

Critical Articles for *Little Women*  
Dramaturg: Sean Connolly

In my research from critical articles about *Little Women: The Musical* I began to realize quickly that very little has been written critically about the musical. When I contacted several noted academics, who are considered to some of the leaders in Louisa May Alcott, many did not even know that a musical had been made about *Little Women*. However, there were still many areas that seemed important to know more about, at least to know what other academics were writing about.

Most importantly it was important to know as much about the female perspective of this work as possible. One had to start with how it was received when it was published in 1868, this was done both through reviews and what scholars had written about it in the 1800s. Then my research took me to examining how it is still being looked at, from the late 19th century, through the middle of the 20th and now to today. Next I detected that there were several areas of research that most academics wrote about when discussing *Little Women*. These academics looked at how patriarchy, gender, imagination, and feminism has defined *Little Women*. These four topics form the backbone for almost all scholarly writing on the subject. As such, I included articles that explored these issues. There are certainly other articles that I could have included as well, but depending on what of the four topics they are discussing, they for the most part say the same thing. There are outliers to this however. Some briefly touched on the idea of the musical, but their lack of understanding of even the most fundamental elements of theatre deemed it inappropriate to include, as well as some other more outrageous statements on gender which would have suggested these articles had been written in the 1950s not the 2000s. Regardless, the articles included here give a good overview of what the majority of academic have been writing about regarding *Little Women*.

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A Collection of Reviews and Assessments of *Little Women*  
By Various Authors

Almost all the reviews of *Little Women* were positive. There was much praise for Alcott as a writer, and no one seemed to be surprised, upset or have any other opinions on Alcott's gender as a writer. The books were loved by much of the population, male, female, young and old. And as one can see from the "*Little Women: leads polls*" even in the 1920s the books was ranked as one of the most popular books in America by high schoolers.

most ordinary every-day life. Parents desiring a Christmas book for a girl from ten to sixteen years, cannot do better than to purchase this.

The writer almost promises, as the story is concluded, to follow this volume with others of similar character. We sincerely hope she will.

normal  
life is  
extraordinary.

[Review of *Little Women*, Part II,  
1869]

Anonymous\*

No reader of Miss Alcott's *Little Women*, published some months since by Roberts Brothers, but will desire to possess the "second part" of the charming sketches which she has just given to the public through the same publishers. The first series was one of the most successful ventures to delineate juvenile womanhood ever attempted; there was a charm and attractiveness, a naturalness and grace, about both characters and narrative, that caused the volume to become a prime favorite with everybody. This issue continues the delight—it is the same fascinating tale, extended without weakening, loading the palate without sickishness. The varied emotions of the young heart are here caught and transfixed so that we almost note the expression of the face upon the printed page. Surely Miss Alcott has wonderful genius for the portraiture, as, years ago, we knew she had for the entertainment, of children. Lee & Shepard have the volume.

Better  
than the  
first.

Praise  
for Miss  
Alcott.

[Review of *Little Women*, Part II,  
1869]

Anonymous\*

The second part of this charming story is out, and all who followed the four sisters and their brother-friend through their childish years, will be eager to follow their various experiences through maidenhood, in college, abroad, and later, in the new home centres they all, save one, helped to make. It would not be fair to those who will read the book, and whose eyes may fall upon this notice to tell any of the story. It is enough to say that the second part perfectly fulfills the promise of the first, and one leaves it with the sincere wish that there were to be a third and a fourth part; indeed he wishes he need never part company, with these earnest, delightful people.

One thought ought to be sown broadcast, till it supplants the heresy that "boys *must* have wild oats to sow," with the truth that purity and virtue are not less the birthright of the brother than of the sister. Of Laurie she says

Praise  
to write  
more of  
more

\*Reprinted from the *Commonwealth*, 7 (24 April 1869), 1.

\*Reprinted from *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 29 (1 May 1869), [3].

[Review of *Little Women*, Part I,  
1868]

Anonymous\*

Miss Alcott's new juvenile is an agreeable little story, which is not only very well adapted to the readers for whom it is especially intended, but may also be read with pleasure by older people. The girls depicted all belong to healthy types, and are drawn with a certain cleverness, although there is in the book a lack of what painters call atmosphere — things and people being painted too much in "local colors," and remaining, under all circumstances, somewhat too persistently themselves. The letterpress is accompanied by four or five indifferently executed illustrations, in which Miss May Alcott betrays not only a want of anatomical knowledge, and that indifference to or non-recognition of the subtle beauty of the lines of the female figure which so generally marks women artists, but also the fact that she has not closely studied the text which she illustrates.

— Oh the 1860s

— Mitch McConell could have written this.

— So we can make some clear changes, since Alcott's drawings suck.

[Review of *Little Women*, Part I,  
1868]

Anonymous\*

This is decidedly the best Christmas story which we have seen for a long time. The heroines (there are four of them) are the "little women" of the title, ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age, each interesting in her way, and together enacting the most comical scenes and achieving most gratifying results. The father is in the army, and it is to please him that his daughters make an effort of a year to correct certain faults in their dispositions. In this they are quite successful, and the father comes home, after many sad war scenes, to find his little ones greatly improved in many respects, a comfort and joy to both their parents. The book is most originally written. It never gets commonplace or wearisome, though it deals with the

→ Very positive reviews

\*Reprinted from the *Nation*, 7 (22 October 1868), 335.

\*Reprinted from *Arthur's Home Magazine*, 32 (December 1868), 375.

The poor fellow had temptations enough from without and from within, but he withstood them pretty well. — for much as he valued liberty he valued good faith and confidence more. — so his promise to his grandfather, and his desire to be able to look honestly into the eyes of the women who loved him, and say 'All's well,' kept him safe and steady.

Very likely some Mrs. Grundy will observe, "I don't believe it; boys will be boys, young men must sow their wild oats, and women must not expect miracles." I dare say *you* don't, Mrs. Grundy, but it's [sic] true, nevertheless. Women work a good many miracles, and I have a persuasion that they may perform even that of raising the standard of manhood by refusing to echo such sayings. Let the boys be boys, — the longer the better — and let the young men sow their wild oats if they must, — but mothers, sisters, and friends may help to make the crop a small one, and keep many tares from spoiling the harvest, by believing, — and showing that they believe, — in the possibility of loyalty to the virtues which make men manliest in good women's eyes. If it is a feminine delusion, leave us to enjoy it while we may — for without it half the beauty and the romance of life is lost, and sorrowful forebodings would embitter all our hopes of the brave, tender-hearted little lads, who still love their mothers better than themselves, and are not ashamed to own it.

Miss Alcott could crave no richer harvest than that which is sure to come from her sowing. Thousands of young people will read her story of these healthy, happy homes, and their standard of home and happiness must in many cases be raised. This is a blessed thing to accomplish in these days of extravagance, when the highest ideal of home is more and more seldom realized.

[Review of *Little Women*, Part II,  
1869]

Anonymous\*

*Little Women*, Part II, by Louise M. Alcott, is a rather mature book for the little women, but a capital one for their elders. It is natural, and free from that false sentiment which pervades too much of juvenile literature. Autobiographies, if genuine, are generally interesting, and it is shrewdly suspected that Joe's experience as an author photographs some of Miss Alcott's own literary mistakes and misadventures. But do not her children grow rather rapidly? They are little children in Part First, at the breaking out of the civil war. They are married, settled, and with two or three children of their own before they get through Part Second.

Too adult  
for children.  
It's rather  
like The  
Hobbit. (Webster)  
Literature, not  
for adults.

\*Reprinted from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 39 (August 1869), 455-56.

**[Little Women and the Rollo Books]**

Barrett Wendell\*

Miss Alcott's *Little Women* does for the '60's what *Rollo* does for the '40's.

Mr. Jacob Abbott's "Rollo Books," . . . remain, with their unconscious humour and art, such admirable pictures of Yankee life about 1840. Twenty-eight years later, Louisa Alcott, the admirably devoted daughter of that minor prophet of Transcendentalism, published a book for girls, called *Little Women*, which gives almost as artless a picture of Yankee life in the generation which followed Rollo's. A comparison between these two works is interesting. Comically limited and consciously self-content as the world of Rollo is, it has a refinement which amounts almost to distinction. Whatever you think of the Holiday family and their friends, who may be taken as types of the Yankee middle class just after Gilbert Stuart painted the prosperous gentlemen of Boston, they are not vulgar. The world of *Little Women* is a far more sophisticated world than that of Rollo, a bigger one, a rather braver one, and just as sweet and clean. But instead of unquestioning self-respect, its personages display that rude self-assertion which has generally tainted the lower middle class of English-speaking countries.

**Little Women Leads Poll:  
Novel Rated Ahead of Bible for  
Influence on High School Pupils**

Anonymous\*

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is still one of the favorite books of American childhood, according to a poll just completed by Current Literature among high school classes. The pupils were asked "What book has interested you most?" The Alcott novel was the first choice.

Next in order came the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Helen Keller's *Story of My Life*, *Polyanna*, E. J. Copus's *As Gold in the Furnace*, *Romona* [sic] *Ben-Hur*, Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, *The Bent Twig*, *So Big*, and *Trail Makers of the Middle Border*.

An essay contest was conducted at the same time, with fifteen prizes for the best written essays on the subject of the book selections. The first prize went to Mildred Childs of Gray, Ga., who chose *Little Women*.

\* Reprinted from *A Literary History of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), pp. 237, 337.

\* Reprinted from the *New York Times*, 22 March 1927, p. 7. Copyright 1927 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

## When the Alcott Books Were New

Dorothea Lawrance Mann\*

There are best sellers and best sellers, but the sales of *Little Women* are now mounting up toward the three million mark.

[Passage on biographical background deleted.]

*Little Women* was translated into French, German and Dutch, and was well known in England and on the continent. In Holland the first book was published under the title, *Under the Mother's Wings*, while the second part was known as *On Their Own Wings*. In 1890, when he was in Athens, Frank Sanborn found a copy of it in modern Greek. Just a few years ago *Little Women* was translated into Chinese by the Misses Sung Tsing-yung and Martha E. Pyle, and appeared in red-linen covers with golden Chinese characters and a fanciful colored-picture in time to be a gift for the Chinese New Year. The fame of the book is world-wide. In the Royal Free Hospital of London not so long ago there was established a *Little Women* bed.

One of the remarkable things about *Little Women* has been the way in which its sales have gone on increasing. Great as was its success during its author's lifetime, it did not touch its fame or its sales in the succeeding years. In 1921 it was selling better than it did in 1896, twenty-five years earlier. The delegates to the American Library Convention held in Detroit in June, 1922, and the delegates to the National Educational Association in Boston the same year were given a ballot bearing the names of one hundred books considered to be the children's favorites. They were asked to indicate twenty-five books which they would consider the best for a one-room country school. When the vote was tabulated the result showed that *Little Women* headed the list, with Lewis Carroll's volume containing the two stories, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* second.

THIS IS  
when  
critically  
it was talked  
about through  
Scholar's at  
all time  
low.

## One Hundred Good Novels

David A. Randall  
and John T. Winterich\*

### Little Women

*Little Women* / Or, / Meg, Jo, Beth And Amy / By Louisa M. Alcott / Illustrated By May Alcott / Boston / Roberts Brothers / 1868.

\*Reprinted from *Publishers' Weekly*, 116 (28 September 1929), 1619, 1623, 1624. Excerpted from the *Publishers' Weekly* of September 28, 1929, published by R. R. Bowker Company. Copyright 1929. Used by permission.

\*Reprinted from *Publishers' Weekly*, 135 (17 June 1939), 2183-84. Collations by Randall; notes by Winterich.

*The Westminster Confession of Faith.* Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990. *FreePress.org.* Free Presbyterian Church, 2006. Web. 29 Oct. 2013.



*Little Women* in its Time by Daniel Shealy

*Little Women* was written in the “golden age of children’s literature, and Alcott was writing for mainly a female audience, although all genders have enjoyed the novel. In the late 1860s, *Little Women* was met with mostly positive reviews from the mainstream press. Her positive acceptance from mainstream Americas was based in Alcott’s contemporary approach to writing. Her back ground was in the women's rights movement and equality in education. While interesting, Shealy does spend a little too much time talking about Alcott’s background and political women at the time, many of his conclusions don’t really illustrate any specific moments of enlightenment in the novel. However, there are a few exceptions that are interesting to talk about. 1st. Shealy concludes that the Hummels were deliberately placed in the story to talk about the poor immigrant story, and Professor Bhaer represents the successful immigrant. These might prove interesting ideas to talk about in our production.

## Little Women in Its Time

Daniel Shealy

In August 1868, as Louisa May Alcott was correcting proofs for part one of *Little Women*, she confided in her journal: "It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it" (*Journals* 166). When Thomas Niles, editor at Roberts Brothers publishers of Boston, first approached the thirty-five-year-old Alcott about writing a book aimed at a female audience, the author was unsure of her topic: "Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it" (*Journals* 165-166). Alcott turned the real-life escapades and tribulations of herself and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth, and May, into the fictionalized adventures of the March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. In turn, she created a family that readers as varied as Edith Wharton, Theodore Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein, and J. K. Rowling have cherished for almost 150 years. In an early review of 10 October 1868, *The Commonwealth*, a Boston newspaper, declared: "Few writers bear along with them so successfully the expressions, desires, sympathies and feelings of children as Miss Alcott, and the happy consequence is that her portraiture of child-life is real, penetrating and abiding" (qtd. in Clark 61). With the publication of *Little Women*, Alcott created one of the first realistic American children's books. It was to be a significant work, one that changed the landscape of children's literature.

Three years before *Little Women*, the golden age of children's literature began in America with the publication of Mary Mapes Dodge's *Hans Brinker; Or, the Silver Skates* (1865), a work that combined history and geography with a dramatic, yet sentimental, realistic plot. The 1860s also saw a boom in magazines devoted to children that would escalate throughout the last half of the century. However, most literature for children prior to the Civil War was designed more for moral instruction or education than entertainment.

Children could read the didactic works of Samuel Goodrich's series of "Peter Parley" books or the numerous adventures of Jacob Abbott's Rollo character. Even *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), the first in a series of over twenty-five books by Martha Finley (1828–1909), who used the pseudonym Martha Farquharson, featured a character so insistent upon proper moral and religious behavior that she would sit in protest at her piano stool for hours rather than play secular music on a Sunday.

Compared to *Elsie Dinsmore*, Alcott's Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy seem like real girls. They have faults, and they make mistakes. But how they attempt to correct their faults is what makes the book realistic. Such a difference in the type of literature for children was not lost on some reviewers. *Putnam's Magazine*, in its December 1868 review of *Little Women*, announced: "Verily there is a new era in this country in the literature for children . . . Most Sunday-school books were stories of unnaturally good and pious boys and girls, who, however, were not attractive enough to rouse a desire of imitation in the youthful breast" (qtd. in Clark 67). By re-imagining her own childhood and those of her sisters, Alcott created characters with whom her readers identified. Avid readers adapted chapters of the novel for amateur plays; others started their own newspapers, like the Marches' "Pickwick Portfolio." Many enthusiastic young girls wrote to Alcott insisting that Jo marry Laurie.

While *Little Women*, as Alcott herself noted, was based upon her own parents and siblings, whom she often referred to as the "pathetic family" (*Selected Letters* 122), the novel was also very much a product of its time. Today, *Little Women* possesses a patina of nostalgia for a simpler life. However, to readers in the late 1860s, the book was modern, addressing issues and concerns of many young women and families: the uncertainties of war and its aftermath, the growing pains of industrialization and immigration, and the struggles for gender equality. The central question Alcott grapples with is one that readers, then and now, must settle for themselves: How does a young girl grow into womanhood—not the cult of true womanhood that Alcott herself had been part of—but a new type of womanhood, one marked by independence and equality? The answer that Alcott

The next several pages deal with Alcott's history and while interesting, it

doesn't really talk about white women's reception in the 19th century.

gives in *Little Women* transformed this story of an impecunious family into a classic American novel.

Although *Little Women* is not often thought of as a Civil War novel, the war permeates part one. Opening in December 1861, the book focuses on life at home during the war. Mr. March's absence as a chaplain in the army creates an ongoing tension in the book. From the very first page, Alcott reveals a hole in the family's unity and happiness when Jo declares: "'We haven't got father, and shall not have him for a long time.' She didn't say 'perhaps never,' but each silently added it, thinking of father far way, where the fighting was" (*Little Women* 11). Alcott heightens the tension in Chapter 15, as a telegram informs the family that Mr. March has fallen gravely ill. Thoughts of him fill the sisters' minds—and the readers'—until he finally makes his appearance, healthy but weak, in the penultimate chapter of part one.

Louisa May Alcott, a fervent abolitionist like her parents, well knew the suffering that entire families experienced during the Civil War. She herself longed to be able to serve her country. When the Concord Artillery of the State Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, departed on April 19, 1861, in anticipation of conflict, Louisa confided in her journal: "A busy time getting them ready, and a sad day seeing them off; for in a little town like this we all seem like one family in times like these . . . as the brave boys went away perhaps never to come back again. I've often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man; but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can" (*Journals* 105).

Along with her mother, sisters, and other prominent Concord families, including the Emersons, Louisa was part of the Women's Aid Society in Concord, formed in 1861, sewing clothing and preparing bandages for the soldiers. In Chapter 1 of *Little Women*, Jo knits blue army socks, but moans: "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 at home and knit like a poky old woman" (13). Even Marmee arrives home late on Christmas Eve because she was preparing boxes to ship to Union soldiers for the holiday. War casts a pall of uncertainty in part one, an uneasiness that

many of Alcott's first readers vividly recalled when encountering the book in 1868.

Alcott, like her fictional counterpart Jo March, yearned to join the war effort. Once she turned thirty years old in November 1862, Alcott applied for a position as nurse and served in that capacity at the Union Hotel Hospital in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC. Arriving in December 1862, just as the first of the dying and wounded soldiers were brought in from the killing fields of the Battle of Fredericksburg, Alcott was thrust suddenly into the horrifying results of war. She quickly learned that impartial death chose no side. While the cost of the Civil War was enormous, approximately seventy-five billion dollars by today's comparisons, the human costs were staggering. In *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust observes: "The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated six-hundred-twenty thousand, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined" (xi). Contracting typhoid fever in mid-January 1863, Louisa returned to Concord with her father's assistance. Adapting the letters she had written to her family into an episodic story, Alcott published *Hospital Sketches* serially in the *Boston Commonwealth* in May and June 1863. As the first account of a Civil War hospital, Alcott's work attracted attention, inspiring noted abolitionist James Redpath to publish *Hospital Sketches* in book form that August. It proved to be Alcott's first real success as a writer, at least in the New England region.

However, the Civil War was not the only great change Alcott experienced. By 1860, the United States' population was not one that its Founding Fathers would have recognized. The great Irish Potato Famine of 1845–1852 had brought a million Irish immigrants to America. Because of their poverty, their lack of education, and especially their Catholic religion, the Irish were discriminated against, and many Americans thought these foreigners could never be assimilated into the country. German, Eastern European, and Chinese immigrants arrived in greater numbers than ever before,

most of them with little access to education, employment, housing, or health care. Poverty brought with it crime, violence, physical abuse, and vice. Opposition to such a large influx of immigrants also grew as Nativist political parties were formed to attempt to limit United States citizenship. By 1860, Boston's population was over 36 percent foreign-born and the problems were myriad.

In *Little Women*, Alcott hints at these disparities in Chapter 7, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," when Amy tosses her contraband pickled limes out the schoolroom window and the pupils discovered "that their feast was being exulted over by the little Irish children, who were their sworn foes" (59). The Irish children, who must have shouted in delight at this unexpected treat, could never afford to pay for an education—unlike Amy and her classmates. Instead, their life's dictionary was the street. Alcott also gives us a brief, but accurate, portrayal of the poverty endured by German immigrants when the Marches take Christmas breakfast to the Hummels in Chapter 2. Walking the backstreets of town, the angels of charity soon discover the reality: "A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bed-clothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm" (Alcott, *Little Women* 21). Although Alcott depicts the problems of immigration, she also, through her portrayal of Professor Bhaer, shows how successful immigration can be. Bhaer wishes to assimilate into American culture and is able to do so with his marriage to Jo, just as his own sister had married an American. *Little Women* demonstrates that nineteenth-century America was truly becoming a melting pot of cultures. At the same time, the novel does not hide the fact that such changes have costs rooted in poverty and ignorance.

The Alcott family was indeed familiar with poverty—their own and others. Abigail Alcott was a staunch defender of the poor, exhibiting constant kindness and charity. From 1848 to 1850, she served as a social worker—a "City Missionary"—where she viewed the horrible living conditions of the poor. After leaving her paid position, Abigail opened her own employment office (an "intelligence office") in order to find suitable work for the needy,

noting, "We do a good work when we clothe the poor, but a better one when we make the way easy for them to clothe themselves, the best when we so arrange society as to have no poor" (qtd. in Barton 143). Just as Marmee encourages her daughters to assist the needy in *Little Women*, so too did Abigail Alcott inspire her own daughters to help others. But Mr. March's letters home to his "little women" also affect the sisters' thoughts and actions, just as Bronson Alcott's ideas for a more perfect society and individual had a profound impact on his daughters, especially Louisa. Abigail's brother, Rev. Samuel Joseph May, once said of Bronson: "He was radical in all matters of reform; went to the root of all things, especially the subjects of education, mental and moral culture" (qtd. in Dahlstrand 49).

Born on November 29, 1832 (a birthday she would share with her father, Bronson Alcott), Louisa May Alcott was a child of the age of reform in the United States. She grew up surrounded by Transcendentalist writers in Concord and Boston, including her father, who thought that all people possessed divinity, a belief that branded them as heretics to many of the old religious order. Even Bronson Alcott had, with the assistance of the British reformer Charles Lane, established a utopian community called Fruitlands, in rural Harvard, Massachusetts in the summer of 1843. This experiment in consociate living, however, failed by the following January, leaving the Alcotts homeless and Bronson a depressed man. But the whole nation seemed caught up in the winds of change—not just the Transcendentalists. The activist Alcotts took part in most of the major movements: abolition, assistance to the needy, education reform, and woman's rights, among others. Some of the most prominent leaders of reform were among the Alcotts' family friends: Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Theodore Parker, and Lucy Stone. Influenced by her parents' active involvement in changing the individual and society for the better, Louisa herself took up the banner of change.

Alcott's interest in reform began with her parents' involvement in the anti-slavery movement. Bronson Alcott was an early member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833–1870), which was

founded by his friend Garrison. Abigail Alcott, perhaps inspired by the actions of her abolitionist brother, joined the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and later the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. As fervent abolitionists, the Alcotts also opened their homes to escaped slaves as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Alcott herself knew many of the anti-slavery leaders, or at least heard them speak as they mobilized financial and moral support: Angelina and Sarah Grimke, William and Ellen Craft, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman. John Brown visited Concord in the late 1850s, meeting with its leading abolitionists. Recent Harvard graduate Benjamin Franklin Sanborn, a friend to the Alcotts and teacher at a new private academy in town, even joined Brown's cause as part of the "Secret Six," a group of prominent citizens who helped finance Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. After the failed October 1859 attack upon the federal arsenal, Louisa recorded in her journal: "Glad I lived to see the Antislavery movement and this last heroic act in it" (*Journals* 95). As both an onlooker and a participant in the anti-slavery movement, Louisa's desire for change led to her involvement in other types of reform. One of the most effective keys to reform was, of course, education. The ability to enlighten an individual or one's self was the first step in reform, and Alcott had learned much about education from her father.

Bronson Alcott, born in 1799, was the son of a poor farming family in Connecticut. Self-educated, he worked as a peddler, traveling as far as the Carolinas to sell his domestic wares before finding a teaching position in Connecticut, where in 1827 he met Abigail May, the daughter of the well-to-do merchant, Colonel Joseph May, a prominent Bostonian. She was captivated by the tall philosopher and his "earnest desire to promote better advantages for the young" (qtd. in Dahlstrand 49). The two married at King's Chapel in Boston in 1830. Bronson soon earned a reputation as an excellent teacher, and, in 1834, he opened a new school in the Boston Masonic Temple. At this "Temple School," he initiated a number of educational reforms: children had their own desks and the environment was aesthetically pleasing. Class was conducted by the Socratic method, and students were instilled with the



Transcendentalist idea of divinity within. Corporal punishment was not permitted. Dorothy McCuskey notes that Bronson:

paid particular attention to the development of the imagination, partly because he felt it was neglected elsewhere, and partly because he considered the child to be dependent upon it before reason and judgment develop. For this reason he used stories, pictures, and imaginative poetry . . . Singing and instrumental music he valued as a means of cultivating the ear and voice, and he liked marching and dancing to music. (47–48)

Bronson was fortunate to have as instructors, at various times, three women who were more educated than he. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, an important figure in the Transcendentalist movement, and her youngest sister Sophia Peabody (future wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne) both taught at the school and were far superior to Bronson in their language skills, especially Greek and Latin. Margaret Fuller, a feminist, a Transcendentalist, and later author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), also taught at the Temple School. Bronson's educational reforms can be seen in Peabody's *Record of A School* (1835) and his own *Conversations with Children on the Gospel* (1836–1837). His practices, as reported in these books, prompted an outcry from conservative Boston, who believed Alcott, along with his Transcendentalist friends, was a religious heretic. Enrollment dwindled, and Bronson eventually closed the Temple School in June 1838, moving the few remaining students to a smaller school in his house on Beach Street in Boston. When Bronson enrolled a young African American girl, Susan Robinson, parents objected and withdrew their children. In June 1839, the school closed, and Bronson Alcott's career as a teacher was over.

Louisa, who as a child visited the Temple School, was educated primarily at home; however, her father's educational reforms found their way into *Little Women*. In Chapter 7, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," Alcott uses Mr. Davis, Amy's teacher, to criticize American education. Comparing Davis to Dr. Blimber, the inept head of the boys' school in Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), Alcott notes: "Mr. Davis knew any quantity of Greek, Latin,

Algebra, and ologies of all sorts, so he was called a fine teacher; and manners, morals, feelings, and examples were not considered of any particular importance" (*Little Women* 58). After reprimanding Amy for possession of the pickled limes, Mr. Davis physically punishes her by striking her hand with a ruler, an act that prompts Marmee to declare, "I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching, and don't think the girls you associate with are doing you any good" (61). Bronson's emphasis on student-centered education can also be seen in Chapter 11, "Experiments," where Marmee allows the girls to discover on their own the value and need for domestic chores. In addition, at the conclusion to part two of *Little Women*, Alcott introduces readers to the newest student of Jo and Professor Bhaer's school at Plumfield: "a merry little quadroon [a person who is one-fourth black], who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was welcome to the 'Bhaer-garten,' though some people predicted that his admission would ruin the school" (377). Although the quadroon mysteriously disappears in the March family sequels, the character is clearly inspired by Bronson's defiant act of integration some thirty years earlier. In many ways, *Little Women* exemplifies how education is not just facts learned in a classroom, but instead part of the very fabric of one's life. Alcott would go on to explore her father's education theories in *Little Men* (1871) and its sequel *Jo's Boys* (1886). While Alcott was active in various reform movements, she was perhaps most strongly drawn to the struggle for woman's rights.

Louisa May Alcott was fifteen years old when the first woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York in July 1848. As the daughter of abolitionists, Alcott was taught to regard everyone as equal. Both Bronson and Abigail Alcott supported the woman's rights movement (the singular "woman" stressed the importance of the individual as well as alluding to Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, one of the first important books to treat the rights of a woman seriously), and Alcott herself began to take an active part in the fight. Having read Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as a teenager, Alcott believed she had every

inherent right to achieve her own independence and self-reliance. As Alcott was writing *Little Women* in 1868, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony began publishing their feminist newspaper *The Revolution*. As part two of the novel appeared in April 1869, the two suffragists organized the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). However, some people, including Alcott, thought the organization too strident, especially in its demand that women be given the vote at the same time as African Americans. This demand, they felt, would slow the effort of freedmen to obtain the right to cast their vote. The clash caused many supporters in the New England Woman's Suffrage Association, led by Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone, to consider creating a new organization. The American Woman's Suffrage Association was formed in November 1869, and in 1870, the organization began publishing the *Woman's Journal*, a mouthpiece for its ideas. Alcott herself would contribute a number of articles or letters to this paper.

With such stirring social change in the political air as Louisa May Alcott was writing *Little Women*, much of that zeitgeist could not help but find its way into the novel—most notably in the subject of marriage. While part one ends with the impending marriage of Meg and John Brooke, part two centers on marriage in various ways, so much so that Alcott jokingly told her editor that a friend had suggested “Wedding Marches” as its title (*Selected Letters* 119). Even reviewers noted that the novel went beyond the normal fare of juvenile literature. The *Massachusetts Springfield Daily Republican* writes that the March sisters “are girls with the instincts of womanhood strong and active . . .” (qtd. in Clark 62). Alcott had explored marriage in several of her earlier works, most notably her first novel *Moods* (1864), where the young protagonist Sylvia Yule discovers, only after marriage, that she is unprepared to take a husband. Alcott believed that in a democratic society, marriage must be egalitarian and a home should be built on love and mutual helpfulness, a lesson eventually learned by Meg when she arranges for her wealthier friend to buy her expensive dress fabric in order to provide her husband John with a winter coat. Even Jo's marriage to Friedrich Bhaer proves to be one of equals, despite the howls of

protest Alcott heard from her first readers. Although Alcott originally wished for Jo to remain unmarried, she well understood the realities of the late 1860s. Women had so few opportunities for employment. In addition, the Civil War had devastated the pool of available husbands. Elaine Showalter notes: "As a couple, Jo and Bhaer have both values and feelings in common; they share an interest in educational reform, in new ideas, and in practical philanthropy. Most important he understands her need to work" (62). In fact, as early as October 1856, Alcott had depicted an independent woman and egalitarian marriage. In her story "The Lady and the Woman," published in the *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette*, Alcott's protagonist Kate Loring declares:

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An affectionate or accomplished idiot is not my ideal of a woman. I would have her strong enough to stand alone, and give, not ask, support. Brave enough to think and act, as well as feel. Keen-eyed enough to see her own and other's faults, and wise enough to find a cure for them. I would have her humble, though self-reliant, gentle, though strong; man's companion, not his plaything; able and willing to face storms, as well as sunshines, and share life's burdens, as they come. (35)

These are the same qualities that Marmee would like to see in her daughters. What Alcott describes here is not a pious, pure, passive, and domestic young woman, but a modern one—a woman of the nineteenth century.

*Little Women* is very much a novel of its time, but it also transcends its time as Louisa May Alcott creates a universal family with many of the same struggles that still exist today. At the conclusion of the novel with the entire family around her, Jo declares her future plans: "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" (*Little Women* 374). Thus, the novel ends much as it began—with thoughts of reform. From the identification of the March sisters' burdens to the education of Jo's boys at Plumfield, *Little Women* demonstrates the ability to improve both one's self and society. One would expect nothing less from Louisa May Alcott,

It still  
is a very  
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tale

who once closed her letter to the feminist newspaper the *Woman's Journal*, "Yours for reforms of all kind" (*Selected Letters* 238).

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### *The Critical Reception of 'Little Women' by Beverly Lyon Clark*

Although difficult to decipher between popular and critical resources in the 19th Century, Alcott did managed to be discussed by many academics in the 1800s. These early critical reviews of *Little Women* expressed mostly positive reactions to her work, claiming that her characters were real and relatable. Additionally, these early sources claim that this was by no means just a children's book, and that it was read with fervour from all parts of the population because these characters were very much like normal Americans. After her death her popularity waned and slowly her work was considered more and more, children's literature. Her popularity among academics waned even further well into the 20th Century, but the love affair with young readers and women who have continued to read and watch *Little Women* to this day. Academics began to reexamine Alcott's work again in the late 20th Century as new feminist approaches were discussed, even more contemporary approaches in examining *Little Women* have emerged, for instance, looking at how people have read Alcott's work. Regardless, these studies have established Alcott once again in a position of prominence in the world of great American Literature.

## The Critical Reception of *Little Women*\_\_\_\_\_

Beverly Lyon Clark

From the “children’s friend” to the permanent adolescent who “has never really faced life’s darker mysteries” to the creator of “the American female myth” (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 252; Shepard 393; Bedell xi), the reputation of Louisa May Alcott has soared, then dipped, then soared again. In the nineteenth century, she was lauded as having rare insight as a writer, but by the beginning of the twentieth, literary critics largely ignored her; only in the final decades of the century did she start to receive increasing and increasingly favorable critical attention.

Thesis  
of this  
article

To begin with the nineteenth century, it’s difficult to distinguish the critical reception of Alcott’s best-known work, *Little Women* (part 1, 1868; part 2, 1869), from the popular reception. For critical and popular reception weren’t yet as oppositional as they would become in the following century. The scholars who would later play a key role in determining and upholding a canon of great literature were not yet paying much attention to American literature; indeed, the scholarly presses and journals that we now consider the torchbearers of criticism were just starting to emerge. Yet one can get a sense of Alcott’s critical reputation by turning to such sources as literature textbooks, polls, and reviews and commentaries in newspapers and literary journals. Overall, in the mid-nineteenth century, Alcott’s critical reputation was high, peaking in the 1870s, even if the more highbrow the venue, the more likely it was to condescend to her and her work.

Even in an era when college courses in American literature were rare, there’s some evidence that Alcott’s work figured in high school and college curricula, given its representation in manuals and compendia of American literature. Alcott received a paragraph of positive discussion in Charles F. Richardson’s influential *A Primer of American Literature* (1878), for instance, and half a dozen paragraphs in John S. Hart’s *A Manual of American Literature*:

*A Text-Book for Schools and Colleges* (1872). Yet of sixteen later textbooks of American literature that I have scanned, published between 1890 and 1910, only eight mention Alcott at all, and those mentions are brief, often only addenda to fuller discussions of her Transcendentalist father, Bronson Alcott. Her reputation was waning by the end of the century.

The nineteenth century was also an era in which children's literature was not sharply differentiated from that for adults, and *Little Women* was not considered to be just for the young. It appeared as a matter of course on lists of recommended titles for children—on, for example, a list prepared by the influential Pratt Institute Free Library (P., "Books" BR665). But it also appeared on general lists, which is to say, on lists for adults. An 1893 poll in the *Critic* is suggestive: the editors had invited readers to name the books that were "the greatest yet produced in America, or by Americans" ("Best American Books" 357). *Little Women* came in twenty-fifth on the list of thirty-nine, one of only four titles by a woman.

As for reviews, more than one reviewer of Part 1 of *Little Women* found the novel "charming," "attractive," "capital," "healthy," "wholesome," "fresh," "natural," "lively," "sprightly," or "sparkling." The *Boston Sunday Courier* pronounced it "an excellent book for young folks, and far from uninteresting to those of larger growth" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 61), a sentiment echoed in, among other places, the *Nation*, one of the few national journals that reviewed the book. (More reviewed later novels, after Alcott had established her reputation.) A few critics did not find *Little Women* sufficiently plotted or sufficiently religious (and hence not suitable for Sunday school libraries); others found too much slang or vulgarity and desired "more lady-like language" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 84). But overall, in reviews of both Part 1 and Part 2 (often called *Good Wives* in Britain), Alcott was praised for her homely lessons, her fresh style, and the realism of her characters. In the words of a modern critic, reviewers found that Alcott's work met their requirements that it "delight and instruct" and "be what they considered true to life or 'natural'" (Zehr 323).

realism  
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be the key  
Very different  
from the novels  
that was  
being produced  
However, specificity  
is an important  
part of the novel



One gauge of Alcott's status is response in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the most prestigious American literary magazine in the second half of the nineteenth century. It offered essays on and frequently reviewed children's literature, especially literature about boys (see Clark, *Kiddie Lit* 55–56). Its editors started reviewing Alcott's work in 1870, when they addressed *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. Bemused by the "plain material," the reviewer condescendingly found the "pretty story . . . almost inexplicably pleasing" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 110). That *inexplicably* sounds a note that recurs in nineteenth-century criticism—a puzzlement that the ordinary events that Alcott wrote of were nevertheless so engaging. Later reviewers in the *Atlantic* found various Alcott works lively and cheerful, perhaps displaying "roseate optimism," but with "nothing like real character drawing" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 375, 339).

Many other periodicals, popular and elite, reviewed Alcott's work as well. Lyman Abbott, writing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, was concerned that her books for the young veered too much to adult concerns, namely, courtship, and also displayed a lack of reverence for elders: he called Part 2 of *Little Women* "a rather mature book for the little women, but a capital one for their elders," and he claimed that *Eight Cousins* (1875) "is better reading for the aunts than the cousins" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 78, 258). Abbott's views were echoed by Henry James, writing in the *Nation*, where he chastised Alcott for catering to children's views "at the expense of their pastors and masters" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 247). Abbott nevertheless conceded, in a notice regarding *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, that Alcott was "a writer of rare power" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 95).

Indeed, most nineteenth-century reviewers were positive about Alcott's work. They were particularly enthusiastic about the realism of her characters. An American reviewer of Part 2 of *Little Women*, for example, spoke to Alcott's "wonderful genius for the portraiture . . . of children" (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 71). A British reviewer of a reprint of *Little Women* praised it for being "truer to nature than a veritable narrative of actual events" (Rev. 381). An American reviewer of *Little Men* (1871), the sequel to *Little Women*,

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claimed that “this same power of intense realization and portraiture, exercised in a broader sphere, makes a great novelist, a George Eliot or a Charlotte Brontë. But Miss Alcott has chosen to write for children, and she has her reward in a boundless popularity” (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 151). Another addressed Alcott’s “absolute fidelity to real life” by claiming,

She is entitled to greater praise as an artist than has been bestowed upon her; ultimately she will be recognized as the very best painter, *en genre*, of the American domestic life in the middle classes; the very faithfulness, the aliveness—there *ought* to be that word—of her pictures prevents their having full justice done them at once. (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 149)

While some critics faulted Alcott’s language (the frequency with which characters used the colloquial *ain’t*, for example), it was in part this language that made her characters come alive. As a Scribner’s critic wrote in 1876, Alcott “is unquestionably one of the few women who can make not merely small children but even college Sophomores talk with something of the raciness of real life” (qtd. in Clark, *Louisa* 260).

After Alcott died in 1888, many periodicals weighed in with evaluations of her work in obituaries and in reviews of an 1889 biographical compilation by Ednah D. Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. Obituaries tend to praise the deceased, but those of a popular figure such as Alcott also included critical judgments. In venues ranging from the *Christian Union* to the *Washington Post*, Alcott received praise for the nobility of her own character and the reality, the naturalness, of her fictional characters. In a comment that speaks to both realism and wholesomeness, a writer for the *Hartford Courant* stated, “She made good people interesting” (Boston 3). The London *Times* credited Alcott with “a forcible style, with considerable humour and a keen eye for character,” and with “creat[ing] for the young a new kind of fiction” (Obituary 7). Some American periodicals were more measured: the writer for the *Critic* admitted that Alcott’s portraiture of young

- I like this part

people might be apt, but her “claims to popularity as a writer do not rest upon the literary merit of her books” (“The Alcotts” 119). Thomas Wentworth Higginson claimed in *Harper’s Bazar* that “the instinct of art she never had” and suggested that her work was unlikely “to reach an audience remoter than that of today” (218). Yet as if in response, Dorothy Lundt predicted in the *Boston Evening Transcript* that “much of loftier pretensions will die, while the world is calling for new editions of ‘Little Women’” (8).

In Cheney’s biographical compilation, she memorialized Alcott as “Duty’s faithful child,” to quote Bronson’s term for her, someone who willingly devoted herself to serving her family. The review of Cheney’s book in the *Atlantic* underscored the self-sacrifice: “The book is at once a reproach to the self-indulgent and a warning to young writers. One cannot escape the conviction that great possibilities were lost in Miss Alcott’s career” (“Two” 421). Even more than obituarists, reviewers of this book tended to praise the woman more than the author. The popular author John Habberton began his review for *Cosmopolitan* by stating, “About twenty years ago a million or more men, women and children enjoyed the most delightful literary surprise which native wit had devised within the century” (254). Namely, *Little Women*. Yet he ended by suggesting that the reader of Cheney’s book “will find the woman better, greater, and more delightful than her books” (Habberton 255). Other reviewers agreed. The *Literary World* lamented that “this noble woman’s strong mind and warm heart did not find expression in some more permanent work than her delightful books for children. Surely this woman’s life was greater than anything she ever wrote” (“Louisa May Alcott” 366).

Overall, Alcott’s critical reputation rose after the publication of *Little Women* in 1868 and crested in the mid-1870s. By the time of her death in 1888, her work was still popular and praised for being morally beneficial—she was indeed the “children’s friend,” as she was commonly called—but she was accorded diminishing enthusiasm in elite venues. Both children and adults had been enthusiastic about her writing, both females and males, but as she became increasingly identified with children’s literature, and as

children's literature lost status in the critical establishment, Alcott, too, lost favor.

Alcott's critical star continued to dim after the turn of the century. The arbiters of culture were shifting from the genteel literary establishment to the academy, and the canon of authors considered important became less female, less child friendly, less genteel (see Clark, *Kiddie Lit* 48–76). Indeed, *genteel* had become a contested term, and it was used in varying ways to belittle Alcott.

Her work was part of what George Santayana called the genteel tradition, the becalmed backwater of culture, which tended to be perfunctory and conventional and associated with American women (see Santayana 4). Yet nineteenth-century attitudes toward gentility still lingered, and sometimes, in these contexts, Alcott was not genteel enough. In 1911, Katharine Fullerton Gerould, writing in the *Atlantic*, criticized Alcott's characters, with their bad grammar, as "underbred" and "provincial," having a "trace of vulgarity" and an "untrained and crude" aesthetic sense: "You know that their furniture was bad—and that they did not know it" (181–83). Whether too genteel or too little so, Alcott was simply not to be admired in highbrow contexts.

When she was addressed in such contexts, enthusiasm was tempered. In a chapter on children's literature in the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–21), Algernon Tassin described *Little Women* as having a "most assured position" (2:402) among books for children. Yet he still felt the need to criticize Alcott's work for adults as mediocre and to suggest, somewhat dismissively, that it was the simple recording of her memories in *Little Women* that lent the book "its atmosphere of real life and its real portraits" (2:402). By 1948, the one reference to Alcott indexed in the three-volume *Literary History of the United States* is simply in an account of translations into Swedish, "a curious selection from new and half-forgotten authors, with Louisa May Alcott rubbing elbows with Dashiell Hammett" (Spiller 2:1383). Half-forgotten? Not by young readers, not by women, not by the crowds who flocked to see the 1933 and 1949 film versions of *Little Women*. But rather by

This is also an idea that is explored in modern female plays. I'm thinking of *Cloud Nine*. This idea is brought up a lot.

Among other influential feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, Karen Halttunen similarly drew on the sensation stories: she explored a shift in Alcott's work from using "theatricality to undermine the cult of domesticity" in these stories to using theatricality, beginning with *Little Women*, to shape and uphold domesticity, even while implying "that the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions" (242, 245). Nina Auerbach unearthed the politics of the community of women created by Marmee and her daughters, potentially "a reigning feminist sisterhood whose exemplary unity will heal a fractured society," even if they can't finally amalgamate "their matriarchate with the history it tries to subdue" (37, 73). In 1990, Ann B. Murphy summarized much of the criticism to date, especially the way it addressed the contradictions and tensions in *Little Women*, and whether the result for the characters is ambiguous success or conclusive failure.

In the 1990s, critics gave notable play to matters of reception and reader response. For Catharine R. Stimpson, *Little Women* was the emblematic paracanonical text, a text that readers have loved, no matter its place in the canon of "great" literature. Richard Brodhead further explored the differentiation between canonical and noncanonical by examining the emergence, in the 1860s, of distinctive literatures that addressed and helped to create distinct social classes: storypaper sensation fiction, elite literary works, and domestic fiction targeting the middle-class young. Alcott briefly engaged with all three strands, mapping their relations in *Little Women*, before focusing her career on the last. Barbara Sicherman unearthed the many ways in which readers have read the novel, often based on their class status or aspirations, whether they read it as a romance or quest, as a way of gaining entry into middle-class domesticity or escaping it. Since then, a myriad of essays and chapters have addressed *Little Women*—historicizing it, exploring adaptations or international responses, and analyzing Alcott's treatment of masculinity, consumer culture, or the non-heteronormative. Among the book-length projects, significant scholarly work has included the editing of biographical materials, such as Alcott's letters

(1987) and journals (1989), the compilation of biographical and cultural information in Gregory Eiselein and Anne Phillips' *Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* (2001), as well as several biographies, including John Matteson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Eden's Outcasts* (2007). There have also been several recent reprintings of works by Alcott, including three significant and authoritative editions of *Little Women*: Phillips and Eiselein's Norton Critical Edition (2004), Elaine Showalter's edition for the prestigious Library of America (2005), and Daniel Shealy's annotated edition (2013).

Works of literary criticism have focused on the novel as well. In "*Little Women*": *A Family Romance* (1999), Elizabeth Lennox Keyser provides intelligent exegeses of the novel's chapters and also a succinct summary of late-twentieth-century criticism of the novel. In *The Afterlife of "Little Women"* (2014), Beverly Lyon Clark focuses on matters of response, including adaptations, illustrations, and spinoffs. Books that address Alcott's work as a whole, whether their focus is literary criticism or social or intellectual history, Alcott alone or in context, also usually devote significant attention to *Little Women*: they include another book by Keyser (1993) and volumes by Cornelia Meigs (1971), Ruth MacDonald (1983), Joy Marsella (1983), Sarah Elbert (1984), Charles Strickland (1985), Gloria Delamar (1990), Christine Doyle (2000), Pascale Voilley (2001), and Roberta Seelinger Trites (2007). There have also been collections of criticism and/or reviews, some old, some new, edited variously by Madeleine Stern (1984), Aiko Moro-oka (1995), Janice M. Alberghene and Clark (1999), Clark (2004), and Phillips and Eiselein (2004).

It's a sign of critical respect that such compendia have appeared, that Alcott is represented in the Critical Essays series, the Contemporary Reviews series, and the Norton Critical Editions. Works by Alcott turn up in the major anthologies of American literature, such as the *Bedford*, *Heath*, and *Norton*. Essays on Alcott are published in the leading children's literature journals, such as *Children's Literature* and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, but also in other prestigious scholarly journals, like *Signs*, *New Literary History*, *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, and *American Literary*

*History.* In the nineteenth century, *Little Women* received respect in part because literature for the young wasn't strongly segregated from that for adults, and women writers hadn't yet been summarily dismissed by cultural gatekeepers. The novel lost respect in the twentieth century when the arbiters were willing to cast women and children aside. In recent decades, however, the publication of the lost thrillers, the rise of feminism, and the increased status of children's literature in the academy have reversed that trend. Now, if anything, scholarly respect for Alcott's work is accelerating: half of the pieces on *Little Women* currently indexed in the MLA online bibliography were published after 2000, twice the rate for the previous quarter century.

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*In Jo's Garret, Little Women and the Space of Imagination* by Sue Standing

This article delves into the importance of Jo's private space. It takes the physical space in the novel as the attic where she writes. Standing states that this is a private area of reflection, writing and escape. The space not only allows Jo to escape but it also allows the reader (or audience) to escape with her. This is the realist space for Jo, even though she goes there to imagine and write, the rest of the house could just as easily for her be an imagination. The Garret exists as a safe space for Jo to write and can be used as an inspiration for other women as well because it has inspired them. This article also talks about several other spaces that relate back to the garret, or Jo wanting to escape there, such as the Beth scene on the beach.

(London:

## IN JO'S GARRET

LITTLE WOMEN AND THE SPACE OF IMAGINATION

*Sue Standing*

*Every few weeks [Jo] would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and "fall into a vortex," as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace.*

### I

This essay is a spatial and temporal mosaic, a mapping of two widely separated readings of *Little Women* into what I am going to call an "auto-bookography" that incorporates my own and others' perceptions of the impact of reading *Little Women* on the formation of the imaginative self.

### II

I'm eight years old. For my birthday, someone has given me a copy of *Little Women*. I can still see the brown plasticized cardboard cover with its painting of the four March girls. I read it right away and decide I want to be a writer like Jo.

I'm forty years old. For a public art project, someone has asked me to decide on the book that most influenced me, then donate a copy to a library with a statement describing why I chose it. I shuffle books in my mind: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*? Denise Levertov's *The Sorrow Dance*?

One fall Sunday, a friend asks me to go for a drive to orchard country, Harvard, Massachusetts. We find ourselves at Fruitlands, where Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson, started a short-lived communal living experiment. In one of the bedrooms of the house—now a museum—where the Alcotts lived, I see a lock of Louisa May Alcott's hair, which palpably evokes Jo's sacrificed hair. In another room, there are pages of Alcott's childhood diary, which I have never read before, and which bring back my own striving, moralistic entries:

Sunday, September 24th [at Fruitlands, 1843]

Father and Mr. Lane have gone to N.H. to preach. It was very lovely. . . Anna and I got supper. In the eve I read "Vicar of Wakefield." I was cross today, and I cried when I went to bed. I made good resolutions, and felt better in my heart. If only I kept all I make, I should be the best girl in the world. But I don't, and so am very bad.

I am always susceptible to writers' houses—have wept over Emily's white dress, drafts of "Ode to a Nightingale," the Brontës' imaginary kingdoms—but Louisa May's lock of hair takes me straight back to my earliest desire to become a writer. And to the primary reason I now live in New England. I know what book to pick: I choose *Little Women*. I wish I had my original copy to send—it may be in my cedar chest (very like the chests in Jo's poem "In the Garret") full of things from childhood and stored at my brother's house in Seattle—but I buy another copy of the book in the Fruitlands gift shop. And in it I inscribe my reasons.

III

Early childhood reading is the free indulgence of fantasy and desire, done because it feels good. I remember the sensation of reading (Freudians can note this) as one of returning to a warm and safe environment, one that I had complete control over. When I picked up a book it was as much to get back to something as it was to set off to the new.

—Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*

In Little Women this is the audience escapism into the nostalgia of the past.

A few years later. I'm thinking about *Little Women* and its place in my life and writing. There's been something of a *Little Women* craze. Copies of the 1994 movie come with lockets. Winona Ryder as Jo? Where are the heroines of yesteryear? Will girls read the book or only see the movie? Will *Little Women* be totally commodified like "The Little Mermaid" and "Beauty and the Beast"? There are *Little Women* paper dolls. Are outfits for Barbie dolls far behind?

I understand the point but hopefully the movie & the musical will inspire people to read book

I ask some friends and colleagues, mostly writers themselves, how *Little Women* has been important to them. I decide to reread the book myself, which, despite my Fruitlands nostalgia, I have not done since childhood. I am afraid that my own reconstructed, deconstructed, feminist, postmodern reading of the book will fail my childhood self. Or as Allyssa McCabe says,

much of the theories and articles are lost on children. And perhaps that's a good thing.

Read and see Little Women with child like imagination.

"Rituals and other repetitions seem a clear way to prove only that the spell is no longer there."

Sven Birkerts is right. The act of reading is a way of gaining control, especially for young girls who have little, if any, explicit power. There are many kinds of quests, but not many possibilities for external action in the lives of most girls. Expressing anger is usually unacceptable. Many kinds of physical activity—including autoeroticism—are often unacceptable. But the kind of vortex—the space of the imagination—that saved both Louisa May Alcott and Jo is available and becomes a way to create the life one wants to live. What Sven Birkerts calls "the shadow life of reading" equally becomes the shadow life—or double life—of writing.

How can we get this idea of reading & writing across?

Several women I spoke to about *Little Women* recalled in great detail—and pleasure—the physical circumstances surrounding their reading of the book as well as their emotional responses. Johana Arnold—whose mother gave her *Little Women* when she was eleven years old, sick in bed, and unable to dance in *The Nutcracker*—most remembers that Jo was "strong, courageous, and independent. What attracted me to Jo was probably what attracted a lot of the women of my generation to her—she broke out, from under the clamps imposed on girls, but in a constructive way." Johana, who had up to that point in her life been called Josie, insisted on being called Jo from then on.

Allyssa McCabe also read *Little Women* when she was ill. "I was about nine years old, when I was young enough to be impressed with myself for reading such a thick chapter book. Nine is a great age for dreaming about what you will do when you grow up and are looking around for someone who will show you the way." Allyssa's copy of *Little Women* "had yellowed pages, patches of frayed binding, and the smell of old libraries."

Similarly, Annie Finch recalls reading an old copy of *Little Women*, with a green cover and thin, brittle pages. She was so gripped by emotions when she read the book (at about age ten) that she would rub her fingers along the edge of the pages and break little pieces off.

#### IV

*Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measurements and estimate of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination.*

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Prop note:  
Can we really  
use the books in  
The March House.  
Evoke love of  
Books

Rereading *Little Women*, I become obsessed by the idea of space, "real" space and the space of the imagination. The space of the various houses Alcott describes: the shabby-genteel March house contrasted with that of the poor Hummels—"Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire"—and again with "the stately stone mansion" of the rich Laurences; Aunt March's house, Plumfield, with its "wilderness of books"; Annie Moffat's grand house—Vanity Fair; the "sky parlor" in Mrs. Kirke's boarding house; Meg's Dovecote. The space where Jo puts her physical writing self. Her conflict between self and selflessness played up by the distance she places between herself and the rest of the family.

The Garret is of upmost importance.

The spatial analogies and metaphors of the house as an imaginative realm are suggested early in the book when Marmee reminds her daughters how they would mimic *Pilgrim's Progress* and "travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the house-top, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City."

Interesting notion about the house.

V

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment.*

—T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

When I was eight and I first read *Little Women*, we (my parents, younger sister, two younger brothers, and I) lived in the basement of a house in Bountiful, Utah. My mother was pregnant again, with my third brother. It was my first birthday in that house. I can't remember exactly when we moved to the basement and started renting out the upstairs, but I suspect it had something to do with so many children coming so quickly and my father not making much money as a bookkeeper at Slim Olson's, a huge filling station just north of Bountiful.

From the street near our house, you could see glimpses of Great Salt Lake, depending on how high it was. You could hear the train stopping at the meat-packing plant. You could see the houses being built on the hills where there used to be orchards and were called Val Verde, which I always confused with my grandmother's name, Verda.

We were four children in one bedroom with two sets of bunk beds. I could vaguely remember what it had felt like upstairs: pretty flowered wallpaper, not the rough knotty pine walls and the huge scary furnace that roared inches from my ears while I tried to sleep. The windows were high in the walls, and we had to enter around the back of the house, not go through the front door anymore. We could still play in the chicken coop at the far back of the lot, near where we watched the neighbor who still kept chickens kill one for us every Saturday evening, chopping off its head with one stroke of his ax. We would carry it by the feet back to our house, where my mother would pluck it and put it in a pot to cook with her homemade egg noodles, thickly sliced on the floury bread board for Sunday-after-church dinner.

I had always liked to read, and I was good at memorizing scriptures for Sunday school and primary classes. My sister got to take dancing lessons. She was graceful and I was clumsy. I was sent to elocution lessons instead. For the most part, we learned mediocre poems, but they tuned me up for language, I think. And the language of *Little Women* might have been more challenging for an eight-year-old less steeped in the language of the King James Bible and nineteenth-century poetic diction than I was. Even so, I can't imagine how I coped with "minion," "minx," "blanc-mange," and the vagaries of "Speculative Philosophy."

Turning eight was significant for several reasons: it meant I would be baptized and it meant I would get my first two-wheeled bike. Turning eight meant, I knew, that I had reached the age of reason. I had free will to accept the gospel and be baptized by immersion in the tiled font hidden behind the folding doors in the Sunday school room. Then I would be confirmed at Fast-and-Testimony Meeting and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. My life unrolled calmly in front of me. I knew what my life would be. As a Mormon woman, I would serve the Church and my husband, be fruitful and multiply. But *Little Women* introduced new possibilities.

## VI

*I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity.*

—Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Jo was very busy, up in the garret. . . . Quite absorbed in her work, Jo scribbled away till the last page was filled, when she signed her name with a flourish and threw down her pen. . . .

These images & lack of sounds seem very important for Jo's creative & peaceful juices, can we illustrate that in our staging?

For many readers of *Little Women*, the core scenes include those in which Jo finds refuge in the garret, where "she loved to retire with half a dozen russets and a nice book." Laura Gamache relates, "I thought that was a tremendously idyllic scene. Jo is way on the top of the house, where nobody knows she is, all by herself in her own world. The basket of apples was the topper. That basket of sustenance meant she could stay up there for hours, and hours, and hours. She had everything she needed. In fact, I think I went and found an apple to eat while I read *Little Women* after reading that scene. I still think of that scene, how quiet it was in the attic, away from the scramble of daily life, from dishes and laundry. That scene gave me the idea of the soul sustenance of a room of one's own years and years before I read Virginia Woolf."

Recalling the same passage, A. Manette Ansay states, "I looked up 'russet' and for a while I'd eat apples whenever I read, only I couldn't eat more than two or three."

In Annie Finch's household, writing—and space for writing—was more associated with her father than her mother, though her mother wrote poetry. She found it a revelation that women could shut themselves away to write, and that the rest of the family would respect that.

writing is certainly power for young women

"What I especially remember," Allyssa McCabe notes, "was Jo's ability to act, especially her ability to act by scribbling. . . . Jo formed my dream of becoming a writer, a strong woman writer. In my mind (somewhere in the twilight between conscious and unconscious thought) to this day, I am always upstairs scribbling in her attic when I write."

VII

"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," said Jo, thinking that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down south.

Amy got no farther, for 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, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never forgive you as long as I live."



"It's my dreadful temper! I try to cure it; I think I have, and then it breaks out worse than ever."

If the space of Jo's garret is empowering for many women, it is clear that *Little Women* also creates some problematic spaces or sites of resistance. Rereading *Little Women*, I am especially struck by the passages that display Jo trying to control her temper. Suddenly, I remember that when I was thirteen I decided never to show any anger again. I don't know whether Jo's struggle was in my mind then, or whether my decision was born out of the general temperament of my family and my parents' constant exhortation, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." I don't even know whether I actually was very tempestuous, but my efforts to repress anger were, in fact, all too successful. All through the rest of my teens and well into my twenties, I went "underground"—rarely did I express any kind of spontaneous emotion. The space for the play of my imagination became narrower indeed.

For some readers, even at first encounter, *Little Women's* gendered cultural expectations and religious matrix raised vexing issues. "When I was a girl, I was very anti-girl—in other words, if I was expected to like something I'd say I hated it," recalls A. Manette Ansay. "I got *Little Women* as a Christmas gift, along with a counted cross-stitch wall hanging which had the 'sugar and spice and everything nice' poem stitched on it in pink and green. So I didn't read *Little Women* for a long time. It was, to me, a girl-thing like Barbie. I don't remember when I finally read it. I think I was pretty old—fourteen or fifteen. But I loved it and most identified with Jo. I also most despised her, because she always seemed to relent/apologize just when things were getting interesting."

Laura Gamache remarks, "I disliked everybody but Jo. Jo was wonderful: smart, funny, and a voracious reader, like me. I thought the rest of the girls were too 'girly.'"

Judith Beth Cohen remembers finding *Pilgrim's Progress* after reading *Little Women*. "I was so disappointed when I got it from the library. I just couldn't relate to the Christian piety and felt excluded. Maybe I couldn't really be like Jo if I wasn't a Christian. Of course, I identified with Jo, but sometimes wondered if I couldn't also be the pretty one, Amy, or the mature one, Meg. I pondered this question deeply—who am I really?"

## VIII

*An old maid—that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps. . . .*

- a safe space is need to foster the imagination in Little Wo

- a human quality though also a lot very relatable.

When I was seventeen and came to New England for the first time, on a scholarship to summer school at Phillips Academy in Andover, I had "put away childish things." My images of Louisa May Alcott's Concord had been replaced by those of Emerson and Thoreau. Walden Pond was my holy grail, not Orchard House. Even though she was a "serious" writer, Alcott was never discussed in school. In American Lit class, we studied the Transcendentalists, read Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and were even assigned Salinger and Kerouac.

relates back to Alcott's popularity over time. Not popular in academic circles.

I wanted to be a writer, but the only women writers I knew of seemed to have been spinsters or suicides. My classmates called me "Emily," after Emily Dickinson. There seemed to be an intractable dichotomy: marry, have children, and put aside the dream of writing, or write, be single, and suffer. Or try entirely to forget you were a woman and identify with male writers: the *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* model. I had no idea there were any living women writers (let alone married ones) until I stumbled on a book of poems by Denise Levertov: *The Sorrow Dance*. My teachers had never heard of her. American Lit was man against nature, man against man, man against himself. There didn't seem to be room for a room at the top of the stairs where a girl could scribble her heart out.

IX

November 1st, 1868

Began the second part of "Little Women." I can do a chapter a day, and in a month I mean to be done. A little success is so inspiring that I now find my "Marches" sober, nice people, and as I can launch into the future, my fancy has more play. 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 on Laurie/Jo marry possibly interesting.

she is very against it.

Alcott's refusal to have Jo marry Laurie generates another site of readerly resistance. Here is where many of the most interesting aspects of "double reading" (first as a child, then as an adult) occur. "At age ten or eleven, I was furious with Jo for letting Laurie go," confesses Alice Lichtenstein. "Her preference for Bhaer irritated me, stood as a mysterious flaw in an otherwise perfect character. At age thirty-seven, I think I understand Alcott's vision. Women writers who choose men need Bhaers, need men who support and appreciate their work, who give them the space and time to think their thoughts. (Think if Jo had married Laurie with all that money, that zest for

THIS IS really interesting. I like this interpretation of why Laurie can marry Jo.

A room to go to—  
not lapidary windows,  
but jars which hold the light of fruit,  
the taste of summer, and my mother's labor.  
In winter, I open the knotty pine door,  
hide from my sister and brothers,  
read *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden*.

It occurs to me now that both *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden* are books about finding a place for the imagination to flourish. In *Little Women*, Jo has her garret, in *The Secret Garden*, Mary grows herself in the garden. The heroines of both books are displaced in various ways—both are on a quest for a space in which to feel at home, a quest for what Gaston Bachelard calls “felicitous space”:

And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative; that even when it is forever expunged from the present, when, henceforth, it is alien to all the promises of the future, even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. We return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell.

## XI

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

It is 1995. I finally visit Orchard House. On the bookshelf in the room where Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women*—among the volumes of Shakespeare, Dickens, Goethe—I notice a book I have never heard of: *Girls Who Became Famous* by Sarah K. Bolton. I wish I could open the glass doors and look at it, see what secrets or inspiration it reveals.

Before I leave, I buy a shiny red wooden apple with a leather stem. I will put it on the desk in my study with my other totems, reminders or pieces

of places that have carved out space for my imagination to breathe in: a block of purple heartwood, a piece of raw garnet from a mine in the Adirondacks, a small carved tortoise from Botswana. I also leave with six words—"good, strong words that mean something"—that I hope to use in a sestina in honor of Louisa May Alcott: women, concord, Alcott, orchard, book, house.

NOTE

I am grateful to the many people whose ideas, advice, and inspiration helped shape this essay. In particular, I would like to thank Allyssa McCabe, Judith Beth Cohen, Alice Lichtenstein, and Johana Arnold, my longtime friends and allies. My gratitude also to Annie Finch, A. Manette Ansay, and Nomi Eve for their time and insight, and to Beverly Lyon Clark and Jan Alberghene for their patience and thoughtful editing. I would also like to thank the MacDowell Colony, which provided me with space to imagine and act in, and where much of this essay was written.

*It's Complicated: Jo March's Marriage to Writing and Professor Bhaer* by Marlowe  
Daly-Galeano

This article focuses on how Alcott's personal life and writing, affected the characters presented in her writing, most notably Jo in *Little Women*. Alcott and Jo illustrate some stark similarities, for instance their writing arch goes from sensational storytelling to more realistic portrayals over the course of the novel. Daly-Galeano also explores the relationship between women in the private and public sphere in the 1860s and clearly demonstrates how very difficult it was for women to move into one of between these spheres. However, most interesting are the questions raised about Laurie. It's reasoned that Laurie is the logical lover for Jo, however, Alcott picks Professor Bhaer as the final partner. It's concluded that it's Laurie's simple love of Jo's writing, and perhaps his lack of understanding of it that Jo refuses him. She isn't writing what she actually needs to write and so Laurie is denied. Professor Bhaer on the other hand could actually represent this writing. While at first glance reader could argue that Jo gives up her writing to marry the Professor, the Professor actually represents the text, represents her writing.

## It's Complicated: Jo March's Marriage to Writing and Professor Bhaer

Personally, I think Galeano's tone is a little condescending, but he does raise some interesting points. Marlowe Daly-Galeano

Louisa May Alcott was always fascinated by questions of why and how people write. In many of her novels and stories, Alcott features prominent characters who are writers or thinly-veiled substitutions for writers—painters, sculptors, actors, and actresses—all individuals who create art or literature. For example, in Alcott's novella *A Modern Mephistopheles*, written in 1877, the mystery hinges on a character who pretends to be the author of a book he did not write. Alcott included a similar secret about authorship in her 1864 sensational story "Enigmas" and in the 1866 tale "The Freak of a Genius." Writing in an age when female authorship was expanding, but still sometimes considered a questionable profession, Alcott was especially attuned to the personal and professional problems faced by women involved in creative production in literature, theater, and other arts. In her unfinished novel *Diana and Persis*, Alcott depicts two women who take different paths in their efforts to live successfully as artists. For both women, one of the major obstacles to a successful artistic career is marriage. Is it possible, Alcott wonders in this novel, for women to reconcile a traditional family life with a career or artistic pursuit? If this question sounds familiar, it is. The recent revival of the public conversation about whether women can in fact "have it all" shows us how the questions that plagued Alcott in the nineteenth century remain relevant.

In *Little Women*, Alcott examines these questions in her portrayal of the act of writing. Depictions of writing are all over *Little Women*. The characters read and write to and for one another throughout the book, but it is the heroine, Jo March, whom Alcott presents as *Little Women*'s strongest and most complicated writer figure. Jo's struggles as a writer illustrate the difficulties that all individuals involved in creative production face; more specifically, they illustrate some of the particular challenges of the woman writer

trying to define and make a place for herself. Through Jo's writing career, Alcott explores so many of the issues that were a concern for nineteenth-century women writers. Because nineteenth-century women were expected to live primarily in the private sphere and because writing requires constant communication with the public, women writers had to develop unique public and private spaces for themselves. Jo's public career as a writer often seems opposed to her domestic role as a wife (or potential wife). Tracing Jo's writing career alongside her two marriage proposals and eventual marriage, this essay investigates two of the enduring questions of Alcott's most famous novel: *Why, if Jo loves writing so much, does she seem to give it up?* and *Why does Jo marry Professor Bhaer?* In doing so, I aim to provide a better understanding of Jo as well as the complex and conflicted, but also generative, nature of the female author's position.

From the first pages of *Little Women*, Jo's identity is connected to literature. When she and her sisters fantasize about the Christmas presents they desire, Jo, the "bookworm," wishes for a new book, "Undine and Sintram" (Alcott, *Little Women* 11). In addition to being a voracious reader, Jo also aspires to be a writer—an ambition Alcott describes as her "castle in the air" (117). In Jo's dream, she is a recognized and celebrated writer:

I'd have . . . rooms piled with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand so that my works should be as famous as Laurie's music. I 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 I 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* favorite dream. (118)

Jo's dream reveals that she aspires to *genius*; she wants to create something "heroic, or wonderful." Noted Alcott scholar Christine Doyle comments that genius was both troubling and intriguing to Alcott and that "the question of genius was never settled in her own mind" (21). Here we see that genius is a concern for Jo as well. As her writing career develops, Jo tries to find a style and mode of

writing that adequately demonstrates her genius. Jo also imagines and hopes she will be “rich.” Most importantly, the word “famous” appears twice in Jo’s short description of her dream, indicating that it will not be enough to be a great writer or to receive generous compensation, but she must also achieve recognition. Her dream depends not just on her talent or the variables of the economy, but also on the approval of her readers. The public’s acceptance is significant to Jo, and throughout *Little Women*, Jo imagines and responds to different reading audiences. From the play she writes for her young neighbors to the “Pickwick Portfolio” pieces written just for her family, Jo learns that writing is both personal and communal.

As a writer, Jo is clearly linked to her creator. Alcott endows many of the characters with artistic outlets, such as Amy’s art or Laurie’s music, but Jo, like Alcott, was committed to writing. Sheryl Englund highlights this similarity between Alcott and Jo with her claim that “From *Little Women*’s first appearance, readers have insisted—with varying degrees of sophistication—that Alcott ‘is’ Jo” (201). Englund argues that reading Jo and Alcott as the same person has formed an “American reading tradition” (217). The similarities between Jo and Alcott extend beyond writing, but we will see that by linking writing to marriage, a definitive and life-changing step for any individual, Alcott suggests that Jo’s writing—and her own writing—deserve our special consideration.

Just as Alcott did, Jo moves through several stages of being a writer. She begins writing for her family, but her writing career evolves when she begins to transition from a private writer, writing for herself and members of her domestic circle, to a public author, writing for a wider audience, including readers she does not know personally. This transition from private to public is not easy. It represents an important step for Jo as she transgresses the rules of nineteenth-century feminine behavior by entering into the public sphere and writing for money.

Jo is uncertain, however, about how to cross from the private, acceptable, feminine sphere of writing at home, into the public, less socially acceptable, masculine sphere of writing for the newspaper. In a scene that figures memorably in all of the Hollywood feature



These feelings do not exist. She appears ready. <sup>not the musical.</sup>  
from Jo really.

films, Jo hikes up her skirt and sneaks out the window in order to avoid being seen as she delivers her writing to a potential publisher. The moment demonstrates that although Jo wants to enter into the public world of publication, she is not yet confident enough to walk out the door of her house carrying her manuscript. She is not yet ready to leave the comforts and privacy of her home. She wants to write, but she wants to keep it secret, at least for a while. When she does reveal her secret to her closest friend, Laurie, it is begrudgingly "whispered . . . in her confidant's ear" (Alcott, *Little Women* 124).

This is an insight to Laurie

In response, Laurie imagines a future in which Jo is already a public figure: "Why, Jo, your stories are works of Shakespeare compared to half the rubbish that's published every day. Won't it be fun to see them in print; and shan't we feel proud of our authoress?" (Alcott, *Little Women* 124). Perhaps this is the moment that has made millions of readers swoon for Laurie. For with these words, Laurie acknowledges himself a feminist, someone who supports equal rights for women, including a woman's right to work in the public sphere. He even imagines a world in which Jo's public success extends to the people (including men) in her life. "Shan't we feel proud of our authoress?" Laurie asks, showing that he *wants* to be associated with the female author. Not only does he support Jo as an author, but in doing so, he also shows he is willing to challenge prevailing gender norms.

although this doesn't really happen perhaps we can channel it

But should we take Laurie's support for Jo's writing career at face value? This is an important question. It is romantic if Laurie's attitude toward Jo's writing is sincere, but Jo is unsure. Much later, when refusing Laurie's declaration of love, Jo maintains, "You'd be ashamed of me, and we should quarrel, . . . and you'd hate my scribbling, and I couldn't get on without it, and we should be unhappy, and wish we hadn't done it—and everything would be horrid!" (Alcott, *Little Women* 287). It is a crucial moment in the plot because so many of the characters and Alcott's readers expect Jo to marry Laurie. Laurie's plea, "Don't disappoint us, dear! every one expects it," might just as easily be said by *Little Women's* readers (286). Alcott famously disappointed her readers (along with the pining Laurie) by refusing to pair the two lovers off and instead

making what she called "a funny match" for Jo (*Letters* 125). In her journal, Alcott defiantly wrote, "I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (*Journals* 167). As Barbara Sicherman observes, this surprise in the novel's development may explain why *Little Women* continues to be read and appreciated by modern audiences (254). It is the novel's mystery. Why does Jo turn down the mate who seems to be her perfect match? Why does Alcott build Laurie up as Jo's ideal mate only to marry him off to someone else? We might ask this question another way: *Why does Jo blame her refusal on writing?* She tells Laurie he'd "hate [her] scribbling," even though Laurie has demonstrated no aversion to Jo's writing career. He supports it. Yet Jo turns Laurie down *so that she can be a writer*, admitting she "couldn't get on without it." Thus, Jo's refusal of Laurie is more than a rejection of a suitor; it is a statement of her commitment to writing. In spite of Laurie's proclaimed support for her writing, Jo sees her future with Laurie as incompatible with the writer's life and her castle in the air.

Leading up to her refusal of Laurie, Jo has many new experiences that help her to develop as a writer. Perhaps she is only able to refuse Laurie because she has grown as a writer and learned more about herself in the process. Her first attempt at writing a sensational story in the style of "Mrs. S. L. A. N. G. Northbury" (an allusion to the popular nineteenth-century sensational writer E. D. E. N. Southworth) wins a prize (Alcott, *Little Women* 213). Then, in addition to writing "very mild romances," Jo tries her hand at different styles of writing and finds that she is successful (214). She also begins to recognize her writing as a product with calculable value. She sees writing as a form of expression that merits evaluation and critique and learns that critique can be difficult. Jo experiences the sting of literary criticism when her father tells her, "You can do better than this, Jo" (214). When Jo sends her "first-born," a novel that has been revised multiple times, out for publication, she learns that she must make major changes to the work if she wishes to have it published, and this is, for Jo, a disappointment (216). She must negotiate the author's recurring problem: writing is not for the author's benefit alone, but must also produce a connection with

not in her  
father but  
from the professor  
& publishers. Still  
same emotions.

readers.<sup>2</sup> After she publishes her heavily revised novel, Jo is baffled by the conflicting critical reviews it receives and can only decide to try again, presumably with another work (217).

In these accounts of Jo's writing career, Alcott mirrors many of her own experiences. Alcott vividly depicts the deep concentration of the "vortex" in which Jo composes her writing (*Little Women* 211). She described her own writing process in the same way, using the words "vortex" and "fit" for her moments of creative output (Alcott, *Journals* 171, 132). Like Jo, Alcott published a number of sensation stories, including several under the pen name A. M. Barnard (Rostenberg & Stern 123). Jo's career as a sensation writer is short-lived. While Alcott slowed her production of sensation fiction after the financial success of *Little Women*, Jo stops writing sensation fiction for different reasons. When she becomes friends with Professor Bhaer and learns that he disapproves of this kind of writing, Jo begins to see the stories she has been publishing in the *Weekly Volcano* as a cause for personal shame. Alcott writes:

Now she seemed to have got on the Professor's mental or moral spectacles also, for the faults of [her] poor stories glared at her dreadfully, and filled her with dismay.

"They are trash, and will soon be worse than 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."

The problem with Jo's career as an anonymous or pseudonymous sensation writer is twofold. First, it prevents her from realizing her dream of being a famous author. While she can earn money for her sensation writing, she will never receive public recognition for this work that must be hidden under anonymity. Second, the work is not of genius quality. It is, in Jo's new view, "trash." The recognizable element of this literature, its trashiness, stems from its lacking moral message. We might also infer that the writing is not good, since Jo's characters, the "banditti, counts, gypsies, nuns, and duchesses" do

Professor represents higher form of writing this might be grasped on But it's in fore case

not come from her life experiences (274). Jo is, therefore, guilty of breaking that cardinal rule of realist writing: *Write what you know*.

However, Alcott does not completely or directly discredit Jo's sensation writing. This may be because she enjoyed writing and publishing the literature she referred to as her "blood & thunder" tales (Alcott, *Letters* 79), notoriously commenting later in life, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style" (qtd. in Stern xxvi). Although Alcott stops short of praising Jo's "blood & thunder" tales, she also critiques the writing Jo produces after giving up on sensation stories. Alcott describes this new form of writing as dull and overly moralizing, something "more properly called an essay or a sermon" (*Little Women* 281). In an attempt to find yet another mode of writing, Jo tries children's literature, but finds it unrewarding. Rather than writing out of the "magic inkstand" she envisioned in her childhood dream, Jo "cork[s] up her inkstand," effectively leaving writing behind for quite a while (281). This is a disappointing development in Jo's writing career, one that modern readers tend to dislike, overlook, or re-write (Estes & Lant 101-2).

When we go to the movies, it becomes clear that modern audiences are especially troubled by Jo's movement away from writing. In the Hollywood feature films of *Little Women*, the filmmakers emphasize Jo's writing career more than the end of Alcott's novel does. At the end of each film, Jo writes a novel, and it is this novel (not the poem "In the Garret") that brings Jo and Professor Bhaer together. In George Cukor's 1933 film, this novel is simply referred to as Jo's "book." The novel that Jo writes in Mervyn LeRoy's 1949 *Little Women* film is titled *My Beth*, like the poem Jo writes for Beth before she dies. In Gillian Armstrong's 1994 *Little Women* film, Jo is so conflated with Alcott that she publishes a novel called *Little Women*. Even though it is standard for film adaptations to alter plots, it seems more than coincidental that all of the films insist on changing Alcott's story in this way. In the films, Jo must continue to be a writer. Beyond that, she must be the successful, publicly-recognized author of a novel. Filmmakers and modern audiences don't want Jo to stop writing. Instead, they demand that she continue writing and that she do so in the public sphere.

I include myself in a group of readers who have been bothered that Jo gradually becomes less of an author in *Little Women*. By the end of the novel, her identity as a writer seems secondary to her identity as a wife and mother. "Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there," Alcott writes. "She enjoyed it heartily, and found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world,—for now she told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers" (Alcott, *Little Women* 377). This statement will have profound and probably troubling meaning for the readers who have loved or admired Jo specifically *because she is a writer*. Jo's movement away from public authorship is so distasteful to modern readers that they often will themselves to ignore or forget it. Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant note, "Even today, women who as children read *Little Women* remember Jo at her best, that is to say, at her most liberated" (101), suggesting that the reader must "repress her awareness that Jo—who never wants to marry, who values her writing above all else—does finally marry and abandon the writing she cherishes" (102). Although there's no definitive indication that Jo is actively pursuing a public writing career at the end of the novel, many readers choose to take with them the idea that Jo *is* a writer, choosing also to leave behind the idea that she *may not* be a writer.

The apparent end to Jo's writing career is challenging for many reasons, not the least of which comes from its ambiguity. While it appears that Jo is no longer publishing her work, she could still be writing, or telling stories, just to a smaller audience, presumably of boys. At the very least, Jo has not rejected her dream altogether. When reminded of her youthful dream, Jo responds "I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait" (Alcott, *Little Women* 379).<sup>3</sup> Alcott herself did not wait. She would spend the rest of her career writing and publishing for enthusiastic and admiring audiences. The similarities, then, between Alcott's writing career and Jo's writing career have the potential to exacerbate the difficulties readers might have in trying to understand why and how Jo can give up writing. Although Jo seems to make a choice to stop or limit her writing, Alcott was continuously writing. She would go on to write and publish regularly, prolifically, and successfully

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for twenty more years. Understanding this difference, as well as the obvious biographical difference that Alcott never married, should perhaps shatter (or at least complicate) our understanding of *Little Women* as the story of Alcott's life. — between part 1 & part 2

The differences may not be so difficult to reconcile, however. The first part of *Little Women* was published in 1868 to immediate success. The second half of the novel, published in 1869, offered more freedom to embellish. Alcott admits that the first half of the novel draws from her own "queer plays and experiences" (*Journals* 166). Yet Alcott sets the second half of the novel three years after the conclusion of the first, commenting, "As I can launch into the future, my fancy has more play" (*Journals* 167). Therefore, we might read the first half of the novel as more autobiographical than the second half. While many of the events that transpire in the first part of *Little Women* were modeled after Alcott's childhood experiences, the events of the second half of the novel are simply the product of Alcott's "fancy." She imagined the future for Jo and her sisters, and the future she imagined for Jo is not obviously writerly.

This is especially perplexing within the modern practice of reading Jo as Alcott because it is hard for readers today to think of Alcott as anything but the famous author of *Little Women*. Alcott's identity, of course, was much more complex than something that could be boiled down to the single act of writing. While writing was clearly important to her throughout her life, she was also a feminist, an abolitionist, a Transcendentalist, an actress, an editor, an aunt, a daughter, a teacher, and many other things. She understood that the first volume of *Little Women* had received critical and market success, but Alcott had no way of knowing in 1869 just how culturally meaningful and enduring her work, particularly *Little Women*, would be.

Like Alcott, Jo is a woman with various interests and desires. The life Jo gets at the end of the novel reflects some of these desires. Inheriting Plumfield allows her to be forever surrounded by wild boys; it is a tomboy's dream. Just as writing in the public sphere was a way for nineteenth-century women to participate in some activities that were more commonly reserved for men, by placing Jo among the

rambunctious boys of Plumfield, the ending of *Little Women* allows Jo to escape many of the confining expectations for young women of her society. However, in suggesting that Jo tells "no stories" once she marries, Alcott seems to bar Jo from an important element of her dream: the production and recognition of her genius.

Yet Jo's marriage and writing career might be read in other ways that allow space for this genius. In the same way that nuns are symbolically and spiritually wedded to Christ, unmarried authors and artists are sometimes described as being married to their work. In choosing to never marry, Alcott affirmed a serious and life-long commitment to her writing. Although Alcott admitted she did not want to marry Jo off (*Letters* 125), in the second half of *Little Women*, she was working within the realm of "fancy," a realm characterized by its relationship to imagination. Therefore, the "funny match" that Alcott makes between Jo and Professor Bhaer should be viewed imaginatively and symbolically, too. As a character, Bhaer is quirky and likeable, but not necessarily desirable as a husband. As a symbol, however, Bhaer fills an important role in Jo's development as a writer. Readers using their own realms of fancy may better understand Jo's marriage to Bhaer as it relates to Jo's writing career.

By marrying Jo and the professor, Alcott offers Bhaer to readers in symbolic terms. He represents an author, a reader, and a text or book to be read. Critics have noted that descriptions of Professor Bhaer in *Little Women* link him to some of the male authors and intellectuals that Alcott read and admired. These include Henry David Thoreau (the Transcendentalist writer with unruly hair and a prominent head); Ralph Waldo Emerson (Alcott's neighbor, who was known for his kindness and generosity); Charles Follen (a German-born poet and political thinker); Bronson Alcott (Alcott's father, an idealist with a gift for dealing with children); and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (one of Alcott's favorite authors, a German intellectual and philosopher).<sup>4</sup> Not accidentally, Professor Bhaer, in one way or another, resembles each of these influential authors. Even though Professor Bhaer works as a teacher, Alcott suggests that what he stands for is something that she values even more: Bhaer is a writer.

So why did Jo marry?

Why I think this is very interesting. I think Alcott was trying to say that she was a smart business woman who wanted to sell books.

Jo's marriage to another writer, then, might symbolize the process of collaborative writing and production (or reproduction). In their school, Jo and her husband work to create and form their boys into good students or good children, just as authors work to mold their writing into good texts. In her journals, Alcott even refers to the stories and books she writes as her "children" (*Journals* 163). Therefore, if Bhaer symbolizes an author or authorship, Jo may also be understood, in equal terms, as an author, married to her writing and producing and reproducing good texts. Suggesting that good writing can be a collaborative process and product, something that anyone who's ever been part of a writing workshop knows to be true, Alcott presents a model of writing that departs from the idea of a single, lonely, godlike (and often masculine) author.

Because Bhaer comes to find Jo after reading her poem "In the Garret," he is also presented as a good or ideal reader. He reads Jo's poem and acts upon it, admitting "I read that, and I think to myself" (Alcott, *Little Women* 372). Alcott presents Bhaer as a model for readers. Not only does he read Jo's work, but he is changed by it. Jo's poem is successful. It fulfills its function by connecting the author with the audience. By marrying her reader—her audience—Jo affirms her commitment to being an author. Although it is easy to envision Jo's marriage as something that takes her *out* of the public sphere and confines her to the private, domestic sphere, casting Bhaer as the ideal reader challenges that vision of marriage. If Bhaer symbolizes the reader of Jo's writing, then the marriage also symbolizes Jo's serious commitment to writing publicly. Jo creates a formal union with her audience, her public. The marriage, then, takes her out of the private sphere and places her securely within the public realm.

Taking the "funny match" one step further, Bhaer may also be understood as a text himself. When he shows Jo her own poem, "In the Garret," Jo unceremoniously "tear[s] up the verses the Professor had treasured so long" (Alcott, *Little Women* 372). In this spirited moment, Jo rejects the role of the sentimental or lovesick heroine, demonstrating that love has not diminished her power for destruction. Readers will recall the earlier moments in which Jo's



writing was destroyed. When Amy burned Jo's fairytales, the young author's anger was so great she lost her care and common sense. To see Jo destroy her own work yet again (for she also burned her sensational stories) indicates that Jo's relationship to her writing has changed as she has matured. A seasoned writer understands that there are times writing must be given up, destroyed, changed, or rewritten. More importantly, this portrayal of destruction allows us to infer that Bhaer becomes a substitute for Jo's writing. When he arrives, Jo destroys her poem. She no longer needs it; the professor takes its place. What this means for Jo as a writer is ambiguous. If Bhaer replaces Jo's writing, Alcott may be suggesting that Jo gives up writing in order to devote herself wholly to becoming a good wife. But since the union of Jo and the professor is by Alcott's own admission a "funny match," Alcott offers the possibility that there is a funny way to understand this replacement. If Bhaer represents the text, then he is subject to the author's will, her decisions, and her preference. She makes the text what she wants it to be. In this way, Alcott suggests a more egalitarian vision of marriage, in which the wife also exercises a power over the husband rather than merely complying with the husband's demands. Marriage is not only about power but also about love. Jo confirms that she "couldn't help loving" the professor (372). As a writer, she loves the text like a husband, like a partner. Out of this love, she creates the text as her work of genius.

man is  
not in  
mistake,  
but  
Alcott's

Marriage, according to *Little Women*, matters. Writing, we have seen, also matters. This brings us back to lingering question of *why* Jo marries Bhaer. She refuses Laurie as her mate *because she is a writer*. Does she choose Bhaer for the same reason? Alcott provides no easy answer and instead leaves this to readers to interpret. We must make a choice about the outcome of Jo's writing career. Just as individuals are faced with a serious choice when they consider marriage, writers are constantly faced with choices that affect their characters and texts. By leaving the outcome of Jo's writing career unanswered and ambiguous, Alcott encourages her readers to make interpretive choices. In doing so, they consider the importance of the choices a committed writer makes. Regardless of whether Jo's

marriage to Bhaer ends, postpones, or becomes the embodiment of her successful writing career, the dilemma Jo faces reveals Alcott's own complicated relationship to writing. Writing requires deep commitment, love, sacrifice, and choices. Some of the choices a writer makes are unpleasant. Others will be unpopular. Jo March may or may not be the best model for today's aspiring writer, but by infusing the development of her heroine's writing and romantic life with such complexity, Alcott reveals the depth of a writer's challenges. In this she offers readers one possible path to genius.

### Notes

1. In 2012, Anne-Marie Slaughter's op-ed piece in *The Atlantic*, titled "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," inspired a lively conversation in print and social media forums. Kunal Modi and Lori Gottlieb were among the writers who responded to the article with their own perspectives.
2. Like Jo, Alcott won a prize for writing a sensational story. "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" was published as a contest winner in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1863. Jo's frustrations at the changes she made in order to publish her first novel were similar to Alcott's disappointment at the publication of her first novel, *Moods*, in 1864.
3. Readers who follow Jo's development through *Little Women's* sequels see that Jo does eventually return to writing and publishing for a wide audience in *Jo's Boys* (1886), publishing a book that is highly acclaimed and sells well.
4. Daniel Shealy, Mary Lamb Shelden, Laura Dassow Walls, and Lynda Zwinger are among the critics who have connected Professor Bhaer's character to authors in Alcott's life or circle.

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mainstream literary critics, who disparaged “children’s literature,” but still found boys’ adolescent quests quintessentially American.

In one of the few midcentury assessments of Alcott, the Rev. Robin Alastair Denniston, reviewing an edition of *Little Men* for the *London Times Literary Supplement* in 1957, concluded that “Louisa M. Alcott is not a major writer; neither her style, her imagination, nor her critical powers entitle her to this distinction” (340). The March family books “are not classics . . . in the sense that they have a relevance outside their time and place, a universal message to communicate.” If that were the case—if her books were no longer relevant—how does one explain why they were and are still being published and read? Handicapped by midcentury conceptions of universality, by a failure to understand that works still being read might lay claim to some universality, he finally retreated by stating “that good reading will not necessarily become literature.”

This midcentury indifference and condescension toward Alcott changed by the end of the twentieth century, with the advent of feminist approaches to literature and the publication of her lost thrillers. Leona Rostenberg had tracked some of these fugitive stories in the 1940s, but it wasn’t until her partner Madeleine Stern started reprinting them, beginning with the collection *Behind a Mask* in 1975, that other scholars took note. Since then, Alcott’s popularity with critics has soared: the MLA online bibliography has indexed 393 scholarly publications about Alcott since 1975, 127 of them on *Little Women*.

In 1979, for example, in what may be the most influential critical essay (certainly the one on *Little Women* that appears to be the most cited, according to Google Scholar), Judith Fetterley drew on the thrillers as “an important context” for reading *Little Women* when she pointed to the “alternate messages” that are “in subliminal counterpoint to the consciously intended messages” of the novel (370), the anger beneath the feminine compliance. *Becoming a little woman is associated with self-denial and self-control, and yet, Fetterley notes, “the figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman [Jo] is the most attractive and the figure who most succumbs to it [Beth] dies”* (379).

*Beneath the Umbrellas of Benevolent Men: Validating the Middle-Class Woman in 'Little Women' and 'Five Little Peppers and How They Grew' by Sandra Burr*

This article examines Jo March through the lens of the “cult of domesticity.” This is not a new phenomenon in literary or theatrical circles, *Cloud 9* also could be examined in a similar way. Regardless, Burr argues that through the cult of domesticity Jo March achieved the idealized 19th Century idea of womanhood. This Victorian ideal is epitomized through the art of acting, through which all Victorian women were subject to. They had to act the part. Jo is transformed through this from the rambunctious person we meet in Act 1 to the much more serious and refined person in Act 2. The publishing, Jo’s exploration of New York, and even her needlework bring her slowly closer to Professor Bhaer and the end result of marriage.

## Beneath the Umbrellas of Benevolent Men: Validating the Middle-Class Woman in *Little Women* and *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*

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Sandra Burr

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–69; hereafter *LW*) and Margaret Sidney's *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* (1881; hereafter *FP*) are two of the most successful American children's novels of the later nineteenth century. Generations of audiences have embraced *LW*—iterated across a vast array of print, film, and digital media and promoted in children's games and toys—as *the girl's story*, finding it a poignant depiction of the four March sisters' experiences surviving adolescence and each other. *FP*, however, has not enjoyed the same cultural renown. First serialized in 1880 in the children's magazine *Wide Awake*, the story—by Harriet Mulford Stone Lothrop writing under the pseudonym Margaret Sidney (Johnson 139)—was published by the Daniel Lothrop Publishing Company as a novel in 1881 and went on to sell over two million copies by the author's death in 1924 (Kunitz 483). Lothrop eventually produced eleven sequels about the Pepper clan to satisfy the clamoring public. Between 1939 and 1940, Columbia Pictures released four black-and-white films loosely based on the Pepper series, and the original book has remained in print since its initial publication. *FP* endures, but in relative cultural obscurity.

To date, *FP* has generated only scant, sporadic, and disparate scholarly interest, beginning with Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson's formative 1987 article about late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North American female coming-of-age novels. These critics document key parallels that *LW* shares with the Pepper books and two other popular juvenile series of the era—*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Anne of Green Gables*—to ascertain whether the novels are culturally safe or subversive. They argue that the series' utopic

communities, nurturing mother-figures, and blissful family lives provide an unfettered developmental space for growing girls that is possible only in fiction, given the real, patriarchal world in which the series' authors lived. They thus acknowledge that, knowingly or not, the authors mingle subversion and safety in these famous texts. Peter Stoneley pairs *FP* with Mary Mapes Dodge's book *Hans Brinker; Or, The Silver Skates* (1865) to argue that American economic instability triggers a fear in certain characters of being socially excluded from middle-class values and experiences because of sudden (and temporary) impoverishment. Kelly Hager's 2011 study interrogates the Pepper series as a celebration of a so-called "new" extended family structure, with an occasional nod to plot parallels within the *LW* books. Enough overlap exists among Kornfeld and Jackson's, Stoneley's, and Hager's analyses to point to an emergent strand of critical inquiry on the middle class in the Pepper world, both with and without reference to *LW*.

Using the lens of the American nineteenth-century middle-class ideology known as the cult of domesticity, I concentrate here on the trajectories of Jo March and Polly Pepper to explore the authors' representations of white female domestic ability. Jo, American literature's most famous tomboy, grows increasingly domestic as she approaches adulthood; Polly, on the other hand, devolves from a domestic idol to a strangely fumble-fingered novice. Neither fits comfortably within the middle-class ideal until each experiences, at text's end, a turbulent, domestically oriented episode in urban space that triggers her reincorporation into family tranquility. This intriguing rite of passage in a male-dominated domain symbolically acts as a touchstone that purifies and strengthens Jo and Polly's gender value, a process so generative that new families spring from it.

### The Cult of Domesticity

*LW* and *FP* look back upon an idealized time when the sexes knew and were content with their rightful places in society, reflecting Alcott's and Sidney's adherence to the domestic ideology of *separate spheres*, which advocated different responsibilities for white men

Do we  
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to talk  
about this  
or have  
Jo remain  
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against  
these themes

But is this  
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the father  
doesn't provide  
all. Jo has  
to provide  
for him.

and women. Men belonged to the public sphere, the bustling urban world of business and politics that showcased and institutionalized men's supposedly superior intellect, authority, and power. To make his ideology work, men needed to provide financial support, and protect their homes from the world's tribulations in order for women to raise children in domestic tranquility.<sup>1</sup> Women belonged to the private sphere, where they raised children, maintained the house, and provided warm, moral guidance for husbands and children alike. Middle-class boys allegedly gained manly self-reliance through school and play before venturing into the public sphere, and they benefited at home from their sisters' sacrificial attentions as those sisters practiced surrendering themselves to future husbands and sons.<sup>2</sup> Middle-class girls were believed to be biologically and spiritually ordained to learn domestic skills to weave into private spheres of their own once they became wives and mothers.

Within *LW* and *FP* we therefore see white, middle-class worlds in which the youths' moral character thrives under the rigors of cheerful, gender-specific toil. The four March girls sew, knit, dust, sweep, read the Bible, remake dresses, and work on their character flaws to mold themselves into morally and sexually pure, pious, domestic, and submissive women. (Note here Jo and her mother's continual efforts to "cure" their anger at the March patriarch's insistence.) The sisters are already literate and apparently require little further education to prepare for their futures. Despite the family's genteel poverty, the Marches pay Hannah to cook, bake, and run the home so that Marmee can engage in the volunteer work so dear to middle-class women's hearts, Meg can be a "nursery governess" to small children (Alcott 35), and Jo can serve as a companion for Aunt March. In so doing, they help to "purify" and domesticate the community and never worry about when or if they will eat another meal.

> Aunt March

I did wonder  
about this,  
perhaps we could  
suggest at jobs.

The five utterly destitute Pepper children also strengthen their moral integrity in a chore-filled environment while they "scramble" (Sidney 1) toward adulthood. Only the two oldest children, Ben and Polly, actually work. Eleven-year-old Ben does odd jobs and cuts firewood for pay, while ten-year-old Polly takes care of the home by

DWS is  
a good  
1860s  
solution

cooking, baking, sewing, tending the three younger siblings (Joel, Davie, and Phronsie), telling wonderful stories, and battling an aging stove. Mamsie, Marmee-like in name and action, assists community members during the day but, unlike Marmee, sews for money at night. Like the March sisters, Polly and Ben are already literate; the three younger children do not go to school, but can attempt to write when necessary. Despite their diet of bread and potatoes, the Peppers rarely complain, flourishing together as if they could live on love alone. Unlike Alcott, Sidney was comfortable with the domestic world. Energized by her compelling "sense of responsibility" toward American youth (Lothrop 12), she devised many moral stories filled with happy children engaged in gender-appropriate activities. Alcott and Sidney may not have shared the same perspective on middle-class domesticity, but they both contributed to its hegemonic role in their texts

### Jo March

In Part I of *LW*, Jo may be fifteen, but her looks and manners embrace childish ways. "Very tall, thin," she "remind[s] one of a colt, for she never seem[s] to know what to do with her limbs, which [are] very much in her way" (Alcott 6). Today's readers would call her an adolescent, but that term was not in wide use then.<sup>3</sup> Rather, Jo is still a child, as gangly and ebullient as the baby horse that she resembles. Indeed, *colt* makes sense here because Jo does not feel like a *filly*; she whistles, runs, romps, tosses off slang, and sprawls on the floor, all tomboy behaviors.

One look at Jo's life reveals how carefree and childlike it is. Though she daily trudges to Aunt March's to be the elderly woman's companion, she has time to read voraciously on the job. Home by two o'clock in the afternoon, Jo can revel in sisterly "good times." When Jo is on vacation from her aunt, she has even more free time, which she sporadically punctuates with Busy Bee Society gatherings. Notably, only a person with too much time on her hands feels the compunction to *play* by mimicking *work*—specifically, dainty domestic pursuits. Meg sews, Beth sorts pine cones, Amy sketches, and Jo knits and reads aloud to the group. This ultimate

DWS is

an interesting note about the girls. Suggesting doing this for money could rectify that, unless its important to show their proper class,



“girl’s game” allows the sisters to rehearse their futures as women of a leisured class.

Karen Halttunen argues that “for Louisa May Alcott, ‘domestic drama’ had become an instrument of domestic harmony and happiness. At the heart of her concept of domestic drama was the implicit convention that the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions, curbed her rebelliousness, and learned to play the role assigned her within her family” (Halttunen, “Domestic Drama” 245). Indeed, it seems at first that Jo merely plays at being a woman. She only knows how to make molasses candy and gingerbread—sweet, nutritionally empty foods. Even though she is fifteen, Jo is not ready to do the serious work of nourishing a family. Nor does her mother require her to take cooking lessons from Hannah, an odd gap in both Jo’s and Meg’s preparation for their own future homes. (Indeed, Meg does not learn to cook until the chapter before she is engaged to John Brooke.)

Jo’s proficiency with needlework, however, could be her domestic *sine qua non*. She knits blue socks for the Union Army in Chapters 1 and 13, aligning herself ideologically with both middle-class domesticity and American patriotism. Needlework is also one of the most female-gendered domestic tasks in Western culture. As the industrial revolution introduced mass-manufacturing of textiles and gradually displaced homespun arts, the labor market grew glutted with women willing to accept abysmal pay for any sewing employers required, which was typically piece work—i.e., the simple sewing of garments or other pieces of cloth paid by the amount produced, regardless of the time involved—that women could do at home. Alcott mentions needlework so casually throughout *LW* that it is easy to overlook. The March sisters have their own work (i.e., sewing) baskets, and needlework often takes place while the girls talk, whether they make sheets for Aunt March in Chapter 1 or sew together while they chat with Marmee in Chapter 4.

Notably, multiple and exclusive references to a particular sister sewing signal a vital impending change in her life. Between Chapters 13 and 23, we repeatedly see only Meg sewing (Marmee excluded). By Chapter 22, Mr. March praises Meg for valuing domestic

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pursuits over vanity, specifying his appreciation for her needle “pricked fingers” and the “goodwill” that “went into the stitches,” a commendation full of foreshadowing when he adds that he hopes he “shall not soon be asked to give” her hand “away” (Alcott 208). Meg’s engagement to John Brooke immediately follows in Chapter 23. Beth’s death is presaged in Chapter 40 by her declining ability to sew or knit presents for school children; when she declares the needle “so heavy” and put it down forever,” readers know death is imminent (387).

Jo is good with a needle, but nonetheless she knows enough about women’s responsibilities to feel ambivalent about them, a sign that she is not completely a child. She yearns to be “a little girl as long as [she] can” (Alcott 144) because childhood affords her time free to romp or read. Jo’s predilection for burning things also points to her deep discomfort with most domestic duties.<sup>4</sup> When she burns Meg’s hair in an attempt to give her sister a popular hair style for a social event, Jo not only displays ineptness with hot irons; she reveals a self deeply conflicted about creating even the superficial image of a young lady. Jo cannot transform Meg into a fashionable young woman because Jo does not fully believe that the transformation into womanhood will be beneficial. Accordingly, Jo cannot transform herself either. She burns her dresses because she stands too close to fires, a habit that suggests the domestic hearth is dangerous for her. At the New Year’s Eve dance, Jo “must sit still all [she] can and keep her back out of sight” (23) so that the other guests do not see her burned gown, a sign of her domestic pain. By putting on a brave front, Jo provides an illusion of womanhood without the substance. That she then ruins the illusion by spilling coffee on herself simply allows her to hide from the fashionable dancing crowd and be the child she is, playing merry games with Meg, Laurie, and a few other young people.

Despite this ineptitude, Jo shows domestic capability beyond needlework. When Laurie is sick and confined to his room, Jo imparts warmth and nurturing by prescribing kittens and blancmange, a custard-style dessert made of sugar, gelatin, and cream and usually bearing an almond flavor. The kittens will make Laurie laugh, while

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the blancmange will provide him with wholesome nourishment so “soft” that it “will slip down without hurting [his] sore throat.” That “Laurie watches [Jo] in respectful silence” as she tidies his room is not surprising because he appreciates her domestic skills. She gives the boy’s room “quite a different air,” a woman’s touch, just “what it want[s]” and just what Laurie wants to feel the same “home love and happiness” that he has often glimpsed in the March home (Alcott 47). Jo’s domestic nurturing has immediate results. “There [is] color, light, and life in the boy’s face now, vivacity in his manner, and genuine merriment in his laugh” (51).

Jo also “play[s] mother” to Beth, a role that grows deathly serious when the younger sister contracts scarlet fever (Alcott 39). Jo “devote[s] herself to Beth day and night,” concentrating so intently on selfless nursing that she sees new value in female self-denial: Jo “acknowledge[s] the warmth of Beth’s unselfish ambition to live for others, and make home happy by the exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth, or beauty” (171).

By the end of Part I, Jo is different from the girl we see at the beginning. She now “loung[e]s in her favorite low seat” with “the grave, quiet look which best [becomes] her” (Alcott 220). She begins to weave sewing metaphors into her speech: she “hate[s] to see things going all crisscrossed and getting snarled up, when a pull here and a snip there would straighten it out” (192). While Marmee, Hannah, and Beth have tended to the household, Jo has been responsible only for self-improvement. She is extraordinarily lucky to have time free for reading and growing more comfortable with herself—i.e., with growing up, arguably her most important creative construct.

### **Polly Pepper**

Polly Pepper is an adult thrust into a child’s body. Chronologically ten years old, she is mature enough to know that five growing children can translate into “five bothers” in the adult world (Sidney 9). Moreover, Polly and her brother Ben do not consider themselves to be children. They “always call [...] the three younger ones of the

flock 'the children'" (154). As the "real" children in the household, only these three receive special treats. Polly begs her mother "many times" to "try" celebrating Christmas—but only "for the younger ones" (145). When Mamsie finally relents, she feels somewhat rueful that Ben and Polly have never experienced Christmas festivities. Their protestation, however, reveals a sophisticated sense of self-denial: "It's a great deal better to have *the children* have a nice time" (160; my emphasis).

Polly's maturity stems from her exceedingly domestic role in the household. She makes all the meals, bakes the bread, washes the dishes, cleans the house, puts the children to bed, nurses the children when they are sick, and helps her mother sew and mend clothing. Domesticity is her job. Thus, when Polly gets ready to cook, she "proceed[s] to business" (Sidney 12). Although she somehow knows how to read and write, the only education she has in most of the story is domestic. Her "learning" is sewing (178); the more nimble she is with a needle, the more able she will be to share the burden of Mamsie's labor as a seamstress doing outwork for a village store. Needlework is both an ideological necessity and an ideologically acceptable source of income for the family.

Polly is more than an overworked drudge, however; she is a perfect housewife (minus the husband), who wishes to give of herself unceasingly. When measles settle in her eyes, a condition for which the doctor prescribes complete bed rest, Polly still "long[s] to spring out of bed and fix up a bit" when Mrs. Henderson visits. She is willing to risk *blindness* to confirm to the minister's wife that serious disease does not preclude her from keeping a clean house (Sidney 63). So devoted is she to her domestic tasks that "the very idea" of not "*do[ing]* anything" fills her "active, wide-awake little body with horror" (67).

Although Polly "doesn't have anything" of her own, the one thing she wants is a new stove (Sidney 66), a "status symbol of the efficient, well-ordered home" when it replaced open-hearth cooking (Hareven 264). Her frustrations with the current malfunctioning model confound domestic harmony. Yet Polly—unlike Jo—burns food only once because of the stove's unreliability. Polly's dismay

prompts the family doctor, anxious to help the family, to give her a new replacement. Her reaction to it is significant. Polly drops "down on her knees with her arms flung right around the big, black thing" and "laugh[s] and cry[s] over it, all in the same breath" (Sidney 92–93). It has "such a comfortable, homelike look about it" that Polly treats it as a domestic shrine (90). Further, the stove's structure—"it's 'most all ovens"—suggests a rich symbolic cluster of wombs, pregnancy, and nurturing. No wonder the stove "has a look about it as if it would say, 'I'm going to make sunshine in this house!'" (92, 90). Polly will use it to generate and perpetuate domestic warmth.

Sidney takes care to point out Polly's signal importance in the story. Even though Ben is also a storyteller and the first to befriend the rich boy Jasper King, Polly is invited to the city to visit Jasper's family and is touted as a wonderful storyteller. Her ideological significance lies in her responsibility to create a home, just as Jo's importance lies in her responsibility to develop herself. Polly balks at the idea of leaving home to go to the city—"Tisn't right" to go because "it's too good," she insists—but she goes because she has the opportunity to make a home for the Kings, something Mamsie believes "will be the making of [the Pepper family]" (Sidney 182).

In the city mansion amid bickering boys, Polly is a "bright-faced narrator" who creates such cozy descriptions of her family "and all the sayings and doings in the Little Brown House" that everyone falls in love with her and her home (Sidney 190). She is a "comfort" who brings domesticity's medicinal balm: "in her smile the Little Brown House seem[s] to hop right out" (188). This feeling grows stronger when Polly's sister Phronsie visits the city. Her added presence makes the "old dungeon" seem "a little like 'the Little Brown House'" (221). When the rest of the Peppers join Polly and Phronsie, Polly's job seems complete. "The emptying of the Little Brown House into the big one" has made Jasper's house into a home (234). Neither Polly nor readers need to return to the country because the city now radiates domestic warmth and virtue.

Unfortunately, Polly's attention to others comes at a high personal price. She so internalizes her mother's belief that "the Little Brown House ha[s] got to be...just the *nicest* brown house

that ever was" that she expends all her energy on it (Sidney 245). The one time she thinks "of something besides cups and saucers," she is immediately "ashamed" because she feels selfish. She is guilty only of longing "to go off for just one day, and do *exactly* as she ha[s] a mind to in everything" (36). She wants the freedom to be a child who frolics in the freedom of self-absorption. Yet in Polly's world, a ten-year-old girl functions as a woman who cannot indulge in unstructured time in the country or the city. Polly finds that her new responsibilities to Jasper's family keep her busier than she was at home, making free time for her a luxury that her rich friends cannot afford to give her. Time thus becomes Polly's enemy; the more she has, the more that others demand it. That readers rarely see her resting, a vital part of any smoothly-running domestic system, is crucial. "In a well-ordered household," notes the author of *Mixing in Society: A Manual of Manners* (1870), "domestic arrangements are carried on as noiselessly and easily as if by machinery.... The machinery is always in order, and always works out of sight" (50).<sup>5</sup> Hiding the labor of rest, paradoxical as that sounds, results in the readers' and the King family's comforting belief that Polly is not a domestic machine.

### Beneath the Umbrellas of Benevolent Men

Certainly a good point.

Through their depictions of childhood, Alcott and Sidney give the middle class a positive self-image. The middle class may not always be wealthy, but it commands enough resources to allow its children ample time to play and grow. The March family, although not as financially solvent as it used to be, can afford Christmas roses and chrysanthemums and time for Jo to approach the adult world when she is ready. Indeed, the "one great freedom" Mrs. March "allows her girls" is the "freedom to remain children" (Auerbach 21). The lower classes, on the other hand, lack time and money, turning their children into income-earners and, thus, symbolic adults as early as possible to help the family survive (Coontz).

Middle-class families who have fallen on hard times also fit this category; they are respectable people too proud to beg. Mr. Pepper's wealth remains an unknown, but the text suggests his death

obliterated a crucial source of income for this middle-class family. Sidney, however, never exposes the Peppers to gut-wrenching pain, even though their diet of bread and potatoes would prompt malnutrition and nagging hunger more easily associated with the Other—the lower classes, immigrants, and blacks—than with shabby gentility. Instead of feeling this anguish, the Peppers share the pressure of labor's yoke as they scramble to turn time to their advantage.

Jo and Polly occupy the domestic periphery. Jo does so as the sole rebellious March sister with spotty domestic skills. At a time when one woman in ten became a spinster (Kelley 34), Jo appears to be on her way to social mediocrity. Polly's intense domesticity probably precludes her from spinsterhood, but like Jo, Polly is a liminal character. Her lineage is unknown. On the opening page, readers learn only that "the father" is dead. Discerning readers will notice, though, that the Peppers are among the few people in Badgertown who speak without a rural dialect, their correct speech functioning as a clear sign of their gentility. Indeed, Joel's occasional lapse into slang prompts fierce reprimands from Polly, who is "very particular about things" (Sidney 136). Her scrupulousness points to a middle-class fondness for etiquette and manners, symbols of aristocratic merit (Bushman). Mamsie's belief in the value of education and in saving money for the future signals her own middle-class background, as does Polly's and Ben's literacy. Ideologically speaking, the Peppers are middle-class folks living as the working poor at a time when the middle class "embraced considerable disparities of wealth" (Stoneley 57).<sup>6</sup> Their heritage shines through despite their penurious circumstances because Sidney follows a traditional English belief that "blood will out"—i.e., the superior moral and social character of an honorable line of descent is so innate that it will manifest in family members in any environment. Yet within the Peppers' world, no one exists to verify their ancestral worth, without which Polly's eventual marriage prospects will surely suffer. Ironically, Polly, like Jo, will have to eschew her female-centered home for the male-dominated city to find what she needs to secure her future, a clear tension in a middle-class ideology demanding separate spheres.

The city,  
the Professor,  
the publishers.

As was the case with Meg and Beth, multiple references to needlework foreshadow a major life change for Jo. Mrs. Kirke's desire for someone to teach her children and to sew turns Jo's domestic skill into economic and creative opportunity in the city. Once there, blue socks—remember Chapter 1?—subtly foreshadow a more intimate relationship between Jo and Professor Bhaer when her first opportunity to speak with him catches him trying to darn “a big blue sock” (Alcott 317). Three pages later, Jo is secretly knitting heels for Bhaer's socks, an intimate, wifely chore that the professor later thanks her for. How could these two *not* get married? Needlework proves an ideologically safe matchmaker here because it symbolically and literally stitches domestic ties between them, giving Bhaer enough moral clout to convince Jo that her lurid stories endanger her good character. When the professor first meets the family, Jo is quietly knitting socks again, but her prim demeanor, that of a “model maiden aunt” (422), provides an ideologically apt camouflage that cannot quite quell the sexual frisson that those familiar socks weave into the text. Needlework's foreshadowing of Jo and Bhaer's growing feelings has occupied such safe ground thus far that Jo's rainy, nightmarish errand to procure needles, ribbons, and fabric in the dry goods store comes as a surprise in the penultimate chapter. But if we read Jo's mishandling of textiles as a sexual awareness—which accounts for her “blush and blunder,” which Bhaer watches (441)—we see an emotionally private, but publicly observable, modest young woman manifest her romantic shyness and awkwardness with the man she's grown to love. Their return home under the intimate space of his umbrella symbolizes their imminent domestic pairing, his protection and provision of a safe home.

Polly is wooed from her happy home with the promise of nursing Jasper, not because she pursues her own ambition. Once at the Kings' mansion, Polly has multiple protective male tutors, including Jasper and his cousins Van, Percy, and Dick; the schoolroom and music teachers; and the King family gardener. Their constant vigilance, however, cannot preclude the city's encroaching menace. Phronsie slips away unnoticed to post a letter and is nearly killed crossing

It could be for money from the beginning. They need it to survive.

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most of this is not in the musical & only in the novel but it adds a lot into the plot that is fun

could be subtle 15 fac



the street in the business district—a resonant recreation of Jo's hazardous downtown experience that strongly warns females to avoid urban environments and signals Polly to find the right male protection to ensure her future.

Like Jo in the dry goods store, Polly is suddenly, bizarrely inept. She cannot sew buttons on her shoes and morphs from a cheerful homebody into "a hateful, cross old bear" whose impatience and irritability wreak havoc on her schedule, a domestic woman's only ally in her exhausting fight against time (Sidney 252). She "trie[s] to make up for lost time," but "the day seem[s] to be always just racing ahead of her, and turning around a corner before she c[an] catch up to it, and Ben and the other boys only ca[tch] dissolving views of her as she flit[s] through halls or over stairs" (252, 253). Literally and figuratively, Polly's very substance melts away. She even forgets to feed her pet bird, just as Beth forgets to feed Pip. Polly's bird does not die—it simply needs some food—but the symbolic resonance of the absent birdseed points to a hollow emptiness lurking within Polly's domestic pursuits. No amount of cheerful self-sacrifice will nurture Polly's present or future because her family connections remain yet another resonant textual absence. The best way she can provide for her own and her family's future is to replenish what is missing: the practical birdseed but a rich symbol of domestic fertility, nurture, and nourishment. Like Jo's, Polly's rainy errand results in a sudden encounter with a man and his umbrella, but in this instance, the man is the key to reconfiguring the members of the already established Pepper and King families because he can establish the worth of the Peppers' lineage. He is Mason Whitney: Jasper's brother-in-law, Jasper's cousins' father, and Mrs. Pepper's first cousin. Linked biologically to Jasper's cousins and brother-in-law, the Peppers now can verify that the "look about them that shows them worthy to be trusted" is indeed the product of "good blood" (202). We could argue that Mason Whitney thus provides for the Pepper family's future in a way that Polly never could; his genealogy legitimizes future intimate ties among the three families, allowing Polly to escape the pain of an inappropriate marriage and to marry Jasper in a later book. That reading, however, erases Polly's elaborate, uncharacteristic domestic

malfunctioning, which precipitates Whitney's sudden appearance. Perhaps, just as Jo's clumsiness camouflages and emphasizes her sexual maturity, so Polly's problems, paradoxically, foreground her domestic respectability. Her very stress, that is, highlights the pride she takes in her typical prowess; were she not so committed to domesticity, its clear absence would not distress her so deeply.

Blanche H. Gelfant postulates that the literary heroine, hungry for the freedom allowed men in actuality and in frontier tales, views the city as an alluring harbor of independence and anonymity. There, liberty would run rampant, like wild grapes, ready to be picked anywhere: "around the corner, a few streets away, in another neighborhood where nobody knows [the female harvester] and where she alone will say who she is"—and what fruits she will pick (Gelfant 279). Yet for Jo and Polly, turning corners and crossing city streets have ominous consequences requiring male intervention and reclassification, which confounds self-rescue as an ideological possibility.

### Notes

1. For in-depth studies of middle-class culture, see Blumin, Bushman, Cott, Halttunen, Rodgers, Ryan, and Welter.
2. See particularly Ryan, chapter 4.
3. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall's two-volume *Adolescence* (1904) triggered professional study of adolescence as a viable scholarly field.
4. For additional analysis of fires and burning in Alcott's works, including *Little Women*, see Stadler, who asserts, "[t]he hearth is an active, potentially dangerous, performative agent; it is not simply a reflection of domestic sanctity" (669).
5. Chapter 4 in Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, also explores this phenomenon.
6. Hager stresses Mr. Pepper's English birth as the source of the family's quality. See Sidney 270 for Mamsie, born Mary Bartlett, marrying "an Englishman."

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