

Coming of Age in Victorian America Challenging Gender Roles in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract

This essay argues that *Little Women* does not promote breaking stereotypical gender norms and nineteenth century gender roles, contrary to what several critics say. This paper will be using feminist criticism and analyzing two of the novel's main characters, Meg and Jo, and examining their behavior towards stereotypical gender norms and rules. This essay concludes that while Jo challenges certain gender norms and roles, such as having "manly" emotions (anger) and taking on male-dominated jobs (author), within the narration she is punished for these and forced to become a conventional woman of the nineteenth century in order to live a happy life. On the other hand, Meg follows the rules of societal gender expectations and is rewarded for her behavior. By examining these two characters, this essay establishes that *Little Women*, because it is a didactic novel, delivers the moral that women can only be truly happy if they fit into stereotypical gender norms and roles.

Key words

Gender roles, feminist criticism, femininity, nineteenth-century literature, coming of age, Little Women, domesticity

Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* was originally published in two parts. Chapters 1 to 23 were published under the name *Little Women* in 1868, and after substantial commercial success, Alcott published chapters 24 to 47 in 1869 under the name *Good Wives*. Today they are known as one novel with the title *Little Women*. Initially a children's book, it follows the lives of sisters Margaret, Josephine, Elizabeth, and Amy March, as they grow up and deal with societal and personal issues of their own. The narrative is centered on each of the girls' fears, failures, and aspirations in life, in addition to how the sisters influence each other daily and what relationship they have with other characters. In the story itself, the sisters are mostly referred to as Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, which is what they will be referred to in this essay. The novel has become famous for its feminist approach ever since its release. It has become even more prominent as the story has had several different adaptations into movies, tv shows, ballets, operas, Broadway shows, and even a Japanese anime. The most recent adaptation released in 2019 starred renowned actors like Meryl Streep, Laura Dern, and Emma Watson. These adaptations and the fact that it has never gone out of print shows that this novel is still loved by many and stays relevant as it brings up women's issues that have not yet been resolved such as "female aspirations, family life, and women's career choices" (May 20-21).

The representation of feminism in *Little Women* has been discussed by several critics and the novel has been praised as one that supports new ways of living in the nineteenth century. In the article "The Newness of Little Women", Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips explain that the novel in the nineteenth century was seen as something "groundbreakingly new" (363). In his article "Wedding Marches: Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women," Daniel Shealy argues that "*Little Women* changed the landscape of children's literature" and that egalitarian marriage was "a topic not really explored in any detail in American books for young adults" as previous novels aimed for young girls "did not adequately address the question of marriage" (366-367). Their arguments focus mainly on the "portraiture of Jo" (Eiselein and Phillips 363) as she is initially being presented as a strong, young woman, challenging traditional gender norms. Janis Dawson on the other hand claims that the novel celebrates "domestic stability" and that "Alcott's contribution to the domestic ideal was the source of her [...] continuing literary fame" (111-112) as the novel's ending leaves no girl unmarried.

Through the analysis of Meg and Jo's characters and by examining their relationship to gender norms and roles, this essay argues that *Little Women* does not support feminist values to the extent that critics have claimed. In this essay, it will be analyzed what negative consequences and reactions emerge as gender roles and norms are being broken and how characters within the narrative get punished for breaking gender stereotypical roles. Further it will be examined in what way the narrative encourages the characters, specifically Jo, to

conform to gender stereotypical roles instead of breaking them. As mentioned earlier, at the time of its publication, *Little Women* was marketed as a novel for children and young adults. This means that the story was not only written for entertainment purposes but to teach children in Victorian America what was wrong and what right. Consequently, when analyzing *Little Women*, it needs to be taken into consideration that it is a didactic novel, and the story has several morals to remind the characters of their flaws and how to clear them. These morals include being hardworking, as Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy learned that there is no joy in being lazy (Alcott 113) but also that a lonely, single woman cannot be happy unless she is with a man, which becomes clear at the end of the novel (Alcott 462) and will be further discussed later in this essay. To determine what gender norms Meg and Jo conform to or challenge, their behavior will be analyzed in contrast to nineteenth-century gender roles and stereotypes, such as their roles at home and in society, their aspirations in life, their adoption of societal gender expectations, and their married lives. These two characters have been chosen because Jo has been the main focal point for critics when analyzing *Little Women* from a feminist perspective and illustrates the greatest antipathy to stereotypical gender roles and societal expectations. On the other hand, Meg follows the rules given to her closely and does not deny them in the same way Jo does. Through examining two opposite main characters, an overall view of the story is given to argue that the novel is more in support of non-feminist than feminist values.

According to Lois Tyson, being a feminist means being of the belief that males and females should be treated as equals, with equal opportunities and equal representation in all aspects of life. Feminists thus fight to stop the belief that physical differences such as the shape or size of the body make men superior to women (Tyson 86). The feminist movement itself is divided into four waves; the first will be discussed in this essay. The fight for gender equality has been unfolding throughout centuries, but the term feminism and the first wave of the feminist movement only started in the mid-nineteenth century, more specifically in 1848 (Rampton). In that year, women first started to protest for their equality as three hundred men, and women demanded equal opportunities for women at the Seneca Falls Convention. Their demands included rights for women to enter public life, for example by being able to vote. In addition, those women who demonstrated, publicly spoke, and actively involved themselves in the movement were seen as “un-ladylike” in Victorian America, which was another reason they decided to rally for their rights (Rampton).

Little Women was published shortly after the start of the first wave of the feminist movement. To understand and give a sense of the world that Meg and Jo grew up in, historical context is needed. The way adolescence and adulthood were experienced by boys was very different from how girls experienced it in Victorian America. Before the twentieth century, girls

were not believed to experience adolescence, puberty, or any evolution from a girl into a woman. Crista DeLuzio explains in her work *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought* that the philosopher's John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau limited the traits of being in self-control, autonomous, disciplined, and mature to the male gender. They saw youth as a stage to test out these qualities until eventually having to take them fully on (11). Even though Locke and Rousseau gained some criticism from other health reform advocates who argued that girls were equally able to experience development in the way boys could, girls were not treated similarly in society (DeLuzio 12).

While boys transitioned into men by taking on productive labor or work in their fathers' shops to learn how to earn money, girls were prepared for their domestic household responsibilities by their mother or other female adults (DeLuzio 13). Additionally, both boys and girls had the desired goal of marriage, but boys also gained ownership of land, a job, and freedom when reaching adulthood. In contrast, girls only gained more domestic responsibilities, and their dependence on men transferred from their father to their husband. (DeLuzio 13). Since marriage was such an important life goal, girls had to make themselves as desirable and agreeable as possible to make sure they were suitable wives. In most cases, girls would not move out of the house unless they got married and would have a man to live with (Romesburg 231). *Little Women* depicts these aspects of history in its novel and thus gives a realistic insight into nineteenth century America and all its problems.

It is important to note that the previous sections exclusively discussed white, middle-class women and their experience in Victorian America and the feminist movement. While feminism includes all women, the term "intersectional feminism" discusses the fact that there are differences in equality between different races, sexualities, and classes (Talbot 134-135). The understanding that women have different experiences under the patriarchal society was not yet developed in first-wave feminism, and it was "assume[d] that gender can be isolated from other parts of a woman's identity" (LeGates 2). *Little Women* does not deal with race or sexuality issues, but class, money, and societal backgrounds play a big part in the novel. Stephanie Foote claims that "gender and class are inseparable" (66) and, while this recognized, this essays' focus lays purely on gender and the expectations of women in the nineteenth century as the limited scope of this project. The reasoning behind this is because class in *Little Women* is a complicated issue, as the March family cannot be placed into one class because their relationship with money and society is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Marchs' often say that they do not have much money, hinting that they are of a lower class, but on the other hand, they have rich relatives and often meet wealthy friends, showing they are respected in society and that "[c]lass is not merely about how much money one has" (Foote, 66). Consequently, class and

society in *Little Women* is an important and vast topic, but this paper does not allow for discussion of either as its focus lays solely on the feminist aspects of *Little Women*.

While race, sexuality and class are important in the discussion of feminism, but not crucial, stereotypical gender norms and roles always need to be taken into consideration. Gender norms and roles are created by patriarchal society to oppress women and impose certain traits on them. Whereas someone's sex indicates if their "biological constitution is female or male" which is defined by their reproductive anatomy, gender is the "cultural programming as feminine or masculine" (Tyson 86), shaped by society. These gender norms result in women stereotypically being seen as "emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive," whereas men are attributed traits such as "rational, strong, protective and decisive" (Tyson 85). Furthermore, gender norms result in men often having jobs in higher positions and earning more money than women, in addition to the fact that it is most often men who go to work and earn a living whereas women stay at home and raise the children. This inequality has become even more extreme in modern times as more and more women decide to work but are still expected to fulfill the same tasks at home as non-working women (Tyson 98). *Little Women*, this paper argues, encourages these stereotypical norms and enforces gender normativity, such as acting according to the patriarchal society's standards and stereotypical gender roles.

The following analysis will examine to what degree the characters Meg and Jo adhere to stereotypical gender norms and what reactions they receive if they break them. This evaluation will focus on several different aspects, such as Meg and Jo's overall relationship to gender roles and norms and what following or denying them meant to their quality of life, in addition to how gender affected their dreams and aspirations in life. Furthermore, to go into more detail, and to compare Meg and Jo's experiences in the novel to the real Victorian life, their working life, or the lack thereof, and their domestic life will be analyzed, in connection with their marriages and family life, which will be compared to nineteenth century family structures.

While the publication of the two parts that the novel includes is just one year apart, three years have passed between parts one and two in the narration of *Little Women*, meaning that the characters have evolved and changed a lot between these years. The first part of the story deals with Meg's and Jo's wishes and expectations for the future, whereas the second part is showing the circumstances of how their life unfolded and which of their expectations were fulfilled. Jo especially is much more opposed to gender roles in the first part of the novel, which is the reason for critics calling *Little Women* a feminist novel. Arguably, these critics ignore her transformation from the first to the second part in which she changes her behavior drastically and immerses into stereotypical gender norms. Meg's transformation between part one and two

is similar but much less radical than Jo's as she has always been acting according to gender roles.

Prior to the ending of the first part of *Little Women*, Meg shows a strong opinion about marriage and what she wants her future to look like. In the chapter "Castles in the air" which deals with all the sister's wishes, or their "castles," she states that in the future she would like "a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people and heaps of money" (Alcott 136). As a reply to Laurie, who asks her if she would not like to have a "master" for her house she replies, "I said 'pleasant people,' you know" (Alcott 136). Indicating that her current dream is mainly materialistic, she turns down the idea of having a husband in her house and gives herself the freedom of achieving her goals in life without the company of a man. Her future plans do not include a "master", but Meg does not make clear how she would earn money to support herself either, in contrast to Jo and Amy, who have similar goals of becoming "rich and famous" (Alcott 136), but who present plans on how to achieve their goals. Jo is an aspiring writer, and Amy, a passionate painter.

Meg is only sixteen and it becomes clear that she has a very childlike and naive mindset, which asks the question if she wishes to not have a husband because she wants to be free from domestic responsibilities or if she is simply not interested in men yet as she is not mature enough. The answer to this can be found just before the end of part one, where she agrees to marry John Brooke since he promises to wait for her to "learn" to love him and until she is older (Alcott 217). The second part of *Little Women* starts with Meg's wedding and shows her entering wifedom at 21 years of age. Shealy claims that it is not surprising that Meg gets married at a young age as marriage was the most common experience for American women before the twentieth century (372). According to Conrad and Irene B. Taeuber, merely eight percent of women born between the years 1845 to 1849 did not get married (40). Moreover, it was the norm for girls to get married between the age of 20 to 25 in the late nineteenth century, mainly because the life expectancy was much lower than today, and about one-third of women did not live long enough to be eligible for marriage (Smith 41). Additionally, as the novel is set in the time of the civil war, possibilities for women to earn money were restricted, and the male to female ratio was uneven through many men losing their lives in the war (Shealy 372). Meg's decision to get married at a young age is thus stereotypical to nineteenth century gender roles.

As much as Jo is very different from Meg, they share the same opinion about marriage at the beginning of the novel. Whereas Meg changes her opinion soon after she meets John Brooke, it takes Jo until the very end of *Little Women* to agree to marriage. Both Meg's and Jo's marriages are described as "egalitarian" in Shealy's article (378), and their marriages is one of

the main reasons why *Little Women* is seen as a progressive novel by critics. John and Meg's marriage, this paper argues, is a traditional and conventional nineteenth-century marriage that portrays several stereotypical gender roles and is arguably not as exceptional and egalitarian as Shealy describes in his article. Shealy instead portrayed their marriage as progressive. When researching nineteenth-century women's rights and roles in marriage, it is notable that "the average woman experienced a great increase in power and autonomy within the family" such as over their own sex- and reproductive life and their right to choose their own husband (Smith 40-41). *Little Women* thus arguably does not portray a new way of marriage but one that is on trend and consistent with its time as relationships in Victorian America became more equal.

Meg and John's relationship is deeply conventional, showing few signs of an equal relationship. Shealy describes the Brooke's marriage as "filled with home-love and mutual helpfulness, husband and wife as equals" (373); this paper argues the opposite. Arguably, the fact that John does not abuse Meg physically or sexually can be valued as "home-love" as violence in the household was common in Victorian America (DeLuzio 15). While there is no clear evidence that Meg and John do not love each other, mutual helpfulness is indeed lacking. At the beginning of their marriage, Meg promises John to "always be prepared; there shall be no flurry, no scolding, no discomfort, but a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good dinner" (Alcott 263). Meg is taking all responsibility to take care of the household and is not receiving any help from John. In a patriarchal society, a woman is "never too tired after work to fix dinner, clean house, attend to all her children's needs, and please her husband in bed" (Tyson 91), which is precisely what John expects of Meg, but also what she expects of herself. Meg has "internalized the norms and values of patriarchy" which is a concept illustrated by Tyson (85), showing that she is not aware of the uneven relationship between her and her husband and accepts her fate as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, in a scenario in which Meg was not able to keep the house clean for the day since she was cooking homemade jelly, John calls it a "disappointment" that there is "no picture of the pretty wife sewing on piazza, in white, with a distracting little bow in her hair" (Alcott 263). As previously mentioned, there is no sexual or physical abuse in *Little Women*; emotional abuse, though, can be found. Without even acknowledging his wife's feelings, John tells her to not "have hysterics" (Alcott 264) as he brought a guest home to dinner and "excused his little wife as well as he could" (Alcott 266). The word "hysterics" is vital here, as it is assumed within a patriarchal structure "that more women than men suffer from hysteria" and it is defined as a female problem (Tyson 85-86). John does not understand his wife's emotions and why she is upset but brushes them away as stereotypical feminine hysterics. If the couple were presented in an egalitarian relationship, John would have to treat Meg as an equal, but instead, she is being

viewed as an object which is “used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions” (Tyson 91). Even today, but more so before women started to have their own careers, women’s opinions and emotions do not matter as much as men’s do, and they must always attend to their husband’s needs. Meg is being affected by traditional gender roles as her own husband is not taking her seriously and does not respect her, whereas respect is the foundation in an equal relationship.

The novel arguably does not only present Meg’s emotions as problematic but Jo’s as well. Part of Jo’s character is her struggle with holding back her anger, as anger is a central emotion of hers in the story. Jo’s anger becomes particularly visible after she forbids Amy to accompany her, Meg, and Laurie to a play at the theatre. Amy wants to make Jo “be sorry for this” (Alcott 72) and decides to burn her handwritten collection of stories. Even though Jo is wronged and allowed to be angry in this situation, her feelings are not acknowledged as valid by her family, but they were brushed off. On asking her mother how to prevent her “dreadful temper,” “Marmee,” instead of sympathizing with her and understanding why Jo is angry, answers to “[w]atch and pray, dear; never get tired of trying; and never think it is impossible to conquer your fault” (Alcott 77). By this example, the novel tells its reader that “women must learn to repress [...] their anger, even if their anger is [...] just and reasonable” (Foote 67). Jo is not allowed to be angry because she is a woman, as stereotypical gender norms express that violent emotions, such as anger are only permitted in men, not in women” (Tyson 88).

Because Jo did not forgive her sister immediately for burning her stories, Amy nearly died when running after Jo on a frozen lake that broke underneath her feet. After Amy falls in, it is Jo who rescues her, and she decides to forgive her sister. This scene is an extreme outcome to the situation as it hints to the moral that, even if no real harm was wanted, “female anger [...] leads to murder” (Fetterley 380). Jo is thus encouraged to not act like a man and to suppress her natural emotions to be more feminine. In addition to that, if she fails to suppress her stereotypical male emotions, she will be punished for her natural feeling of anger. Because *Little Women* is a didactic novel, this incident expresses the message to its readers that by rejecting gender roles, something terrible will happen. By keeping certain emotions applied to one gender, gender norms and rules are being closely followed and not challenged at all, which creates inequality between men and women, which is caused by traditional gender roles (Tyson 88). Besides her anger issues, Jo’s attitude is regularly criticized by people around her as it is most often not suitable to nineteenth-century etiquette. It becomes most noticeable when she goes on “calls” (Alcott 283) to visit her Aunt Carol and Aunt March and does not behave in a way they appreciate. Arguably, because she appears disinterested in them, gives “brusque” replies, and shakes their hand in a “gentlemanly manner” (Alcott 284-285), the novel’s depiction

of women is in support of Jo's challenging gender norms. Her sister Amy, though, whom Jo accompanies while making calls, presents herself entirely differently from Jo and is described as "angelic" (Alcott 283). Amy had "virtuously done her duty, kept her temper and, pleased everybody" (Alcott 283), which benefitted her later in the story, as it is Amy who is being asked to accompany Aunt Carol and her cousin Flo to Europe, instead of Jo, even though Jo is the older sister and would usually be prioritized in this choice. This decision was made on the basis that Aunt Carol disapproves of the way Jo carries herself in society because Jo's "blunt manners" and "too independent spirit" (Alcott 294) bothered her. Thus, this example again shows that as a woman acting "manly" is bad and will have consequences. This comparison between Amy, who believes that "women should learn to be agreeable" (Alcott 282), and Jo, who at the beginning of the novel is of a different opinion, shows that traditional and agreeable women were favored by society as it is Amy who is being rewarded for her behavior. Foote describes "Jo's independence [as] ha[ving] resulted in exclusion, not freedom" (76). The narrative itself thus criticizes Jo's behavior towards gender roles by rewarding Amy for her behavior and punishing Jo's manliness by rejecting her trip to Europe.

Even though gender roles and norms were very deeply engraved in Victorian America, women gained some rights to have and share their opinions. As discussed earlier, an increased number of women were granted the freedom to choose if they wanted to have children, and as a result, fewer children were born. In his article "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," Daniel S. Smith explains that this was achieved by women using contraceptive methods such as "douching" and "the sponge" or convincing their husbands to control their sexuality through withdrawal or abstinence (44). Consequently, the average number of children that a white, married woman who survived her menopause had decreased to an average of 6.14 in 1840 to 4.24 in 1880 (Smith 44). Meg and John have two children, twins, which initially makes their small family progressive. By taking into consideration though, that on average, it is a trend that families became smaller, it supports the claim that Meg's family was not developing differently than other families in the Victorian era. The novel does not expand on Meg's sexual life or wishes to have children, likely because it is a children's novel, which means there is no evidence for Meg's wish to become a mother, it becomes clear, though, that she is often overwhelmed with her role as a mother (Alcott 373). According to Tyson, patriarchy assumes that every woman's instinct is to want to have children and "tells them that they are unfulfilled as women if they don't have children" (97). This pressure could have forced Meg to become a mother and adhere to traditional gender roles, even if she did not want children as she is overwhelmed with their upbringing.

As mentioned previously, Jo is firmly positioning herself against marriage throughout the story. Aside from disagreeing on becoming a wife herself, she expresses her dissatisfaction about Meg's relationship with John. When Meg and John become engaged at the end of the year, Jo says that she "[h]ope[s] the next will end better" (Alcott 222), and she "[does not] want any more marrying in this family for years to come" (Alcott 236). While this shows Jo fighting against traditional gender roles in which a woman's only purpose is to be a wife to her husband, it can also be interpreted as a fear of abandonment or loneliness. Jo expresses that she sees their marriage as John taking Meg away from her (Alcott 145), which in addition to losing Beth to illness and learning that Amy and Laurie got married in Europe without her knowing, makes her "lonely, sometimes" (Alcott 420). Furthermore, Foote argues that Jo becomes "a most unhappy young woman, misunderstood and often lonely as her two surviving sisters make successful entrances into the social world." (75). Jo is "lack[ing] economic options, but [...] emotional options as well" (Fetterley 377). Thus, in her fear of loneliness and against her strongly defended beliefs, Jo's only escape is marrying Professor Bhaer, a poor German man, who ruins all possibility for her to become the independent feminist heroine that many critics portray her to be. At the ending Jo shares that "the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now" (Alcott 462), reinforcing the argument that she married Bhaer so she would not feel alone anymore but to have company since those to whom she was closest, her sisters, all left her. The story thus informs the reader that there are no prospects for single women other than to feel alone and be left behind by their loved ones if they do not marry.

In addition to giving up her ambition to be an unmarried woman, live life on her own terms, and support herself through writing, Jo gives up her passion for literature as well. Jo's wish was to do

something heroic, or wonderful, that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all, some day. I think I shall write books, get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream. (Alcott 136)

The greater part of the novel is a love letter to Jo's writing and worships the aspirational female author. Jo spends a significant part of the novel finding her true style as she only writes sensational stories for the newspaper to earn money, but neither Jo nor her family is proud of them, and there is "an inverse relationship between Jo's interest in what she is doing and it's [sic] acceptability" (Fetterley 374). Still, Jo's will to be an author is unusual for women in the Victorian era as they were often not taken seriously; thus, when Professor Bhaer tells Jo his disapproval of sensational stories, saying they are "bad trash" (Alcott 337), she becomes embarrassed and decides to stop writing. Jo only starts writing again at the request of her mother

and she finally finds her “true style” which is a “mind seeking solace for private pain” (Fetterley 374). Shortly after, though, by marrying Bhaer, she is forced to give up writing and instead must focus on domestic life, meaning Jo’s entire evolution of becoming the writer she was meant to be is lost. Shealy argues that her “marriage is a compromise” (377), but instead of becoming rich and famous, she turned out to be a conventional domestic wife and mother, no different than her sisters. Her marriage is arguably not a compromise but a loss of character and wishes, abandoning everything she used to stand for and giving up her fight for what she believes in.

Before earning money for her stories, Jo moved to New York to escape her home life, experience something new, and get away from her complicated relationship with Laurie. To support herself there, she found work as a teacher at a boarding school. While one could argue that moving away from her family and working outside the home is breaking out of gender norms, as women usually only left their home when they became married, it is important to note that she did not live alone, but with other men, women, and children. Additionally, teaching in the nineteenth century was seen as “appropriately domestic and respectable for a young woman of her class” (Dawson 116). Jo’s capability to have an unusual job is ignored by Alcott but instead she chose to employ Jo at a workplace that “[does] not seriously challenged the domestic ideal” (Dawson 117).

Even as Jo was writing and publishing stories, she was a victim of the patriarchy; as when she was living in New York, Jo proposed her stories to the editor of “The Weekly Volcano.” Instead of telling him that she is the author, she tells him “[a] friend of mine desired me to offer a story” (Alcott 329). Because women were rarely taken seriously in the field of writing, Jo did not present herself as the author of her stories as she feared it would only be “considered a good joke” (Alcott 329) as well as being concerned that by writing she is “losing her womanliness” (Fetterley 377). Her worries developed as writing stories in general, but especially “sensational stories” what Jo is producing, is a “sordid and unwomanly activity” (Fetterley 377) in the nineteenth century. Instead of embracing her unconventional approach to writing, Jo is ashamed of it and hides it from her family and friends. When the publisher finally agrees to publish Jo’s stories, it is only because “one of his hacks [...] had basely left him in the lurch” (Alcott 331). Jo will, as a woman, be paid less than her predecessor, who was a man and shows that she is “ripe for exploitation” (Fetterley 377). Tyson explains that French materialist feminism “examines the patriarchal traditions and institutions that control the material (physical) and economic conditions by which society oppresses women, for example, patriarchal beliefs about the difference between men and women” (96). One of these differences is that a woman is being considered as “less than a man” (Tyson 96), which is presented here in the novel as Jo is, for the

same work, being paid less than her male predecessor and is used as an emergency plug instead of having her work be appreciated and valued.

The oppression of women continues until the end of the novel when Jo decides to open a school for only “poor, forlorn little lads” (Alcott 456). She plans for Bhaer to teach the boys and for herself to “be like a mother to them,” (Alcott 456) which she mentions has always been a plan of hers even though she has never mentioned it throughout the entire novel. Next to giving up her passion for writing, Jo also gives up teaching that she did for a few months in New York and enjoyed immensely. She accepts traditional gender roles, steps back, and lets her husband work as men traditionally “maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power” (Tyson 86). While being a teacher for young boys is not an extremely powerful position, he is more dominant and influential than Jo as he denies her the authority that teachers have over their students. Even though their school is at home, meaning Bhaer technically does not go out of the house to earn money, his profession is still seen as a “real” job, whereas being a mother and a housewife is defined by patriarchy in which “women in their domestic roles as nonworkers [...] should not expect to be paid” (Tyson 98), even though mothers work around the clock. Jo is being denied the same opportunities to work as her husband and accepts her role in the house, showing that the society portrayed in *Little Women* does not support equal chances.

Similarly to Jo, Meg does not work outside the home after she gets married, even though she did before her wedding. Both sisters are forced to attend to home life and take care of their children. In *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, Alan Trachtenberg claims that women in Victorian America were expected to, at home, build “a nest where conjugal love and maternal care would nurture, secure, and protect the family from the ‘outside’” (129). Since women were expected to stay at home to take care of the household, in fact, only 2.5 percent of white married women sought work outside the home, whereas 35.2 percent of white unmarried women participated in the labor force in 1890 (Lebergott 519). Traditional gender roles, as Tyson suggests, declare that one of the most humiliating things that could happen to a man is the failure to “provide adequate economic support for [one’s] family” (87). As a result, men instead of women went to work to be recognized as an acceptable head of the household and not be shamed by society. This problem is visible in the novel not only by the example of Meg and John’s marriage but Jo’s and Bhaer’s and every other marriage introduced in *Little Women*. All of them show the husband as the working man and the wife as the stay-at-home wife, meaning not one couple breaks out of the stereotypical gender norms. Not only is it the exclusively men that go to work, but it is also a given that they do so. No discussion about women going to work after they are married arises, which shows *Little Women* undoubtedly forcing its characters into gender roles.

Not only is Jo denied gender equality herself, but her school too as it is only open to boys, even though it was possible to open schools for girls, as they were popular country wide. At the beginning of the nineteenth century schools for girls expanded in the United States and by mid-century one of the “highest female literacy rates in the world” was recorded (DeLuzio 16). While girls throughout the Victorian era continued to enter public high schools, and private boarding schools, they were often only sent there by their parents to be occupied between the years of puberty and marriage and were mostly only prepared for “elevated domestic and maternal roles of Victorian womanhood” (DeLuzio 16) and how to develop their “modesty, cheerfulness, and household management” (Romesburg 234). Moreover, they were often treated poorly, which can also be seen in the novel when Amy is being humiliated by her teacher and is being forced to throw her lemons out of the window (Alcott 67). Alcott’s novel was directed towards young girls, and with her publication of *Little Women*, she wanted to “reach a wider audience of young female readers” and “guide female readers” (Shealy 366). Jo’s decision to open an all-boys school and give up her position as a teacher shows girls that they are not intelligent, or logical enough to attend school.

Formal education and schooling for girls is generally not valued much in *Little Women*. Neither Meg, Jo nor Beth attend school throughout the novel, and Amy only does so very briefly before she decides not to go anymore. Education, though, is one of the most important sources in stopping prejudices and inequalities and the fact that the women in *Little Women* do not receive one shows that they are still closely following gender norms. This argument is strengthened by the claim saying that in a patriarchal society “females are less logical than males” (Tyson 87), meaning that women were and are still generally seen as less smart than men. The novel thus elevates that society thinks more highly of boys and arguably it suggests that they are more fit to attend school, whereas girls should focus on becoming a housewife and are not in need of an education. Similarly, to Meg, Jo has internalized misogyny and believes that boys and men are more valuable to society than girls and women are.

As discussed throughout this paper, several critics argue that *Little Women* applies feminist concepts to its novel. Eiselein and Phillips argue that “the novel offered singular depictions of young women and men playing, talking, squabbling, dreaming, creating, learning, and coming of age in ways that embodied and resisted its era and region” (363). Moreover, it is argued that Jo is depicted as a woman who grows into “a new womanhood marked by independence and equality” (Shealy 367). This essay argues against these statements as Jo cannot be independent and equal to men as she is denied an abundance of opportunities because of her gender. That includes the ability to express certain emotions that are stereotypically male, such as anger, without being punished. Elaine Showalter argues that “[m]ost important, he

[Bhaer] understands her [Jo's] need to work" (62). In contrast, Jo had to give up her literary dreams and achievements and open a school that she cannot teach in herself meaning Jo's desires are being disregarded. Bhaer takes away her opportunity for professional work, and instead, Jo must abide to the role of the mother. This is not to say that being a mother is not exceptionally hard work, but that Jo has never expressed of dreaming of motherhood, whereas writing was her true passion. Furthermore, Jo could arguably not choose her own fate but was, after marrying, pressured by patriarchal stereotypes to take on the motherly role instead of receiving support to continue her career in writing.

Equality is not only lacking in Jo's life but in Meg's as well, even though critics claim that Alcott "set out to instruct her readers, especially young women, on the importance of egalitarian relationships between husbands and wives" (Shealy 366). It becomes clear though, that Meg and Jo did not have any opportunity to choose a profession they liked or the life they wanted. Like other characters in the novel, she was influenced by the patriarchal society to marry for financial and emotional stability. This stereotype led to her becoming a housewife, taking care of her children, and serving her husband, without a chance of having a career herself. Furthermore, not only does society not treat Meg and John as unequal, but he does so too. John, like several characters in the novel, propagates traditional gender roles and does not see Meg as an equal, which he makes clear by disrespecting her emotions as he does not take them seriously but shrugs them off, thinking she is upset purely because she is a woman, and that "hysterics" are female emotions.

While this essay is solely discussing and analyzing the novel itself, the majority of critics discuss the story in relation to Alcott's life as they argue that *Little Women* is either wholly or partly autobiographical as she based Jo on herself and the other sister of her own siblings (Dawson 113). It is often pointed out that Alcott had different intentions specifically for Jo's ending and wished she would have undergone another development. Alcott was unsatisfied with the ending because she was forced to marry Jo to Professor Bhaer as her publisher would have otherwise not released the novel (Shealy 366). In her letters to a friend Alcott writes that "Jo should have remained a literary spinster" and that "publishers [...] insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me" (Selected Letters 124-125). Alcott herself never married and stayed single for her entire life, and wanted the same outcome for Jo.

The term *intentional fallacy* was created to "refer to the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the text's meaning" (Tyson 136). In this context it means that Alcott's intention to let Jo stay unmarried should be no argument for critics that *Little Women* promotes a more modern way of living, even if a different ending would have changed aspects of this essay's argument. Because the ending shows Jo marrying there is no other possibility that can be

taken into consideration when analyzing the novel in this essay. In this paper's analysis, multiple examples have been named on why *Little Women* does not promote feminist values to the extent that critics have claimed, and in opposition to what some critics say, the characters are not presented in a new or different way than from the usual nineteenth-century life, as presented in the paragraphs about fertility rate and Jo's experience in working life. This argument cannot be changed purely by considering Alcott's intentions and arguing that she was forced to censor her novel or rewrite parts of it. While Alcott herself may have been an early feminist, and it can be appreciated that she suffered under patriarchy that did not allow her to publish a book with the ending she preferred, the novel itself stays conventional and specifically the ending is unsuccessful at challenging gender roles or norms.

Due to limitations of time and space, this essay is not able to discuss all topics related to feminist criticism in *Little Women*, nor was it able to analyze all the main characters in the novel. Further research could examine Beth and Amy and their relationship to gender roles as they have very different personalities compared their other two sisters Meg and Jo. As established in the beginning of this paper, "gender and class are inseparable" (Foote 66); thus, Amy could present a different view of the way that *Little Women* stays close to gender roles, in addition to how class affects gender. Beth presents further consequences that resisting marriage and a domestic lifestyle brings to a nineteenth-century woman, but her lack of presence in the novel does not allow for a thorough analysis. Additionally, in further research, through male characters such as Laurie and Mr. Bhaer, the male relationship to gender norms and roles could be examined in detail. Furthermore, Jo's relationship with Laurie and if these two are acting according to their gender could be analyzed as this paper's limitations could not take their friendship into consideration.

In this essay, it becomes clear that Meg is consumed by traditional gender roles and cannot break out of them as society forces her to be submissive to her husband. Because Meg acts exactly as society expects her to, she lives an everyday, conventional life throughout the novel and is not punished for her behavior. On the other hand, Jo is being scolded for challenging traditional gender norms in several instances, such as acting angry, selfish, or blunt, characteristics that traditionally only men should carry. Consequently, patriarchy forces Jo to marry to not be lonely, give up her passion for literature to be happy, be obedient to her husband and become a mother to be fulfilled in life. Despite her efforts to follow her dreams as a writer and achieve the goals she set for herself, Jo's attempts are being oppressed, making the moral of the novel that, as a woman, having male traits characteristics is bad and unacceptable. *Little Women* is interpreted to discuss relevant topics such as the pressure of females to act according to societal gender expectations, like having children or being a stay-at-home mother. In modern

times, the discussion of feminist problems can be seen as valuable and important as we understand and can problematize the story from a different point of view. In the nineteenth century, though, readers did not have such understanding as they had a different viewpoint when it came to gender norms and their place in the patriarchal system and because *Little Women* is a didactic tale, children were made to believe that the only way to be truly happy is by following gender roles and norms.

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