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The Dichotomy between a Proper Woman and a Rebel: Jo's Inner Discrepancies in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract

Written in the midst of the nineteenth century, *Little Women* is a well-known novel about four sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy—who try to find their place in the world while getting to know themselves as well as the others around them. Under this premise, the novel deals with femininity, social standards, gender roles, love, family, and marriage.

Although the sisters have their own problems, the object of study will be Jo March, the second eldest. Jo has an incongruous personality because, even though she is boyish, unladylike, rebellious, and sees marriage as an imposition more than a match formed out of reciprocal love, she highly values familial love. A dichotomy between those traits that defy gender roles and those that confirm her role as a woman is formed. Therefore, this project will analyze the effect of Jo's inner discrepancies in her character development in an effort to understand Alcott's goal to end patriarchal impositions in Nineteenth-century American women.

Keywords: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, Gender Roles, Social Standards, Femininity, Womanhood, Character Development

1. Introduction

1.1. Literature Review

Even though the concept of *feminism* was not on everybody's lips during the 19th century, *Little Women* has been at the center of all the debates since 1868, becoming a pivotal book for literary feminist studies. Alcott's novel focuses on themes like family, femininity, social expectations, marriage, love, and, in general, what it is like to grow up as a girl in a world made for men. This literature review will examine what other critics and authors have said about the novel.

Although the novel is about four sisters, this paper aims to study the character of Jo March, the second of the March sisters. Jo is often described as immature, thoughtful, and bad-tempered. That is why, according to Stephanie Foote, *Little Women* is usually read as Jo's story, not so much focused on the other characters (2005, 274). Apart from Foote (2005), Bender (2017) and Rioux (2018) see Jo's character as the perfect feminist because she is the living image of a feminine woman who is "strong and vocal" (Bender 2017, 151).

Several authors (Auerbach 1976, Camprubí 2021, Wadsworth 2019, and Zwinger 1991) agree that Jo undergoes a maturity arc going from a rebellious tomboy to a true woman. In this regard, Boyd adds that every character in *Little Women* is formed by multiple traits that shape their unique personality (2018, 154). So, for Jo to love her family and to write and to be independent is natural, in the critic's opinion. Thanks to this, many readers of all ages and periods have experienced a deep connection to *Little Women*'s story, specifically Jo's.

However, not everyone agrees with Boyd. McDermott (2019) and Quimby (2003) describe Jo's evolution as a stagnation of her character. In addition, Shardai Smith (2021) thinks that, although Alcott's work is a literary masterpiece, Jo's "ending offers the sad realization that most women— awakened to the truth or otherwise—succumb to the conveniences that married,

accommodating women enjoy" (7), yielding to patriarchal and heteronormative social standards.

It is essential to understand that gender roles were misogynistic for the American standards of the time. Women's place was to be at home, "on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (Altick 1973, 54). Women did not have the same opportunities as men nor the same privileges because, despite being from upper or lower classes, "in the eyes of the law [they still] were second-class citizens" (Gallagher 57, quoted in Camprubí 2021). Watkin (1979) describes the origin of this situation as a change in society's structure that altered the home sphere "and so diminished the social worth of the American women" (119).

Nevertheless, Louisa May Alcott, in creating Jo March, defied gender and created a heroine that was defined by both masculine and feminine traits; she is not described as a girly girl by critics that have studied her behavior but rather as a tomboy. Jo March became one of the most popular tomboys in literary history because she gave a voice to all the *girls* that did not want to wear gloves or smile politely. Quimby (2003) has referred to Jo as an incoherent character due to the fluctuation between masculinity and femininity (1). However, both Quimby and McDermott arrive to the same conclusion: being a tomboy is only tolerable when one is young and childish (McDermott 2019, 135). It is only during childhood that it is acceptable to delve outside the realms of gender roles. But, when one becomes a teenager, that gender deviation is seen as poisonous and unladylike because American society expects girls to become exemplary women who leave behind their masculinities and embrace their heteronormative femininity (McDermott 2019, 135).

In order to flourish as a real true woman, marriage was mandatory. Otherwise, they could face life's setbacks as a spinster, implying the loss of financial security, which kept "women in submissive and vulnerable positions" (Smith 2021, 7). Marriage has always been

seen as an institution that as Peter N. Stearns and Mark Knap explained, was also love's graveyard (1993, 772) for both sexes. However, women suffered the most since they had to leave their lives behind and merge themselves to a man. Most matches were made for economic purposes.

Taking this into consideration, it is undeniable that, however feminist Alcott's most famous character might be, Jo ends up following the socially accepted path because she marries, being tamed into proper civilized manners. This outcome has originated plenty of discussions. Foote (2005) affirms that the second eldest's marriage only serves as a transformation of her rebelliousness and a domestication of her character (78).

Nonetheless, Sarah Wadsworth (2019) thinks that Jo, by refusing to marry Laurie, "is able to maintain the egalitarian quality of the relationship" (390). Moreover, Nina Auerbach alleges that the fallout between Jo and Laurie comes from the fact that Theodor Laurence was born into a wealthy family; he "can only make his comrade a lady" (1976, 24). Hence, if Jo had married Laurie, she would have been defined by her husband's economic status and would lose all her independence and power.

Jo needs to find a suitor, her equal, with whom she can have an intellectual connection, not only an economic one. For these reasons, Clare Bender (2017) thinks that Professor Bhaer is an ideal match because of his status as a professor in Mrs. Kirke's house, where the pair meet. In the same line of thinking, Stephanie Foote states that Jo's and Mr. Bhaer's relationship is based on equality because they are both workers (2005, 79); thus, their relationship is one of mutual respect and position since Jo comes from a low-income family, as well as Mr. Bhaer. Ergo, Alcott destabilizes the typical paternal relationship of the nineteenth century and "brings into existence the concept of "democratic home," a term that implies full equality between both members of the couple" (Camprubí 2021, 8).

Still, Alcott's final decision to marry Jo has not always been seen as the proper choice. Anne Boyd Rioux asks herself in the prologue of *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and why it still matters* if Alcott's novel can be seen as a "rebellious tale of one young woman's resistance to the restrictions of her era, or [if it is just] a dispiriting portrait of her capitulation to the status quo" (2018, 136). Janey Tracey answers Boyd's question by saying that the novel's second part denies the feminist view of the first half by marrying the heroine to any man and questions the marriage as a way to subdue Jo's flaws (2018). Hillary Kelly (2018) agrees with Tracey that the novel's second part is blind obedience to patriarchy. However, many authors have acknowledged that Alcott did not have the ultimate decision. Alcott was pressured, by her editor as well as by the readers of the first half, to write an ending where Jo abided by the norms of heterosexuality, so she went on and, instead of marrying her to the preferred choice—Laurie—, she created a match that was not the common one (Quimby 2003,10).

Although Professor Bhaer may seem the perfect man, some studies have focused on the fact that after marrying him, Jo quits writing and ends up having a settled life, one she vehemently despises in the first part. However, in her literature review, Boyd found that Janeway says Jo's marriage allows her to become her true self—a matriarch (2018, 147). In this way, Alcott creates a non-patriarchal, complementary view of marriage. Despite Jo quitting her passion for writing, she discovers that she likes to teach and opens up a boarding school in Plumfield for little boys. Lynda Zwinger states that Jo keeps her ideal independence (1991, 55) by marrying as a whole person and not as a half. Jo is a woman who does not fit into gender roles, and the institution of marriage does not make her wit crumble.

1.2. Hypothesis and Objectives

The early readings of the book have explored how femininity, social standards, and marriage are closely linked and are crucial to understanding the change of *Little Women's* heroine, Jo March, throughout the novel. Louisa May Alcott created a character that was both feminine and masculine in an effort to undermine gender roles and social expectations. In the novel's first half, she is vocal and ambitious, but by the second half, the reader begins to see how Jo gradually yields to social norms.

With the study of these three traits—femininity, marriage, and social standards— in Jo's character, the principal objective is to investigate whether Jo conforms to the values of her time or if, in another way, she rebels against social impositions. For this reason, the paper is divided into: "Women, Femininity, and Society" and "Love and Marriage."

In the former, the tomboy concept is analyzed concerning Jo's character, as it has been said that she was the first literary tomboy. It will focus on the heroine's feminine, and masculine traits to better understand her role as a woman in society. In the latter, Jo's perspective regarding love and marriage is discussed in order to assess how it evolves throughout the novel.

The analysis follows this structure to help confirm or deny the hypothesis: Jo indeed learns to accept her femininity and womanhood but manages to discover other paths to keep alive her feminist ideals.

2. Women, Femininity, and Society

2.1. Gender roles and social standards

To talk about *Little Women* is to talk about Louisa May Alcott. To talk about Louisa May Alcott is to talk about social expectations in one of the most riotous periods in American history. Women were confined to specific traits and roles within their sphere during this period. The protagonists of the novel give voice to four different types of women, but Jo is the one that proclaims the words of a movement that was just being born: feminism.

Feminism has always been aware of the importance of gender roles and the place of women in society. One of the main concerns the feminist movement aims to destroy is social standards, which are intimately intertwined with gender roles. The way one dresses, talks or acts are examples of social impositions women face daily. Gender roles tame and oblige women into being submissive and obedient. Due to this, it is no surprise to say that girls and women suffer the most. And not only real girls but also fictional ones, such as Jo in *Little Women*.

2.2. Jo March: the first tomboy

In consonance with feminist ideals, Louisa May Alcott wrote a novel that sought to undermine imposed patriarchal views on women. (Boyd 2018, 136) To break the gender barrier, she created a character that questioned the categories where a woman was supposed to excel. This character was a girl who did not want to learn to be proper and correct in all social instances and was labeled as a "tomboy."

They have "a proclivity for outdoor play (especially athletics), a feisty, independent spirit, and a tendency to don masculine clothing and adopt a boyish nickname" (Abate xi, quoted in McDermott 2019, 135). Literature has created multiple famous tomboys. One of them is Jo March, the second oldest of the March sisters.

Jo's story starts when she is 15 years old, in the middle of adolescence, who is described by the people surrounding her as "boyish" (Alcott 2018, 6–7) because she is adventurous,

“never takes advice; can't keep still a day, and not being a pussycat, [doesn't] like to doze by the fire” (46), does not like to wear dresses nor gloves, “does use such slang words” (6), and loves her independence. Additionally, as Abate has already pointed out, the character adopts a name that is more masculine than feminine, that of Jo March, as an abbreviated form of Josephine. In page 29, she explains that she wants people to call her Jo because she “ain’t miss March, [she’s] only Jo” and because her real name is “too sentimental.”

Her needs also seem to be outside the usual feminine drives of her time and age. Jo is an ambitious woman, a trait that has distinguished tomboy stories from the nineteenth century onwards (McDermott 2019, 136). She wants to do something great, “to do something splendid […] —something heroic, or wonderful, —that won't be forgotten after [she's] dead” (Alcott 2018, 136). She yearns for a life outside the domesticity of her home, a free life.

> I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a Chinaster. It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay home and knit like a poky old woman (7).

In this fragment, we can see a teenage Jo who loathes women's obligations to adhere to patriarchal norms— “wear long gowns, and look as prim as a Chinaster [...] stay home and knit like a poky old woman”—, but also a Jo who furiously says that “it's bad enough to be a girl”, because of the association between femininity, purity, and chastity when she does not wish to partake in either of the three but longs to be part of the activities typically associated to men, which are “boy's games”, and fighting in the war, where her father is.

Another crucial aspect of the time was dress code. Attire was the first thing people saw when someone entered a room. It served as a way to show social rank and fortune. It also defined the possible connections women could make because, as Meg says in chapter 3, “a real lady is always known by neat boots, gloves, and handkerchief” (27). Nonetheless, Jo defies her older sister by saying that she does not care what people say and will go without gloves if

necessary (25). Also, to Meg, to wear an elegant dress is a window to the soul, but to Jo, it is only a matter of fun, never of fashion.

Regarding gender identity, Jo does not fall into the stereotypical category of what a woman is supposed to be like, which makes her an ambiguous character.

> You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady (Alcott 2018, 7).

Her problem lies in the fact that she is a teenage girl; she is "old enough" (7), so she must be conventionally correct and "leave off boyish tricks" (7), those who characterize her have made her a memorable icon. She "should remember that [she is] a young lady" (7). McDermott remarks, "a girl who carries the queerness of her childhood, her once acceptable experiments into masculine identities, into her adult future" (2019, 135). In the long run, Jo's inability to let go of her queerness becomes a problem not only for herself but for her family as well.

2.3. Tomboyism and family

Family was, and still is, one of the essential parts of society; in the nineteenth century, it defined someone's education, wealth, and acquaintances. Louisa May Alcott depicts a family torn apart by war. The patriarch has left the familiar home to fight for the United States, so Marmee, the matriarch, is the one who educates her four daughters to be good little women.

The family receives a letter from the absent dad for Christmas in the first chapter. In the letter, he asks them to wait for him, as he will be away for a year, and while waiting, they should "all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted" (12). To work does not mean to get a job and earn money, but to "be loving children" and "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves beautifully" (12) because he wants to be proud of the little women he left behind. To this heartfelt letter, the five women sniff and cry. Nevertheless, it is what Jo says that is relevant here: "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman' and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be

somewhere else" (12). This sentence suggests Jo's acceptance to adapt to social standards and learn to play mother not for her own sake but for those she loves. In order to become the woman her father wants her to be, she needs someone to teach her. It is none other than her family members who take the role of Jo's instructors to help her evolve.

There is an evident opposition between the real lady and the perfect daughter—Meg—and the tomboy—Jo—. However, their relationship does not take the foreseeable path of sister enmity; but the opposite. Meg helps Jo come to terms with her gender expression. Meg is not the only one who helps; all the members reach a hand to Jo. Nonetheless, the one who plays a vital role in the girl's formation in the first part of the novel, mainly in Jo's character, guiding the daughters toward good morality, is Marmee. She teaches the girls "to reject the "evils" of femininity (or, in Jo's case, un-femininity) and retain only the most feminine virtues, such as softness, selflessness, and modesty" (Tracey, 2018).

The heroine ignores or responds rudely to others, like when Meg asks her: "When *will* you stop such romping ways?" (Alcott 2018, 146), and she answers: "never till I'm stiff and old and have to use a crutch" (146). Demonstrating that women have felt pressured to grow up quickly, be more mature, and leave childhood behind at a fast pace.

> Don't try to make me grow up before my time, Meg; it's hard enough to have you change all of a sudden; let me be a little girl as long as I can (146).

By demanding space to grow up as she pleases, Jo questions Meg's version of girlhood "and pries open the door between femininity and masculinity" (Smith 2021, 2). This confrontation with Meg contrasts with Marmee and Jo's relationship.

Marmee is the only one Jo truly listens to due to her filial admiration. Case in point: when Amy falls into the icy river following an angry Jo to gain the older sister's forgiveness, and Jo has to rescue her, what she wants to do is "lay her head down on [Marmee's] motherly bosom and cry her grief and anger all away" (Alcott 2018, 75). She runs off to Marmee because mother and daughter are similar, even though Jo is unaware.

> [...] Jo, dear, we all have our temptations, some far greater than yours, and it often takes us all our lives to conquer them. You think your temper is the worst in the world; but mine used to be just like it (Alcott 2018, 77).

When Marmee acknowledges that she used to have a temper like Jo's because “we all have our temptations” (77), the daughter is surprised because she has never seen her mother angry. Nonetheless, as Marmee says, anger is present every day, but the vital thing to do is to learn not to show it and control it. As Foote says, “the novel seems to tell its readers that women must not have, much less act on, negative emotions” (2005, 65), as it was not an acceptable attitude for a lady. To overcome this feeling, Marmee thanks her mother and her husband. She says that marriage and motherhood were the two things that helped her realize the great responsibility she held. Marmee represents what a woman must become: a good spouse and a good mother.

Through her mom, Jo is learning social standards. Shardai Smith (2021), Shawna McDermott (2019), and Jane Tracey (2018) agree that in the second half of the novel, the tomboy is outgrown in favor of the true woman thanks to the evolution the heroine’s character undergoes on the first part. Jo starts to finally accept her feminine traits, trying to fit into the established gender roles. In part, Jo's evolution happens because of Marmee's education, but there is one crucial moment in which Jo has to make a decision: Beth's death.

Beth is the youngest of the sisters, "the angel," as they call her. Kind, quiet, and introverted. Furthermore, Beth is Jo's favorite sister, reason enough for the heroine to take “it upon herself to care for her, which, in turn, makes her more selfless and—as her father puts it—"motherly" (Tracey, 2018). In chapter 40, in the precious moments of death, Beth requests Jo to take her place “and be everything to father and mother” (395) after she is gone.

> She tried in a blind, hopeless way to do her duty, secretly rebelling against it all the while, for it seemed unjust that her few joys should be lessened, her burdens made heavier, and life gets harder and harder as she toiled along. [...] Poor Jo! these were dark days to her, for something like despair came over when she thought of spending all her life in that quiet house, devoted to hum-drum cares, a few poor little pleasures, and the duty that never seemed to grow any easier (408).

Beth is forcing Jo to put away writing and imposing upon her the paper of the next angel of the house, a task Jo tries in a “hopeless way to do” (408) but is not sure of fulfilling correctly. Her burdens are only “made heavier, and life gets harder and harder” (408). “Something like despair [comes] over” (408) since she is not the kind of girl apt for domestic life. As a result, Jo is unhappy because her castle on the air was to do something splendid, to "write books, and get rich and famous" (136). However, she ends up “spending all her life in that quiet house, devoted to hum-drum cares” (408), only contenting herself with her family’s happiness, but not her own. When she was younger, Jo wanted to be like those men who traveled around the world getting to know other cultures, but she has to accept her fate to stay home and take care of the family, like every other woman. Thus, along with Marmee's teaching, Beth's death serves as a taming mechanism for Jo's manly behavior.

While she is in the process of accepting her inner womanhood because of the surrounding circumstances, Jo is also gradually drawing closer to the future she pictured when she was younger. Heartbroken by the sudden death of the youngest sister and encouraged by her mother's words to write something for them, never minding the rest of the world, Jo starts a story about her family, without any pretensions of fame or money and giving up sensational stories. With this story, she starts to win over the heart of her readers, and a publisher accepts to print the text. Therefore, although she abandons boyish games and manners, her rebellion is still patent in the act of writing. She becomes an independent woman able to maintain herself, creating an alternative approach to shattering gender social constructs. She finds a way in between, a profession only imagined for men, and makes it her own.

3. Love and Marriage

In the first part, Jo outgrows the tomboy but manages to keep her independence by becoming a writer. However, there is another social construct that was important at the time and that Alcott tried to subvert: marriage.

Marriage has not always been a choice but more of an obligation. In the nineteenth century, marriage was a duty women had to fulfill in order to be accepted in society. Only rich and widowed women could be unwedded, one because of their economic independence and the other because of the husband's death. But when a young girl came of age, it was proper for her to find a suitor and marry.

In *Little Women,* there is a character who represents these patriarchal views regarding marriage and love: Aunt March.

> I mean it kindly, and don't want you to spoil your whole life by making a mistake at the beginning. You ought to marry well, and help your family; it's your duty to make a rich match, and it ought to be impressed upon you.
> [...]
> So you intend to marry a man without money, position, and go on working harder than you do now, when you might be comfortable all your days by minding me, and doing better? I thought you had more sense, Meg (Alcott 2018, 219).

In this excerpt from chapter 23, Aunt March advises Meg not to marry John Brooke because her "duty [is] to make a rich match" (219); she has "to marry well" (219) in order to "help [her] family" (219). However, if she marries the man she loves, she will marry a "man without money [and] position" (219). Aunt March implies that marriage is a ladder to climb social and economic positions. Still, Meg wants to marry Mr. Brooke in spite of her aunt's words because "John is good and wise; he's got heaps of talent; he's willing to work, and sure to get on, he's so energetic and brave" (219). Although Meg opposes societal beliefs by marrying whom she wishes to, without taking Aunt March's advice, her desires were always directed towards the formation of a family and to be a mother, so, on the one hand, she steps out of the established path, but on the other hand, she goes along this path.

Nonetheless, In the March family, one character firmly breaks with this patriarchal imposition, Jo March. Jo differs from Meg first by her lack of romantic interest and sense of motherhood and then by her rejection of the most coveted boy, Laurie. But by her subsequent marriage to Mr. Bhaer, she resembles Meg because both sisters choose their husbands without paying attention to the ideals and social expectations of the Reconstruction era.

3.1. Jo and Laurie

Jo is totally against marriage. She thinks it is useless and sees her older sister's relationship with Mr. Brooke as a way to "make a hole in the family" (193). When Marmee says that her time will come when she wants to love someone the same way she is loved, she responds that she "would like any one try" (145) taking her as a bride because she is very aware that she is not like her sisters, who are agreeable proper women. Jo is not likable because of her wild and rebellious temper, her masculine traits, and her wish to make a profit out of her work. She is not docile like Meg or Amy, therefore, "nobody will want [her], and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family" (236). Obeying her tomboy traits, the novel's heroine refuses romantic love embracing her spinsterhood.

The climax of this rejection arrives when Laurie, the boy next door and Jo's best friend, confesses his feelings towards Jo:

> I've loved you ever since I've known you, jo—couldn't help it, you've been so good to me,—I've tried to show it, but you wouldn't let me; now I'm going to make you hear, and give me an answer, for I *can't* go on any longer (343).

Yet, Jo declines Laurie's love because she "can't change the feeling" (344) of not loving Laurie as he wants her to. Moreover, even though Jo may be messy and chaotic, her thoughts on love do not change. She does not believe the right sort of love is that of making herself love Laurie when she does not. Besides, she continues to believe that she will never marry because she loves her liberty "too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (346), but also because she is "awkward, and odd, and old" (346).

Jo's negation also comes along with the idea that she and Laurie do not match due to their similar "quick tempers and strong wills" (345), and their mutual fondness for freedom, but at the same time, they are too different. Their positions are not the same, neither economically nor socially. Jo comes from an impoverished family, and Laurie is the wealthiest man in their neighboring area. Laurie loves elegant society, balls, and meetings, but Jo hates them. She does not want to be part of it. In addition, because of Laurie's economic position, he would expect her to stop scribbling, but, as she says, she "couldn't get on without it" (346). The result of this match would not be one created out of love; in Jo's words, "everything would be horrid" (346).

As a matter of fact, before Laurie's actual proposal, the moment is so imminent that Jo decides to run off to New York. She does not only flee to escape from her best friend's confession but to continue her quest for independence. In the city, Jo meets herself, as well as another teacher that works in Mrs. Kirke's household too, Professor Bhaer.

3.2. Jo and Professor Bhaer

In the multiple letters Jo sends her family during her time in New York, she describes Professor Bhaer as a "queer-looking man" (318), around the age of forty, "a regular German—rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his head, a bushy beard, droll nose, the kindest eyes [she] ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's ears good" (319). He is Laurie's opposite. While the one back at home is handsome and "very polite, for a boy, and altogether jolly" (30), the German professor has not "a handsome feature in his face, except his beautiful teeth" (319). While one is the richest and youngest man in the village, the other "was neither rich nor great, young nor handsome, —in no respect what is called fascinating, imposing, or brilliant" (332).

However, Jo likes him "for he had a fine head" (319) and because "he was as attractive as a genial fire" (332), meaning that she is drawn by his intelligence, not his physical

appearance. “She [begins] to see that character is a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty” (335). Despite his rusty clothes and humming, she describes him as a gentleman. In other words, Professor Bhaer is a person with flaws, not perfect and impeccable. He is real. Jo is attracted to him precisely because he is genuine and has as many imperfections as herself.

Jo starts talking to Mr. Bhaer because she recognizes that she wants to enter into good society, but as she says, “it isn’t the same sort that Amy likes” (321). Amy likes balls and social events where one can meet rich people; however, Jo aims to get to know Mr. Bhaer, and therefore the society in which he moves, because he likes to read, goes to the theater, and knows people that are of interest for Jo’s purpose, that of being a writer. Jo uses Mr. Bhaer as a social ladder.

She not only uses him as a conduct to socialize and move around the intellectual sphere, but also as someone to learn from. Mr. Bhaer acts as a teacher to Jo. One of the critical moments of the novel happens when Mr. Bhaer finds the Volcano, the paper where Jo publishes her tales. Mr. Bhaer says that those papers “are not for children to see, nor young people to read” (336) because they cause harm, and he “would more rather give [his] boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash.” (337) Jo, who feels directly attacked by Bhaer’s words, responds that “if there is a demand for it, [there is not] any harm in supplying it” (337). Mr. Bhaer says that respectable people know how much harm sensational stories do to society. When the conversation is finished, Jo feels ashamed of the stories she has written because they are as bad as the one the professor just harshly criticized, filling her with dismay. It is because of Professor Bhaer’s words that she quits writing, because she realizes it does no good to society or herself. It is because of a man that she relinquishes her academic and intellectual work; however, she does not abandon that dream completely. Jo learns that what she writes is of no use, because Mr. Bhaer knows her and knows that she can do better. Mr. Bhaer does not want Jo to stop

writing because she is a woman, thus she has to stay inside her gender roles, but the opposite. He wants her to pursue her dreams but respecting moral codes.

If Marmee and Beth serve as a guide for Jo to get the better of her masculine instincts, Professor Bhaer's role is that of a tutor as well. He teaches Jo, not aiming to patronize her, but out of respect and always thinking about what is best for her.

3.3. A turning point in Jo's life

When Jo comes back home after Laurie's love confession, she becomes aware of her sisters' transformation. Meg is a mother, Amy is in Europe, and Beth has died. It is then that she starts to feel alone because, except for her, everyone has already flown the nest and found their place. Although in a conversation with Marmee on page 413, she recognizes that familial love is the best kind of love, she "would like to try all kinds" because her heart "is so elastic, it never seems full now" when it "used to be quite contented". Pondering about her loneliness, she goes back to her room, where she finds "a little message written in the Professor's hand" (414) that suddenly takes "a new meaning" (414). This letter asks her to wait for him as he is going to come for her, and Jo wishes that Mr. Bhaer would be there with her at that moment because "everyone seems going away from [her], and [she's] all alone" (414). By the end of the chapter, the author of the story creates a tension between Jo's loneliness and Jo's romantic feelings for the man she met in New York.

In the following chapter called "Surprises", it seems like Professor Bhaer has sensed Jo's change because in front of the door, on the day of her birthday, "stood a stout, bearded gentleman, beaming on her from the darkness like a midnight sun" (424). This unexpected visit is what sets the ground for their subsequent union in marriage, as it is in these final passages that Jo, as well as the other members of her family, start to be aware of her growing feelings towards Professor Bhaer, but it is not until the next-to-last chapter that they confess their mutual love. However, "being laughed at for surrendering after her many and vehement declarations

of independence" (441) frightens Jo. But her family enjoys seeing her happy, so they would never say anything discouraging. They are the ones that persuade Jo to go to the city to try to find Mr. Bhaer.

Their encounter is not romantic but rather messy. It is raining, the street is muddy, and Jo is running to cover up but suddenly, she sees a blue umbrella "stationary above the unprotected bonnet" that attracts her attention, "looking up, she [sees] Mr. Bhaer" (443). In these circumstances, both wet, with their hands full of packages, they start walking and talking. Professor Bhaer tells Jo that he has been offered a place in a college, but it is in the West, so they will not be able to see each other as much if he accepts.

Their conversation implies that if Jo tells him to stay, he will leave everything just to be with her. However, she does not say anything, and when the departure moment arrives, she starts to cry because her professor, her dearest friend, is going away. Professor Bhaer, "in spite of the umbrella and the bundles" (447), confesses his love for the novel's heroine and his real intentions for his trip to Concord: "I came to see if you could care for it" (447). To Bhaer's question of being "something more than a friend" (447), Jo finally says yes, "with an expression that plainly showed how happy she would be to walk through life beside him" (447).

The proposition, the same way as their friendship, is real. It is not something out of the romance books Jo used to read in her younger years. Mr. Bhaer cannot "go down upon his knees, on account of the mud, neither could he offer Jo his hand, except figuratively, for both were full" (448). They only look at each other because, sometimes, words are unnecessary when the eyes already voice what has been brewing in the heart. But, although Jo may accept Friedrich's proposal to be husband and wife, her thoughts on marriage are still clear: she will continue working, she will "carry [her] share, and help to earn the home" (453).

As a matter of fact, after their wedding and Aunt March's death, Jo inherits Plumfield State. Where, the lovely couple's objective is to "open a school for little lads—a good, happy,

home-like school, with [her] to take care of them, and Fritz to teach them" (455). Precisely because of these words, Tracey (2018) states that Jo's feminist character undergoes a regression as she surrenders to her role as a mother. Nevertheless, Jo is self-aware of her change and, in her own words, the "life [she] wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to [her] now" (462), but she has not given up her ambition to write a good book, however, she has learned to be patient. After everything, Jo has nothing to complain about. She is happy.

4. Conclusions

Following a thorough analysis of *Little Women* and the different secondary sources, two resolutions emerge from this investigation. Firstly, as seen in the literature review, the readings of *Little Women* are subjective because the novel, and its main character, are complex. Depending on the reader's focus, the novel will be seen as a praise of patriarchal values or as a means to their annihilation. Because of this, the aim was to study how Jo's character development represents a way to subvert nineteenth-century American gender roles or a redemption of her rebellious temperament.

The hypothesis was that she welcomes her feminine duties of forming a family and marrying without abandoning her insurgent and wild spirit. Given the circumstances, this paper concludes that Jo March takes part on both sides. Therefore, the initial assumption is confirmed.

First, thanks to the help of her family, specially Marmee and Beth's characters, Jo learns to live in consonance with social expectations and gender roles. She leaves behind her boyish mannerisms to become a proper woman. However, Alcott's most loved character leads a life outside the domains of domestic conventions. She becomes the director of Plumfield's Boarding School with the purpose of continuing to write. A very atypical situation was for most women of the time as they were not allowed to work and were relegated to familial and house care. Jo March does not relinquish her career and intellectual aspirations because of her mother role.

In addition, Jo's marriage is not arranged by her family. The safest option was to marry Laurie, a match that not only the characters of the novel expected, but also the readers. However, in getting to know Friedrich Bhaer, she learns to love him romantically. She chooses to marry him. At this moment, Jo's rejection of Laurie is better understood. In negating the predetermined love match between the heroine and her male equal, Louisa

May Alcott subverts nineteenth-century social expectations by allowing her heroine to love freely. Laurie wanted a lady, and Jo could not give him that because, as the first part of the research has explored, she was never one. Also, Laurie and Jo's friendship holds an essential place in *Little Women*. To marry them is to tear down and reduce their whole character arcs in an attempt to please readers. That is why Alcott creates Mr. Bhaer, to give Jo an equal both economically and intellectually.

Jo's inner discrepancies are very relatable as we can see ourselves reflected in her debates, contradictory thoughts, and personal confrontations. The novel starts with a teenage girl who wildly dreams, but what Alcott's masterpiece portrays is that changing is okay. Jo's story is that of self-knowledge. She first discovers how to be herself in order to be able to do whatever she wishes to. Jo is the perfect example of how humans err, try, and retry, being in constant evolution, this is why her story has inspired so many readers of all ages, time periods and cultures.

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