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"At Home We Work Together": Domestic Feminism and Patriarchy in Little Women

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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““At Home We Work Together””:

Domestic Feminism and Patriarchy in *Little Women*

By

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ABSTRACT

For 136 years, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has remained a classic in American children's literature. Although Alcott originally wrote the novel as a book for young girls, deeper issues run beneath the surface story of the March family. This thesis explores a few of these issues. Chapter One examines the roles of patriarchy and domesticity in Alcott's private life and in *Little Women*. Chapter Two emphasizes the Transcendentalist thinking that surrounded Alcott in her childhood, her own, feminized take on Transcendentalist philosophy, and how it subsequently infiltrates the novel. Chapter Three explores the role of the struggling female artist in *Little Women*, as portrayed by the March sisters, especially Jo and Amy March, and how the fictional characters' struggles reflect Alcott's own problems as a female writer in a patriarchal society. Chapter Four discusses Alcott's reformist ideas and the reformist issues that surface in *Little Women*. Domestic feminism—the idea that a reformed family, in which men and women equally participate in domestic matters, would lead to a reformed society—emerges as the predominant reformist issue in *Little Women*. Alcott believed that women should be able to choose the course of their adult lives, whether that included marriage, a professional career, or otherwise, without the threat of being ostracized from society. In *Little Women*, the March family serves as an example of a reformed, egalitarian family in which women exercise self-reliance, employ their non-domestic talents, and still maintain femininity.

Introduction

From kindergarten to graduate school, I have never been required to read any of Louisa May Alcott's works, yet somehow *Little Women* has become a favorite, a novel that I can read over and over, discovering something new with each reading, weeping every time Beth dies, and becoming frustrated when, despite my sentiments, Jo still insists on rejecting Laurie. At the age of 10, I inherited my first copy of *Little Women*, a slightly abridged 1950 children's version with yellowed pages and a loosening spine, from my grandmother when the librarian at my elementary school refused to lend me the book, claiming that it was "too much" for a reader my age. I loved it from the first read. This was no Disney cartoon; Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Marmee seemed so *real*. Of course, at that young age I saw only the story, not the deeper issues that run beneath its surface. Now, as I have engrossed myself in literary scholarship, I am revisiting the novel to explore a few of these issues.

Louisa May Alcott's journals, letters, and fiction indicate a far more complicated, less picturesque life than that which the semi-autobiographical *Little Women* depicts at first glance. In this thesis, I explore those complex issues as they appear subtly in *Little Women* and more explicitly in her personal journals and correspondence.

Many twentieth-century critics have categorized *Little Women* as early feminist literature that sought to subvert the patriarchal culture of nineteenth-century America and point to Louisa May Alcott's tumultuous relationship with her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, as the catalyst for her rebellion.¹ Chapter One inspects the roles of patriarchy and domesticity, which I believe go hand-in-hand, in *Little Women*. The March family, with their conspicuously absent father, maintains a female-dominated world in which men, including Laurie, Mr. Lawrence, publishers, suitors, and even Mr. March, play second fiddle. Furthermore, her journals and correspondence with fans, friends, and publisher reveal that Alcott struggled with concocting an ending to the March family saga without submitting to the demands of patriarchy by marrying off her heroine. Alcott's journals, letters, and memoirs reveal how much the March family reflects her own experience. Amos Bronson Alcott inflicted an unorthodox, if not abusive, experimental system of

education and philosophy on his family that repressed them financially and perhaps psychologically, yet Louisa did not despise him. Rather, her attitude toward him oscillated between exasperation and adoration. I draw on these elements of the novel and Alcott's personal history to determine if she wrote *Little Women* as an act of subversion, merely as an observation of her own family, or as an altogether different suggestion for social egalitarianism.

The emphasis on Amos Bronson Alcott's experimental philosophy in Chapter One segues into Chapter Two, which focuses on the Transcendentalist thinking that surrounded Louisa May Alcott throughout her childhood and infiltrates *Little Women*. Although he did not achieve the fame of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott was perhaps the most ingenious Transcendentalist thinker and practiced his philosophy to the point of impracticality and even arrest.² Thoreau lived in a cabin in the woods, Emerson appreciated Nature within reason, but Alcott dragged his wife and four young daughters into a utopian experiment he called Fruitlands, risking their lives and his marriage in the process. Louisa May Alcott exhibited a strain of Transcendentalism in her own life and in *Little Women*. Her personal philosophy may not be pivotal to this study, but the philosophical connotations in the novel are obvious to the adult reader. What prevented Alcott from completely embracing the philosophy her father and Emerson, whom she professed to idolize, proclaimed? Perhaps her father's failures or her mother's discerning practicality or her own ideas, which her father's liberal education allowed her to form, contributed to her beliefs and thus to her writing.

As a result of the patriarchy/domesticity issue I discuss in Chapter One, the novel also raises the issue of the struggling female artist in its depiction of the sisters' struggles to develop their gifts and talents while fulfilling the domestic duties of keeping house and working to provide for the impoverished family, and I have dedicated Chapter Three to this subject. Alcott struggled to become recognized as a serious writer in a culture that denied women, among other things, admittance to the literary realm as legitimate authors. The well-renowned nineteenth-century American author Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote with disdain, "...America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash'" (qtd in Wallace 204). Often, as Hawthorne's quote indicates, male writers,

editors, and publishers consigned would-be female authors to the genres of children's literature and moral romances for women.³ Alcott keenly felt these outside pressures. Additionally, she fought the inner battle between writing for money and writing for art, felt torn between her passion for writing and her domestic responsibilities, and, as a result of her father's ineptitude, was determined to become financially independent, a difficult feat for a woman seeking fortune in a stereotypically masculine occupation. Alcott conveyed her frustration as a woman artist in *Little Women*, especially through Jo. By placing her struggles in a fictional scenario, Alcott toyed with ideas for solutions to the problems women artists faced in patriarchal mid-nineteenth-century America.

The fourth and final chapter discusses Louisa May Alcott's role as a reformist and the reformist issues *Little Women* addresses. Alcott advocated a number of social reform agendas, including temperance, abolition, woman suffrage, woman's rights, and education reform. Although *Little Women* never comes across as a soapbox for any of these issues, they clearly had an effect on Alcott, who scattered subtle allusions to them throughout the novel. Alcott spoke more candidly about these issues in her journals and letters and in a few of her other fictional texts. Put together, these writings reveal an advocate of social reform who sought changes that would balance society between men and women through a reformation that would begin with the family. Beverly Lyon Clark, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, and Rena Sanderson describe this agenda as "domestic feminism," an agenda which aims to reform society by first reforming the family. This exploration of reformist issues brings the study full circle, back to patriarchy and domesticity, a social system in which women had limited options.

Now in the twenty-first century, *Little Women* may seem to some readers to be a quaint, naïve, unrealistically moral children's book, yet for some reason, this classic novel maintains popularity. Parents still buy it for their daughters, critics and students still write about it, a new film version premieres every few decades, and, most recently, a musical interpretation debuted on Broadway in January 2005. Similar to Janice Radway's conclusions about twentieth-century romances,⁴ Louisa May Alcott's most famous work has some deeper theme with which American readers identify, and it keeps us coming back again and again, discovering something new with each reading, weeping

every time Beth dies, and becoming frustrated when, despite our sentiments, Jo still insists on rejecting Laurie.

I. “‘Why Weren’t We All Boys?’”: Patriarchy and Domesticity

Little Women is undoubtedly a domestic novel, as almost all of the action takes place in and around the March family home. The Victorian patriarchal system begets domesticity and consigns the March women—Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Marmee—to the domestic sphere, yet, paradoxically, the little women dominate their world and thus the novel, reciprocally consigning the male characters to the margins unless and until they can adjust to the women’s domain. Louisa May Alcott lived this paradox. Her ingenious yet impractical father, Amos Bronson Alcott, taught his daughters to exercise rigid self-control and desired that they submit to him, yet his impracticality plunged the family into debt, forcing Louisa, her sisters, and their mother to seek employment outside the home to support the family as he had failed to do. The matriarchy of the March and Alcott families did not alter the patriarchy of nineteenth-century American culture, however, and the women, including the March sisters and Louisa May Alcott, struggled out of economic necessity and natural talent to succeed in a society that sought to restrict women to the home.

Louisa May Alcott grew up in a repressive home. This repression stemmed from her father, who did not enforce the typical patriarchal system of the mid-nineteenth century. On the contrary, Amos Bronson Alcott supported the New England Woman’s Suffrage Movement along with several other social reform movements (Sanderson 43). However, his experiments in education and philosophy inflicted poverty, distress, and, as some critics would say, abuse on his wife and daughters. Hailed by Ralph Waldo Emerson as “‘the most extraordinary man and highest genius of the time,’” Bronson Alcott was “‘the most transcendent transcendentalist of them all” (Brooks 58). His applications of these transcendentalist ideas tended to lead him and his family into trouble. His Temple School in Boston became his most successful endeavor in children’s education, but after he admitted an African-American student, the school quickly folded (Brooks 62, Elbert 37).

With a tarnished reputation, Alcott continued his educational experiments with his own daughters. His Socratic method, as represented by the technique Mr. March

employs with Demi in *Little Women* (359-60), diverged sharply from the traditional rote method most American schools used at the time (Franklin 260, Elbert 8). Alcott, by contrast, questioned his students and his daughters on their thoughts concerning the metaphysical (the soul, Judgment Day, etc.) and encouraged them to take control of and reform their character flaws. Denying the effect of corporal punishment, Alcott “preferred to reward and punish his daughters by bestowing and withdrawing his love and approval” (Keyser, *Little...* 31), a practice Rosemary F. Franklin labels “brainwashing” (258). Despite the downfall of the Temple School, Alcott did continue in his role as an educator outside the home as a traveling lecturer. In 1859 the voters of Concord, Massachusetts, elected him superintendent of schools and twenty years later, he opened the Concord School of Philosophy as a venue for lecturers like himself. Alcott advocated educational reforms that would not seem at all radical to today’s educators. He longed to introduce “singing lessons, physical-education classes, conversations rather than rote recitations, and an end to the barbarity of the cane” (Brooks 65). However, in overseeing his daughters’ education, Alcott may have crossed the line between instruction and abuse. Anna, the oldest Alcott daughter, submitted easily to her father’s instruction, but Louisa “agonized over her inability to please...and her childhood journals are filled with expressions of remorse and resolutions to reform” (Keyser, *Little...* 31). For example, at the young age of eleven, Louisa expressed in her journals the desire to be rid of her “impatience” and her “bad temper” and to be “gentle always” (*Journals* 44, 47, 48).¹ In a bout of frustration, a thirteen-year-old Louisa complained, “I’ve made so many resolutions, and written sad notes, and cried over my sins, and it does n’t seem to do any good!” (59).² Franklin argues on this point that “Bronson wanted full power over the household” (257) and sought to “create dependency in the girls” (262), but he relinquished his authority as head of the household with his Fruitlands experiment.

Fruitlands proved to be Bronson Alcott’s greatest mistake. In June 1843, the Alcotts moved with Charles Lane and a few other Transcendentalist thinkers to Fruitlands to create an Edenic community in which they would subsist only on the fruit of their labors, as Alcott and Lane insisted that anything that deprived animals or human beings was not fit to consume. Fruitlands lasted only six months, and as Alcott and the increasingly repressive Lane departed on “proselytizing jaunts, leaving Abigail [Alcott]

and the children to bring in the crops alone,” Abba and the girls grew weary of Bronson’s experiment (Brooks 64). Impoverished and exhausted, Abba Alcott confronted her husband with an ultimatum. She and her daughters were abandoning Fruitlands, and he could either join them or stay with Lane. This family counsel traumatized Louisa, who confided in her journal that she “prayed God to keep us all together” (*Journals* 47).³ Bronson opted to follow his family back to civilization but from that time forward never fully provided for his family nor regained his authority with them. In fact, Abba’s role as head of the household and his inability to tame Louisa frustrated him more than his own ineptitude. He wrote, “Two devils, as yet, I am not quite divine enough to vanquish—the mother fiend and her daughter” (qtd in Franklin 264). Nevertheless, his inadequacy as a provider and his own education of his daughters enabled Louisa to step outside the traditional domestic sphere by working outside the home to provide for her family and form her own ideas of reform.

Ironically, Louisa became the one primarily responsible for providing for the Alcott family and eventually rescued them from debt. For years, the Alcotts received charity from friends and family. This indebtedness humiliated Louisa and made her “fiercely determined to be self-supporting” (Keyser, *Little...* 31). The same fiery, ambitious nature that Bronson strove to subdue aroused in Louisa a “strong sense of responsibility for the needs of her mother and sisters” (Pauly 584). Still, society limited her to “female” work—teaching, domestic labor, sewing, and nursing. Despite carrying the burden of providing for her family from a young age, Louisa did not despise her father, or if she did, she never expressed her anger in her journals or letters. Nonetheless, some critics such as Rosemary Franklin, who asserts that “Alcott was obsessively compelled to write... thrillers because she could project personal issues onto the characters” (254), suggest that she wrote out her disgust in several of her sensational short stories.⁴ Although work was a difficult necessity for Louisa, she seems to have approached it with ambition and a sense of pride. She wrote, perhaps a bit facetiously, to her father in 1856, “I think I shall... prove that though an Alcott I *can* support myself” (*Letters* 26).⁵ Her parents instilled in her a purpose to seek out a meaningful life, and as a result, she saw the importance of work in “building a substantive life and forming the self” (Maibor 124). For example, at 23, Louisa set out for a winter in Boston because

there she could “support [her]self and help the family” (*Journals* 79).⁶ She further lamented, “I *can’t wait* while I *can work*, so I took my little talent in my hand and forced the world again” (79).⁷ Louisa did “force the world” and published *Little Women* twelve years later, the novel which finally pulled her family comfortably out of debt. Paradoxically, Bronson Alcott’s impracticality and subsequent poverty served, in a way, as a gift to Louisa, whom the patriarchal system allowed to work out of necessity while she actually fulfilled the desire of many women to become self-supporting.

Alcott’s complex family life paired with her experience in the working world, a typically male sphere which overlapped at times with the traditionally female domestic sphere, led her to a particular brand of feminism that did not necessarily seek the overthrow of male authority or roles but instead sought balance and equality between the sexes. The separation of spheres has in some way fueled feminist literature and scholarship over the last century out of the fear that “unless women pay attention to the separate culture of, by, and for women, it is possible...that women will be, once again, left out” (Davidson 459).⁸ By contrast, Alcott’s strain of “domestic” feminism, as her fiction reflects, did not seek abolition of the spheres but instead “saw a reformed family as the key to a reformed society” (Strickland, qtd in Keyser, *Little...* 22). I discuss Alcott’s role as a reformer in more detail in Chapter Four, but I bring up domestic feminism here because of its importance to the treatment of patriarchy and domesticity in *Little Women*. Unlike many feminist critics, I do not embrace the theory that in *Little Women* Alcott tried to create a Utopia within a female-dominated world that crumbles as soon as men invade their sphere (Keyser, *Little...* 54, 65), nor do I think she attempted to use the March women’s choices and actions as a lament or protest against patriarchy.⁹ On the contrary, I argue that in *Little Women* Alcott utilized and then idealized her personal experiences to suggest a culture in which neither patriarchy nor matriarchy rule, but the traditional spheres overlap and blend to the point that women are at liberty to pursue professional goals and provide for their families and men are more involved domestically without losing their femininity or masculinity.

From the beginning of *Little Women*, readers learn that the March women, much like their creator, must work outside the home to support their impoverished family. Alcott conveniently places Mr. March “far away, where the fighting was” as a chaplain in

the army (*LW* 11), a character who, as Madeline Stern acknowledges, “must be muffled, for the author realized that he would be atypical in a book on the American home” (*Louisa...* 436). None of the girls likes her employment. Meg complains about her job as a governess, and Jo despises working as a companion for Aunt March. Beth dislikes her role as housekeeper, and Amy, who is too young for wage labor, grudgingly attends school. Despite their mutual distaste for work, each sister’s occupation shapes her character. Meg and Jo, the two sisters who work outside the home, come across as stronger and more balanced than their younger siblings. Beth, the domestic, is physically weak and painfully timid, even around her own family. Amy, by contrast, operates in neither the domestic nor wage-earning realm and, subsequently or coincidentally, exhibits the most independence and self-centeredness of the four.

Furthermore, each of the March girls has some sort of artistic talent, but their required duties prevent them from developing these skills. Meg, as Jo points out, is “the best actress we’ve got” (*LW* 14), but she actually desires to develop the “domestic” arts and “enjoy [her]self at home” (11). Jo, of course, enjoys writing; Beth is musically inclined; and Amy’s talent lies in drawing and painting. Remarkably, none of the girls finds a niche in either the traditionally male sphere of earning an income or the traditionally female domestic sphere. Quite the contrary, each of them would rather pursue the talents and dreams that identify them, not as females, but as individuals. For instance, in the chapter “Castles in the Air,” Meg dreams of a “lovely house...with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit”; Jo desires “Arabian steeds, rooms piled with books, and [to] write out of a magic inkstand”; and Amy’s wish is to “be the best artist in the whole world” (118). Even Beth admits that she would be happy at home now that she has “my little piano” (118). Of the four girls, only Jo aims to make money, not for sustenance, but for fame. She vows, “I shall write books, and get rich and famous” (118). Note that none of their dreams aspire to destroy the constructs of patriarchal society or completely break away from the home.

Enter the men. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser argues that Mr. March’s return, “escorted by Laurie and John Brooke, disrupts the feminine tableau” and marks the beginning of the end, bringing marriages and squelching the March sisters’ dreams of their “castles in the air” (*Little...* 65). I wholeheartedly disagree. Instead, I favor Anne

Dalke's argument that the novel "reaches a climax when Father, John, Friedrich and Laurie join their ranks" (557). Before the men make much of an appearance, "boys were almost unknown creatures" to the March girls, and they admit that they are content with these circumstances (*LW* 31). Meg comments that she is "rather glad [she] hadn't any wild brothers to...disgrace the family" (41), and Jo opposes marriage outright, claiming it would "make a hole in the family" (161). Jo even wishes that they were "all boys" (161) so marriage would not be an issue and repeatedly refers to herself as "the man of the family" (14). Readers could interpret these comments to indicate that Jo actually feels like a man trapped in a woman's body and role, but Thomas Pauly points out that these references do not define "what she is, but rather her sense of deviance from what is conventionally expected of her" (587). If Jo were to find herself in an environment with males who acquiesced to her pursuits outside the home, she may no longer refer to herself as a man but would be free to be feminine while performing non-domestic roles.

According to Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and Nina Auerbach (qtd in Dalke 562),¹⁰ Meg's, Amy's, and Jo's marriages in the second part of *Little Women* mark their downfall and submission to the patriarchal system that they had so inspiringly aimed to escape in Part One. Keyser interprets the description of the minuteness of Meg's marital home as an implication that "Marriage can prove confining...to the woman relegated to the house, that her powers may be diminished and belittled" (*Little...* 71). Alcott confided in her journal, "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" (167).¹¹ She admitted that "Jo' should have remained a literary spinster," but "publishers...wont let authors have their way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style" (*Letters* 125, 121-22).¹² Weeks earlier, she had explained that she "didn't know how to settle my family any other way & I wanted to disappoint the young gossips who vowed that Laurie and Jo *should* marry" (120).¹³ Nevertheless, on the surface *Little Women* seems to perpetuate the idea that marriage and domesticity are the ultimate goal for a woman. Marmee, the all-wise matriarch, confides to Meg and Jo, "I want my daughters...to be well and wisely married....To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman," but she further adds, "better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find

husbands....[Father and I] trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives” (LW 84). Here Marmee shares a bit of her wisdom with her two oldest daughters. She knows that a happy home has its own rewards, but she also believes that a woman should not feel limited to or in that home. Marriage, as Marmee has discerned, is not a woman’s downfall, but rather it serves to meet the needs of and instruct both spouses in cooperation, compassion, and love. Marmee instructs her daughters that their individual talents and aspirations are worth pursuing, yet at the same time, a happy family can be as much or more fulfilling than any material gain. The men whom the March sisters have so far excluded from their circle have needs that they can meet, and reciprocally, the sisters have needs, yet to be discovered, that the men can fulfill.

As I mentioned above, the March girls lived largely secluded from male society, but masculine influence is always present in *Little Women*. From the first chapter, the sisters resolve to earnestly pursue *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to meet their father’s request that they “conquer themselves so... that [he]...may be fonder and prouder than ever of [his] little women” (17). Laurie also serves as an honorary sibling throughout the novel, and the girls admit him into their Pickwick Club and Busy Bee Society. His home even serves as the Palace Beautiful for each of the sisters (52). Dalke points out that all the significant male characters desire a home (561). Mr. March anticipates his return from Washington; Laurie longs to be admitted into the comforts of the March family; Professor Bhaer could not find “satisfactory substitutes for wife and child, and home” (LW 283); and John Brooke wishes that Meg would create a more comfortable domestic atmosphere for him after their twins are born.

These men long for the comfort the women find in each other, and the women—and, perhaps unwittingly, Alcott as well—are “slowly educated on the necessity of including men in their circle,...that [they] will...fill in the gaps which already exist” (Dalke 562). Therefore, the women tutor the men in the compassion and stability of home. Marmee and Father March have already attained this goal, and Marmee advises Meg, “don’t shut [John] out of the nursery, but teach him how to help in it. His place is there as well as yours.... That is the secret of our home happiness.... Each do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always” (LW 307). Amy likewise

reproaches Laurie for his laziness and instructs him in responsibility and love. Keyser laments that “Bhaer domesticates, or takes the edge off, Jo’s more distinctive characteristics” (*Little...* 82), but Jo and Friedrich actually exhibit the most reformation of the traditional family in that Jo “chooses the life work for herself and her partner, and provides the setting for their new school” (Dalke 563). As a result of the women’s tutelage, the male characters “participate little more than the women in the world outside of the family” (561). Contrary to Keyser’s assessment of the final scene of *Little Women* as “far from...utopian, or even happy...[but] as a defeat for Jo’s literary aspirations” (*Little...* 22), I see the culmination of the novel as a realistic depiction of sacrifice on everyone’s part in order to promote the reformation of a patriarchal society by beginning with the reformation of a single family.

If *Little Women* follows the theme and episodes of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as the sisters vow to do at the beginning of the novel, then the male characters play significant roles that parallel the characters whom Christian meets in Bunyan’s classic and are not as marginal or insignificant as other critics routinely suggest. Perhaps Mr. March parallels God, as the girls aim to please him with their improvements. Laurie may correspond to Evangelist, as he reappears throughout the novel to rescue and protect the sisters. John Brooke and Friedrich Bhaer may represent Hope, as they enter the Celestial City with their wives. In the closing scene at Plumfield, Marmee has the final word: ““Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!”” (380). If readers continue the parallels, Plumfield should correspond to the Celestial City, where all is as it should be. Under Jo’s authority, Plumfield becomes a place where separate spheres no longer exist. The men actively involve themselves with the children, and Jo no longer has to refer to herself as “the man of the family” now that she can be feminine and provide for her family at the same time.

II. “Leave All to God—and Me”’: Extending Transcendentalism to Women

Louisa May Alcott’s upbringing in the Boston, Massachusetts, area in the 1850s, a time F.O. Matthiessen referred to as the “American Renaissance,”¹ impacted her writing in a monumental way. Literary giants such as Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau surrounded Alcott, and their success and philosophies influenced her mightily. Although her unconventional, Transcendentalist background emanates more clearly in some of her other texts, readers and scholars must dig a little deeper to see its implications in a children’s novel such as *Little Women*. In order to connect the story of the March sisters to Alcott’s spiritual ideas and Transcendentalist philosophy, readers should first familiarize themselves with her family’s connections to the quintessential Transcendentalist thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and how her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, deeply entrenched himself in the philosophy to the point of obsession. Louisa May Alcott’s own perspective on the tenets of Transcendentalism did not always reflect her father’s or Emerson’s philosophies. Therefore, insight into her views on the individual and spirituality further illuminate the underlying spiritual themes of *Little Women*. Implications of Transcendentalism hide in the March girls’ personalities, in the lessons they learn, and in the contrast between them and other minor young female characters.

Amos Bronson Alcott’s colleagues and friends included the members of Boston’s Transcendental Club, leading intellectuals such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and the founder of American Transcendentalist thought, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although Alcott was the “most transcendent transcendentalist of them all” (Brooks 58), his “association with Emerson placed the [Alcott] family in the center of the transcendentalist circle” (Keyser 4). Alcott and Emerson met in 1835 and remained friends until Emerson’s death, more than four decades later. Louisa acknowledged Emerson as her father’s “nearest & dearest friend” (*Journals* 234).² Their friendship went beyond their shared ideology. Alcott served as Emerson’s philosophical tutor and muse. His ideas “fuelled Emerson’s thought during the composition of... ‘Nature,’” and journalists in New England referred to him as “Emerson’s master” (Brooks 58, 65). Emerson, in turn, became Alcott’s benefactor, financially supporting the Alcott family off

and on for years. Through Emerson's generosity, the Alcotts purchased their "Hillside" home in Concord, where much of the autobiographical background for *Little Women* took place ("About..." XXI).

Despite their shared philosophy, however, Emerson and Alcott did not always see eye to eye in applying Transcendentalism. For instance, Emerson frowned upon Alcott and Thoreau's tax evasion in protest of Massachusetts's commerce with slave states, which landed them both in jail. Emerson disdained their civil disobedience, lamenting that they acted "in bad taste" (Brooks 63). Alcott's Fruitlands fiasco became another point of contention between the two philosophers. Sarah Elbert explains, "Emerson noted that Bronson had a...sincere belief that beautiful, rich farmland 'should be purchased and given' to him" (60). Emerson, however, refused to contribute to the purchase of Fruitlands and expressed his skepticism in his journal: "'They look well in July. We will see them in December'" (qtd in Brooks 64). Nevertheless, upon the Alcotts' return to Concord, Bronson Alcott and Emerson resumed their friendship and philosophical discourse.

Since Transcendentalism was so influential in American culture during Alcott's developmental years, I think I should point out a couple of its basic ideas before discussing her viewpoints and the spiritual ramifications within *Little Women*. Transcendentalism emphasizes self-reliance, as the title of one of Emerson's more famous essays implies, and contribution to the betterment of humanity, two concepts that can come across as paradoxical. Anne E. Boyd notes in *Writing for Immortality* that Emerson's philosophy "linked self-abnegation and self-assertion, communal responsibility and solitude.... Transcendentalism favored intellectual nonconformity and resistance to social dictates concerning styles of worship and living" (19, 21). During the Victorian era, most Americans founded their moral values on Judeo-Christian standards and based their culture on traditional, external social mores. By contrast, Transcendentalism "locat[ed] true virtue within the individual soul,...fostered self-reliance and also made every citizen his own policeman" (Elbert 32). Bronson Alcott fully embraced the idea that individuals could find virtue within themselves by committing themselves to continual self-evaluation and self-reform, and he painstakingly tried to instill this concept in his daughters.

Bronson Alcott's parents encouraged him to seek his own faith, and by his late teens he "chose his own personal, antisectarian religion," which eventually led him to Transcendentalism (Elbert 3). Alcott adamantly rejected his parents' Episcopalian faith. Of organized religion he wrote, "I cannot so regard it, to attend the churches. My own spirit preaches sounder doctrine'" (qtd in Brooks 61). Neither did he believe in the deity of Jesus. His motto became, "'Plato for Thought, Christ for Action'" (Elbert 31). As a result, he did not make church attendance a priority for his family. Louisa reminisced that on Sundays during her childhood, her family "had a simple service of Bible stories, hymns, and conversation about the state of our little consciences and the conduct of our childish lives" ("Recollections..." 4). Note that despite his distaste for organized Christianity, the Alcotts still read the Bible in their home, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an unabashedly Christian allegory, was a staple in the Alcott family repertoire. *Little Women* reflects this fact in the March girls' admiration for *The Pilgrim's Progress* and in the manner that the structure of the novel itself tends to parallel Bunyan's allegory, as I noted in Chapter One.

Transcendentalism may have advocated self-reliance and self-assertion, but in the wider arena of nineteenth-century American culture, its female adherents ran against the wall of patriarchy and its repression of women. In *19th-Century American Women's Novels*, Susan K. Harris notes that patriarchy "forbids [women] 'self-knowledge,' 'self-control,' 'self-help'" (177). Therefore, practicing Transcendentalism proved to be more challenging for women like Louisa May Alcott. Even Transcendentalism itself had tinges of patriarchy. Anne Boyd notes "the masculine rhetoric of Transcendentalism" in that it "excluded women...by emphasizing the maleness of the individual who desired seclusion even from family members" (19). For women, then, Transcendentalism did not acknowledge the possibility of a balance between domesticity and self-reliance. Through her fiction, Alcott sought to change this perspective. A London paper commented in 1873, "'In all [of Alcott's fiction] underlying the main story...burns the one great keynote of success, *self-reliance*, and clustered around it are purity, kindness, faith, and endeavor'" (qtd in Harris 177). Even though Alcott appreciated and adhered to Transcendentalism's philosophy as Emerson portrayed it, she recognized its inconsistencies as her father perpetuated them. Consequently, Alcott developed her own

brand of Transcendentalism that idolized Emerson, satirized her father, and tossed in a dash of feminine reality.

Alcott had mixed emotions about Transcendentalism. Intrigued and inspired by the ideal of self-reliance, she still knew from first-hand experience that “self-reliance really meant reliance on others and required the self-sacrifice of family members” (Boyd 50). Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands experiment created an environment of discomfort and stress for his wife and daughters. Through this Transcendentalist consociate community, Bronson and his English cohort, Charles Lane, attempted to create an environment in which their subsistence did not rely on hired labor or beasts of burden but on the toil of each individual in the community—and above all, philosophical conversation and nourishment of the mind ruled the agenda. They aimed to create an intellectually stimulating, physically invigorating way of life, but Abba Alcott complained in her journal, “I am almost suffocated in this atmosphere of restriction and form” (qtd in Elbert 58). For the women of Fruitlands, the community turned out to be nothing but another, stricter form of patriarchy than the society they had left behind.

This inconsistency in philosophy, one that promoted self-reliance, reform, and self-assertion—yet apparently for men only—colored Louisa Alcott’s view of her father’s ideals, and she vented her frustration in “Transcendental Wild Oats.” In this story, Alcott satirizes her family’s Fruitlands experience and alludes to her feelings toward her father’s impracticality. In one memorable passage, she captures the imbalance between male and female responsibilities at the commune: “About the time the grain was ready to house, some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away,” leaving Hope, representative of Abba Alcott, and the children alone to bring in the harvest by hand (“Transcendental...” 41). Apparently, women were incapable of being “called” by the Oversoul and were useful only as domestic laborers. This imbalance eventually prompted Abba Alcott (Hope in the story) to take the initiative to abandon the experiment, which in turn emasculated Bronson Alcott (Abel). Hope reassures him ““Leave all to God—and me”” (45). Louisa realized that her father’s “self-reliance” actually relied on his wife’s drudgery and confined women even more to duty than Victorian patriarchy.

Louisa later described a philosopher as ““a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends holding the ropes which confine him to earth, and trying to haul him down””

("About..." XVIII), and one can substitute "wife and children" for "family and friends." Consequently, as an adult, "Alcott insisted...that the self-reliance and self-awareness so vaunted by the transcendentalists be extended to women as well as men" (Estes and Lant 565). She voiced her insistence in her literature, thereby creating a great deal of pressure and conflict between her ambitions as an author and the precedents her family and the Transcendentalist community set for her. She lamented, "To have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual God all one's life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety.... And what would my own good father think of me...if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do?" (qtd in Maibor 111). Her inner struggle forced her to reexamine Transcendentalism and its feasibility and to develop her own ideas, separate from her father. Unlike her frustration with and mockery of her father's brand of Transcendentalism, Louisa admired Emerson and attributed much of her sense of self and way of thinking to him. Indeed, she idolized him. She hailed him as "the man who has helped me most by his life, his books, his society" (*Journals* 234),³ her "master who did a great deal for this admirer...untempted and unspoiled by the world which he made better" (qtd in Elbert 91). In fact, her "safe" infatuation with Emerson tended to draw her "away from her father" and more toward Emerson's more practical, although masculine, form of Transcendentalist thought (91).

The combination of Emerson's instruction in self-reliance, her father's foolhardy methods of expecting to live completely set apart from society, and her mother's endurance, practicality, and work ethic set Louisa on a path to her own brand of Transcendentalism for women. Alcott observed that as long as women were confined to the domestic sphere without any other options, they could not own themselves nor reach their full potential. She, unlike her father, was not floating away in a philosophical balloon. Instead, she kept her feet and mind grounded in the hard realities of patriarchal mid-nineteenth-century America and vowed to do all she could to integrate women into the self-reliance that men possessed. In her writings, she "insisted upon woman's right to selfhood" but often ran against the hopelessness of actually achieving that goal in a male-dominated culture (Elbert 119), as we see in *Little Women*. As a result, *Little Women* features female characters, especially Jo March, who struggle with self-discovery and, once they know themselves, fitting themselves into society in a practical way that gives

them the freedom to exercise their gifts and pursue their ambitions without denying their femininity or the blessings of family. To some critics, Alcott's attempts at reconciling the genders and blending the spheres in *Little Women* seem pie-in-the-sky. For example, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser sees the ending of the novel as "Jo's defeat—her acceptance of familial and societal values" (*Little...* 23). Instead, Alcott actually approached the subjects of gender and the spheres with reform at heart and reality in mind and even anticipated to an extent the glass-ceiling issue of the woman's rights campaign of the twentieth century.

G.K. Chesterton asserted that Louisa May Alcott "had anticipated realism by twenty to thirty years" (Boyd 236). Yet reality did not quench, but rather enhanced, the Transcendentalist spirit that her father and Emerson had instilled in her because the challenges she faced as a woman seeking self-reliance trumped the obstacles these men faced. She heartily embraced the goals of self-knowledge and self-reform and, through her writings, encouraged the pursuit of these attributes in women. She may have mocked her father's impracticality, but she did not reject Transcendentalism. Instead, she seemed to be "throwing her hand on top of the pile and saying 'Me too'" (Maibor 124), extending Emerson's philosophy to women.

Alcott's extension of Transcendentalist philosophy to women, especially the ideal of self-reliance, infiltrates the story of the March sisters in *Little Women*. Jo embodies Transcendentalist ideals more than any other character, and through her, Alcott illustrates the difficulty women in a patriarchal culture faced when they tried to assert themselves as individuals. Alcott places Jo in a society that is "inhospitable to a fully liberated woman, [thus] she can have no radically independent life of her own, but because of the spirited self-reliant nature given to her by her creator, she will not submit to repression" (Estes and Lant 578). Jo exhibits this self-reliance throughout the novel, but I discuss only three instances here.

First, in her writing career, Jo struggles to discern between writing for money and writing in a way that develops her self-knowledge and/or contributes to the betterment of humanity. In fact, the blood and thunder stories she composes for the "Weekly Volcano" bring her into "bad society," which "desecrate[s] some of the womanliest attributes" of her character (*LW* 275). Professor Bhaer, an Emersonian character in his own right, pulls

Jo out of the mire of sensational fiction. In fact, I would contend that, in effect, Bhaer is Emerson. Note Jo's thoughts on her sensational stories: "'*what should I do if they were seen at home, or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them?*'" (280). These thoughts arise nearly verbatim from Alcott's own journals (see page 17, above) and indicate that Jo associated herself to Bhaer in much the same way that Alcott viewed her relationship with Emerson. Through his "moral spectacles" (280), Jo realizes that "making money at something even she considers 'silly' contributes nothing to her own self-development or to society" (Maibor 110). Therefore, Transcendentalist values shape Jo's writing, much as they shaped Alcott's writing of *Little Women*.

Another illustration of Transcendentalist thinking through Jo surfaces in her refusal of Laurie's marriage proposal. Estes and Lant point out that "Jo's refusal to marry Laurie remains—for both Jo and her author—the one act of self-assertion which neither can quell" (574). Despite Laurie's emotional persistence, Jo heeds Emerson's advice to "Trust thyself" (132), follows her intuition, and replies to Laurie, "I agree with mother that you and I are not suited to each other" (*LW* 286). Jo knows herself better than Laurie knows himself. Jo's self-knowledge and self-assertion allow her, at this point, to flee a marriage that she knows would not fulfill her.

Jo further exemplifies Transcendentalist philosophy through her self-discovery, not as a writer or lover but as a person. We see this personal evaluation when we compare her self-reflections during her stay in New York, after Beth dies, and at Professor Bhaer's proposal. As I have discussed above, in New York, Jo exercised her independence away from the comforts of home, but writing sensational fiction did not fulfill her, as she continually "quieted all pricks of conscience" as she wrote (275). After Beth succumbs to her long illness, Jo devotes herself to Beth's former housekeeping duties, but replacing Beth as the domestic does not satisfy her either. In fact, her misery deepens. The narrator explains, "these were dark days to her, for something like despair came over her when she thought of spending all her life in that quiet house," and Jo laments, "I wasn't meant for a life like this" (337). However, by the time Bhaer proposes, Jo has found herself and established standards that will allow her to be herself. She clarifies, "I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go" (372). Jo determines to maintain "the female

community of ‘woman’s sphere’ while still acting in accordance with her own self-reliant impulses” (Estes and Lant 270). Unlike her perception of a future with Laurie, Jo can envision a life with Bhaer that maintains a balance between her goals as a writer and her sense of domestic duty.

Amy March exercises Transcendentalist values more stealthily than Jo. This contrast comes through more in Part Two of *Little Women* than in Part One, as Amy has matured and her character has solidified. Elizabeth Keyser points out that, throughout the novel, Amy “is not afraid to assert herself, take risks, and appear selfish or foolish” (“Portrait(s)...” 616). Amy ridicules Jo’s version of self-reliance as awkward and counterproductive, complaining to Jo, ““You...go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it independence”” (*LW* 207). Amy, on the other hand, believes that ““Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones; for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive”” (235). Through her amicability or, as Jo would call it, social conformity, she establishes herself in a culture that would restrict her because of her gender and social class. Actually, as a result of her subversive conformity, Amy finds a way to “bridge the gap between world and home” much more quickly than Jo (Keyser, “Portrait(s)...” 616). Amy possesses self-knowledge, is not uncomfortable with leaving home for an extended amount of time to travel in Europe, and quickly discovers her limits as an artist, an issue I discuss in the next chapter. Yet this self-awareness and independence often remain below the surface, hidden by Amy’s need to please. Amy’s depth of character and ability to assert herself eventually burst forth in her courtship with Laurie. She vehemently scolds, ““You men tell us we are angels, and say we can make you what we will; but the instant we honestly try to do you good, you laugh at us, and won’t listen, which proves how much your flattery is worth”” (*LW* 320). This scathing remark rebels against not only Laurie but also the patriarchal mentality in general. Where Jo passionately rebels against patriarchy and its restrictions on women and struggles to find balance between self-reliance and domesticity, Amy, by complying with the system for a while in an anti-Emersonian way, eventually transcends it, finding independence and contentment more quickly than Jo.

If Jo and Amy, standing alone, are not convincing as illustrations of Transcendentalism in *Little Women*, compare them and their sisters with other young

women in the novel and see how Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth contrast sharply with these worldly young ladies. These women are “almost all presented as either foolish or unhappy” and “the effect of their illusory comforts is to make them vain, frivolous, superficial, and ultimately ludicrous” (Harris 178-79). Consider Meg’s friend Sallie Gardiner Moffat. When the young people spend a day at “Camp Laurence,” Sallie attends, yet instead of romping with the March girls, she “was absorbed in keeping her white piqué dress clean” (*LW* 104), an indication of the vanity Harris notes. Not only is Sallie vain, but she proves herself to be intellectually inferior to the Marches. While the other girls imaginatively contribute to the story-game, “Rigmarole,” Sallie fumbles over forming a coherent story line, exclaiming, ““Oh, gracious! What *shall* I say?”” (108). By the end of the day, Sallie feels that she has to apologize to Ned Moffat, her future husband, for Meg’s inability to flirt, a character trait that Sallie considers to be one of Meg’s “short-comings” (114). Nevertheless, later on at Meg’s wedding, Sallie comments again to Ned, ““That is the prettiest wedding I’ve been to for an age...and I don’t see why, for there wasn’t a bit of style about it”” (202). Several years after the Camp Laurence episode, Sallie remains oblivious, immersed in fashion and frivolity, yet she recognizes something in Meg and the March family that she envies, something deeper than the latest trend. Perhaps it is the March girls’ self-confidence, self-assertion, and self-knowledge that Sallie finds so lovely.

Earlier in the novel, after Meg returns from an extended visit with Annie Moffat, she confesses to Marmee that she tried to conform to the Moffat girls’ styles and behaviors. She admits, ““I let them make a fool of me”” (83), implying that, because they dressed her to look like themselves, they were fools as well. Marmee describes these women as ““kind, I dare say, but worldly, ill-bred”” (83). By comparing Meg’s behavior with that of Sallie Gardiner Moffat and Annie Moffat, we see that the Marches have encouraged their daughters to aim for something higher than fashions and flirtations, to develop their minds and spirits, and assert themselves as individuals. This Transcendentalist instruction provides the March sisters with a foundation that eventually leads them to content, fulfilling adult lives, while Sallie Gardiner Moffat continues ““buying silks”” (224).

The prevalence of Transcendentalist thought in *Little Women* illustrates how Louisa May Alcott embraced this philosophy. Alcott sought to extend Emerson's vision of self-reliance, self-awareness, and non-conformity to women and expressed her sentiments in her writing. Unlike her father's disastrous Fruitlands escapade, Alcott ends *Little Women* with a utopian community that works because both sexes contribute to the manual labor and the philosophical discourse. The imbalance, drudgery, and failure of Fruitlands does not extend to Plumfield. Instead, as a result of the vision of Jo March Bhaer, this community produces an abundance of fruit, literally and figuratively.

III. “‘You’d Hate My Scribbling’”: Struggling Women Artists

Women writers in the nineteenth century faced struggles that their literary brothers avoided due to their gender. Louisa May Alcott was no exception, even though her family encouraged her artistic pursuits. The frustrations Alcott dealt with—the aspiration to write for personal independence, the conflict between writing for money and writing for art, and the war between genius and domestic duty—surfaced in her personal life as well as in her fiction. As I mentioned in Chapter One, in *Little Women*, all four March girls have some sort of artistic talent. Meg, the “‘best actress we’ve got’” (*LW* 14), and Beth, the pianist, both completely sacrifice their talents for the domestic arts, while Amy and especially Jo pursue their visual art and writing, respectively, and seek to balance their skills with cultural expectations and domestic duty. Through the March sisters, Alcott captures the frustration that she and other female artists faced in trying to develop their talents in a patriarchal culture that demanded their adherence to domestic duty above all other skills. Her heroines reflect the drudgery of domestic work, the conflict between self-reliance and societal expectations, and the clash between artistic expression and family responsibility.

In 1856, Louisa May Alcott wrote home to her father from New York, “I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it. I can’t do much with my hands; so I will make a battering-ram of my head and make a way through this rough-and-tumble world” (*Letters* 26).¹ At the young age of twenty-four, Alcott had already experienced the restrictions a patriarchal society inflicted on women writers and the freedom that crossing those boundaries brought. Society’s limitations on women artists formed a metaphorical wall which Alcott had peeked over and intended to penetrate with her genius. She was determined to be independent, to escape the debt her father had so frivolously brought upon the family, and give way to the burning genius that often led her to physical exhaustion. Anne E. Boyd explains that for Alcott and her literary sisters, “the central drama of their lives was this struggle to overcome the obstacles of their society’s prejudices against women becoming serious artists” (13). In such a social environment, women “were not supposed to dedicate their lives to anything but their homes and families” (13). Therefore, metaphorically speaking, unmarried,

wage-earning Miss Alcott became a reincarnated Lady Macbeth, unsexed not by the use of a dagger but by the employment of her pen.

Carolyn R. Maibor points out that “Alcott frequently struggled to balance the work of her genius with the work that paid” (108). Her father’s impracticality and financial irresponsibility forced Louisa and her mother and sisters, out of necessity, to work outside the home. Eventually, as her mother aged and her oldest sister married, Louisa became the sole provider in her father’s place. She took on several jobs—seamstress, teacher, household servant, Civil War nurse—but “writing [became] the available career that produced the maximum independence” (Brodhead 76). Magazines and newspapers paid well for the sensational stories that Alcott adeptly churned out. However, with the 1863 publication of *Hospital Sketches*, her first adult novel which she based on her experience as a nurse in a Union hospital in Washington, D.C., Alcott tasted the first fruits of her aspirations to gain recognition as a serious author. Nonetheless, “Alcott did not abandon the form of writing that was now paying the family’s bills” (Keyser, *Little...* 9). Alcott oscillated between writing as her artistic genius inspired and writing for money. She even wrote *Little Women* at the request of her publisher—not out of her own initiative. The very month she had *Little Women* published, Alcott wrote to a friend, “I should very gladly write this sort of story altogether, but, unfortunately, it does n’t pay as well as rubbish, a mercenary consideration which has weight with persons who write not from the inspiration of genius but of necessity” (*Letters* 118).² Ten years later, however, Alcott wrote to a fan “though I do not enjoy writing ‘moral tales’ for the young, I do it because it pays well” (232).³ Clearly, even after the immense success of *Little Women*, Alcott’s preferences as to genre depended on the going rate for “rubbish” versus that of “moral tales for the young.” This conflict between writing for money and writing for art noticeably infiltrated her fiction.

Even if the society at large resisted Alcott’s infiltration into the male-dominated literary business, her family supported her ambitions, proud of their daughter and sister who embodied the self-reliance she had learned at home and had rescued them from her father’s debt. Still, even her supportive family could not alter the domestic stigma which society attached to women. While male authors could shut themselves up in a study while women worked around them, female authors did not have the luxury of ignoring

housework—especially impoverished women with no household servants to pick up the slack. Thus, as an author, Alcott received conflicting messages from her family: overt commendation for her writing and quiet expectation to fulfill her domestic duties. She tried to find “a way to be both artist and woman in a culture that obliquely suggested but often overtly denied the possibility of combining the two identities” (Boyd 165). Alcott’s parents instilled in her a sense of responsibility to family and a belief in her own potential. Abba Alcott wrote, “you are capable of ranking among the best” and acknowledged “her powers are greater than she knows” (qtd in Boyd 52). Her father encouraged her not to “name your writing ‘poor scribble’.... [W]rite away about whatever interests you: all is delightful to me” (49), yet he also referred to her as “Duty’s faithful child” (“Remembering...” 359). Boyd further points out that Alcott “convinc[ed] herself that her writing was part of her role as a dutiful daughter” (165), yet “she felt guilty for abandoning her duties and leaving them to her mother and sisters” (168). Alcott’s family were sincere in their support for her writing, but clearly she experienced inner conflict between the financial and emotional need to write and her feelings of responsibility for domestic duty. Housework often interfered with her writing. She wrote to her older sister, Anna Alcott Pratt, “I feel very moral today, having done a big wash alone, baked, swept the house, picked the hops, got dinner, and written a chapter” (qtd in Maibor 109). In other words, Alcott had to squeeze in her writing amidst her household chores whenever she could find the time. Elizabeth Keyser concludes that Alcott learned, as did many of her heroines, “to subordinate [her] needs for artistic expression to the needs of [her] famil[y] and to use [her] artistic talents for the benefit not only of [her] own famil[y] but of the family as an institution” (“Portrait(s)...” 602). Without her experience in domestic drudgery, Alcott would not have produced *Little Women*.

The March sisters embody the struggles that Alcott faced as a woman artist in patriarchal nineteenth-century America. All four girls have artistic talent, but conflict arises when they have to choose between nurturing that talent and sacrificing it on the altar of domestic duty. Meg and Beth easily succumb to the demands of domesticity. Beth, a skilled pianist, “subordinates her music to the needs of others, performing only for the family or when she thinks no one hears and only when her household duties are

over” (Bassil 193). For Beth, becoming a professional musician, as Laurie dreams of doing, is out of the question. Home and family must come first, and these priorities eventually lead to her death. Meg similarly gives up any skill or dreams she may have to be an actress or a society belle with servants and pretty possessions to perform behind the scenes, so to speak, as a poor man’s wife. Like Beth, Meg spends her artistic energies on keeping house, but she has not honed her domestic skills as well as she has her acting. Soon after she and John Brooke marry, she attempts to make currant jelly, “with a housewifely wish to see her store-room stocked” (*LW* 218). However, the preserves do not congeal, and when John returns home with a surprise dinner guest, Meg commands him to “tell him I’m away—sick, dead, anything” (221). Despite an otherwise happy marriage, the Brooke home falls far short of Meg’s “castle in the air” (118).

Juxtapose Meg and Beth with Jo and Amy. In Jo’s castle in the air, she will “write books, and get rich and famous,” whereas Meg longs for “heaps of money.... with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit” (118). Amy desires “to be an artist...and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world,” but humble Beth claims that now that “I had my little piano I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well, and be together” (118). Jo and Amy, in contrast to their sisters, have set goals for themselves that lie outside the domestic sphere. These two aim for “a life defined by talent and inclination, not simply marriage” (Quindlen). I address Amy as an artist later in this chapter, since Jo, as the main protagonist and a fictionalized depiction of Alcott herself, exemplifies the struggles of a female artist most vividly.

Anna Quindlen points out that “Jo is defined...by what she does,” and Jo aspires “to do something splendid...that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead” (*LW* 118). Like her author, Jo works in a stereotypically feminine occupation as a companion to Aunt March before taking up a career in writing. Jo often complains about Aunt March’s stuffiness and propriety, indicating that traditional female roles stifle her. Jo needs to write, not just because it can help support her impoverished family, but because it is part of her nature, a genius that burns until she can write out the stories that churn in her head. In chapter four of Part Two of *Little Women*, Alcott depicts Jo in a “vortex” and explains that Jo must write “with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace” (211). Jo simply cannot give up writing, for “when the writing fit came on, she gave

herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life” (211). While Meg and Beth sacrifice their talents for others and are content, Jo would be incomplete and unfulfilled without her writing. She tries to explain to Laurie that she ““couldn’t get on without it”” (287). According to her education in self-reliance and self-assertion, Jo cannot deny this essential part of her nature without killing a part of herself.

As Jo grows as a writer, she, like Alcott, “finds herself torn between writing for money...or for art” (Quindlen). One of her first published texts, a sensational story she patterned after the stories of Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, brings Jo a check for one hundred dollars, but at this early stage in her career, “Jo valued the letter [from the editor] more than the money, because it was encouraging” (*LW* 214). However, her ambition to do something splendid quickly submits to the incentive of economic gain. As Susan Naomi Bernstein points out, for Jo “writing becomes less of an amusement and more of a means of economic support for her family” (34). Jo succeeds as a writer of sensational fiction, but the narrator constantly implies that this genre is beneath Jo’s capabilities and moral standards. Nonetheless, as the checks pour in, Jo “began to feel herself a power in the house....taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny” (*LW* 215). As Alcott exulted in the independence her writing career brought, Jo also crosses over the gender divide to non-domestic, wage-earning work and finds the results more than satisfactory.

The conflict between Jo’s domestic/family responsibilities and her writing proves to be even greater than the conflict between writing for money and writing for art. After Jo publishes her first story, for which she earns no money, the narrator conveys Jo’s emotions, explaining that “to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved, were the dearest wishes of her heart” (128). However, the processes by which she gains independence and her family’s praise are separate and inconsistent with each other. As Elizabeth Keyser acknowledges, “although she enjoys both the process and the proceeds of her writing, it does not, as she had hoped, bring her the unqualified praise of those she loves” (“Portrait(s)... 613). Although her family’s relative poverty serves as the primary catalyst for Jo’s insatiable thirst for money, their distress concerning her writing, especially her sensational stories, sends a mixed message to the budding author. Jo’s views of herself as a writer oscillate between independent authoress and domestic

breadwinner. As the independent authoress, Jo “journeys alone from Concord to New York in order to discover herself as a writer; [but] there is also the homebody Jo who believes that writing is best only if it supports the constructs of the family” (Bernstein 28). In New York, the conflict comes to a head as Jo discovers that “money conferred power; money and power, therefore, she resolved to have; not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than self” (*LW* 272). However, her loved ones frown upon the style of writing that brings Jo the most money. Marmee never verbally warns Jo against writing sensational stories, but the narrator implies her displeasure as she “always looked a little anxious when ‘genius took to burning’” (214). Mr. March, a mostly silent character, deems it necessary to speak out on Jo’s scandalous stories. He admonishes, ““You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money’” (214), an ironic statement coming from the man whose lack of employment fuels Jo’s desire for money. Professor Bhaer even weighs in on Jo’s writing. He gripes about the genre of sensational fiction, asserting that sensational stories ““are not for children to see, nor young people to read’” (279). Convicted by Bhaer’s condemnation, Jo burns all of her sensational texts and resolves never to write in that style again. She decides “that the money did not pay for her share of the sensation” (281), but in her repentance, Jo also forfeits her income and her independence. She tries her hand at writing didactic stories, but these do not fetch any checks. In frustration, “Jo corked up her inkstand” (281). Jo chooses family over independence once she discovers that the two cannot coincide.

As a writer, Jo finds success through sacrifice by the most trying ordeal an artist can face—to give up her art for the sake of someone else. Veronica Bassil suggests that “in *Jo March*...Alcott depicts an artist who must, paradoxically, give up her art in order to achieve it” (187). Beth’s illness and subsequent death demand the sacrifice of Jo’s writing on the altar of domesticity. Through Beth’s convalescence, Jo learns that self-reliance and self-assertion, when one leaves them unchecked, can be detrimental to the family institution. Jo’s selfishness indirectly causes Beth’s illness as she refuses to take supplies to their destitute neighbors, the Hummels, and delicate Beth goes instead. Beth contracts scarlet fever from the Hummels, never to recover, and Jo feels guilty immediately. She reproaches herself, ““serve[s] me right, selfish pig, to let you go, and

stay writing rubbish myself!” (LW 143). After Beth passes away, Jo, in keeping a promise she made to Beth, exchanges her self-assertion for self-abnegation. She attempts to replace Beth as a domestic and tries to justify her sacrifice to herself. The narrator voices Jo’s mental and emotional tribulation: “She had often said she wanted to do something splendid...and now she had her wish,--for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to father and mother.... And...what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl, than to give up her own hopes, plans and desires, and cheerfully live for others?” (339). However, ever-intuitive Marmee recognizes Jo’s discontent and suggests that she write again. Note the contrast between the Marmee who “looked a little anxious when ‘genius took to burning’” (214) and the Marmee here who encourages Jo to “‘write something for us and never mind the rest of the world’” (339). Jo doubts her abilities and replies, “‘I’ve no heart to write.... Don’t believe I can’” (339), but “Jo takes up writing again ‘as a comfort.’ And, ignoring both market and immortality, she writes the ‘simple little story’” (Elbert 212-13). Alcott seems to be implying that by giving priority to family and the home, the female artist rewards herself with true artistic genius, for “now that [Jo] has lost all artistic desire and confidence can she truly create” (Bassil 194). Jo marvels at the success of her simple story, but her father explains, “‘There is truth in it, Jo.... You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it’” (LW 340). Before Beth’s decease Jo would have exulted in her success, but seclusion and domesticity have rounded her edges. The new, self-abdicating Jo responds, “‘If there is anything good or true in what I write...I owe it all to you and mother, and to Beth’” (340). Jo finally learns what her parents have been trying to teach her all along, that if she is determined to write, she must do so in a way that becomes a young gentlewoman, and that it is familial love, not a paycheck, which defines success. At last Jo has found a balance. In the final chapter of *Little Women*, Jo admits that her life does not faithfully represent the castle in the air she dreamt of as a child, “‘but the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now. I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet...and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences...as these’” (379). Jo finds, as Alcott may have, that domestic duty can serve as a springboard instead of a hindrance to artistic creativity.

Amy's artistic pursuits parallel Jo's, only more subtly, and although Amy struggles as an artist, she grapples more with herself than with society or her family as Jo does. Remember that for her castle in the air, Amy longs "to be an artist...and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (118). Her artistic aspirations are as lofty and ambitious as Jo's and, like Jo's literary aims, lack any sign of domestic life. Amy pursues the visual arts with gusto, in much the same manner that Jo pursues writing. While Jo experiments with genres, Amy "attempted every brand of art with youthful audacity" and "persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time she should do something worthy to be called 'high art'" (203-04). For all their similarities in ambition, Amy diverges from Jo in that she seeks to balance her artistic aspirations with society's expectations. Amy "had resolved to be an attractive and accomplished woman, even if she never became a great artist" (204). Some readers may find Amy shallow because of her social conformity, but ironically, it rewards her with passage to Europe to study art while Jo toils at home.

Amy's need to please brings about conflict between art and money but in a different aspect than Jo's struggle. Although Amy does not seek to sell her art for profit, her poverty puts a damper on her artistic development. For instance, Amy participates in a charity fair that the wealthy Chester family sponsors. Because of the Marches' financial inferiority, Mrs. Chester requires Amy to take a smaller, out-of-the-way booth while the Chester daughters work the main table, the one which displays all of Amy's artistic contributions. Mrs. Chester consoles Amy with the condescending remark "we must give up our private wishes, of course, and I will see that you have a good place elsewhere" (238). Just as Professor Bhaer's condemnation of sensational fiction squelches Jo's opportunity to enhance her literary career, the Chesters' arrogance, a characteristic they have attained as a result of their money, retard Amy's opportunities as a visual artist.

Just as Jo "corked up her inkstand" (281), Amy also relinquishes her art. In contrast to Jo, however, Amy does not "give up or modify her art in response to male criticism," nor does she "allow external authority or fear of impropriety...determine the course of her career" (Keyser, "Portrait(s)..." 617). Instead, when Amy visits Rome and beholds the masterpieces there, she explains, "I...gave up all my foolish hopes in

despair....because talent isn't genius.... I want to be great, or nothing.... so I don't intend to try any more'" (LW 317). While Jo's sacrifice leaves her depressed and empty, consigned to the home to take up Beth's domestic responsibilities, Amy's renunciation does not faze her because she has left herself other options, particularly marriage to Laurie and his wealth and connections to society. Thus, Amy channels her artistic talents to a new venue. After their marriage, Amy expresses the desire "to found and endow an institution, for the express benefit of young women with artistic tendencies" (357), to give other artistically inclined girls the opportunities that she and her sisters never had.

Jo clearly struggles to find a balance between her writing and domestic duty, conflicted by the criticism of her loved ones and her own desires, but Amy discovers that balance much more easily, perhaps because she ascertains it on her own. Even at the end of the novel, Jo's desire to "write a good book" is still only a dream, whereas Amy declares, "I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfil their dreams of beauty. I've begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done" (379). Through Amy, the novel "seems to suggest the possibility of balancing a life of art and a life of appropriate feminine behavior" (Estes and Lant 574). Like Jo, Amy finds artistic success through sacrifice. Amy surrenders her dream of becoming "the best artist in the whole world" (LW 118) only to have her "figure of baby" (379), literally and figuratively a model of maternity and domesticity, become her finest artistic achievement. Again like Jo, Amy has found her greatest artistic inspiration through a traditional feminine role.

As a female artist in the nineteenth century, Louisa May Alcott faced daunting conflicts, torn between writing as genius directed and writing for money and discouraged by the incompatibility of her writing and domestic duty. *Little Women* reflects her struggles as Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy must either choose between their artistic inclinations and domesticity or find a way to balance the two. While Meg and Beth opt for the role of homemaker, Jo and Amy strive to have the best of both worlds and, by the end of the novel, seem to have established a way of life that allows women to nurture their innate creativity without relinquishing their femininity.

IV. “Let Us Hear No More of ‘Woman’s Sphere’”: Reform and Domestic Feminism

The mid-nineteenth century was an era of reform in the United States, and Louisa May Alcott jumped into the swirling, and sometimes boiling, pot of reform movements. She came by her reformist sympathies honestly. The Boston area was a hotbed of progressivism, and tiny Concord, the very birthplace of the American Revolution, provided a lectern for many reformists. In this atmosphere of social upheaval, Alcott advocated many causes, but woman’s rights became her most notable banner. Suffrage, equal pay for equal work, unlimited labor opportunities, dissolution of the “spheres,” and self-reliance made up just a few of the rights she demanded for herself and her peers. Her interest in woman’s rights led to her philosophy of “domestic feminism,” which ““saw the reformed family as the key to a reformed society”” (Keyser, *Little... 22*). Alcott emphasized woman’s rights in much of her fiction, but in *Little Women*, domestic feminism takes center stage. Contrary to the topics I have addressed in the previous three chapters, Alcott conveyed reformist issues with a degree of subtlety in the novel. The episodes of *Little Women* make scattered allusions to woman’s rights, yet they culminate in one final tableau that illustrates Alcott’s domestic feminist agenda.

Interest groups are not recent phenomena in the United States. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “In America, the freedom to associate for political goals is unlimited” (182), and five years later he noted that “there is scarcely an undertaking so small that Americans do not unite for it.... [They] seem to see in [association] the sole means they have of acting” (490). The nineteenth century gave birth to a plethora of social reform movements, especially in antebellum New England. Sarah Elbert notes antislavery, the rights of children and working men, and care for the insane as a sampling of the wide range of causes mid-nineteenth-century Americans supported (40). Women played a leading role in reform movements of all sorts, and chief among them, of course, were woman’s rights. The 1848 woman’s rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, propelled the issue into the limelight and assured it a place in the history books. Woman’s rights activists also espoused abolition before the Civil War, as they saw the two causes linked by the patriarchal white man’s denial of human rights to both groups.

With the onset of the war, however, woman's rights leaders temporarily set aside their agenda in order to help with the war effort as nurses, emancipation advocates, and substitutes for their men. Louisa May Alcott took up several reformist issues, including "[t]emperance, vegetarianism, woman suffrage, educational and health reforms, [and] abolition" ("About..." xxviii), but she supported and became a mouthpiece for woman's rights more than any other cause.

Alcott's reformist ideas did not spring up spontaneously. She found herself surrounded by leading reformists all her life and "never knew anyone who was less than a general in the armies of reform" (Elbert 40). Margaret Fuller, a prominent voice in the feminist movement, was also a member of the Transcendental Club, a teacher in Bronson Alcott's Temple School, and friends with the Alcott family. The Alcotts were also closely connected to Ralph Waldo Emerson, a staunch advocate of abolition and educational reform. Furthermore, "she was, after all, an Alcott" ("About..." xxviii). Bronson Alcott obviously supported educational reform, as his unorthodox teaching experiments suggest; Abba May Alcott was an active suffragette and firmly believed in a woman's right to work outside the home; and Abba's family, the Mays of Boston, were prominent proponents of abolition. Madeline Stern remarks, "Reform was in Alcott's genes" (*Signature...* 1). Indeed, it seems so. Not only did the Alcotts participate in reform on a national level, they also encouraged it on the personal level. Recall from Chapter One that Bronson Alcott insisted that his wife and daughters constantly evaluate themselves, identify their faults, and seek to correct them. This philosophy of self-reform, he thought, would create a perfect society, but his attempt to apply this idea at Fruitlands failed miserably.

Her father's floundering attempts did not deter Louisa from forming her own reformist agendas. Before the war, "Alcott was firmly convinced that woman's rights were part and parcel of general reform" (Elbert 239), but after the war, woman's rights became her primary soapbox, as the return of veteran husbands and fathers forced women back into the home after they had entered non-domestic work in large numbers for the first time during the war. Alcott approached woman's rights from several perspectives. First, she emphatically believed that self-reliance, an ideal she adopted from her parents and Transcendentalist neighbors, was the key to a woman's success in receiving respect

as an individual from men. She wrote in 1873, “I like to help women help themselves, as that is, in my opinion, the best way to settle the Woman question. Whatever we can do & do well we have a right to” (*Letters* 176).¹ Alcott believed that a woman’s knowledge of herself and her abilities gave her the power to assert herself in a patriarchal culture, to step out of the home, and abolish woman’s “sphere.” Through her writing, Alcott set the example in self-reliance and led the way to this abolition of woman’s sphere. Madeline Stern points out that Alcott “did not pioneer in opening untraditional offices to women. What she did do was assume the economic role of provider for a family, and in so doing she practised the egalitarianism that others preached” (*Signature...* 13). She did not simply write out her thoughts—she acted on her philosophy, proving that women could apply her ideas.

Alcott also pursued woman’s rights through the avenue of woman suffrage, which she referred to as the “most vital question of the age” (220),² even holding suffrage meetings in her home. She “began to realize that women who lacked a voice in community government were powerless to extend their spheres of activity beyond the household” (Elbert 76). As long as women could not vote, they would struggle to exercise any self-reliance, egalitarianism, or any other opportunity men denied them. The women of Concord, Massachusetts, gained the right to vote for school committee in 1880, and on the day Alcott registered to vote and paid the poll tax, she noted in her journal with pride, “Paid my first poll tax. As my head is my most valuable piece of property I thought \$2,00 a cheap tax on it. Saw my townswomen about voting &c. Hard work to stir them up. Cake & servants are more interesting” (*Journals* 226).³ Alcott’s tongue-in-cheek comments clearly express her pride, but her frustration with other women who forfeited this opportunity is also obvious. Conceivably, these women’s apathy flabbergasted Alcott, who worked so hard only to see miniscule results.

Alcott was undoubtedly a feminist but not in the mid- to late-twentieth-century, *Ms.*-magazine, Gloria Steinem sense of the word.⁴ Alcott in no way sought to overthrow or undermine men. Although she did remain a spinster, she did not despise the idea of marriage. In fact, as her journals, letters, and fiction repeatedly illustrate, she adored her family and viewed domesticity as something to be embraced—by both women and men. No, Louisa May Alcott was “by no means a militant feminist. She was a feminist

because she was a humanist; she embraced the cause of women because she embraced the causes of humanity” (Stern, *Blood...* 144). In other words, the same philosophies and passions that drove her to support other reform movements, such as abolition, temperance, and education reform, drew her to woman’s rights advocacy. Unlike the more militant feminists who would emerge in American society a century later, “Alcott was concerned not with a radical overhaul of society, but with granting women equal access to the institutions already established” (Maibor 124). Alcott vented this view in an 1874 letter to Maria S. Porter, which many critics, including Madeline Stern, Carolyn Maibor, and Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant, have discussed, and I find it valuable here:

In future let woman do whatever she can do; let men place no more impediments in the way; above all things let’s have fair play,—let *simple justice* be done, say I. Let us hear no more of “woman’s sphere” either from our wise (?) legislators beneath the State House dome, or from our clergymen in their pulpits. I am tired, year after year, of hearing such twaddle about sturdy oaks and clinging vines and man’s chivalric protection of woman. Let woman find out her own limitations, and if, as it is so confidently asserted, nature has defined her sphere, she will be guided accordingly, but in heaven’s name give her a chance! Let the professions be open to her; let fifty years of college education be hers.... Then, and not until then, shall we be able to say what woman can and what she cannot do; and coming generations will know and be able to define more clearly what is a “woman’s sphere” than these benighted men who now try to do it. (*Letters* 189-90)

Here, Alcott in frustration and desperation clearly states her perspective on the Woman question. Self-reliance is the key to the Pandora’s Box of woman’s rights. Given the opportunity, women could hold non-domestic jobs, attend universities, and even vote.

Notice that nowhere in Alcott’s writings does she advocate or even hint at dissolving the family institution. On the contrary, she saw a healthy connection between woman’s rights and domesticity. Alcott “was awakened to a new link between domestic reform and woman’s rights.... [S]he learned...that feminism could provide a new basis for family survival” (Elbert 76). Alcott believed that domestic reform, balancing the responsibilities of home between men and women, could bring about reform on a national level. Elizabeth Keyser quotes Beverly Lyon Clark in referring to this philosophy as “domestic feminism” (*Little...* 22), a movement within the woman’s rights camp that “embraced...piety, purity, and domesticity—but ‘the virtue of “submissiveness” in

women was totally rejected” (Sanderson 42). This stance was the domestic end of the argument. The social end challenged women “to gain access to those prerogatives [of men] without becoming men or men-like” (Maibor 102). This philosophy seems feasible in theory, but how were domestic feminists to practically accomplish their goal? How would they effect a balance of power in the home and achieve success in a man’s world?

For Alcott, the answer lay in self-reliance. Young women should determine their own talents, career paths, and social roles, not to avoid domesticity per se but to make it better. She emphasized this philosophy in her fiction in that characters such as Jo March “demand a period of independence or even modest adventure, not as an alternative to domesticity, but as a necessary precondition to its success” (Elbert 115). By discovering their own gifts, strengths, and weaknesses, women become more self-aware and thus can make more informed domestic decisions. However, Alcott would emphasize, as she did again through Jo, that domesticity should not necessarily be a young woman’s only goal but one of her many options. Only a few months before she published *Little Women*, Alcott submitted an article to the *New York Ledger* on the contentment of single women. She warns young women, “Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success” (“Happy Women” 149).⁵ She reiterates Emerson’s maxim to “trust thyself.” In Alcott’s view, women’s self-reliance would create a balance of power in the home, which would, in turn, create a balance of power between the sexes in society.

Alcott subtly presents her reformist views in *Little Women* through the March sisters’ episodes and dialogues. Alcott had been infusing her fiction with feminist issues for as long as she had been writing, but as she and her publisher intended for *Little Women* to be a children’s book, her rhetoric had to be restrained yet insistent. Of course, she did not foresee the popularity Part One would attain, but by the time she published Part Two in 1869, Alcott knew that the novel’s “success gave [her] access to a popular audience, one receptive to proposals for social change presented within the familiar construct of domesticity” (Elbert 220). By using the March family (a reflection of her own) as a hypothetical example, Alcott could encourage domestic reform within individual families, which could theoretically lead to national social reform. On a small

scale, *Little Women* emphasizes issues such as temperance, dress, and education reform and, on a larger scale, woman's rights, feminism, and domestic reform. Although Alcott somewhat understated these issues and scattered them throughout the text, they culminate in a hopeful picture of how nineteenth-century American families could apply domestic reform.

In the chapter dealing with Meg's wedding lies an easily overlooked hint at the March family's stance on temperance. This reference is most likely an adequate representation of the Alcotts, considering that Louisa contributed to founding the Concord Women's Temperance Society (Elbert 262). In this passage, Laurie finds the absence of wine at the wedding feast odd, especially since he had seen a few bottles in the house prior to the ceremony. Meg explains that Mr. Laurence offered to supply some of his best wine, and Aunt March provided the bottles Laurie had spied earlier. However, Mr. March "thinks that wine should only be used in illness, and mother says that neither she nor her daughters will ever offer it to any young man under her roof" (*LW* 201). Although this conversation is only a passing reference, Alcott uses the occasion of Meg's wedding as a megaphone to endorse temperance. Of most importance here is the philosophy that social reform begins at home, particularly with women. Meg's explanation prompts Laurie to resolve to refuse alcohol forever, and the narrator is careful to point out that "Meg...feeling her power, used it as a woman may for her friend's good" (201). One woman's standard encourages one man's reform, who in turn may reform others and society as a whole.

Much earlier in the novel, Jo encounters the absurdity of women's dress. Although not one of the major reform movements, dress reform was an issue among woman's rights activists in the mid-nineteenth century, and Jo March comically displays a few of the problems with conventional styles.⁶ Jo is one "who never troubled herself much about dress" (27), but Meg, the sister with the most aristocratic taste, insists that "a real lady is always known by neat boots, gloves, and handkerchief" (29). Unfortunately, when the two older sisters receive an invitation to the Gardiners' New Year's Eve dance, Jo's wardrobe is in a sad state. Her best dress is burned and torn, her gloves have lemonade stains, and her hairpins stick out all over her head. Jo's state of disarray confines her to the margins of the crowd at the dance, just as such women who do not

care about their appearance find themselves at the edges of society. In the context of a children's book, the March girls cannot mention corsets or hoopskirts, but readers cannot miss the absurdity of women's conventional styles, especially when the narrator (Alcott?) sarcastically comments, "dear me, let us be elegant or die" (29). How apropos that Jo winds up enjoying herself immensely with Laurie while Meg the debutante sprains her ankle dancing in her insanely tight yet fashionable shoes!

Education reform also emerges in the novel through Amy and her parents. When Amy flees school in shame after her teacher inflicts corporal punishment on her for bringing limes to school, Marmee withdraws her youngest daughter from the public education system. Marmee explains, "I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls. I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching...so I shall ask your father's advice before I send you anywhere else'" (61). Amy never returns to any school. The Marches' perspective on education reflects the methods Bronson Alcott implemented in his Temple School. Rejection of corporal punishment and a dismissal of the traditional rote method of learning marked Alcott's educational philosophy, and the March family also employs that approach. Although Amy's educational experience never surfaces again, toward the end of the novel Mr. March oversees Demi's education, and the methods he uses with his small grandson are most likely the same his own daughters would have experienced. Mr. March explains the theory: "If he is old enough to ask the questions he is old enough to receive true answers. I am not putting the thoughts into his head, but helping him unfold those already there'" (359-60). This approach is the very same Socratic method Bronson Alcott applied in his Temple School as well as with his daughters. Once again, reform begins at home. By educating Demi in a new method preferable to the old rote system, Mr. March affects the next generation through his grandson, who can employ his personal experience to stimulate social change.

Woman's rights, feminism, and domestic reform are more noticeable in *Little Women* than temperance, dress, and education reform, yet they are not necessarily blatant, either. Jo is the obviously feminist character, but her ideas stem from Marmee's instruction. In chapter nine of Part One, Marmee warns Meg and Jo, "better be happy old maids than unhappy wives" (84). This comment, as Elizabeth Keyser acknowledges, serves for "some readers [as] an indication of her nascent feminism" (*Little...* 49).

Marmee offers marriage as an option to her daughters, but in her mind, it should never be the *only* option. As Meg does choose to marry, Marmee advises her to seek a balance between herself and her husband. She encourages Meg to include John in domestic responsibilities, especially where their twins are concerned,⁷ yet she also implores Meg to involve herself in John's "sphere." She admonishes, "Don't shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world's work, for it all affects you and yours'" (*LW* 308). For Meg, domestic balance is easier said than done. When she attempts to apply Marmee's advice, she loses interest and seems to prefer the separation of spheres. She "tried to look deeply interested, to ask intelligent questions, and keep her thoughts from wandering from the state of the nation to the state of her bonnet. In her secret soul, however, she decided that politics were as bad as mathematics...but she kept these feminine ideas to herself" (312). Meg embodies the apathetic women of Concord, to whom "[c]ake & servants are more interesting" than voting (*Journals* 226), yet Meg's opinions do not make her a bad woman. She merely chooses the domestic life. Marmee's reformist instruction has prepared her for a better domestic experience, even if Meg chooses to maintain traditional gender roles in her home.

Contrary to Meg, Jo balks at traditional gender roles and grows frustrated when social mores restrict her behavior. For instance, when Laurie proposes that they escape to Washington together, Jo craves to take him up on his offer but quickly realizes the impropriety of a young unmarried woman traipsing off unchaperoned with a young man. She laments, "If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home.... "Prunes and prisms" are my doom, and I may as well make up my mind to it'" (*LW* 168). Here, Jo almost seems to resign herself to a domestic fate, but as she begins her writing career, her fierce independence resurfaces. Jo takes "great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny" (215). Jo even attempts to persuade Meg to take up her feminist attitude. When John Brooke is on the verge of proposing, Jo encourages Meg to reply with "a good, decided, No'" (178), but Meg, of course, accepts. The vision of Meg "enthroned upon [John's] knee...wearing an expression of the most abject submission" horrifies Jo, who responds with "a sort of gasp, as if a cold shower-

bath had suddenly fallen upon her” (183). For the first part of *Little Women*, Jo staunchly opposes marriage for herself and her sisters and insists on having her independence, but by the second part of the novel, Jo’s perspective begins to alter.

The first glimpse of a development in Jo’s feminism emerges in a conversation she has with Amy while they are out making social calls. After Jo shuns an arrogant young man on one of their visits, Amy questions her behavior, deeming it unladylike, especially for young women with meager financial resources. Jo counters, “I think girls ought to show when they disapprove of young men; and how can they do it except by their manners?... [T]here are many little ways in which [we] can influence [them] without a word, and I say we *ought* to do it to others if we can” (235). Jo’s feminism has matured into an agenda that no longer focuses on self-assertion but on the good of others instead. Amy admonishes her sister, “I don’t like reformers, and I hope you will never try to be one,” but Jo maintains, “I do like them, and I shall be one if I can; for...the world would never get on without them...[Y]ou belong to the old set, and I to the new” (235). This seed of selfless reform eventually evolves into a domestic feminism in which Jo is “intent on maintaining the female community of ‘woman’s sphere’ while still acting in accordance with her own self-reliant impulses” (Estes and Lant 570). Jo’s new domestic feminist philosophy blends and balances her independence with her domestic fate.

Her philosophy finally comes to fruition after she marries Professor Bhaer and they establish their school at Plumfield. Jo admits that the school “‘isn’t a new idea of mine, but a long-cherished plan”’ (*LW* 374). At last, she has the best of both worlds. She can exercise self-reliance, since she is the one providing the school’s financial support, while maintaining her femininity in the more traditional female roles of mother, wife, and housekeeper. She explains the plan: “[N]ow, thanks to my good old aunt...*I’m* rich...Fritz can train and teach in his own way, and father will help him. I can feed, and nurse, and pet, and scold them; and mother will be my stand-by” (374). On top of all these details, Jo still has not “‘given up the hope that I may write a good book yet”’ (379). Sarah Elbert claims, “*Little Women* made the case for an enlightened family life as the best means for raising a new woman” (184). Indeed, at Plumfield, Jo can write, provide, and nurture, while her husband not only helps with domestic concerns but also

finds a venue to implement education reform alongside his father-in-law. Alcott's perspective of domestic reform, as portrayed by the Marches, takes the previous generation's idea of domesticity a radical step further or perhaps contradicts it entirely. Catharine Beecher's 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy* asserted that "[t]he manifest destiny of American women to domesticate...the world can be realized through the work they do in their homes" (Brown 20), work which directly correlated to men's economic activities outside the home and relied on women's self-abnegation. Beecher encouraged women "to abide by the law and to stay within their own sphere" (26). By contrast, the March-Bhaer family "offers a blueprint for revising the world, for reforming the human race.... The novel offers...a family unit in which husband and wife share the economic and, more significantly, the emotional responsibilities of group existence" (Dalke 562). Through the Plumfield school, Jo March-Bhaer can effect social change by exercising reform in her own home.

Louisa May Alcott was a reformist in the truest sense of the word, advocating an array of social reform agendas, including temperance, abolition, dress reform, and education reform, but she was most passionate about woman's rights. She vociferously supported woman suffrage, occupational opportunities, equal pay for equal work, and an abolition of "woman's sphere." Most of her fiction addresses some woman's rights issue, but *Little Women* was the first of her texts to depict domestic feminism. Through the March family, Alcott illustrates a picture of true domestic reform, an egalitarian household in which woman can exercise self-reliance, employ her non-domestic talents, and maintain femininity. Most importantly, marriage, motherhood, and every other interest or occupation in which the March sisters engage are the result of their personal choices. This element of choice, of a woman having an array of available options, is the basic human right for which Alcott so adamantly campaigned.

Conclusion

Through *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott has had a lasting effect on American literature and pop culture. Little did she know in 1868 that her girls' book, which she thought was “*dull*” and doubted would be interesting, would be, in her words, “the first golden egg of the ugly duckling” (*Journals* 166).¹ In 136 years, the novel has never gone out of print, and thousands upon thousands of readers, including myself, have laughed at Amy's antics, found comfort in Meg's placidity, triumphed with Jo's success as a writer, and mourned over Beth's passing. With the exception of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, no other nineteenth-century American children's book has had such staying power. Yet, as I have emphasized, the messages of *Little Women* run far deeper than an initial, casual reading would indicate. Motifs of domesticity and patriarchy, Transcendentalism, struggling women artists, and domestic feminism and reform resonate throughout the novel as well as through Alcott's own life.

Patriarchy thrived in mid-nineteenth-century America. Louisa May Alcott grew up in a culture which confined women to the home. However, Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott, was not the typical Victorian American man. His educational experiments such as Boston's Temple School and his philosophical fiasco at Fruitlands failed miserably and plunged the family into poverty. Because of her father's impracticality and financial irresponsibility, Louisa became the breadwinner of the Alcott family, but social patriarchy limited her employment options. She tried one stereotypically feminine job after another, from teacher to domestic servant to nurse. She approached the necessity of labor with a sense of pride, yet she constantly encountered the social limitations on female workers, especially as she began her career as a serious writer. This problem with the patriarchal system serves as the backdrop for *Little Women*. Alcott first places the March sisters in an all-female environment, then gradually brings in male friends, father, and husbands to illustrate the possibility of a culture which is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal but egalitarian. In the microcosmic society the March-Bhaer-Brooke-Laurence family creates at the end of the novel, men and women share household responsibilities and dissolve traditionally gender-based duties. Jo is still the breadwinner

and can write to her heart's content while maintaining her femininity and enjoying domestic life.

Bronson Alcott influenced Louisa not only through his impracticality but also through his philosophy. Concord, Massachusetts, served as the birthplace of Transcendentalism, and Bronson Alcott's adherence to the philosophy exposed his daughter to the influences of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. Louisa May Alcott embraced self-reliance, one of the basic tenets of Transcendentalism, and sought to make this value attainable for women through her writings. Alcott knew first-hand, through her father's Fruitlands ordeal, that when one man sought self-reliance, he actually had to depend on women to keep the home and everything else afloat. Through *Little Women*, Alcott infuses her father's ideals with her mother's practicality. By taking a more realistic perspective than her father, Alcott uses the March family and especially Jo March to depict ways in which women can initiate a journey of self-discovery and, as a result, become self-reliant. In contrast with Fruitlands, Plumfield is a community in which both men and women participate in domestic labor and philosophical discourse.

As a woman writer in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, Louisa May Alcott struggled with a literary industry that did not consider women to be serious writers. Alcott faced many contradicting goals as an author. She longed to write for personal independence, refusing to fall into financial ruin like her father, but patriarchy frowned upon independent women. She also felt the contrast between writing as her artistic aspirations dictated and writing what she knew would sell. Stories would burn in her mind as she spent hours and even days writing to the point of physical exhaustion, yet as the only able body in the house, domestic duty often demanded her attention, pulling her away from satisfying her genius. She adeptly conveys these frustrations through the March sisters, who face contradictions similar to those Alcott dealt with herself. Each sister has her own artistic talent which, at some point, conflicts with her domestic responsibility. Jo and Amy are the only two sisters who actually pursue their arts, yet, to an extent, each of them lays down her talents in favor of domesticity. However, by the end of the novel, both Jo and Amy have found ways to balance their artistic interests with domestic duty. Alcott sought this balance herself and illustrated through her fictional

characters that in order for women to achieve their artistic goals, they would have to recognize and pursue their talents and have families who supported their endeavors.

Louisa May Alcott grew up and wrote in an era of social reform. Abolition, temperance, health and education reform, and woman's rights were a few large drops in the ocean of mid-nineteenth-century reformist issues. Alcott entrenched herself with a number of reformist agendas, linking arms with prominent activists in the Boston area. However, after the Civil War, woman's rights became her primary political focus. All the issues that the movement entailed—woman suffrage, dress reform, educational and occupational opportunities, equal pay for equal work—became her pet agendas, and she deliberately and stealthily inserted her reformist positions into her fiction. Alcott adopted a form of feminism that scholars such as Elizabeth Keyser (*Little...* 22) and Rena Sanderson (42) describe as “domestic feminism,” one in which the reformed family serves as a means to reform the society as a whole. In this reformed family—drastically different from the one that Catherine Beecher promoted in her *Treatise*, which rigidly maintained the gender-oriented spheres—women exercise the self-reliance of Transcendentalism while stereotypically patriarchal men share in the domestic responsibilities. Egalitarianism in the home, Alcott believed, would lead to egalitarianism in the nation. Alcott illustrated this variety of feminism through the March family. Each of the surviving sisters has to reconcile her need to be herself with domestic duty. Although Meg, Jo, and Amy resolve this conflict in different ways, each of them manages to shape her husband and household into an unorthodox family in which the man shares domestic burdens and supports his wife's talents and dreams. The final scene at Plumfield leaves readers with the impression that if Jo March Bhaer can find a balance between her natural inclinations and her home life, then any woman can.

Little Women has inspired not only a sea of scholarly research but also a number of films, stage performances, and literary spin-offs. Filmmakers have reinterpreted the novel numerous times. The most notable three—the 1933 version with Katharine Hepburn as Jo, the 1949 Technicolor adaptation with Elizabeth Taylor as Amy, and the most recent 1994 film, featuring Winona Ryder as Jo and Susan Sarandon as Marmee—translate the story according to their respective eras, with the latter rendition as the most feminist and the most accurate representation of the novel (Keyser, *Little...* 16). Stage

versions have abounded as well, from sisters and friends reenacting their favorite scenes in their living rooms to a Broadway musical adaptation, which debuted at the Virginia Theatre in New York City in January 2005. Most significant, though, are the literary offspring Alcott begot through *Little Women*. This quintessential American girls' novel has influenced English-language children's and women's literature since its publication 136 years ago. Harbour Winn claims that late-nineteenth-century American authoress Kate Chopin and Alcott were members of a "literary sisterhood" (208), as Chopin was able to write more explicitly about the women's issues which Alcott felt were necessary to disguise. Sarah Elbert connects *Little Women* to the Pollyanna books and the Bobbsey Twin series of the twentieth century (198), and Elizabeth Keyser includes *What Katy Did* by Susan Coolidge, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* by Kate Douglas Wiggin, and Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* series among Alcott's literary descendants (*Little...* 11-12). What has made *Little Women* so timeless and appealing that dozens of authors have mimicked or expanded on it and dozens more scholars have studied it over the decades? The answer is intangible and difficult to express. Through Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March, *Little Women* expresses values and character traits which attract readers and which, to an extent, they yearn to see in themselves. Meg's contentment, Jo's ambition, Beth's selflessness, and Amy's audacity draw readers back to the pages of *Little Women* over and over, seeking something that real life seems to have either lost or buried.

Notes

Introduction

1. See the articles by Franklin, from the early 1970s, and Bernstein and Sanderson, each from the 1990s.
2. See Geraldine Brooks' recent *New Yorker* article, "Orpheus at the Plough."
3. Nina Baym disagrees with this perspective in "The Rise of the Woman Author," claiming that publishers and editors "treated both successful and aspiring women authors with critical seriousness and esteem" (290).
4. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway draws an interesting analysis of the components of romances and the reasons for which women readers repeatedly re-read the same books.

Chapter One

1. 28 August, 29 November, 23 December 1843, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, I have drawn these and all subsequent journal entries from Meyerson, et al. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*.
2. March 1846.
3. 10 December 1843.
4. See Rosemary F. Franklin's "Louisa May Alcott's Father(s) and 'The Marble Woman'" for a more complete discussion of Alcott's sensational fiction and the connections these stories could have to her relationship with her father.
5. Louisa May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, 29 November 1856. Unless otherwise noted, I have drawn this and all subsequent correspondences from Meyerson, et al. *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*.
6. October 1856.
7. October 1856.
8. For more on the overlapping and blending of traditional gender-separated spheres, see Cathy Davidson's preface to *No More Separate Spheres!*
9. See Ann Murphy's "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*" and Susan Naomi Bernstein's "Writing and *Little Women*: Alcott's Rhetoric of Subversion."
10. See Chapters 6 and 7 of Elizabeth Lennox Keyser's *Little Women: A Family Romance*.
11. 1 November 1868.
12. Louisa May Alcott to Elizabeth Powell, 20 March 1869; Louisa May Alcott to Samuel Joseph May, 22 January 1869.
13. Louisa May Alcott to Alfred Whitman, 6 January 1869.

Chapter Two

1. For more on the five (male) figures of the American Renaissance, see F.O.

Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. David Reynolds expands on this theme in *Beneath the American Renaissance*. Jane Tompkins extends the American Renaissance to women's literature in "The Other American Renaissance."

2. 27 April 1882.
3. 27 April 1882.

Chapter Three

1. Louisa May Alcott to Amos Bronson Alcott, 29 November 1856.
2. Louisa May Alcott to Mary E. Channing Higginson, 18 October 1868.
3. Louisa May Alcott to Miss Churchill, 25 December 1878.

Chapter Four

1. Louisa May Alcott to the Lukens sisters, 4 September 1873.
2. Louisa May Alcott to the American Woman Suffrage Association, October 1885.
3. September 1880.
4. See Chapter 8 of Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines' *Takin' It to the Streets* for an excellent collection of primary source material from the mid-twentieth-century woman's rights movement.
5. *New York Ledger* 11 April 1868.
6. For more on women's dress reform, see Chapter 8 of Bonnie Anderson's *Joyous Greetings*.
7. See Chapter One, page 11.

Conclusion

1. May, June, and August 1868.

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