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Harding University

Little Cricket on the Hearth:  
The Quiet Feminism of *Little Women*

Caroline Anderson Klein

Honors Thesis Assignment

Dr. Amy Qualls

2 May 2024

## Abstract

Since the advent of the cult of domesticity, the stakes for female characters in domestic literature have been notoriously high. There was no room for flaws, rebellious decisions, and certainly no room for mistakes—whether of the woman’s own accord, or simply as collateral damage of a male character’s immorality. In this shallowly Calvinist domain, women were never more than one broken guardrail away from social ruin or death. In writing *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott breaks these molds through unflinching kindness to her female characters from childhood to adulthood, even unto death. Alcott achieves this quietly feminist feat by allowing women to learn and grow through emotions and mistakes that in a different novel may have been dehumanizing; providing them the agency to choose whether to work inside or outside of the home, with equal dignity given to either choice; and providing female characters the agency to choose their life partners and the ability to enjoy egalitarian marriages. Alcott also provides a female authority figure in religion who is both wise and lovingly maternal; and the humanity for her female characters to live and die as regular people, rather than angels or whores.

*Little Women* has been studied extensively for how it approaches Protestant domestic values, egalitarianism in marriage, the reality of female anger and anxiety, and its complicated sisterly relationships in the midst of other noted domestic works of the same time period. The novel has been both praised and critiqued for how it handles all of these subjects. This thesis seeks to broaden focus and celebrate *Little Women* as a revolutionary and positive landmark in the history of the genre and depiction of female characters.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Claxton, the soul of kindness and gentleness, who has logged countless hours on behalf of this thesis. Reading *Little Women* is no small feat, and he did so multiple times for my sake. His wonderful recommendations for secondary sources helped to enrich this paper, providing valuable balance and context. In addition, he was always available to provide a listening ear and valuable encouragement. I hope to someday find a way to repay such wonderful kindness. I've had many professors in my college career, but these two stand out in sharp relief as mentors who I will remember always.

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5 April 2024

Little Cricket on the Hearth: The Quiet Feminism of *Little Women*

Since the advent of the cult of domesticity, the stakes for female characters in domestic literature have been notoriously high. There was no room for flaws, rebellious decisions, and certainly no room for mistakes—whether of the woman’s own accord, or simply as collateral damage of a male character’s immorality. In this shallowly Calvinist domain, women were never more than one broken guardrail away from social ruin or death. In writing *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott breaks these molds through unflinching kindness to her female characters from childhood to adulthood, even unto death. Alcott achieves this quietly feminist feat by allowing women to learn and grow through emotions and mistakes that in a different novel may have been dehumanizing; providing them the agency to choose whether to work inside or outside of the home, with equal dignity given to either choice; and providing female characters the agency to choose their life partners and the ability to enjoy egalitarian marriages. Alcott also provides a female authority figure in religion who is both wise and lovingly maternal; and the humanity for her female characters to live and die as regular people, rather than angels or whores.

It would be ill-conceived to begin an examination of the novel itself before addressing the greater genre of domestic literature, which established the literary framework that Alcott so cunningly subverts with *Little Women*. First, domestic literature did not fall neatly beneath the umbrella of either children’s literature or women’s literature—in many ways, it was both. This categorization was largely due to the genre being historically intertwined with the cult of

domesticity, a popular social movement in the nineteenth century. The cult of domesticity promoted women's confinement to the home as the weaker sex in need of protection, "taking on the obligations of housekeeping, raising good children, and making her family's home a haven of health, happiness, and virtue" (MacKethan). In return, they received protection and financial provision from their husbands. Consequently, due to "women's cultural positioning as caretaker, as moral guide, and as teacher, children's literature became women's literature, reflecting a certain commonality of perspective" (Lundin 135). In this way, domestic fiction had a "quiet radicalism" as a literary space where the entire female experience could commiserate, which was arguably not truly utilized before the publication of *Little Women* (Ashworth 143). For most of its history, it was a very strict genre, deeply reflective of societal expectations. In many ways the domestic novel functioned as an American Protestant *bildungsroman*, a story of formative spiritual education, detailing the process that promised to usher good girls into an idyllic life as housewives and mothers. Protagonists were either "angels" or "practical women" struggling for self-mastery, and typically were expected to attain a saint-like level of perfection. The protagonist was also often a victim, enduring injustice through others' abuse of power, such as that of a cruel authority figure. Ultimately, the character experienced an arc of discovering "a reasonable and Christian self-reliance," consisting of "mental strength, firmness, courage, industry, perseverance, and skill in some art or profession," and the ability to effectively evaluate potential suitors (Campbell 119). Finally, the protagonist had to marry to achieve what was considered to be full womanhood and the bucolic completion of the development arc.

Girls were consequently encouraged to keep "a carefully restricted diet consisting largely of [these] pious narratives," as they were believed to contain essential lessons on how to grow into a woman of esteem (Wadsworth). In reality, domestic novels were generally sugar-coated

stories focused on morality and femininity that had little practical or humanizing value, with the odd cautionary tale of women gone astray and the terrible trials they consequently endured as punishment for their apostasy.

The domestic genre had deep roots in American Protestantism, heavily favoring a shallow depiction of Calvinist theology, almost in spite of itself. In the early days of the genre, Reformed theology was quite popular in the United States, largely attributable to “the rising reputation and importance of Jonathan Edwards,” whose works were among the most widely-distributed books in print at the time (Van Engen 298). Though later domestic novels were in fact set against the tumultuous societal shift in preference from Calvinist theology to a more humanist, universal grace-based theology, many novels appear to be like literary flies caught in amber before this transition. Though unintentional, a strong Calvinist undertone in a domestic novel was not uncommon, as “while most sentimental writers rejected predestination and election, many of their books unwittingly supported such doctrines by trapping characters in the structure of sentimental narratives” (Van Engen 300). In other words, genre conventions favored certain kinds of characters, such as an unrepentant villain who would ultimately be vanquished, or an angelic sister who would meet an early death. Readers were familiar with these conventions and so vaguely knew what to expect to happen to certain characters from the very beginning of a story. This expectation constituted a kind of literary predestination, where characters’ fates were ultimately set in stone by type casting and popular tropes. There was no real agency in the novel, because there could be no real surprises; when a character’s stock type was determined, their fate was determined as well.

The genre of domestic literature was extensive, but multiple works emerge as noteworthy for our purposes: Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and *The Coquette* by Hannah



Foster (1797), predecessors of Alcott's novel, and Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* novels, a series published not long after *Little Women*. Each of these works achieved great popularity and acclaim in their time, and so wielded great influence on the overall sentimental genre. Each will be used in the following paragraphs as foils to *Little Women*, in order to help illustrate how Alcott subtly altered many notable genre tropes to grant her characters previously restricted humanity and freedom.

First, in many ways, Alcott is painfully honest about female emotions, most notably anger, and the sometimes impulsive behaviors that arise from such strong iterations of feeling. She provides space for deep anger in *Little Women*, and recognizes its inherent nuances. However, this assessment is somewhat contested among literary scholars, with the true heat of the debate centered around this quote, in which Marmee tells Jo, "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years or so" (Alcott 79). Alcott's portrayal of anger has been perceived as a false bifurcation of female rage, as it "fails to suggest a middle way between a destructive expression of anger and a life of painful repression" (Fite 439). One could believe Marmee to be suffocating under the weight of unexpressed rage, and there are indeed multiple points in the book at which Marmee appears overcome by anger she resolutely refuses to express.

However, I prefer the interpretation that "Marmee's confession about her anger empowers Jo by normalizing her rage. Her fiery temper is no longer a mark of freakishness, shame, or loneliness, but an emblem of resemblance to her beloved mother that strengthens her ability to bear the burden of rage" (Fite 439). Far from pushing a hollow polarity onto her suffering daughter, Marmee's candor allows a glimpse of the psyche of a human woman within the profoundly difficult circumstances of raising four children alone during the Civil War. This

honesty pushes back against the false bifurcation of female rage that the cult of domesticity historically enforced. In this polarizing dynamic, women were required to repress anger and eventually conquer it as part of a self-improvement arc, and so become the sentimental ideal of womanhood. In other words, the successful woman became a beneficent domestic presence and the guardian of all moral purity in the household. Otherwise, women gave themselves entirely up to the anger and became almost monstrous, sometimes referred to as the loathed “madwoman in the attic,” a useful moniker popularized by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

Marmee, on the other hand, is transparent about her anger and yet still depicted as a woman, not as a monster or wicked woman. She is an indisputably good person, a devoted wife and mother, a devout Christian, and she also happens to actively wrestle with anger every day of her life. None of these characteristics is presented as mutually exclusive, as they so often were in other domestic novels. While continuous self-improvement is encouraged by Marmee, including when it comes to her own struggle with anger, the process is always spoken of as a life-long endeavor.

Importantly, anger is not treated with such grace simply because it is an internal struggle that is always conquered before it does any damage. Tempers do not exist within a conceptual vacuum in the novel, and they sometimes pose very real consequences. For example, Jo has very little patience for her sister Amy, who constantly wants to follow along on all of Jo’s adventures. When Jo, Meg, and Laurie plan a trip to the local theater for a special outing, Amy harasses her sister for an invite until Jo angrily snaps at her. Amy, in possession of a healthy temper of her own, is so hurt by this thorny exchange that she purposefully incinerates a book of Jo’s hand-written fairy stories. This is a truly tragic loss for Jo, for she “had worked over them patiently, putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print...she had

just copied them with great care, and had destroyed the old manuscript, so that Amy's bonfire had consumed the loving work of several years" (Alcott 68). Anger can be incredibly destructive, and yet it is addressed with compassion as a flaw that can be worked upon and improved, not as a sign of inherent Calvinist depravity and wickedness. Each sister is deeply ashamed of her behavior, and both find it in their hearts to forgive the other after the fact.

Indeed, all of the March sisters could be said to be grievously flawed. Amy is selfish, Meg is vain and materialistic, and Beth is bashful to the point of being effectively agoraphobic. And none of the sisters could be said to complete the perfect self-development arc demanded by the genre, in which one's "bosom enemy" is neatly conquered by the final chapter. These are lifelong flaws, an inevitable consequence of imperfect humanity, and are not suitably exorcised before the sisters move on into adulthood and motherhood—and that is okay. The three sisters who survive into adulthood are all eventually happily married, and all are able to bear children for whom they lovingly care. They are not required to achieve ultimate self-mastery before they are allowed to become true adults and domestic matrons, because Alcott did not believe that ultimate self-mastery could truly be grasped.

Alcott is also notably feminist in her portrayal of women in the workforce throughout the novel. Far from unsuitable or unladylike, she presents work as a positive force for health and happiness for both girls *and* adult women. Marmee encourages her daughters towards the beginning of the novel that, "Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone; it keeps us from ennui and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion" (Alcott 117-118). Importantly, this encouragement of a hearty work ethic does not wane as the girls grow older. The encouragement of a strong

Protestant work ethic in children is not surprising, as “the necessity of hard work was a central message of children’s books and schoolbooks...[there was] a conviction that social order and social morality depended on individual character and that the chief badge of character was work” (Kaestle 82-83). Devoted obedience and commitment to study were seen as the highest virtues of literary childhood within the domestic genre. These values were exemplified by Finley’s *Elsie Dinsmore* series, in which Elsie’s dogged and pious devotion to her studies is credited as what allows her to “become beloved by her family, enjoy incredible wealth, later marry and begin a family of her own” (Amico, “What Would Elsie Do?”, 101). However, this encouragement of work ethic only pertained to Elsie’s childhood, so that she could retire as the blissful wife and mother she so longed to be. The books culminate with Elsie’s marriage, and there is no indication of her ever going on to have a career.

Marmee, however, instills a healthy respect for work in her daughters even as the girls grow into adults. Additionally, when Marmee speaks so glowingly of work, she means all respectable employment, domestic or otherwise. This equitable perspective does not falter as her children become young women, counteracting the prevailing notions of the “domestic ideal, which celebrated the home as a counterweight to the harshness of modernization” (Dawson 114). To speak against this sentiment was no small feat, as it was well-established in society long before *Little Women*’s publication. Its roots can be traced back to the “Revolutionary era...[where] an ideal of ‘separate spheres’ marked the domestic sphere as a feminine refuge from and corrective to the capitalist marketplace” (Fitzpatrick 28). The workforce was seen as a cold, rigorous, and ruthless environment, both dangerous and unsuitable for the feminine presence. Instead, women were relegated to the rosy sanctity of the home, where they evidently were expected to find respite from hard labor and stress unfitting for their gentler constitutions.

Not only was this feminine commitment to the home considered the proper course to follow, but “eventually, this ‘separation of spheres’ implied a bifurcation of morality by gender, and virtue came to be a notion almost exclusively associated with feminine self-denial” (Fitzpatrick 28-29). A virtuous woman gave herself up for her family and her home, while simultaneously enjoying a seemingly bucolic existence far from the maddening and masculine crowd.

Alcott uses *Little Women* to present a different perspective on work. For starters, each March sister is encouraged to have her own vision of what she hopes for in life from the time that she is little. Meg dreams of a beautiful house with a loving husband and children, Beth cannot fathom a life more lovely than the one she already has at home with her parents, Amy humbly desires to be “the best artist in the whole world,” and Jo’s practical desire is to have a “stable full of Arabian steeds, 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” (Alcott 128). The girls’ hopes and aspirations are very different, yet they all encourage each other’s dreams, regarding none of the potential future paths as inferior.

As a working woman herself, Alcott also gave her characters free rein to pursue employment outside of the safe confines of the home as they got older. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Work*, she presents working women as hardy and sympathetic individuals, who “moderately endowed with talents, earnest and truehearted, are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves” (Alcott, *Work*, 1). This kindly description pertains to three of the four March sisters. Meg and Jo, being the oldest of the girls, very sincerely wish to contribute to the family finances as young women:

When Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend, the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least. Believing that they could not begin too early to cultivate energy, industry, and independence, their parents consented, and both fell to work with the hearty good-will which, in spite of all obstacles, is sure to succeed at last. Margaret found a place as nursery governess, and felt rich with her small salary. [...] Jo happened to suit Aunt March, who was lame, and needed an active person to wait upon her. [...] The training she received at Aunt March's was just what she needed; and the thought that she was doing something to support herself made her happy in spite of the perpetual "Josy-phene!" (Alcott 36-38)

Alcott speaks very kindly of the girls' imperfect efforts. However, far from an idyllic depiction, the novel is relentless about the unrelenting stresses and exhaustion of work itself. In this manner Alcott agrees with the cult of domesticity's belief that the workforce is turbulent and harsh, fraught with physical and moral pitfalls. Where she diverges is her belief and illustration that women can excel despite these deprivations, even if women do have to learn some lessons the hard way.

Meg relishes the financial benefits of employment but happily forsakes her laborious governess job when she gets married halfway through the novel, finding herself untenably frazzled by attempts to nanny six energetic and somewhat mean-spirited children. Jo, however, is deeply inspired to continue caring for her family financially as an adult, albeit in a way that she enjoys more than acting as caretaker for her crochety aunt. She writes private stories for years,

dreaming of an impressive career as an author, but is too timid to submit her works to publication. After the lucky sighting of a sensationalist story in a magazine, Jo takes to writing her own harrowing tales of murder and intrigue, novelettes that Alcott herself loved to pen and fondly referred to as her “blood-and-thunder tales.” After a childhood spent writing fairy stories while sequestered in the family attic, Jo finally finds success on a public literary stage.

Jo delights in her dramas’ publications after so many years of attempts, mostly because the sales prove to be an economic boon for her beloved family. With the first check, she is able to send a still-weakened Beth and worried Marmee to the seaside for a few months’ respite. She begins to feel that she is “a power in the house, for by the magic of a pen, her ‘rubbish’ turned into comforts for them all,” as she supplies everything from groceries to furniture repairs (Alcott 241-242). Her rich imagination, diligent work ethic, and generous spirit are duly celebrated by the novel, noting that while “wealth is certainly a most desirable thing...poverty has its sunny side, and one of the sweet uses of adversity is the genuine satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand, and to the inspiration of necessity, we owe half the wise, beautiful, and useful blessings of the world” (Alcott 242). This analysis is a tender recognition of a determined girl who has known the horrors of family far away at war and the lingering anxiety of persistent poverty, and desires more than anything else that she might make the hard road they walk slightly easier. The joy of writing and positive feedback on her work also lifts Jo’s spirits and gives her a sense of purpose, as she finds that “after years of effort it was so pleasant that she had learned to do something, though it was only to write a sensation story” (Alcott 241). Jo, who is exceptionally hard on herself throughout the novel, is able to discover some internal harmony with her new career, and a sense of both competence and power.

However, true to the novel's honesty about work, Jo eventually encounters trouble. She starts to encounter pangs of concern about the actual content of her sensation stories when she hears Professor Bhaer's criticism of the larger genre, as her respected coworker states that he would rather give children gunpowder to play with than such gory, troubling stories. She is dismayed, and feels that she has been given new eyes to view her own work, ultimately deciding that "they are trash, and will soon be worse trash if I keep on, for each is more sensational than the last...I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people for the sake of money. I know it's so, for I can't read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it..." (Alcott 318) This authorial pivot has been condemned by some scholars as overly pious and restrictive, to the point of suggesting that it was Alcott's "punishment of Jo's inner demons," a sharp rap on the knuckles for loosening morals in the name of money and fame (Blackford 4).

However, what Alcott actually writes about the situation seems to contradict this grim assessment. Alcott is concerned before Jo herself is, but not that Jo is writing incendiary pieces or leading souls astray with her words—Alcott is concerned for Jo herself. To capture material for her thrilling stories and supplement her own meager knowledge of the sordid parts of society, Jo browses crime reports in newspapers and studies ancient tragedies. Alcott worriedly notes, "She thought that she was prospering finely...[but] she was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us" (Alcott 313). This assessment is not the statement of an author condemning her character for moral wrongdoing. Rather, it is an expression of protective maternal concern for the young who do not always understand the weight of their own actions, and are prematurely burdening themselves



with the horrible realities of the world. Childish innocence is a brief gift, and Alcott seems to wish for Jo to hold onto it as long as she can.

Also worth considering, it was not Jo's writing career that was questionable in Alcott's eyes—it was the specific kind of content that she was writing. The proceeds from her initial exciting stories were used for profound good for those Jo most loved. It was only when Jo's stories began to further devolve that Jo's conscience weighs her down and quenches her ambition. This decision also does not spell the end of Jo's writing career, just a personal decision to take a significant break.

Similarly, Amy is allowed to strike out in an attempt at a career of her own. She is a passionate artist, and talented across many mediums, and also has a great desire to become a true gentlewoman and belle of society. Her family encourages both desires, so much so that she is given leave to travel with her great-aunt to Europe for two or three years, to study and develop her craft. Sadly, her artistic career does not last long, as she humbly declares in Rome that “talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try anymore” (Alcott 361). However, this choice to change course is entirely Amy's own; she has all of the necessary tools, support, and resources at her disposal for a lifelong attempt at her dream, and ultimately declines. Instead, she becomes a lady of society and a philanthropist, as well as a wife and mother.

However, Amy does not forsake her love of art completely. At the end of the novel she concludes, “My castle [in the air] is very different from what I had planned, but I would not alter it...I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty” (Alcott 438). Like Jo's struggle with writing, Amy's decision reminds readers that “women continually faced a significant personal obligation to affirm their interests and plans

while learning to exist within the confines of society,” and that it often struck an imperfect balance (May 23). For both sisters, the obstacle to success is not that they are working women, but the tenuous nature of an artistic career. Ultimately, it is a combination of both the workforce and domesticity that provides both security and lasting happiness. Neither is depicted as inferior, and neither must be wholly sacrificed for the sake of the other.

Alcott’s healthy respect for working women does not stop at the doorstep of the home, however. Both Meg and Beth decide to become homemakers, one through marriage and the other by contentedly remaining at home with Mr. and Mrs. March. Alcott’s portrayal is still notably rebellious, however, because she does not shy away from the fact that women are still flawed and vulnerable within the comforts of their own home. Beth loves to be home more than anything, considering it a safe harbor from a world she finds to be big and frightening. However, even she confesses to her sisters that she believes “washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world,” as it makes her hands too stiff to practice piano, her personal passion (Alcott 4). Meg has idyllic dreams of what her home life will be like after she marries, but is quickly disillusioned by the lived reality of being domestic head of her household. She puts far too much pressure on herself and fusses over domestic chores to the point that she is “too tired, sometimes, even to smile” (Alcott 245). This anxiety only increases when she has children, and Marmee feels compelled to step in. She ultimately concludes that Meg has far too much on her plate and decides to send Hannah, her own domestic servant, to provide assistance while the children are young.

In addition, Marmee counsels Meg: “Do not shut yourself up in a bandbox just because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world’s work, for it all affects you and yours” (Alcott 350). Marmee, an experienced

homemaker, knows just how extensive the care of a household was, and how the lauded haven could swiftly become an overwhelming trap. Coupled with her respect for domestic work, she encourages fresh air and engagement in the wider community, so that her daughter is not constantly doing domestic labor. This depiction of domestic labor is far from the rosy perception provided by the cult of domesticity, and gives dignity to the true weight and importance of women's work in the home.

Alcott also gives her female characters agency to choose their marriage partners. *Little Women* was radical in its "approach to marriage," a topic typically avoided by literature marketed to children and young adults, and even more so in its stress of the "importance of egalitarian relationships between husbands and wives" (Shealy 366). This ideal was featured little among the novel's immediate literary predecessors, such as *The Wide, Wide World*, which "promoted submissiveness to men," and the *Elsie Dinmore* series, in which the main character's marriage is described as "not an equal partnership" (Finley). However, this theme of egalitarianism is unsurprising in *Little Women* as it is visible in Alcott's earlier works, in which she explores the "concept of marriage as partnership" (Shealy 369). Alcott had a long literary history of being unafraid to cross the conventional boundaries of domestic fiction, such as with her novel *Moods*. Rather than the typically rosy depictions of marital harmony common in domestic fiction, the novel openly portrays the potential consequences of both going into marriage unprepared and failing to exercise wisdom in selecting a spouse. It also is unafraid to shed light on how such impulses can leave the protagonist trapped in a marriage devoid of passion or true intimacy. This same critical eye is present in her short story "The Lady and the Woman," in which Alcott suggests that women "let their own intellect guide them in relationships" (369).

Alcott's literary history dovetails with that of her personal life, spotlighting how they are complementary. Alcott wrote *Moods* as a cautionary tale, largely based on her own experiences of observing those around her who were confined to loveless marriages. However, the happier events in her novels related to romance were often rooted in her personal experience, as well. Her sister Anna married John Pratt in 1860, a marriage that paralleled the fictitious match between Meg March and John Brooke in *Little Women*. After John Pratt died in 1870, Alcott wrote in a letter to Anna that "[h]e did more to make us trust and respect men than any one I know" (Shealy). Through this personal anecdote of Alcott's, it appears that John's character evidently redeemed marriage for Alcott in some way, and made the prospect of a real-life partnership of equal footing more plausible in her sight. John's example laid the foundation for the inclusion of more democratic marriages in her many works. Marmee declares in *Little Women* that it is "better to be happy old maids than unhappy wives," insisting that remaining unmarried is better than being stuck in an unhappy union. Moreover, this conviction was strong enough that Alcott felt moved to write about it in a time when almost all American women married out of sheer necessity, even before the Civil War radically diminished the number of men of marriageable age.

This embrace of egalitarianism is reinforced by each of the marriages that takes place in *Little Women*, highlighting particular characteristics to support his point. First and foremost, Mr. and Mrs. March are depicted as having "equal say about the lives of their children," such as when they agree that Meg must wait until she is twenty years old to enter into an engagement with John Brooke. In a time when the home was seen as solely the woman's domain, Marmee states that "at home, [they] work together always," shouldering equal responsibility for the welfare of their children and their home life like true partners (Shealy 373). Similarly, Alcott

bluntly points out that each parent has their faults, and that this reality makes the presence of egalitarian partnership all the more important. Mrs. March struggles daily with anger over her family's poverty, and Mr. March helps her combat it through his own patience and calm temperament. Mr. March has a tendency to be absent-minded, idealistic, and pedantic, and Marmee helps to ground him to daily life. In this way, they "help each other with their own personal faults so that they work together for the good of the family itself" (373).

This line of thought is continued with Mr and Mrs. March's children, beginning with the marriage of Meg and John. In their union, there is a heavy emphasis on mutual helpfulness and husband and wife as equals. On the surface, their marriage seems quite conventional for the time, with Meg acting as homemaker and John the breadwinner. The true distinction between their marriage and the social norm lies in their daily behavior. Alcott spends several pages talking about the unfortunate phenomenon in which the moment a woman began to have children, she was "put on the shelf," a euphemism for losing the attention of both the social sphere and her husband, and was confined exclusively to the nursery. This unfortunate trend is strongly contrasted by Meg and John's relationship. Marmee encourages Meg to take an active interest in her husband's work, and to also allow her husband to actively contribute to the raising of their children. Meg follows her advice, and in this way, Alcott "encourages married women to extend their sphere and advises husbands to enter into the home and nursery" (Shealy 374). In doing so, she encourages marriages to stand on equal footing and form an equal partnership.

Amy and Laurie break marital norms like Meg and John, albeit in a different way. While readers shared a desire that Jo would be the one to end up with Laurie, Alcott refused to honor their wishes, warning them that when it comes to marriage, "love [for one] another is not sufficient reason for them to marry unless they are fitted to be and to do all that this sacred

relation requires...temperaments should harmonize, tastes and aims be not too different” (Shealy 3). In personality, Jo and Laurie are far too similar in their fiery tempers, yet want drastically different lifestyles—Jo desires simplicity and peace in which to write, while Laurie longs for high society and a life of grandeur. Amy, on the other hand, feels well-suited to Fred Vaughn in every way, except for the simple fact that she is not in love with him. She and Laurie, however, end up together because they are not only complimentary in character, but because they are also well-matched in “their commitment to philanthropy...[and] openness, honesty, and support” (Shealy 375-376). Their union in purpose makes for a strong team, an “egalitarian relationship...[with] each plying an oar and steering their boat, which ‘glides smoothly through the water’” (376).

The strongest instance of egalitarianism in *Little Women*, however, is evident in the story’s final marriage of Jo and Professor Bhaer. First, genre custom would have had Jo marry Laurie, her childhood friend who matured into a devoted suitor. Such a match was a much beloved trope, and deeply desired by Alcott’s readers. After dozens of letters urging Alcott to marry the two characters, Alcott wrote this scathing entry in her journal: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only aim and end of a woman’s life...I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone” (Myerson and Shealy). In the book, she points to Jo and Laurie’s respective tempers, and how their marriage would be one of constant conflict. She has Jo refuse Laurie’s proposal and travel to New York City. There, Jo meets Professor Bhaer; a much older, traditionally unattractive theologian, flying in the face of genre convention.

However, the match between Jo and Professor Bhaer is wonderfully healthy. They have common values, with a shared “interest in educational reform, in new ideas, and in practical philanthropy” (Shealy 376). The match has been critiqued, as Jo makes the decision to pause her

writing career in favor of running a school with her husband. However, both form an “equal partnership” through mutual sacrifice, with Jo releasing her dream of a full-time career as an author, and Bhaer surrendering his dream of teaching out West. Both compromise in favor of opening a school for boys, together. Arguably, this shared vocation makes their marriage the most obviously egalitarian of all of the unions in *Little Women*, as “instead of portraying wife and husband occupying two different spheres—a public one for the man and a private one for the woman—Alcott suggests the two reside in the same sphere” (Shealy 377). The characters stand on common ground in which both realize that they are happier and more content than they would have been living out their individual dreams alone. Much like Amy and Laurie’s match, theirs emphasized the importance of common passions and values in marriage to its readers.

Another interesting aspect that Alcott utilizes in the novel is that of a motherly voice in both daily life and religion. Mr. March is absent from the beginning of the novel, as he is actively serving in the Union Army. Therefore, the dominant voice of authority in how the sisters approach and understand religion is Marmee’s, a notable departure from genre convention. As previously mentioned, due to the genre’s historical framing, much of the religion present in domestic novels was overtly masculine and traditionally Calvinist. Domestic literature typically encouraged girls towards diligent, pious obedience of God and His commandments and self-control, the highest virtues a woman could possess. The Calvinist value of predestination contributed to the perception that all events in one’s life, including its trials and tribulations, were established from the beginning by God. Thus, all troubles were to be faced with a stiff upper lip befitting an obedient follower that trusted in God’s plan. For example, at the very beginning of Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, the protagonist Ellen is about to be separated from her mother. Her mother is quite ill, and is told by her doctor that if she does not take

advantage of her husband's work trip to move abroad and experience a change of climate, she will not survive. Ellen is understandably distraught at the impending separation, and her mother counsels her, "Remember, my darling, who it is that brings this sorrow upon us—though we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel..." (Warner). The focus is consistently on honoring God as sovereign ruler and author of all events in one's life, including the most painful ones. This perspective on obedience dovetails with how the genre mandated that children treat their parents, exemplified by Elsie Dinsmore's exclamation to her father, "I love you all the better for never letting me have my own way, but always making me obey and keep to rules" (Finley). God and human fathers were the utmost authority figures, and the key to their love was unquestioning respect for their mandates.

Alcott writes a warmer, more intimate perspective of God and parents in *Little Women*. She does not reject the notion of God's authority or worthiness of honor, the importance of self-control, nor of a good parent's right to respect from their children. However, through the voice of Marmee, she depicts God as warmly maternal. After Jo allows Amy to fall through the ice and narrowly saves her life, she goes to Marmee, distraught and utterly convinced of her own evilness. Marmee disabuses her of this notion, and tells her that God's love "can never tire or change, can never be taken from you...believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother" (Alcott 73). Rather than just a sovereign father to honor, God is also seen as as safe and gentle as the girls' human mother.

Finally, *Little Women* breaks the genre constraints of domestic fiction by overtly humanizing female death. In domestic literature, death was a double-edged sword; women typically either died as angels or whores. The way to ensure one's health and prosperity was to



subscribe to the domestic ideal of womanhood to the perfect degree. On one hand, “excessive docility and otherwise perfect behavior often mark[ed] a character as too good to live,” and so died as angels in the house (Campbell 120). On the other edge of the sword, female characters who fell beneath the genre’s standard met death as an avenging angel, the sure punishment for depraved women who strayed from the narrow, marked path.

For example, in *The Coquette*, protagonist Eliza Wharton famously meets an exceedingly tragic end. Blithe and willful, she is doggedly pursued by a career womanizer, Peter Sanford, who is apathetic to the fact that he is cruelly betraying his own wife at home. When he successfully seduces her, she falls pregnant. Her letter to her mother is suitably devastating, intended to carefully drive home the weight of her moral failure in the unforgiving eyes of the genre: “The various emotions of shame, and remorse, penitence and regret, which torture and distract my guilty breast, exceed description. Yes, madam, your Eliza has fallen; fallen, indeed! She has become the victim of her own indiscretion, and of the intrigue and artifice of a designing libertine, who is the husband of another! She is polluted, and no more worthy of her parentage!” (Foster) Rather than a very young, disillusioned woman who needs to be guided through a tumultuous and emotionally devastating experience, Eliza paints herself as a jezebel.

Peter Sanford himself agrees with her moral estimation, despite being its sole cause. The implicit judgment of a woman “allowing herself” to be preyed upon is evident in his disturbingly glowing appraisal of Eliza’s dear friend and confidant, Julia: “Now there’s a girl, Charles, I should never attempt to seduce; yet she is a most alluring object, I assure you. But the dignity of her manners forbid all assaults upon her virtue. Why, the very expression of her eye, blasts in the bud, every thought, derogatory to her honor; and tells you plainly, that the first insinuation of the kind, would be punished by with eternal banishment and displeasure!” (Foster) In a twisted,

roundabout way, Sanford's insinuation is that Eliza's own lack of character and virtue opened herself to his predatory behavior, rather than her simply suffering through the age-old tale of abused innocence.

Beth March represents a departure from this cruel convention. Though depicted as undeniably flawed, she is ironically the March sister who comes closest to truly achieving the genre-honored status as "angel in the house." She is docile and sweet, endlessly patient, an expert in domestic skills, loves being home very deeply, and is utterly devoted to her parents and sisters. She is also quite altruistic and kind, with an empathetic heart. It is easy to see where this generosity of spirit comes from: her mother is devoted to a near-desitute German family living near the Marches in Massachusetts, and she regularly brings them food and supplies to help sustain them in their poverty. However, towards the middle of the novel, Mrs. March is called to Mr. March's bedside in a hospital in Washington D.C., as he has been wounded while serving as a chaplain in the Union Army. In her absence, Beth worries deeply over the sisters' collective lack of attention to this poor family, the Hummels, benignly neglecting their mother's explicit instructions. When they sheepishly dodge her urgings, citing other work to do, shy Beth goes herself. When she arrives at the Hummel house, she finds multiple children very ill with scarlet fever. Beth unfortunately contracts the disease, and though she survives, her heart is permanently weakened. She passes away five years later at nineteen, after a prolonged period of suffering.

Both Eliza and Beth meet tragic, premature ends. However, their depiction is very different. Eliza, however sincerely she is mourned as a sweet woman gone astray, is duly punished by the all-seeing eye of the genre. She wandered from the morally pure, straightlaced path set for her, and she suffered mightily for it. The implication is clear—had she remained

chaste, she would not have died in childbirth and all would be well. Instead, she dies in disgrace, fallen into depravity.

Beth, in contrast, never actually commits any offense. Her years of suffering and the tragedy of her dying so young are all brought about by an act of pure-hearted altruism. Death is not implemented as her moral punishment. Beth is, in many ways, the best of the sisters, and yet she still dies. As she dies neither disgraced nor fallen, it has been argued that Beth meets an early end because she is doomed from the start as one of the staple characters written to be “too good to live.” She helps around the house as long as she has suitable strength to do so, and she is unfailingly sweet to others. She is actually quite similar to Alice, the doomed, saintly sister figure in *The Wide, Wide World*. Just as Beth is Jo’s special confidante and comfort, Alice is protagonist Ellen’s surrogate sister who provides precious kindness and advice. However, there is a critical distinction that I believe separates Beth from Alice. Alice is “not sorry [to die], except for others” (Warner 429). Alice cements her angelic selflessness and detachment from material cares even as she is wasting away, the true mark of a doomed angel in the house. They are never as deeply attached to earth as other characters, making the final transition more natural and painless.

Many attribute this same sainted patience and self-sacrifice to Beth March, who dearly wishes that her death not “trouble anyone” (Alcott 332). However, Beth distinguishes herself from Alice and her fellow angels by desperately wanting to live. She is confident in the Protestant faith that permeates the novel and so is not afraid of death itself, or where her soul may reside after its earthly departure; she simply loves her family, and loves life, and does not wish to be separated from either. Unlike Alice, she is incredibly sorry to die so terribly young, leaving all that is familiar and adored. She confesses to Jo on a winter beach that she does not

think she is going to survive due to her fever-weakened heart with the plaintive statement, “I never wanted to go away, and the hard part now is leaving you all. I’m not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven” (Alcott 384). She is a wonderful person who is not dying of any genre sins committed, and yet she is deeply attached to life and the living, rather an angelic presence floating above mortal turmoil and strife. She is not an angel, she is not a whore—she is nineteen, and she is understandably daunted by the biggest transition that every human eventually faces.

*Little Women* was an enormous success, to an extent that surprised Alcott, who privately referred to the Marches as “the pathetic family.” The first published volume sold thousands of copies, and her editor urged her to write a second volume. She did so, assuming that its popularity would pale in comparison to that of the first volume. She was wrong, for over seventeen thousand copies were sold, and “suddenly, Alcott was richer than she could have imagined, as her book flooded into every bookstore and home in New England” (Cheever 206). It is likely the kindness towards female characters that made the novel so transformative for so many readers, as Alcott happily noted in her journal that there was “much interest in my little women who seem to find friends by their truth to life” (Myerson and Shealy).

Ultimately, I believe that the greatest kindness Alcott provided in her novel was to herself. Alcott wrote *Little Women* semi-autobiographically, with the four March sisters based on the four Alcott sisters, and Marmee and Mr. March heavily glamorized and softened versions of her own complex parents. Most of Alcott’s life was poverty-stricken, uncertain, and difficult, and she was profoundly reluctant to write *Little Women*, as she had little patience for girls’ fiction of the time. She consented, however, because “lively, simple books are very much needed for girls.” The novel ultimately provided her a venue to sneakily present some of her most cherished

feminist beliefs, and “allowed herself to create, instead of her real family, the family she had always dreamed of having” (Cheever 202). The March family is famously based on the Alcott family, but the sharp edges are carefully sanded down in the novel. Her sisters’ real lives were shadowed by poverty, grief, and instability.

For example, May Alcott, Amy March’s real life inspiration, died from complications post-childbirth after her first baby, and yet Amy has two healthy children and lives to raise them both. The March parents are wise, loving, and dedicated to working on their own faults, very unlike the unreliable bully of a father and unrepentant hothead of a mother that Alcott grew up with in her own life. I do believe that Beth was written as a eulogy for Elizabeth Alcott, who died of illness very early in life, largely unnoticed and unsung. And Louisa, Jo, was dying slowly of mercury poisoning while she wrote *Little Women*. During her stint as a nurse for the Union Army, she fell ill and was treated with mercury, and it killed her slowly for the rest of her life. In the book, Jo is full of vitality, running with the strength and swiftness of a deer. In real life, Louisa faced a litany of mercury-exposure-related health complications, and her feet were often so swollen that she could not walk. So yes, Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women* for all women, but she also wrote the novel for her women. She wrote them a kinder story than the one that they were given.

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