Free Spinster or Little Woman

Uncovering Little Women’s Feminism from the Perspectives of Social and Radical Feminism

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This thesis examines *Little Women*’s feminist reception from the perspectives of social and radical feminism. The study draws on the personal life of Louisa May Alcott, namely her work as a suffragist, and advocate for women’s rights in the nineteenth century, and her writings of sensation fiction to explore the author’s relationship with feminism. For this purpose, this thesis relies on a variety of sources such as autobiographical letters, research publications and scholarly articles. *Little Women*’s feminist themes are examined through selected passages from the novel. The study uses the ideological perspectives of social feminism and radical feminism to explore these themes. Social feminism supports *Little Women*’s feminist message by underlying the novel’s subversion of gender stereotypes and promotion of matriarchy. Radical feminism opposes what it considers *Little Women*’s mutilation of the self, rejection of womanhood and capitulation to patriarchal structures. The study does not identify either group of readers as exclusively social or radical, but draws on research, opinion pieces and published articles to present examples of both ideologies. The study reveals that the feminist reception of *Little Women* is the result of Alcott’s inclusive feminist approach and that the novel’s themes promote discussions from the perspectives of social feminism and radical feminism.
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1. Introduction

The feminism of *Little Women* is intrinsically connected with the social developments of the nineteenth century. The Victorian era saw a wave of social changes ushered in by industrial capitalism and the rise of women’s movement (Vaid 63). Capitalist development led to a reconfiguration of social structures, the consequences of which altered preconceived notions of labour division (Vaid 63). One consequence of these changes took place inside the home. As industrialization rearranged economic models, the Victorian home ceased to be the principal source of production (Vaid 63). In *Ideologies of Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Vaid explains that these considerations for the demarcation of home were not based on sentimentality, but represented “a crucial axis around which many ideological battles were fought” (63). She presents these ideological struggles as existential questions of the Victorian age: “Would home and family, and thereby society, suffer if women, the traditional home-makers, be allowed to gain political and legal privileges, education, and employment, or would it benefit?” (63). It certainly seemed that industrialization was having a significant impact on the structures of the Victorian home, to the extent that patriarchal institutions debated the relevance of women’s roles in society. By all means, these considerations caused a crisis of masculinity (Kimmel 262). In *Men’s Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century*, Kimmel explains this crisis as the product of two main developments. He attributes the challenges of masculinity in Victorian society as the result of “men’s relationship to their work”, and how the capitalist industry had rendered the Victorian man into a mechanized automaton lacking the entrepreneurial skills of farmers and shopkeepers (263). The industry also provided another reason for men’s growing anxieties. Citing Leach, Kimmel explains that industrialization allowed for the subversion of “older sexual division of labor, and
created conditions favorable to the emergence of women into the public realm with men” (264). This led to women’s involvement in social spaces that influenced the lives of men. Regardless of marriage status, women experienced increased opportunities for employment, especially in professions such as journalism, medicine and education (Kimmel 264). Kimmel explains that the divide between workplace and household was erased by the industry, and that “motherhood was professionalized”, which led to women becoming the major influence in their sons’ lives, or, as Kimmel puts it by citing Rotundo, “women were teaching boys to be men” (265).

However, this study does not deny the fact that these freedoms and developments mostly concerned high to middle-class women. Vaid explains that these periods of economic growth and household independence were not experienced by women from the lower classes. To this she adds that women from the lower strata saw limited job opportunities, and that their primary concerns were not status-based, but related to their incomes (Vaid 64). Indeed, this divide in the experiences of Victorian women brought about more questions of employment rights and control over their financial situations. Bryson describes another scenario – one more troubling – in which industrialization, although beneficial to women, still did not afford them enough liberties (Bryson 84). She explains that despite technological advances challenging sexual concepts of labour, the “single largest occupation for women in both countries [the United Kingdom and North America] remained domestic service” (Bryson 84). However, she emphasizes that continuous access to education provided women with “the skills and confidence with which to demand and campaign for these [legal] rights” (Bryson 85). As Vaid mentions, “what was needed was an organized effort to highlight these contradictions and change the material and social conditions of women” (64). The result of this was the emergence and rise of feminism. This
thesis identifies this form of feminism as social feminism and defines it as separate from hardcore or radical feminism. In *A Paradigmatic Social Movement? Women’s Movements and the Definition of Contentious Politics*, Bereni and Revillard argue that feminism, by its definition, presents a separation between conservative and progressive movements (13). In this sense, the distinction is made by recognizing two forms of women’s movement: women’s mobilization based on gender roles and women’s mobilization that directly opposes gender roles (Bereni and Revillard 13). While not mutually exclusive categories, the distinction is important in regards to feminism in the Victorian age. According to Bereni and Revillard, the type of feminism practiced by the women’s movement took place “in the space of social, religious, or civic communities where their [women] presence was tolerated” (10). Citing American historian Nancy Cott, they explain the difference between “social feminism” – a term ascribed to “women’s involvement in social reform activities in the name of specific qualities of women”, and “hardcore feminism” – which refers to “activism specifically focused on equal rights between men and women” (16). This study approaches social feminism as described by Cott in *What’s in a Name? The Limits of ‘Social Feminism’; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women’s History*. In her article, Cott links social feminism with the developments of progressive reform, explaining that the term (first coined by William L. O’Neill) “placed the suffrage movement in the context of women’s wider public activities” and connected the ideology with women’s understanding of their “own domestic and maternal roles […] as justification for seizing public responsibilities” (811). By contrast, the study refers to Willis’ *Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism* to define hardcore feminism – which, in this study, is termed as radical feminism. On this ideology, Willis writes that radical feminists promoted “radical skepticism toward existing political theories,
directed as they were toward the study of ‘man’” (94). Thus, to explore women’s condition was an effort in “consciousness-raising”, which led to the collective analysis of women’s lives to determine their individual circumstances (Ellis 94). Ellis reveals that the process “uncovered an enormous amount of information about women’s lives and insights into women’s oppression” (94).

This thesis explores the existence and interaction between the two feminist perspectives in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. It draws on aspects of Alcott’s personal life to explore the extent of her feminism and to examine the influence of her activism in her novel. From a variety of sources, ranging from academic articles to opinion pieces, this study delves into the social and radical feminism of *Little Women*, analyzing passages from the novel as well as the book’s reception by modern feminist readers.

2. Louisa May Alcott: The Inclusive Feminist

To examine the feminism of *Little Women*, it is perhaps useful to look into Louisa May Alcott’s stance on feminism. From Alcott’s personal letters, there is direct evidence of her support for feminist organizations (Stern 429). Born in 1832, Alcott was the child of activists Bronson Alcott and Abby May Alcott (Stern 430). Her parents supported “most of the reforms of the day from temperance to health food, from homeopathy to anti-slavery” (Stern 430). To Bronson Alcott, the “reform of reforms” (Stern 430) was woman suffrage, and in 1867 he wrote that “…woman is soon to have her place in the State with every right of the citizen” (Stern 430). For her part, Abby May Alcott adopted a protectionist approach. Citing the latter, Stern explains that, to Abby, “the opening to women of ‘a great variety of employments’ could have none but salutary effects”, and furthermore, that “woman’s rights as ‘wife,
mother, daughter and owner of property’ must be protected” (Stern 430). Her approach coincided with her husband’s views on the necessity for women’s participation in the political sphere, writing that “extension to women of all civil rights” would benefit “the welfare and progress of the State” (Stern 430). The views expressed by the Alcotts align themselves with the ideology of social feminism. This extended to Louisa May Alcott’s feminist approach. In *Louisa Alcott’s Feminist Letters*, Stern writes that, for the majority of her life, Alcott “continued to exercise the very limited privilege accorded to her as a woman” (434). Citing Alcott’s journal entry in September 1880, Stern reveals Alcott’s own record of activities, including her first poll-tax payment, her voting for the school committee, her meetings in town, and her thoughts on women’s lack of involvement in the town’s voting (Stern 434). Stern’s observations that Alcott maintained active participation in public activities – despite how limited they were to women – corresponds with Cott’s definition of social feminism. Moreover, it supports the idea of women’s mobilization based on gender. Another important revelation provided by Stern is Alcott’s financial contributions to advancing suffrage (435). In a letter to the Woman’s Journal – “the only woman’s suffrage paper published in Massachusetts” (Stern 431) – Alcott explained that “when a fund was voted to organize local suffrage associations throughout the state” she decided to subscribe a hundred dollars to the paper (Stern 435). Stern writes that this was one of Alcott’s last contributions to the Woman’s Journal, and her check for a hundred dollars “reiterated her endorsement of that paper” (Stern 435). In the words of Alcott: “I read it, lend it to my neighbors, and sent it to hospitals, prisons, country libraries” (Stern 435). Alcott’s statements show how she approached her activism. Corresponding with the ideology of social feminism, Alcott’s contributions were made through private means that Victorian society
deemed adequate for women. Writing her personal opinions in her journal, donating money to feminist newspapers and taking part in women’s suffrage, Alcott was an activist of her time who understood how society worked.

There is another side to Alcott’s approach to feminism. In examining her letters, Stern notes that Alcott viewed suffrage “as a right to which women were entitled but also as a privilege for which they must make an active effort” (Stern 433). While these views agree with social feminism, Alcott also shows deep frustration towards the societal norms of the Victorian era. In Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography, Cheever reveals an important aspect of Alcott’s personality and compares it to her dearest literary creation, the novel Moods. Cheever writes that Moods was “Louisa May Alcott’s first serious novel”, but she emphasizes the novel’s obscurity by mentioning that “with the exception of scholars who are interested in both Louisa May Alcott and feminist studies, little has been written about it [Moods]” (Cheever 164). In Moods, Alcott explores “the connection between love and marriage and the destructive nature of impulse” which suggests a more complex aspect of Alcott’s stance on feminism (Cheever 164). While she tolerated the slow progress of women’s suffrage, Alcott was very vocal against the Victorian concepts of home and marriage. In a letter written in 1882, Alcott criticizes the lack of participation from the women of the town of Concord in matters of suffrage (Stern 433). She writes that, in order to earn themselves the right to vote, the women of Concord need to “leave the dishes till they get home, as they do when in a hurry to go to the sewing-society, Bible-class, or picnic” (Stern 433). In a similar fashion, Cheever mentions that Alcott viewed marriage as something very different from love, noting that, to her, “marriage didn’t seem to make people happy” (Cheever 169). Furthermore, Cheever notes that to Alcott “nineteenth-century marriage was a kind of domestic slavery for women, who
were yoked by law to the financial and emotional whims of their husbands” (Cheever 169). These opinions hint at Alcott’s views on the patriarchal configuration of Victorian society. They also align themselves with Ellis’ explanations on radical feminism, in that radical feminists pushed forward “the thesis that women’s oppression was not only the oldest and most universal form of domination but the primary form” (Ellis 96). The models of radical feminism described by Ellis correspond with Alcott’s rejection of women’s domestic imprisonment to serve masculine needs. Ellis writes that, to radical feminists, the most powerful societal hierarchies were “specialized forms of male supremacy” (Ellis 96). Alcott’s means of expression were often linked to her unpredictable character (Cheever 170). In explaining Alcott’s fondness for her novel *Moods*, Cheever argues that “for Alcott, moods [or emotions] were an important topic” and that “she was a creature of violent, often uncontrollable emotional ups and downs” (Cheever 170). Citing Matteson, Argyle speculates that Alcott might have “inherited from her father and her uncle a manic depressive disposition” (Argyle 180). Moreover, she links this propensity for mood swings to Alcott’s earlier writings of “female revenge thrillers” (Argyle 180). Describing Alcott’s writing process, Argyle mentions that the process of composing “more ambitious novels engulfed her in obsessive “vortices” of writing […], lasting days or weeks, followed by periods of dejection” (Argyle 180). Stern seems to agree with this position by positing Alcott’s earlier publications in sensation fiction as an example of her “plots of violence and revenge” (Stern 429). Brockell supports the idea of Alcott as a radical. In her article “Girls Adored ‘Little Women.’ Louisa May Alcott did not” Brockell synthetizes Alcott’s life as an abolitionist, a feminist committed to life as a spinster, and as someone “who loved to pull her up her skirts and go for a long run through the woods” to stress the depths of Alcott’s radical life
(Brockell 2). It should be noted that Brockell’s definition of “radical” remains ambiguous in her piece, and whether she refers to Alcott’s life as a series of radical events or as a life devoted to the practice of radical feminism remains unclear. However, Stern agrees that the circumstances of Alcott’s life, along with her early publications, “prompted many readers to view the author as a militant feminist herself” (Stern 429). However, she later remarks that judging Alcott’s feminism on “the vengeful deeds of her heroines is less productive […] than a study of her non-fictional writings on the subject” (Stern 429). Indeed, Alcott’s feminism was rooted in the realities of her time. In her novels, her feminist ideas were expressed through her emotions, while her letters showed a more practical approach to her feminism.

In regards to social feminism, Alcott’s letters illuminate her commitment to women’s suffrage that is characteristic with said ideology. Radical feminism, in Alcott’s opinions, tends to be more complex. Nevertheless, it is still present. Furthermore, Alcott’s opinions offer evidence of an inclusive form of feminism that accepts the two ideologies. In a letter to her editor, Alcott mentions that “we are going to win in time, and the friend of literary ladies ought to be also the friend of women generally” (Stern 435). The statement begs the question: Winning against whom? From a social feminist perspective, Alcott’s remarks suggest that women must win against themselves, that the single greatest obstacle to suffrage is the extent of their commitment to activism. From a radical feminist approach, the statement puts the blame on the patriarchal configurations of society. This division is present in Alcott’s suffrage activism and it appears in her most popular work, Little Women.
3. Little Women: A Social Feminist Perspective

This section comprises two narrative themes from Little Women that, from the perspective of social feminism, are considered progressive and subversive. The first refers to the relationship between Jo March and Theodore “Laurie” Laurence and how it subverts gender stereotypes in the Victorian era. The second centers on Marmee March and explores the silent power of matriarchy. For this part, it is relevant to mention that, although the sources engage with paradigms of social feminism, the individual authors do not exclusively identify themselves as social feminists.

3.1 Jo and Laurie: Conversations on Gender

Commenting on the concept of social feminism, Cott asserts that it “made strides towards expressing the way that women raised their own public stature and responsibilities by asserting themselves […] on behalf of reform causes” (Cott 815). However, Cott also acknowledges that, in identifying specific concepts of feminism “not only an individual’s (or organization’s) ideological stance at a given time needs to be considered but also its relation to context” (Cott 823). Her conclusion is that feminism is an evolving phenomenon of ideologies and context, and that it is hard to define, for “the radical feminist move of one generation may become the conventional move of its successors” (Cott 823). Certainly, evidence suggests that the reception of Little Women in the nineteenth century diverges from the responses of the twentieth century. Of importance to this study is how social feminism turns these differences into an evolving dialogue. Sicherman mentions that Victorian reception of Little Women was largely positive, and that young female readers praised the novel for its “ability to engage them in ways that open up future possibility” (Sicherman 15). It was clear that a character like Jo “promoted self-discovery” (Sicherman 15), and that
through her, “readers could catch glimpses of their future selves” (Sicherman 15). Furthermore, Sicherman introduces the idea that the personal aspirations of Victorian young women from different backgrounds gave *Little Women* a widespread appeal. As she explains, “young women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed means of transport that allowed them to chart their own directions” (Sicherman 16). *Little Women* contributed in charting young women’s personal journeys. Sicherman illustrates that “for those born in privilege, Alcott’s story often provided a focal point for elaborating dramas of personal autonomy, even rebellion” (Sicherman 16), and she makes the observation that these dramas of self-discovery “helped them [young women] transcend otherwise predictably domestic futures” (Sicherman 16). As for other classes, particularly Russian Jewish immigrants, *Little Women* provided a “model for becoming American and middle class” (Sicherman 16), something that introduced this group of young women to “bourgeois domesticity” (Sicherman 16). Thus, Sicherman remarks that for Victorian readers “aspiration mattered more than actual social position” (Sicherman 16). This is important because it shows that *Little Women* was able to transcend the still-conflicted division of labour and privilege among women in the nineteenth century.

Jo March is arguably the most popular character in *Little Women*. As Cheever states, “for more than a century, the portrait of *Little Women*’s Jo March […] has offered a kind of sympathy and guidance that didn’t seem to be available anywhere else” (Cheever 9). Cheever connects Jo’s popularity to her rebellious and artistic nature (Cheever 9). Certainly, from the perspective of social feminism, the appeal of Jo March is understandable. As previously discussed, the characterization of Jo March promoted autonomy, an important element of the women’s movement associated with social feminism. However, Jo’s declarations against marriage surpassed the concept
of social feminism at the time. Her declaration that “an old maid, that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse” challenge the conventions of social feminism and encourage it to keep evolving. Indeed, Jo’s rejection of Victorian configurations of society are centered on her refusal to get married (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 148). Moreover, her hostile attitude towards marriage mirrors Alcott’s personal views on getting married. Alberghene, Zipes and Clark explain that Jo’s reasons for rejecting marriage come from a need to preserve a “homonuclear family” (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 148). In the absence of the patriarch, the March family inhabits a space entirely dominated by femininity. In light of this, the prospect of marriage seems dangerous. To Jo, who craves autonomy and a sense of authority, the female-centered household represents the only space in which her views are properly considered. This way, Jo “recognizes that marriage would entail a loss of her personal power” (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 148) and that bringing a man to the house would “disrupt the sororal harmony of her home life” (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 148). Nevertheless, no matter how much “Alcott insisted that by rights Jo should remain a ‘literary spinster’” Victorian readers pressured her “to imagine a different fate for her heroine” (Sicherman 21). Sicherman explains that when Alcott began to write a sequel to Little Women (which would later become the second part of a single tome), she wrote in her journal: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only aim and end of a woman’s life. I won’t marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone” (Sicherman 21). Despite Alcott’s observations, the fact remains that social feminism governed the Victorian mentality and that young women, although eager to see themselves thrive in the public and private spheres, still maintained an affectionate sensibility towards the idea of marriage. This sensibility can be explained as the result of young women’s connecting with the character of Jo.
Sicherman observes that, despite Alcott’s subversive intentions in the relationship between Jo and Laurie, “an adolescent reader, […] contemplating the burdens of future womanhood, might find it reassuring that her fictional counterpart emerges happily, if not perhaps ideally, from similar circumstances” (Sicherman 21). The desire for Jo to end up married to a man who respects her as a woman, and moreover, treats her differently than any other man she has met, offers a positive outlook on the future for young women. In Jo, they have found a person that gives them solace, a heroine in which they can place their hopes and dreams. Nevertheless, the resolution of Jo and Laurie’s storyline was one of the most frustrating aspects of *Little Women* at the time.

From the perspective of social feminism, twentieth century readers and critics alike have identified groundbreaking aspects in the relationship between Jo and Laurie. In this respect, modern readers have identified clues in Jo and Laurie’s first meeting that point to their unwillingess to conform with Victorian perceptions of

Their first meeting happens as follows:

“‘How is your cat, Miss March?’ asked the boy, trying to look sober while his black eyes shone with fun.

‘Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I’m only Jo,’ returned the young lady.

‘I’m not Mr. Laurence, I’m only Laurie.’

‘Laurie Laurence, what an odd name.’

‘My first name is Theodore, but I don’t like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead.’

‘I hate my name, too, so sentimental! I wish everyone would say Jo instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?’

‘I trashed them.’” (Alcott 39).
Bender refers to the importance of names and presentations in this first exchange (140). She explains that “Alcott breaks many stereotypes by giving two of her main characters, Jo and Laurie, names that would usually denote someone of the opposite gender”, and that their introduction to each other plays against stereotypical expectations of gender (Bender 141). Certainly, the name “Jo” seems more suitable for a boy, while the name “Laurie” seems more fitting for a girl. However, “neither character is surprised by the other’s atypical name”, and their exchange shows a lack of gender stereotyping that is liberating (Bender 141). This freedom from gender constraints allows the two characters to possess characteristics that subvert Victorian expectations of their genders. As Bender explains, in *Little Women* Jo assumes “more masculine attributes and Laurie […] more feminine attributes” (Bender 141). In *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott*, Keyser suggests that these subversion of gender roles is owing to how Jo and Laurie liberate each other. She explains that Laurie, who is trapped inside his lavish residence, is liberated by Jo “in a reversal of the Sleeping Beauty tale” (Keyser 66). According to Bender, “Jo is the one to free Laurie from his stiff grandfather”, thereby subverting gender norms of the Victorian era (Bender 144). Keyser adds to this by explaining that, in liberating Laurie from confinement, Jo seems to be “appropriating male power and freeing a part of her own nature” (Keyser 66). Indeed, previous to his acquaintance with the March sisters, Laurie fulfilled a passive role, a form of masculinity that was rejected in the nineteenth century. Laurie’s attitude towards Jo manifested in his complacent nature, and it fit the model of men who “supported women’s advance, or progressive reformism” and were considered “unpatriotic and thus their masculinity itself was suspect” (Kimmel 267). Certainly, while Jo liberates Laurie through an active role, Laurie’s liberation of Jo is more passive. Nevertheless, it is mutual. Keyser describes
their relationship as a means that allows them to “temporarily escape entrapment in gender role stereotypes” (Keyser 67). Going back to their first meeting, Keyser argues that “Laurie allows Jo to be her full self and offers her male camaraderie”, something that Jo herself has been craving (Keyser 67). In doing this, Laurie provides Jo with scenarios to develop her masculine side. Similarly, he allows her to nurture her femininity (Keyser 67). Keyser remarks that, on her first visit, Laurie’s lavish manor, Jo “enters like a male hero but presents herself to Laurie as a nurse” (Keyser 67). Moreover, when Beth becomes sick, Jo “allows herself to break down in Laurie’s presence and be comforted by him” (Keyser 67). This also allows Laurie to develop his feminine side. Keyser explains that even though “Jo’s bracing companionship has tended to make him more manly, Laurie has learned, through contact with the feminine household, how to offer maternal support” (Keyser 67). Through these examples it becomes clear that Jo is the active participant, and Laurie is the reactionary individual.

Bender explains the importance of geography in terms of the masculine and feminine worlds in *Little Women*. Citing Keyser, Bender remarks that “the mansion [the Laurence manor] and the March home are symbolic of masculine and feminine spheres” (144). The combination of the two worlds, as expressed by Jo and Laurie, thus weakens the barrier separating men and women’s “gender-stereotypical roles” (Bender 144). Through this, “each gender group is no longer confined to their societal sphere of expectations” and “they can cross those boundaries and interact with each other” (Bender 144). This interaction between the men and women’s worlds in public and private spheres represents a progressive form of social feminism in the Victorian era. Keyser notes that this interaction allows Jo and Laurie to become a “whole, androgynous person” (66). In relation to these views, Bender observes that “Alcott
does not expect the audience to ignore gender but rather look past the stereotypes that have confined the genders” (144). More than an androgynous person, the relationship implies a form of harmony and mutual understanding that allows the two characters to experience different perspectives without losing their identities. In fact, the friendship between Jo and Laurie nurtures previously unexplored aspects of their personalities and helps them discover who they are. To some extent, Laurie represents to Jo what she represented to Victorian women, a glimpse into another world that hints at exciting possibilities about the future and self-discovery. This way, their friendship provides “masculine strength and freedom from sentimentality with feminine sympathy” (Keyser 67).

This explains why marriage is an impossible prospect for them. When Laurie proposes to Jo, he is actually not expressing feelings of romantic love to her as much as he is acknowledging that he loves the side of himself that he can see through her. Similarly, when Jo rejects Laurie, “she feels as if “she had stabbed her dearest friend; and when he left her, without a look behind him, she knew that the boy Laurie would never come back” (Keyser 67). This explains why they cannot consolidate true romantic feelings. Jo is in love with the boy Laurie that lives inside of her as much as Laurie loves the girl Jo that resides within him. In this way, their affection is not romantic or even sexual; rather, it is the result of them loving to stare into their own reflections. Thus, Keyser concludes that “in refusing to marry Jo to Laurie, Alcott conveys her recognition that in society as it was then constituted such androgynous wholeness as would have been theirs […] was impossible” (Keyser 67). This observation is representative of modern perceptions of Little Women. Moreover, it favors an analysis of the text that respects the context of social feminism between the eras, thereby providing a continuous dialogue across generations. This way, the
relationship between Jo and Laurie is the result of an uncompromising, progressive feminist mentality.

3.2 Marmee March: The Silent Matriarch

In her letters, Alcott was critical of matriarchy insofar as it interfered with the mobilization of women in the public and private spheres (Stern 433). In Victorian society, industrialization slowly democratized the labour market, gradually opening up spaces in which women could redefine themselves as citizens (Kimmel 265). Indeed, Alcott’s frustrations were based on women’s lack of awareness that the industry was altering the configurations of society. These frustrations were part of a collective mentality of a group of women in the Victorian era. Their collected dissatisfaction with patriarchal society led to the emergence of the New Woman. Ledger explains that the New Woman was formed by “representatives of an emergent femininity which was ‘heedless of social conventions and social consequences’ and whose pioneers ‘announced [themselves] captains[s] of [their] own destiny’” (7). Kimmel also explains that “in the public sphere, the rise of women’s colleges, women’s increased literacy, delayed age of marriage, an ideology of upward mobility, and capitalist development gave rise to the New Woman” (265). The New Women of the Victorian era were “avowed feminists, who campaigned for suffrage and autonomy” (Kimmel 265). In Men’s Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century, Kimmel writes about one woman claiming that “my aim […] is to make myself a true woman, one worthy of the name, and not to be one of the delicate little dolls or the silly fools who make up the bulk of American women, slaves to society and fashion” (265). While Little Women preceded the emergence of the New Woman (the novel was published in 1868), its themes of womanhood and independence aligned themselves with the principal concepts of the New Woman. Certainly, the
reception of *Little Women* in the nineteenth century showed early signs of this progressive sentiment of women’s nascent mobilization and promotion of suffrage. In light of this, the book’s most popular character at the time became the rebellious Jo March. However, more modern interpretations of the twentieth century have uncovered another central character in the novel. Lurking in the background, Marmee March oversees the conditions of her household and the lives of her daughters. Taking into account the perspective of social feminism, Victorian reception of Marmee March is overlooked in favor of more progressive, gender-breaking characters. However, in the context of a new century, social feminism allows readers and critics to delve into the theme of matriarchy through Marmee March.

Discussing Marmee’s role in *Little Women*, Auerbach connects her with the idea of family (7). For Auerbach, the concept of family represents “the first community we know” and it manifests in the form of the mother. In *Little Women*, the March sisters “turn to Marmee for encouragement and guidance”, and Jo describes her presence in their lives when she says that “we were in the Slough of Despond tonight, and mother came and pulled us out as Help did in the book” (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 222). Certainly, “throughout much of the novel, Marmee functions as Help: she offers her hand, in turn, to each of her daughter-pilgrims” and “after she has rescued them, she encourages them to continue their pilgrimage” (Alberghene, Zipes and Clark 222). This playful description perfectly summarizes Marmee’s role in the story as a constant guide to her daughters’ lives. Alcott further emphasizes the importance of Marmee’s role by removing the patriarch from the March’s house. Mr. March, though not portrayed as abusive, or lacking in affectionate qualities, is nevertheless absent from his daughters’ lives. Thus, in embodying the role of the household authority, Marmee’s responsibilities stretch to include those of the
patriarchal figure. Auerbach explains that, in the nineteenth century, the matriarchy was basically a school for wives (9). She points out how, in Little Women, the character of Kate Vaughn is shocked upon realizing that the March sisters have had no governess (9). This is important because it allows Marmee to fill in this role, and become a primary source of knowledge to her daughters. Auerbach emphasizes the importance of the March sisters’ education by stating that it comes from the perspective of a woman (9).

From a feminist perspective, Marmee March is the perfect matriarch that embodies authority within a complete societal space. She is also a feminist character. Victorian reception tended to ignore Marmee’s relevance, but modern feminist views contend that “Marmee is far from an unambivalent figure” (Grasso 183). Grasso notes that “although she [Marmee] speaks in the cadences of nineteenth-century domestic-manuals and plays a major role in Jo’s gender socialization”, she still promotes her daughters’ autonomies. In the case of Jo, Grasso mentions that “it is she [Marmee] who suggests that Jo turn to writing when she is in the depths of despair” (183). This connection between Marmee and her daughters contains powerful narrative themes. Citing Murphy, Grasso mentions that “Little Women’s power derives from its exploration of the previously repressed, complex mother-daughter relationship” (183). In Little Women, this relationship is not presented as “either idealized perfection or pernicious destruction” but as example of the “role of the mother as both nurturer of female creativity an enforcer of patriarchal dictates” (Grasso 183). Similarly, Marmee is responsible for her daughters’ spiritual upbringing. In Little Women’s opening page, Jo complains that “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents” (Alcott 4). To spare their mother a dreary Christmas, the girls agree to each donate a dollar to buy their mother a present. But, almost in the manner of a reply, Marmee enters the scene
to ask her daughters whether they would find it in themselves to donate their dinner to a poor family. Auerbach explains that Marmee’s suggestion explains the nature of sacrifice to her daughters (10). Indeed, by planning to give up one dollar of their money the March sisters felt themselves spiritually accomplished. However, their mother, through sheer selflessness, teaches her daughters how to handle their richness. In this sense, she provides them with a sense of morality.

The previously discussed “homosocial” environment is accentuated in the private revelations shared between Marmee and Jo. Gubar and Gilbert explain that “in the paradigmatic Marmee March” Alcott showed how submission and service could never eradicate “silent, savage rage” (483). When Jo worries about the nature of her “temperamental flare-ups”, Marmee confesses that she too suffers from a temper she has been unable to cure for forty years (Gubar and Gilbert 483). “‘You think your temper is the worst in the world,’ she says to Jo, ‘‘but mine used to be just like it.’” (Alcott 111). When Jo asks her mother to elaborate, the latter replies: “‘I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it, and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so’” (Alcott 111).

This revelation adds layers to Marmee’s character. In confessing to her daughter the silent rage that has taken over her for the majority of her life, Marmee is as inclusive a feminist as Alcott herself. Both understand the context of their given eras and still preserve their anger which, although invisible to most, prevails in silence. Thus, Marmee March is a social feminist from the Victorian era who also reveals new layers of the ideology to modern readers.
4. Little Women: A Radical Feminist Perspective

This section concentrates on the narrative theme from Little Women that from the perspective of radical feminism is considered controversial and problematic. It focuses on the theme of marriage and why the March sisters ultimately betrayed their autonomy to fit into Victorian models of femininity. For this part, it is relevant to mention that, although the sources engage with paradigms of radical feminism, the individual authors do not exclusively identify themselves as radical feminists.

4.1 Falling Castles: The Theme of Marriage

From the perspective of radical feminism, the reception of Little Women has criticized the novel’s definitions of womanhood. Fetterley describes the concerns towards the novel’s overall message as “the concern of defining woman’s proper sphere and proper work” (372). Early in the story, we are introduced to the idealized, homosocial family environment overseen by the matriarch and populated by her free-spirited, gender-challenging daughters. The chapter entitled “Castles in the Air” offers a private gaze into each of the March sisters’ personal dreams. Meg, the oldest of the sisters, explains that she “should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things, nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people and heaps of money” (Alcott 202). Then, she declares: “I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit” and through this she would “make everyone love me dearly” (Alcott 202). Meanwhile, Amy, the youngest of the sisters, wants to become an artist and “go to Rome, and do fine pictures and be the best artist in the whole world” (Alcott 203). For their parts, Beth just wants to stay at home and tend to her family while Jo wants to write books and earn great heaps of money. These “castles in the air” are manifestations of the March sisters’ feminism.
In reviewing the feminist message of *Little Women*, Desmawati explains that the feminism in the novel “is reflected by the struggle of the characters in survival” and finding their place in “the world of men” (95). The oppression that women must face to declare their own rights and define themselves as people is the principal evil that radical feminists aim to obliterate. This oppression comes from the patriarchy and it seeps its way into the collective unconscious of an entire generation (Desmawati 95). This explains why some of the sisters’ castles were meant to crumble while others became realized.

It is important to remember that *Little Women* was published in two separate volumes. The first volume was entitled *Little Women*, and comprised the majority of the March sisters’ childhood. The second volume was entitled *Good Wives*, hinting at the outcome of the little women’s fates. From the context of Victorian society, the second volume touches on growing anxieties concerning societal concepts of gender. In *Austen and Alcott on Matriarchy: New Women or New Wives?* Auerbach makes an interesting observation about “the collective groups of women” (6) that challenged the patriarchal configurations of the Victorian era. She cites Dr. Mary Walker and her desire to “found a community of women […] to be called “Adamless Eden” as representative of the era’s collective rejection of patriarchal institutions (6). Walker’s Eden was to become “a colony for young women who would pledge themselves to single blessedness. They would work and study, and eventually go forth as samples of the new womanhood” (6). While Walker’s utopian colony promoted women’s transition from house-bound reality, Alcott’s *Little Women* seemed to steer young girls’ minds in the opposite direction. Auerbach explains that *Little Women*’s “rather perfunctory concluding marriages” end up “giving a twilight flavor to the enforced passage into womanhood” (6). Thus, she concludes that Alcott’s novel removes the
sisters “from the collective colony of women presided over by their mother to the official authority of masculine protection” (6).

Victorian reception of *Little Women* hailed Alcott’s accomplishment in exploring two important aspects of a woman’s life: economic reality and marriage (Sicherman 27). However, rather than separating both concepts, Alcott knew that “opportunities for self-respecting singlehood and women’s employment went in hand in hand” (Sicherman 27). But, as previously stated, her desire to marry the March sisters – particularly her alter ego, Jo March – was not something appealing to her. A strong reason for Alcott’s continuous opposition to marriage can be found in her personal life. In “*Wedding Marches*”: *Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women*, Shealy mentions that “after Alcott’s younger sister Elizabeth died from a lingering illness, twenty-seven-year-old Anna Alcott, the eldest of the four sisters, announced her engagement to John Bridge Pratt” an event that undoubtedly left an emotional impact on Alcott (369). Shealy offers a private gaze into Alcott’s feelings at the time, quoting from her personal journal a passage that states “so another sister is gone. I moaned in private over my great loss, and said I’d never forgive John for taking Anna from me, but I shall if he makes her happy” (369). Moreover, Shealy offers another substantial passage that shows how “when Anna and John wed in May 1860, the ceremony brought conflicted thoughts about marriage into Louisa’s mind”: “I mourn the loss of my Nan, and am not comforted” (369). These conflicted emotions led to Alcott’s later entry that “I’d rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe” (Shealy 369). Certainly, Alcott’s feelings towards marriage echo Jo’s fears that her homosocial environment will become threatened by the prospect of marriage. Commenting on radical feminism, Willis supports Alcott’s views and asserts that “women in a familialist system need marriage to establish the
father’s social obligation to his children, and this in itself gives power to set the terms of the marriage contract” (99). This marriage contract was constantly challenged in the Victorian era by the women’s movement. However, Willis points out that “women’s demands for equality in the home come up against male resistance, and if they press their demands “too far”, the probable result is not an equal marriage, but no marriage at all” (99). These remarks are interesting in how they relate to Alcott’s life. While her rejection of marriage manifests in external acts of antagonism the real reason for Alcott’s opposition to it is internal. In this sense, Alcott agrees that familialist systems of house life are demeaning towards women. However, her sentiments are not expressed through ideology, but through feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Through *Little Women*, Alcott was able to explore her complicated feelings over the loss of her sister Anna. These emotions are evidently expressed in Meg’s storyline. Shealy explains that when Laurie reveals to Jo that John Brooke has kept Meg’s glove in his pocket for many months Jo’s reaction is representative of Alcott’s shock over losing her own sister (371). Notwithstanding these emotions, “[in the nineteenth century] marriage was important to a young woman” and “Alcott knew well the realities for women of her day” (Shealy 372). Shealy offers interesting data in relation to this, revealing that “93% of American women married during the mid-nineteenth century” and that “for women in 1868, opportunities to earn living wages or attain financial support were certainly limited”, especially after “the carnage of the Civil War” where “eligible females outnumbered prospective husbands” (372). This is a fact that “many contemporary readers in the twenty-first century, especially young readers, take too lightly or never really consider” (Shealy 372).

Nevertheless, the marriage plots of *Little Women* have generated widespread controversy. From the perspective of radical feminism, modern readers have grown to
distinguish the novel as symbolic of an idyllic, “golden-era past in which all women are white, all the houses are in New England, and everyone cherishes the institution of marriage as a sacred foundation of civilization” (Grasso 184). Recalling her personal experience of re-reading the novel, Kelly agrees with Grasso’s assessment. In her piece *We Regret to Inform You that Little Women is Not a Feminist Novel*, Kelly takes issues with novel’s second volume, arguing that “it is obsessed with wifely duty – deferential to patriarchy and dismissive of female ambition of any variety other than maternal” (4). This clearly underlies the contradictions most modern readers have found in Alcott’s novel: the early promise of the March sisters’ autonomies undone by their succumbing marriage and masculine authority. Fetterley views this as a syndrome of Alcott’s capitulation to the patriarchy. She compares the writing of *Little Women* to Alcott’s early stories of sensation fiction. While her previous stories were filled with rage and rebelliousness, Alcott’s *Little Women* is a reminder of “the amount of rage and intelligence Alcott had to suppress” (370). Fetterley calls this suppression of Alcott’s most natural instincts her “true style”, and compares it to “the sexual politics of Jo’s relation to Professor Bhaer” through whom she relinquishes her true devotion to feminism (370). There is certainly a civil war occurring both inside Jo’s life and Alcott’s. Fetterley emphasizes the importance of the novel’s setting to explain the internal struggles and ambivalences of Alcott and Jo’s decisions. She writes that “the Civil War is an obvious metaphor for internal conflict and its invocation as background to *Little Women* suggests the presence in the story of such conflict” (370). Willis points out that one of the principal goals of radical feminism was “to exhort women to stop submitting to oppression by being subservient or participating in sexist institutions like marriage” (103). When Laurie reveals to Jo that Meg has been carrying John’s glove in her pocket her reaction is the following:
“Laurie bent, and whispered three words in Jo’s ear, which produced a comical change. She stood and stared at him for a minute, looking both surprised and displeased, then walked on, saying sharply, ‘How do you know?’

‘Saw it.’

‘Where?’

‘Pocket.’

‘All this time?’

‘Yes, isn’t that romantic?’

‘No, it’s horrid.’

‘Don’t you like it?’

‘Of course I don’t. It’s ridiculous, it won’t be allowed. My patience! What would Meg say?’

‘You are not to tell anyone. Mind that.’

‘I didn’t promise.’

‘That was understood, and I trusted you.’

‘Well, I won’t for the present, anyway, but I’m disgusted, and wish you hadn’t told me.’

‘Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I’m only Jo,’ returned the young lady.

‘I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘At the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away? No, thank you.’” (Alcott 399).

This is clearly Jo assuming a position of radical feminism. Willis explains that “the feminists were idealist, voluntarist and moralistic in the extreme. They totally disregarded what other women said they wanted or felt” which is what Jo exhibits in the previous passage (103). In the first volume, it seems that Jo will represent the radical and revolutionary woman. However, the importance of marriage could not be overlooked and modern reception has taken fault with Alcott’s decision to marry her
heroine. Kelly writes that “even Alcott devotees have long lamented the author’s decision to marry her [Jo] to the painfully serious Professor Bhaer” (12). While she describes Jo’s rejection of Laurie as “one of the best scenes in the novel” (namely because refusing Laurie’s offer means that Jo “holds true to her conviction that a wife must truly love her partner”) she laments the union of the free spinster with the solemn academic (13). The surprise of Jo’s resignation of her independent spirit is more shocking when considering she almost succeeded in her literary ambitions. She moves to New York and briefly concentrates on writing sensation fiction like Alcott herself. However, upon meeting Professor Bhaer, she is confronted with the statement that “writing sensational novels isn’t an ‘honest’ living” (13). Her reaction is to mutilate her own manuscripts and marry the professor later in the story. Kelly describes this development as Alcott abandoning “Jo’s passion for writing – the fire that propelled her” (13). She emphasizes Alcott’s betrayal of her heroine by pointing to the sentence: “don’t laugh at the spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragical romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly […] they have missed the sweetest part of life” (14). This seems to suggest that Jo’s rebellious, free-spirited personality is actually a façade to mask a melancholic interior. In setting up Jo to marry professor Bhaer, Alcott is hinting at the true nature of Jo’s feminism. For the majority of the novel, readers are led to believe that Jo’s devotion to female authority is a natural expression of her own beliefs. However, from the perspective of radical feminism, Jo’s feminism turns out to be a reaction, a self-defensive mechanism from someone who actually wants to belong in patriarchal society. Kelly emphasizes that Jo’s fate ultimately leads her to fulfilling her new husband’s dreams. She mentions that “Bhaer has always loved teaching young boys” as opposed to Jo, who has never in the story mentioned this before (14). In the end, “Jo fulfills ‘a long-cherished plan’,
turning the mansion her aunt left her into a school”” a fate that is made the more tragic considering that “the school is only for boys” (Kelly 14). Kelly concludes that “Alcott, the daughter of a teacher and at times one herself, has Jo pass on her bountiful learning only to little men” (14).

Meg also succumbs to the theme of marriage. As it has been discussed, Meg’s castle in the air centers on commandeering her own home and the possession of numerous luxuries. From the perspective of radical feminism, Meg relinquishes her desires of wealth and material fulfillment to become a good-natured, servile wife to her husband. Through Marmee’s teachings “Meg must learn that love is better than luxury; she must learn to put a man in the center of her picture” and “she must learn that without domestic chores to keep them busy, women will be idle, bored, and prone to folly” (Fetterley 373). This suggests that Victorian women should not dream of wealth and luxury to the same extent as men, and given women’s imposed conceptualizations of purity and morality, to crave wealth is the representation of sin and vanity. This also undermines Marmee’s accomplishments. Instead of teaching her daughters to be free-thinking women, she is teaching them how to behave like Victorian women. While Meg’s castle in the air is the most realized of the four, the price she pays for it is to gradually let go of her autonomy.

Kelly explains why Meg’s domestic life is far from fulfilling. She describes an argument between Meg and her husband, John (10). John yells at Meg for not putting on the food at the time she was supposed to, an act that Alcott justifies by writing that “John was a mild man, but he was human” (10). Kelly suggests that this justification means that “a man can’t be expected to conduct himself properly when he’s hungry” and that Meg resolves the argument by “remembering her mother’s warning that ‘peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect’” is antifeminist (10). Moreover,
once her twins are born, Meg concentrates more on them, something that makes her husband feel neglected. When John expresses these feelings of neglection, Meg apologizes to him and promises to “make home what it used to be, if I can” (Kelly 11). The tragedy is that Meg dreamt of lavish goods and ends up imprisoned in a domestic life where her only means of comfort are pleasing her husband. This suggests that women are not supposed to be selfish and must not allow themselves some vanity lest their material dreams push them too far out of reality.

Artistic dreams are also shattered in the story. Throughout the novel, Amy endeavors to raise her castle high in the air only to have it land on the ground and smash to pieces. She makes it to Rome and “she comes to see that there is a difference between talent and genius, and that she has only the former” (Fetterley 373). Instead of reevaluating her choices or find the means to plod on, Amy “decides that her relationship to art will be primarily that of patroness, encouraging and supporting the work of others” (Fetterley 373). Thus, Amy’s artistic goals go from selfhood to maternal, aligning themselves with her mothers’ lesson that “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (Fetterley 373). Not only does Amy forsake her castle in the air; she is the one responsible for breaking it down and handing it over to the patriarchal institution of marriage. This way, “although Amy never completely gives up her art, she places it in the service of home and family” and “her artistic impulses have been harnessed and subordinated to her ‘maternal instinct’” (Fetterley 373). Thus, Amy’s independence becomes sanctioned, and her means for self-expression no longer belong entirely to her, but to her family.

There is a sense of foreboding to these fallen castles. In the second volume, a sinister aura permeates the mood. In many respects, the death of Beth signals the
private deaths of each of the sisters’ castles in the air. It also acts as metaphor for the little women leaving their homosocial home environment and engaging with the realities of Victorian society. Fetterley describes Beth as “the character who most fully internalizes the overt values of *Little Women*” (379). She explains that like her mother, Beth’s “devotion to her duty and her kindness towards others are never-failing” and that “she never expresses needs of her own” (379). Indeed, Beth’s castle in the air is to linger at home and take care of her family, something that, in Fetterley’s words, makes her “the perfect little woman” (379). This is important given Beth’s ultimate fate. In the second volume, she succumbs to scarlet fever and dies. Fetterley observes that “a connection is made between the degree to which she fulfills the prescription for being a little woman and the fact that she dies” (379). Beth’s ultimate fate aligns with radical feminist views of the March sisters’ castles in the air: while it is Beth who “registers the cost of being a little woman”, it is also her sisters who die metaphorical deaths and give away their autonomy and independence. (Fetterley 380). Fetterley writes that “in Beth one sees the exhaustion of vitality in the effort to live as a little woman” but one can see the same exhaustion in her sisters’ lives. Ultimately, Beth is the embodiment of a general mood, of the price the March sisters must pay to be a part of Victorian society. Beth March represents the burden of someone who tries to be a little woman, while Jo, Meg, and Amy are the embodiment of women who decide to live like little women.

5. Conclusion

The experience of reading *Little Women* can be as transformative as it can be disappointing. For Alcott, the novel was a compromise between her artistic needs and those of her audience. Not ascribing to one particular type of feminism, Alcott
advocated for suffrage and contributed to the women’s movement to the extent that she deemed right. In this respect, her feminism is inclusive and allows for multiple interpretations. To those who approach the text from the perspective of social feminism, *Little Women* is a groundbreaking novel that defies gender stereotypes and completely transforms the perceptions of matriarchy. As for the perspectives of radical feminism, the novel is a symptom of capitulation, of mutilation of one’s own beliefs and acceptance of patriarchal oppression.

However, no matter how the novel is interpreted, its themes are as inclusive as Alcott’s feminism. In *Little Women*’s compromises, there are signs of acceptance; in its silence, there is anger; in its fear, there is hope for life; in its servitude, there is love; in its selfishness, there is desire for self-acceptance. *Little Women* is the story of four sisters and their mother and how they brought together the popular and the intimate to deliver a story that is as socially feminist as it is radical. Notwithstanding the feminist perception, *Little Women* is a feminist novel that presents numerous interpretations of the definitions of autonomy and womanhood.
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