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"I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy": Jo March's deconstruction of "The Cult of True Womanhood" and her quest for self-determination in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century America is marked by the so-called "Doctrine of Separate Spheres", which largely affects women. Indeed, according to such widespread belief, not only are dames obliged to stay at home, carrying out their household chores and taking care of their children's education, but they also owe submission and respect to their husbands, on whom they are financially dependent. Faced with this oppressive situation, **Louisa May Alcott gives life to Jo March**, the tomboyish protagonist of *Little Women*, with whom she intends to demonstrate that, even when questioning gender stereotypes, **it is still possible to conquer the realm of femininity and feel fulfilled**. Having said that, this current study aims to analyse not only the well-known "Cult of True Womanhood" and the role that "The Angel of the House", its resultant figure, was supposed to accomplish, but also the way in which the literary heroine of the American classic departs from it. In addition, the investigation covers **motherhood, marriage and employment** in detail, topics that lead Jo March to self-government and, with it, to the construction of a new type of *fin-de-siècle* lady already concerned with the acquisition of fundamental rights: "**The Real Woman**".

Keywords: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, nineteenth-century Victorian America literature, The Cult of True Womanhood, questioning gender stereotypes, women's social roles, femininity, womanhood, independence.

0. INTRODUCTION

0.1. Context and objectives

> "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as China-aster. It's bad enough to be a girl, any way, when I like boys' games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a bo*y*, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman." (8)[1]

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, apart from having been categorised as "children literature" – for its instruction of certain moral values to the young girls– **constitutes, unequivocally, a pioneering feminist manifesto of its times**, being thus one of the most studied works in world literature. Having grown up in an era in which the acquisition of women's rights was a cause worth fighting for, **Alcott**, through the writing of the above-mentioned novel, **proved that, despite the oppressing conditions of the moment, it was plausible for the female sex to achieve a considerable amount of self-independence**, a fundamental right that, until then, only men had benefited from.

In nineteenth-century America, ladies were tyrannized by "**The Cult of True Womanhood**". Such worship "prescribed a female role bound by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Smith-Rosenberg 13). Effectively, living imprisoned by the division of gender spheres – the public and the private one - **women not only had to keep themselves confined to their homes, fulfilling their domestic duties and taking care of their children's education, but also had to be docile to their husbands**, on whom they were economically dependent.

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[1] All page references in the text (cited parenthetically) are to Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. Vintage Classics, 2018.

Not following these patriarchal standards not only was practically considered a sin, but it also denoted "unfemininity", an adjective usually associated to the **great minds**.

One of the best examples is, undoubtedly, our author, **Louisa May Alcott**. Having lived in a time in which the male sex ruled every aspect of the daily life, the daughter of the transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott knew that **working as a writer would not be an easy task**. However, determined to contribute to the family's economy, she soon began to **cultivate**, always using the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, the literary genre of **sensational novels**. Frowned upon by society due to her approach of taboo subjects, she was advised to write works of a much more sentimental nature, capable of **educating readers and**, with it, **the community**. Even if, at first, she did not find such a suggestion appealing - since it went against her personal values - she ended up imbuing her novels with **her feminist spirit**, inviting thus dames to **be themselves and to find their own way to happiness** regardless of Victorian social norms.

This is precisely the case of **Jo March**, the protagonist of *Little Women*, who, in order to become a great writer, must undergo a journey of **personal development**, paralleled to "The Pilgrim's Progress". Depicted as a tomboyish girl, for her rejection of etiquette and ladylike manners, the second daughter of the March family has won its readers' hearts for **being brave enough to challenge the existing gender and social stereotypes,** corroborating thus that women could "take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things" (Welter 174).

Nevertheless, according to several studies, **the heroine of *Little Women* is far from making an appearance as an absolute women's right advocate.** In reality, it seems that her longing for reaching a self-proclamation stage is thwarted as soon as she marries professor Bhaer and enters both domesticity and motherhood. These critical analyses, along with women's desire to **begin to govern their own lives** are, indeed,

what have encouraged me to write my dissertation on Louisa May Alcott's classic and, most particularly, on the rebellious character of her *alter ego*. Therefore, with the elaboration of this assignment, my principal objective is to verify whether Jo March managed to **put an end**, once and for all, **to the injustices to which her gender was subjected**, leading me to wonder **to what extend she can be considered a feminist.**

My provisional thesis statement is that the main character's attitude of disobedience did not result in the surrender of her freedom but rather in **the accomplishment of her true self, being able to cope with both family life and literary career.** Nonetheless, with the aim of providing a satisfactory answer to my research question, I have accurately examined Louisa May's Alcott's background and carried out a close reading of the **two different novels** that constitute her masterpiece, *Little Women* and *Good Wives.* In fact, without the treatment of the latter, it would have been impossible to tackle the last section of my literary study. Similarly, it is as this point that I consider necessary to comment that, in order to facilitate the understanding of my investigation, **I have decided to head each of its parts with a quotation taken**, normally, **from one of the two books**. In this way, the audience, in reading them, will get a sort of guide to the topic that is going to be discussed.

Having said that, I have organised my paper in two parts: "**Challenging the Status Quo" and "The path to self-reliance: Broadening female sphere".** In the first one, **the historical context of the novelist's period** is going to be analysed so as to help readers to conceive the weightiness of "The Cult of True Womanhood". To do so, not only a **theoretical framework of such doctrine** will be given - focusing on both its **origins** and its **principles** - but I will also deal with **the revolutionary behaviour of Jo**, the most contentious one compared to that of her younger sister, Beth, the highest exponent of the figure of "The Angel of the House". In the second part, issues such as

marriage, motherhood or employment will be addressed, concentrating always on the emergence of **the "Real Woman"**, a modern female archetype who, together with the "New Woman", started to change patterns. Only thus one can finally come to comprehend **how standing up against an ideal is not an obstacle when it comes to gain access to the realm of femininity.**

0.2. Literature Review

From its publication in 1868, Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women*** **has marked an undoubted turning point in the history of Nineteenth-Century American literature**. Starring Jo March - a girl who, despite living imprisoned in a patriarchal society, is able to **surpass the stereotypes of her time** - the book in question has been classified, by many critics, as a **perfect declaration of Feminism**: "Through Jo, Alcott exemplifies her ideas about feminism fairly well. She provides a picture of a woman who cannot be only feminine but also strong and vocal. This imaginary of a strong, independent woman is what provides readers a connection to and a love for Alcott's timeless novel" (Bender 151). In contrast, reviewers such as Lavinia Russ or Hillary Kelly do not support this statement at all. For them, *Little Women*, especially its second part, should not be given as a Christmas present to the youngest girls of American households, since "it is obsessed with wifely duty – deferential to patriarchy and dismissive of female ambition of any variety other than the maternal" (Kelly 2018).

Taking into account both perspectives, it could be asserted thus that ***Little Women*** **has definitely been the object of endless debates**. In effect, although the vast majority of them are related to Women's Cause, a movement that "was in Louisa May Alcott's genes" (Stern 7), they are also originated due to the **subversive language** of the author, whose writings normally include contradicting messages: "The homes she depicts are both cosy and claustrophobic, the marriages companionate and perverse, and the March girls' dreams both fulfilled and depressingly renounced" (Blackwood 2018). Having said so, it is not difficult to comprehend why Ann B. Murphy asked herself: "Is *Little Women* adolescent, sentimental and repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become "little", domesticated and silent? Or is the novel subversive, matriarchal and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female

domesticity it purports to admire?" (1990, quoted in Grasso 188). By considering several aspects that play a significant role in *Little Women* – such as **Jo's nonconformity towards the conventional Victorian stereotypes, the institution of marriage or the pursuit of a professional career**- analysts attempt to reach a resolution to all these questions.

In the first place, with the objective of helping readers to make a proper understanding of the novel, it is interesting to examine the historical context in which *Little Women* took place, in this case, **Nineteenth Century America**. As Susan Rubinow Gorsky (1992) reminds us, back then, **a woman was supposed to be the queen of the house,** a place often seen, by men, as a castle (25). In it, while the husband ruled with total authority, **the wife was forced not only to satisfy each and every need of her partner but also to keep the household in perfect order as well as to supervise the children's education.** To make matters worse, ladies were to be constantly shown as caring, domestic, self-sacrificing and, most importantly, as submissive individuals, a series of adjectives that led Virginia Woolf to want to put an end to the notion of *The Angel of the House*. Even if prior to the British author, Alcott is **definitely of the same mind:** for her, "the Angel of the House, a demon internalized from the social ideal, must be killed before women can achieve identity, independence, and the chance to fulfil their talents" (Rubinow 25). It is precisely to accomplish this mission that the daughter of the transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott decides to give birth to **Jo March**, one of the most beloved literary heroines of all times.

In spite of the assumption suggested by Fetterley: "With no legitimate function in life, women will not be tolerated unless they are agreeable" (376), the second of the March sisters demonstrates that **even when having an unceasing strong and rebellious temper, individuals can also be accepted and loved by their entourage**.

In reality, the unruly and disobedient Jo – as she has always been described - **proves herself to be**, from the very beginning, **a person who loves her family unconditionally.** Far from being eager to please a possible husband – an idea of the moment that she definitely rejects- she prefers to consecrate her life to the welfare of her relatives, notably of her enchanting Beth, for whom she is willing to give up her biggest passion, writing. In this way, readers can appreciate how **the protagonist of *Little Women* is not repudiated at all by her lineage**, but on the contrary: she is admired for being **a real subject**, that is to say, **somebody with natural human conflicts and imperfections** completely away from the figure of the "perfect woman" that the male chauvinist nation had always venerated.

Her paradoxical character is not the only aspect in which our heroine deviates from Victorian stereotypes. Unfortunately, **Jo March has been the target of many critics for her unfeminine manners and way of dressing**. As depicted in Quimby's study: "She wants to be the man of the family, not the little woman; she wants to be a soldier, not a seamstress; and she wants to be like Laurie, not have him" (1). In effect, she is a teenager who not only **enjoys being in company of the opposite sex** but **who is also fond of the social activities that only men are allowed to engage in**. In addition, contrasting with her older sister Meg, Josephine does not pay attention to the fashion patterns of the moment: for her, attending a social engagement wearing an elegant dress and gloves is just another senseless protocol of the time. For this reason, **having her hair cut or shortening her name so as to make it sound more masculine do not pose a challenge to the little woman in question**. Having said so, it could be alleged that by creating such a complex identity, "Alcott does not expect the audience to ignore gender but rather to look past the stereotypes that have confined the genders. Biological sex is

not what confines a person; society's gender expectations and stereotypes confine a person" (Bender 144).

Along these lines, what has generated a divergence of opinions when assessing Alcott's work is **the main character's final acceptance to get married**. In point of fact, as Bernstein has claimed: "Jo marries the older, more reserved "friend" from New York (…). In this act of marriage that banishes Jo from her "lonely spinsterhood", Alcott appears to abandon Jo as the "wilful child", seeming to contradict her view that marriage need not be the "only aim and end of a woman's life"" (11). Undeniably, being pressured by her readership – who protested against Jo's celibacy - **the American writer is obliged to find a partner to her heroine.** Nonetheless, letting herself be guided by the principles of Feminism, which sought to modify matrimonial laws, Alcott brings into existence the concept of a "**democratic home**", a term that implies full equality between both members of the couple. As a result, far from uniting the second daughter of Marmee with Laurie – as expected, principally, for his capacity of granting her economic stability - **the author finally resolves to do so with Professor Bhaer,** "a man who was hardworking, compassionate and moral rather than one who was merely wealthy or physically attractive" (Cogan 75). By this alliance, apart from espousing someone she really loves, Jo **can share her personal interests and aspirations as well as be treated not as a servant but as an egalitarian partner.** Only in this way, **our idol can proclaim her freedom**, since she is not only able to find her place in the private domain but also encouraged to conquer the public sphere.

On this matter, it should not be forgotten thus that **Jo tries to do her best so as to procure herself an employment**, a remunerative activity from which only men can benefit. To obtain it, **she has to face a great number of difficulties**, starting with the criticisms of the man who ends up being her husband, who actually suggests her to stop

writing her sensational stories, an act through which "she symbolically destroys her anger and independence" (Grasso 180). To worsen the situation, Alcott's *alter ego* has also been accused of giving up her job to dedicate herself to marital life. Nevertheless, as Rudin defends: "Her temporary desistance from writing is not the result of her marriage (…) but is rather due to the constraints she encounters when she writes and wishes to publish what she calls her "rubbish", a term that derives from the obligation to write commissioned stories that suit the readers' desires" (124). Therefore, by this temporary renunciation of her biggest dream, Alcott is, in fact, suggesting that **the machismo that reigned back then was incapable of accepting new writing styles and, with it, new ways of portraying society.** For this very reason, **Jo is determined to fight against widely accepted labels** – the ones of the "angel" and the "monster"- **whereby her male writer precursors have always framed women,** coming to show that the female gender has also, as Gilbert and Gubar have remarked, "her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity" (48).

In conclusion, after having analysed the selected literature, I conclude that ***Little Women,*** **certainly delves into feminist issues**. Despite the fact that "for most of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Alcott was neglected by academia- her children's fiction was deemed too insignificant and her few adult novels were recognized as only fair attempts at unrealized greatness" (Brook 1), the truth is that "Alcott's classic has seeped into generation of lives and helped shape the way we think about what it means to grow up, what it means to be female, and what it means to live a fulfilling life" (Rioux). In reality, thanks to its protagonist, Jo March, **the American writer perfectly evinces that**, even when living in a suffocating society, **harmonizing family and career while being blessed with a friendly marriage is completely possible.** Commencing thus a wonderful social change, the bestseller under study not only serves as a loudspeaker for

Feminism, but it also promotes the figure of the Real Woman who “seeks independence, individuality and a rich education” (Laire 97).

1. CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

1.1. Historical Context

> I am tired, year after year, of hearing such twaddle about sturdy oaks and clinging vines and man's chivalric protection of woman. Let woman find out her limitations, and if, as is so confidently asserted, nature has defined her sphere, she will be guided accordingly; but in heaven's name give her a chance! (Louisa May Alcott to Maria S. Porter, 1874, quoted in Elbert 1)

First of all, it is essential to take into account **Louisa May Alcott's historical background**, focusing, above all, on **the treatment that women received in Victorian America,** one of the most agitated periods of the country. Only in this manner will readers be able to comprehend why **Jo March**, the heroine of *Little Women*, appears to **have given voice**, like her creator, **to the values proclaimed by the Feminist Movement of her time**.

"Welcome home, dear! Can I get you something to drink or would you like your pipe?" (Bonventre 4). Without a doubt, **this sentence perfectly exemplifies the well-known concept of "The Angel of the House", the prototype of woman that every American man wanted to have by his side.** Notwithstanding the fact that this idealisation is supposed to have played a significant role during the 1800s, it should be mentioned that the ideas denoted by such a notion "have been present in literature from the Middle-Ages onwards, with the Divine Virgin, symbolising the eternal type of female purity" (Laire 69). Unfortunately, as years went by, this chaste, timid and modest image of the female gender became more and more cherished, reaching almost its peak in the **American Revolution**, an era marked by the War of Independence. "If America's existence, growth and success as a democratic nation and an example to the rest of the world were dependent on the virtue and contributions of its citizens" (Hill 50), it was conceivable that ladies, even if only indirectly, wanted to contribute to the

prosperity of their homeland. This is how the notion of "**Republican Motherhood**" was born. According to Linda Kerber, "Motherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of government, a device that ensures social control in the gentlest possible way" (200). In fact, during the 18th century, after having attended some of the first female academies, **women started to assume that their function of major significance was to educate,** in the most proper style, both their sons and their daughters. For the former, such schooling would allow him to **grow into a virtuous and astute inhabitant capable of ruling his country smoothly**; for the latter, it meant **following the mother's example as teacher and moral guide** in order to be able to apply it, at the right time, with her own children.

This perception of women eventually paved the way to what has become recognised as the ideology of the "**separate spheres**" and, with it, to the "**Cult of True Womanhood**", a doctrine that was deeply studied, in 1966, by the historian Barbara Welter and with which we will deal in the next section. It is important to bear in mind that this belief system of two distinct domains had also been promoted by the **economic and social changes** that took place in nineteenth-century America. The fact is that during this period - which was characterised not only by **the arrival of immigrants** but also by **the Industrial Revolution** and its consequent **development of cities** - males were given the opportunity to spend a greater quantity of time away from home, as they started working in either factories or offices. Therefore, inhabiting such a hectic public field in a way that they had never done before, **men could justify their progressive disinterest as to conventional religious responsibilities were concerned**.

For a relatively young country, these innovations prompted **instability and incertitude**, reason why there was an urgent need to find a balance; a base on which to settle down. American families finally found it in **women** and, most especially, **in the**

tasks they were supposed to carry on within their patriarchal community. As previously mentioned, it was at this time when the figure of "**The Angel of the House" commenced to be rapidly promoted among the young girls of the nation**, who assimilated it as an excellent model to follow. Indeed, as reported by manuals of conduct and etiquette, journals, magazines or other types of publications -such as *The Young Lady's book* – a Real Woman's "profession embraces the care and nursing of the body in the critical periods of infancy and sickness, the training of the human mind in the most impressible period of childhood, the instruction and control of servants, and most of the government and economies of the family state" (Beecher 14). In other words, **Victorian dames were to be constantly glorified**, for on them depended not only **the appropriate preservation of society, home and religion**, a discipline that prevented them from interfering with the urban sphere, but also **the welfare of both her children and husbands**, to whom they were completely devoted.

In addition to all these obligations, which necessarily forced the female gender to sacrifice their own interests and passions for those of her loved ones, women, back then, were required to have "a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind" (Welter 159). Since they were financially subjected to their partner's income and emotionally to their social approval, **ladies were dispossessed of any kind of freedom.** As the contemporary chronicler has impeccably pointed out, an exemplary wife must be, above all, **a docile individual**, that is to say, **someone easy to govern.** In reality, by convincing them that it was within the confines of the home where she was to find her true place, **men ensured that their spouses could not have access to work environment,** an activity that would grant them the possibility of supporting themselves, a right to be avoided at all costs. Nonetheless, **even those who were able to hold a job** – for instance, as factory employees – **could never gain a**

certain degree of independence because, as Smith-Rosenberg has highlighted "[l]ow wages, the absence of upward mobility, depressing and unhealthy working conditions, all made marriage an attractive survival strategy for working-class women" (13). Following these oppressive impositions, it is worth mentioning that **neither girls nor their mothers were authorised to consume certain types of literature**. Along these lines, novels that might pervert their spirits or lead them to commit acts that could endanger the security of United States, had to be kept away from them. Otherwise, they would be deviating from the principles instilled by "The Angel of the House" prototype. In this respect, **women who dedicated themselves to authorship or to primary-school teaching were rejected as well** since, according to males, by carrying out such professions they could badly influence their audiences' minds.

Knowing, then, the requisites that women had to honour, it can be surmised that, within the American Victorian period, **society's opinion was determining**. As if their domestic burdens were not strict enough, **ladies started to be considered as mere objects of consumption**. In effect, living in an environment that was increasingly being represented by **capitalism**, the female gender was demanded to show off both her husband's labour success and wealth through her **refined attire**. As it could be noted in the magazines of the time, **the upper and middle-class dames of the 19th century were obliged to follow a fashion pattern with the objective of ensuring gentlemen contemplate them as beautiful and perfect individuals.** In this way, their style was represented, apart from bonnets and top hats, by corsets, bustles and petticoats, complements that made up the distinguished bell-shaped dresses. Given this information, little by little, **a new image came into existence**, the one of the "**Lady of Leisure**". As defined by Frances B. Cogan:

> She carefully dedicates her life to ladylike consumption of luxury goods and practices devotions at the shine of fashion and beauty, the former in whose

> service she distorts her rib cage and internal organs with corsets, the latter for which she becomes a "delicate flower" and a passive parasite. This, according to historians and critics, is the quintessential ideal of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class women. (3)

So, although this type of clothing was **extremely uncomfortable** and had even induced many females to **develop eating disorders and other physical maladies,** men did not seem to care about their health, but on the contrary, "women's illnesses were praised, especially if their illness designated them as delicate and "interesting" (Saxton, 1977, quoted in Bender 146). That is why not putting such wardrobe on definitely meant that "the girls will be looked down on and considered inferior" (Bender 143). Finally, as readers would deduce, the world of "etiquette" was related to **proper standards of behaviours** too. From this perspective, **ladies' idiosyncrasy and personality were two of society's focal points** because not being able to follow the principles prescribed by the existing manuals of good manners – such as **being always loving, kind and respectful** to others- implied **the outright rejection** of the general public: "The woman who rebels (…) cannot be tolerated: she must die or become a social outcast" (Legates 31). Hence, Marmee's perpetual advice to her daughter Jo whenever she cannot control her fervid and rebellious temperament.

After having analysed the living conditions of women in Victorian America – which, because of social discrimination and their status of non-citizens, did not affect **immigrants and Africans –** it is not surprising that, over the course of the century, **the first feminist movements began to emerge**. Effectively, taking advantage of the fact that part of society was mobilising to end slavery, notorious personalities such as **Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Lucretia Mott prepared** "to resist (…) the attempt to keep them in their "woman's sphere" (Zinn 124). Consequently, with the objective of both improving their fellow's position and obtaining an ensemble of civil, social, political and religious rights, **The Seneca Falls Convention was held on July**

19-20, 1848. This meeting, which was attended by approximately 300 people – including the foremost abolitionist Frederick Douglass-, concluded with **the signing of the Declaration of Sentiments**, a document based on the Declaration of Independence (1776) that attempted to **achieve, for the first time, gender parity**, as it stated: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; dial among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Zinn 71) .

1.2. The Cult of True Womanhood

Being aware of the historical context in which *Little Women* was written, it is now necessary to assess **one of the most important dogmas of the time** that, sadly, affected women in almost every aspect of their daily lives. In order to analyse it, **different examples from Louisa May Alcott's book will be used**, which will certainly help readers to understand, more effectively, not only **the principles established by such thinking** but also the reason **why Jo March finally chooses to defy it**.

As explained in the previous section, **nineteenth-century American civilisation revolved around the philosophy of the "separate spheres"**, according to which each gender had to develop their respective functions in completely opposite spaces, the public and the private one. This rigid imagery gave way to **"The Cult of "True Womanhood"**, a doctrine defined by the historian Barbara Welter in 1966. Also called "The Cult of Domesticity", it stated "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours and society" (Welter 152). These traits "could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. (…) With them she was promised happiness and power" (Welter 152). Indeed, apart from these four qualities, **the bourgeois class dames were regarded as "sovereigns**" over their "palaces" – these being their homes- as they were in control not only of the **proper maintenance of their realms** but also of the **schooling of their descendants**, who were expected to follow their parents' triumphs.

Concentrating on the characteristics required by the above-named cult, let us begin to examine the first one: "**piety**". Associated to **religiousness**, this notion established, by some means, **the metaphorical relationship between the female gender and Christ as far as redemption was concerned**. In effect, back then, it was

thought that women, who had been chosen by God, had as their main purpose to **illuminate and rectify – through the spiritual flame of their bosoms- the world**, a place full of sinners and vices. Such an election, per contra, entailed bad effects for madams, for **if they desired to obtain their final salvation, they were condemned to suffer**. This information would justify the incessant tender and passionate character of ladies towards their male counterparts, even when they treat them badly. In addition, it cannot be forgotten that **religion**, unlike other disciplines linked to the area of work, **encouraged the confinement of both mothers and daughters in their circle, the domestic one.** Although *Little Women* is not a chef d'oeuvre celebrated by its theological content – which is practically non-existent- **the concept of the "Pilgrim Progress"** must be cited. Giving part of its name to the first chapter of the book, "Playing Pilgrims", this **Christian allegory invites humankind to behave appropriately during its existence** in order to be able to gain admission, after death, to Heaven, the kingdom of the Almighty. This is what **Marmee** - the mother of Jo March and, simultaneously, the character who acts as a moral counsellor- **instils to her teenage girls,** to whom she advises that despite the difficulties that may come their way, they should always **make an effort to be good to others:**

> "Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City". (16)

Regarding **purity**, it ought to be noted that, if not the first, **it was one of the most valuable and respected conditions by the general male public of the time**. As Rousseau already asserted in his book *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*: "If the timidity, chasteness and modesty which are proper to [women] are social conventions, it is in society's interest that women acquire these qualities" (Rousseau, 1758, quoted in LeGates 39). In reality, not being innocent or chaste were

enough arguments to belittle the female gender, whose members would be immediately treated as **despicable individuals**. An exquisite illustration of the provided data could be found in the image of "**the Fallen Angel**" who, as its name indicates, was far from reaching the ideal of "True Womanhood". Unlike her antithesis - the "Angel of the House" -, the aforementioned figure, who was often identified with the Devil, **was not sufficiently strong and prudent to repress her sexual urges or impulses**. As a consequence, with the aim of preventing ladies from becoming in such a deplorable being, suggestions were given in the literature of the moment, such as the one of Eliza Farrar who recommended in her manual *The Young Lady's Friend*: "Sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another's person's (1837, quoted in Welter 155). Along these lines, it is patent that the wedding night was the most awaited event for man, as it was the perfect occasion to check whether his wife **had been able to keep – or not - her most precious possession: her virginity.** This honour is concealed in Louisa May Alcott's masterpiece, for the audience constantly witnesses **Marmee's interest in both the institution of matrimony and the adequate pick of the right husband on the part of her daughters**:

> "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience". (125)

Nonetheless, living such a glorious experience with a suitable partner called for **the goodness of the women as well,** a moral rectitude that was to be applied to all aspects of their daily lives.

It is the union between two people that, albeit implicitly, results in the third virtue designated by Welter: **submissiveness**, a *conditio sine qua non* the Victorian dames could not exist or even be taken seriously. As many literary critics have avowed,

"a woman's real life began when she entered into marriage, an indissoluble relationship that made her invisible under the law" (Rubinow 19). As a matter of fact, after getting married, **madams were denied not only any personal belongings or properties they might have** – which, from then on, would be administered by the man of the house - but most importantly, **their own freedom**. The truth is that, for the nineteenth-century macho American community, "a whole person could not exist**"** (Blackford, 2011, quoted in Bender 144) "because [it] would not accept or recognize that there is more to people than their gender-identified roles" (Bender 144). On account of that, women were led to believe – to a certain degree, due to the magazines' illustrations- that **their only goal in life**, from birth, **was to encounter someone with whom to be unified and, if necessary, to feel protected by**, as if they were infants. To make matters worse, the term "freedom", apart from making reference to the privation of civil rights, intends to highlight **the loss of self-expression**. For "taken" ladies, **proclaiming either their opinions or feelings** – especially, if they departed from the precepts of "the Cult of True Womanhood"- **was totally forbidden**. Without a doubt, for the American male, "the desirable partner for a successful, peaceful married life is a woman of well-balanced temperament who is known among her associates as one not given to what is often called fits of temper" (Richter 205). Thus, even if their husbands were cruel or aggressive, it was far better to remain silent and try to control oneself than to challenge their authority. For all these reasons, in *Little Women***, Marmee decides to lecture the rebellious Jo whenever she gets angry or cannot manage her rage**. As she herself explains, when Mrs. March was young, she used to have the same disposition as her daughter's. Nevertheless, out of respect for her husband, whom she considered a **superior moral being**, she had to learn to tame herself:

> "He never loses patience, - never doubts or complains, - but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully, that one is ashamed to do otherwise before him.

> He helped and comforted me and showed me that I must try to practise all the virtues I would have my little girls possess, for I was their example". (103)

Ultimately, it is advisable to ponder over **domesticity**, a pillar so significant that it has even given its name to the cult that is being depicted. As it has been remarked on other occasions, **Victorian women are responsible for making the household** –seen as a refuge from the hostile outside world – a private place that "served as (…) the centre of harmony, peace, stability, morality and, increasingly, religion" (Hill 55). Actually, as Kindelán reveals in her article "The Cult of True Womanhood", **the home was the centre of the community insofar as it embodied the fundamental American culture and principles**. Thus, being the female gender the moral guide of the nation, **it was essential to train them in their role as wives and mothers** (150). To this end, and, in particular, to prevent their husbands, brothers or even sons from leaving, they not only **had to pay more attention to the needs of their loved ones than to their own,** but **they were also forced to take care of their "kingdom" by the correct and meticulous execution of the domestic tasks**, which included from cooking to making beds or knitting. As Bonventre alleges: "The picture of the young housewife wearing her pearls and cashmere sweater while cleaning or preparing dinner is an ideal that one might imagine has permeated American society for ages" (5). **Domestication was also closely related to motherhood** and to each and every one of the duties that went with this state. In this way, **a good mother was somebody who was worried about the protection, caring and feeding of her children as well as their education**. In fact, disengaging herself from the latter function signified preventing their descendants from growing up to be the best citizens of the country, something her male compatriots would never forgive her for: "The distinctive feature of the family is self-sacrificing labor of the stronger and wiser members to raise the weaker and more ignorant to equal advantages. The father undergoes toil and self-denial to provide a home and then the

mother becomes a self-sacrificing labourer to train its inmates" (Beecher 18). Taking now our object of attention as an example, in chapter 11, "Experiments", Jo March and her three other sisters, despite complaining about how hard and boring it is to be constantly taking responsibility for the house, **soon find out that not doing so has irreparable repercussions for themselves**. Moreover, thanks to their mother's words, the four girls come to understand that **a perfect residence can only be created when working as a team**:

> "I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing their share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work, you got on pretty well, though I don't think you were very happy or amiable; so I thought as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when every one thinks only of herself. 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 or forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all?" (151)

In short, "**The Cult of True Womanhood" restricted women within the domestic sphere,** forcing them to play strict social roles that **deprived them,** doubtlessly, **of any type of independence**. Such a worship, notwithstanding, **led Victorian dames to join forces,** as the above paragraph demonstrates, **a union that, throughout the years, allowed them to exercise their supposed incorruptible power** outside the home as well. Consequently, after becoming aware of their harsh living conditions, "in Beth, one sees the exhaustion of vitality in the effort to live as a little woman" (Fetterley 380), **ladies**, including Louisa May Alcott herself – who felt that there was a "world elsewhere" (Elbert 4) - **took to the streets in pursuit of gender equality,** challenging thus nineteenth-century norms and stereotypes. As reported by Cogan, this is how **"The ideal of Real Womanhood" flourished:**

> The Ideal of Real womanhood offered American women a vision of themselves as biologically equal (rationally as well as emotionally) and in many cases markedly superior in intellect to what passed for male business sense, scholarship, and theological understanding. Moreover, The Ideal of Real womanhood demanded that the woman's duty to herself and her loved ones was

> not, as True Womanhood seems to suggest, to die, but rather to live; not to sacrifice herself, but to survive. (5)

As it will be analysed in "Jo March's deviance from Victorian Stereotypes", readers would be able to comprehend why the young protagonist of *Little Women* can be regarded as the **perfect representative of this new image.**

1.3 Jo March's deviance from Victorian stereotypes

> "What shall we do with that girl? She never ***will*** behave like a young lady" (197)

According to the information provided so far, ***Little Women*** **seems to perfectly defend the social conventions** that dominated nineteenth-century America. Indeed, it could be asserted that the aforementioned masterpiece intends to inculcate undeniable moral values to the country's youngest girls by exposing **the importance and benefits of becoming an "angel of the house"**. Nevertheless, as Brook notes, "few people realized that Louisa May Alcott was a strong advocate of women's rights. Most consign her to the domestic realm because her popular fiction celebrates home and family, but she worked throughout her life to give women the political and social equality that men denied them" (8). Effectively, thanks to its author's subversive writing, the novel in question **challenges Victorian gender stereotypes.** To do so, **Alcott gives birth to Jo March**, a teenager who, disapproving the preconceived roles that females have to adopt in her community, decides to **rebel against them**.

Considered by many critics to be Alcott's own *alter ego* – especially for her strong temperament and refusal to be loved - the heroine of the work under study does not belong to the group of "the typical passive women, belles or damsels in distress in need of rescuing" (Laire 95). On the contrary: she is courageous enough to survive on her own. To enhance such self-sufficiency, the writer, right from the beginning, makes Jo embrace the idea of becoming the **"man of the house**", an adoption that is far from upsetting her. In fact, having her father departed for the American Civil War, **the second daughter of Marmee is prompt to do everything in her power to supply the needs of her loved ones**:

> "I'm the man of the family now papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone". (10)

This performance is accompanied by **a physical description** which, despite being fully masculine, **marks Jo's true essence:** "Round shoulder had Jo, big hands and feet. A fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (9). In reality, all these data can be interpreted, according to Beverly, as "a gesture of defiance and self-assertion as well as a measure of her capacity for financial independence" (1989, quoted in Ying 8), a gain to be obtained by entering the public sphere, as will be later further developed.

Although the appropriation of the man of the house's functions includes Jo's **negligence as far as her look and domestic responsibilities are concerned**, Alcott does not hesitate to make use of it so as to manifest "the injustices found in daily life" (Graña 11). Along these lines, the American author **bestows her character with manly traits and attitudes that clearly contradict the feminine ideals of her time**. Among them, her **rebellious and stubborn temperament, her literary ambition and, above all, her rejection of getting married** - an act that would prevent her from becoming a complete independent being - should all be highlighted. Nonetheless, before analysing these three aspects in depth, it is recommended to focus on **the name of the girl**, which already reveals a lot of information about her virile personality. Virtually, the heroine of *Little Women* is never called "Miss March" or "Josephine", but simply **"Jo", which at first glance, does not appear to be a typical lady's appellation.** In turn, readers do not know her best friend by his real identity, Theodore, but rather by "Teddy" or even "Laurie", a diminutive more appropriate to the opposite sex. This inversion, however, is no coincidence: if the creator of this literary classic chooses to nickname the members of this puerile couple this way, she does it with the aim of "removing gender expectations based on the characters' names" (Bender 141). Only thus can the audience

come to understand that a person must be defined by his/her nature, and not because of a label. Therefore, this information supports **Jo's abnegation to be recognized by her cognomen**, a term that sounds too tender for her, who repudiates etiquettes:

> "How is your cat, Miss March? Asked the boy, trying to look sober while his black eyes shone with fun.
> "Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo", returned the young lady.
> "I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie"
> "Laurie Laurence, what an odd name".
> "My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it (…).
> "I hate my name too, so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo instead of Josephine". (37-38)

Being aware thus of the restrictions imposed on her sex, **Jo March feels the necessity to mirror men.** Knowing that this is the only option she has in order to "win" her longed-for liberty, our protagonist quickly exposes **her more masculine side**, **behaving wholly different from her three other sisters**, who appear to welcome the doctrine of the separate spheres. The greatest proof of this is Beth, "who can be analysed as the emblematic Angel woman" (Meyer-Frazier, 2006, quoted in Laire 69). In this way, having assumed her role to perfection, the little musician possesses a unique aspiration in life: **distancing herself from the outside world with the objective of taking care of both her loved ones and the proper functioning of the household**, as she herself asserts in the chapter "Castles in the Air":

> "Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well and be together, nothing else". (183)

This sweet and docile attitude is further emphasized in **her relationship with Jo**, whom she adores. In effect, even if emotionally contrary, this uncorrupted creature always finds the right words to **give comfort to her older sister when she needs it the most**, demonstrating, one more time, that it is convenient to sacrifice her personal problems – such as shyness and agoraphobia- for **those of others**. Furthermore, apart from rejoicing in cooking and cleaning, **Beth seems to be eager to enter the realm of**

motherhood, as she treats her dolls as if they were her own daughters. Notwithstanding, being the situation too good to be true, Louisa May Alcott decides to put an end to it. After visiting, several times, her humble neighbours to offer them food and take care of their babies, **our angel of the house contracts Scarlet fever, a disease that makes her pass away at the age of only eighteen.** Therefore, since Beth represents the exemplary damsel, "does her death symbolize the end of that typical female stereotype? (…) Perhaps she was not trying to use Beth to change society's minds against that role but rather desired that society could be more open-minded about women's roles." (Bender 145-146)

To this end, the writer creates the character of Josephine March who, through her actions, evidences that **a woman can find her place and feel fulfilled even outside the home**. Unlike Beth, **Jo is clearly a free soul**. Unwilling to submit to anyone, **the protagonist of the novel in question acts so much based on her own principles** that she ends up being remembered, by the readers, for **her difficult spirit**. To start with, although it is true that this girl is characterized by her revolutionary behaviour, **she also stands out for her fury**, a feeling that, if innate, is impossible to control. As it has already been studied, nineteenth-century norms dictated that women, faithful servants of God, should not only be obedient but also able to **repress resentment, revenge or hatred towards their equals** if they desire to keep their feminine attributes. However, as reflected in "Jo meets Apollyon" – angel of war and destruction-, the heroine of *Little Women* cannot help but **give vent to her rage** after learning that Amy, her little sister, has burned a book she was working on:

> (…) Jo's hot temper mastered her, and she shook Amy till her teeth chattered in her head, crying, in a passion of grief and anger, -
> "You wicked girl, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never forgive you as long as I live."
> Meg flew to rescue Amy, and Beth to pacify Jo, but Jo was quite beside herself. (97)

As reported by Barbara Welter, "fire could be used as a symbol of Jo's anger or disagreement with particular actions (…). This symbol is also present when Jo unintentionally burns her dress, which may suggest that she is passionately against the stereotypical dressing code women were confined in at the time" (15). As discussed in previous sections, ladies, in 19th century, had to dress not only **luxuriously** – becoming thus objects of consumption - but also **demurely** in order to maintain their purity. Consequently, so as to meet the latter requirement, it was crucial to attend major events -such as balls- **wearing gloves**, a piece of clothing that avoided direct contact with gentlemen. Still, defiant as she is, **Jo is not worried at all to attend Laurie's party without one of them**:

> "Mine are spoiled with lemonade, and I can't get any new ones, so I shall have to go without", who never troubled herself much about dress.
> "You must have gloves, or I won't go", cried Meg decidedly. "Gloves are important than anything else. You can't dance without them, and if you don't I should be mortified". (33)

This concept of "but, dear me, let us be elegant or die" (35) is enhanced a few chapters later, in which Jo, wanting to help her mother economically, **determines to get rid of her most precious quality, her long hair, an act far removed from what "being a lady" signifies.** This masculinisation allows for tackling one of the most debated issues as far as female gender is concerned: **employment**. Back then, the ideal accommodation for women, namely, the place where they could really feel happy and accomplished, was **the home,** interpreting thus that **any kind of access to the world of work – including writing- was not an option for them**. According to Gilbert and Gubar "if a woman would want to write, she would not face her predecessors, as there are none, but she would have to challenge the entire patriarchal literary tradition" (1984, quoted in Laire 31). Sadly, this one (the patriarchal tradition) had not only dedicated itself to **excluding dames from the possibility of becoming writers** but had also

created a **concrete image** of them that was almost impossible to erase: that of "**the Angel of the House**". As a result, any intellectual lady, as was the case of Margaret Fuller – one of Alcott's major influences- would be stigmatized as **unfeminine**, "since a woman's "heart" was valued over her "mind", the mind being associated with the masculine" (Cruea 189). Yet, in spite of the criticisms to which she may fall victim, Jo, because of her **defiant and independent nature**, "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**"** (Ying 14):

> "I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, -something heroic or wonderful - that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is *my* favourite dream". (183)

Despite the fact that **making it happen (**becoming a writer and earn a lot of money) **is not an easy endeavour** since, due to her gender, she will have to make her way, **she never gives up**. Supported by her family, **the protagonist of *Little Women* is authorised to travel to New York**, where she has been offered the chance to work as a governess. Not being able to refuse such a fascinating job, Jo is also resolute that it is in this city where she would be able to publish her books, a conviction that leads her to visit the publishing house, The **Weekly Volcano**. It is at this point that her **deviation from Victorian patterns begins** as, apart from being brave enough to go to a place fully dominated by men, she starts composing **sensational novels**, a literary genre which, because of its content – full of crime and murder- is unsuitable for ladies. For this reason, Professor Bhaer points out:

> "I do not like to think that good young girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with that this bad trash" (444).

So, the literary heroine, although having left aside her passion for writing for a while, **will take it up sumptuously**. In reality, she will learn that to help her loved ones financially and, in particular, to gain her own independence, **it is better to be firm to one's values than to be driven by the demands of society.**

Finally, the **institution of marriage** also deserves special attention. As readers may imagine, in Victorian America, **it was inconceivable** – and sometimes even regarded as a "sin"- **for a young lady not to tie the knot**. In fact, for them to be able to exercise, to perfection, their role as "The Angel of the House", it was essential to have a husband capable of venerating their tasks within the domestic realm. Nonetheless, the main objective of Jo March is **not to find her better half**, as such a union is far from bringing her bliss and peace of mind. It is exactly for this reason – and, in particular, for being so similar to each other – that she cannot accept Laurie's proposal, whom she can only consider as **her best friend**:

> "Then, you don't care for him in the way it is evident he begins to care for you?" and Mrs. March looked anxious as she put the question.
> "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".
> "I'm glad of that, Jo!"
> "Why, please?"
> "Because, dear I don't think you are suited to one another. (…) I fear you would both rebel if you were mated for life. You are too much alike, and too fond of freedom, not to mention hot tempers and strong wills, to get on happily together, in a relation which needs infinite patience and forbearance, as well as love". (414)

In addition, for Alcott's *alter ego*, a woman's final purpose is not to become a wife, but to be a **free being**, that is to say, **someone capable of self-sufficiency; of being jubilant even in her solitude**. Although it is true that she feels great pain in declining the proposal, she would feel worse denying herself the opportunity to live her own existence. As opposed to her sister Amy, who aspires to encounter a high-class man with whom to share a dream life, Jo **prefers to fulfil herself by becoming a**

memorable writer, even if such a decision costs her the accusations of antifeminism or even lesbianism:

> "I don't believe I shall ever marry; I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man". (456)

In short, constrained to becoming the indefectible housewives, espouses and mothers, **the vast majority of nineteenth-century American ladies are prohibited from entering the public sphere; from making themselves heard.** It is precisely with the objective of denouncing the social inequities that clearly violate some of female gender's fundamental rights that Louisa May Alcott conceives *Little Women*, a book which, through the figure of its heroine, Jo March, gets to **glorify women's personal identity**.

2. THE PATH TO SELF-RELIANCE: BROADENING FEMALE SPHERE

2.1. Womanhood and marriage

> "I *am* lonely, and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said "Yes", not because I love him any more, but because I care more to be loved, than when he went away". (546)

Although no reference has been made before, it appears that ***Little Women*** **perfectly reflects Louisa May Alcott's personal experiences during her childhood and adolescence**. From a very early age, Alcott was, like Jo March, an unusual girl: not only did she have a strong temperament, but she never accepted the labels and stereotypes of her time. Moreover, due to her father's influence, the transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott, and to the companies she frequented, **Louisa seemed to be interested in Women's Cause,** which is why "reform in general and feminist reform in particular had fired her imagination" (Stern 151). Having said so, **it is difficult to comprehend**, in the above quotation, **the protagonist's longing to find somebody with whom to unite in marriage and feel fond**, a topic that has created enormous controversy among critics: "We are not surprised that she herself did not marry, but then why did she have to force a husband on her most Louisa-like character?" (Acocella)

Even though it is true that, from the very beginning, **the author advocates for the independence of the female gender**, it should not be forgotten that the novel under study, in addition to belonging to the category of children's literature, **constitutes, *per se*, a "bildungsroman"**. In fact, as Boyd Rioux has indicated in her book *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The story of Little Women and why it still matters*, in Alcott's bestseller "what appears to be a sweet, light story of four girls growing up is also very much about how hard it was (and is) to come of age in a culture that prizes a woman's appearance over her substance". For this reason, despite the fact that **Jo's image and mental**

development have been questioned on several occasions – as by the end of the novel it seems that the young protagonist has succumbed to the chauvinist norms of her society – **it is precisely her revolution against the world – and against her own faults - that helps her to establish herself as an independent woman.** In reality, if she had never made the effort to understand herself, she would, by no means, become a jubilant mother and spouse: "Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much anxiety, and a perpetual racket. She enjoyed it heartily and found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world." (608)

Such magnificent growth as person is possible, mostly, thanks to her mother, **Marmee**, who instil in her four daughters "a deeper sense of family love and the blessings to be gained from lives of earnest effort, mutual sacrifice and high aims" (Alcott et al. 192). While commonly criticised – especially for her ambiguous and contradictory language- **one cannot deny Mrs. March's role as spiritual guide.** Just as Abigail May, Louisa May Alcott's biological mother, did with the novelist, Margaret – Marmee's real identity- is always ready to give **wise advice** to her descendants so that **they may live a future life of joy and success.** Among these valuable lessons, **proper behaviour and maternity** occupy a significant place, since they are two of the fundamental pillars of womanhood. As already stated in previous pages, if a lady yearns for respectability and acceptance within her community, she is envisioned to ""fulfil herself in the "instinctive" arts of child rearing, domestic pursuits and spiritual comfort" (Cogan 68). In this sense, Marmee accomplishes entirely her duty as, from the beginning of the drama, **Jo**, in spite of her unruly personality, **is attentive to her family**, for whom she looks out. Acting as an excellent progenitor – and thus an Ideal Woman – she is able to give up her biggest ambition – becoming a famous writer – to devote herself to the care not only of her little sister Beth, who is on the verge of death,

but also of the household, a sphere she never feels as her own. As if this information was not enough, **her motherly nature can also be appreciated in her relationship with Rob and Teddy,** the "two little lads of her own [that] came to increase her happiness" (608) and, notably, **in her opening of a school for forlorn children**, where she does both helping them making life jolly and instructing them according to her own morals, as Marmee once had done with herself:

> "Yes, Jo, I think your harvest will be a good one", began Mrs March, frightening away a big black cricket, that was staring Teddy out of countenance.
> "Not half so good as yours, mother. Here it is, and we never can thank you enough for the patient sowing and reaping you have done", cried Jo, with the loving impetuosity which she never could outgrow". (614)

Only in this way, the protagonist of *Little Women* realizes that, despite having gone through hard moments in her adolescence, **the acceptance and the consequent improvement of her weaknesses** – something she would not have learned without her mother's help - **have accredited her part of her femininity.** Nonetheless, for Jo, womanhood is not only a term related to the adequate upbringing of the young but also **to her own independence**, a human right extremely complicated to obtain back then. It is at this moment that the other side of Marmee - the one that has always been under the gaze of literary reviewers - **starts to play a powerful role.** Unlike her contemporaries - the prototypical "Angels of the House"- **Marmee's education is based on feminist values**. Probably tired of the strict social and gender standards, this housewife transmits, albeit subtly, **principles and ideals that were far from being appropriate for the time**, the most prominent of which are those concerning **matrimony**. It is true that, generally, Margaret advises her daughters on **the pleasures that a holy union can bring them and, most importantly, about the importance of being selected by a marvellous partner**, as any mother worried about the welfare of her youngsters would do:

> "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience". (125)

However, and this is absolutely what has turned her into the target of criticism, **she also seems to invite them to remain single if they consider it necessary**, illustrating that a female's goal life is not to turn into a spouse:

> "Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands" said Mrs. March decidedly. (125-126)

Actually, Marmee's concept of a "good man" is completely different from that of any other lady of her class. For our figure, **marriage is not to be seen as an institution of convenience based on docility and submissiveness**, in which "a woman's social status and economic well-being depended on the man in her life, and, to a very large degree, her happiness (…) on his goodwill" (Robinow 2). On the contrary, according to Margaret, **wedding** – and, with it, all the possible conjugal problems that may arise, such as poverty-, **ought to help a dame to blossom; to become stronger**. For this very reason, **Jo and her sisters are encouraged to marry someone they really love; someone with whom they can get along and feel esteemed, regardless of his economic position**:

> "My dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid house, which are not homes because love is wanting. Money is a needed and precious thing, - and when well used, a noble thing -, but I never want to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace". (125)

This is how Louisa May Alcott gives birth to her well-known concept of **"egalitarian marriage"**. Frustrated by the demands of her feminine audience -who would not allow her literary heroine to destroy the myth that "a woman is nobody, a

wife is everything" (Cady Stanton, 1848, quoted in Zinn 122) - she was forced to look her a partner. Although the public expected Laurie to meet such a requirement, **the American writer decides to break down preconceptions of the ideal companion**, as stated in her personal letters and journals: "girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone" (Alcott et al. 201). Being a feminist supporter, Alcott is aware that "marriage represented the final domestication of the women" (Laire 45), a fact that would be strengthen if Jo ended up with her best friend. Effectively, as he belongs to the bourgeoisie, **the young girl would not have the opportunity to be free** because, apart from having to adapt to his luxurious lifestyle - which she abhors- she should have to be content to stay at home, carrying out her household chores. That is why **Alcott is determined to make the second of the March siblings to fall in love with Professor Bhaer**, a non-archetypical character that she meets while living in New York. Although this union has been disapproved by many of the members that support women's cause – since it is because of him that Jo abandons her dream of becoming a famous author – **this German man turns out to be a suitable suitor**. Comparing him to Laurie, the philosophy teacher is not only a **fully developed individual** - namely, somebody with a permanent job – but also **a respectable and honest one**. Likewise, **as well as sharing with the protagonist the same social status, he does not conform to the conventions of the time**, as besides being older and physically unattractive, "he presents a gender mixture of femininity and masculinity" (Rudin 129), reflected in his **motherly ability to be in charge of his two little nephews**.

> "We shall see. Haf you patience to wait a long time, Jo? I must go away and do my work alone. I must help my boys first, because, even for you, I may not break my word to Minna. Can you forgif that, and be happy while we hope and wait?" (601)

"In this act of marriage that banishes Jo from her "lonely spinsterhood", Alcott appears to abandon Jo as the "wilful child", seeming to contradict her view that marriage need not be the "only aim and end of a woman's life" (Bernstein 11). Nevertheless, if the novelist resolves to marry her *alter ego* to Professor Bhaer, it is because **he is Jo's adviser and companion**, being the one to whom she explains her personal problems. In addition to the existent confidence between them, it is known that both possess an interest towards education, an intellectual field that permit them to **feel satisfied and earn a living**. Be that as it may, it can be understood that in this affectionate liaison **neither partner submits to the authority of the other** – as it used to happen- but that **both of them complement, distributing tasks and responsibilities**:

> "I want to open a school for little lads – a good, happy, homelike school, with me to take care of them and Fritz to teach them" (603).

Therefore, treating as if they were just friends – instead of a couple- "Marmee promotes mental equality and the exchange of ideas in marriage, bringing together the traditionally female sphere of the home and the traditionally male sphere of the outside world" (Rivas 58). This the only way to **achieve mutual love** and, with it, a **legitimate and righteous matrimony as well as a democratic household:**

> "I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now, - for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go" (600).

In conclusion, it cannot be omitted that marriage – and indirectly motherhood- is one of the most important ingredients of the "bildungsroman". Indeed, this literary genre suggests that **such a bond is capital in the configuration of every woman's maturity**, being thus **considered as a fact of life**. Per contra, readers should remember that it can be assimilated from two opposite points of view: as an institution which

oppresses women, who "were valued and commended only to the extent that they served other and that they had identities only in relation to those others" (Hill 58), **and as a personal process through which female achieves parity, love, happiness and self-reliance.** Louisa May Alcott opts for the latter. For her, "Jo's non-feminine character and rebellious behaviour do not prevent her from displaying her aspiration to live the life of a happily married woman**"** (Ying 15), but quite the opposite: learning to deal with her shortcomings can also be a way to **find a person with whom she can feel valued and fulfilled in both private and public sphere**. As a result, as the titles of both stories suggest, by allowing the second March sister to go from being a Little Woman to becoming a Good Wife, "Louisa's intention was to grant Jo the perfect blend of maintaining her true self but also balancing that with femininity" (Bender 151), i.e., marital life and maternity:

> "I don't think I ever ought to call myself "Unlucky Jo" again, when my greatest wish has been so beautifully gratified". (611)

2.2. Employment

> "Why don't you write? That always used to make you happy" said her mother once, when the desponding fit over-shadowed Jo. "I've no heart to write, and if I had, nobody cares for my things". (543)

It is probable that this quotation **creates confusion** among *Little Women*'s readers. In fact, as has been discussed in our study, **Jo March**, since her adolescence, **has insisted on defending Women's Cause**, especially, due to **the tyrannical role played by nineteenth-century America chauvinist community over them**. As a result, the audience, used to the social struggle that characterized their literary heroine, may be disappointed to discover that she has finally **relinquished her independence as well as her dream of becoming a great writer.** Nonetheless, it should be noted that Louisa May Alcott "was not seeking to repress her female characters" (Bender 150), but on the contrary. Being aware of the existing abuse and discrimination towards her gender, the writer "emphasizes the empowerment of women specifically outside their home and presents their role as initiating social change" (Rudin 126). Such progress, however, is not only about **practising a healthy and equal marriage**, as stated in the previous section, but also about **access to the world of work**, a topic highly debated throughout history.

As can be imagined, for a dame, getting a job at that time was a dream that was almost unattainable. While it is true that some women, during the American Civil War, were employed as nurses or factory workers, **the vast majority was intended to be housewives.** Nevertheless, "critics have begun to illuminate the role of Alcott and her work in a mid-century world that extended changing possibilities for social mobility to women" (Foote 67). To do so, she does not hesitate to take as an example her *alter ego*, Jo, who, from an early age, **seems to have overstepped the boundaries of her home.**

Unlike her sisters, **who have not come into contact with the dangerous outside world,** Laurie's best friend is brave enough to face it as any real man of the house would do. In this way, and with the objective of **contributing to the family economy**, Jo goes to work, first of all, **at the service of her aunt March**, a wealthy and conservative woman for whom she must keep company in her large mansion. Secondly, after a while, the main character of *Little Women*, probably tired of her environment, decides to travel to New York so as to become **the governess of Mrs. Kirke's two little girls**, a family acquaintance. Although back then it was not typical for a young lady to travel alone, Marmee, as usual, respects her daughter's choice, who is immensely motivated, since such a travel would give her the opportunity to **leave the nest, something she has always wanted**:

> "I want something new. I feel restless and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning more than I am. I brood too much over my own small affairs, and need stirring up, so as I can be spared this winter, I'd like to hop a little way and try my wings". (413)

This trip, by the same token, implies that she starts to **win a place in some publisher house** of the city. As is already known from the first chapter of the book, **Jo develops an enormous interest in writing**. Like Louisa May Alcott, the literary heroine is encouraged by her family – principally by her mother – to **work as an author**, a profession that would both **provide her with a salary to help her loved ones and earn a certain reputation** that would certainly allow her to be remembered for generations to come. Only in this way **could she feel fulfilled**. Be that as it may, the protagonist of the *magnum opus* under study, in the course of time, realises that **making her dream come true is, by no means, an easy task**. As studied, the history of humankind and, most particularly, of women, has always been marked by the **authoritarianism** that men have constantly exercised over them. In fact, as *The Declaration of Sentiments* points out, "he has endeavoured, in every way that he could,

to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life" (1848, quoted in Zinn 123). This coercion, of course, does not exclude the **literary field**, in which **female writers** – such as Alcott herself – **have always been undervalued**. In truth, dominated by male publishers and critics, women have fallen victims to the so-called "Anxiety of Authorship", a term widely described by scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In short, when a lady decides to go into writing, she must not **struggle** to impose herself on her predecessors – non-existent then – but on men and, most particularly, **on the images they have given birth to in their works over the years: the ones of the angel and the monster**. Only by destroying or killing them, as Virginia Wolf proposed, could she begin to find her place and, with it, **her own identity**: **"**For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (Gilbert et al 17).

This is precisely Jo March's case. Even if she is accustomed to going against the principles imposed by her society, she must overcome a number of obstacles to **get hold of her own integrity**. Along these lines, the protagonist of *Little Women* eventually gets a job at the publishing house ***The Weekly Volcano*****, a name which, in itself, seems to evoke danger.** Initially, she visits the offices with the intention of divulging stories with a moral, i.e., stories capable of educating readers. Nonetheless, Mr. Dashwood, who ends up being her editor, claiming that "people want to be amused, not preached at" (435) compels her to cultivate a genre that, according to Victorian conventions, is not appropriate for girls to read. This is the **sensational novel which** - unlike the sentimental one, where "the ideals of familial affection, marital fidelity and female

chastity were celebrated" (Legates 24) – depicts, without reservation, **gothic events** such as **murder, crime or adultery**, among others. Despite the fact that with this type of publications, which she composes under anonymity, she commences to **earn a considerable amount of money -** a clear sign that the audience likes her work - **she is soon to be thwarted.** Virtually, even if it is a fact that by writing sensational fiction, she is able to provide for her sisters and mother as well as for herself, **the criticism received from Professor Bhaer** - her still colleague who sees no point in letting women read such savage content- **leads her to quit her job**:

> "They are trash, and will soon be worse trash if I go on, for each is more sensational than the last. I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money. I know it's so, for I can't read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it, and what should I do if they were seen at home or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them?"
> Jo turned hot at the bare idea, and stuffed the whole bundle into her stove, nearly setting the chimney afire with the blaze.
> "Yes, that's the best place for such inflammable nonsense. I'd better burn the house down, I suppose, than let other people blow themselves up with my gunpowder". (445-446)

Such an act is reinforced by the realization that her writings produced so far **violate the ethical principles and values that her mother has always instilled in her**, a fact that makes her ashamed of herself (hence the use of the word "rubbish" to refer to any of her written productions). Moreover, Jo is sick of having to adapt to the demands of the public, being thus **deprived of publishing works that really represent her**. Even if her abandonment of her greatest passion has been **disapproved by many critics** Grasso sees it as a proclamation of her autonomy, "by destroying her work, Jo was ultimately taking charge of her own fate and her writing career, as she realized that she desired her work to inspire goodness" (Bender 150). This longed-for rightness, however, is later achieved in the book, when the heroine of *Little Women* returns to her homeland in order to take care of her ill little sister, Beth. There, following Marmee's advice, **she takes up literature again, writing a book based on her own family and**

on the experiences they have lived together. After her father sent it to one of the most popular magazines of the area, Jo's work appears to be a masterpiece, since it is warmly welcomed by readers. Nonetheless, the second March sister is surprised by such success, as for her, there is nothing special about the writing, something her mother disagrees with:

> "There is truth in it, Jo – that's the secret; humour and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter; you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet; do your best, and grow as happy as we are in your success". (544)

The expression "now comes the sweet" can be closely linked to the last aspect to be discussed in this section which, notwithstanding the fact that it has also been a subject of debate, demonstrates that our heroine "has not succumbed to convention. Instead, she dominates her world" (Brook 17). As observed, after having gone through humiliating moments in which her talent has been mistrusted, especially when being in New York, Jo "chooses to suspend her writing efforts in order to refrain from cooperating with the existing establishment, and the alternative she offers is engaging in progressive education" (Rudin 125). In fact, Louisa May Alcott, through her classic, also intends to **criticise the educational system of nineteenth-century America**, based, once again, on **submission and strict obedience to rules**. For this reason, her *alter ego,* after having inherited her aunt March's mansion, **resolves to open her own school for children**. There, apart from educating the little ones with **her own ideology** and that of her husband, Professor Bhaer – something she should have done through her stories - she also worries about all those infants who are orphans or who live marginalised due to their race.

> "Before my Fritz came, I used to think how, when I'd made my fortune, and no one needed me at home, I'd hire a big house, and pick up some poor, forlorn little lads, who hadn't any mothers, and take care of them, and make life jolly for them before it was too late. I see so many going to ruin for want of help, at the right minute; I love so to do anything for them; I seem to feel their wants, and

> sympathize with their troubles; and oh, I should *so* like to be a mother to them". (603-604)

While "Jo appears to abandon her literary ambition to the raising and educating of boys" (Bernstein 2) Louisa May Alcott suggests that, at present, the best employment Jo can have is the one to be found **in the project she is about to undertake**. It is true that **she has, momentarily, abandoned writing**, but as the American author rightly said in a letter to a friend: ""Success" is just where I left it for though I have tried a dozen times I cannot get on with it, so must wait for inspiration" (Stern 217). Therefore, never giving up hope of resuming activities, for the time being, **the protagonist of *Little Women* seems to feel completely accomplished.** In fact, the creation of her educational centre will give her the opportunity not only to be surrounded by boys – which she has always been passionate about – and baby-sit them but also to work as a teacher, **combining thus, almost perfectly, both the private and the public domains**. As Madelon Bedell indicates:

> The story of a family of 4 girls seen in their crucial adolescent years [Little Women] has survived the successive waves of both American feminism and antifeminism, able in some mysterious ways to assume a protective coloration that blends with the prevailing ideological winds, emerging fresh, whole – and different – for the next generation of women. (1983, quoted in Grasso 177)

This is how the female sphere broadens, as **the home, for the first time, changes from being a fortress** with which to protect oneself from external threats – the male world -**to a place in which the "angel of the house" can also be an entrepreneur**. This innovation will lead, certainly, to a social change in which the birth of the "**New Woman**" will mark a turning point in twentieth century femininity.

3.3 Redefining gender roles

> "Louisa really was an early feminist. It's underappreciated how she was able to [use] her success to make her really a megaphone for feminist issues". (Geraldine Brooks, 2009, quoted in Bender 150)

As evinced throughout this study, **women in nineteenth-century America have always been described on the basis of ideals infused by a capitalist and chauvinist community**. Exasperated with the injustices and prejudices against their gender, in mid-nineteenth century, many women began to join **forces to initiate a change; to commence a social revolution** that would allow them not only to **redefine themselves as a class** but also to **gain fundamental rights**. Among them, it is worth mentioning Louisa May Alcott who, deeply involved in **Woman Question**, "could voice the concerns of her era and envision a realm in which a woman could defeat the forces that tried to limit her authority" (Brook 51). To grant her wish, she conceives Jo March, a radical character with which she demonstrates that **it is possible to earn a place in both the private and the public sphere**. This and other progressive ideas are embodied, in fact, by a **new ideal of lady** which, although evolving over time, is particularly significant at the end of the Victorian period: **This is the Real Woman**.

Before addressing it, however, a brief overview of the status of dames is necessary so as to make the reader aware of **the extent to which this – The Real Woman – and other new models** destroy the well-known figure of "The Angel of the House". Grouped in the doctrine known as "**The Cult of True Womanhood**", females were seen as **purely decorative objects** that men could easily manipulate and display to the public whenever they felt like it, becoming thus **a lady of leisure**. To make matters worse, women were not able to get other adjectives than **submissive, financially dependent on her husband and intellectually unwise**. However, as has been the case

of our civilisation, which, by virtue of the various historical events that have been taking place over the years, has changed, **the role of women has also become more nuanced**. This is precisely what Frances Cogan tries to illustrate in her book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America.* According to this literature professor of the University of Oregon, the explanation regarding "**The Cult of True Womanhood**" seems to be inaccurate. Depicted by Barbara Welter and other scholars such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg or Charles Rosenberg, this dogma, apart from not having been distinguished in terms of dates, has been probably shaped from gynaecological theories rather than literary ones: "Physicians saw woman as the product and the prisoner of her reproductive system. It was the ineluctable basis of her social role and behaviour characteristics, the cause of her most common ailments; woman's uterus and ovaries controlled her body and behaviour from puberty through menopause" (335).

In the face of this definition, which merely **supports the belief that women are born to become mothers** and, consequently, to **devote themselves to the upbringing of their children**, Cogan introduces to her audience a **different archetype for ladies to follow**, the aforementioned "Real Woman". This *fin-de-siècle* concept, which she herself baptises, "advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance and careful marriage: it was, in other words, a survival ethic" (4). Furthermore, in a way, it also seeks to establish **a certain equality between the two genders**. While it is true that in the case of *Little Women*, the issue of muscular exercising is not essential at all, **matrimony, self-government or employment play a serious role**:

> "I don't much wonder, poor dear, for you see other girls having splendid times, while you grind, grind, year in and year out. Oh, don't I wish I could manage things for you as I do for my heroines! You're pretty enough and good enough already, so I'd have some rich relation leave you a fortune unexpectedly. Then

> you'd dash out as an heiress, scorn everyone who has slighted you, go abroad, and come home my Lady Something in a blaze of splendor and elegance".
> "People don't have fortunes left them in that style nowadays, men have to work, and women marry for money. It's a dreadful unjust world", said Meg bitterly. (200-201)

As Jo's older sister, Meg, rightly states, in nineteenth-century America, **marriage was no more than a mere contract** in which the husband agreed to maintain his wife as long as she performed her duties, that is to say, be docile, obedient and responsible for the upbringings of their sons or daughters. In this sense, always based on Cogan's research, **the "Real Woman"** must be cultivated **to avoid falling into a disastrous union**. "A woman with an education was more likely to be a suitable partner for an educated husband, better able to participate in conversation on a more equal level of understanding" (Cruea 192). As a result, **an "authentic" lady may come to marry a man with whom she is intellectually similar**, which is why, instead of wedding someone good-looking and attractive, prefers to notice his **abilities, his personality** and, most importantly, **his morality**.

In addition, Cogan's "Real Woman" is not interested in having to depend on anyone other than herself. In fact, being **financially independent**, she **can continue earning her own living** until she finds her perfect partner or even **choose whether to get married.** If so, if any hardship should arise, she should not worry as she would be able to provide for her own family. It is exactly for this reason that **money, for Jo, comes second**:

> "I'm glad you are poor; I couldn't bear a rich husband!" said Jo, decidedly, adding, in a softer tone, "Don't fear poverty; I've known it long enough to lose my dread, and be happy working for those I love". (600)

This is, undoubtedly, the basis of the well-known **"equal" or "democratic" marriage** which Louisa May Alcott proposes in her *chef d'oeuvre,* and which, later on, **becomes the role model of the "New Woman".** As June West brings out in her article:

"Both the man and the woman went ahead with their work. If either one had any money before marriage or earned any money after marriage, both the man and the woman shared the money equally" (58).

In a similar way, **thanks to her instruction** – in the case of Jo and her sisters, on the part of their mother, Marmee – **the "Real Woman" begins to gain access to the world of employment** which, hitherto, has been a domain only explored by males. Using the danger detached from the public sphere as an excuse, full of corruption and perversion, **dames**, during nineteenth-century America, **live locked up in their cages – the household – as if they were animals**. Unable to endure such a confinement any longer, American writers gradually liberate their heroines. Nonetheless, it is at this point that the reader must ask himself or herself what kind of job the Victorian woman can aspire to. Given that she has been educated to become a good mother, **the best solution is to occupy herself with teaching**, a position that not only **gives her the opportunity to be in contact with children** but also to **transmit them her knowledge**:

> The plan was talked over in a family council and agreed upon, for Mrs. Kirke gladly accepted Jo, and promised to make a pleasant home for her. The teaching would render her independent. (415)

With this aim in mind, **the protagonist of *Little Women* ends up founding her own school**, as has been explained in the previous section.

As far as **writing** is concerned, Matthews suggests that it is mostly embraced by "The Public Woman". Being the polis governed by 4 fields, the legal, the political, the spatial and the cultural one, **female writers** – such as Alcott and, consequently, Jo- **have always felt ostracised and scorned in the latter**: "when women began to publish, they frequently hid behind a pseudonym, sometimes a male one, so that they would not render themselves vulnerable to charges of immodesty or impropriety" (7). Thereby, it is comprehensible that having as a main objective to **leave behind her**

constant exclusion from urban places, the "Public Woman" wants to gain control over the publishing industry. Only in this way **would she be permitted to free herself from the male tyranny** that has always deprived her from culture as well as to **make one of her biggest dreams come true: becoming autonomous and self-sufficient.**

> Jo's breath gave out here, and wrapping her had in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears, for to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wished of her hearts, and this seemed to the first step toward that happy end. (199)

This innovation, however, is not enough. Despite the fact that both "The Real Woman" and "The Public Woman" have intended to deal with -and even to destroy - the oppression exerted on female gender in Victorian epoch, **they never quite distance ladies from the private sphere advocated by the "Cult of True Womanhood"**. As Cruea points out: "Yet, while Real Womanhood required women to work, this work was usually of a domestic nature and involved traditional housekeeping, gardening, canning and baking and taking care of children" (193). It is not until **the birth of the "New Woman",** in the inter-war America period, that the figure of the "Angel of the House" tries to be definitely abandoned. In reality, this fresh paradigm is not only focused on **getting rid of the domestic chores** but also, and especially, to **resemble as closely as possible to men either in dress code or in the acquisition of fundamental rights**, such as holding the private property, ingress of a higher education or suffrage.

In the same way that Louisa May Alcott, in her lifetime, was the **first lady to vote in her town**, she can also be considered as the **pioneer of the Feminist Movement that was about to come**. Advocating gender equality as well as the merging of the two traditional spheres, the daughter of the transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott "demonstrates how woman, though labouring under the constraints of convention, can indeed help to transform herself, and, inevitably, her society (Bernstein

11). Perhaps this is why, more than 150 years after its publication, ***Little Women*** **has conquered not only world literature but also the hearts of readers of different generations**, becoming thus **a classic worthy of admiration.**

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

A close analysis of both the primary and secondary sources has allowed me to **validate my thesis statement** and to argue, as a result, that **Jo March is, undoubtedly, one of the first literary heroines to concern herself with the improvement of women's situation.** Nevertheless, before delving into this issue, it is necessary to recapitulate the information obtained through the conducted research. Actually, it is only by remembering the historical context of nineteenth-century America as well as the protagonist's reaction to the strict social rules that one can come to understand to what extend **the second daughter of the March family** - and, with her, Louisa May Alcott– **can be labelled as feminist**.

First of all, it is impossible to deny that in the United States, even before the Victorian Era, **ladies** – like slaves or black people – **seem to be treated not as human beings, but as decorative objects**. In reality, males, considering that dames were born with only one purpose in life - becoming the ideal mother and wife – **forbid them to develop themselves in any circle other than the private one, i.e., the household**. Only there - seen, back then, as their kingdom – they contribute to the welfare of their community since, apart from **being subjected to the authority of their husbands**, whom they have to treat with respect and affection, **they are in charge of the education of their children**, the next citizens to govern the country. Precisely for this reason, the most popular magazines of the time begin to promote the archetype of **"The Angel of the House"**, the role model of any nineteenth-century woman.

Although it is true that setting new standards is not permitted, **Jo March** – the protagonist of Alcott's *chef d'oeuvre* – **never gives up on her quest for her own independence**. Tired of the code of conduct that any girl has to adopt if she wishes to be valued by her social environment, our literary heroine does not hesitate to infringe

the norms. Always true to her principles – instilled by her mother, Marmee – **Laurie's best friend is beloved by the readers, especially, for having been able to take the reins of her life**. Characterised, since her adolescence, by her rebellious spirit and her strong character - traits that have led her to overcome a series of personal obstacles and to be highly criticised - **Jo March constantly struggles for finding her way in society, and indeed she does**.

To make her dream come true - that is to say, to live her existence in her own way, getting carried away by her feelings and not by what civilisation dictates - **the main character of *Little Women* manages to go beyond the established patterns concerning matrimony and employment**. Effectively, unlike girls of her age and social class, Jo, while initially reluctant to marry someone, eventually comprehends that, far from oppressing her, **a healthy and equal marriage can bring her joy**. To achieve this kind of union, it is crucial to **fall in love with a man not for his wealth but for his way of being,** as she herself does with Professor Bhaer, an individual capable not only of loving her and respecting her interests but most importantly of treating her as his **equal**. **The world of work does not seem to be a problem for Jo either**. Despite the fact that she temporally abandons her passion for writing – an act that should not be regarded as a surrender of her freedom but rather as an act of courage – **our literary idol is convinced that by setting up her own school for children**, a project that allows her to exercise the role of teacher and mother at the same time, **she is already fulfilling herself.**

It is precisely in this way, by conquering both spheres – the public and the private one – that **Jo March can be asserted to be a pioneer of the Feminist Movement that comes in the scene in the twentieth century.** Whereas she is still far from putting a definitive end to the abuses of the moment, she shows – from the very

beginning of the work – an enormous concern for the **achievement of women's fundamental rights**, such as the ones referring to education and salary, a remuneration that would help ladies to provide for themselves. **This small step towards self-determination is what has allowed some critics to classify her as a perfect example of "real womanhood".**

In short, thanks to the extensive research I have done, and which I have enjoyed very much, **I can claim having grown as person**. "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy": Jo March's deconstruction of "The Cult of True Womanhood" and her quest for self-determination in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*" has given me the opportunity to discover aspects of Victorian America society that, hitherto, I was unaware of. Furthermore, it has also deepened my knowledge about Women's Cause, **learning that the true goal of every female is to be able to feel contented and at liberty in the same way than a man does**, as the young Louisa May Alcott confirms in her poem *My Kingdom* (1845) : "I ask not for any crown but that which all may win; Nor try to conquer any world except the one within".

In this TFG, I have introduced **some aspects** that I could not fully developed within the scope of my investigation because of the space limitations. However, these data can be analysed to a greater extent in future work so as to better appreciate **how far-reaching Louisa May Alcott's task is with reference to gender equality**.

Firstly, further research is needed to **discuss two characters that are also central to the development of *Little Women's* plot**. Although it is true that, in my paper, they have been, in part, mentioned, I consider that knowing in detail **Beth's personality** will help the reader to figure out the suffering hidden behind the figure of "The Angel of the House". Similarly, by examining **Marmee's dichotomous attitude**, one can find out personal traits of the American writer herself who, in spite of wanting

to show her true essence in her works, was always obliged to **seek a balance between her interests and the moral values of her time**.

Secondly, another interesting facet to consider is the concept known as "**the anxiety of authorship**". Coined by university professors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, this term involves the **difficulties that women had to undergo**, two centuries ago, **if they wanted to make a living as a writer**. Along these lines, through the examination of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë or Emily Dickinson's works, these two scholars treat the development of a **new female imagination**, an innovation that can surely grab the attention of all those people passionate about literature.

Lastly, a widespread analysis is also required on the subject of the "**New Woman**". Emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, **this figure** – seen no longer as a divine being to be worshipped, but as an individual of flesh and blood - is able to partially accomplish what Jo had tried to do in her time: **challenging gender norms**, defending thus the presence of ladies in different fields, among which education, entertainment or politics should be highlighted. Although controversial for its departure from Victorian conventions, **this modern stereotype deserves to be put under scrutiny**, particularly by feminists, for **promoting egalitarianism and autonomy**, notions that have absolutely marked a milestone in contemporary women's history.

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