



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

“Little Women” in a Man’s World

Louisa May Alcott’s Life Reflected in Her Work

B.A. Essay

Mary Catherine Ólafsson

June 2012

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
Department of English

“Little Women” in a Man’s World

Louisa May Alcott’s Life Reflected in Her Work

B.A. Essay

Mary Catherine Olafsson

Kt.: 141085-2559

Supervisor: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir

June 2012

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to argue the point that the fictional Jo in *Little Women* (1868), represents Louisa May Alcott, the great 19th century writer, in her aspirations to write. Not only was Alcott a revolutionary writer for her time, but an avid abolitionist and women's rights activist. This essay looks at the parallels between Alcott's life as an unconventional female advocate and writer and her headstrong character, Jo, and shows the similarities of the two women's struggle as they find their way in life and push the boundaries as writers in a male dominated society.

While both women struggle to make it in the world as writers, they are fueled by passion for what they write and are determined to have a better life for their families than simply struggling in poverty. Louisa and Jo achieve success as writers and are able to help their families, however, Louisa continues her writing career throughout her whole life, unlike Jo, who switches vocational direction when a love interest comes into her life. Louisa May Alcott's dream of being a writer, abolitionist and female right's advocate all came true. Having Jo to represent her writing aspirations made it possible for Louise to show the world all of the emotions she felt through all of her life's adventures, whether it be family, career, or romance. Even though there were many sacrifices and struggles, she worked through them and lived an extraordinary life. Louisa pushed the boundaries of a male dominated society in the mid 1800s by her strong character, through which her family helped to shape, her accomplishments as a writer, and her independence as a woman willing to stand on her own and accomplish her life's ambitions.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
1. Two Birds of a Feather	5
Family Life	5
Taking a Stand.....	7
Little Women.....	8
2. Career Minded and Independent Woman.....	11
Ms. Independent.....	11
Literary Spinster.....	14
Conclusion	19
Works Cited	20

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott was an exceptional female author and pioneer of her time in the field of literature. Born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Louisa was the second eldest of four children, who were all girls. Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was an unconventional educator who was obsessed with his work in Unitarian teachings, which resulted in having to move his family often due to his radical nature (Argyle 179-81). Louisa's mother, Abigail May Alcott, was an abolitionist, women's rights activist and a pioneer social worker who acted as the glue that held the family together and kept the girls grounded. The family ended up finally settling in Concord, Massachusetts after having lived there on several different occasions, and was neighbors to the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who helped influence and encourage Louisa's writing as well as her father's. Louisa enjoyed writing from a young age, which inspired her and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth and Abby May, to form their own secret society. They would contribute stories to a journal and read them aloud in the attic of their home along with enacting short plays. These memories, and others, were preserved in her most famous and successful novel, *Little Women*, published in 1868. Her writing skills came to use in order to help support her family financially through the hard times when her father was away on one of his educational ventures.

Louisa wrote several novels, short stories and poems. In *Little Women*, as previously mentioned, Louisa spins a tale that is parallel to her own reality. Growing up in New England during the American Civil War, Louisa felt like a man trapped inside a woman's body. She was very passionate and held strong viewpoints about certain aspects of society. Nevertheless, she dedicated her life to writing and worked hard to help provide for her family, putting their needs and desires before her own. Similarly, Louisa's protagonist and alter ego, Jo, is a headstrong independent character that acts as the man of the house while her father is away and mentions several times how she longs to be a boy (*Little Women* chapter 1). Louisa, like Jo, longed for independence and freedom from the burden society placed on women. The parallels between Alcott's life as an unconventional female advocate and writer and her headstrong character, Jo, in *Little Women*, show the similarities of the two women's struggle as they find their way in life and push the boundaries as writers in a male dominated society.

The next two chapters, chosen primarily to discover the main influences in Louisa's life, are going to discuss how her background, career, and relationships all factor in to shaping how Louisa relates to Jo through her writing. In her background, different aspects of

her family life, neighbors, beliefs and living conditions will be discussed in relation to how these issues shaped her writing style. Secondly, her career as a writer as well as her romantic, or lack there of, relationships and how that has effected her writing and lifestyle. These topics will be looked upon to discover how very similar both Louisa and her character Jo really are up until romance enters the picture.

1. Two Birds of a Feather

In this chapter, the topic of discussion is that of Louisa's background, from her humble beginnings to how she grew into a passionate and independent writer and the people who helped her to get there. The main point to argue here is how Jo represents Louisa's aspirations through her writing by using similar backgrounds as her foundation. Her family life, influential neighbors and family friends, and beliefs will all be taken apart and discussed, so that the pieces of the puzzle can be put back together and be understood as a whole.

1.1 Family Life

After reading *Little Women* and researching Louisa May Alcott's life, the point can be argued that Jo represents Louisa in her aspirations to write. In one respect, both women have similar backgrounds. The setting of the novel, family attributes, and attitudes and ambitions of both Jo and Louisa are quite parallel. Their similar backgrounds fuel the fire in them to keep the passion for writing burning strong and give them a solid foundation on which to start. Louisa uses Jo's character to express, and perhaps even to explain, her passion for writing to the world and where it all began. Both women push societal boundaries in the way that they go about living their lives as writers and their nonchalant attitude of how society views them, both in reality and fictionally.

Louisa lived for many happy years at "Hillside" in Concord, Massachusetts with her parents and three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth and May. She began writing at a young age and used a journal to capture her childhood experiences and thoughts, which in turn led to eventually creating stories to writing novels. Louisa's parents, Bronson and Abigail were extremely instrumental in influencing her writing. To begin with, Louisa was raised with Unitarian beliefs in which her parents were engrossed. Unitarians believe in non-conformity and tend to be rational and individualistic in nature. With this in mind, along with her father's long absences to promote the cause, Louisa and her sisters spent the majority of their time under their mother's rule. Abigail was, and had to be, a strong independent woman who served as a role model to her girls. They were taught how to run a household as well as working outside of the home. Living in poverty and moving from one place to another, Louisa and her sisters learned the values of working hard and the importance of depending on family. They learned to take care of one another through the ups and downs of life. Louisa's parents taught her independence and determination which resulted in her self-reliant nature.

Through Unitarianism groups and residing at "Hillside" in Concord, Massachusetts, Louisa came in to contact with many influential people including Ralph Waldo Emerson,

Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the family friends that took Louisa and her father under his writer's wing. As fellow Unitarians, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau began discussing with Bronson their ideas in the Transcendental Club, in which Bronson was a founding father. Although Emerson disliked Bronson's writing prose, he thought his ideas were of value (Price).

When Louisa was young, as recalled in her short story "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson," she would play with the Emerson children and was introduced to the solace of Walden and the "wood-people" which Henry David Thoreau knew so well. Whilst reading novels written later by both Walden and Thoreau, Louisa would already be familiar with the people and settings within them, regarding them as old friends. As secret societies were very posh at the time, the Alcott sisters were no exception. Louisa and her sisters created personas while writing their weekly contributions to the paper. This is one of the many creative outlets that Louisa had when she was younger. As she turned fifteen, her love of literature skyrocketed and she became engrossed with Emerson's fine collection of books. Seeming to always find herself in his library, Louisa would ask his advice on which book she should read. Emerson encouraged her reading and challenged her to expand her mind. Louisa was an eager pupil and looked to him as her mentor in the field of literature.

One of Louisa's short stories, "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson," was written in 1882 shortly after Emerson's death and captured a side of him rarely seen by others. In her story, she recounts precious memories of her mentor and how he generously shared his knowledge of literature:

His kind hand opened to me the riches of Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Carlyle, and I gratefully recall the sweet patience with which he led me round the book-lined room, till "the new and very interesting book" was found; or the indulgent smile he wore when I proposed something far above my comprehension. (Alcott, "Reminiscences" 1-2)

Emerson saw the spark of Louisa's spirit as a writer and inspired her to continue her journey. As soon as she was of age, Louisa sought work as a writer in Boston in order to support her family. In her journal she wrote of the experience, "I was born with a boy's spirit under my bib and tucker. I can't wait when I can work; so I took my little talent in my hand and forced the world again, braver than before and wiser for my failures" (Alcott, "Her Life, Letters, and Journals" 85). She wrote several novels, short stories, and plays and kept a journal from an early age. Her first book, *Flower Fables*, was published in 1854 when Louisa was 21, although it was written when she was just 16 with the purpose of entertaining Ellen Emerson,

her mentor's young daughter. Under the pseudonym A. M. Bernard, Louisa also wrote sensational and passionate stories for local papers. Even though it was her passion to write adult suspense, she was obligated to write children's stories or anything else that would be applauded by the general public. After her publishers suggested she write a children's novel about her family experiences, and keeping in mind the much sought after income, she produced *Little Women* in 1868.

1.2 Taking a Stand

Society, as well as her family, made a significant impact on Louisa's writing. The hot topics of the mid to late 1800s were abolition and women's rights. With Louisa's mother, Abigail, already holding strong beliefs on these issues, it was only a matter of time before the daughter became an advocate of both. Attending as many anti-slavery meetings as she could, Louisa expressed how she wanted to "do her part:"

I became an Abolitionist at a very early age, but have never been able to decide whether I was made so by seeing the portrait of George Thompson hidden under a bed in our house during the Garrison riot, and going to comfort "the poor man who had been good to the slaves, or because I was saved from drowning in the Frog Pond some years later by a colored boy. However that may be, the conversion was genuine; and my greatest pride is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war which put an end to a great wrong. ("Her Life, Letters, and Journals" 29)

Louisa felt led to help out with the Civil War any way she could. Since she could not fight, much to her displeasure, she served as a nurse in the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, Virginia in the winter of 1862-63. Due to illness caused by typhoid pneumonia, she only served one month before returning home. Although this illness never allowed her to fully recover, she was able to write "Hospital Sketches" recounting her short-lived time serving in the war (Alcott, 1863).

After gaining a small amount of fame due to this and other works, her career began to really take off. Not only was Louisa a successful writer, she also used her stories to inspire others who would otherwise be unable to read them. She would travel to prisons, hospitals, and poor areas of the town to read for people, even using what little money she had to set up a school for orphaned newsboys. However, the money was still not enough so Louisa took up a job as a seamstress as well as other small jobs in order to supplement her income. Eventually, her children's stories became so popular that she was offered the position as

editor of a children's literary publishing group, "Merry's Museum" (Alcott, "Her Life Letters, and Journals" 186).

Louisa's ability to hold on to her strong beliefs during that revolutionary time in history was quite remarkable. Even though society allowed slavery, embarked on war with itself, and oppressed women, Louisa saw things differently and wanted to make a change. This added the fuel to her fire that she needed and these attitudes can be seen throughout her writing, especially with such a strong female protagonist, Jo, in *Little Women*. This novel would go on to become one of her most well known works and beloved children's books of all time.

1.3 *Little Women*

Drawing from her own reality by using characters and themes present in her own life, it does not come as a surprise that in Louisa's *Little Women*, she creates a tale about four sisters and their adventures and struggles while growing up together. The novel is set in Concord, Massachusetts during the Christmas season and opens with the introduction of the four March sisters. The eldest sister, Meg, is beautiful but vain. She complains about the work she must do and longs for the life of luxury. The second eldest and protagonist of the novel, Jo, is quite the opposite. She longs for adventure and loves to write. She feels the responsibility to be the "man of the house" while her father is away. Beth, the third eldest, is the dearest of all. She never complains about anything and is very quiet and polite and loves to play the piano. The youngest March sister is Amy. She loves to draw and thinks very highly of herself as a young lady (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 1).

In addition to portraying her three sisters in this novel, Louisa also includes her mother Abigail. She pours all of her mother's qualities of tenderness and guidance into the mother character, Marmee, who is a stalwart figure to her daughters in the novel. Her father, Bronson, is also a strong figure recurring throughout the novel and offers guidance and praise to his daughters, although rarely physically present. Louisa uses the fictional character of old Mr. Lawrence as the friendly neighbor who lets Jo indulge herself in his library, such as Emerson did for Louisa. However, unlike Emerson, Mr. Lawrence never becomes a literary mentor to Jo. Whereas Louisa receives encouragement from both inside and outside of the home, Jo is prepped with nothing but the love from her family and her own imagination. Louisa's first short story that was ever published in the newspaper, "The Rival Painters," was also the name she used in the book for Jo's first story to be published. While a few of the

names have changed, the personalities seem to persist. When asked by her fan base as to whom the characters represent, Louisa stated:

“Little Women”—The early plays and experiences; Beth's death; Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences; Meg's happy home; John Brooke and his death; Demi's character. Mr. March did not go to the war, but Jo did. Mrs. March is all true, only not half good enough. Laurie is not an American boy, though every lad I ever knew claims the character. He was a Polish boy, met abroad in 1865. Mr. Lawrence is my grandfather, Colonel Joseph May. Aunt March is no one. (Alcott, “Her Life, Letters, and Journals” 193)

As the protagonist in *Little Women*, Jo is decidedly different than all three of her sisters. From the very beginning of the novel to the end, Jo's character always reveals an adventurous and “masculine” way of thinking and acting, as opposed to her sisters' lady-like behavior. In the first chapter, Jo refers to herself as having to be the “man of the house” while father is away at war and is always being reminded throughout the novel to stop her boyish behavior, such as running and talking slang. Jo's wild and adventurous behavior is recaptured from Louisa's recollections in her journal as she speaks of her own childhood:

I always thought I must have been a deer or a horse in some former state, because it was such a joy to run. No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race, and no girl if she refused to climb trees, leap fences, and be a tomboy. (“Her Life, Letters, and Journals” 30)

As secret societies were very posh at the time, the Alcott sisters were no exception. Louisa and her sisters created personas while writing their weekly contributions to the paper. This is one of the many creative outlets that Louisa had when she was younger. Jo, like Louisa, being an adventurous spirit, leads the March sisters to construct a secret society writing and acting club, named the *Pickwick Club*, or “P.C.” after their fondness for Charles Dickens. After reading the weekly report in their different personas, Jo suggests they induce Laurie, their beloved neighbor, as a new member into the society. Afterwards they construct a “mailbox” in the hedge between the two properties as a means of communication where either party can leave letters and gifts to one another (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 10). On one such occasion, Laurie sends Meg a song that has been translated from German by his tutor and only one of her two gloves that has gone missing. Jo receives two letters, a book, and an oversized hat that is out of fashion, but practical. Beth receives an invitation from old Mr. Lawrence to play piano for him, and Amy a box of chocolate drops and a picture (Alcott,

Little Women chapter 12). They continue their adventures, such as these, for many years, enjoying themselves immensely.

Jo is often very awkward and gangly in her youth when she speaks of comparisons between herself to her more attractive sisters. However, Jo's most admired feature, her long beautiful hair, is sacrificed in exchange for the much needed money for Marmee to travel and visit her ailing father in the hospital. To her sisters' dismay they exclaim, "Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty" (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 15). This act of self-sacrificing shows how Jo is constantly thinking of the greater good of the family above any selfish desires she may have. This display of self-sacrifice is also prevalent throughout Louisa's life, shown in what she gives up in order to help keep her family happy and financially afloat. Working on her "burden" of having a quick temper for a year, and wanting very much to please her father, Jo improves her behavior and appearance much to her father's delight, "In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the 'son Jo' whom I left a year ago" (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 22). These few examples show how Louisa writes through Jo's character, perhaps even unawares, of how badly she is in need of her family's approval.

Louisa's alter ego, Jo, is almost a mirror image of herself growing up. As stated above, Louisa also lived for many years in Concord, Massachusetts, like her protagonist Jo and her family. Many happy memories came from this place, making it the perfect setting for her novel. Also, several adventures from Louisa's childhood are preserved in the pages of *Little Women*. Both women begin writing at early ages and have supportive families, which give them a good foundation in their passion of writing. Both share a love for literature, passion for writing, and struggle to help the family rise above poverty. Louisa and Jo both want to be fighters and stand up for what they believe in. However, in reality Louisa does many things for the women's rights, civil war, and abolition movements, whereas Jo's passion is with wanting to help in the war where her father is involved. Both women want to fight, but only Louisa was able to contribute as a nurse for the cause. Louisa and Jo are both very passionate and family oriented women with a writer's spirit. They long for freedom above the restraints that society places upon women in the mid 1800s. Jo represents Louisa's writing aspirations through her boyish demeanor and drive to continue to write even in a time where women are supposed to just sit pretty. Writing as a means of supporting ones self is the path that both Louisa and Jo eventually go down. Through pushing societal boundaries in this manner, gives Louisa aspiration to go from writing short stories and essays to eventually a career in writing, which will be discuss in the next section.

2. Career Minded and Independent Woman

Now that Louise's background and foundation have been established in the previous chapter, this one covers the topic of her career as a writer and her relationships that involve romance and how these have effected her writing and lifestyle. The main point to argue in this particular chapter, is how Jo represents Louisa's aspirations through her writing and discovering how very similar both Louisa and her character Jo really are up until romance enters the picture.

2.1 Ms. Independent

Jo represents Louisa in her aspirations to write, not only from similar backgrounds as first seen, but also by a budding career in writing. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Little Women* was a huge success for Louisa, however, it was still not enough for her to sit back and relax. Louisa had to work very hard and struggle throughout her life in order to pay the bills and provide for her family. She felt this was her duty and honor to let her manuscripts pave the way to a better future. In Louisa's portfolio are several short stories, novels, and even plays that helped her gain some recognition as a writer.

The social stance of a person and money is a recurring theme in the novel, always being the driving factor behind Jo and her sisters' actions, much like in Louisa's own reality. Louisa and Jo achieve success as writers and are able to help their families, however, Louisa continues her writing career throughout her whole life, unlike Jo, who switches vocational direction when a love interest comes into her life. However, Jo's character pushes societal boundaries by being a workingwoman in the 1800s as well as in her choice of occupation, writing. Growing up in poverty, with their father a minister and currently at war, Jo and Meg are forced to take jobs outside the home. Meg is constantly making comparisons between she and her rich friends, who have no need to work. Meg longs to marry rich and never have to work again, but Marmee imparts words of wisdom on her two eldest daughters:

Money is a needful and precious thing, and when well used, a noble 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. (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 9)

Jo, on the other hand, is happiest when scribbling away at her desk and is delighted upon finding that her short story, "The Rival Painter," is published in the weekly paper. Jo is elated that her family is so supportive and proud of her accomplishment:

...for to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end. (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 14)

After seeing how she can make money for her family by doing what she loves most, things start falling into place for her. Jo falls more into her writing spells and stays holed up in the attic for days just writing and thinking. She comes upon a writing competition in the paper that offers \$100 as the prize, and gathering her courage, decides to send her manuscript in for judging. Six weeks later it is revealed that she wins the money along with a letter of encouragement to continue her dream. Jo does just that, and earns several more checks that year for her sensational stories. The money she receives is much welcomed and used for various needs around the house. She takes much satisfaction in helping her family by providing for them. As her writing grows, so do her critics, and Jo is forced to write things that sell rather than what interests her. However, Amy comforts Jo by giving some advice in reference to her editor:

Do as he tells you. He knows what will sell, and we don't. Make a good, popular book, and get as much money as you can. By-and-by, when you've got a name, you can afford to digress, and have philosophical and metaphysical people in your novels. (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 27)

Jo's occupation as a writer is in full swing and she eventually decides to spread her wings and find inspiration for her writing in a different setting. She acquires a job as a governess to two girls who reside in a boarding house in New York. Once settled in the crowded house, Jo immediately notices a very kind-hearted German professor named Friedrich Bhaer. He is very poor but well liked and enjoys giving German lessons to his students. Noticing the man could hardly look after himself, by means of cleaning and sewing his clothes, Jo secretly begins mending his socks for him. She is caught one day, much to his surprise and pleasure, and he offers her German lessons in exchange for her kind deeds. She accepts and they become fast friends, even giving Jo his prized book of *Shakespeare* as a gift to add to her "library" (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 33). Jo soon begins to write "short and spicy" stories, or stories without morals, for the *Weekly Volcano* newspaper and soon saves a bundle to take Beth away for some summer excitement. However, Jo soon feels ashamed that she is sacrificing her morals for vulgar stories, and after hearing how Professor Bhaer is disgusted with such sensational writing, decides to burn what she has written. Instead, Jo throws herself into her studies and friendship with Bhaer:

He helped her in many ways, proving himself a true friend, and Jo was happy, for while her pen lay idle, she was learning other lessons besides German, and laying a foundation for the sensation story of her own life. (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 34)

Eventually, her time comes to an end at the boarding house and a rather awkward “goodbye” is said between Jo and Bhaer, who now has more than just friendly feelings toward Jo, while she remains unaware (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 34).

Jo’s occupation is now on the back burner due to her sister Beth’s steadily declining health and eventual death. Marmee eventually pushes Jo to start writing again because she knows it is Jo’s passion and will help her to recover from the heartache of losing Beth. After dabbling in a few short stories, Jo finally discovers her true calling after her great aunt March leaves Plumfield manor to her after her death. Jo wants to open a school for boys, both rich and poor, with her future husband, Professor Bhaer:

“I’ve always longed for lots of boys, and never had enough, now I can fill the house full and revel in the little dears to my hearts content.” (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 37)

At this point in their parallel life stories, this is where Louisa and Jo part ways, so to speak, from the author’s reality. The fates of Louisa’s sisters in reality, with the exception of Elizabeth, were stretched. Louisa’s eldest sister, Anna, married and bore two children. Too soon, however, the happy marriage was cut short, and Anna became widowed. Elizabeth met a tragic end and died at young age of scarlet fever. May had a blossoming career as an artist, married a Frenchman, and lived in Paris. However, she too, like Beth, sadly died as a young woman shortly after her first child, Louisa “Lu Lu” May, was born. Of all the fame and authorship titles Louisa was given throughout her life, there was one title that she was unexpectedly given, the title of “mother.” She was to raise her recently deceased sister May’s daughter, Lu Lu, who sailed from France to America when she was an infant. In her journals, Louisa writes of the new member of the family, “My heart is full of pride and joy, and the touch of the dear little hands seems to take away the bitterness of grief. I often go at night to see if she is really here, and the sight of the little head is like sunshine to me” (Alcott, “Her Life, Letters, and Journals” 338). This newfound responsibility inspired Alcott’s final novel, *A Garland for Girls*, published in 1888. This book was made up of fairy stories meant to entertain Lu Lu. Knowing there might be little time for herself due to her ailing health, she also officially adopted her eldest sister Anna’s two children in order to add them to her will and divide her wealth evenly amongst them.

Just as their siblings had different fates, so did Louisa and Jo. From her writing, it seems Louisa associates marriage with the death of her career. Her career brings her the most joy in life, therefore, marriage signals the death of her happiness as well. Whereas Louisa never parts from her writing career, Jo finds love and happiness away from the pen. Although giving up her writing, but not her love of literature, Jo's success in life far exceeds her expectations and she is fulfilled in taking care of "her boys" in Plumfield manor alongside her loving husband and two boys of their own. Pulitzer Prize-winning author, John Matteson, described Alcott's novel as the "ideal of equality touched principally on opportunities to serve rather than any presumed right to seek one's individual happiness" (qtd. In Trites 348). Jo gave of herself for the good of her family, which also rang true in Louisa's reality, as she lived to please and served her family until her dying day. Now that Louisa's views about her writing career have been compared to those of Jo, the next section deals with romantic relationships.

2.2 Literary Spinster

Jo represents Louisa in her aspirations to write, not only by similar backgrounds and writing careers, but also by putting herself and her career above any romantic entanglements. Louisa defied social norms in the mid to late 1800s by refusing to marry. Unlike the vast majority of women at that time, Louisa threw herself into her writing career, which took precedence over her need to find a partner. Although writing had always been her passion, Louisa had to sometimes write fluff that didn't appeal to her, just so she could use the money to support her family. She chose her responsibility to care for her sisters and parents ahead of her own personal happiness of settling down with a family. This selfless attitude helped relieve her family from the debts they were in and raised them out of the grips poverty had on them.

Jo pushes societal boundaries to the extreme when she proclaims on several occasions throughout the novel that she will never marry. Throughout the chapters, it seems as if Louisa cannot stress enough through Jo's character her scorn and disdain for marriage. Several examples are listed throughout the novel giving Jo a pedestal on which to preach her feelings in regard to the matter. Her constant fear of the change in the sisterly order of life spurs her on and puts her off the idea of any inkling of a romantic relationship. Jo's stance on marriage first comes to light when she realizes her friend Laurie's tutor, John Brooke, has feelings for Meg. Brooke is found having in his possession one of Meg's missing gloves, keeping it in his pocket as a sentiment. This news alarms and upsets Jo, for she now fears that the poor tutor

will come and take Meg away, upsetting the delicate family life balance she has always known (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 14).

Although poor, Brooke is a good, kind-hearted man whom everyone likes. Everyone, that is, with Jo being the exception:

“You can’t know how hard it is for me to give up Meg,” she continued with a little quiver in her voice.

“You don’t give her up. You only go halves,” said Laurie consolingly.

“It can never be the same again, I’ve lost my dearest friend,” sighed Jo.

(Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 23)

After some time, Jo is still disagreeable about her family being broken up by Meg’s marriage and promises to never marry, stating, “Nobody will want me, and it’s a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family.” However, Laurie promises, “Mark my words, Jo, you’ll go next” (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 24).

After leaving for a period of time to spread her writer’s wings in New York, Jo returns and the moment she has feared has finally arrived. While out for a walk, Laurie takes her aside and confesses his love for her, wanting them to be married. Jo begs him not to ask her and confesses that she does not love him and that they are just friends. After Jo gives him several reasons why they shouldn’t be married, Laurie can’t control his temper any longer, and blames the German Professor, Bhaer, for stealing her affections. Jo shrugs this notion off as non-sense and claims she will never marry anyone, but Laurie thinks otherwise:

“You think so now, but there’ll come a time when you will care for somebody, and you’ll love him tremendously, and live and die for him. I know you will, it’s your way, and I shall have to stand by and see it.” (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 35).

After the disastrous event is over, Mr. Lawrence convinces Laurie that they should go abroad to forget his troubles. Laurie leaves Jo without looking back and she knows at that moment that her friend will never return the same (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 35).

Time passes by, after Beth’s death and Amy and Laurie’s engagement news, Jo feels lonely and feelings for professor Bhaer start cropping up. However, Jo is still in denial about her feelings and try to squash them. Nevertheless, Jo’s family notices the change in her, as she sings around the house, fixes her hair and wears finer clothes in hopes of “accidentally” running into professor Bhaer when in town. When she finally does, it is on a rain-drenched afternoon and he proposes to her, each confessing their feelings of love toward one another.

Even though he is poor in earthly possessions, Jo loves him for his wealth in knowledge and kindness. They are both so blissfully happy that:

Little they cared what anybody thought, for they were enjoying the happy hour that seldom comes but once in any life, the magical moment which bestows youth on the old, beauty on the plain, wealth on the poor, and gives human hearts a foretaste of heaven (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 44).

To the Professor's lament of having nothing to give Jo but his "full heart and these empty hands," she responds by placing her hands in his and says, "not empty now" (Alcott, *Little Women* chapter 46).

From Louisa's depth of romantic emotions in her writing, it is hard to believe that she herself had never felt so strongly enough about someone as to not settle down with them. However, it is unknown whether or not she had indeed had these feelings and just never acted on them, not wanting to give up the ultimate sacrifice of her career. In her journals, Louisa wrote, "Saw Nan [Anna] in her nest, where she and her mate live like a pair of turtle doves. Very sweet and pretty, but I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" (Alcott, 122).

However, although Louisa never married, it did not mean she never cared for another. Her first "romantic" notions began when she was young and felt sentimental feelings toward Emerson, her "Master" and mentor. Louisa writes:

My romantic period began at fifteen, when I fell to writing poetry, keeping a heart-journal, and wandering by moonlight instead of sleeping quietly. About that time, in browsing over Mr. Emerson's library, I found Goethe's 'Correspondence with a Child,' and at once was fired with a desire to be a Bettine, making my father's friend my Goethe. So I wrote letters to him, but never sent them; sat in a tall cherry-tree at midnight, singing to the moon till the owls scared me to bed; left wild flowers on the doorstep of my "Master," and sung Mignon's song under his window in very bad German. ("Her Life, Letters, and Journals" 57)

Louisa eventually told Emerson of her little romance years later. He was flattered and wished to see the letters, but she had long ago burned them in the fire.

There had also been rumors of many flirtatious relationships with younger men, although there has been no proof other than an essay entitled "My Polish Boy" in *The Youth's Companion* and also in "My Boys" from Aunt Jo's Scrap-bag. This short-lived romance came about when Louisa became a companion to an older, sickly lady who wished to tour Europe. In order to supplement her income and also wanting to travel, Louisa gladly

accepted. Eventually she met a Polish freedom fighter that was younger than she, named Ladislav Wisniewski and to whom she bestowed the nickname of “Laddie.” They would occasionally meet up and even spent two weeks in Paris unchaperoned. Apparently the romance fizzled, however, he still lived on as part of her model for “Laurie” in her novel *Little Women*. The other, “sober” half of Laurie was apparently modeled after Alfred Whitman, a family friend (Blackford, “Chasing Amy” 1-40, 167).

Although she had been offered a few decent marriage proposals in her life, Louisa chose to live her life as an independent woman. Her sexuality has even been questioned in more recent years due to a look at an 1883 interview with Louise Chandler Moulton which quotes Louisa as saying:

I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body... because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man. (Moulton)

Independent from the burden of being a wife, invisible and undervalued in society; and independent from motherhood, which might never allow her the time to write. This lonely but successful path she chose on her own free will. In her novel, *Little Women*, Louisa’s opinions on marriage seem to be reflected in the character of Jo and seem exemplify how she may have felt about the topic in her own reality:

“An old maid, that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor Johnson, I’m old and can’t enjoy it, solitary, and can’t share it, independent, and don’t need it. Well, I needn’t be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner, and, I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it, but...”and there Jo sighed, as if the prospect was not very inviting (*Little Women* chapter 43).

In the 1800s, society deemed it fit that women marry young and well, and to conduct oneself in any other manner would have been scandalous. Louisa challenged society’s view on marriage when she chose to forgo finding a partner and to instead put her career first.

Although, she had some minor flirtations throughout her life, Louisa was never serious about anyone enough to accept any marriage proposals. Her family’s health and well-being was her number one priority, especially money debts that burdened them.

After writing the first part of *Little Women*, drawn from her original idea of “The Pathetic Family,” Louisa found it to be a boring autobiographical story. However, after receiving loads of letters from fans asking what became of the sisters and who they married, Jo felt she needed to give closure to the characters. In her journal she wrote, “as I can launch

into the future, my fancy has more play. Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (Sands-O'Connor). In her own right, it seems as if this is Louisa's way of using Jo as a medium to express her own feelings toward marriage. Just because society expects her to marry, she will refuse to participate just to spite them. However, due to the public's outcry and her publisher's demand, a new character had to be created [professor Bhaer] as Jo's love interest, much against the writer's wishes that Jo remain single.

Like Louisa, Jo also begins life adamantly refusing to marry. Her reasons for doing so revolve mainly around the break up of their family circle. Jo is saddened by the loss of her sisterly union to another man. After turning down a chance to marry her neighbor and family friend, she eventually finds love with a poor professor. She then gives up her dream of writing, as society deems fit, and becomes a domestic goddess taking care of children in a boarding house. While Jo seems perfectly happy to give up her dreams and aspirations as a writer, Louisa did not choose to do the same. She knew that marriage meant giving up who she was to conform to her husband's wishes. Louisa was far too independent and creative to let her talent die. She chose a life of "spinster-hood" in order to be free from the burden that society places on women and used Jo as a medium to communicate that message for her through her writings.

Conclusion

As the years passed, Louisa's health began to deteriorate even more, due to supposed mercury poisoning in order to treat an illness she contracted during her stint as a hospital nurse serving war victims 20 years prior (Hirschhorn, Norbert, and Greaves 243-44). Between taking care of her family and her writing career, there was not much time left to take care of herself. She dabbled, however, in holistic medicine, which brought only temporary relief. In her journal Alcott wrote:

Home, and begin a new task. Twenty years ago I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps, but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose. ("Her Life, Letters, and Journals" 182-83)

While coming to visit her dying father at his bedside, Louisa knew that she must say her goodbyes. A few days later, on March 6, 1888, Bronson Alcott died. Shortly after, Louisa had an enormously painful headache that sent her into a coma and followed her father up to heaven only two days later. She died of a severe stroke on March 8, 1888 at the age of 55. Louisa finally had the rest her body needed after working tirelessly for years. She was buried beside her parents and sister Elizabeth along with her old mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

Louisa May Alcott's dreams of being a writer, abolitionist and female right's advocate all came true. Jo's representation of Louisa in her writing aspirations were able to show the world all of the emotions she felt through all of her life's adventures, whether it be family, career, or romance. Even though there were many sacrifices and struggles, she worked through them and lived an extraordinary life. Louisa pushed the boundaries of a male dominated society in the mid 1800s by her strong character, through which her family molded, her accomplishments as a writer, and her independence as a woman willing to stand on her own and accomplish her life's ambitions.

Works Cited

- Alcott, Louisa May. "Hospital Sketches." Boston: James Redpath, Publisher, 1863.
Web. 1 May 2012.
- . *Little Women*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868-69. *Kindle* ebook file.
- . "Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals." Ednah D. Cheney. 18 November 2011. Project Gutenberg. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38049>>
- . "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson." 1882. Web. 2 Apr. 2012.
- Argyle, Gisela. "Edens Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father/Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life." *Canadian Woman Studies* 28.2 (2010): 179-81. ProQuest Central. Web. 12 Apr. 2012.
- Blackford, Holly. "Chasing Amy: Mephistopheles, the Laurence Boy, and Louisa May Alcott's Punishment of Female Ambition." *Frontiers* 32.3 (2011): 1-40,167. ProQuest Central. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.
- Hirschhorn, Norbert, and Ian A. Greaves. "LOUISA MAY ALCOTT: Her Mysterious Illness." *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 50.2 (2007): 243-44. ProQuest Central. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.
- Moulton, Louise Chandler. *Our Famous Women*. Interview with Louisa May Alcott. 1883. Web. 1 May 2012.
- Price, Matthew. "Our Gang and the Little Woman: American Bloomsbury Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, their Loves, Their Work. Susan Cheever Simon & Schuster: 224 Pp." *Los Angeles Times*: R.4. ProQuest Central. Dec 17 2006. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.
- Sands-O'Connor, Karen. "Why Jo didn't marry Laurie: Louisa May Alcott and the Heir of Redclyffe." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 15.1 (2001): 23-41. ProQuest Central. Web. 12 Apr. 2012.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. "Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33.3 (2008): 327-31. ProQuest Central. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.