undeniable, Jo does not want to be feminine and would rather be a man, so she could be as, Sara Elbert puts it "born with a boy's spirit" (Quimby, 7). Still, though Jo might be born with a boy's spirit, she does evolve into womanhood. Yet, according to Quimby, Elbert's reading of Jo's gender transgression is inadequate, as she "struggles with the dilemma of Jo's gender identification" (9). Louisa May

Alcott had intended to have Jo become a literary spinster. However, due to the public demand, Alcott was forced to marry Jo off, as such Jo's evolution towards independence ends in marriage. However, Alcott makes sure that Jo realises and understands that marriage should not and does not always result in the enshrinement of the home. As such Jo clearly undergoes a feminine domestication. Certainly, at the end of the novel, Jo is able to find a balance between her need for domestication and her claim of individuality. Jo will understand that marriage can be wholesome, as she observes her sisters and their marriage;

> As they sat sewing together, Jo discovered how much improved her sister Meg was, how well she could talk, how much she knew about good, womanly impulses, thoughts, and feelings, how happy she was in husband and children, and how much they were all doing for each other. "Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it? said Jo, as she constructed a kite for Demi in the topsy-turvy nursery. "It's just what you need to bring out the tender womanly half of your nature, Jo. You are like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but silky-soft within, and a sweet kernel, if one can only get at it. Love will make you show your heart one day, and then the rough burr will fall off." "Frost opens chestnut burrs, ma'am, and it takes a good shake to bring them down. Boys go nutting, and I don't care to be bagged by them," returned Jo, pasting away at the kite which no wind that blows would ever carry up, for Daisy had tied herself on as a bob. Meg laughed, for she was glad to see a glimmer of Jo's old spirit, but she felt it her duty to enforce her opinion by every argument in her power, and the sisterly chats were not wasted, especially as two of Meg's most effective arguments were the babies, whom Jo loved tenderly. Grief is the best opener of some hearts, and Jo's was nearly ready for the bag. A little more sunshine to ripen the nut, then, not a boy's impatient shake, but a man's hand reached up to pick it gently from the burr, and find the kernel sound and sweet. If she suspected this, she would have shut up tight, and been more prickly than ever, fortunately she wasn't thinking about herself, so when the time came, down she dropped. (GW 270)

From this excerpt, it is apparent that Jo has indeed grown, simply by admitting that marriage can be more than just the confinement of a woman. Furthermore, I believe that Meg's assessment of her sister may be the more accurate description of Jo. Indeed, Jo could best be defined as a chestnut, rebellious on the outside, defying society's rules, but truly feminine inside, which can only be revealed through love. The narrator seems to confirm Meg's evaluation of her sister, as Alcott – the narrator's voice – declares that no boy can find Jo sweet and sound, only a man's hand. Thus, only a man can appreciate Jo's rebellious temperament and discover her true intimate and feminine self. Yet, the narrator also remarks that if Jo had suspected this, she "would have shut up tight," but that "fortunately she wasn't thinking about herself, so when the time came, down she dropped" (GW 271). This emphasizes the fact that Jo might feel that she ought to run away from love, having misunderstood love and marriage. Now that Jo is surrounded by love, she must acknowledge that if the love is pure and true, it can be beneficial for women. And indeed, several pages later, Jo secretly confides in her mother that she feels lonely "because I care more to be loved" (GW 275).

After having observed Meg's blissful marriage, Jo learns of Amy and Laurie's engagement and when reading Amy's letter confiding her how much she loves Laurie and how happy she is to have found a man who loves her as well, Jo will finally admit her desires and longings:

> A restless spirit possessed her, and the old feeling came again, not bitter as it once was, but a sorrowfully patient wonder why one sister should have all she asked, the other nothing. It was not true, she knew that and tried to put it away, but the natural craving for affection was strong, and Amy's happiness woke the hungry longing for someone to 'love with heart and soul, and cling to while God let them be together'. (GW 276)

Jo's desires and longings to be loved – awakened by her sisters' happiness – can, I believe, be seen as the confirmation that Jo is indeed all feminine. For now, she feels envious of her sisters' feelings, which are true womanly feelings. As such, I tend to believe that Jo is not forced into love or marriage, but simply learns to love, just as Amy and Meg did. This does however not deny her boyish manners, as they will still be noticeable. Furthermore, while Jo's womanly feelings are aroused and awakened with Alcott's authorization, the author still faintly judges woman's idle curiosity towards light romantic details and gossip, as she described Jo's inquiry of Laurie and Amy's wedding as "a fever of feminine interest and curiosity" (GW 283).

Jo's realisation is immediately followed by a new revelation. On finding Pr Bhaer's letter "her lips began to tremble, the books slid out of her lap, and she sat looking at the friendly words, as if they took a new meaning, and touched a tender spot in her heart. 'Wait for me, friend. I may be a little late, but I shall surely come'" (GW 277). After reading this note, Jo seems to fall apart, crying her heart out, wishing that this promise would be fulfilled. The narrator had already foreshadowed this turn of event, in chapter 11, as their German lessons are described as "laying a foundation for the sensation story of her own life" (GW 165). However, now that the sensation story of her life is about to begin, the narrator will leave us in suspense, suddenly questioning her sorrow and pain: "Was it all self-pity, loneliness, or low spirits? Or was it the waking up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its inspirer? Who shall say?" (GW 277) And indeed, the blossoming feelings will be tossed aside and oppressed, as Jo asserts that:

> "An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor Johnson, I'm old and can't enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it. Well, I needn't be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner, and, I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it, but..." and there Jo sighed, as if the prospect was not inviting. (GW 278)

Though Alcott had anticipated Jo to become a proud old maid, Jo will now look upon this title as uninviting. As such the domestication of Jo does now seem final. Yet, after having portrayed the prospect of spinsterhood, Alcott immediately engages herself in one of her numerous lectures, strongly pleading that, though for some spinsterhood would not have been ideal, it is not less worthy:

> Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragic romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the sober gowns, and many silent sacrifices of youth, health, ambition, love itself, make the faded faces beautiful in God's sight. Even the sad, sour sisters should be kindly dealt with, *because they have missed the sweetest part of life*, if for no other reason. And looking at them with compassion, not contempt, *girls in their bloom should remember that they too may miss the blossom time*. That rosy cheeks don't last forever, that silver threads will come in the bonnie brown hair, and that, by-and-by, *kindness and respect will be as sweet as love and admiration now*. Gentlemen, which means boys, be courteous to the old maids, no matter how poor and plain and prim, for the only chivalry worth having is that which is the readiest to pay deference to the old, protect the feeble, and serve womankind, regardless of rank, age, or color. Just recollect the good aunts who have not only lectured and fussed, but nursed and petted, too often without thanks, the scrapes they have helped you out of, the tips they have given you from their small store, the stitches the patient old fingers have set for you, the steps the willing old feet have taken, and gratefully pay the dear old ladies the little attentions that women love to receive as long as they live. The bright-eyed girls are quick to see such traits, and will like you all the better for them, and if death, almost the only power that can part mother and son, should rob you of yours, you will be sure to find a tender welcome and maternal cherishing from some Aunt Priscilla, who has kept the warmest corner of her lonely old heart for 'the best nevvy in the world'. (GW 279)

Though Alcott argues that one should always respect and treat spinsters with much regards, a warning and almost nostalgic tone is detectable. Indeed, girls should not laugh, for they too could end up alone and sour. They should not forget that beauty is transient. Therefore, kindness and respect should be acquired, as they are more valuable than beauty. As such, a valuable and feminist idea is put forward and should not be dismissed as less. This advice should not be taken lightly by the reader and reminds us of Virginia Woolf's words concerning beauty: "No sooner have you feasted on beauty with your eyes than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and beauty passes."[38] Beside this warning to her young female readers, a sad nostalgia is noticeable. Alcott talks of hidden tragic romances and sacrifices and the missing of "the sweetest part of life." Evidently, she refers to joys and sorrow of love. Though she severely questions the matrimonial union in her writings, she cannot do the same for love. The love between the March sisters is the core of the novel, but the love between a mother and daughter is as important, just as the love between a husband and wife is no less celebrated in this novel. Consequently, when Alcott talks of these sacrifices and hidden romances, the reader cannot but wonder if Louisa is talking from personal experience, nostalgic feelings about her past or missed opportunities.

In chapter 20, *Surprises*, Jo's wishes will be granted. However, she must face a final ordeal before she can truly fall in love with her professor. This ordeal comes in the persona of Laurie. Laurie, who had already been used as an obstacle in the growing romance of Jo and the professor, will now serve as a uniting tool:

> "Yes, *my boy Teddy*. I'm very proud of him and should like you to see him." Jo looked up then, quite unconscious of anything but her own pleasure in the prospect of showing them to one another. Something in Mr. Bhaer's face suddenly recalled the fact that she might find Laurie more than a 'best friend', and simply because she particularly wished not to look as if anything was the matter, she involuntarily began to blush, and the more she tried not to, the redder she grew. If it had not been for Tina on her knee. She didn't know what would have become of her. Fortunately the child was moved to hug her, so she managed to hide her face an instant, hoping the Professor did not see it. But he did, and his own changed again from that momentary anxiety to its usual expression, as he said cordially... (GW 165)

Indeed, the professor had misread Jo's feeling for Laurie, as most readers have always done. However, on newly wedded Laurie's return, Jo is now confronted with his happiness and her past rejection. And once again, Jo admits to her newly changed attitudes, as Laurie confronts her with her old barricades she used to put to guard men of, as she retaliates by saying: "The old pillow is up in the garret, and we don't need it now; so come and 'fess, Teddy" (GW 281) Two meanings are hidden in this metaphor. Firstly, Jo relinquishes her barricades and is now ready for any romantic attachment. And secondly, Jo reminds him that these barricades are no longer needed as he is a married man. And indeed, her original barricades are no longer useful to them; nonetheless, a new barricade has installed itself, as both characters have changed through time and have changed of heart. Laurie's return seems to function as a test for Jo, trying her feelings for Professor Bhaer, as can be read in the following excerpt:

> She stood a minute looking at the party vanishing above, and as Demi's short plaid legs toiled up the last stair, a sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon, *for even Teddy had deserted her*.[39] If she had known what birthday gift was coming every minute nearer and nearer, she would not have said to herself, "I'll weep a little weep when I go to bed. It won't do to be dismal now." (GW 292)

Indeed, she does unconsciously feel abandoned by Laurie; yet, Jo does not pine for Laurie. His desertion only reminds her of another desertion, Professor Bhaer's. Moreover, Jo will reveal later on that she always used to compare men to Laurie. So, we might read her loneliness caused by Laurie's desertion as a loneliness caused by her fear that all men will now desert her and that she may indeed end up an old maid. However, as her birthday present arrives, her wish is granted and she is reunited with *her* professor as she rejoices seeing her father and the professor talk, saying: "how he would enjoy having such a man as *my* Professor to talk with

everyday!" Not only does she already refer to him as 'her professor', but she already suggests their matrimonial union.

Evidently, their marriage follows quickly, though Jo somehow still feels the obligation to herself to not "lose her heart in a decorous manner," (GW 317) even though her loved ones know that she is indeed losing her heart to her Professor. She does indeed feel that she *ought to* deny her feelings, for she fears that she would otherwise betray her search of independence: "She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence." (GW 317)

Like Mr Brook and Laurie, the Professor can be seen as the typical conventional hero: solid, ethical, generous, frank, hard-working, admiring and respecting Jo dearly. Yet, he too will somehow save Jo and this at different levels. Consequently, he can also be analysed as a traditional hero rescuing his damsel in distress. Firstly, he is the one who saves Jo from immorality, bad society and "dangerous and unsubstantial food," who sets her on the right track. Secondly, while mourning Beth, Jo finds herself all alone feeling abandoned by her loved ones. It is partially due to the Professor's memory that Jo is able to struggle through this overpowering and all consuming loneliness. Thirdly, while courting, he is described as the sun, rescuing her from the rain. He does indeed literally rescue Jo from the rain, as she has forgotten her umbrella. He gives her *shelter*, making the world right again. Not only does the professor give her a real protection against the rain, he will give her a new home and as such he saves Jo from the destiny of spinsterhood she dreaded. So, Jo is rescued from what Alcott herself was not, for no one warned her for her sensation stories and she did find herself on the path of spinsterhood. However, Alcott did not want her Jo to be rescued, but she was forced to do so, for no audience would have tolerated a single Jo writing *trash*. Nevertheless, in spite of these little rescues, Jo is never a true damsel in distress, as she does find independence, even in marriage. After declaring their love for one another, the professor calls her "Professorin," giving her a rightful title of power, a new emancipation (GW 328).

Jo's attraction to the Professor has often been labelled as an Oedipus-like attraction (Quimby, 2), considering the Professor's age and the close resemblance between both men. Indeed, Jo ends up with 'papa Bhaer.' Yet, their union is not so astonishing and unanticipated. For, as Holly Blackford rightly pointed out, symbolically, Bhaer and Jo are the same person (31). They are both different and alien to the nineteenth-century American culture; as Jo herself asserts in one of her letters, he is a "castaway" (GW 136). He is estranged from the nation and

Jo has nothing to do with the American feminine culture. They are both foreign, but together they are home. In chapter 23, *Harvest Time,* they are finally united, as they finally voice their feelings for one another. And certainly, when their union is officialised by tender words of love, Jo finds herself at home at last, as is said: "while Jo trudged beside him, feeling as if her place had always been there, and wondering how she ever could have chosen another lot" (GW 327). The domestication of Jo is now complete.

Finally, I would like to mention that Jo did find her true voice. So, we might conclude that she did overcome her anxieties of authorship. Yet, this would be misleading, as her true voice had already been dismissed and will be dismissed once more. Jo has learned to write again, not for the world, but for her family: "write something for us, and never mind the rest of the world." Encouraged by her mother, Jo takes up her pen again. Her new story is published and praised by everyone, as it "went straight to the hearts of those who read it" (GW 272). The reason for this new approval is that, though she still uses humour and pathos, she writes from her heart, from her life. She does not write for money or for fame. This new style could only be achieved after pain and sorrow, after losing Beth. As such, Beth will function as the "memento mori" (Gilbert and Gubar 24) – as will be elaborated further on – for it is because of this loss that Jo can find her inner self; as she herself says: "I owe it all to you and mother and to Beth" (GW 273). Her new voice will do exactly the opposite of what she used to do and was disapproved of. As her sensation stories were bad for her readers, her new stories will teach and rejoice their readers: "So taught by love and sorrow, Jo wrote her little stories, and sent them away to make friends for themselves and her, finding it a very charitable world to such humble wanderers, for they were kindly welcomed, and sent home comfortable tokens to their mother, like dutiful children whom good fortune overtakes" (GW 273). And as they were written, taught by love, it will bring her love, for after reading one of her stories, Bhaer is invited back into her life:

> "Now tell me what brought you, at last, just when I wanted you?" "This," and Mr. Bhaer took a little worn paper out of his waistcoat pocket. Jo unfolded it, and looked much abashed, for it was one of her own contributions to a paper that paid for poetry, which accounted for her sending it an occasional attempt. "How could that bring you?" she asked, wondering what he meant. "I found it by chance. I knew it by the names and the initials, and in it there was one little verse that seemed to call me. Read and find him. I will see that you go not in the wet." […]"It's *very bad poetry, but I felt it when I wrote it,* one day when I was very lonely, and had a good cry on a rag bag. I never thought it would go where it could tell tales," said Jo, tearing up the verses the Professor had treasured so long. "Let it go, *it has done its duty*, and I will haf a fresh one when I read all the brown book in which she keeps her little secrets," said Mr. Bhaer with a smile as he watched the fragments fly away on the wind. "Yes," he added earnestly, "I read that, and I think to myself, She has a sorrow, she is lonely, she would find comfort in true love. I haf a heart full, full for her.

> Shall I not go and say, 'If this is not too poor a thing to gif for what I shall hope to receive, take it in Gott's name?'"[40] (GW 328)

From this excerpt, we can conclude that her writing has done its work, as Bhaer says so himself. Yet, Jo still diminishes her own work, believing it to be bad poetry, though it were her true feelings. As such, she still feels anxiety of authorship

In a final note, I would like to comment that the female development that is centralized in the novel, has been summarized and captured in this poem, In the Garret, describing the unique path each sister chose. Each chest, belonging to the sisters, is a testimony of their development.

IN THE GARRET

Four little chests all in a row,
Dim with dust, and worn by time,
All fashioned and filled, long ago,
By children now in their prime.
Four little keys hung side by side,
With faded ribbons, brave and gay
When fastened there, with childish pride,
Long ago, on a rainy day.
Four little names, one on each lid,
Carved out by a boyish hand,
And underneath there lieth hid
Histories of the happy band
Once playing here, and pausing oft
To hear the sweet refrain,
That came and went on the roof aloft,
In the falling summer rain.

"Meg" on the first lid, smooth and fair.
I look in with loving eyes,
For folded here, with well-known care,
A goodly gathering lies,
The record of a peaceful life—
Gifts to gentle child and girl,
A bridal gown, lines to a wife,
A tiny shoe, a baby curl.
No toys in this first chest remain,
For all are carried away,
In their old age, to join again
In another small Meg's play.
Ah, happy mother! Well I know
You hear, like a sweet refrain,
Lullabies ever soft and low
In the falling summer rain.

"Jo" on the next lid, scratched and worn,
And within a motley store

Of headless dolls, of schoolbooks torn,
Birds and beasts that speak no more,
Spoils brought home from the fairy ground
Only trod by youthful feet,
Dreams of a future never found,
Memories of a past still sweet,
Half-writ poems, stories wild,
April letters, warm and cold,
Diaries of a wilful child,
Hints of a woman early old,
A woman in a lonely home,
Hearing, like a sad refrain—
"Be worthy, love, and love will come,"
In the falling summer rain.

My Beth! the dust is always swept
From the lid that bears your name,
As if by loving eyes that wept,
By careful hands that often came.
Death canonized for us one saint,
Ever less human than divine,
And still we lay, with tender plaint,
Relics in this household shrine—
The silver bell, so seldom rung,
The little cap which last she wore,
The fair, dead Catherine that hung
By angels borne above her door.
The songs she sang, without lament,
In her prison-house of pain,
Forever are they sweetly blent
With the falling summer rain.

Upon the last lid's polished field—
Legend now both fair and true
A gallant knight bears on his shield,
"Amy" in letters gold and blue.
Within lie snoods that bound her hair,
Slippers that have danced their last,
Faded flowers laid by with care,
Fans whose airy toils are past,
Gay valentines, all ardent flames,
Trifles that have borne their part
In girlish hopes and fears and shames,
The record of a maiden heart
Now learning fairer, truer spells,
Hearing, like a blithe refrain,
The silver sound of bridal bells
In the falling summer rain

Four little chests all in a row,
Dim with dust, and worn by time,
Four women, taught by weal and woe
To love and labor in their prime.
Four sisters, parted for an hour,
None lost, one only gone before,

Made by love's immortal power,
Nearest and dearest evermore.
Oh, when these hidden stores of ours
Lie open to the Father's sight,
May they be rich in golden hours,
Deeds that show fairer for the light,
Lives whose brave music long shall ring,
Like a spirit-stirring strain,
Souls that shall gladly soar and sing
In the long sunshine after rain.(GW 329)

This poem captures the entire soul of the novel and is – I believe – an ode to their childhood. Indeed, as pointed out by Blackford in her essay, this poem "crystallizes the unique process of female development," (1) from children in their prime to mothers, brides and to finding love. In the poem, the sad and tragic fate of Beth, as she had been canonised through death and liberated of her prison house, is literally expressed in the poem .The poem does not only emphasize the development of four women, it equally stresses the everlasting and indestructible bond of their sisterhood, which functions as the heart of the novel. Indeed, though Beth has died, the poem asserts and confirms that none are lost, as their bond has been forged by love's immortal power. As such their love for one another is a spiritual love, superior to the boundaries of death.

6. Beth, the Subdued Heroine

6.1 Beth, the *Angel of death*

American girls belonging to the middle or upper-class were expected to learn to play the piano. Music making is often used as a symbol for women's desires and accomplishments (Meyer-Frazier 46). In the American novel music is used to portray women as pious and spiritual or as the typical Victorian Angel in the house.

This is clear in the character of Beth. The piano appears to be her closest friend, for Beth can not exist without it. But it is her friend only in appearance, for it characterises her, creating of her a self-destructive woman. Compared to her sisters, Beth is an oppressed character and not in the least bit empowered. She does not have strong desires and wishes, as is made clear in chapter 13, *Castles in the Air*, for her only wish is to "stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family," said Beth contentedly. "Don't you wish for anything else?" asked Laurie. "Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well and be together, nothing else" (LW 224). Whereas her sisters dream of grand things such as luxury and fame, Beth's only wish is to stay within the confinement of the domestic household. And when asked if that is all, she shyly answers that she cannot wish for anything else, since she has her *little piano*.

Beth, who is as accomplished in playing the piano as her sister Amy is in drawing and Jo in writing, is too shy and timid to prove that she can play more than what people expect of her. Indeed, unlike her sisters, she does not want to prove or exhibit her accomplishments. She always refuses to play in public and though she yearned "for the grand piano", she can not pluck up courage to go and play, just as her sister would do. It is only by tricking the poor girl and by many secrets arrangements that she finally does play the grand piano.

> But Beth, though yearning for the grand piano, could not pluck up courage to go to the 'Mansion of Bliss', as Meg called it. She went once with Jo, but the old gentleman, not being aware of her infirmity, stared at her so hard from under his heavy eyebrows and said "Hey!" so loud, that he frightened her so much her 'feet chattered on the floor', she never told her mother, and she ran away, declaring she would never go there any more, not even for the dear piano. No persuasions or enticements could overcome her fear, till, the fact coming to Mr. Laurence's ear in some mysterious way, he set about mending matters. During one of the brief calls he made, he artfully led the conversation to music, and talked away about great singers whom he had seen, fine organs he had heard, and told such charming anecdotes that Beth found it impossible to stay in her distant corner, but crept nearer and nearer, as if fascinated. At the back of his chair she stopped and stood listening, with her great eyes wide open and her cheeks red with excitement of this unusual performance. Taking no more notice of her than if she had been a fly, Mr. Laurence talked on

> about Laurie's lessons and teachers. And presently, as if the idea had just occurred to him, he said to Mrs. March... "The boy neglects his music now and I'm glad of it, for he was getting too fond of it. But the piano suffers for want of use. Wouldn't some of your girls like to run over and practice on it now and then, just to keep it in tune, you know, ma'am?" Beth took a step forward and pressed her hands tightly together to keep from clapping them, for this was an irresistible temptation and the thought of practicing on that splendid instrument quite took her breath away. Before Mrs. March could reply, Mr. Laurence went on with an odd little nod and smile... "They needn't see or speak to anyone, but run in at any time. For I'm shut up in my study at the other end of the house, Laurie is out a great deal and the servants are never near the drawing room after nine o'clock." Here he rose, as if going, and Beth made up her mind to speak, for that last arrangement left nothing to be desired. "Please, tell the young ladies what I say and if they don't care to come, why, never mind." Here a little hand slipped into his and Beth looked up at him with a face full of gratitude, as she said, in her earnest yet timid way... "Oh sir, they do care, very very much!" "Are you the musical girl?" he asked, without any startling "Hey!" as he looked down at her very kindly. "I'm Beth. I love it dearly and I'll come, if you are quite sure nobody will hear me and be disturbed," she added, fearing to be rude, and trembling at her own boldness as she spoke. "Not a soul, my dear. The house is empty half the day, so come and drum away as much as you like, and I shall be obliged to you." "How kind you are, sir!" Beth blushed like a rose under the friendly look he wore, but she was not frightened now and gave the hand a grateful squeeze because she had no words to thank him for the precious gift he had given her. The old gentleman softly stroked the hair off her forehead, and, stooping down, he kissed her, saying, in a tone few people ever heard... (LW 91)

As Petra Meyer-Frazier explained in her essay, when Beth does indeed finally play the grand piano, her playing rises above average and leaves no one untouched (51). Yet Beth remains, and will remain so throughout the entire story, un-empowered within her female sphere.

Beth can be analysed as the emblematic Angel woman or the perfect representation of "true womanhood" (Meyer-Frazier, 47). According to Gilbert and Gubar, the idea of the "Angel in the house" is not just a typical nineteenth-century idea; it has been present in literature from the Middle-Ages onwards, with the divine Virgin, symbolising the eternal type of female purity. Our Western literature has always been a patriarchal tradition until the rise of women's fiction, resulting in the creation of the ideal woman as an angel, as male authors wanted it. This Angle-like woman is, as Eichner describes;

> She … leads a life of almost *pure* contemplation… in considerable isolation on a country estate … a life without *external* events – a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not *useless*. On the contrary … she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travellers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.[41](Gilbert and Gubar, 22)

From the eighteenth century onwards this idea became quite popular, encouraging young girls to actually become this "Angel-like" woman. These women's only duty was to be completely

devoted to their husband and to the domestic tasks. Male authors had "enshrined" the woman within the domestic spheres, as "a living *memento* of the otherness of the divine" (Gilbert and Gubar, 24).

This *selflessness* was very extreme in her domestic solitude, but during the nineteenth century, the Angel-like women changed from the "memento of otherness" to a "*memento mori*". These "Victorian angelology", as is explained by Gilbert and Gubar, "assist in the translation of the dying to a future state" by officiating a sickbed and by welcoming the sufferer "from the other side of death" (24).

Beth is first portrayed as an Angel woman and she evolves in the novel into an Angel of death. Beth has no real story of her own; she has no ambitions and wishes to stay at home to devote herself to her parents, so her existence is not useless indeed. She is the symbolic Angel in the house of the Marches. She is always present and ready to help the others, to listen to their worries and complaints. As such she is truly "a beacon in a dark world […] by which others, the travellers […] can set their course," the travellers being her sisters, and in particular Jo. Indeed, Beth is the only person Jo always relies on and as "Meg was Amy's confidante and monitor, and, by some strange attraction of opposites, Jo was gentle Beth's" (LW 63). Jo strongly relies on Beth and needs her as her beacon in her dark and troubled world, for no one has as much influence on Jo as Beth has: "and over her big harum-scrum sister Beth unconsciously exercised more influence than anyone in the family"(LW 63). She is indeed the ideal representation of true womanhood, as she is the "virtue of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness" (Gilbert and Gubar, 22).

Alcott consciously abuses the image of the Angel-like woman in the creation of Beth. Beth's only source of joy and happiness are her parents and her piano. She is isolated within the confinements of the March household and does not want to disturb anyone, if possible. Yet, when playing the piano, she expresses herself. As playing the piano is a deed of self-expression, she is very reluctant to play in public for then she would display herself to others, who do not belong to the private household. Indeed, as a typical Angel in the house, she should stay pure and reveal her intimate self only to her family. Were she to play in public, she might reveal too much of herself. So she chooses to play unseen and unheard. As such Alcott does indeed, as Meyer-Frazier indicates in her essay, expose "the complex interaction of accomplishment, self-effacement" (52).

But Alcott also criticises this very same image, as the narrator severely judges those who take women for granted:

> 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.(LW 60)

This is the fate that awaits little Beth. She does indeed change from a household saint into a sweet Angel of death. Alcott's criticism is also to be found in the fact that she does not allow Beth to enjoy a full life, including the joys of romance and motherhood. Yet before Beth is to die, she is taken ill and will forever be – until her death – delicate, confined to rest.

> Beth, who remained delicate long after the fever was a thing of the past. Not an invalid exactly, but never again the rosy, healthy creature she had been, yet always hopeful, happy, and serene, and busy with the quiet duties she loved, everyone's friend and an angel in the house, long before those who loved her most had learned to know it.(GW 3)

What is most striking in the excerpt is that Alcott will now literally refer to Beth as an Angel in the house, whereas in the first part of the story, Beth was not yet an Angel "but a very human little girl"(LW 59). In this passage, Beth has literally become the Angel woman, the household saint. From then on, she is frail and forced to stay within the protective confinement of her beloved house. Before her illness she freely, though unconsciously, chose to stay within the protection of the feminine sphere; now she cannot choose to leave the house, but as this was never her desire, we might thus analyse her illness as complementary to her personality.

With her death, Beth finally surrenders herself to heaven; with her death Alcott explores the extreme possibility to be a memento of otherness, as Beth becomes a memento mori. Her death becomes the symbol of self-sacrifice, as she surrenders her entire person, which is – according to Gilbert and Gubar – "the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven." However, the "spiritualized Victorian woman" will lead a "posthumous existence." Indeed, though "exorcised from public life, denied the pleasures of sensual existence, the Victorian angel in the house was allowed to hold sway," Beth will continue to influence her sisters after her death.

In her essay on Matriarchy, Nina Auerbach asserts this idea. She believes that Beth dies "so that the others can marry" (23), for Beth is the symbol of domesticity and childhood fun. Thus with her death, the spirit of the home dies allowing Jo and Amy to move on from childhood to marriage. After Beth's death Jo, overwhelmed with grief – as is the rest of the

family – flees from her grief by trying to take Beth's place in the household, as she throws herself in the housework. As such, Jo becomes domesticated and will finally learn the proper social circulations, appropriate to Jo's stern democratic values (Foote, 78). Amy's life will also be influenced by her sister's death. Though she is in Europe at the time, she feels as much pain at the loss of her sister as the rest of her family. But Beth's death will finalise Amy and Laurie's union.

6.2 Beth's Patriarchal Socialization

In their book, The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate the ways in which the patriarchal society did not only enshrine women within the domestic, but also the ways in which this society made women sick, both physically and mentally. The two most forthcoming diseases, a result of the maladjustment to the physical and social atmosphere, are anorexia and agoraphobia. Anorexia, a psychotic condition characterized by the loss of appetite or self- starvation, is more likely to affect young adolescent girls. And agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder characterized by fear of public places, is most likely to affect middle-aged housewives. Both diseases are, just as the Angel of death, the products of the patriarchal views on women and their femininity.

Beth, who is – as we have already established – an emblematic example of the typical Victorian Angel woman, is also infected by such a syndrome. Indeed, she falls ill, but she clearly suffers from a serious case of agoraphobia. Therefore I shall not discuss the case of anorexia, as it is not of any real importance in our discussion of Beth.

These symptoms are a result of the stern and docile education a girl received, educating her to be submissive and selfless. So it is to be expected that those girls – who have been taught to erase themselves and to become "memento" (Gilbert and Gubar 24) of otherness – will suffer from pathological fears of public spaces. Beth is described, along with her sisters, in the very first chapter as:

> Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and 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. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, acomical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it. Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her *'Little Miss Tranquillity', and the name suited her*

> *excellently, for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved*. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners. What the characters of the four sisters were we will leave to be found out.[42] (LW 6)

However, though the narrator explicitly said that she would describe the physical features of the girl, "as young readers like to know 'how people look'"(LW 5), and does indeed describe the physical features of Meg, Jo and Amy, she decides to add to his detailed description of Beth that she "seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved", thus already describing her personality, as Beth is just shy and timid and would never leave her home.

Time after time, Beth is reluctant to leave her home and she is almost paralysed within the domestic sphere. As a result she does not engage in typical girlish actions outside the house, but plays the 'perfect' housewife with her dolls, inside. Moreover, she cannot enjoy a real education as her sister did:

> Beth was too bashful to go to school. It had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up and she did her lessons at home with her father. Even when he went away and her mother was called to devote her skill and energy to Soldiers' Aid Societies, Beth went faithfully on by herself and did the best she could. She was a housewifely little creature and helped Hannah keep the home neat and comfortable for the workers, never thinking of any reward but to be loved. Long, quiet days she spent, not lonely nor idle, for her little world was peopled with imaginary friends and she was by nature a busy bee. There were six dolls to be taken up and dressed every morning, for Beth was a child still and loved her pets as well as ever. Not one whole or handsome one among them, all were outcasts till Beth took them in, for when her sisters outgrew these idols, they passed to her because Amy would have nothing old or ugly. Beth cherished them all the more tenderly for that very reason and set up a hospital for infirm dolls. (LW 58)

Indeed, her clear case of agoraphobia bans her from school life. School and education are very important within the women's novel, as it is one of the crucial tools to achieve independence and to learn how to function in society. Amy goes to school and her experiences – though at times very painful – will shape and form her into the strong, liberated and intelligent young woman she becomes. Jo's fruitful education empowers her to write, to see the flaws in the patriarchal society and will finally encourage her to – instead of sulking – try and change this mentality by opening her own school and teach her democratic values. And finally, though Meg's school experiences are not spoken of in the novel, she chooses to work as a governess, preparing young children for their school careers. Alcott knows how important school is, not only for the intellectual education of the mind, but also the acquisition of social skills.

To be home-schooled, as a result of her *bashfulness*, will only enhance Beth's fear of public places and strangers. Beth will indeed serve, throughout the novel, as the Victorian wronged woman. She herself truly believes that she – as the patriarchal society wants her to think – is a memento of otherness, as she confesses on her deathbed to her only confidante:

> Beth lay a minute thinking and then said in her quiet way, "I don't know how to express myself, and shouldn't try to anyone but you, because I can't speak out except to my 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. I never wanted to go away and the hard part now is the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven."(GW 188)

This confession once more confirms that Beth is indeed an Angel woman, believing she cannot be anything else. Through the character of Beth, who tragically dies, Alcott strongly criticises the Victorian society and the literature dominated by men that created and promoted this image of the angel woman.

IV. *Little Women*'s Regeneration

> Where else … could we have read about an all-female group who discussed
> Work, art and all the Great Questions – or found girls
> who wanted to be women and not vice versa
> – Gloria Steinem[43]

In this final chapter, I would like to explore the novel's legacy. As already mentioned, this novel has become a classic since its publication. The novel was first published on 30 September 1868 and was given the title Little Women: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. The Story of Their Lives. A Girls Book. With a first impression of 2,000 copies, it was an instant success. Her publisher, Thomas Niles soon begged Alcott for a sequel. The March saga was born.

The success was quite unexpected to Alcott. Indeed, as noted in her journals, she was not eager to write a story for girls: "Mr. N. wants a girls' story, and I begin "Little Women." Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it" (198). As we read on, we discover that she found the whole business quite boring and so did her publisher after reading the first twelve chapters. However, strong-minded as she was, Alcott persevered, for she believed she should "try the experiment" (198). Yet, she also acknowledges the need of good wholesome books for young, innocent and easily impressionable girls. She believed she might as well try and supply them with the righteous literature. After she had sent the manuscript, her publishers company offered to buy her story, but wisely advised the authoress to keep the copyright. From this advice, we might conclude that the publishers already anticipated a success. Alcott kept the copyright and with its publication she made a fortune, as the book was the "first golden egg of the ugly duckling" (198).

Indeed, a sequel followed soon and again Alcott had her doubts, for she disliked sequels. However, a sequel Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy Part Two, was written in 1869. Indeed, Niles had decided a sequel and had encouraged Alcott to the keep the ending of her story open. It was not only a huge success in the United States; it was soon translated into French, German and Dutch and published in Europe. In Alcott's biography, the author clarifies

this great success as a result of its realistic transcription of life, "idealised by the tenderness of real feeling" (192). She continues justifying its success by saying that the novel "teaches the lessons of everyday conduct and inculcates the simplest virtues of truth, carnest effort, and loving affection"(192). In addition, the humour and tenderness of the novel are stressed. The novel was immensely popular, as was its author, who received many letters from happy readers. So the *Little Women Series* was born. The second part, Little Men, was published, followed by Jo's Boys. Little Men deals with the new adventures of Jo and her Professor in their new school, whereas Jo' Boys tells the story of the sister's children.

Due to its immense popularity and influence, this classic tale, touching the heart of everyone, has known numerous adaptations and is still widely read today. As such, we could talk of a regeneration of the novel, for though the story is set in a time foreign to us, the chore matter of the novel, the coming of age of young women, will never be foreign to the reader as it is a universal theme with no time boundaries. The humour, tenderness and realistic record of intimate female feelings of self-doubt, joy, sorrow and love are immortal and are as such responsible for its everlasting popularity. In addition, its feminist subtext enhances its appeal to present readers.

In this final chapter I will investigate the novel's influence through time. I will first analyse its place in children's literature and its importance as a gender-specific book. Secondly, I will talk of its intertextuality with the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winner March by Geraldine Brooks. And finally, I will briefly discuss its numerous adaptations.

1. "Little Women" and its Influence on the Gender Specific and Juvenile literature

Since its publication, this novel's influence has been immense. In Alcott's biography, the novel is already treated as a classic as its influence "has been wide and deep, and has helped to make a whole generation of girls feel a deeper sense of family love and the blessings to be gained from lives of earnest effort, mutual sacrifice, and high aims"(192).

According to Nina Baym, Little Women has been remembered, not so much for being a strong work of woman's fiction, but as children's literature (23). Indeed, according to the book's original title Little Women: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. The Story of Their Lives. A Girls Book, categorising this book as children's literature would not be unjustified as it says 'a girls

Book' and not 'a woman's book'. However, I believe that this novel can be read by both young girls and women, for it tells the story of becoming a woman, not being a woman. According to Barbara Sicherman, the novel can be read as "a rite of passage for generations of adolescent and preadolescent females" (Wadsworth, 41). And indeed, this process of becoming a woman may be the reason why this story is so appealing to all ages, as was confirmed in an anonymous review in the Nation (October 22, 1868) "an agreeable little story which is not only very well adapted to the readers for whom it is especially intended, but may also be read with pleasure by older people" (Cauti, XX).

Children's literature as we know it today, intended for children to read and enjoy, is a relatively new phenomenon. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, more leisure time allowed the middle-class children to read more. Indeed, as child labour diminished, children's literature began to develop. This phenomenon first occurred in England with books such as Charles Kingsley's The Water Babies, published in 1863. These stories represented the notion that children's literature should not only be read as part of their instruction and moral development, but should be strongly favoured and read for their enjoyment.

However, until that time, the vast majority of books and stories written for children in the nineteenth-century were didactic as moral virtues were to be promoted. Yet, novels such as Little Women, which responded to the realistic and entertaining description of family life, imposed themselves as "a new breed of books" (Cullinan and Person, 9).

With the rise of children's literature, a shift from a more or less homogenous body of literature for both boys and girls to a body of gender-specific literature gradually developed in the mid-nineteenth-century in America. This began with authors such as Jacob Abott[44] and William T. Adams.[45] In the 1860s there were contributions of authors such as Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott.

Alcott's main contribution to children's literature was achieved by creating a new kind of fiction, especially addressing young adolescent girls. She created new realistic female characters and plots, which differed from preceding models of womanhood in fiction (Wadsworth, 18). American literature for children intended to prepare and guide boys and girls into adulthood, which for girls meant to use one's feminine influence for good and virtuous ends within the home. When Little Women was published, the demand for novels for girls was

big; yet, this extreme genre specialization was new. This new realistic fiction for girls was highly popular and would strongly influence the social function of girls's reading (Wadsworth, 27). Indeed, with the publication of her novel Alcott was responsible for the gradual expansion of the female sphere and opportunities for women. In creating a place where women could be more than just domestic housewives, Alcott endorsed her readers new opportunities for women, such as education and career. As Wadsworth observed in her essay on this matter, Alcott created a new heroine, representing the next generation of young women (29). As such, Alcott contributed to the creation of the gender-specific book.

According to Macleod, the tomboyish attitude typical of Jo would not have been so rare in the nineteenth-century. It is his conviction that girls of the later nineteenth-century were more involved with the "rough-and-tumbles activities" typical for boys, until the time they were to become young ladies, as society demanded (Wadsworth, 29). This might explain Jo's popularity and appeal, for her struggle to pass from the innocence of girlhood to the often oppressive restrictions of womanhood, may have been familiar to many American girls of her age and class.

In addition, Alcott's practice of "spinning off sequels" – under the influence of her publishers – became a marketing innovation, which would flourish in the late nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth-century (Wadsworth 31). Evidently, publishers had finally learned to recognize the needs of the market and were becoming proficient to fulfil these demands.

Alcott was able to respond to her reader's needs and concerns as well as to the expectation society placed upon them. Furthermore, by concentrating on issues such as female education and individualism, Alcott defined a sense of community among her readers and encouraged them to redefine their femininity (Wadsworth 33). And it is precisely because of this new model of femininity and womanhood created in Little Women that this book cannot be categorized as just children's literature. In her Woman's Fiction, A guide to Novels By and About Women, 1820 – 1870, Baym's observations on how "the story of feminine heroism now becomes a didactic instrument for little girls" (296) is in fact true. Yet, as Wadsworth comments, Baym does not signal the marginalization of women's fiction with this observation. Instead, the publication of The Little Women series can be seen as part of a progression "encompassing both the rise to dominance of female readers in the nineteenth- century literary

marketplace and the ascendancy of girls in the expanding market for juvenile books, in conjunction with the gradual supplanting of "True Woman" by "New Woman" as acceptable models of femininity" (Wadsworth, 33).

Today, the novel still appeals to young adolescent girls as well as to women. The Penguin Classics collections have therefore two versions of the novel, one for young girls and one for adults. As such they respond to the demands of our literary market. Though the story remains unchanged in both versions, we do find some important distinctions. Whereas the Penguin Classics' Little Women for adults is published in the traditional black cover with a colour illustration, better known as the "Black Classics", the children's version is included in the Puffin Classics, the children's print of Penguin Books. The reissued Puffin edition of Little Women, published in 2008, has a bright pink cover, targeting at young adolescent girls. Apart from the different covers, the publishers opted for different introductions. The 1989 adults reprint included an introduction by Elaine Showalter and notes by Siobhan Kilfeather and Vinca Showalter. The 2008 Puffin version was introduced by none other than Louisa Rennison, author of the Confessions of Georgia Nicolson series.

The choice of a popular voice to reintroduce such a classic may be seen as a stroke of ingenuity, as it is Georgia Nicolson, Rennison's popular teenage heroine, who promotes this story to her young fans. Furthermore, in her introduction Rennison will not immediately acclaim the novel's ingenuity and feminism. Instead, she will mock men and the classic novels, for they are written "by beardy Elizabethan folk rambling on for England" (V). Evidently, Rennison plays upon today's young readers's conception of literature. Yet, she decides to make an exception for Alcott:

> I have made an exception of Loulou Alcott and there are many reasons for this. Number one being that she is not an Elizabethan beardy bloke in tights. She never to anyone's knowledge said, 'Forsooth and lack-a-day I have a hole in my tights.' In fact Louisa M. was a jolly good egg during the … er Civil War in Hamburgeragogoland[46] between the deep South and the North people. She helped people in hospitals A LOT. Still finding tie to do her writing. Unlike Jas, my so called betsy, who fainted when we went to do a day's work experience in a doctor's surgery. […] Loulou Alcott is not known for her nursery skills; she is known (much like me) for her huge talentosity *vis à vis* writing about her life. She wrote it about her own family as I did mine. I just hope her family appreciated her efforts a bit more than mine have. Because *Little Women* was written ages ago by a girly type person about girly type people, it is good. […] It makes you laugh, it makes you cry, it makes you even more convinced that there is something really, really, really wrong with boys. (V)

The introduction is befitting to children and young girls, using more colloquial English – including Alcott's nickname Loulou – and exploiting the general misconception about literature among adolescents. As such, Rennison promotes this novel. Furthermore, though this may be a children's version, Rennison still stresses the feministic aspect, saying that, as it was written by a "girly" person about "girly" people, it is good.

Yet, Rennison is aware of the changes in society from its first publication in 1868 to its present publication in 2008. Indeed, society has changed throughout the ages and this cannot be ignored when reading Little Women. Rennison seems to bridge this gap by connecting this novel to her own and by comparing Louisa M. to Georgia Nicolson, her heroine. In addition to the intertextuality set forward by Rennison, the latter is compelled to acknowledge some major changes saying: "The only unrealistic note in the book (besides the amount of knitting that goes on) is that all the girls and the mutti miss him and keep reading his letters out to each other"(VII). This observation not only shows the common distance between children and their parents, but also recognizes the strong individualization of our twentieth-one century families. Finally, I would like to add that when this reissued 2008 edition was published, the film version of the Confession of Georgia Nicolson, Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging[47] was released. By choosing the voice of Georgia Nicolson to reintroduce this classic to the adolescent reader, the publishers benefited from the film's popularity and success. As such, this introduction is a living proof of the novel's universal appeal and constant regeneration.

2. "March" and its Debt to "Little Women"

> "Spanning the vibrant intellectual world of Massachusetts and the sensuous South, *March* adds adult resonance to Alcott's optimistic children's tale to portray the moral complexity of war, and a marriage tested by the demands of extreme idealism – and by a dangerous and illicit attraction."
>
> (March – book cover)

In the *Afterword* Geraldine Brooks explains the writing of her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, March, published in 2005.[48] As Brooks remarks, her book is a work of fiction that drew its inspiration from one of the great American families of the nineteenth-century. In spite of what the title may suggest, Brooks has not been inspired by the March family, but by the Alcotts. Nonetheless, she borrowed from Alcott's Little Women. In her novel, we follow the adventures of the young Mr March on his journey through the great South and of the mature Mr March as a chaplain during the Civil War.

According to Geraldine Brooks, and I tend to agree, Louisa Alcott was more concerned with how the girls were able to survive without their father and how the war had influenced the girls. Indeed, with the father absent, the girls are no longer under the strict patriarchal rules and are given the possibility to become individualistic and empowered women. The father's absence is continued in the second part of the story. Though Mr March is home again, he seems absent in Good Wives. Though Alcott started her story of little women against the bleak background of the Civil War, we are not told how these traumatic events influenced Mr March. Apart from discussing his injuries, very little is said about the war on his coming home. In chapter 22, *Pleasant Meadows*, Mr March enters the novel as he comes home. However, no real attention is given to Mr March.

It is this void that Brooks has tried to recreate in her novel. In her attempts to portray Mr March, Brooks was forced to look at Alcott's own father, Bronson Alcott. In her search she discovered that Bronson Alcott was a radical man, extreme in his beliefs. Alcott grew up with illiterate parents on a farm in Connecticut. As a youngster, he travelled South as a "peddler of notions and books to wealthy planters" (March 276). During this period he witnessed the cruelty imposed on slaves. At first he was not acquainted with the matter of slavery, but after

his journey he went back to New-England as a philosopher and strong defender of the slaves's rights. He went as far as to risk his own life when he protested against the repatriation of runaway slaves. As such, Brooks guides her readers through Bronson Alcott's life, portrayed as Mr March. Thus the protagonist is not a woman, but a man. The opening chapter stresses the traumatic events of the Civil War, as Mr March fights for his life while under attack. However, the novel goes back to his youth where he is confronted with the harsh and brutal reality of slavery. The novel also includes the romance between Mr March and Miss Margaret Day and the illicit romance between Mr March and Grace, a slave. However, as it is Mr March who is focalised, this story is quite different from Alcott's own record of her family's life in Little Women. While Alcott focalises the female development and the tensions between the patriarchal assumptions and the girls, Brooks focuses on how Mr March survives in the nineteenth-century.

However, the tension between the patriarchal and the feminine are picked up in Brooks's account. I will investigate this tension by discussing the relationship between Margaret Day, better known as Marmee in Little Women, and Mr March.

Marmee is first introduced as Miss Margaret Marie Day, reverend Day's sister. Mr March describes her not as really beautiful or pretty, but as noble, resembling an aristocrat. However, he is so impressed with her looks that he must force himself not to stare: "I had to call on a lifetime's discipline to keep myself from staring fixedly at her face" (March 60). She is depicted as an active listener, not shy or indifferent. The sexual attraction towards Miss Day is obvious and will be explicitly suggested. When lying in his bed in the morning, listening to her singing, he imagines his fingers lying on her lips and his gaze directed on her breasts. The text even goes as far as to imply that Mr March would have been sexually occupied as a result of Miss Day's singing, for "the consequences of these thoughts meant that I was a little delayed before I was able to present myself at breakfast" (March 61). The growing attraction between both will soon be consummated, before any matrimonial vows have been taken. In chapter 5, *A Better Pencil*, Mr March witnesses a heated discussion between Miss Day and Waldo Emerson on the matters of slavery. Later that evening, Mr March goes for walk, to ease his mind and ponder on Miss Day's behaviour towards Mr Emerson. Though very much in love with her, he cannot help but question what kind of wife or mother she may be, with such a heated temperament. On that very moment, Miss Day catches up with him and his "mental reservations were swept aside by" his "bodily longing" (March 86). However, it is suggested

that she seduces him, as she takes off her stockings and reveals the naked skin under her dress. She then breaks down; weeping over the atrocious faith that awaited a slave she had helped. The text breaks down and then continues with the following words:

> It was fortunate for both of us that she has such a long practice in these illicit evening outings, for some hours later, when we made our clandestine ways back to the village, neither of us was in any state that could have been easily explained. I have no idea what she did with that white dress, stained as it was with mud and, yes, blood. For we married each other that night, there on a bed of fallen pine needles – even today, the scent of pitch-pine stirs me–with Henry's distant flute for a wedding march and the arching white birch boughs for our basilica. At first she quivered like an aspen, and I was ashamed at my lack of continence, yet I could not let go of her. I felt like Peleus on the beach, clinging to Thetis, only to find that suddenly, it was *she* who held *me*; that same furnace in her nature that had flared up in anger blazed again, in passion. (March 88)

Looking at the relationship between Mr March and Miss Day, we might conclude that Miss Day was not an ordinary girl, but a girl in passion. Miss Day is clearly presented as a feminist voice in the novel.

In chapter 4, *A Little Hell*, female education is discussed and criticized by Marmee. She does not only criticize the lack of a good female education, but also the fact that only a minority of women are able to have an education: "It is bad enough that so few, so *pathetically* few of us are advanced an education worth the name at all, but worse that we, the fortunate ones, whose families seek out the best for us, are subjected to a course of study that is stultifying, oppressive, crippling rather than enhancing to our moral integrity and intellectual growth" (March 62). When suggested that she should teach young girls, she answers "Who would hire me to corrupt their daughters' minds?" With this explicit critique, the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon women are targeted and Marmee is now officially presented as a feminist. While Alcott's portrayal of Marmee is at times questionable as she seems to push her daughters to become perfect little women as demanded by society, Brooks' feminist portrayal of Marmee cannot be questioned.

According to Alcott's text, Jo takes after her mother. Marmee had learned to oppress her temperament, and will teach her daughter to do the same. At the end of the novel, Jo has indeed learned self-control. This fierce temperament is strongly present in Brooks' account. As already mentioned, Mr March witnessed Miss Day's heated accusations towards Mr Emerson, on which he questioned her abilities as wife and mother. The subject is taken up again in chapter 7, *Bread and Shelter*. As Jo in Little Women, Marmee is confronted with the fierceness

of her own anger as she slaps her husband. After having lost their fortune, aunt March suggests adopting the eldest infant, Meg.

> She waved a mace-clad arm in the direction of our darling Meg. "I am willing to take her," she declared with an exaggerated sigh of resignation. "I will adopt her forthwith, thus relieving you of the burden of at least one mouth to feed." I glanced at my wife. No gesture from me would gainsay her now. The hands on my lips raised itself, instinctively, as a man would raise an arm to fend off a weight about to crash down upon his head. "Burden? You dare call my darling girl a *burden*?" She was on her feet as if the chair had spring which had propelled her upward, and was advancing in aunt March menacingly. I, too, was affronted but I could not have my wife behave so. (128)

What follows is a small physical encounter between husband and wife. After the incident Marmee accuses her husband of hypocrisy, a hypocrisy that seems to sustain the patriarchal society:

> "You stifle me! You crush me! You preach emancipation, and yet you enslave me, in the most fundamental way. Am I not to have the freedom to express myself, in my own home? In the face of *such* insult? You call our girls your 'little women'; well, I am your belittles woman, and I am tired of it. Tired of suppressing my true feelings, tired of schooling my heart to order, as if I were some errant pupil and you the schoolmaster. I *will* not be degraded this way. "It is you," I said, trying to keep my voice, though my pulse beat in my head. "It is you who degrade yourself, when you forgo self-mastery." (130)

In this excerpt, Marmee voices what most women may have felt, but could not express. Even Alcott will not go as far as explicitly voicing her opinions. Though Alcott's text clearly suggests and criticizes this oppressing environment women found themselves in, it is Brooks who will take the accusations one step further, by literally pronouncing them. The patriarchal assumptions are clearly portrayed in Mr March. He expects his wife to behave in a certain way and even before having married Marmee, he knew how his future wife should behave. Indeed, as Marmee accuses him of, he may preach emancipation, but he still believes that a wife and mother should act as a moral force and oppress herself to some extent. Marmee, as Alcott clearly pointed out in her novel, is much like her daughter. However, Marmee has been taught self-control by her husband. In Alcott's version Marmee tells Jo that she had to practise all virtues she wanted her girls to possess and that she is grateful for her husband's teachings. In Brooks' story this is not the case yet. The events Brooks describes, results from her imagination, portray an oppressed Marmee who cannot understand her husband's teaching and who only sees his hypocrisy. He may teach emancipation, yet he seems to enslave her. The discussion ends in tears and in peace after Marmee realizes that she may have struck one of her girls in a fit of anger. The narrator, Mr March, finishes his little account by saying that Marmee

took her struggle for self-control seriously and tried her best, though he cannot say if she ever succeeded: “Perhaps it is still not done, entirely.”(131)

Though peace may have returned in the March household after this incident, Brooks was able to recreate the tension between the patriarchal assumptions and the feminine. This tension is clearly visible in the couple’s relationship, as Mr March tries to teach his wife self-control in order to complete his wishes. In doing so, he may not realise that he denies his wife her freedom of expression. Nevertheless, though his heart may be right, he will indeed oppress his wife and stifle her feelings. According to Alcott, Mr March would have been successful. The tension between the patriarchal society and the feminine will be less explicitly suggested in her novel, but will be nonetheless present. As such, Brooks did indeed borrow from Alcott, in numerous ways. She used the absent father and reshaped his life based on Bronson Alcott’s personal journal. In addition, she placed Marmee in a situation that may well have been true. Consequently, she redefines the tension between the patriarchal and the feminine and gives a voice to the oppressed.

To voice these feelings in such an explicit way and to add sexual suggestion is something that may not have been appreciated in the nineteenth-century. Today, this is no problem. With her book, which focuses more on Mr March’ war experiences, his travels in the South and his illicit affair with Grace, a slave, Brooks gave a voice to Marmee and reshaped this character in another, more emancipated light.

3. Adaptations

"Jo … Such a little name for such a person"
Pr. Bhaer – 1994 film

Finally, I would like to take a look at some adaptations of our novel. Little Women has had many adaptations since its first publication. Several plays and one opera from the librettist-composer Mark Adamo, based upon Alcott's story, were performed. However, the most important adaptations were the film adaptations. In total there have been twelve screen adaptations.

Only three adaptations were memorable. The first and most famous one was the 1933 version starring Katherine Hepburn as Jo, directed by George Cukor and written by Sarah Y. Mason. This adaptation was nominated for three Oscars, Best Director, Best Picture and Best Writing, Adaptation. It won the Oscar for Best Writing Adaptation. The second memorable adaptation was the 1949 version, starring Elizabeth Taylor as little Amy and June Allyson as Jo, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and written by Victor Heerman. This picture was also nominated for two awards and won the award for the Best Art Direction and set Decoration. And finally, there's the 1994 version, starring Susan Sarandaon as Marmee, Winona Ryder as Jo, Clair Danes as Beth and Kirsten Dunst as the young Amy. This film was also nominated for three awards, but did not win.

According to Mark Adamo "Hollywood has had to film the piece once every 20 years or so to slake the recurring appetite [for it] and indeed, each film creates its own very different 'Little women'" (Barton, 80). Indeed, as Cartmell and Simons mentioned, the subversive subplot of the novel has been shaped by the cultural and political forces of that period. The adaptations always consider the audiences' expectation, resulting in different interpretations of the novel (Barton 80). In this final discussion I would like to focus more on the 1994 version. In this version, the director Gillian Armstrong will underline the authorship of Jo as main theme; furthermore, the subversive subtext will be more explicitly voiced. The close feminine community will be stressed throughout the entire film. As the two other versions were produced in a time when women were not fully emancipated, different from ours, they tend to almost neglect this subversive subtext.

As observed by Cartmell and Simons in their essay Screening authorship: *Little Women* on screen 1933-1994[49], Cukor 's version was produced in the early thirties, a time when Hollywood's influence on the morals of American society were questioned and LeRoy 's version was prouced under the restrictive Productive Codes dictating all Hollywood films. This post-war period was characterized by the need to portray the American home as optimistic, materialistic and as the romantic escape (Barton 83). The post-war period was much engaged in the re-domestication of women and encouraged a return to their traditional roles of housewife. Consequently, the liberal attitudes towards female independence and emancipation were neglected to the point where they were almost left out (Barton 83). Moreover, as the movies made in that period were to promote the American home as attractive and optimistic, some of the most important themes and motives are simply left out; no references are made to the war, we do not see Beth die, the March household has not fallen into poverty. As is said Barton's Nineteenth-century American fiction on screen; "The frictions that are a natural part of family life – and that make Alcott's depiction of it so authentic – are nowhere in sight" (83). And finally, the portrayal of Jo has been somewhat deplorable. Hepburn, simply too old to pass as a fifteen-year-old, seems "boyish and physically awkward" (Barton 83). Furthermore, her performance lacks the true individualism so typical of Jo. In LeRoy's version, Jo's portrayal by June Allyson seems to vanish as she is overshadowed by her fellow actors.

This is not the case in the 1994 version. Armstrong strongly relied on Alcott's biography and actually based her version on the novel as well as on Alcott's private journal, mixing fiction and facts (Barton 86). The movie is introduced by a voiceover positioning Jo as the narrator, looking back on her childhood, and ends with the fulfilment of her authorship as she writes Little Women after Beth's death, finding her true voice. The feminist subtext will be put forward as the main theme alongside Jo's authorship. The strongest feminist voices present in the film are Jo's and Marmee's. I will briefly share my observations on this matter, describing three pivotal scenes that were added to the story.

Though Marmee may be analysed as a guidance to the sisters in the novel, she is also, as suggested in Barton, responsible for their transformation into little women, encouraging her daughters to stamp out their envy, pride and aggression and to be more like perfect Beth (86). To some readers, Marmee was successful, for at the end of Good Wives, all three sisters are married and seem "inert women who lack a life and identity of their own" (Barton 86). In the portrayal of Mrs March by Sarandon, this is certainly not the case. Mrs March herself is

portrayed as a liberal mind encouraging her daughters to be better, but most of all to be emancipated. At the first encounter between Mr Brook and Mrs March, Mr Brook comments to Mrs March how "surprisingly active her girls are", to which Mrs March boldly answers that girls are no different than boys in their physical needs, but through restriction were weakened:

00 B: Your young ladies are unusually active, Mrs March, if I may say so.
01 M: You may indeed, Mr Brooke, it is my opinion that girls are no different than boys in their need for exertion. Feminine weakness and fainting styles are the direct result of our confining young girls to the house are the result of keeping them at home, bent over needlework, in restrictive corsets.
(B; Mr Brooks - M; Mrs March)

As such she criticizes the nineteenth-century prescription for women, which seemed to urge women to be ill. Gilbert and Gubar discussed this phenomenon in their books. They believe that feminine weakness and the typical symptoms of fainting styles Mrs March mentioned are not only a result of a woman's training, but were goals of such trainings. Indeed, society agreed that women were frail, weak and sickly (Gilbert and Gubar 54). As such, Mr Brook's observation is not surprising, as the "cult of female invalidism" was well developed in England and America. It is Mrs March' response that is most surprising. Not only will she openly voice her concerns regarding the restrictions imposed on women, she will voice them to a man.

The second scene I would like to discuss, takes place in New York, at Mrs. Kirke's boarding home. The novel informs us that Jo attends a symposium discussing literary and philosophical matters. However, before the evening was over, Jo is said to have felt "completely *désillusionée*" and that she "sat down in a corner to recover herself" (GW 156). Jo is overwhelmed and feels at loss surrounded by these intellectuals. In the movie, Armstrong tries to recreate such an evening of lively conversation and debates. However, instead of depicting a literary subject, Armstrong proposes a debate on women's emancipation and their right to vote. Jo is not presented as voiceless, overwhelmed and *désillusionée*; she listens with a fierce interest and joins the conversation. This scene, scene 17 in the scene selections, is appropriately entitled *Debating the vote*. The discussion distinguishes two voices: one opposing to women voting and the other claiming that if women were not allowed to vote, this would be a betrayal to the country's ideals:

00 It was the system our nation was build upon
01 M: Come now, it was nothing short of a betrayal of our country's ideals
02 Country's ideals ?
03 M: A constitution that denies the basic right of citizenship to women and black people?

04 They just passed the fifteenth amendment Jacob. They can vote!
05 M: Ah ...Black men can vote!
06 *A lady* has *no* need of suffrage if she has a husband
07 No No …
08 B: You don't take wine?
09 J: Only medicinally
10 B: We'll pretend that you have a cold
11 I agree, but if women are a moral force, shouldn't they have the right to govern, preach and testify?
12 What… ohohoh
13 B: What is it Miss March?
14 J: I find it poor logic to that because women are good women should vote. Men do not vote because they are good, but because they are male. And women should vote not because they are angels and men are animals … but because we are human beings and citizens of this country
15 M: You should have been a lawyer, Miss March.
16 I should have been a great many things Mr Mayer.
(M; Mr Mayer – B; Pr Bhaer – J; Jo)

While the novel does not include this matter, Alcott was an active member of women's suffrage. She was the first woman to register to vote in Concord. Gillian Armstrong includes this subject in her movies; as such, she will indeed mix fiction and reality. However, by including this little debate, she is able to create a more emancipated Jo, strongly influenced by her creator, Alcott. With her words, Jo is perceived as the feminist heroine, pursuing not only authorship but also equal rights. Furthermore, while Mr Mayer argued that a woman should vote for they are the moral force, Jo believes that this is poor logic. Women should vote because they are equal to men and not better than men. Instead of ignoring her observations, she is admired and praised for her insight and her assertiveness by Mr Mayer. His admiration, "You should have been a lawyer," suggests great respect, to which Jo answers that "She should have been a great many things." With these words, the movie implies that women like Jo, gifted with great accomplishments and talents surprising men, were not allowed to explore these accomplishments and pursue real careers in the nineteenth-century, for she too *should have been* great *at many things*, but she never received the opportunity. Women's emancipation is not the only social and political matter important to Alcott that has been included in this movie. The Alcott family were known for their anti-slavery feelings. This issue, which is not present in the novel, will be integrated in Armstrong's adaptation. Scene 9, *Preparing for the Ball,* coincides with chapter 9 *Meg goes to Vanity Fair*. While showing off her new self-made dress the subject arises:

00 B: The nicest I have seen that kind of fabric since the war broke out. But you had it made up so plain.
01 M: Well … I do my own sewing, … and …

02 B: Mrs Finster on Charles Street carries pieces ready-made. Tomorrow I'll take you there
03 The Marches haven't bought silk in years. They have *views* on slavery. Meg, isn't it true that your father's school had to close when he admitted a little dark girl?
04 B: The silk at Mrs Finster isn't milled in the South. It's made right here, over at Linfield.
05 This isn't China silk?
06 M: They use little children for labour. All the silk mills do.
07 B: The poor are always with us. You are so good to remind us.
(B; Miss Belle Gardiner – M; Meg)

This scene not only includes the topic of slavery, but suggests that their views on slavery may have been the reason why the March household fell into poverty. Child-labour is mentioned in addition to the issue of slavery.

The final topic I would like to discuss is the interpretation of Jo's authorship. In this adaptation, Jo's authorship has been depicted as the central theme. However, Armstrong was not able to portray the "frustrations that beset the real author" (Barton 86). According to Cartmell and Simons, all three adaptations would have erased this matter. Indeed, Jo does not find herself in a situation where she was forced to choose between patriarchy and independence, obedience and rebellion. The three adaptations present Jo – in the end – as a serious author after having found true love. In the 1994 adaptation, her professional authorship comes early, in scene 12 entitled *Professional Author*, as she is paid five dollars for two stories. Yet, due to Beth's illness, their father's coming home and Meg's marriage, Jo's writing is put aside. In scene 16, *New York*, Jo's ambitions are introduced again. As Jo's voice-over says: "And so I stepped over the divide between childhood and all that lay beyond." In her letters to Beth, read out aloud by the voice-over, she reveals her intentions and what she hoped to find in New York:

Mrs Kirk believes that I am here for a brief interlude of sensational experience before succumbing to a matrimonial fate. While they are surely no lack of sensational experiences of every kind available in such a city, I hope – though I have had no luck yet – that any experience I gain here will be strictly literary, and that all events of romantic or sensational nature will be entirely confine to the page.

00 P: My subscribers are not interested in sentiments and fairy-stories Miss.
01 J: … They are not fairy-stories.
02 P: Try one of the ladies magazines.
(P; Publisher – J; Jo)

Jo clearly distinguishes herself as an independent strong-minded woman. After this encounter she meets Pr. Bhaer. In the movie we will see how Jo will find her true voice after having met

the professor. In scene 18, *Two published stories*, Jo proudly announces to Friedrich that two of her stories have been published:

00 J: I have some good news. A newspaper has published two of my stories, and they wish to see more.
01 B: This is wonderful! The … the Daily Volcano? *The Sinner's Corpse*. By *Joseph* March. … Lunatics … Vampires … This interests you?
02 J: People like thrilling stories Friedrich. This is what the newspapers want.
03 B: Yes … Yes I suppose that is … true.
04 J: It will buy a new coat for Beth. I am sure she'll be grateful to have it.
(J; Jo – B; Pr Bhaer)

With these words, Jo storms out of the room. Next we see how it is the professor who will seek forgiveness and not Jo, who burns her stories in full shame as is written in the novel. While the financial reasons for her writing are also acknowledged, they are not stressed as the sole reason for her writing.

00 B: I … I do not want to be your teacher. No understand me …I am saying only that you should please yourself. My opinion is … of no importance. Do you forgive me?
01 J: Of course.
(B; Pr Bhaer – J; Jo)

Professor Bhaer apologizes to Jo, saying that he does not want to be her teacher, in contrast to Alcott's original story. In the novel the professor will function as a teacher to Jo, both literally and figuratively. He will literally teach her German and will figuratively teach her to abandon her sensational stories. In Armstrong's version professor Bhaer relinquishes this role. Additionally, he will encourage her to write as she pleases, as long as she pleases herself. From then onwards, they will form a couple and he will support and assist her in her writing *her thrilling* stories. Their first quarrel occurs in scene 21, *An Honest Opinion*. After having finished her fist novel, she proudly presents it to Bhaer and hopes to hear his honest opinion:

00 J: Friedrich! Did you read it?
01 B: Yes …it's a … it is well written Jo. Your first novel. What … what a great accomplishment!
02 J: I am going to be showing it to your publisher friend, Mr Fields today. He liked the *sinner's Corpse*. What is it?
03 B: Mr Fields is a good man. He will give you an honest opinion.
04 J: Oh … I see … What is your honest opinion?
05 B: I am a professor of philosophy, Jo.
06 J: No, I'd really like to know what you think.
07 B: You should be writing from … from life. From the depths of your soul. There is nothing in here of the woman I am privileged to know.
08 J: Friedrich, this is what I write. My apologies if it fails to live up to your high standards.

09 B: Jo, there is more to you than this, if you have the courage to write it.
(J; Jo – B; Pr Bhaer)

Professor Bhaer first refuses to give her his honest opinion. Only upon Jo's insistence does he tell her his true feelings. Yet, he does not diminish her work as bad or unworthy. Instead, he advises her to look for her true voice. But Jo defiantly responds as if he has indeed diminished her writing to nothing. This scene is immediately followed by Beth's death, in scene 22, *Telegram* and scene 23, *With Beth*. In scene 24, *Beth's trunk*, we see how Jo will find her true voice after having looked in her sister's trunk. In Alcott's novel, Jo will find her true voice after Beth's death and she writes her poem In the Garret. Following scene 24, scene 25, entitled *Writing what she knows*, Jo writes her novel Little Women. As we see her finished novel, the camera zooms in on the author's name, Josephine March. In the final scene of the movie, scene 27, entitled *Little Women*, Jo receives a published copy of her book. The book was delivered by Friedrich himself. He leaves, however, believing that she has married Mr Laurence. When Jo discovers the mistake, she runs after him:

00 J: Oh Friedrich, thank you for my book. When I didn't hear from you, I thought you hated it.
01 B: Oh no! Reading your book was like opening a window to your heart. James Fields took it out of my hands and he would not give it back to me. I said: such news I have to give to her myself. Well, it was a silly impulse.
02 J: No, no, not silly at all. It's so good to see you. Come and meet my family.
03 B: Thank you. But I have to catch the train. I am going to the West. My ship leaves from Boston tomorrow morning.
04 J: Oh.
05 B: Yes, the euh … the schools in the West are young. They need professors, and …euhm they're not so concerned about the accent;
06 J: I don't mind it either. You see, my aunt left me Plumfield. It isn't a field. It's a house, actually. A rather large house. And it isn't really good for anything except a school. And I want a good school. One that would be open to anyone who wanted to learn. Well, I'll be needing someone who knows how to teach. Is there nothing I might say to keep you here?
07 B: I confess that I was hoping that I might have a reason to … to stay, but …congratulations *on* the celebration of your marriage.
08 J: Oh no! No, no that's, that is Amy. My sister, Amy and Laurie actually. No I am not married. Please don't go so far away.
09 B: Jo… such a little name for such a person. Will you have me?
10 J: With all of my heart.
11 B: But I have nothing to give you, my hands are empty.
12 J: Not empty now. (taking his hands into hers)
(J; Jo – B; Pr Bhaer)

As such, with the publication of the novel and the professor's admiration and love, Jo has it all. She becomes an author and finds the love of her life. Yet, as is said in Barton's Nineteenth-

century American fiction on screen, "for a woman to achieve her ultimate creative potential, according to Hollywood rules, she must have a man" (90). Consequently, Jo is able to fulfil her ambition and finds true love in the person of Pr Bhaer. Additionally, in true Hollywood style, Pr Bhaer is not portrayed as the bearded old man, but as a refined gentleman with no beard. Indeed, Hollywood's need to romanticize stories such as Jo's quest for independence and authorship while torn between the patriarchal and her own artistic beliefs, goes as far as to rejuvenate Jo's *papa Bhaer*. According to Anne Hollander, this rejuvenated Bhaer may well be a "1990 invention", as this version is the only to "reward Jo's forceful independence with a really sexy, intelligent lover who also won't interfere with her work" (Grasso 187). Yet, while the movie explicitly refuses Jo's frustrations concerning her authorship, it will – though in a very subtle way – implicitly suggest a certain form of anxiety towards her writing. Indeed, while her first stories published in New York were published under the male pseudonym of Joseph March, her novel will proudly be published as Josephine March. The fact that she chose to use a male pseudonym may imply that she too felt insecure about her own female position as a writer to seek refuge under a male disguise. However, by publishing her novel under her own name, she renounces this fear and proudly achieves true authorship.

Finally, I would like to observe, that in the final scene, scene 27, entitled *Little Women*, it is Jo who gives shelter to the Professor. The umbrella motif so crucial in Good Wives, which I already mentioned in my discussion on Jo and the Professor, will be used in the movie. As the camera zooms in on the umbrella the Professor's forgot, Jo will take the umbrella and return it to its owner. As such, the original motif of giving shelter is reversed, for it is not Professor Bhaer who rescues Jo from the rain, but exactly the opposite. As such the film may suggest that Jo is the one rescuing the professor from a life without Jo.

V. Conclusion

With this study, I hoped to examine and uncover the feminist subtext enclosed in Louisa May Alcott's famous Little Women. After exploring the quest for female emancipation and the marriage theme elaborated in the American classic, I have come to the conclusion that Louisa May Alcott does indulges in a feminist writing. However, both a feminist and an anti-feminist writing are pursued. Despite the fact that Jo will defy society, she will be domesticated. Indeed, as Auerbach pointed out, the girls will ultimately be "forced into a posture of waiting," for they are not allowed to be totally free, to be angry, and to fully pursue art or spinsterhood (86). Instead they must wait and educate their children to be what they could not fully acquire. However, Little Women should not be dismissed as anti-feminist, for this is simply not true. The novel will clearly advocate the benefits of feminine socialization, but will simultaneously depict "the terrible cost of feminine submission" (Gilbert and Gubar 483), well exemplified through Beth's persona and death or in the fact that Marmee admits to her daughter that she too feels anger, but she has learned to repress her feelings.

Yet, Alcott is successful as her novel does advocate the possibility of being more than just a wife to a man, for she emphasizes the importance of education and career opportunities for women. Indeed, the novel strongly celebrates the individuality of young girls. As its main focus lies on the female education and the process of becoming a woman, it can certainly be categorized as a Bildungsroman, illustrating the initiation of young girls into true womanhood. As such the gradual expansion of the female sphere and increasing opportunities for women in the nineteenth-century are well depicted in the novel. Indeed, both Amy and Jo pursue careers, Amy as an artist and Jo as an author. As such, Alcott promotes models of intellectual daring and honesty.

As I have observed, Alcott's "coming of age" novel belongs to what Nina Baym classifies as woman's fiction. Indeed, the novel was written by a woman, especially for women, describing the intimate process of female development. When writing the novel, Alcott borrowed from her own life and childhood experiences and created her alter-ego Jo. Alcott used many of themes at hand; typical of the sentimental novel. Indeed, the March sisters find happiness in the domestic sphere, in the parental core and the networks of attachment based on

love. Yet, the girls are not the typical passive women, belles or damsels in distress in need of rescuing. Centred in the home, they are independent and self-sufficient. And three of the sisters follow their own path, answering to the conventions of the sentimental plot. In order to give structure to the story, Alcott cunningly used Bunyan's allegory, indicating the trials young girls must face and overcome whilst growing up.

The marriage theme, always present in these sentimental novels, can be analysed as the second plot of the novel. Though Alcott herself was not inclined towards marriage, she did include this theme in her novel. However, the marriages are always overshadowed by loss and sorrow. Nonetheless, this theme is well approached, as Alcott emphasizes the importance of love, as it can increase one's happiness. Additionally, Alcott stresses that a woman should not look upon marriage as a goal, but as a part of life and that spinsterhood is not less worthy. In dealing with this theme, Alcott strongly judges marriages of convenience. All suitors portrayed in the novel – Laurie, Mr. Brook and Pr. Bhaer – are conventional heroes and will be equals to their wives. As such, the matrimonial unions in the novel are not emblematic of Victorian society, as the girls are not forced into the role of Angel in the House, typical of the rigid Victorian domesticity. Instead, a new domesticity is acquired, where women can speak freely, aspire careers and where they are treated as equals. In creating her alter-ego Jo, Alcott bestowed Jo with a talent for writing, resulting in her ambition of becoming an author. Along with this dream, Jo will also be confronted with an anxiety of authorship, something too familiar to Alcott. Indeed, Jo will have to learn to put aside these anxieties in order to sustain her family. Struggling against these anxieties and overcoming her fear of domesticity, Jo will find her true voice and destiny alongside Pr Bhaer.

While Jo defies society, Beth will demonstrate how tragic the female submission can be. Indeed, the subdued heroine will be the victim of the male-dominated society, as the Angel in the House, selfless and pure, but always forgotten, even by her loved ones. Beth is not allowed to become a woman and she tragically dies. In death Beth will never be forgotten, while alive, everyone seems to forget that she too was a woman. Additionally, Beth will be denied the pleasures of education, the fate of many women.

The novel's popularity has never ceased to exist. After its publication it was already celebrated as an American Classic. Though it had fallen under the shadow of children's literature, the novel was discussed again in the 1950s, as a result of the critical studies of Nina

Baym and Jane Tompkins. Once again, this novel was asserted a great American classic. However, now the novel was celebrated for its feminist subplot, the quest for female development in a time of strict patriarchal oppression and it became "the American female myth."

Due to its enticing story of a true family, the novel was so popular in America that during the twentieth-century, it was adapted several times. The novel has been recreated on stage, in an opera, in literature and on screen. Geraldine Brooks borrowed from Alcott's novel when writing her own. Using fiction and reality she created a novel recounting the story of Mr March. The girls's father, absent throughout most of the story, will be focalised in her novel. Borrowing from Alcott's Little Women, Alcott Bronson's own journals and other writing on Bronson Alcott, she gave a voice to the silenced father. However, in her writing, Brooks was able to redefine Marmee, consequently regenerating Little Women's feminist subtext. Indeed, by portraying Marmee as a strong liberal woman, sexually active – as she seduces Mr March – Marmee becomes an empowered feminine character. Yet, she will be oppressed through her marriage. As such, Brooks brilliantly depicts the tension between the patriarchal and the feminine and sheds a new light over Marmee's character, often accused of shaping her girls into 'little women' (Barton 86).

Adaptations on screen were hugely successful and seemed to regenerate the Marches' story for each new generation of women. However, through time, the reading of this novel changes and adaptations must be confined to some Hollywood rules. As such, the story of emancipation has often been romanticized on screen, to the extent that the novel's most significant theme, the tensions between society and the feminine which the girls experience, seems to be ignored. In the 1994 adaptation however, under the direction of Gillian Armstrong, a less romanticized version of the novel was released. In this version, Armstrong hoped to create a more real version, close to Alcott's text, but still appealing to a present audience. Consequently, she chose to mix fiction and reality, presenting Jo as the narrator and author of Little Women and including socio-political subjects such as slavery and women rights. However, she too, explicitly reshaped the feminist subtext. Marmee has now become a new feminist voice and Jo a successful author and wife.

The novel's themes, female development and emancipation, are still admired and due to the novel's many adaptations, this novel is rediscovered time and time again. As Elaine

Showalter suggested, reading this novel is “to engage with contemporary ideas about female authority, critical institutions and the American literary canon, as well as with the nineteenth-century ideas of relationship between patriarchal culture and women’s culture.” As such, each new reading discovers new meanings and new identifications. This novel, which has influenced many girls trying to be more like Jo – or in some cases, as in mine, like Amy – still, influences young readers today. For Alcott’s little women instruct their readers to seek independence, individuality and a rich education. Furthermore, love for one another, so well illustrated in their intimate sisterhood, is preached. This novel can thus rightly be called a feminist reading of little women’s coming of age.

Endnotes

[1] Fruitlands was an Utopian agrarian commune established in Harvard, Massachusetts by Amos Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane in the 1840s, based on Transcendentalist principles. Alcott recorded her experiences at Fruitlands in Transcendental Wild Oats – Wikipedia. The experiment was not successful, and in Louisa May Alcott. Her Life, Letters and Journals, the author says that for Mrs Alcott "the experience was too bitter to dwell upon." Unlike her mother, Louisa was able to "relieve her feelings by bringing out the comic side" (Alcott 33).

[2] The Inheritance was written in by Alcott at the age of seventeen, in 1849, was never published until 1997 after it was found in Harvard's Houghton Library.

[3] http://www.alcottfilm.com/real_life.php

[4] The American Anti-Slavery Society (1833-1870) was an abolitionist society founded by William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan. Frederick Douglass was a key leader of the society and often spoke at its meetings – Wikipedia.

[5] Source; The Woman behind Little Women. The life of Louisa May Alcott, Nancy Porter Productions, Inc. 2008. http://www.alcottfilm.com/real_life.php.

[6] Louisa May Alcott's Obituary. The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1129.html

[7] Baym, Nina. Women's fiction; A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America. London: Cornell University Press, 1978.

[8] Catharine Maria Sedgwick, American writer (December 28, 1789 – July 31, 1867), was an early American novelist whose internationally popular fiction was part of the first authentically naitve strain of Amercian literature, and is now referred to as domestic fiction – Britannica Online & Wikipedia.

[9] The Sentimental Novel. Enotes. http://www.enotes.com/nineteenth-century-criticism/sentimental-novel

[10] The novel, written in the epistolary mode forces the reader to feel true sympathy for it's protagonist, ad becomes an unfolding drama, thus morally interesting. Published in 1740.

[11] The Sentimental Novel. Enotes. http://www.enotes.com/nineteenth-century-criticism/sentimental-novel

[12] Ibid.

[13] Italics, my emphasis.

[14] Italics, my emphasis.

[15] Italics, my emphasis.

[16] Elizabeth Janeway, (October 7, 1913 – January 15, 2005) was an American author and critic. She was a bright literary figure of the 1940s who later acquired a critical voice as a social historian and feminist with such books as "Man's World, Woman's Place." (WashingtonPost)

[17] Italics, my emphasis.

[18] Italics, my emphasis.

[19] Italics, my emphasis.

[20] Mrs Sherwood, British female author, 1775 – 1851.

[21] Miss Edgworth, Anglo-Irish female author, 1767 – 1849.

[22] Hannah More, British female author, 1745 – 1833.

[23] Sherwood, Martha M. Britannica Online & Wikipedia http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/540162/Mary-Martha-Sherwood http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Martha_Sherwood

[24] A Long Fatal Love Chase. Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Long_Fatal_Love_Chase

[25] ibid.

[26] Quote, from A Long Fatal Love Chase. Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Long_Fatal_Love_Chase

[27] ibid.

[28] Behind A Mask, Or A Woman's Power, by A. M. Barnard. The Project Gutenberg Ebook.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Blood and Thunder in Concord. Date: September 10, 1995, Sunday, Late Edition - Final Byline: By Stephen King; Lead**:** A LONG FATAL LOVE CHASE By Louisa May Alcott. The New York Times. - http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/13/nnp/18425.html

[32] Quote, from New York Tim's "Blood and Thunder in Concord." Date: September 10, 1995, Sunday, Late Edition - Final Byline: By Stephen King; Lead**:** A LONG FATAL LOVE.

[33] Italics, my emphasis.

[34] Italics, my emphasis.

[35] Italics, my emphasis.

[36] Italics, my emphasis.

[37] Italics, my emphasis.

[38] Woolf, Virginia. The Common Reader.

[39] Italics, my emphasis.

[40] Italics, my emphasis.

[41] Italics, my emphasis.

[42] Italics, my emphasis.

[43] Keyzer, 13.

[44] Jacob Abott, American author, 1803- 1879 – Britannica online.

[45] William T. Adams, William Taylor Adams (July 30, 1822 – March 27, 1897) was a noted academic, author, and Massachusetts state legislator – Britannica Online & Wikipedia.

[46] *Hamburgeragogoland* is what Georgia Nicolson calls America.

[47] Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging; is a 2008 British comedy film co-written and directed by Gurinder Chadha. The film is based on two popular teenage novels by Louise Rennison: Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging and Its OK, I'm Wearing Really Big Knickers. story, following fourteen-year-old Georgia Nicolson – Wikipedia.

[48] Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2006.

[49] Barton, R. Palmer. Nineteenth-century American fiction on screen. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

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