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The Path to Jo's Self-Realization in
Little Women and Good Wives

Catherine R. Stimpson once claimed that although *Little Women* and *Good Wives* describe a whole family of girls, most readers love *Little Women* because they love Jo March (Stimpson, p. 967). She argues that as its central character, Jo is portrayed as a wild, assertive, and independent heroine who vows never to marry and aims to become a successful writer, using her writing to gain financial independence. Gay also states that the main thrust of this novel is Jo's the struggle toward self-realization and financial independence (Gay, p. 30). That is to say, fighting against social conventions, Jo undergoes a process of self-realization.

The American psychologist Abraham Maslow defined self-realization as "the impulse to convert oneself into what one is capable of being"(Maslow, p. 23). Self-realization commonly refers to psychological growth and maturation. This essay discusses how both nature and nurture influence Jo's path to self-realization in *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. It argues that Jo transforms from a tomboyish girl into a mature lady and her development towards mental maturity is determined by both her innate personal characteristics such as her tomboyish nature, desire for independence and strong maternal guidance. While the novel at the beginning presents a female protagonist whose innate and social factors are at war, by the end, she demonstrates the possibility of harmonious reconciliation. Jo, the heroine shows that though nature and nurture have different effects on her development and that sometimes they are in conflict with each other, they can still create a peaceful co-existence. Three areas of influence have been singled out for special attention: Jo's family life, her ambition to be a writer and her aspiration as a woman.

Innate qualities

Little Women and *Good Wives* as classic children's literature portray an appealing but unconventional figure of Jo March with innate qualities featuring tomboyish nature and female independence. Instead of behaving feminine-likely, Jo conducts boy-like or masculine speeches and behavior. At the beginning of the novel, Jo exclaims, "It's bad enough to be a

girl anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy [...] go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (*Little Women*, p. 14) This exemplifies Jo's refusal of normative girlhood identifications and desires; she wants to be the man of the family, not the little woman; she wants to be a soldier, not a seamstress (Quimby, p. 4). She also rejects her title as "Miss March", as she claims to Laurie that "I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo" (*Little Women*, p. 43) to get rid of her lady identity. She considers her name "so sentimental" and wishes "everyone would say Jo, instead of Josephine" (*Little Women*, p. 44). The male nickname is appropriate for someone who chafes more than her sisters against traditional expectations of women. In her eyes, "Josephine" is too feminine and full of sentimentality; she prefers "Jo", which sounds boyish and matches her non-feminine qualities more.

Moreover, it is Jo who always keeps a casual friendly relationship with Laurie. During their first meet, instead of talking gracefully, she cries and asks him "eager questions" (*Little Women*, p. 46). Although Laurie is at first bashful, the narrator explains that "Jo's gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at his ease" (*Little Women*, p. 46), a point the narrator makes as if to underscore Jo's immediate assumption of the type of male model Laurie represents (Quimby, p. 8). Moreover, Jo listens acutely to Laurie's "boyish praise of her sister" (*Little Women*, p. 44) as if receiving a lesson in gentlemanly deportment and then stores it up to repeat to Meg (*Little Women*, p. 46). She tries to imitate Laurie's boyish behavior. Her unladylike image is the result of her instinctive male-like characteristics.

Nevertheless, from a historical perspective, Jo is an independent and courageous rebel against conventional recognition of females. As Foster and Simons put it, "*Little Women* maintains an uneasy equilibrium between the fantasies of a rebellion it dramatizes and the moral message it claims to promote (Foster and Simon, p. 99). The middle-class ideology of the proper "sphere of womanhood" (Showalter, p. 14) which developed in the post-industrial

England and America prescribed that a woman should be “a perfect lady, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (Showalter, p. 14). In the mid-nineteenth century, ideal little women were expected to be quiet, lovely, obedient, sensitive, and display an elegant lady-like behavior. By contrast, Jo fails to comply with these moral values; she is just a struggling human girl who dreams of becoming a female writer; and she acts out her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic as the mood suggested. The conspicuous strong female independence, self-assertion, determination and courage all promote Jo’s pursuit of her writing career.

Maternal guidance

In terms of the maternal influence, several critics all stress its indispensability. Macleod, for example points out that “It was the responsibility of mothers to help children overcome their character flaws, to guide them along the right paths to creditable adulthood” (Macleod, p. 24). The prominent notion in theory and research on self-development posed out by critics is that the early self-concept is formed in the context of children’s intimate relationships with their mothers (Harter, p. 553). Perry Nodelman also states that children’s literature demonstrates adults’ effort to colonize children; adults try, through literature, to influence children’s behavior (Nodelman, p. 82). All these three quotations have emphasized the crucial role of caretakers, in particular of the mothers, with whose guidance children will meet less difficulties in their development and path to future success.

To assist her daughters to attain virtues and form optimistic life goals at their adolescent time, Mrs. March’s maternal influence is represented by her moral education in *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. Mrs. March teaches her daughters the crucial responsibility of middle-class American women and gives Jo and her sisters a moral guidance. Her nurture tempers Jo’s inherited personalities somehow, and also reinforces her self-awareness acquisition and mental growth. With her mother as a moral role model, Jo becomes aware of her own

weaknesses, obtaining moral qualities, carrying on her career and finally realizing her womanhood aspiration.

Family life

Little Women and *Good Wives* provide readers with a typical domestic scene featuring close mother-daughter and sister-sister interaction. Maternal influence profoundly affects Jo's transition from girlhood to womanhood. As a conformist herself, Mrs. March has taught the March girls to conform to the image of a typical elegant nineteenth-century lady. She requires them to become quite saintly, obedient, properly-dressed and well-behaved. Although Jo has previously diverged from social restrictions and failed to follow her mother's advice, which is typical of her personality, as she grows older and more mature she gradually learns to shoulder domestic responsibilities, acquiring qualities such as self-sacrifice, benevolence, forgiveness, and a strong will.

Compared with her sister Meg, who acts correctly and is the closest to conforming to her mother's image of a lady, Jo refuses to learn and act in a feminine manner and indeed make herself a great challenge to mother's sage cultivation. Meg blames Jo when she uses slang and whistles, declaring "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine [...] and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady" (*Little Women*, p. 13). Through the argument of Meg, the narrator highlights the necessity of ladylike manners.

When Meg and Jo are leaving for Mrs. Gardiner's party, Mrs. March's voice cries from the window to remind her daughters to take a "pocket handkerchief" (*Little Women*, p. 41). Jo jokes that "I do believe Marmee would ask that if we were all running away from an earthquake" (*Little Women*, p. 41). She does not care about her lady appearance with neat boots, gloves, and handkerchiefs. Moreover, she continues her "bad manners", and delights in "playing male parts" and takes "immense satisfaction in a pair of russet-leather boots" in their

amateur play (*Little Women*, p. 30). That is to say, Jo disdains behaving like a lady but pretty enjoys representing like a man.

Perfection is represented by the selfless Marmee, who always educates her daughters by telling them moral stories. Mrs. March never rigidly preaches to her daughters, she will skillfully combine her moral lessons with real life, directing them to discover and remove their flaws, which exerts significant effects upon the March girls. “Tell another story, Mother—one with a moral to it, like this. I like to think about them afterwards, if they are real, and not too preachy” (*Little Women*, p. 65). Jo prefers such stories, and is willing to seek moral values from them afterwards. Then Marmee provides a transparent allegory about four girls who learn to become happy by counting their blessings (*Little Women*, p. 66). Mrs. March is trying to compare her girls to the ones in her story, convincing them to be content with what they possess: youth, health, enough food and clothes and making them aware that it is sensible to behave well.

Just as the girls tell stories to shape their lives more than to express their feelings, Marmee provides a final one that unifies their stories, much as she unifies the family. Furthermore, she subtly revises Jo’s potentially subversive story about Aunt March (*Little Women*, p. 61) with morality much as she subtly moderates Jo’s rebellious personality. Jo is convinced by mother’s introduction of “when you feel discontented, think over your blessings and be grateful”; the following narration of “Jo looked up quickly, as if about to speak, but changed her mind, seeing that the story was not done yet” (*Little Women*, p. 66) shows that Jo realizes the need to repress her quick temper and curiosity and tries her best to respect others. Mother’s sermon strikes her most, as she claims, “We needed that lesson, and we won’t forget it. If we do, you just say to us, as old Chloe did in *Uncle Tom*” (*Little Women*, p. 66). Jo takes her mother’s lesson to heart as much as she can.

Hunt puts that *Little Women* and *Good Wives* with the view that imagination must be bounded by worldly responsibility, just as the freedom of childhood must be bounded by adult values (Hunt, 2001: 191). On the path of developing her imagination and obtaining freedom, Jo needs the enlightening instructions as well as the proper restraining force from her mother. In the “all play no work” (*Little Women*, p. 144) experiment, Mrs. March intentionally drops her daily chores and lets her girls take care of themselves. Consequently, she succeeds in her experiment. After Jo’s complaint of getting tired of lounging and larking (*Little Women*, p. 155), Mrs. March sincerely points out the advantage of work: it is both physically and mentally beneficial and yields far more than just money and fashion. Through another rhetorical question, Mrs. March emphasizes the virtues of tolerance, benevolence, selflessness and the importance of keeping a balance between duty and pleasure:

Don’t you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all? (*Little Women*, p. 156)

By repeating the four adjectives of similar meaning, “pleasanter”, “sweet”, “comfortable” and “lovely,” Mrs. March stresses the gratification duty brings. It is these qualities above that make the March girls feel an inner peace. Following mother’s lectures, Jo promises to work like a bee, and love it too (*Little Women*, p. 156). From this experiment, she learns the significance of enjoying work and cherishing time; and also understands that life could be successful no matter they are poor or rich. This experiment lays a foundation for Jo’s later sensible acts of taking care of the family.

Under the effects of her mother’s moral guidance, Jo also forms a sense of self-awareness. Pam Morris argues that the plot demonstrates the heroine’s gradual development of self-awareness, as Jo learns her errors with the aid of mother’s moral guidance (Morris, p. 76). Jo is very aware of her weak points such as quickness of temper, impatience, lack of

consideration, and rage, which plays a key role in achieving self-realization in the novel as a whole.

To start with, even if Jo cannot hide her non-feminine nature, she still tries her utmost to learn from her mother, fulfilling her expectations and overcoming the weakness of her personality. In the scene where Jo is irritated with Amy for burning her manuscript, their mother consoles her with the following words: “don’t let the sun go down upon your anger; forgive each other, help each other, and begin again tomorrow” (*Little Women*, p. 105). Mrs. March aims to instill into Jo the virtues of forgiveness and tolerance. She also constitutes a maternal role model for Jo’s self-control. Jo finds her mother will fold her lips and go away sometimes to keep still (*Little Women*, p. 110). Though her mother sometimes feels upset, she can always find a calm and wise way to hide discomfort, depression and bring her temper under control, which sets an example for Jo. The mother’s statement of “I must try to practice all the virtues I would have my little girls possess, for I was their example” (*Little Women*, p. 111) shows her desire to influence her daughters by acting as a role model. After Jo confesses her mistake, her mother speaks in quite a gentle tongue that “you must keep watch over your ‘bosom enemy’ as Father calls it, or it may sadden, if not spoil your life” (*Little Women*, p. 111). Mrs. March inspires Jo to realize her own weaknesses first and then helps her repress and remove them. She manages to temper Jo’s inherited personalities and helps her grow gradually.

In addition, among her sisters, Jo has the strongest sense of responsibility and self-sacrificing spirit to share the burden of her family. One example is Jo’s attempt of selling her long beautiful hair to raise money for mother’s trip to see her sick father. She makes the statement:

I was wild to do something for Father [...] I hate to borrow as much as Mother does [...] Meg gave all her quarterly salary towards the rent, and I only got some clothes with mine, so I felt wicked, and was bound to have some money, if I sold the nose off my face to get it. (*Little Women*, pp. 211-212)

The phrases “was wild to” and “was bound to” reveal her earnest desire and resolution to help the family out of its difficulties. Comparing her contribution with Meg’s, Jo shows a strong self-esteem. The adverb “only” indicates that she thinks her devotion is far from enough. Jo is even willing to sell her “nose” as long as she can collect some money. Her brave action is primarily motivated by her love for her father; but it also stems from an animosity towards Aunt March. As Jo asserts, the haircut makes her appear more “boyish” (*Little Women*, p. 211), and as a gesture of defiance and self-assertion as well as a measure of her capacity for financial independence, it also expresses conventional masculine qualities (Beverly, p. 88). As the mid-nineteenth-century social codes dictated, a woman of Jo’s age must wear her hair up, which is an important woman-marked symbol. Although Jo calmly cuts her hair off and seems not to regret it, the narration “as if I’d an arm or leg off” (*Little Women*, p. 214) signals that she is actually repressing her sadness. Her unselfishness and boundless power are embodied in this thoughtful act of sacrificing her hair.

In the “dark days” episode (*Little Women*, p. 237) when Beth has scarlet fever and their mother is away, Jo is portrayed as the most devoted girl compared with Meg and Amy. She tries to stay calm and “devotes herself to Beth day and night” (*Little Women*, p. 237) and “never stirs from Beth’s side” (*Little Women*, p. 239), which express her tremendous anxiety and desire to be the first person to see Beth become better. She tells Laurie in a grieved tone that “Meg can’t love Bethy as I do; and she won’t miss her as I shall. Beth is my conscience, and I can’t give her up, I can’t! I can’t!” (*Little Women*, pp. 240-241) By using “can’t” four times, Jo cannot help expressing her worries and helplessness. It is not just because she has the deepest affection upon Beth in the March family, but because she has a strong sense of responsibility to look after her younger sister.

Within the domestic sphere, Jo has shown her awareness and desire to be the man of the family. When the March girls practice drama, Jo always plays the central directing role; Beth,

Amy and even Meg follow her instruction (*Little Women*, p. 17). Although Jo behaves not as exactly as what Mrs. March expects, she is highly valued by her mother. She tells Jo that “It’s a great comfort, Jo; I always feel strong when you are at home, now Meg is gone. Beth is too feeble and Amy too young to depend upon; but when the tug comes, you are always ready.” (*Good Wives*, p. 109) Here, “too” appears twice in the mother’s speech, which reinforces her great trust in and dependence upon Jo. Moreover, her use of “always” emphasizes her acknowledgment of Jo’s powerful and unique role in the family. While Jo replies that she is willing to assist her mother with the domestic chores, hard or dirty. Her promise of “if anything is amiss at home, I’m your man” (*Good Wives*, p. 109) mirrors her strength as well as her hope to become the strong spiritual supporter who always stands beside her mother.

Ambition as a Writer

One feature of the family story that has become increasingly popular is the forceful, independent female hero (Hunt, 2001: 91). As a talented writer, Jo longs for independence and freedom in the realization of her ambition. The narrator emphasizes that Jo’s determination and courage play an important part in her pursuit of a writing career. Her ambition is to do “something splendid” and something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after she is dead (*Little Women*, p. 188). She makes up her mind to become a writer, as writing is “splendid” for her and she may produce some masterpiece that is still widely known even after her death. She says joyfully and firmly, “I shall write more [...] I *am* so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girls” (*Little Women*, pp. 203-204). Jo will find contentment so long as she can become economically independent and support her sisters. To earn the praise of the ones she loves is her dearest wish and is also the first step to becoming a successful career woman.

Historically speaking, in the mid-nineteenth century, writing was a male-dominated occupation, making it difficult for women to become writers. Elaine Showalter argues that

negative male criticism of women writers justified assertions that writing by women was and always would be inherently inferior to or weaker than men's writing in the mid-nineteenth century (Showalter, p. 73). According to Morris, happy women, who are content with peaceful family life, have little need of utterance; only those unhappy women denying family fulfillment need to write (Morris, p. 44). The mid-nineteenth century female writers encountered insurmountable gender discrimination as their works were accused of being formless, restricted, irrational, over-emotional and lacking in discipline.

These female writers found that even though their works were reviewed sometimes, they were always treated with little respect as a consequence of the fact that most of the editors and reviewers were males (Hunt, 1990: 153). In the mid-nineteenth-century, as Showalter states that "womanhood was a vocation in itself" (Showalter, p. 21), women always had the stereotyped images of child-caring and domesticity. Even if women were entering literary professions in unprecedented numbers, they were perpetually a minority. Showalter believes that vocation-the will to write-nonetheless required a genuine transcendence of female identity (Showalter, p. 21). In other words, to prove their competence to the general public, female writers had to struggle to cope with the dilemma of obedience and resistance to conventions. Jo March, however, as a rebel against conventional values manages to keep a balance between domestic responsibilities and the pursuit of a career. Her ambition as a writer derives from her own independent personality, capabilities, unremitting efforts and support from her family.

Jo's passion for reading and her talent as a writer are narrated throughout the novel. The narrator describes how Jo shapes her writing dream in the beginning part. In the "castles in the air" (*Little Women*, p. 187) scene, when everyone is required to introduce his or her "castle", Jo also describes hers:

I'd have rooms piled with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie's music [...] I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous: that would suit me, so that is *my* favorite dream. (*Little Women*, p. 188)

“A stable full of [...]” and “rooms piled with [...]” show her “greed” for books and enthusiasm for literature. Jo resolutely plans to become a writer. She demonstrates her strong determination and wishes to produce influential works by comparing her work with Laurie’s music, as for men in the mid-nineteenth century, the gospel of work satisfied both self-interest and the public interest (Showalter, p. 21). Jo is not just anxious to earn money, but also obtain extensive reputation and social recognition. The verb “suit” and the italicized pronoun “*my*” demonstrate that writer is the very vocation that Jo is capable of doing.

It is not surprising that the family were always opposed to a woman’s earning her living and efforts to become independent in the mid-nineteenth century (Showalter, p. 63). Jo in the novel is apparently not in the same situation. Although Jo has to learn domestic skills, her ambition to become a writer is never regarded as the shortcoming of her personality. Instead, her gift and abilities win acceptance and approval from the March family, who support her ambition to become a writer wholeheartedly. After the four girls have successfully conducted the rehearsal of their amateur drama, Beth exclaims that “I don’t see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You’re a regular Shakespeare!” (*Little Women*, p. 18) Jo’s potential is firmly admired and taken pride in by her sister.

When Jo has published her first story, she gains the encouragement from the whole March family afterwards. When she reads her story out loud to draw her sisters’ interest, and they then work out it is Jo who writes the marvelous novel, all of them go into raptures: Meg drops her work; Amy praises critically; Beth begins to hug her sister; Hannah exclaims “Sakes alive”; Mrs. March is so proud of her daughter (*Little Women*, p. 203). They “pass the paper from hand to hand” (*Little Women*, p. 203) as they cannot hide their surprise and excitement to witness Jo’s splendid success. Jo “with tears in her eyes” (*Little Women*, p. 203) is also content with her first and successful attempt. To some extent, her initial success

eliminates her previous anxiety for failing to write excellent novels and gives her more confidence to continue pursuing a writing career.

Once her story is published, Jo's passion for writing grows stronger. As the narrator explains, "Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex' [...] writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace" (*Good Wives*, p. 42). Diction of "every few weeks", "all her heart and soul" and "no peace" all show that Jo is utterly obsessed by her literary creation and devotes herself to writing wholeheartedly. When she discovers that Mrs. S. L. A. N. G has succeeded in making a good living by writing sensation stories, Jo decides to follow suit. She then carries out her plan in secret and nearly gives up hope until she receives the payment from the publisher (*Good Wives*, p. 45). She reacts by staring at it as if it were a snake (*Good Wives*, p. 45), since she is so surprised and excited to obtain the money. The money Jo earns is put into practical use as she manages to send mother and Beth to the seaside, pay the butcher's bill and put down a new carpet (*Good Wives*, p. 47). She realizes that through writing she can not only develop her writing potential but also find remuneration to support the family. Jo regards herself as the power in the house and is encouraged to continue to write.

After Jo gains money and fame, she also receives criticism, which also helps her to gradually improve her writing skills. When Jo is bothered by both praises and blames, Mrs. March tells her daughter that criticism is "the best test" (*Good Wives*, p. 48), aiming to emphasize the advantage of it. She claims "we are too partial" (*Good Wives*, p. 48) because the mother knows that she and Jo's father can do just limited help to Jo, but other critics' praise or blame is more constructive for her to make further progress. Mrs. March's suggestion signals that Jo should not write at will or whatever she herself prefers, she must take others' opinions and suggestions into consideration with an open mind. Jo makes her

final decision that “I’ll comfort myself with that, and when I’m ready, I’ll up again and take another” (*Good Wives*, p. 48), which reveals her determination to correct the shortcomings, and carry on writing. Jo learns a lot from those criticizing ideas and works harder since then,

Speaking of social prejudice, many mid-nineteenth-century female writers felt that they got better treatment from the public when they published anonymously and assumed male personae (Showalter, p. 60). They did not want to reveal their names and tended to use a male pseudonym to avoid gender discrimination. So Jo makes the same decision when she faces such humiliating situation. When she meets the editor of *Weekly Volcano*, she tells him that “a friend of mine desired me to offer-a story-just as an experiment” (*Good Wives*, p. 136). She aims to inform the editor that she does not want to reveal her name. Neither does she want her works to fall into disfavor due to the gender of their writer.

When Mr. Dashwood forces Jo to cater to the market, she has the sense of “betraying herself” (*Good Wives*, p. 146) as she finds her writing purpose and style have deviated from her former track. Jo then gives up writing sensational novels. She compares her novels to “trash”, and feels “horribly ashamed” (*Good Wives*, p. 148) of viewing writing simply to make fast money. The rhetorical question “what *should* I do if they were seen at home, or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them?” (*Good Wives*, p. 148) and in particular, the italicized “*should*” indicate her remorse and unwillingness to let both her family and Mr. Bhaer down. To maintain self-integrity, Jo decides to write what she is really interested in instead of merely entertaining others, which indicates that she is maturing mentally.

The mid-nineteenth-century women writers tried to make their work appear as the spontaneous overflow of their womanly emotions (Showalter, p. 83). This strategy was partly a way of describing the powerful drives for self-expression that, especially for feminine novelists like Mrs. Oliphant, made the act of writing initially a passion by the muse: “I have

written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me.”¹ In the same situation, writing fiction also gives Jo an arena in which she can express herself freely: when she wants to show her anger, she needs not to tighten her lips to suppress it as her mother has taught.

When Jo is feeling despondent, Marmee suggests her to write so as to make both herself and the family happy (*Good Wives*, p. 245). As a result, writing becomes an effective therapy that largely works. In other words, it is a means of self-expression as medicine for Jo. For instance, she has written two samples of poems, which expose her feeling. The first, Jo's poem about Beth's death, allows Jo to express some of her grief and to tell Beth that she has not lived in vain, that others have benefited by her example. The second, a meditation on four trunks in the garret, revealing some of Jo's loneliness and longing for love, appears in a publication that Professor Bhaer reads and it brings him courting. Jo acknowledges that it is “very bad poetry”, but the Professor believes that “it has done its duty” (*Good Wives*, p. 299). Writing is not just a self-expressing career Jo favors but also the source of consolation and happiness.

According to Beverly, much as art should be Amy's supreme goal, writing should also be Jo's (Beverly, p. 84). Jo should outgrow it, like her strong language and her tomboy exuberance. Initially, Alcott endorses writing novels as fiction allows Jo to put her masculine power into practice. She can assume male roles in the plays that she writes and in meetings of the Pickwick Club, where, as Augustus Snodgrass, she gives her word as a “gentleman” (*Little Women*, p. 135). Jo breaks the bonds of conventional restrictions and turns into an independent and courageous female writer. Unlike an obedient and vulnerable housewife, Jo refuses to passively accept her destiny of just staying at home to deal with family chores, but prefers to go out to pursue her dream. Writing is what Jo adores and it also helps her to become the bread-winner of her family. Her independence and courage as well as support

¹ Robert Colby and Vineta Colby. (1966). *The Equivocal Virtue: Mrs. Oliphant and the Victorian Literary Marketplace*, Hamden, Connecticut, p. 5

from her family make Jo manage to resolve the conflict between family duties and her ambition to become a writer.

Aspiration as a woman

Gay has argued that Jo has a complex personality, “a mix of the maternal and the masculine” (Gay, p. 30). Jo’s non-feminine character and rebellious behavior do not prevent her from displaying her aspiration to live the life of a happily married woman. In other words, her female and male instincts are struggling for ascendancy. As Langland once asserted, “Marriage is women’s fulfillment” (Langland, p. 118), and she made it clear that a woman would find self-fulfillment when she becomes a wife and a mother. In Jo’s case, she undergoes a transition from an immature tomboy previously afraid of sex to later a mature little woman aspiring for womanhood identity (Hollander, p. 31). In spite of her longing for independence and freedom from the constraints imposed by traditional social constructions of femininity and masculinity, Jo also thirsts for a normal woman’s life to be a wife and a mother. Both her changed character and maternal role finally lead Jo to a satisfactory marriage life.

Jo's former fear or rejection of sex, like her impatience, is one of the forms her immaturity takes, well past the age when an interest in sex might seem natural. Her fear erupts most noticeably during the period when Meg is tremulously succumbing to John Brooke's attractions. Jo, far from feeling any sympathetic excitement about this, or any envy of the delights of love, is filled with a fury and a misery born of terror. She is not just afraid of losing Meg; she fears Meg's emergent sexual being and, more deeply, her own. However, like all the “preferring literary romantic heroes” (Hollander, p. 32), in her adolescence depiction, Jo begins to dream of her own womanhood life with her mother’s inspiration and her own aroused awareness of female identity.

Jo absorbs a positive outlook on marriage from Mrs. March. When Meg comes back from the Vanity Fair, her mother seriously tells the March girls that she would rather them marry poor men, provided they are happy, beloved and contented (*Little Women*, p. 133). More specifically, the sincere phrases “but I never [...]”, “I’d rather [...]” and “if you were [...]” (*Little Women*, p. 133) all express Mrs. March’s earnest wishes upon her girls on marriage-money issue. She clarifies that they should not be allured by treasure or feel obligated to find a husband, but must seek fulfillment on their own to live a happy life. Mother’s moral guidance again sets a foundation for Jo’s later choice of her spouse and marriage life.

Jo believes that it is better to be old maids than unhappy wives (*Little Women*, p. 133), and inclines to be self-faithful as she decisively refuses Laurie’s proposal. When Mrs. March asks if Jo cares for Laurie, she responds in a firm tone that “Mercy, no! I love the dear boy, as I always have, and am immensely proud of him; but as for anything more, it’s out of the question” (*Good Wives*, p. 119). Jo is clearly aware of the fact that she does not suit Laurie who deserves some lovely and accomplished girl, for she is homely, awkward, odd and old (*Good Wives*, p. 158). She knows her own unladylike personality and behavior would not make herself a perfect wife to match Laurie’s upper society.

Mrs. March’s helpful reminding also reinforces Jo’s loyalty to her own feeling. The mother mentions “too” (*Good Wives*, p. 119) twice to explain their similarities in personality: she and Laurie both have a quick temper and dislike being restrained by others. Jo learns that an ideal match must base on mutual tolerance and patience, which both of them just lack for. Her claim of “I couldn’t fall in love with the dear old fellow merely out of gratitude” (*Good Wives*, p. 119) reveals that she prefers to be faithful to her own heart rather than repay Laurie’s kindness by sacrificing her own happiness, which further highlights her self-awareness and self-esteem.

Jo's aspiration as a woman and desire for love and romance rapidly grow subtly as she meets Professor Bhaer. When she talks about Laurie with Mr. Bhaer, she involuntarily begins to blush. The description of "the more she tried not to, the redder she grew" (*Good Wives*, p. 151) exemplifies Jo's maiden shyness. She gradually abandons her tomboy characteristics and grows into a young lady. Jo cherishes her relationship with Professor Bhaer, "well, the winter's gone, and I've written no books, earned no fortune; but I've made a friend worth having, and I'll try to keep him all my life" (*Good Wives*, p. 152). Jo has gradually regains her feminine personality, as she treats Mr. Bhaer not just as a "friend" (*Good Wives*, p. 152) but the one she cares for all her life.

According to Sarah Elbert, despite her former examples of masculine characteristics, Jo undergoes a shift from tomboyhood to womanhood, as she starts hungering for someone to love and being loved (Elbert, p. 58). She feels lonely after she learns the news of Laurie and Amy's engagement. She talks to her mother, the sharpest-eyed observer to capture her loneliness. In front of her mother, Jo cannot hide her need and envy to be loved as Meg and Amy who have found someone to depend on; she tells her mother that "the more she tries to satisfy herself with all sorts of natural affections, the more she seems to want" (*Good Wives*, p. 248). The expression of "the more...the more" stresses that though Jo has made a great effort, she can still hardly remove her discontent which derives from her inner desire for a companion and marriage life. Moreover, Amy's happiness boosts her strong hunger for someone to "love with heart and soul, and cling to while God let them be together" (*Good Wives*, p. 249). Jo's depression and sadness do not decrease until she accidentally finds the little message left by Professor Bhaer. Her "trembling" lips and murmur of "my dear old Fritz, I didn't value him half enough when I had him, but now how I should love to see him, for everyone seems going away from me, and I'm all alone" (*Good Wives*, p. 249) both express

Jo's intense feminine aspiration to meet Mr. Bhaer, who could be the right person to help her out of helplessness and solitude.

Jo's change reaches its climax when she consolidates her relationship with Professor Bhaer under the umbrella, the description that "she sang about her work, did up her hair three times a day" (*Good Wives*, p. 286) provides convincing clues that she has fallen in love with Mr. Bhaer. In sharp contrast to her past concepts, she begins to pay more attention to her appearance now and behaves like a little girl who has beautiful dreams of love. Jo subtly accepts her female identity and is even "afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence" (*Good Wives*, p. 286). Regardless of her former unfeminine aspirations, she enjoys both loving others and being loved. Her Mother again lends Jo a hand considerately, "yes; I want some twilled silesia [...] if you happen to meet Mr. Bhaer, bring him home to tea. I quite long to see the dear man" (*Good Wives*, p. 287), for the mother clearly knows that it is her daughter's desperate hope to meet Mr. Bhaer at the moment. Jo is also grateful to Mrs. March as her mother can not only understand her, but also encourage her to pursue her love.

The narrator offers readers a natural and satisfying resolution to Jo's ambition with her final marriage to Professor Bhaer and their settlement in Plumfield. Jo is wise to choose to marry Bhaer owing to the great amounts of similarities they share. Bookishness has brought Jo and her Professor together: they read Hans Christian Andersen; he gives her a volume of Shakespeare; they attend a literary dinner (Beverly, p. 91). They both have an interest in literature, which not just becomes their common topic, but increases favorable impression of each other. Additionally, both of them are honest, generous and charitable, and also compatible and complementary in each other's personalities as Jo is frank, quick-tempered while Professor Bhaer is modest and patient.

Jo knows Bhaer quite well, and sees eye to eye to his generous benevolence. She tells Professor Bhaer her plan of opening school only “once”, but “it was just what he would like [...]” (*Good wives*, pp. 303-304) They share the value that happy life counts for more than money and pleasure in the common pursuit of helping others. It seems as if Jo has abandoned her previously yearned independence and given in to a conventional woman destiny. Lynn states that Jo resumes her place within the organic order of marriage, home and the family (Lynn, p. 19). According to Lynn, Jo’s giving up of her writing career after her marriage signifies that the woman renounces her career and independence. Nevertheless, this essay stands that Jo has found contentment in her “Joian plan” (*Good wives*, p. 303):

Then Fritz can train and teach in his own way, and father will help him. I can feed and nurse and pet and scold them; and mother will be stand-by. I’ve always longed for lots of boys, and never had enough; now I can fill the house full, and revel in the little clears to my heart’s content. Think what luxury-Plumfield my own, and a wilderness of boys to enjoy it with me! (*Good wives*, p. 304)

In her arrangement, Jo has divided work for both Fritz and herself: he teaches while she nurses the children. Though she gives up writing at the moment, she aims to realize her ambition in another way. She prefers to work together with Professor Bhaer to help poor boys, which becomes her new life goal. Jo’s suggestion to co-operate with Laurie, “the business man” (*Good wives*, p. 305) further indicates her foresight to plan her future life as well. “I’ve always longed for [...]” “never had enough”, “fill the house full” and “a wilderness of [...]” (*Good wives*, p. 304) all demonstrate her anxiety to become a mother stemming from her maternal instinct.

Jo is not an obedient wife content to rely on her husband, as their marriage sets on the foundation of mutual understanding and trust. What *Little Women* and *Good Wives* present is more than a traditional female romance/ marriage plot (McCallum, p. 83). They also present how Jo handles family life and hard work appropriately. The narration of “Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much anxiety, and a perpetual racket” (*Good wives*,

p. 308) and Jo's joy of being called "Mother Bhaer" (*Good wives*, p. 307) both manifest her subtle change into a lady with tenderness and maternal love. She cares for her "family" more now, as she is convinced that "families are the most beautiful things in all the world" (*Good wives*, p. 306). Then the birth of her own children "increases her happiness" (*Good wives*, p. 308), which further highlights the fact that Jo aspires to becoming a mother by instinct.

In the final scene, she claims "I don't think I ever ought to call myself 'Unlucky Jo' again, when my greatest wish has been so beautifully gratified" (*Good wives*, p. 311). She is aware that even if her life does not go along the track of what she has pictured before, she is still quite satisfied with her present life. The life she wants in the past is "selfish, lonely, and cold" (*Good wives*, p. 312) for her now, but it does not mean that Jo is going to abandon her girlhood dream to become a career woman.

I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these. (*Good wives*, p. 312)

Her assertion of "I can wait" and "I'm sure [...]" illustrates that she is still full of imagination underneath and intends to pursue her writing career at the right moment. To be more specific, her pursuit of female independence and freedom is not completely replaced by maternity. As long as she is happy and busy and dutiful-as a proper woman, a wife and mother-Jo feels no great call to write right now. Owing to her changed characters and life attitude, Jo eventually fulfils her aspiration to be a woman as well as her life goal to work hand in hand with her husband.

Hunt argues that *Little Women* and *Good Wives* demonstrate an interesting balance between independence and conformity (Hunt, 2001: 191). This essay has demonstrated that it is possible to defy social convention and even temper innate characteristics in the pursuit of harmony and happiness. This process, defined here as Jo's self-realization, is discussed from three perspectives: family life, ambition as a writer and aspiration as a woman. Of these three

respects, maternal influence is most indispensable in the realm of family life; the innate qualities of independence, determination and courage are most significant in Jo's successful pursuit of a writing career; and finally, nature and nurture combine in the realization of her identity as a woman.

In her family life, though Jo's masculine behavior and language offer challenges to her mother's moral education, maternal guidance still acts as the basis for Jo's development: Mrs. March makes Jo aware of domestic duties and assists her to remove her defects. The mother's moralistic speeches are in accordance with didactic ideas for mid-nineteenth-century females to behave properly. Jo acquires qualities such as benevolence, sense of responsibility and unselfishness from her mother. Playing the male role, Jo also reflects her female strength in taking care of her family.

In following a writing career, a male-dominated profession throughout the nineteenth century, Jo also displays her desire for independence. Despite the social obstacles and discriminating concepts towards female writers, Jo persists in pursuing her career and getting economically independent. She tries her utmost to balance family duties and ambition as a writer in the meantime by publishing her books to support her family. Jo manages to resolve the domesticity-career conflict as a consequence of both her own endless efforts and support from her family.

Jo combines a maternal and masculine personality: her aspiration as a woman and desire for a marriage life are not prevented by her unfeminine personality. The older and more mature she becomes, the more she yearns for being loved as her two married sisters. As her former tomboyish deportment fades away, Jo becomes more and more womanlike. She forms a positive view of marriage in response to maternal influence: happiness counts for more than money, and thus chooses Professor Bhaer instead of Laurie, who is the richer of the two. This essay stresses that Jo's marriage to Bhaer does not, as might be imagined, signify her utter

surrender to the pressure of social convention, but represents the fulfillment of her new life goal. The resolution of conflict between domesticity and the pursuit of a career is completed as she provides for herself a life of self-content based on her own endeavors and support of her mother.

In her path towards mental maturity, Jo's innate qualities and maternal influence have different effects at first, but they end in peaceful co-existence: the former has been tempered by the latter. This essay demonstrates that by combining the advantages of nature and nurture, Jo eventually achieves her goal of self-realization, as she is transformed from a tomboyish girl into a mature lady who enjoys happiness, financial security and social respect.

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