

DOES *LITTLE WOMEN* BELITTLE WOMEN?
FEMALE INFLUENCE IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

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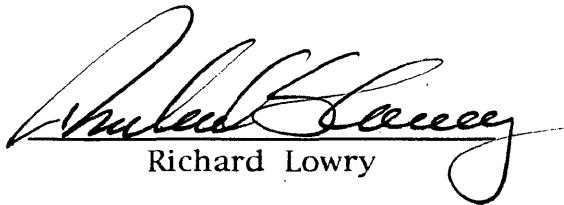
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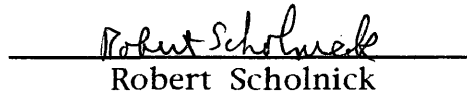
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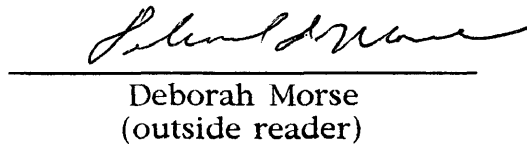
Master of Arts


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This study of womanhood can only be dedicated

To my mother

And to the memory of her mother

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how women without money empower themselves in society and how they gain class status without violating traditional expectations of women. The thesis discusses Louisa May Alcott's representation of class and gender in nineteenth-century America. It asks whether the daughters' expectations for themselves are obtainable given the restrictions society places on them.

The study examines the discrepancy between the characters' voices and the author's voice regarding the role of women in society. It concludes that these voices often contradict one another. The characters are willing to subscribe to a traditional gender role, while the author resists such conformity. Ultimately, however, the author acknowledges that conforming to societal expectations represents the only way women may achieve power in society.

The thesis concludes that power may be achieved by women in nineteenth-century America, but only at the expense of personal desire. In order for women to achieve power during Alcott's era, they were required to conform to norms and make sacrifices that served husband and family more than individual needs. Though the influence achieved by each daughter may appear slight by twentieth century standards, it represents a necessary first step in the march of womanhood.

DOES *LITTLE WOMEN* BELITTLE WOMEN?

. FEMALE INFLUENCE IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

The title of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women may prompt readers to ask whether the author diminishes the status of women in her 1868 novel. If this is so, one must wonder how this novel sold over 6, 000, 000 copies in the United States alone by 1968—a century after its publication. Alcott's coming-of-age novel, which transforms healthy young girls into little women, must do more than diminish the status of women in the text. Critics claim that Alcott actually empowers her female characters in a society that precludes economic status for women. This paper will examine Alcott's treatment of female status in Little Women, and will analyze whether women without money can empower themselves in a male-dominated society.

In Little Women, Louisa May Alcott writes a didactic guide to middle-class feminine ideology in which she explores how women who lack money empower themselves without violating feminine codes of purity. Power, in the text, may be defined by one's influence or moral leverage against her male counterpart. Alcott divides her novel into two sections: Part I describes methods of empowerment for the March children, and Part II questions whether such power is ever fully achieved. In Part I, Alcott illustrates tactics the sisters learn to empower their positions in society in spite of their poverty. Marmee's rhetoric endorses domestic ideology as a primary means of empowerment. This ideology defines a woman's function as making home a comfortable place for family. According to Marmee, if a woman makes her private sphere pleasant, she may enjoy subtle influence over her male counterpart. Marmee teaches her daughters attributes of ideal womanhood

within this domestic ideology--attributes which she purports are tactics for empowerment in a male-dominated world.

Alcott raises anxiety about this domestic ideology in Part II, as she questions who influences the March children, and who they have influence over. Though they follow the precepts of true womanhood endorsed by Marmee in Part I, Jo, Meg, Amy and Beth still find themselves in positions to be dominated. Furthermore, Marmee's children have traded in their artistic freedom, a manifestation of self-assertion, for domestic obligation. This exchange is the same that Marmee makes years earlier, and consequently the daughters all achieve Marmee's status in society--one endowed with responsibility but limited in authority.

It is important to distinguish Marmee's rhetoric from Alcott's voice as the author. Marmee acts as a role-model for her daughters. She teaches them to behave as she behaves, so that all may achieve the common goal of true womanhood. But Alcott provides a meek description of this paragon. When she first introduces Marmee in the novel, Alcott portrays "a cheery voice at the door . . . with a 'can I help you' look about her . . . She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman" (8). Alcott's description of Marmee is hardly awe-inspiring. On the contrary, Marmee appears self-effacing and subdued. "The look, of course, is one of servitude, and her voice is 'cheery' with self-denial. When she feels the urge to speak for herself, she presses her lips tightly together or leaves the room" (Gaard 13). If Marmee represents true womanhood, Alcott does not portray this ideal too highly. Despite any reservations the author may have about true womanhood, however, "this is the model to which the girls aspire, and by the book's end, they all succeed in that goal" (Gaard 13).

In her article, "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter assesses virtues of the ideal woman in mid-nineteenth-century America. Welter describes four attributes of true womanhood, which allegedly "promised happiness and power" for women (152). According to Welter, "Religion or piety was the core of a woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (152). Religion acted as a "tranquilizer" for female yearnings (Welter 153), representing an acceptable outlet for women because it did not take them away from their private spheres.

Comparisons
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The second characteristic of true womanhood illustrated by Welter involves purity. Welter claims that women assert moral leverage over men by remaining chaste while men run wild. Furthermore, "if a woman managed to withstand man's assaults on her virtue, she demonstrated her superiority and power over him" (156). Welter warns, however, that a woman who casts off her delicacy loses all influence. She writes, "A fallen woman was a fallen angel" (154).

Welter declares that submissiveness represents "perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women" in mid-nineteenth-century America (158). She cites Greenwood Leaves (Sara James Clark, 1846), which equated true feminine genius to "a perpetual childhood" (qtd. in Welter 160): a state of temerity and dependence. In her article, Welter also cites advice given by Lady's Token (1848) for women to hold their tongues: "do not give your advice until he asks for it" (qtd. in Welter 161); and even if he is abusive, "never retort" (qtd. in 161). Even The Young Lady's Book (1830) upheld that "a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper and humility of mind" were required of every woman in nineteenth-century America (qtd. in Welter 159).

Finally, Welter defines domesticity as the last virtue of true womanhood. She writes that "domesticity was among the virtues most prized by women's

magazines" (162). The Lady at Home (1847) declared it "woman's mission" to guard morality at home (qtd. in Welter 163). "Woman was expected to dispense comfort and cheer" (163), says Welter. She should make home a pleasant place "so that brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time" (Welter 163). According to Welter, these four virtues of womanhood signify the cult of true womanhood, which was prescribed by ladies journals and magazines throughout the nineteenth-century. Of these same virtues Gaard writes, "The traits needed to diminish a girl into a little woman are simply the ones detailed by Barbara Welter's essay on the cult of true womanhood" (14).

This cult of true womanhood assumes another characteristic--female bonding--according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her book, Disorderly Conduct. Smith-Rosenberg suggests strict gender differentiation leads to emotional segregation of men and women, so that women live in a world inhabited mostly by other women and children. "It was within this closed and intimate female world that the young girl grew toward womanhood" (Smith-Rosenberg 65). Smith-Rosenberg proclaims, "An undeniably romantic and even sensual note frequently marked female relationships" (71). Such bonding among women proves beneficial, as "Women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women" (Smith-Rosenberg 64). Smith-Rosenberg concludes that, in addition to this sisterhood, the cult of true womanhood "prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity and crowned with subservience" (13). Though women remain free to develop relationships with other women, their realm is still limited to house and home.

At the culmination of the cult of true womanhood is marriage—a union resulting in "an increase in authority for women" (Welter 170). Marriage allegedly improved female character in nineteenth-century America because it gave women a goal to strive toward: making home a pleasant place for husband and children. Welter maintains that magazines and related literature encouraged women to accept their private sphere and not to disrupt world order.

By careful manipulation and interpretation they sought to convince woman that she had the best of both worlds—power and virtue—and that a stable order of society depended upon her maintaining her traditional place in it. To that end she was identified with everything that was beautiful and holy.

"Who Can Find a Valiant Woman?" was asked frequently from the pulpit and editorial pages. There was only one place to look for her—at home. (Welter 174)

Marmee echoes this same sentiment in the first book of Little Women: she preaches that a woman's place—her private sphere—may be a powerful place. Again, Marmee equates power with influence over one's counterpart. Marmee endorses virtues of true womanhood and suggests they are tactics for empowerment in a male-dominated world. The March children adopt these tactics and learn from Marmee they may achieve influence in society by practicing such virtues.

Part I: Children Learn Virtues of Womanhood

Little Women begins with the March children lamenting their subordinate position of class and gender. Meg declares, "It's so dreadful to be poor!" (Alcott 3), and she and her sisters mourn their lack of material comfort on Christmas Day. The girls envision their ideal Christmas gift, regretting that "some girls have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all" (Alcott 3). Even Beth, the youngest of the sisters, complains of the domestic chores she performs.

I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff . . . (Alcott 4)

This rejection of domesticity represents a grievance with both class and gender. The family's working class forces the children to perform menial labor in exchange for wages; and domesticity by nature marks the trade of nineteenth-century American women. Jo, especially, resents the role of women in society.

I hate to think I have to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster! It's bad enough to be a girl . . . 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! (Alcott 5)

This dissatisfaction with gender distinguishes Jo from her sisters, who pity their poverty more than anything else. Throughout the novel, Meg and Amy strive to rise above their lower class while Jo strives to rise above her traditional gender role. The latter conquest may prove more significant; in nineteenth-century America "gender remained the determinant regardless of status" of a woman's destiny (Kelley 65). The girls believe that elevation to a superior position in society promises to bring them influence in society.

This early scene in the novel depicts tension between Alcott's voice and Marmee's rhetoric. Jo speaks for Alcott when she tells her sisters to spend their few pennies on themselves during Christmas.

Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it. (Alcott 3)

Jo's suggestion of self-indulgence is soon countered by Beth, who suggests an alternative use for their pennies. "I'll tell you what we'll do," says Beth, "let's each get (Marmee) something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves" (Alcott 6). Beth speaks for Marmee and adheres to the mandate of

true womanhood with this ascetic outlook. That Jo does not conform to this asceticism--yet--is Alcott's acknowledgment that true womanhood may not be easily attained--or desirable. Gaard describes the "ecstasy of self-sacrifice" (5) that follows this scene and concludes, "Self-sacrifice is the first overt lesson for little women; being cheerful is the second" (5).

Alcott introduces the concept of female networks in the scene that follows. She illustrates the happy hour when Marmee returns home after work. "Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her" (Alcott 6). Suddenly the children forget their own troubles, and each does her share to make home pleasant. When Marmee enters the house, "The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own way" (Alcott 9). The girls function as members of a community, making their private sphere, or woman's world, one to which family members wish to return.

Meg arranged the tea table, Jo brought wood and set chairs . . . Beth trotted to and fro between parlor and kitchen . . . while Amy gave directions to everyone. (Alcott 9)

This scene marks Alcott's first representation of female networks in Little Women. Female bonding, according to Smith-Rosenberg, comprises an important part of true womanhood in nineteenth-century America. In her article, "The Power of Women's Networks," Mary Ryan suggests power exists among women who band together. Though Ryan does not refer specifically to familial networks, she does claim that any unified sisterhood contains the seeds for "diverted feminist possibilities" (83). According to Ryan, "Connections with everyday associations and informal social networks of local and neighborhood women" strengthen and reinforce female ambition (82). In this case, the girls' very sisterhood provides each sister with the positive reinforcement needed to work toward a common goal. When they work together, the March children successfully alleviate their down-trodden spirits

and display the capacity to elevate their self-esteem. By describing this transformation from depression to joy in the children, Alcott implies the girls must overcome their self-pity if they are to discover happiness--or influence--in society. Thus women's networks, in addition to fostering strength among the sisters, helps to conquer self-pity and enables them to transform home into a comfort zone.

This female network proves to be a great source of power for the March girls. The sisterhood provides mutual support for its members when Father March writes home and tells his daughters to prepare for womanhood. He urges the girls to "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully" that when he returns, Father March may be proud of his "little women" (Alcott 10). Father March sanctions images of constraint for his daughters, and Marmee upholds these images. She tells her daughters:

Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now my little pilgrims, suppose you . . . see how far on you can get before Father comes home. (Alcott 11)

Marmee summons her daughters to independent survival, but only at the urging of her husband. Father March "sets the moral standards that guide these young pilgrims, and it is for his sake that the girls resolve to carry their burdens" (Halttunen 243). Their burdens are their internal yearnings, and the standard they must achieve is the sublimation of these yearnings. "The messages are clear: self-denial will make them into women, and their father will love them more . . . Marmee suggests the girls play in earnest their childhood game of 'Pilgrim's Progress' to facilitate their task of self-denial" (Gaard 10). That Marmee encourages her daughters to sublimate their desires

suggests that she has already done the same. Alcott thus portrays a role model for the children that represses all internal passion.

The girls promptly support one another in this quest. Meg encourages her younger sisters "to read and love and mind" the guide books which Marmee gives them (Alcott 13). "We must begin at once" (Alcott 13), she pleads with the others. Alcott implies that mutual encouragement enables the sisters to accomplish any task. Here is the first tactic which the girls learn as a method for empowerment: female networking. In addition to providing strength and support for its members, this community of women also validates each other's experiences. "How good Meg is!" Beth declares (Alcott 13), and follows her sister's example of reading her guidebook. Such reinforcement from within the female network fosters self-esteem among the girls.

In her book The Bonds of Womanhood, Nancy Cott suggests that developing a sisterhood enables women to rise above self-pity and conquer low self-esteem.

The female friendships of this period expressed a new individuality on women's part . . . their best chance to escape their stated inferiority in the world of men was on a raft of gender difference. Female friendships, by upholding positive attributes . . . asserted that women were different but not lesser than men. (Cott 190)

Cott contends that women relied on each other to confirm values and validate experiences. Thus women could assert their equality, if not authority, through sisterhood. Women were willing to accept their separate sphere provided "they had sisterhood to secure it" (Cott 195). Smith-Rosenberg echoes this nurturing aspect of female networks. She proclaims that "an intimate mother-daughter relationship lay at the heart of this female world" of bonding (64). According to Smith-Rosenberg, the "mother-daughter bonding served as the model for subsequent relations with other women" (32). In the novel,

Marmee's relationship with her children proves mutually beneficial. It endows Marmee with a purpose--to teach her children virtues of true womanhood--and it provides the children with a model toward which they may strive in adulthood.

Cott argues this sexual solidarity among women marks the beginning of gender consciousness and, ultimately, the feminist movement. Cott writes that "the ideology of a woman's sphere formed a necessary stage in the process of shattering the hierarchy of sex and in softening the hierarchical relationship of marriage" (200). It was "not until they saw themselves classed by sex would women join to protest their sexual fate" (Cott 206). Banding together, according to Cott, empowers female circumstance. This holds true for the March sisters, who have already demonstrated their ability to foster self-esteem by working together. Marmee empowers her circumstance through female bonding as well. Training her daughters in true womanhood endows Marmee with a purpose while providing consolation for an absent husband. Female networks, then, prove to be a source of strength for mother and daughters alike.

Developing a female network enables the girls to work together in a community, which represents another tactic for empowerment. Marmee tells her daughters that each girl should do her part to make home pleasant for all. "Work is wholesome" (Alcott 111), she declares. Marmee teaches the value of community effort by denying it for one week: she allows the entire family, including Hannah, to neglect daily chores which had previously marked "the happiest hour" (Alcott 8) in the household.

It was astonishing what a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things was produced by the 'resting and reveling' process. The days kept getting longer and longer, the weather was unusually variable and so were tempers, an unsettled feeling possessed everyone, and Satan found plenty of mischief for the idle hands to

do. (Alcott 104)

After this experiment, the sisters discover the value of hard work. Jo speaks for her female network when she admits "lounging and larking doesn't pay" (Alcott 110). This renewed appreciation for a strong work ethic contrasts with the children's earlier grievance with domesticity--that it represented "the worst work in the world" (Alcott 4). "The virtues of mutual self-sacrifice and domestic cooperation, however, must be proven to the March girls before they can recognize the importance of such virtues to their self-realization" (Elbert 200).

Now the sisters understand each girl plays a role in making home pleasant. Marmee's gentle reprimand teaches them a lifelong lesson:

I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work, you got on pretty well, though I don't think you were very happy or amiable; so I thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when everyone thinks only of herself. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all? (Alcott 111)

Marmee's glorification of domesticity in this experiment affirms the value of domestic work and its potential for making life worthwhile. Marmee has "proven to the girls that domestic work is real work" (Elbert 202). In the world of true womanhood, there is no room for self-indulgence. She tells her daughters that work represents a viable tactic for empowerment. Having regular hours for work and play make life "a beautiful success, in spite of poverty" (Alcott 111).

Domestic work empowers the girls for two reasons. Commitment to household chores enables them to perfect domesticity, which represents the poor woman's trade in Little Women. Jo significantly earns Laurie's "respectful silence" after asserting her domestic skill by ordering his parlor

and whisking "things into place" (Alcott 47). As well as contributing to the elevation of female stature, domestic work wards off idleness, which leads to "ennui and mischief" (Alcott 111). This aversion to idleness also empowers the girls; it raises their moral stature above Laurie's. The girls' constant labor makes Laurie "ashamed of the indolent life he led" (Alcott 55). By practicing their skills, the girls learn that domestic work ennobles their character and fosters self-esteem. It gives them "a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion" (Alcott 111). According to Alcott, hard work represents a proven tactic for female empowerment.

Women in nineteenth-century America commonly devoted their whole lives to mastering their domestic space. Cott remarks that developing a private home, or separate sphere, "of comfort and compensation" became "an ultimate goal" for women (69). Such preservation of home and domesticity "began to mean for women what worldly occupations meant for men" (Cott 73). Domesticity becomes the primary vocation for women, and "they staked their major claim to social power on their vocation" (Cott 205). Women believed their status was elevated as they improved the home, because the welfare of society depended on the comfort of home and the happiness of man. Hard work offered women a means by which to feel empowered in society; it assuaged self-pity. But this domestic ideology also devalues women by defining them in sexual rather than human terms. That they belonged to a separate sphere confined women's social power to their "special female qualities rather than on general human rights" (Cott 200). Cott calls this paradox of women's sphere a "simultaneous glorification and devaluation" of women (62). For the moment, Marmee glorifies this separate sphere of women. Marmee encourages domesticity as a suitable trade for women and offers hard work—within this trade—as a tactic of female empowerment. Alcott endorses the

value of hard work, though notably, she portrays the virtue as something that does not come naturally to the girls. It is a virtue which they must learn from their mother, who presumably has had to learn it herself over time.

Within this domestic sphere, Marmee teaches her children other tactics that may strengthen their self-esteem. A memorable lesson arrives Christmas morning, when Marmee asks her daughters to give up their Christmas breakfast for a starving family. The children agree, and "Funny angels in hoods and mittens" deliver their breakfast to the needy (Alcott 16). After performing this act of charity, the children experience instant gratification. Alcott reveals, "there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts" (16). Auerbach remarks of this scene that "The Christmas gift Marmee seems to tenderly offer her girls is hunger" (56). Such satisfaction with themselves contrasts with earlier self-pitying thoughts about it being "so dreadful to be poor" (Alcott 3). The girls discover the value of charitable acts, thanks to Marmee. They find "it is better to renounce than receive . . . And the book succeeds in making us believe that this hungry day is 'A Merry Christmas'" (Auerbach 56). By creating a sisterhood of want among her daughters, Marmee enables them to feel more fortunate than another family. Consequently, self-pity vanishes and self-esteem strengthens.

Sacrifice empowers the girls for another reason as well. A selfless nature elevates their stature in society, thus making them a more marketable commodity. Amy attributes Beth's popularity to her selflessness. "Beth isn't selfish," she observes, "and that's the reason everyone loves her" (Alcott 189). Amy thus resolves "not to be selfish anymore" (Alcott 15). Popularity, especially among men, also defines power in the text. If the girls can achieve

femininity despite their working class background, and find suitable husbands, then they will have empowered their social positions in society.

Alcott interrupts this moment of female self-sufficiency with an instance of male intervention. Mr. Laurence donates Christmas dinner to the March family after hearing of their charitable act. Auerbach calls this a gift of "masculine largesse" (57). Though Marmee tries to instill a sense of self-worth in her young daughters, happiness still arrives in the form of a male counterpart. Mr. Laurence compensates for the girls' missed Christmas breakfast, giving them "a feast at night to make up for the bread-and-milk breakfast" (Alcott 21). By sending dinner to his neighbors, Mr. Laurence validates their sacrifice on Christmas morning. This male intervention undermines any independence achieved by the March children because the girls' ultimate sense of worth derives from the gift they receive, and not from the act they perform. Mr. Laurence's gift is a further reminder that economic power is solely endowed in men. "In the real world, of course, men had all of the economic power . . . It is no coincidence . . . there is a male benefactor who distinctly improves the family fortunes" (Kornfield 71).

Alcott describes a family of girls who are restricted by their poverty. According to Marmee, if the girls work together, develop networks, and sacrifice for others, they may defeat self-pity and develop virtues of womanhood--ultimately gaining influence in society. Such influence will manifest itself in suitable marriages for the daughters. Alcott implies the goal of true womanhood is marriage, a convention she does not embrace wholeheartedly.

Each daughter learns individual lessons about true womanhood as well. Meg discovers an important tactic for empowerment, modesty, in spite of her self-pity. Her regret over not having luxury in life leads her to overreact

when she is invited to a social engagement. She indulges in vanity as she dresses for the Gardiner's party, believing that refined appearance reflects refined character. She thinks that "a real lady is always known by neat boots, gloves, and handkerchief" (Alcott 25). Meg wrongly believes she may gain influence over her peers by adopting pretenses. She tells Jo to wear gloves to hide her worn hands, and then she laments pathetically, "If only I had a silk!" (Alcott 23). Alcott mocks these "aristocratic tastes" (Alcott 25) of Meg's when she narrates, "dear me, let us be elegant or die!" (Alcott 25). Meanwhile, Alcott portrays Jo as the consummate resistance to such vanities. Jo, who "never troubled herself much about dress" (Alcott 23), attends the Gardiner's party without pretense and finds reward for her humility. Jo meets Laurie here, whom she impresses with her "gentlemanly demeanor" (Alcott 28), rather than any affected lady-like behavior. Jo admits honestly to her frock being burned, and afterward enjoys an equal relationship with her new friend. Significantly, Laurie is attracted to a simple woman: Jo's value as a commodity increases as she practices the virtue of modesty. While Jo reaps the benefits of modesty, Meg sprains her ankle trying to be the socialite she is not. Humility empowers Jo in this social situation, and Meg has yet to learn that affected appearance does not elevate her in society.

At the next party she attends, Meg's self-pity results in excessive indulgence again. As she dresses for the Moffat party, Meg regrets her impoverished attire. She wishes for the violet silk instead of her "old tarlatan" (Alcott 79), a new housedress, and a more fashionable umbrella. And most importantly, "my bonnet doesn't look like Sallie's" (Alcott 80). Before leaving her home, Meg laments her sorry state. She sighs pathetically, "I wonder if I shall ever be happy enough to have real lace on my clothes and bows on my

caps?" (Alcott 80). After harping so much on her simple lifestyle, Meg cannot help but feel inferior to other party-goers.


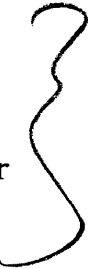
The more she saw of Annie Moffat's pretty things, the more she envied her and sighed to be rich. Home now looked bare and dismal as she thought of it, work grew harder than ever, and she felt that she was a very destitute and much-injured girl, in spite of the new gloves and silk stockings. (Alcott 81)

Feeling embarrassed for her poverty, Meg allows herself to be transformed into "a fine young lady" by the Moffat family (Alcott 85). "They crimped and curled her hair, they polished her neck and arms with some fragrant powder, touched her lips with coralline salve to make them redder" (Alcott 85). Meg believes her affected appearance will conceal her poverty and increase her popularity at the party.

Meg's false airs at the party teaches her a much-needed lesson about womanhood. Initially, Meg enjoys her transformation, believing "there is a charm about fine clothes which attracts a certain class of people and secures their respect" (Alcott 86). But predictably, Meg's perspective changes as she soon becomes uncomfortable with her costume. She meets with Laurie's disapproving gaze and immediately becomes embarrassed over her altered appearance. "Something in his honest eyes made her blush and wish she had her old dress on" (Alcott 87). Laurie, speaking as Meg's conscience, invalidates Meg's transformation and objects to such "fuss and feathers" (Alcott 88). Meg regrets her vanity, wishing "I'd been sensible and worn my own things, then I should not have disgusted other people, or felt so uncomfortable and ashamed of myself" (Alcott 88). Contrary to her expectation, Meg loses status when she allows herself to be decorated with costume and make-up: Alcott implies Meg is less chaste than before, violating feminine codes of purity. As Welter suggested, "a fallen woman was a fallen angel" (154), and in this scene, Meg appears as both. Meg learns from experience that a modest lifestyle cannot be

embellished, and that humility represents a desirable virtue of womanhood. Meg's indulgence in vanity results from her perception of the way women are valued in society. Meg adopts a rich and refined air thinking it will increase her value as a commodity. That Meg actually loses value is consistent with the ascetic staple of true womanhood: femininity cannot be achieved through self-indulgence. Alcott uses Laurie to convey this point because Meg has more respect for a man's opinion.

Following this scene, Marmee reveals her visions of happiness for the children. She admits to Meg and Jo that marriage represents the ideal goal of all women. "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (Alcott 92), she tells them. But Marmee cautions her daughters not to marry only for financial security.


 Money is a needful and precious thing--but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace . . . better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands. (Alcott 93)
 
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Marmee sanctions an independent lifestyle for her daughters--one where they are married to poor men, or not married at all. She gives them the "precious freedom not to fall in love" (Auerbach 62). In his book Victorian Domesticity, Charles Strickland proclaims that "Ideologically, Marmee proves to be a feminist, although a moderate one" (129). By teaching her daughters tactics for empowerment in society, Marmee prepares them for a life without money--and perhaps a life without men.

Like her sister Meg, Amy also resists a primary virtue of womanhood--humility--until she discovers from experience that it represents a tactic for empowerment. She learns this lesson after indulging in luxuries she cannot afford. Amy borrows money from Meg so she may purchase fashionable limes

as her classmates are doing. "The girls are always buying them," Amy explains, "and unless you want to be thought mean, you must do it, too" (Alcott 62). Amy feels she must return these "debts of honor" (Alcott 62), after enjoying so many from her classmates. Amy purchases the limes to keep up with appearances, but loses face when her teacher punishes her for bringing the forbidden fruit to school. The teacher strikes his student for her transgression, in effect denying her expression of passion, and Amy suffers severely for the public reprimand.

For the first time in her life she had been struck, and the disgrace, in her eyes, were as deep as if he had knocked her down . . . the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. (Alcott 65-66)

Not only has Amy been devalued as a commodity, she has been devalued publicly. Amy runs home after this humiliating experience and looks to her female network for comfort and guidance. Though she admits that Amy's punishment is severe, Marmee agrees that her daughter should temper her growing conceit. "Conceit spoils the finest genius," Marmee declares flatly (Alcott 67). "The consciousness of possessing and using (real talent or goodness) should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty" (Alcott 67). Marmee's rhetoric is substantiated by Ann Douglas, who writes in The Feminization of American Culture, that "the essence of the fictional heroine is her ability to attract flattery without having to solicit it" (261). Douglas maintains that women should be responded to, and in that way, "work a kind of religious transformation in man" (46). Marmee warns Amy about indulging in excesses she cannot afford, and she tries to impress upon her daughter the virtue of modesty. Marmee's gentle reprimand upholds the necessity of self-denial to true womanhood. "Thus the novel's overt messages and Marmee both work to the same end" (Gaard 10).

Amy fails to recognize the virtue of modesty after this humiliating experience. She proceeds to plan an extravagant luncheon for the girls in her drawing class so that she may be accepted by her high society classmates.

One of her weaknesses was a desire to move in 'our best society,' without being quite sure what the *best* really was. Money, position, fashionable accomplishments, and elegant manners were most desirable things in her eyes, and she liked to associate with those who possessed them, often mistaking the false for the true, and admiring what was not admirable.
(Alcott 242)

Amy perceives that riches will elevate her status in society, thus making her a more marketable commodity, but she fails to recognize that self-denial is a more feminine virtue than self-indulgence. Amy's attraction to the trappings of high society only leads her to experience further humiliation. Despite Marmee's suggestion that she attempt a humble style of luncheon "keeping with our circumstances" (Alcott 243), Amy plans a menu which she cannot afford. Like her sister Meg, Amy believes that refined appearances reflect refined character. She "had yet to learn that money cannot buy refinement of nature, that rank does not always confer nobility" (Alcott 242). Predictably, Amy's luncheon of cold tongue and French chocolate fails: only one guest attends the party. Her effort to "go into good society" proves unsuccessful (Alcott 244). Having wasted precious money on the frivolous lunch, Amy feels embarrassed before her family. She declares categorically, "I've been a fool" (Alcott 248). This experience teaches Amy the value of a modest lifestyle. Once she understands that money does not guarantee popularity, Amy can feel comfortable with her modest means and exercise virtues of true womanhood. Alcott shows Amy mercy by this example: she teaches her at a young age that humility is an acceptable lifestyle. This is one of the few instances where Alcott's voice and Marmee's rhetoric agree with one another.

While Amy and Meg discover the value of modesty in a poor woman's life, Jo learns a different virtue of womanhood: controlling her temper and maintaining a pleasing disposition. Alcott writes of the oldest daughter:

Jo had the least self-control, and had hard times trying to curb the fiery spirit which was continually getting her into trouble . . . Poor Jo tried desperately to be good, but her bosom enemy was always ready to flame up and defeat her. (Alcott 71)

Jo's temper flares up early in the novel and results in the near death of her sister Amy. This incident, where Jo's silence causes Amy to nearly drown, demonstrates to Jo the necessity of repressing her anger. Distraught with her behavior, Jo turns to Marmee for advice. "What shall I do?" Jo cries in despair about her "dreadful temper" (Alcott 75). "I am afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me" (Alcott 75). Marmee responds to Jo's cries by confessing that she also has a violent temper, one that has taken her years to subdue.

I have been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it. (Alcott 75)

Marmee urges Jo to be persistent in subduing her temper. "Never get tired of trying," she tells her, "and never think it is impossible to conquer your own fault" (Alcott 75). Jo heeds this advice, mostly because of the example her mother sets: "The patience and humility of the face she loved so well was a better lesson to Jo than the wisest lecture" (Alcott 75). This lesson by example has a strong impact on Jo, and she resolves to adopt the disposition of a more virtuous woman—one which represses any negative emotion.

Gaard writes that "anger has the potential for empowering revolution" (3). Thus any female expression of discontent was potentially dangerous—a threat to the male-dominated society.

The little woman must not sulk, pout, complain, or in

any other way express her anger while she denies her personal desires . . . good little women who cheerfully practice self-denial will be loved by friends and family, and will be able to marry. But . . . cheerful self-denial implicitly requires the suppression of anger. (Gaard 4)

That Marmee successfully represses her own anger is viewed as a step toward true womanhood--a model which Jo will strive to imitate. It is significant that Marmee cannot manage her temper on her own, but rather, requires her husband to silence her. "For men virtue seems natural; for women, in most cases, it must be bitterly acquired" (Spacks 117). Furthermore, Marmee all but forgets Jo's loss of her precious journal. That Jo's art has been destroyed means nothing to the family, and the only issue now is Jo's disposition. "The loss of her 'little book' is apparently not worth discussing. This is the overt meaning of the incident, and the rest of Jo's life is proof that she indeed learns from it that her writing is of little value; her husband-to-be drives the lesson home" (Armstrong 468). Jo's attempted self-assertion through artistic expression is denied--by all including Marmee. Alcott subtly portrays true womanhood at odds with independent artistic expression, and true womanhood prevails.

Later in the novel, Jo successfully manages her temper. When the March children play with Laurie's English friends, Jo suffers an insult against all "Yankees" (Alcott 117). She resists responding to the insult with harsh words, and instead "checked herself" (Alcott 117). Jo has learned the value of exercising self-control, and such self-restraint elevates her stature. By controlling her temper, Jo moves one step closer to embodying a characteristic of true womanhood: submissiveness. Marmee already embodies this aspect of womanhood, as she freely admits to checking "the hasty words which rise to my lips" (Alcott 76). Jo successfully does the same.

By accepting this submissive disposition, the woman does not necessarily perpetuate her subordinate role in society. In Cradle of the Middle Class, Mary Ryan suggests that women may actually obtain influence in society "by persuasion, by kindness, by gentleness and affection, by the continued exhibition of sweet temper, and of a soothing and forgiving spirit" (190). Thus when Marmee advises Jo to work toward the ideal state of womanhood--submissiveness--she is teaching her the tools to gain influence, or power, in society. Tompkins confirms this view of female submission in Sensational Designs :

. . . submission becomes self-conquest and doing the will of one's husband brings an access of divine power . . . as (women) learn to transmute rebellious passion into humble conformity to others' wishes, their powerlessness becomes a source of strength . . . the strategies of the weak will finally inherit the earth. (162-165)

Marmee suggests that Jo's conquering her temper will actually lead her daughter to a position of influence in society. Even after adopting an air of submission and a pleasant disposition, however, Alcott will question a woman's influence in society. Marmee's own example suggests a submissive nature may prove problematic for a woman. She has submitted to her husband throughout their marriage and admits to being angry nearly every day of her life. Alcott also suggests by this example that submission does not come naturally to women, but must be taught to them.

Marmee offers religion as a crutch for her daughters during their times of trial. She tells Jo that God may help one endure any difficulties in life, including subduing her temper.

My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father . . . His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but

may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. (Alcott 77)

Marmee ends her sermon by urging Jo to turn to God with all her troubles as freely as she would turn to her own mother.

Amy discovers a similar power in religion during her own solitary experiences. While living with Aunt March during Beth's illness, Amy finds piety in her prayers for Beth's recovery. Amy goes daily to her dressing closet, which has been converted to a little chapel by Aunt March's religious maid. Here Amy sits alone, "thinking good thoughts, and praying the dear God to preserve her sister" (Alcott 182).

The little girl was very sincere in all this, for being left alone outside the safe home nest, she felt the need of some kind hand to hold by so sorely that she instinctively turned to the strong and tender Friend, whose fatherly love most closely surrounds his little children. (Alcott 182)

Amy allows religion to replace her parents' absent influence. That the two prove interchangeable implies that parental authority represents high authority in nineteenth-century America. Marmee visits Amy in her little chapel and applauds her efforts. "I like it very much, dear," she says approvingly (Alcott 188). "There are a good many times in this hard life of ours, but we can always bear them if we ask help in the right way" (Alcott 188).

By encouraging piety in her daughters, Marmee pushes them one step closer to true womanhood. According to Welter, religion represents a sanctioned diversion for women because it acts as a tranquilizer for female yearnings that could not be achieved in society. Nancy Cott, in The Bonds of Womanhood, views religion as a means of obtaining power in society. According to Cott, "the feminization of Protestantism in the early nineteenth century was conspicuous" (132). Women pursued religion because it gave

them an intellectual and moral outlet. More important than that, however, was that religious identification enabled women to assert themselves "both in private and public ways" (Cott 140). Women could practice self-indulgence and self-expression in their religion, two ideals not normally attained by women in nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, religion gave women an authority beyond the world of men. Marmee asserts this aspect of religion when she tells Jo, "The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom" (Alcott 77). Religion supplied women with the possibility to escape a male-dominated world, and perhaps exert a power of their own.

In The Feminization of American Culture, Douglas discusses the changing face of nineteenth-century Protestant religion. She writes that by the late 1800's, "American Protestants were much more likely to define their faith in terms of family morals, civic responsibility, and above all, in terms of the social function of churchgoing" (7). This less intellectual approach to religion appealed to the female masses: "Nothing could show better the late nineteenth-century Protestant Church's altered identity as an eager participant in the emerging consumer society than its obsession with popularity and its increasing disregard of intellectual issues" (Douglas 7). Consequently women became primary consumers of American culture, religion included. In Little Women, the March children become consumers of religion during their passage to adulthood. Jo learns to ask for God's help in conquering her temper. Amy learns to ask for God's kindness in restoring Beth's failing health. In both instances, the girls look beyond the male world for authority, making them appear less subjugated than before.

In Part I of Little Women, Marmee teaches her daughters various feminine ideals to strive toward as they mature. The girls learn that female

networks play an important role in a woman's life. They discover the value of hard work, and making home a pleasant place. They attempt to develop selfless natures, modest dispositions, and pleasing tempers. Finally, they learn to turn to God during times of trial. According to Marmee, these ideals represent tactics for empowerment and promise to earn the girls influence later in the novel.

The girls already have moral leverage with the rich Laurence family. Laurie "can't help watching" the girls through the window (Alcott 47); and Mr. Laurence notices added "life in the boy's face" (Alcott 51) after his grandson plays with Jo. The grandfather encourages interaction among the children, believing the girls will prove a positive influence on his grandson. Laurie "can't get into mischief in that little nunnery over there," thinks Mr. Laurence, "and Mrs. March is doing more for him than we can" (Alcott 55). Though initially the March children "found it very hard" to overlook class difference between the families (Alcott 55), eventually they allowed this distinction to fade:

the fact that they were poor and Laurie rich . . . made them shy of accepting favors which they could not return. But, after a while, they found that he considered them the benefactors, and could not do enough to show how grateful he was for Mrs. March's motherly welcome, their cheerful society, and the comfort he took in that humble home of theirs. So they soon forgot their pride and interchanged kindnesses without stopping to think which was the greater. (55)

The March women do not allow their condition of poverty to represent social inferiority, though often they feel poor and disadvantaged. By adopting virtues of true womanhood, the girls negotiate their way in the world, empowering themselves by following Marmee's teaching. These attributes, among others, raise the poor March girls to the level of the rich Laurence boy so that all may enjoy a relationship of equality.

It is significant that power achieved by the girls thus far is, firstly, as children; and secondly, in a predominantly female world. Within their private sphere, and according to female perspective, the girls are empowered by adopting virtues of womanhood. There are no male authority figures to validate or invalidate this female power. There is only Laurie, who is himself just a child. Once Laurie matures, he will recognize his neighbors' authority in an entirely different light.

At the end of Part I of Little Women, Mr. March returns home and reinforces the elevated stature of his daughters. The male figure confirms the children have all moved closer toward attaining womanhood. Mr. March detects Meg's commitment to domestic work. He notes that Meg's "roughened forefinger, a burn on the back, and two or three little hard spots on the palm" appear prettier to him than the "white and smooth" hands she once possessed (Alcott 208). The industrious hands reflect Meg's dedication to the domesticity and "womanly skill which keeps home happy" (Alcott 208). Amy's character appears similarly strengthened. Mr. March remarks that "she has learned to think of other people more and herself less" (Alcott 209). Again, the father perceives this change will result in a better domestic life for the girl "with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others" (Alcott 209). Finally, Mr. March notices Jo, who no longer tries to act boyish but instead lets her true nature flower. He views Jo as "a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug as she used to" (Alcott 208). Mr. March sanctions these images which are "constricting rather than expanding" (Armstrong 466). Jo's "motherly way" delights her father (Alcott 208). Mr. March validates his daughters' learning experiences and observes their transformation from little girls to little women. These little women have learned tactics to improve their potential as

good homemakers. Alcott writes of their influence that "to outsiders the five energetic women seemed to rule the house" (Alcott 223). But in Part II, it becomes evident that the lessons they have learned at home do not ensure status or power outside this private sphere.

Part II: Children Discover Adulthood

In Part II of Little Women, the sisters venture outside their home, discover adulthood, and attempt to claim power in a male-dominated society. Marmee's attempt to indoctrinate her children with virtues of true womanhood have ambiguous consequences. Meg, Amy, and Jo each face difficulty exercising the feminine virtues they have learned in Part I. Once they exhibit such virtues, however, the girls succeed to femininity. This femininity, or state of female adulthood, does not result in the power Marmee promised her girls would have with their male counterparts. What Marmee claimed were tactics of empowerment only result in higher valued commodities. Authority remains in the hands of male counterparts throughout Part II. It is true, however, that the girls exert subtle influence over their male counterparts.

Meg exhibits virtues of womanhood on her wedding day, which marks the beginning of Part II of Little Women. Following a three-year courtship, Meg agrees to marry John Brooke in spite of his poverty. At the ceremony, Meg overcomes the vanity that marked her character in Part I. Rather than adopting an affected appearance, Meg maintains a simple style for her wedding: "Neither silk, nor lace, nor orange flowers would she have" (Alcott 234). Meg explains:

I don't want to look strange or fixed up today . . .
I don't want a fashionable wedding, but only those
about me whom I love, and to them I wish to look
and be my familiar self. (Alcott 234)

Meg's humble wishes suggest she has learned a tactic of empowerment for women: modesty. Meg is empowered by her high stature on her wedding day.

Her character appears much more womanly than it did at the Moffat party. Meg appears further learned when she proudly defends her match with John, declaring, "I'm not afraid of being poor, for I've been happy so far" (Alcott 217). It is ironic that Meg makes this claim, as she more than any of the sisters has resented her poverty thus far. Though she insists, "I'm too happy to care what anyone says or thinks" (Alcott 236), Meg will have difficulty accepting poverty in marriage. Nevertheless, Meg's acceptance of John's poverty empowers her with determination; her strong will even breaks Aunt March.

Meg's determination does not penetrate Jo's objection to the marriage, however. Viewing Meg sitting on John's lap "wearing an expression of the most abject submission" (Alcott 218), Jo seems acutely aware of the consequences of Meg's marriage. In addition to Meg becoming saddled with domestic obligation, "Jo worries that Meg's marriage will fundamentally alter the structure of her family and its strong female bonds" (Kornfield 73). Jo cannot object more strongly. She "gave a sort of gasp, as if a cold shower bath had suddenly fallen upon her . . . (She) cried and scolded tempestuously as she told the awful news to Beth and Amy" (Alcott 218). Jo has resisted marriage all along on the grounds of its restriction on women, and now she must bear to watch Meg marry. "You can't know how hard it is for me to give up Meg," Jo declares solemnly (Alcott 219). Jo's harsh opposition to Meg's marriage represents Alcott's resistance to marriage as an institution. Alcott will describe Meg's marriage as one that endures, but not without difficulty.

Meg becomes frustrated with her husband's poverty almost at the outset of the marriage. Ignoring that her husband is a poor man, Meg succumbs to the temptation of luxury and buys material for a silk dress which the couple cannot afford. The extravagance comes to "haunt her, not delightfully as a new dress should, but dreadfully like the ghost of a folly that was not easily

laid" (Alcott 265). Meg blames Sally for the extravagance, and insists that her wealthy friend had "tempted Meg beyond her strength" (Alcott 264). Eventually Meg accepts responsibility for her transgression, explaining pathetically, "I try to be contented, but it is hard, and I'm tired of being poor" (Alcott 266). Meg's self-pity--the same self-pity that prevented her from living happily in Part I--leads her to make the frivolous purchase. Now her self-pity stands in the way of John's happiness as well. Meg suffers greatly for her extravagance.

A week of remorse nearly made Meg sick, and the discovery that John had countermanded the order for his new greatcoat reduced her to a state of despair which was pathetic to behold. (Alcott 267)

Meg's despair only finds relief in John's tenderness, and the two recover happiness after talking over the matter. Once and for all Meg triumphs over her feelings of inadequacy. "Meg learned to love her husband better for his poverty" (Alcott 267), and never felt in want of luxury again. Meg dispenses with vanity altogether, and finds poverty much easier to bear after adopting a modest lifestyle.

Meg continues to experience trials in marriage after this incident. Meg must adopt additional virtues of womanhood to secure her happiness. She soon discovers another aspect of womanhood which proves essential to a successful marriage: a pleasing disposition. Though her manner had always been pleasant during childhood, after marriage a woman's disposition must conform to certain norms. Meg makes this discovery on an occasion where her husband returns home from work with a guest for dinner. Meg is out of sorts, and she and her husband proceed to squabble. Both feel equally wronged by the other.

John was angry, though he did not show it; he felt that Meg had got him into a scrape, and then deserted him in his hour of need . . . (He

resolved) to be calm and kind, but firm, quite firm, and show her where she had failed in her duty to her spouse.

Meg likewise resolved to be 'calm and kind, but firm,' and show him his duty. (Alcott 262)

Meg alters her response to this domestic squabble, however, as she remembers Marmee's advice:

Be careful, very careful not to wake his anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err . . . (Alcott 263)

Meg submits to her mother's advice and asks John for forgiveness. "I'll do my part" (Alcott 263), she rationalizes in her mind. John, in turn, apologizes as well, thus restoring domestic tranquillity. Through these experiences, Meg learns the proper role of a woman in marriage: to submit to her husband.

Marmee's rhetoric suggests that female submission actually empowers women over their male counterparts. Tompkins concurs with this assessment, arguing in Sensational Designs that submission gives women a platform from which they may rise to power. She writes that "Submission becomes self-conquest (of one's own passions) and doing the will of one's husband brings the access of divine power" (162). Women's submission represents a denial of passion, which ultimately represents self-control, a characteristic of strength. Alcott implies that Meg exercises subtle influence over her husband by restoring the marriage to a happy state. In Empire of the Mother, Mary Ryan confirms that women "could achieve moral power from a position of apparent subordination" (122). Meg does not appear morally empowered, however; Meg's submission to John makes her appear less powerful in her marital relationship. She must stifle any discontent she experiences, and beg forgiveness for troubles both husband and wife contribute to. John's happiness dictates Meg's every action.

The dynamics of Meg's patriarchal marriage become further apparent after Meg embarks on motherhood. Following the birth of twins, Meg experiences troubles again in the private sphere she is supposedly master of. Motherhood consumes Meg so much that her husband becomes distant and aloof. Meg begins to feel neglected by John. "I'm getting old and ugly," she despairs. "John doesn't find me interesting anymore . . . Well, the babies love me, they don't care if I am thin and pale and don't have time to crimp my hair, they are my comfort" (Alcott 365). Meg's children replace her husband as the giver of affection. Alcott claims this situation as the lot of most women after marriage. "Whether they like it or not," Alcott writes, "they are virtually put on the shelf as soon as the wedding excitement is over" (Alcott 363). Alcott's portrayal of the first marriage in the novel as less than blissful reveals "a subtle subversion of the cult of domesticity" (Kornfield 74). But Meg bemoans this plight of womanhood, and seeks to change it. "It isn't fair that I should have the hardest work, and never any amusement" (Alcott 365). Despite her lessons from childhood, Meg lacks knowledge necessary for making home pleasant again. She must turn to Marmee for advice.

Marmee recounts the secret of her success in marriage and advocates a revolutionary approach to the domestic sphere. Traditionally, married women in nineteenth-century America lacked working knowledge of public affairs. Ryan writes that women "were often bereft of first-hand knowledge of the world occupied by their male domestic charges and denied access to the formal centers of public power" (Empire 146). But Marmee encourages her daughter to penetrate this male world. She explains that children should bind rather than separate husband and wife, and that both men and women should do their part in the nursery. Marmee tells Meg:

That is the secret of our home happiness: he does not let business wean him from the little cares and

duties that affect us all, and I try not to let domestic worries destroy my interest in his pursuits. Each do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always. (Alcott 366)

Marmee urges Meg to accept John's help caring for the children, thus using the twins to secure his love rather than to repel it. She also tells Meg not to limit her interests to the domestic sphere. Meg should work toward relieving the "phantom-like connection" (Ryan, Empire 146) between woman's private sphere and the rest of society.

Marmee urges Meg to become interested in whatever matters interest John. "According to Alcott, the reform of domestic life required restoration of a mutuality that had vanished with the separation of home and work" (Elbert 204). Significantly, pressure rests with the woman to make an effort. Marmee implies that males or the male world need not change.

Don't shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world's work, for it all affects you and yours. (Alcott 367)

Though Marmee tells Meg to become involved in John's affairs, she acknowledges the impetus is on the wife. Furthermore, Marmee clings to traditional roles for husband and wife. She reminds Meg that general happiness of the household depends on her. "You are the sunshine-maker of the family," Marmee tells her daughter, "and if you get dismal there is no fair weather" (Alcott 367). Though Meg and John should share in household matters, Marmee acknowledges that woman's primary responsibility is making home pleasant. Above all, Meg should maintain a pleasing disposition, so John will wish to return home every night. This notion enforces Marmee's conservative views of gender roles within marriage. She urges Meg to only make small changes that do not dismantle traditional marriage, and thereby

maximize her influence at home. By following these conditions, Marmee suggests that Meg may convert her private sphere into a type of moral empire.

Once Meg follows the precepts listed by Marmee, changes ensue in the Brooke household and home life becomes pleasant again. Alcott remarks that "a revolution of some kind was going on" (371). Meg apologizes to John for the sorry state of home affairs, and the two discover happiness again. Gaard concludes, "When Meg agrees to be a *little* woman, peace in patriarchy is preserved" (12). Though Meg may have subtly influenced her domestic situation, John possesses all conspicuous authority in the marriage. Alcott writes that "It was not at all Paradise by any means, but everyone was better for the division of labor system . . . Home grew homelike again" (Alcott 373). Meg and John discover household happiness by indulging in mutual helpfulness, "which the poorest may possess, and the richest cannot buy" (Alcott 373). Meg learned this lesson as a child, but only understands its necessity after experiencing trials as an adult. Through trial and error Meg finally converts her private sphere into an empire and learns "that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the sort of ruling it not as a queen, but a wise wife and mother" (Alcott 373). It is at this moment that Meg's castle in the air changes. Her dream as a child was of "a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things--nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money" (Alcott 134). Meg becomes a mature woman as she tempers her romantic ideals with adult expectation and assumes her proper role in marriage. Once she does this, Meg seems contented with her adult life.

Marmee claims that women play an important role as charges of the domestic sphere. In Private Women, Public Stage , Mary Kelley agrees that a wife's worth within her domestic sphere is valuable. "Without participating

politically herself," Kelley writes, "the wife was expected to be a salutary influence upon her politically active husband . . . lives denied political participation were said to be fully endowed with political purpose" (61). Ryan makes an important analogy in Empire of the Mother between husband, wife, and society. Ryan argues that the mother acts as a social agent of her child, while the wife acts as a social agent of her husband. Ryan concludes that the household acts a social agent for society at large. "This third social relationship converted domestic space into an extensive social territory, a kind of moral empire" (144). Marmee suggests Meg has achieved this moral empire in marriage, but later Alcott questions Meg's authority in marriage.

Meg and John ultimately accept joint responsibility for the care of their two children. Their approach to caretaking, however, is determined wholly by gender. Meg deals gently with her children, explaining, "He's my child, and I won't have his spirit broken by harshness" (Alcott 370). Meanwhile, John deals harshly with his children, explaining, "He's my child, and I won't have is temper spoiled by indulgence" (Alcott 371). That Meg resigns herself to a traditionally female approach to parenting while her husband assumes male responsibility suggests that their marriage is not one of equality after all. In fact, Alcott remarks, "The children thrive under paternal rule, for accurate, steadfast John brought order and obedience into Babydom" (Alcott 373). By assuming the traditional role in marriage which Marmee urges her to assume, Meg relinquishes her authority and places John in command of the household. John rules the children--and his wife--and any claim Meg had to a moral empire within her private sphere has vanished.

Alcott casts further doubt on Meg's claim to a moral empire by mocking Meg's inability to penetrate the male world of current affairs. Alcott undermines Meg's authority in a scene where Meg attempts to understand

politics so that she may discuss matters with her husband. John explains political issues to an obviously uninterested wife. "Meg tried to look deeply interested, to ask intelligent questions, and keep her thoughts from wandering from the state of the nation to the state of her bonnet" (Alcott 372). Meg entertains "feminine ideas" about politics (Alcott 372). She believes politics represent nothing more than name-calling; but she keeps these frivolous notions to herself. By poking fun at Meg's lack of worldly knowledge, Alcott portrays Meg's inferior position in marriage--one where the wife's knowledge is limited to domesticity, and her actions restricted to household chores. Alcott claims that Meg's fate is common to nineteenth-century women in America.

This is the sort of shelf on which young wives and mothers may consent to be laid, safe from the restless fret and fever of the world, finding loyal lovers in the little sons and daughters who cling to them . . . walking side by side . . . with a faithful friend, who is in the true sense of the good old Saxon word, the 'house-band,'" and learning, as Meg learned, that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art of ruling it not as a queen, but a wise wife and mother. (Alcott 373)

There is no moral empire for Meg. There is only making home a pleasant place for her husband, and raising children with a gentle hand.

On the whole, (Alcott) does not paint a compelling picture of marital equality in Little Women . . . the married life of John and Meg Brooke . . . is not a modern egalitarian marriage. The single wage earner for his family, John provides a domestic servant but does not share in domestic chores himself, except for disciplining his son in the evening. Meg is totally dependent upon his income for both household and personal expenses. (Elbert 203)

Meg believes she has found her happy kingdom at last. She has adopted virtues of womanhood, which she believes secure a position of power at home. But Alcott suggests otherwise: the end result of adopting virtues of true womanhood is an inferior position to one's male counterpart.

The second little woman to mature in the novel is Amy. More than Meg, Amy has already adopted virtues of womanhood by the time she enters adulthood. Once she leaves the home nest, Amy's virtues are tested. Amy does achieve a degree of female influence, however. Alcott rewards Amy's succession to femininity in various ways.

Amy displays her refined nature when she and Jo pay social calls to friends and family. Amy maintains a pleasing disposition while Jo appears wild and careless. Amy instructs her sister on how a virtuous woman should act. "Women should learn to be agreeable," she explains wisely, "particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive" (Alcott 278). This is the "way of the world", Amy reveals, asking Jo not to be a "reformer" (Alcott 278). Douglas echoes Amy's rhetoric in The Feminization of American Culture, claiming that "the independent woman with a mind and a life of her own slowly ceased to be considered of high value" (51). Jo responds that she likes reformers, however, and she willfully chooses this approach. "I shall be one if I can . . .," Jo declares, "you belong to the old set and I to the new" (Alcott 278). It is significant that one sister chooses to accept the place of women in society while the other resists her place in want of a better position. "Amy is a pragmatist: she has observed that, in order to succeed, she must conform to her gendered role, and she is willing to do so to reap the benefits" (Gaard 8). Ultimately, Amy is rewarded for her conformity with feminine ideals when Aunt March chooses to take her to Europe instead of Jo. Jo makes no progress with her radical reform of a woman's place in society. On the contrary, she regrets her "abominable tongue" and air of independence (Alcott 290). By this example Alcott reveals that a girl who strives for true womanhood will make more progress than one who rejects tradition outright.

During her travels abroad, Amy's femininity flourishes. Amy finds that "Foreign life polishes one in spite of one's self" (Alcott 362). She refines her manners and becomes sophisticated, and learns an important trade: how to influence a man. "Amy knew her good points, and made the most of them with the taste and skill which is fortune to a poor and pretty woman" (Alcott 357). Amy uses this new found influence to rouse Laurie from his lazy attitude. She draws two pictures to present Laurie, one showing him idle, the other showing him active. The latter picture "recalled the past so vividly that a sudden change swept over the young man's face as he looked" at the sketch (Alcott 384). Alcott uses this scene to demonstrate Amy's potential as an artist; Amy's artwork influences Laurie. Amy assumes her mother's mature air when she lectures to Laurie, "Love Jo all your days, if you choose, but don't let it spoil you, for it's wicked to throw away so many good gifts because you can't have the one you want" (Alcott 384). Amy succeeds in influencing Laurie; that night he tells her that "Lazy Laurence has gone" (Alcott 385).

This episode represents the closest Alcott comes to depicting a woman with power. Amy's influence on Laurie is subtle, persuasive, and complete—just as female influence should manifest itself according to critics of the period. Amy recognizes her authority over Laurie and enjoys "the delightful sense of power which comes when young girls first discover the new and lovely kingdom they are, born to rule by virtue of beauty, youth, and womanhood" (Alcott 359). Having discovered the influence she may have among men, Amy places more stock in her abilities as a woman than in her abilities as an artist. She relinquishes her ambition to become an artist all together. "Rome took all the vanity out of me" (Alcott 378), Amy says. She resolves to devote herself to the development of womanly charm. She wishes to "Polish up my other talents, and be an ornament to society, if I get the

chance" (Alcott 378). Though her castle in the air was "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott 134), Amy redefines her terms for happiness. This change in desire represents Amy's onset of maturity, as childhood dreams give way to realistic expectation. Now that she has entered adulthood, Amy has a better understanding of the options available to women. These options include cultivating her womanly charm or her artistic talent. Amy perceives that the former will result in more power.

In her book, Sister's Choice, Elaine Showalter discusses Amy's succession to femininity. Amy discovers that she lacks genius, Showalter claims, but the girl believes that, with a man's help, she may cultivate genius in others. According to Showalter, Alcott implies the Romantic model of genius presents problems for a woman in nineteenth-century America. Amy cannot reconcile her desire to create art with her need to fulfill traditional gender roles; so she forsakes the former for the latter. Alcott has portrayed this same exchange throughout the text. Alcott also implies that a woman will give up anything for a man at the first inkling that she has some influence over him. Amy's sister Jo will make similar choices in adulthood.

Once Amy moves away from the home nest, she exhibits weakness in her new-found womanhood. Marmee's efforts to train Amy in true womanhood were not all successful, as Amy still finds herself tempted by wealth. This temptation leads Amy to entertain thoughts of marrying Fred Vaughn for his money. Amy discusses this idea in a letter she writes to her mother. "I may be mercenary," she explains, "but I hate poverty, and don't mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help. One of us must marry well" (Alcott 300). She explains that, though she does not love Fred, "he does very

well, and in time I should get fond enough of him" (Alcott 300). Despite the lessons she has learned at home, Amy is still self-indulgent.

Ultimately, Amy proves true to her mother's teachings. Away from her home and her family, Amy discovers the value of true love all by herself.

. . . when the time came (to accept Fred's marriage proposal), the courage failed her, and she found that something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart so full of tender hopes and fears. (Alcott 397)

On these grounds Amy refuses Fred's marriage proposal. Amy discovers what Marmee has known all along--that love conquers all. Alcott reveals that Amy "didn't care to be a queen of society now half so much as she did to be a lovable woman" (Alcott 398). With love in her heart, Amy accepts Laurie's proposal of marriage, and discovers "how much like heaven this world could be, when two people love and live for one another" (Alcott 409). Amy discovers happiness in love rather than in elevation of class or entrance into elite society. Amy's decision to marry Laurie and not Fred attests to Marmee's most successful teaching yet: that love matters more in marriage than money. Amy has grown into the virtuous woman Marmee wanted her to be. Alcott rewards Amy for this maturity by giving her a rich husband who is also lovable.

When Amy returns home from Europe, she possesses a detectable change in character. Her character seems elevated.

Amy's face was full of the soft brightness which betokens a peaceful heart, her voice had a new tenderness in it, and the cool, prim carriage was changed to a gentle dignity, both womanly and winning. No little affectations marred it, and the cordial sweetness of her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for it stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she had hoped to become. (Alcott 418)

Marmee credits love for the improvement in Amy. She remarks that "Love has done much for our little girl" (Alcott 418). Love elevates the poor girl's

character more than money ever could. Through Laurie's rhetoric, Alcott suggests that Amy has influence over her husband. When asked which partner rules in marriage, Laurie nods toward Amy.

I don't mind telling you that she does, now, at least I let her think so—it pleases her . . . She is the sort of woman who knows how to rule well; in fact, I rather like it, for she winds one round her finger as softly and prettily as a skein of silk, and makes you feel as if she was doing you a favor all the while. (Alcott 417)

Alcott describes a newly married couple where the wife appears to have subtle authority over the husband. But it is the husband who validates his wife's authority. As time goes on, the couple revert to traditional gender roles in marriage—where the husband rules and the wife submits. "Amy's nature was growing sweeter, deeper, and more tender; Laurie was growing more serious, strong, and firm" (Alcott 458). Like her sister Meg, Amy will experience a marriage where her role is defined by gender. Her artistic talent will become similarly confined by gender. Years into her marriage, Amy settles for modeling a figure of her baby. "Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done" (Alcott 457), she says complacently. Amy's artistry has become domesticated. "Alcott depicts her fictional artist as yielding up (her) energy to the demands of domesticity" (Bassil 188). Though she followed Marmee's precepts of true womanhood, Amy remains Laurie's "little woman" (Alcott 426), and nothing more.

While her sisters transform from little girls to little women, Beth remains a child in the family until her death. Though she does not endure the trials that the other girls do, Beth plays a key role in the book. Hers is the character which most resembles Marmee, and perhaps embodies Marmee's ideal. Beth possesses the one trait Marmee wishes she had: a mild temper. Alcott calls Beth a "household saint" (387), and her noble character becomes

apparent as she approaches death. "I'm not afraid" of death, she says defiantly, "but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven" (Alcott 350). Throughout her illness, Beth maintains a kind and generous nature. Her modest disposition and selflessness represent virtues of womanhood which the sisters all strive toward. Her "feeble fingers were never idle" writes Alcott, "for nothing could change the sweet, unselfish nature" of the youngest daughter (387). Alcott ironically illustrates the youngest daughter as the one closest to achieving true womanhood, but the one who never does.

Beth's character affects the entire family. Alcott writes pages on the activity of the March family all revolving around Beth's deathbed. Beth's illness provides "precious and helpful hours to Jo" (Alcott 388). Beth influences Jo more than any other member of the family.

. . . now her heart received the teaching that it needed: lessons in patience were so sweetly taught her that she could not fail to learn them; charity for all, the lovely spirit that can forgive and truly forget unkindness, the loyalty to duty that makes the hardest easy, and the sincere faith that fears nothing, but trusts undoubtedly. (Alcott 388-389)

Beth embodies all of the virtues of womanhood which Marmee has tried to instill in her other daughters. Beth's influence on her sisters becomes most apparent by the significance that her parting words assume in Jo's life. Beth teaches Jo from her death bed a final lesson in love:

It's such a comfort to know that someone loves me so much, and feels as if I'd helped them . . . love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy. (Alcott 391)

Immediately Jo heeds Beth's words and begins life with a new outlook.

And then and there Jo renounced her old ambition, pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love. (Alcott 391)

It is at this moment that Jo relieves the tension between her domestic ideal and her artistic freedom by forsaking the latter. Beth's death pushes Jo closer to adulthood. It "triggers Jo's maturation" as she will attempt to "reproduce her lost sisterhood in a new, democratic union" (Elbert 207). According to Elbert, "fully realized sisterhood becomes a model for marriage" for all of the March children (204). Now the older sister can assume all the virtues which the dead one represented: selflessness, patience, nobility. Throughout her youth, Jo resists domesticity on the grounds that it is too confining. Her castle in the air does not involve marriage or family at all; she wants only "to do something splendid" (Alcott 134). What finally stirs Jo's heart is her dying sister. That Beth awakens domestic yearnings in Jo's heart attests to the power of Marmee's youngest daughter. "Jo *becomes* Beth . . . Jo's wish to do something splendid is fulfilled with Beth's wish: 'to devote her life to father and mother.'" (Gaard 16).

It is significant that Beth, who typifies the ideal woman, never achieves womanhood herself. Alcott implies the ideal woman cannot exist in society. Gilbert and Gubar confirm that "to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead" (25). Beth's entire life revolved around self-denial, and "At last . . . her self-denial has effectively destroyed her human being" (Gaard 14). Beth's self-destruction through self-denial represents the dangers of domestication. Beth's death also suggests that a woman with influence cannot exist in society: Beth is the most influential sister in the family, but she never reaches adulthood. Perhaps Beth's influence in the family is because of her death. "By dying even a child can be the instrument of redemption for others, since in death she acquires a spiritual power over those who loved her beyond what she possessed in life" (Tompkins 128). Douglas also maintains that death empowers its victims. She writes that "Death . . . instead of marking the end of

power, had become its source . . . death widened rather than limited the . . . sphere of influence" (207). The unfortunate implication of this example is that death represents an ultimate tactic of empowerment for women.

Before Beth's death, Jo devotes herself to developing a career in writing. Earlier she goes to New York to pursue this interest. While her sisters look to traditional roles in marriage and motherhood for fulfillment, Jo discovers a whole new world for women. Alcott suggests that Jo's work is as valuable as motherhood; she refers to her writing as Jo's "firstborn" (255). This "child" of Jo's is difficultly conceived and developed, however. Alcott writes that, "with Spartan firmness the young authoress laid her firstborn on her table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre" (255). Winn writes that "This sublimation of female passion characterizes (Alcott's) representation of female experience" (207). Alcott depicts a similar instance with Amy, where the young artist sublimates female passion through her painting. Jo discovers that non-domestic work may prove as fulfilling to a woman as homemaking. After selling her first story, Jo enjoys "the genuine satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand . . . (Jo) ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny" (Alcott 254). In New York Jo learns a very basic tactic for empowerment: earning money. Unlike lessons she has learned at home, this one is completely unrelated to domesticity.

When she moves to New York, Jo becomes enchanted with the possibility of securing wealth. She writes sensational stories for the sole purpose of selling her work. Jo "saw that money conferred power" (Alcott 324) and agreed to compromise her writing style.

Jo hardly knew her own MS. again, so crumpled and underscored were its pages and paragraphs, but feeling as a tender parent might on being asked to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new

cradle, she looked at the marked passages and was surprised to find that all the moral reflections--which she had carefully put in as ballast for much romance--had been stricken out. (Alcott 326)

Jo compromises her work--she takes a "plunge in to the frothy sea of sensational literature" (Alcott 327)--while she is away from her home and outside of the domestic sphere. Without Marmee's influence, Jo violates feminine codes of purity, just as her sisters come close to doing. Despite the morals Marmee has instilled in her daughter, financial security still has an allure for Jo. She succumbs to temptation, ignoring her feeling that "Father and Mother would not approve" (Alcott 327). That Jo must compromise herself to obtain financial security demonstrates an important lesson which Jo learns about women in the working place: a woman cannot succeed in the public sphere without compromise. Jo remains powerless against her editor. Alcott writes that "there was nothing for her to do but bow and walk away" when her editor asks her to change her story (Alcott 325). The artistry that once elevated Jo now compromises her integrity and leads her away from true womanhood.

Jo's conscience eventually prevails as she recalls important lessons from her youth. "I almost wish I hadn't any conscience at all" (Alcott 334), she exclaims. "It's so inconvenient . . . I can't help wishing sometimes, that Father and Mother hadn't been so particular about such things" (Alcott 334). While Jo regrets her healthy conscience, Alcott interjects that such "will prove sure foundations to build character upon in womanhood" (Alcott 334). Virtue represents the staple of true womanhood. Jo's character moves closer to true womanhood as she resolves to abandon sensational stories altogether, "deciding that the money did not pay for her share of the sensation" (Alcott 334). Marmee's teachings do not prove enough to satisfy Jo's yearning for financial security. Like her sisters, Jo only upholds virtues of womanhood

after personal experiences in adulthood. She rejects money after experiencing a guilty conscience--one which Professor Bhaer rekindles. "I would rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash" (Alcott 333), Bhaer says of Jo's stories. This male figure invalidates Jo's efforts, so she abandons her writing altogether. "Soon after she relinquishes the only acceptable outlet for her anger, Jo's complete submission to the role of little woman follows" (Gaard 16).

Jo returns home and devotes her life to making home a pleasant place for her parents, as Beth had urged her to do. Having no other outlet for relief, Jo turns to her pen to express grief over Beth's death. She writes simply and with emotion, thus creating a poem which brings her great fortune. Mr. March applauds his daughters efforts:

There is truth in it, Jo, that's the secret; humor
and pathos make it alive, and you have found your
style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame
or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter;
you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet.
(Alcott 408)

Elbert calls Jo's poem an indication of Jo's "successfully completed adolescence" (119). That father March validates Jo's efforts, just as he had done in the beginning of the novel, suggests that he still considers Jo a child despite her success. Once again, male intervention undermines female self-sufficiency. This is Alcott's reminder that authority still rests in the hands of men.

Jo remembers Beth's parting words, and she wonders if there is not something more waiting for her. Jo notes an improvement in Meg's disposition since her marriage to John.

As they sat sewing together, Jo discovered how
much improved her sister Meg was, how well she
could talk, how much she knew about good, womanly
impulses, thoughts, and feelings, how happy she was
in husband and children, and how much they were all

doing for each other. (Alcott 406)

Like her sister Amy, Meg's character is elevated by marriage. Though her class status has not improved, her stature has. In marriage both sisters find all that they need for happiness, and it shows. That Meg and Amy each discover joy in marriage represents Alcott's endorsement of both matches. Despite restrictions placed on women during marriage, Alcott acknowledges that wives may still be satisfied with their lot. It may be that Alcott objects to marriage but still embraces love. Love may prove to be a final source of power for women. With Beth's testimony to love in Jo's heart, Jo admits to caring more to be loved now than before. She remarks to her sister that "Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it?" (Alcott 406). Alcott calls Jo's acceptance of marriage "the waking up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its inspirer" (410).

At the end of Part II, Jo finally enters into adulthood and consents to marriage—an institution she had resisted throughout the novel. Jo agrees to marry her old friend Professor Bhaer, whose love she considers "the one precious thing I needed" (Alcott 448). Jo's admission that she needs a man's love contradicts any notions of female empowerment which Jo entertained. Indeed, "She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence" (Alcott 437). To ensure a suitable marriage, Jo states her terms before finalizing the union.

I'm to carry my share, Friedrech, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go . . .
I have my duty, also, and my work. I couldn't enjoy myself if I neglected them even for you.
(Alcott 449)

Jo demands respect for her individuality, and her self-assertion attests to the influence she has with Professor Bhaer; naturally he yields to her. Elbert

writes that "Bhaer is a man Jo can love and marry without fear of inequality" because of his feminized nature (209). Strickland confirms that Bhaer is "a thoroughly domesticated male, but with a touch of sainthood" (104). Knowing that love will make "all the rest easy to bear" (Alcott 449), Jo urges Professor Bhaer not to fear poverty. "I've known it long enough," she explains, "to lose my dread and be happy working for those I love" (Alcott 448). Though her sisters had made similar statements before their marriages, Jo's claim seems more sincere: after all, Jo had never troubled about class so much as she troubled about gender. Jo, the last sister to mature, has introduced domesticity to her castle in the air. This mature adaptation to her dream enables her to find happiness at last. Elbert claims that "perhaps the novel's greatest strength lay in (Alcott's) comfortable assertion that domesticity and feminism were not only compatible but essential to one another" (186). Jo's independent selfhood finally merges with traditional gender roles.

Alcott's biggest opposition to Jo's choice of marriage comes from Showalter, who writes that Jo ends in "self-denial, renunciation, and mutilation" (57). Showalter argues that Jo surrenders to patriarchal values about womanhood by getting married and later, by raising children. Showalter points out that the literary life Jo dreamed about comes to seem, in Jo's own words, "selfish, lonely, and cold" (Alcott 457). Jo postpones her literary career to raise children, thereby exchanging romantic illusions for realistic expectations--which is the same exchange her sisters made. Though she attempts to define marriage on her own terms, Jo will embrace domestic ideology just as her sisters have done. Alcott marries Jo off reluctantly--and at the end of the novel--because she understands that a married woman is more socially acceptable than an independent artist. Though she tells the story of a rebellious youth who defies class and gender barriers, Alcott cannot, after all,

break with convention all together if she is to sell her novel. Gaard further concludes, "Jo's choice to marry Bhaer is quite far from being the free choice of a healthy individual, for Jo is a broken and lonely woman with a dismal future . . . Jo's engagement is appropriately termed 'surrendering'" (17).

After marriage, Jo devotes herself to raising children and managing a school for boys. She receives support and assistance from Professor Bhaer, and for the most part Jo's relationship with her husband appears to be equal. Alcott reminds that "it was uphill work at first, and Jo made queer mistakes; but the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters" (Alcott 453). Alcott's ironic tone represents her impression of Jo's match: equal as it may seem, Bhaer still exercises ultimate authority. Nevertheless, Jo's boarding school flourishes, and Plumfield becomes a "sort of boy's paradise" (Alcott 453). Elbert calls Plumfield "a model society which institutionalizes many of Jo's feminist ideas" (215).

It never was a fashionable school . . . but it was just what Jo intended it to be--'a happy, homelike place for boys, who needed teaching, care, and kindness' . . . There were slow boys and bashful boys; feeble boys and riotous boys; boys that lisped and boys that stuttered . (Alcott 454)

Jo arrives at the final stage of womanhood--the vocation of all women--motherhood. Though she tells that she has not relinquished her hope of writing some day, she will first fulfill her maternal responsibility. "I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these" (Alcott 457), Jo rationalizes. Alcott implies that a female artist must, "paradoxically, give up her art in order to achieve it" (Bassil 187). Presently Jo "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 454). Like Amy, Jo settles for domesticated artistry. In the case of both sisters, Alcott depicts the struggle of the individual artist to break away from

traditional obligation--and failing. Halttunen writes that Alcott resolves "each struggle between passionate self-expression and domestic self-restraint in favor of the latter" (242).

Conclusion

Alcott chronicles the lives of the March children from the early days of their youth through marriage and motherhood. From the beginning, Marmee teaches her daughters tactics for empowerment in a male-dominated society. Such virtues, Marmee promises, will lead the girls to influence in society. Marmee impresses upon her daughters aspects of the cult of true womanhood: virtues that will give women authority without violating feminine codes of purity.

Early on the children discover that female networks represent one tactic for empowerment. The March sisterhood provides mutual encouragement for one another and enables the girls to perform tasks not easily accomplished. Sisterhood also fosters self-esteem in each sister by validating individual experience. Female bonding has its limitations, however. Beth's death provides one example of the dissolution of female networks. In fact, the sisterhood all but disappears in Part II of the novel, as husbands replace mother and sisters as primary givers of attention. Nevertheless, female networks mark the beginning of gender consciousness for women. Such self-awareness represents the first step in the feminist movement.

The March children learn the virtue of modesty in their youth, but still they have difficulty accepting their poverty in adulthood. The girls discover in childhood that modesty elevates the stature of a poor woman, and that riches do not guarantee happiness. Meg, Amy, and Jo, however, each are tempted in adulthood by the allure of luxury. Meg purchases extravagant material for a dress she cannot afford. Amy entertains notions of marrying a wealthy man

whom she does not love. Jo compromises her artistic integrity and writes sensational stories to make money. Only after their trials in adulthood do the children finally comprehend the value of a modest disposition: that this empowers a woman and elevates her stature beyond any material wealth. Significantly, it is their male counterpart that must teach the girls this lesson.

Another characteristic which empowers a woman in society is a pleasing disposition. Marmee teaches her daughters that having a mild manner is an essential ingredient to achieving true womanhood. That is why Jo must learn to control her temper, and Meg must not complain too much to John. Amy maintains a pleasing disposition better than any of her sisters, and the power she achieves because of this virtue becomes apparent. First, Amy travels to Europe with Aunt March because her charming disposition attracts the old woman. Second, she succeeds in rousing Laurie from his lazy days and influences him more than any sister yet. Amy's marriage to Laurie represents Alcott's reward for Amy's good temper. Laurie, who was first attracted to Jo's unaffected style, ultimately chooses a fine lady. Alcott implies that women must adopt a pleasing disposition if they are to marry well.

Marmee extends the definition of pleasing disposition to include a submissive nature, which she tells her daughters also represents a tactic for empowerment. This virtue is perhaps the lesson best learned by the March children. After some domestic squabble, Meg knowingly submits to John. Amy eventually bows to Laurie in marriage, though she perhaps is less aware of this submission. Even Jo allows that she has yielded to Professor Bhaer, when she tells that she has relinquished childhood dreams for marriage and motherhood. Though critics argue that submission subtly empowers a woman in marriage, one need only examine Marmee's character to ascertain the effects of a submissive nature. Marmee admittedly represses her emotion, and

she tells Jo that even now she is angry nearly every day of her life. This revelation of Marmee's inner character points toward Alcott's opinion of submission in women: submission breeds contempt, not influence. The only authority Marmee exercises is over her daughters. This is a significant aspect of Marmee's teachings. The girls learn tactics of empowerment from a female perspective. In the eyes of women, therefore, the girls have achieved influence in society by marrying suitable husbands. Alcott's repeated depiction of male intervention in the novel reminds readers that men have true authority in the text.

The final virtue of womanhood that Marmee instills in her children is domesticity. She teaches them that hard work is valuable because it wards off idleness and endows one with a sense of purpose. Alcott backs up this notion by depicting busy March girls happier than idle Laurie. Alcott's final irony, then, comes when she remarks that Jo leads a happy life as wife and mother "in spite of hard work" (Alcott 454). Alcott almost acknowledges here that domesticity does not represent the best trade available to women after all: it is the only trade available to women.

In conclusion, Meg, Amy, and Jo, all succeed to womanhood by arriving at its final stage: motherhood. Each have relinquished their castles in the air to answer the calling of all women in nineteenth-century America. Cott writes that "Ideally, a woman's life followed a continuum from childhood upbringing in a family, through adolescent apprenticeship in nurturing and household duties, to wife-and-motherhood" (55). The cycle accurately describes the story of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. Each daughter develops virtues of true womanhood in their adult lives, the result of which is a secure marriage for all three girls. Alcott has done her part to reward her characters with fulfilling adult lives. The author cannot liberate anymore

heroines who believe they are already free. Now each may make their own stamp on succeeding generations. This, Marmee admits, is the greatest gift of all: "Oh, my girls," Marmee concludes the text, "however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!" (Alcott 459).

It is ironic that Alcott writes of the same struggle--between artistic independence and traditional obligation--from which she herself emerged victoriously. Alcott remained a single woman, and independent artist, until the day she died. Of this discrepancy, Kornfield concludes that Alcott "is bound by the constraints of domestic fiction and the need to create a credible facsimile of life. The parameters of this world are set by a social reality over which even an author cannot exercise complete control" (74). Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that "the untamed Jo in the beginning of Little Women seems more lovable than the tamed Jo at the end" (Stimpson 968). Alcott makes a clear distinction between the boyish, temperamental young girl and the feminine, less impetuous little woman--favoring the former.

Alcott rewards her characters for their achievement of true womanhood by giving them suitable husbands, but she still portrays these women in inferior positions in society. These inferior positions, however, represent the only option available to women in nineteenth-century America. The enduring popularity of Beth, Amy, Meg, and especially Jo March is because these girls live up to the standards expected of them during the time they lived. In spite of their poverty, the girls attain what they needed to in order to live well in a male-dominated society: true womanhood.

Alcott's text acknowledges women's littleness, but it does not belittle women. It shows young women as socially powerless, sometimes physically weak, constricted by family pressures, forced to contain their anger, and restricted in their verbal power. The kind of greatness women like Jo long for may have to be deferred to a time when these bonds can be broken; but Alcott's 'little women,' through their resistance, have played their part in making the bonds

weaker, and the strength of their aspirations confers on them a greatness of spirit, if not of achievement.
(Armstrong 471-472)

Readers cannot fault little women for working toward something that was acceptable--even desired--years before, but is not anymore. The definition of true womanhood has changed dramatically since the nineteenth century, and had Alcott written her novel one hundred years later, perhaps her characters would have had different lives. The March women might have gone on to become artists--or remained wives--or maybe they would have become both. The fact remains that for the era they lived in, these little women meet their desired end: marriage and motherhood. Achieving this goal has raised their status in society, though they still have little influence over their male counterparts. But the reason these characters endure, and the reason Alcott's novel remains popular even today, is because Little Women offers little girls the chance to make the most of their littleness--to make their restricted lives expand, so that their daughters' lives will expand. And keep expanding still.

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