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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Trapped in between Conformity and Subversion: A
Close Look to Amy March in Louisa May Alcott's
*Little Women***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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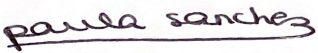
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction	1
0.1. Objectives.....	1
0.2. Literature Review	3
1. Discerning between submission and subversion	7
1.1. Conformity and agency in <i>Little Women</i> through Jo and Amy March.....	7
1.2. Amy March through the lens of pragmatism.....	12
2. Reading Amy against the grain.....	15
2.1. Selection of passages that picture Amy as an agential character	15
2.1.1. Scene 1: Chapter 26 “Artistic Attempts” – meeting the class standards.	16
2.1.2. Scene 2: Chapter 29 “Calls” – complying with social events.	17
2.1.3. Scene 3 and 4: Chapter 31 “Our Foreign Correspondent” & Chapter 39 “Lazy Laurence” – settling for an economic marriage.	18
2.2. The intertwining of submission and subversion.....	20
3. Conclusions and Further Research	22
Works Cited.....	24

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Abstract

Little Women (1868) by Louisa May Alcott is a coming-of-age story that narrates the journey from childhood to womanhood of the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy in 19th century North America. Amy, the youngest of the sisters, has always been outshined by her older sister, Jo March, both in the story and in the field of studying literature, and read as the perfect example of the conforming and pleasing woman expected by the society of the period.

In this dissertation, I aim to analyse Amy March and see whether her actions and life decisions are a result of her submission to the dominant norms or if it was, on the contrary, a question of subverting the imposed roles from underneath in order to forge her own pathways to achieving her goals and self-independence. I argue that the scenes of apparent conformity to the social conventions should be read, instead, as a tool to escalate the social ladder and earn certain benefits she would never have by herself just for being a woman. To do this, I will carry out a close reading of a selection of four passages where Amy adopts a seemingly conforming stance. This analysis will be preceded by a theoretical background of the works of various feminist critics on the issue of agency, submission and subversion, as well as providing a pragmatist approach, and concluding with a final reflection on how conformity and agency are constantly intertwined in Amy and, subsequently, in women.

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Amy March, submission, subversion, conformity.

0. Introduction

0.1. Context and objectives

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, from its publication, was considered children's literature since it is a *bildungsroman* that presents the passing from childhood to womanhood of the March sisters –Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy–, and the book contains instructions of behavior and moral values for the little women. Moreover, in this moral instruction, there is a feminist undertone that has never gone unnoticed and is considered one of the first proto-feminist literature of the time. Through this novel, Alcott aimed to prove that despite the suffocating oppression in every aspect of their life, women were capable to attain a certain level of freedom and independence and create their life paths, away from male and patriarchal control.

Alcott is one of the best examples of this battle against the patriarchal system to obtain a life where she could be self-sufficient. Alcott grew up in a family where her father was the main authoritarian figure and ruled every aspect of the household as well as her academic life. She knew that becoming a writer would not be easy to achieve, but her concern for the stability and welfare of her family was greater, so she began to write so she could contribute to the economy of the household, but always under the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard. After having written a few stories as well as poems, she was asked by her publisher to write a 'girls' story', with a more approachable and sentimental tone. "Alcott simply has to submerge this self-expressive writing since, according to the ethic she wanted to espouse, submerging the self and caring for others are more suitable to a little woman than self-dramatization and self-expression" (Clark 88). Alcott thoroughly started working on *Little Women* and did not hesitate to use her life experience with her sisters as an inspiration and as a means to channel her feminist values and beliefs to her

readers and especially young girls: “Alcott writes a didactic guide to middle-class feminine ideology in which she explores how women who lack money empower themselves without violating feminine codes of purity” (Prasad 2). Alcott does that through all the March sisters, but especially through Jo March, who is the most straightforwardly subversive and rebellious, always at the forefront to oppose what seems unjust to her and prepared to accomplish her dream of becoming a writer.

Amy, the youngest of the March sisters –and the most unheard and misunderstood– is a figure Alcott uses to convey her ideals but in a subtle and unnoticed way. Amy is depicted by Alcott as a spoiled, pretentious brat who’s only concerned about behaving like people from higher spheres and being agreeable and superficially endearing in terms of appearance and manners. Many academics, including Stephanie Foote and Ann B. Murphy, have read her in this same way; however, other critics such as Anne Hollander and Judith Fetterley, advocate another reading that places the fourth sister in a more agential and empowered position, which is the perspective I will adopt in this paper.

One of my main objectives in this dissertation is to counter Amy’s traditional reading as a submissive and aimless character with a more subversive vision that claims Amy’s conformity to the social norms is a strategic procedure to get where she desires to be and reach her ambitions. My thesis statement is that the scenes of apparent conformity and performance of the established social and gender roles are, contrariwise, an attempt, a mere formality for her to acquire her life goals and a glimpse of freedom in a patriarchal society. To provide an answer to my research question, my methodology consists of a close reading of four scenes of the selected text, accompanied by a previous theoretical background and complemented by the work of various feminist critics on the issues of submission and subversion to patriarchal norms.

The paper has been organized into two parts: “Discerning between submission and subversion” and “Reading Amy against the grain”. The first section addresses the different ways conformity and agency are manifested in Amy in contrast to Jo in order to see both extremes of the same equation, as well as provide a pragmatist interpretation of feminism and Amy. The second section contains a close reading of four selected passages of the book where Amy takes an active role and displays an agential attitude, along with a reflection on the intertwining of submission and subversion in the book.

0.2. Literature Review

With the publication of her most known and influential piece in 1868, *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott altered the Nineteenth-Century American literary tradition, leading it to a turning point that will shape the history of literature from that moment onwards. It is a coming-of-age novel, where the reader witnesses simultaneously the four sisters’ passage from childhood to womanhood, embracing their power and strength, each in their own way. Many critics consider that what Alcott did in this novel is not to empower women to create an independent world for themselves, but to teach them how to make their life path easier in an obtrusive way, discreetly to the eyes of men: “In *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott writes a didactic guide to middle-class feminine ideology in which she explores how women who lack money empower themselves without violating feminine codes of purity” (Prasad 2).

In the first place, to thoroughly comprehend the novel, acknowledging the historical context where the novel was written is crucial: the Nineteenth Century North America. By that time women were expected, just as in the British Victorian period, to be ‘angels in the house’: their duty was to keep the household as a flawless and safe place for their husbands, to please them and be permanently caring and sacrificed for their

familiar life; in brief, to be submissive and devoted to their husbands and family. As Fetterley argues, “With no legitimate function in life, women will not be tolerated unless they are agreeable; only through a life of cheerful service to others can they justify their existence assuage that derives from being useless” (376). These perceptions are backed by Alcott’s characterization of Marmee, since even though she wants to raise their daughters in an environment of sisterhood and self-worth, “happiness still arrives in the form of a male counterpart” (Prasad 15), and inevitably, this influence will condition her daughters’ lives: “To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (Alcott 92).

Concentrating on Amy March, the youngest of the sisters, is portrayed throughout the novel as self-centered, conceited and feigned, and it certainly is the general superficial impression readers get from her character, especially when put into contrast with her sisters. As Hollander notes, “Amy is undoubtedly the Bad Sister throughout the early parts of the book. Alcott seems to have very little sympathy for her shortcomings, which are painted as both more irritating and more serious than those of the other girls. She is the one who is actually bad, whereas the others are only flawed” (32). Alcott constructs a façade for Amy that makes the public come to rapid assumptions about her and not want to look beyond the surface, but stick to the obvious: “the narrator of *Little Women* paradoxically asserts Amy’s coquettishness and innocence, characterizing her as a polished social sculpture, yet “the baby” or “unspoiled” child” (Blackford 6).

Nevertheless, some reviewers, not contented with the scarce interpretations previously made about Amy, wanted to have a closer look at the character itself from a not so much exploited perspective. They believe there are underlying implications and intentions in her, that Alcott, through Amy, very subtly suggested a way of playing along with the patriarchy, in a way that women could derive some kind of benefit from it. An

introduction to this interpretation of Amy could be the following statement by Stephanie Foote (2005): “gender conformity helps to compensate for uncertain class position” (75), “Amy is rewarded for her reading of interdependence of class and status, a reading she facilitates by transforming her bumptious social airs into more mannered expressions of ladylikeness” (78).

The youngest of the March sisters has never hidden her determination to be liked by others, and that she is willing to do whatever is in her hand in order to achieve it. An early example in the novel where Amy’s goal is to meet the standards of the high society and be socially accepted is in the chapter *Amy’s Valley of Humiliation*; she feels in debt to her classmates because they all gave one to her, so she buys some to give them to her colleagues and fulfil her social duty: “They treat by turns; and I’ve had ever so many but haven’t returned them, and I ought, for they are debts of honour, you know” (Alcott 59). Amy shows to understand from an early age that “when she repays her debts during social calls, she is rewarded beyond her wildest dreams” (Foote 76); in essence, that conforming to social rules brings one closer to their objectives. This strong sense of social duty from a young age explains her later conviction on being an artist on her own merit, but also how she feels indebted to her family, and also in duty, to marry well so them, and herself, can have a good life: “Amy quests for financial freedom and profession [...] she associates her quest with romance, vowing to marry well” (Blackford 25). She is conscious about women’s position in society at the time and acknowledges that a man is essential for them if they want to progress: “‘Men have to work and women to marry for money,’ says Amy; and while her emphasis here is mistakenly in money, nothing in the book contradicts her assessment of what women must do to live” (Fetterley 377). Eventually, Amy gives up her dream of being an artist due to several adversities, but far from feeling it as a defeat, she feels it is not that bad of an event, since she will still be

fulfilling what is expected of her: “In the end, Amy gives up art, Alcott permits her to use her taste and her esthetic skill for the embellishment of life with no loss of integrity or diminution in her strength of character” (Hollander 34).

Judith Butler (1990), quoted in Mes (2011) argues that “agency does not entail an outright rejection of norms. Rather, agency receives its specific form from these norms and displaces these norms from within” (12). Mes in her thesis also states: “I understand agency not as overt resistance and emancipation, but rather as the ability to re-signify dominant norms from within” (9). According to Butler and Mes, Amy seems to fit into the concept of agency as well, and not only in the submissive or conformist, because, as Prasad claims: “By accepting this submissive position, the woman does not necessarily perpetuate her subordinate role in society” (23).

To sum up, after having analyzed the selected literature, I conclude that the youngest of the March sisters, Amy, is a character built on the dichotomy between agency and submission; she leaves behind her dream of being a painter because, among other reasons, she knows she would never achieve in the way she desires, and that she has a commitment to her family, so she decides to prioritize marrying well. Nonetheless, this does not mean she is giving up the strength and self-determination she has built over the years, but that she learns how she will have a good life, being free as she always wanted, in the time and society in which she has been born. As Murphy rightly claims: “The power of *Little Women* derives in large measure from the contradictions and tensions it exposes and from the pattern it establishes of subversive, feminist exploration colliding repeatedly against patriarchal repression” (584).

1. Discerning between submission and subversion

This former section will address the questions of submission and subversion in *Little Women*. Firstly, I contrast how conformity and agency are embodied through Jo and Amy March, preceded by a historical context of the period. Secondly, I will focus on the pragmatist interpretation of feminism and subsequently, a pragmatist interpretation of Amy, which positions her as an agential character like her older sister Jo and opposes those readings that interpret her as the most patriarchal and submissive sister.

1.1. Conformity and agency in *Little Women* through Jo and Amy March

The question that has been permanently central in the literary studies of *Little Women* is whether the novel moves towards conformity or agency –in other words, towards submission or subversion–, or if it lies somewhere in between these opposites. To make a proper analysis, a brief historical and social context on the situation of women at the time is necessary.

The coming-of-age novel *Little Women* is set in the 1860s, in the North American state of Massachusetts. At that time, women were almost as stagnant as decades ago speaking in terms of attaining laws and legal and political rights. There was the social convention that they belonged to the domestic sphere, taking care of the household and raising the children, what Virginia Woolf will later label as ‘The Angel in the House’¹, characterized by being sacrificial, pure, wholesome, in brief, angelical. However, further into the century, more and more activists started to speak up and things began to advance

¹ Term coined by the feminist English writer Virginia Woolf in 1942 to describe the ideal Victorian women, who were a white, middle-class woman that was sympathetic, charming, selfless, sacrificial, pure and beautiful. (Woolf [1942] 2008, 141) This model of women had predetermined domestic roles and were charming, modest, pure, unproblematic, simply angelical.

in women's favor; the seeds of change were planted. It is crucial, too, to be aware that the first years of the novel are set during the Civil War, where women took over the role of men as well as their own, being responsible for keeping everything moving forward during the absence of men. Seeing they were successful in this new duty imposed on them, they wanted to push forward for equality and to leave behind previous conventions and rules in order to make change tangible and real.

This shifting socio-cultural context where the four sisters were brought up undoubtedly influenced their personality and beliefs, such as the never-ending and inexhaustible aim to fight for what they dream of and what they believe is fair, but still with traces of wanting to adhere to the established standards and have a conventional life. This increasing change in the women of the time is especially noticeable in Jo and Amy, both known to be stubborn and determined, each in their own particular way.

Amy March, the focus of this thesis, could not be fully grasped without Jo March, one of her older sisters and the one with whom more competitiveness is shown in the book. Likewise in the critical community, the two sisters have always been compared and put in opposition to highlight the apparent shortcomings of each other. However, they both share being submissive and subversive throughout their life experiences as they grow older.

In the early years of the story, Alcott depicted Amy, in part, as innocent and childish, which could be a usual description for a girl her age, but she also painted her as "conceited, affected and selfish" and "only seriously committed to high standards of visual appearance" (Hollander 32). Amy acts impulsively and is easily angered, grumbling and complaining at the minor inconvenience she encounters, and at the same time, she goes out of her ways to please others. Since she was a child, she was aware of her femininity and what this implied, and also wanted to be liked by others: "She was a

great favorite with her mates, being good-tempered, and possessing the happy art of pleasing without efforts” (Alcott 48). Not only that, but she too had a strong sense of social duty: she knew what she wanted for herself, to be an artist, but she also was aware of what was expected from her, and that she could not escape.

Jo, on the other hand, was not so harshly illustrated by the writer; Jo had a “quick temper, sharp tongue, and restless spirit” (Alcott 46). Unlike Amy, Jo did not seem to care about agreeing with the social standards and expectations: she only had in mind her dream of being a successful writer and the inexhaustible desire to achieve it. Therefore, they both have a determination for their independent future, which is an indicator of the presence of agency in their personality, but only Amy is willing to conform to the social standards and abide by the expectations laid on her; she is willing to embrace her femininity, while Jo refuses to do so. This leaves Amy in an inferior position to Jo in terms of being subversive; as Foote describes: “Jo, scorning social convention, and Amy, happily enslaved by it” (74).

Years go by and Amy’s personality starts to differ from when she was a child, and she gradually leaves behind her aspects of being a spoiled kid. According to Prasad, “the second little woman to mature in the novel is Amy” (38). She learns more prematurely than usual about the virtues of womanhood. As opposed to Jo, who regardless of the passing of the years, remains rather careless about proper femininity and womanhood. Amy claims that “women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones; for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive” (Alcott 343). She has observed that to be a successful woman, gender roles must be conformed, and is willing to do so in order to benefit from it. It is from this point onwards that agency appears to be embraced by both of them, but Jo does it in a raw, transparent way, while Amy puts on a social or gendered façade.

Alcott starts giving Amy a career in the artistic world, proving she always had talent. She finds in art the power she holds in herself, especially after her trip to Europe with Aunt March. In fact, Aunt March, instead of taking Jo to Europe, ends up taking Amy with her because she has proven to be more disciplined and committed to what she considers her role as a woman is, independently of her devotion being an artist. Jo has always behaved wildly and unladylike in front of her aunt, which is not to her liking, so she gives her hopes up on her. Hence, Alcott is rewarding Amy for leaving her old manners behind and adopting new virtues that will result in more fruitful for her in the society of the time. As Prasad states, “Alcott reveals that a girl who strives for true womanhood will make more progress than one who rejects tradition outright” (38), the former being Amy, and Jo the latter.

Amy discovers in Europe how powerful she can be, not only in terms of independence and determination but also how this power can affect men and influence them, which facilitates finding a suitable man for herself and her family, too: “Amy knew her good points, and made the most of them with the taste and skill which is fortune to a poor and pretty woman” (Alcott 439). She decides by herself to refuse her first proposal of marriage and later persuades Laurie into loving her. She is using her charms as a woman to get what she wants, not in a way where she objectifies and inferiorizes herself, but subtly manipulates the situation to steer it in her favor. At first glance, actions like these may seem like acts of submission, since in the end, she is submitting herself to the power of a man, but it is a greater act of agency considering she is the one who is managing the situation, something quite unusual at the time.

Once she discovers that her talent to make the most out of her femininity is better, Amy decides to leave behind her facet as an artist “[...] because talent isn’t genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won’t be a common-

place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more. [...] Polish up my other talents, and be an ornament to society, if I get the chance" (Alcott 467). This decision is also a sign that she is moving towards adulthood, gaining consciousness about her strengths, limitations, and most importantly, her realistic life options as a woman. Hollander defends that "Alcott permits her to use her taste and her esthetic skill for the embellishment of life with no loss of integrity or diminution in her strength of character" (34), meaning that by devoting her life to domesticity from now on, by embracing this new stage in her life, this does not make her less than when she was alone and fulfilling her dream, nor does it detract from previous acts of subversion, since the compilation of them all led her to this point.

Referring back to Jo, she remains in her determination on being true to herself, and to the fact that she is not made for marriage and focuses on making her dream of being a writer come true until the very end of the book. She misses at adapting to her social context or being agreeable in social interactions since she perceives those attitudes as a submission to an oppressing system; thus, she rejects to participate in anything marriage-related and is subversive towards anything she finds unfair: "Jo's independence has resulted in exclusion, not freedom" (Foote 76). However, this permanent insurgent attitude, in the long term, leads her to a life of solitude when all her sisters have already found a life partner, which leads her to fall into despair and, eventually, she too falls into the oppressive system that she has been avoiding for so long.

It is not until she reaches adulthood and realizes that she is being left behind by her closest circle of people – her sisters – that she decides she must marry as well. The biggest realization is, in fact, that she needs a man's love and his company, for being successful in her working life, and, also, to have a companion and erase the feeling of loneliness that has been with her for many years.

1.2. Amy March through the lens of pragmatism

This section aims to introduce a new approach –closer to the notion of agency discussed earlier– to the interpretation of Amy’s character: pragmatism. This new standpoint moves closer towards the interpretations that uphold the ideas that the young girl is an agential character and subversive towards what oppressed her. Firstly, the concept of pragmatism will be explained and put in context for a better comprehension of the text; this will be followed by arguments that evidence and support the reading of Amy as a pragmatist in the book.

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement born in the United States in the mid-19th century. Some of the key figures associated with this movement are Charles Sanders Pierce, who first defined the term, considered the founder, and William James, who furtherly developed the ideas and applied them to other fields of knowledge. This tradition defends the priority of taking action and getting results, over theorization; that ideas and principles –words, in essence–, and their accompanying actions, are tools to help one get closer to achieving their goals. Pragmatism values the usefulness and practicality of concepts applied to real-world situations, rather than just considering their theoretical validity.

What the main theses of philosophical pragmatism defend and can be clearly identified in Amy March, is the one that puts the usage of language at its center: the key aspect of pragmatism is its focus on the practical consequences of ideas and beliefs. Therefore, it is implied in the intentions of pragmatism that how language is used plays a pivotal role in the achievement of practical outcomes in social and political contexts. Language can be used to persuade, create social relationships, convey information and so on. Language can represent the most effective means to attain the desired goal. Pragmatists claim that language use, far from being neutral, is shaped by cultural and

historical components. They are interested in how its usage can shape social and political power relations, but also in how it can be used to challenge and subvert dominant forms of knowledge and to promote social justice and equality.

Even though the relationship between feminism and pragmatism has not been studied in any depth to date, both of their theories share some key aspects; the main one being having their focus placed on practical problem-solving, and they are both concerned with their ultimate outcome being the improvement of people's lives conditions. Feminists have used pragmatism to develop alternative approaches to social and political change involving experimentation and being flexible, adapting to the circumstances. Some feminists argue that traditional forms of political activism such as protesting, which more closely resembles the ways of Jo March, are not always effective, and that new forms of activism are needed, such as wisely shaping and adapting oneself to the changing circumstances, this being more reminiscent of Amy.

The youngest of the March's seems to have a pragmatist tendency in her beliefs and actions. According to Gaard, quoted in Prasad, "Amy is a pragmatist: she has observed that, in order to succeed, she must conform to her gendered role, and she is willing to do so to reap the benefits" (1994 38). The novel reaches a turning point for Amy where she acknowledges that instead of outrightly rejecting her femininity, she should embrace it in order to make progress in her given context and escalate the social ladder. She is aware of her capabilities, her ambitions and what she wants for her life, but she gradually realizes that that is not enough; her determination, will and hard work are not sufficient. To be a successful, almost unfeasible desire for a woman, she must be agreeable and fit into the unwritten yet prescribed roles.

Amy makes explicit this method of agreeing with the norms as well as with the ones in higher positions than her in the chapter *Literary Lessons*, where she is advising

Jo to listen to her publisher, to not counter him, so it is him who has the principal key for her to success: “Do as he tells you; he knows what will sell, and we don’t. Make a good, popular book, and get as much money as you can. By and by, when you’ve got a name, you can afford to digress, and have philosophical and metaphysical people in your novels” (Alcott 314). Complying to the publisher may be an unpleasant decision for Jo to make, but in the long run, it will put her in a more privileged position at the time of obtaining a certain liberty. In the chapter *Calls*, where Amy and Jo have to attend to numerous social arrangements together, Amy commands her sister to be “sociable”, and lectures her on how this is the only path for them to become someone in life. However, having regard to the vital point where Jo finds herself, being successful is not a priority for her, so she is not as witty as her youngest sister, and neither are her performances.

Another passage where Amy’s pragmatism is glimpsed is in her decision to marry Fred Vaughn, which she was determined to do even though she did not love him, and would have gone ahead with it if it hadn’t been for Laurie’s unexpected love declaration at the last moment. Yet Amy has esteem and affection for Fred, she does not feel a romantic attraction towards him; she is considering accepting his marriage proposal, and is more inclined to say yes, because of the benefits, mainly economic, this union can bring not only to her but also to her family. The basis of her decision is thinking about what the outcome of it will be, and how practical and convenient it will end up being for them. This can be read as an act of submission to the norms, but it can also be seen from an alternative perspective that places this decision as a tool to create more opportunities and provide better welfare for her family. Amy is being pragmatic, as the act of conforming to an economic marriage is the interlude towards the desired goal that will not oppress her, but contrarily, will liberate her.

With time, Amy has learnt she must think ahead and smarter, anticipating the events and possible scenarios, and act with an eye to what may be to most convenient potential aftermaths. This way of operation in most cases leads her to do what society expects of a woman her age and in her own particular context. Yet, this apparent compliance has an undertone of pragmatism and agency, as it is not closing doors nor limiting herself, but rather creating more subtle pathways that will lead her to a freer and more independent life.

2. Reading Amy against the grain

This second section of this dissertation concerns the analysis of four specific scenes in the novel where Amy is present and directly delivering a speech or actively participating in a conversation, where she is consequently putting herself in an agential position as a woman. Afterwards, the focus will be put on the evidence that demonstrates there is an intertwining of submission and subversion in the novel.

2.1. Selection of passages that picture Amy as an agential character

To carry out the selection of these specific passages I focused on whether Amy to a great or lesser extent, straightforwardly delivers her opinions and thoughts, or if the central topic of the scene was conformity –or agency– related; this means, scenes where the willing to meet the social standards is discussed and an opposing force is present as well. This selection has emanated into four scenes that are found from the middle of the book onwards.

Even though there are glimpses of Amy's subversiveness earlier in the book, I have decided to choose these scenes from when she has almost or already entered womanhood because I consider her thoughts and opinions are more solid and with a more complex background that makes her behave and think as she does.

2.1.1. Scene 1: Chapter 26 "Artistic Attempts" – meeting the class standards.

I chose this scene –from chapter 26, "Artistic Attempts"– as the first to evaluate because it is one of the very first occasions where Amy, already moving away from childhood and behaving as a young adult, expresses her steadfast will to carry out her goals but also her morals and values in speech.

In this first passage, Amy March wants to throw a party for her drawing class colleagues. She argues with Marmee about the food that will be served since they do not seem to reach a common ground where both of them are satisfied with the options. Marmee suggests serving affordable food according to their economic situation, while Amy is tarnished on serving more expensive food. She wants to impress her classmates but also, from her viewpoint, to pretend to have a higher social status and thus, to resemble them more. As an argument, Amy claims that: "The girls are used to such things, and I want my lunch to be proper and elegant, though I do work for my living" (Alcott 299); an argument which she will later reinforce by adding: "If I can't have it as I like, I don't care to have it at all. [...] and I don't see why I can't if I'm willing to pay for it." (Alcott 300). In these quotations can be seen Amy's obstinacy in conforming to what the girls will likely be expecting from her party; these can also be read as indicators of what Amy aspires for herself in the future.

Further into the chapter, Jo enters the scene and accuses Amy of "truckling" to her colleagues just because they are richer and fancier than her. Amy responds:

“You don’t care to make people like you, to go into good society, and cultivate your manners and tastes. I do, and I mean to make the most of every chance that comes. You can go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it independence, if you like. That’s not my way.” (Alcott 301).

Amy considers this party a “chance” she must “make the most of”. Therefore, she sees a potential opportunity in this gathering to make a place for herself among her drawing friends from a higher social class; this is, in the end, a procedure to reach her goal of establishing more relationships with wealthy people and getting into their world. Here, Amy is being pragmatic, since she plans this reunion with a purpose, and, as opposed to Jo, who resists the way of society with her “elbows out”, she blends into the cultural norms to be a step closer to freedom.

2.1.2. Scene 2: Chapter 29 “Calls” – complying with social events.

This second scene was chosen since the issue of the social debt Amy feels she owes to society and everyone kind to her reaches one of its highest points. Jo and Amy are carrying out social calls to friends and family. The former is reluctant to go, but Amy finally convinces her to attend, since “it’s no pleasure to me to go to-day, but it’s a debt we owe society, and there’s no one to pay it but you and me” (Alcott 334). She urges Jo to dress properly and to perform ladylike behavior, just like hers. Amy shows awareness of how society works and how should she behave to fit in and be respected.

Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones; for they have no other way of repaying the kindness they receive. [...] I only know that it’s the way of the world; and people who set themselves against it only get laughed at for their pains. I don’t like reformers and I hope you will never try to be one (Alcott 343-344).

Being pleasant, agreeable, and reciprocal of what others give you was of paramount importance in the society of the time, especially for young adult women who were trying

to forge their future. Conforming to what is expected from them was the best strategy, and this is what Amy is trying to teach Jo in this scene.

The fact that Amy considers her conformity a way of payment is what makes it an agential operation, since, again, it is just a transaction for the attainment of something else. In this case, Amy's goal is to please Aunt March and Aunt Carrol to enthrall them, so they will provide her with the benefits of having contacts in the higher society, and bring her the opportunity to go to Europe and study art. Finally, her pleasantness is rewarded by her aunt, who chooses her over Jo to accompany her to Europe. Consequently, this journey will open new doors for her, such as the chance to marry a rich man like Fred Vaughn, a storyline that will be analyzed next. "Conformity to norms is the capital with which Amy accesses and attains the things that she really wants" (Mess 16-17).

2.1.3. Scene 3 and 4: Chapter 31 "Our Foreign Correspondent" & Chapter 39 "Lazy Laurence" – settling for an economic marriage.

Scenes 3 and 4, joined together because they deal with the same issue, present the moment in which Amy communicates she has almost made the decision to marry Fred Vaughn, first to her family through correspondence, and later to her beloved neighbor Laurie.

In the first passage, the letter for her household, which Amy is writing from Europe, she is aware beforehand that her mother will not agree and her sisters will disapprove, as she writes: "Now I know mother will shake her head, and the girls say, "Oh that mercenary little wretch!", but even so, she adds: "but I've made up my mind, and if Fred asks me, I shall accept him, though I'm not madly in love" (Alcott 368). She admits it would not be a marriage born out of love, but that she is willing to carry it through since the consummation of this marriage would be convenient not only for her

but also for the wellbeing of her family. “I may be mercenary², but I hate poverty, and don’t mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help. One of us must marry well. Meg didn’t, Jo wouldn’t, Beth can’t yet, so I shall, and make everything cozy all round” (Alcott 369). Amy is willing to make this ‘sacrifice’, to apparently lower her standards and stoop to a marriage for economic and welfare convenience on behalf of her family.

The second scene depicts a conversation between Amy and Laurie in which she is also informing him of her intentions to marry Fred Vaughn. Laurie seems annoyed by this information, so he uses a teasing tone in his response and reproaches her that it would be a decision improper for being her mother’s daughter: “I understand. Queens of society can’t get on without money, so you mean to make a good match and start in that way? Quite right and proper, as the world goes, but it sounds funny from the lips of one of your mother’s girls,” (Alcott 468).

In these two moments, Amy’s idea of marriage can be perceived, which is the ideal example of the social conception of marriage, where social expectations and cultural norms are put above anything related to romance and feelings. Primarily, she, as well as most of the population of the time, believes a woman must marry well to ensure herself a stable future in terms of economy. Notwithstanding, her intentions go beyond that: she is willing to undergo this conventional marriage as it is her duty, a debt she feels she owes to her family, as well as a shortcut: she attempts to provide her family with wealth, and herself with a higher level of freedom and independence after this engagement. Labelling this marriage as ‘mercenary’ implies that she is interested in the possible outcome of it rather than in the union per se. For that reason, her will to settle for this marriage cannot be read as a submission to the standards, but rather as an agential and pragmatic practice,

² According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, ‘mercenary’ means: “interested only in the amount of money that you can get from a situation.”

where she is taking advantage of how the system is framed in order to craft a pathway to attain her independence and do as she likes.

Gathering the readings of these four scenes together, it is safe to say that, by looking at them in detail, Amy gives her actions a different connotation than the first impression of them: while her acts have been chiefly read as oppressive and submissive to the norms, she gives them an empowering and liberating connotation.

2.2. The intertwining of submission and subversion

Having carried out a close reading of these four selected scenes, the analysis shows that Amy is in a position of neither complete submission to the norms nor complete opposition to the system and expectations like her older sister Jo. Therefore, Amy's character is in an in-between position where there is a constant intertwining of subversion and submission, both stances coexist in Amy and take place at the same time.

It is undeniable that, from an objective perspective, Amy is constantly conforming to the norms and social expectations. The impression she gives outwardly is, as mentioned before, fairly similar to the canon of Victorian femininity that Virginia Woolf labelled as "Angel in the House": Amy presents herself, broadly speaking, as charming, sacrificial, serviceable and beautiful. These behaviors have been spotted in her in all the previous scenes through interactions with her family and friends. In these scenes, at first glance, Amy's biggest concern is to be pleasant and agreeable to everyone she interacts with, even though some situations are not of her liking.

Nevertheless, having some background of the character and her situation, it is easy to deduce that the motivations behind these acts of conformity, go beyond being liked by others, that she has a deeper purpose that prompts her to perform this way. It is precisely this that moves her actions away from being read as submissive and places them a step

closer to subversion. This subversion, however, is not evident to the naked eye, is a kind of subversion from underneath, contradicting the system by completely submerging in it. Thus, Amy March is not submissive *or* subversive, she is found in an in-between point where a dichotomy between submission and subversion is created, so, Amy could be categorized as both submissive *and* subversive at the same time.

Amy's conformity, mainly in her early stages of life, is unconscious, meaning that she does not acknowledge or realize the real reason why she is conforming and attaining the norms so strictly, thinking she is just behaving as she should, molding herself to the ways of the world. As she comes of age, she progressively becomes more aware of the real functioning of society, and how her already learnt, interiorized behaviors can lead to a positive and beneficial impact in her life, so she starts wittingly taking advantage of it.

According to Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), agency –or “the rules that govern intelligible identity” (185)– is created on the basis of the repetition of acts rather than their straight refusal:

[...] ‘agency’, then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation of that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practice of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible (185).

Hence, Butler's posture is that what makes agency attainable, –even though this being found in the repetition and conformity of the norms–, is the variation in the reiteration of these norms, the slight difference in each act every time it is executed that places the ‘doer’ closer to being the owner of their ‘deeds’. For this reason, Butler's perspective ensures the plausibility of finding subversion in abiding by the norms, that one does not preclude the other, in fact, they coexist. Agency does not necessarily mean

explicitly rejecting the norms, but learning how to use them in one's favor so the path to empowerment is less complicated and more accessible.

Amy March inhabits those social standards and re-signifies them her way, giving them a liberating meaning: she uses her submissive behavior as a pragmatic practice to attain her desires rather than just to meet the expectations.

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 that the character of Amy March, from the book *Little Women*, could have another interpretation than the long-established one and be reread as an in-between position amid submission and subversion.

In the first section, I inquire into the debate of conformity and agency in Amy and her older sister Jo, comparing their dissident ways of moving around in the world and observing that, even though undeniably being two opposites ideologies and practices, they are essentially doing the same and battling for the same outcome: attempting to build themselves alternatives routes to reach their desires, since following the conventional manners is not an option. Later, I offer a pragmatic approach to the character of Amy, since her actions place her in a pragmatist position as she acts in a forward-looking way, thinking about the benefit the given action can grant her in the long run.

The second section delves more into the text per se: I identified four scenes in which Amy has direct intercourse with another character and where apparent submission and her compliance to the standards stand out. In this section, I argue that Amy adopts a conforming behavior in all the passages to generate opportunities and open several doors that would eventually lead her to success; she is aware at all moments of what she should or should not do to content her counterparts of interest. Finally, in the last sub-section, I

defend the idea of Amy's character being at an intermediate point between submission and subversion, since her manners, objectively, are conforming to the dominant norms, but it is the intention behind her behaviors that re-signify their meaning and give them an agential and pragmatic connotation.

With this research, through Amy and indirectly through Jo, I have come to the realization of what women had to do and the intricate alternatives they had to provoke to ensure themselves a dignified future because, if they did not earn it, no one would do it for them. This ambivalent intertwining of conformity and agency found in Amy gives a new dimension to the book *Little Women* as a whole, as well as a better understanding of the situation of women at the time the book was written; a great number of the feminine population were not as courageous and candid as Jo March is, but that had the same determination and will for a better future, like Amy. I believe Amy represents this great percentage of women who had to be nimble and discreet, to go under the radar in order to move forward and not remain stuck in tradition.

In conclusion, *Little Women* is a book that explores the different ways in which women forge their way into the world and create, on many occasions from scratch, a place in society. It tries to be a kind of instructing manual for young girls growing up in a patriarchal society but with a feminist undertone for the time, and still continues to have it in some aspects. Therefore, Amy's character is crucial in the way the issues of subversion and submission are presented from a new viewpoint, especially in the message it gives to the readers.

In this TFG I have introduced some aspects that I could not fully develop within the scope of my research: First of all, the feminist approach and theory discussed in this dissertation is specific to white, middle-class women, and this debate of submission and subversion within the novel *Little Women* has also been mainly addressed by white,

middle-class women. Thus, a perspective that also includes the questions of ethnicity and class conflict –which the book disregards– would enrich and contribute to a more complete understanding of the issue of agency and conforming behavior. Secondly, because of the choice of only four scenes where conformity is at the surface, many other moments have been overlooked that may commit to a thorough understanding of how acting submissive functions in the novel. Lastly, moving away from strictly analyzing the book, comparing it to the different film adaptations carried out from the former in 1949, to the latter, in 2019, would be an issue of interest for further research to examine how the understanding of the character from a perspective of a society with a more progressive and freer ideology and understanding of the world.

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