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Representation of the roads to female independence in the novels *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

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Cílem této práce je analyzovat reprezentace nezávislosti žen v románech *Malé ženy* od Louisy May Alcottové a *Pýcha a předsudek* od Jane Austenové.

Použitím metod genderové analýzy na pozadí historického kontextu, práce klade za cíl porovnat cesty k nezávislosti žen vyobrazených v uvedených románech.

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Anotace

Bakalářská práce *Vyobrazení cesty k nezávislosti žen v románech Malé ženy od Louisy May Alcottové a Pýcha a předsudek od Jane Austenové* se zabývá důkladnou analýzou historického pozadí společenského postavení žen v americké a anglické společnosti devatenáctého století. Následuje diskuse o tom, jak tato literární díla odrážejí nezávislost žen. Obecně je uznáváno, že svoboda žen byla v různých oblastech života vážně omezena, zejména pokud šlo o manželství, příležitosti ke vzdělání a kariérní vyhlídce. Prostřednictvím analýzy rolí a povinností žen v institucích jednotlivých zemí by člověk mohl do hloubky porozumět tomu, jak byly životy žen ze střední třídy uspořádány. V průběhu devatenáctého století stále větší počet spisovatelek ve svých dílech vyjadřoval názor na omezování nezávislosti žen. *Malé ženy* Louisy May Alcottové a *Pýcha a předsudek* Jane Austenové jsou dva kritické texty, které přispěly k posunu společenského postavení žen v patriarchální kultuře devatenáctého století, neboť zdůrazňovaly důležitost nezávislosti žen. V důsledku literární analýzy obou románů se ukazuje, že ženské hrdinky, Elizabeth Bennetová a sestry Marchové, zejména Jo Marchová, projevují nezávislost a zpochybňují společenské konvence, když postupují k sebeuvědomění, svobodě a nezávislosti i přesto, že na svém putování sledují různé cesty.

Klíčová slova: nezávislost žen, vzdělávání, oddělené sféry, sociální normy, manželství, Jane Austenová, Pýcha a předsudek, Elizabeth Bennetová, Malé ženy, Louisa May Alcottová, sestry Marchovy, Jo Marchová.

Annotation

The Bachelor thesis *Representation of the roads to female independence in the novels Little Women by Louisa May Alcott and Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen* deals with a thorough analysis of the historical background of women's social standing in nineteenth-century American and English society. This is followed by a discussion of how literary works reflect women's independence. It is generally recognized that women's freedom was severely constrained in various aspects of their lives, notably with regard to marriage, education opportunities, and career prospects. Through an analysis of women's roles and duties in the countries' institutions, one might gain an in-depth understanding of how women's lives were arranged within the middle class. Over the course of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of female writers expressed their views on the limitations imposed on women's independence in their writings. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are two critical texts that contributed to a shift in women's social standing in the nineteenth-century patriarchal culture by emphasizing the importance of women's independence. As a result of the literary analysis of the two novels, it is demonstrated that the female protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and the March sisters, particularly Jo March, exhibit independence and challenge societal conventions as they progress towards self-awareness, freedom, and agency despite pursuing different paths along the journey.

Key words: women's independence, education, separate spheres, social norms, marriage, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, the March sisters, Jo March.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Historical Context of Women's Position in the Nineteenth Century.....	3
English society	3
American society.....	13
The representation of female independence in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	26
The representation of female independence in <i>Little Women</i>	43
Conclusion.....	58
Bibliography	63

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, women's standing in society became a topic of interest for several female authors. Those authors utilized their works to assess gender roles and social limitations imposed on women. Furthermore, the authors of that era created compelling female characters willing to stand up to society with their actions, viewpoints, and ambitions, defending their right to autonomy and respecting their feminine dignity. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* were two critical texts that contributed to the change in women's social status in the nineteenth-century patriarchal culture by highlighting women's independence and gender inequality. According to Gunn (2017), in both *Little Women* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the female characters were placed in rigidly patriarchal settings, yet they managed to “discover ways of defining spaces and meaning without men” (5).

The thesis aims to examine the paths taken by the heroines in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* in their pursuit of independence. It analyses whether the female protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and the March sisters, demonstrate their independent spirit and challenge societal conventions as they progress toward self-awareness, freedom, and agency despite having individual paths in such a journey.

The thesis has been divided into several chapters. The first section of this paper introduces the historical context of women's position in American and English societies in the nineteenth century. This chapter aims to shed light on the societal limitations that middle-class women experience during this period of time to characterize the roles that “true ladies” are expected to perform within a patriarchal society. It also deals with the disparity between women's standing in England and

America by exploring the factors that have contributed to such a difference. As a result of this detailed analysis of the historical backdrop, this chapter will determine whether women were limited in their independence and how the conventional framework contributes to the growth of the community of female authors such as Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott, who begin to reflect the shortcomings of society by creating powerful and independent characters, such as Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and the March sisters in *Little Women*, willing challenge the traditional patterns.

In the second chapter, the author of the thesis provides a comprehensive literary analysis of Elizabeth Bennet's independence in *Pride and Prejudice* in light of the historical context of the Regency era. This section aims to determine how Jane Austen's novel portrays the independent spirit of its female protagonist through direct quotations from the novel, the researcher's remarks, and a literature review related to the subject matter.

The third chapter introduces Louisa May Alcott's portrayal of the March girls' independence in *Little Women*. Using the historical background of the Victorian period during the mid-19th century United States of America, the researcher of the paper will investigate how social factors influence the independence of female protagonists in the selected literary work. In this section, the emphasis should be placed on Jo since she is one of the novel's most defining independent heroines. Nevertheless, it is equally important to analyze the journeys taken by other March sisters in order to attain independence. Direct quotations from Louisa May Alcott's novel, the researcher's comments, and a review of relevant literature will be incorporated.

The thesis will be concluded by comparing how *Little Women* and *Pride and Prejudice* depict the main characters' independence.

The Historical Context of Women's Position in the Nineteenth Century

This chapter deals with the social status of women in nineteenth-century society with a particular emphasis on England and the United States of America. Examining the roles and duties of women in the institutions of the countries mentioned above will provide an in-depth analysis of how women's lives are arranged in the middle class as a whole. Furthermore, throughout the study, the portrayal of women's social standing in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* will be frequently examined. In the research process, it will demonstrate how female independence was limited and how authors Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott managed to depict it in their writings.

English society

Attempting to construct a rational sequence of events influencing women's social standing during the nineteenth century and in later decades, one might begin by examining the social structure of English society. Davidoff and Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (cited in Kim 2015, 36) found that industrialization and urbanization, among other changes occurring in England during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, significantly benefited the economy. In light of this, it resulted in the separation of men from the home, which enabled them to focus on the workplace and politics. The concept of *separate spheres* was a term used to describe the traditional ideology of gender segregation, "which inserted women into the domestic space and men into the public" (Boardman 2000, 150). While men were responsible for providing financial security for their families, women were expected to perform household duties, "limiting the range of their interests, knowledge and perspective" (Kim 2015, 25). Even though women played such an essential role in society, they were not permitted

to support themselves autonomously, leaving their future in the hands of male patrons. Even though Christian life's values emphasized "spiritual equality" between the sexes, they also fostered women's submission and dependency on men (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 451). Consequently, the limitations imposed on women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constrained their freedom, independence, and agency.

It is widely acknowledged that women's independence was severely restricted in several aspects of their life. Among these was a woman's personal property. Traditionally, young ladies' property belonged to their fathers before marriage and to their husbands afterwards. Although middle-class and upper-class women were expected to manage household duties, they "received no public, or indeed, economic recognition" (451). Generally, economic recognition referred to the right to own property and financial assets. In the early nineteenth century, women were limited in economic affairs by a lack of education (Okin 1983, 135). Therefore, they could not claim to be involved in the business or possess personal savings or income, which they ceded to their spouses. Only after their husbands' death could women assert their position as "active economic agents" to obtain their property rights (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 272). Yet, despite having a certain level of independence, women, who were engaged in this practice, "risked opprobrium" for themselves by society, whereas men's activity, on the other hand, contributed to raising their social standing (272). According to Okin (1983), "both legal barriers and public opinion prevented such women from engaging in any kind of remunerative work without incurring, at the very least, serious loss of status" (127). Moreover, widows obtaining legitimacy over their property had little to do with being financially independent since they lacked the resources to lead a self-sufficient existence (127).

Nevertheless, the situation regarding female property rights significantly improved following the passage of legislation such as the 1833 Dover Act and the 1870 Married Women's Property Act. Adopting the 1833 Act allowed widows to use their property acquired before marriage while losing their claims to inheritance received through marriage (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 209). In spite of the fact that this law limited women's ability to pursue financial independence, it marked the beginning of improvements by giving women the opportunity to participate in "property arrangements" (209). As the nineteenth century progressed, the 1870 Married Women's Property Act came into effect. Combs (2000) contends that this legislation enabled a married woman to have "the right to control her personal property [...] as well as the right to control the rent from any freehold and copyhold property left to her in wills" (5). Consequently, it could be asserted that women were, albeit partially, closer than ever before to achieving financial independence.

It is noteworthy, however, that in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, set in the early nineteenth century, the heroines, on the contrary, did not enjoy the privilege of having financial independence. One of the novel's plot lines revolved around the issue of possession, or more specifically, which of the characters would inherit a portion of the family estate if Mr. Bennet passed away. Since women were not entitled to equal inheritance rights, none of the Bennet family's possessions, including the land in Longbourn, should be passed to Mrs. Bennet or her daughters but to Mr. Collins, the gentleman following him in the male line of descent. For this particular reason, Mrs. Bennet was so eager to marry Elizabeth to Mr. Collins to secure a small portion of the land for one of her children.

To further explore the social limitations that women were subjected to required a look back to the roles and duties of women at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. As mentioned above, “[m]en were to be active in the world as citizens and entrepreneurs”, while “women were to be dependent, as wives and mothers” (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 450). Following the concept of separate spheres, women’s responsibilities included the duties to “look after their families, bring up children, and run the household” (Hofreiterová 2012, 34). Traditionally, women belonging to the middle and upper classes were not expected to work since men served as “the sole breadwinner[s]” in accordance with the ideology of separate spheres (Karch 2017, 98). Additionally, Kim (2015) argues that having a woman in the home was expected to display the family’s moral principles by conveying an image of innocence and purity to the outside world (37). Eventually, such a domestic woman was known as the “Angel in the house”.

Young ladies needed to acquire a special education to fulfil the role of “Angel in the house” (Hughes 2014). In addition to singling out young girls in a secular society, so-called “accomplishments” also served to allure potential partners (2014). Given that women were considered to be “central to the image of family status”, such occupations as “[t]he arts, drawing, piano playing, and knowledge of French” were necessary to support this image (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 289). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Caroline Bingley remarked on women’s education as follows:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of

walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved (Austen 1992, 35).

Ladies-to-be began their schooling at a very young age. This included the study of religion, which promoted such ideas as “cleanliness and godliness” (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 399). This was fundamentally the basis for perceiving a Regency woman as innocent, pure, and fragile. As Davidoff and Hall (1987) point out, these norms, such as “modesty, keeping the body covered, refusing to directly name its parts and functions, and keeping limbs and voice under control”, were the pillars of nineteenth-century English society’s conception of women’s behaviour (399). It was generally believed that homeschooling was prioritized more since it provided young women with an in-depth understanding of how their lives would unfold in the household (290).

With parents and governesses attempting to encourage girls’ education, young ladies’ “personal behaviour, dress and language became their arena to judge and be judged” (398). The social norms and conventions of the time consistently and harshly criticised and condemned women throughout their lives. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* contained many examples of Elizabeth being frequently criticised by members of an aristocratic society, particularly Caroline Bingley, for instance, as she went to Mr. Bingley’s estate to visit her sick sister while wearing a dirty dress that ended up being soaked during an intense downpour, Elizabeth was criticised for showing “an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum” (Austen 1992, 33). The incident in which Caroline Bingley judged Elizabeth for her opinion regarding the absurdity of female accomplishments was also worth mentioning. As Mrs. Bingley observed, Elizabeth’s questioning of women’s education illustrated that she “is one of those young ladies who seek to

recommend themselves to the other sex, by undervaluing their own [...] it is a paltry device, a very mean art” (37).

Besides family members and governesses, literary works also emphasized the importance of women’s education. The works of authors from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walter Scott, Jane and Ann Taylor, frequently incorporated the concepts relating to female reinforced obedience and dependency on men as well as the praise of domestic lifestyle and raising children (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 398-399). As a result of being exposed to these conventional standards at a young age, women could not question the reasoning behind why such norms were considered acceptable once they reached adulthood. With regard to Jane Austen’s novel, it would be vital to emphasize that although this literary work illustrated the social structure of a patriarchal society, it also highlighted its flaws and shortcomings, such as gender inequality, the prohibition on women’s higher education, and the obligation to find a future spouse (Chang 2014, 77).

Moreover, it should be noted that Jane Austen was not the only female author who addressed the injustices faced by women. The nineteenth century was marked by an increasing number of feminist authors appearing around the world. These women included Harriet Taylor Mill, George Sand, and Margaret Fuller, who advocated for women’s rights, independence, and gender equality. In addition to providing emotional support for women who were confronted with discrediting social culture, this feminist movement also played a critical role in urging reforms in education, politics, and employment, marking the beginning of women’s empowerment.

Taking into consideration the previous paragraphs devoted to women’s education, one could conclude that “women were trained to become wives” (Gunn

2017, 1). The courtship process began in their early to mid-twenties. Based on the hierarchy's rules, a cavalier had to be older than his prospective wife, not only out of notions of dominance but also of practical considerations. As the husband assumed full financial responsibility for his wife, he was required to have sufficient funds to provide her with a comfortable standard of living (Hughes 2014). An example of a conflict portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice* related to this convention. Since Mr. Wickham was unable to support Lydia financially, their marriage was not only unfeasible from a financial perspective but also potentially embarrassing for Lydia's family, which would eventually jeopardise the Bennett family's reputation.

It was widely recognised that marriage was of great importance to both women and men as it was regarded as a "social building block for the middle class" (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 322). Men demonstrated their readiness to be responsible for the family with marriage, while women were considered fully mature individuals (322). In Jane Austen's novel, Charlotte Lucas aspired to marry a wealthy man primarily for the purpose of achieving financial security and social status since marriage "was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (Austen 1992, 105).

Throughout marriage, the extent of each spouse's contribution varied. Following Puritan beliefs, the lady served as her husband's "helpmeet" (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 323). Although women played a critical role in the domestic sphere, they were perceived as accessories whenever men participated in public occasions. The practice was widespread, symbolising masculine dominance, superiority, and authoritarianism. Despite this, this was not always the case. It was common for young men to marry

older women of good fortune and social standing up until the seventeenth century, but by the end of the eighteenth century, this union was condemned and lost its relevance. As a consequence of this pattern, women were eventually viewed as “young, dependent, almost child-like” beings (323).

Despite its importance, marriage also served “both symbol and institution of women’s containment” (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 451). In their literary work *Family Fortunes*, Davidoff and Hall (1987) described a married woman as a “burgeoning garden flower”, which was domesticated and turned “into an indoor pot plant” (451). For many women, marriage constituted a social sphere that forced upon them “its structured dependency and burden of children” (325). Nevertheless, many desperate women sought marriage for pragmatic reasons. For instance, to gain financial security or establish a position of prominence in society. Following Charlotte’s story, the young woman’s hasty decision to wed Mr. Collins was motivated by social pressure stemming from her title as an “old maid” due to her age, who “already feels the effects of looming spinsterhood” (Gunn 2017, 14). Additionally, she was eager to advance socially within the aristocracy. The young lady’s choice illustrated the limited choices available to English women when attempting to establish themselves in a patriarchal society. Besides, it highlighted the precarious position in which women were put when choosing their future partners, which limited their options and placed tremendous pressure on them to live up to social expectations.

Social norms also restricted women’s mobility, compromising their independence and freedom. As travel was an avenue for men to broaden their cultural horizons, which also included acquiring education or working overseas, women were confined exclusively to their domestic sphere (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 405). In light

of the fact that women played such a significant role in the household, the persistence of this occupation was highly valued and preserved. As a result of the limitations placed upon “the physical and social mobility of women” in early nineteenth-century English society, a scope of female interests was further constrained (403). Among the pastimes that ladies could engage in were reading, short journeys, horse riding, strolling, and conversing with family and friends (403). The restrictions, however, applied to even these daily activities. For instance, women were only allowed to travel short distances if they were “accompanied by a man or an older woman” (404). Additionally, Karbach (2017) indicates that young ladies were permitted to converse with male representatives as long as chaperones accompanied them; however, flirtation or advances were prohibited in accordance with the social norms that considered such conduct improper and unacceptable (94). Due to these societal expectations, Lydia’s acts in *Pride and Prejudice* were considered inappropriate. In light of Lydia’s age, it was clear from this social evaluation that she was not permitted to behave promiscuously with men. Elizabeth claimed that her sister’s behaviour would be considered a public humiliation, ruining the Bennet family’s image:

Our importance, our respectability in the world must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character [...] Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself or her family ridiculous. A flirt too, in the worst and meanest degree of flirtation; without any attraction beyond youth and a tolerable person (Austen 1992, 196).

Further, if a woman dedicated a great deal of her time to “intellectual pursuits”, she could “be called a blue-stocking” (Hudges 2014). As portrayed in *Pride and*

Prejudice, Maria appeared more concerned with self-education than seeking a potential partner, a trait which was opposed by her sister Lydia. Since women were expected to “preserve their femininity and never surpass their husbands in knowledge”, it was likely that behaviour of this kind would be condemned by society (Karbach 2017, 93). Nevertheless, a woman was allowed to engage in intellectual activities as long as it pleased her husband, thereby “making her a better listener for male company” (93).

To conclude the discussion regarding women's social standing in late eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century England, it would be necessary to emphasize that the social structure to which women belonged severely restricted their independence and agency. “Women’s independent action”, which deviated from generally accepted conventions, was not only considered inappropriate; it was also “denounced as ‘unwomanly’, ‘unsexed’ or ‘strongminded’” (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 451). However, as time progressed, the situation began to improve, and more women, including literary heroines, became aware of their oppression and expressed their dissatisfaction. With their wit and the sharpness of their minds, women could defend their positions and affirm their independence. Among these women is the protagonist of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, whose character will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent chapters. Prior to this, however, it would be necessary to turn attention to the following country, the United States of America, whose author created an acclaimed literary work known as *Little Women*. Since Louisa May Alcott's novel takes place between the mid to late nineteenth century, this narrative will provide an overview of the historical background of women's social standing in American society within this timeframe.

American society

As part of the exploration of the social limitations imposed upon American women during the nineteenth century, one might require an in-depth analysis of the historical period that marked the beginning of radical changes in the history of the United States, such as “industrialization, knowledge explosion, immigration and vast population growth, urbanization, geographical expansion, changing race relationships, and the greatest armed conflict on American soil” (Howe 1975, 507). This period of time became known as American Victorianism, which lasted from 1837 to 1901 during the reign of British Queen Victoria. Despite gaining official autonomy and independence from Britain, the United States of America remained divided and heavily influenced by “Anglo-American relations”, especially within the economic and cultural spheres (508). Among the reasons for this residual connection to British culture was American desperate search for its “proper national identity” (508). Notably, American Victorianism “shared a predominantly British-American [...] heritage” in its early stages (520). However, cultural diversity and later historical events contributed to the emergence of a unique American culture that proved to be substantially different from the British one (520).

One of the pillars of Victorian philosophy was the “cult of domesticity” (529). The American family and household evolved significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. Howe (1975) argued that “[t]he emphasis shifted from the home as a place of productive activity to the home as a place of family community”, where women performed a key role as moral figures for their families (530). In fact, American society promoted “the exaltation of motherhood” as part of its cult of domesticity (530). It would crucial to acknowledge the importance of women’s status

in American households since they served as “agent[s] of cultural transmission” to their families as well as being an integral part of its hearth and morality (530). In Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, which was set in the 1860s, Marmee, the matriarch of the March family, fulfilled this moral duty. Despite her young ladies’ hardships throughout the literary work, their mother was always encouraging and available to provide unwavering emotional support to her daughters.

Nevertheless, it would be essential to take into consideration the assertion provided by some historians, including Catharine Beecher, that the cult of domesticity had an impact on “enhancing the dignity of womanhood” (cited in Howe 1975, 530). According to Beecher, the Victorian sphere of domestic life influenced the change in the status of women by providing them with greater opportunities for separation “from their traditional subjugation” (530). Consequently, women were granted a voice in the “religious, educational, and reform” fields, which contributed to the increasing respect they received as “moral preceptors within the framework of Victorian didacticism” (530).

Adopting strict “moral, didactic, and patriarchal approaches to life” within society was another crucial component of American Victorianism (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 7). According to Victorian philosophy, the only way to raise the standard of living in the community was to dedicate oneself to diligent work and endure hardships. Due to this assumption, it was concluded that “[s]entimentalism and emotional expression” had no place in the workplace since these feelings were confined to the home, which was under women’s control (7). It was argued that people with “self-discipline and restraint” would contribute positively to Victorian society, which led to character development becoming a social value (7-8). Neither women nor men were exempt from this rule. In light of the fact that these norms and standards were imposed

on them at a very young age, young ladies and gentlemen had to adapt to them. In addition, these interpretations of Victorian life profoundly impacted literary works, which conveyed the values of hardship. Throughout *Little Women*, Marmee encouraged her children to work hard, believing that by putting in much effort, women could achieve independence (Rivas 2014, 58):

Then let me advise you to take up your little burdens again, for though they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them. Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone. It keeps us from ennui and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion (Alcott 2016, 151-152).

American Victorianism also promoted the concept of separate spheres, discussed in the previous section regarding women's position in English society. Due to the Victorian belief that men and women were completely different, separate spheres represented the idea of dividing them into specific occupation fields that limited their scope of interests, despite shared ideals, such as "moral purity, self-improvement, hard work, genteel behavior, and [...] self-reliance" (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 12). Consequently, the cult of female sentimentalism and emotionality enforced by society was inadequate in the context of male pursuits, resulting in the assumption that women would be more concerned with running the household and bringing up children, while men would be expected to take an active role in public affairs (8-9).

It is crucial to recognize, however, that while the ideology of separate spheres preserved the patriarchal view that women were subordinate and dependent upon men, it allowed them to have "an area of authority (the home) and an expertise (domesticity

and morality)” (8-9). Additionally, it provided a platform for women to speak out “in regard to either those shared values or their separate sphere”, which contributed to the creation of strong bonds between female communities from various social strata (13). Macdonald (1999) believed that this positively impacted the later establishment of “voluntary associations and campaigning groups” devoted primarily to tackling “antislavery, religion, welfare, and alcohol abuse” (14).

Similar to Britain, the American ideology of separate spheres was a result of industrialization. Due to the relocation of economic income transferred from households to factories, men were separated from the domestic sphere, leaving the responsibility of household duties to women. In addition, since the economic resources derived from production were in the hands of men, this created a difficult situation for both women and children. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the position of women in society improved significantly through, for instance, granting them the right to work, but it did leave a negative mark on the concept of separate spheres as such. The woman question was brought to the public’s attention by women themselves, even though a wide range of opinions were expressed during this discussion. Some women of conservative view claimed that their social status was not a subject of subordination, given the importance of their role, while other liberal women criticized the system, alleging gender inequity and discrimination (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 8-9).

These opposing perspectives were referred to as the “Cult of True Womanhood” and the “Vision of New Womanhood” (10). During the antebellum period, the United States of America was evolving at a phenomenal rate, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, yet the cult of True Womanhood persisted within society as one of its enduring narratives. It claimed that “a true woman was a true woman” who was supposed to “uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand” (Welter 1966,

152). Conservatives claimed that women were intellectually incapable and “were assigned by God and nature to their separate sphere of activity and should rejoice in that” (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 9). Since this narrative was not only spread within domestic circles but also through women’s magazines, sermons, and literary works, this ideology had a broad audience of devotees (10).

The concept of True Womanhood was based on four pillars: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 1966, 152). It is crucial to note that, despite a woman’s accomplishments and pursuits, she was not considered the True Woman unless she failed to adhere to at least one of these characteristics (152). In addition, if a lady deviated from this philosophy, she was deemed unfeminine, abnormal, and boyish, in other words, a “fallen woman” (154). Although men were also expected to comply with Victorian beliefs, they were not obligated to do so when it came to duties assigned explicitly to women. Louisa May Alcott’s novel reflected on these social norms, subtly criticizing them to a certain extent through her female characters. In order to demonstrate that young ladies’ lives revolved primarily around their domestic sphere, which severely restricted their independence to pursue their ambitions, the author created the character of Jo. As seen in chapter 21, Teddy asked Jo whether she was interested in taking a trip to Washington. Despite the sweetness of the proposal, Jo bitterly declined it, saying: “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. Don’t tempt me [...] ‘Prunes and prisms’ are my doom” (Alcott 2016, 273).

In view of the fact that young women’s choices were always under severe observation within and outside the home, it is crucial to acknowledge that, in accordance with the idea of True Womanhood, they were practically deprived of the right to act independently without being condemned by the public. Despite these

constraints, unlike their British sisters, American women had the opportunity to adopt an alternative way of thinking, shifting from the utopian ideals of the cult of True Woman and embracing the modern ideas of New Woman. As the nineteenth century progressed, “[t]he movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War” affected the shift among female communities (Welter 1966, 174). Eventually, this radical change in female vision was referred to as the New Womanhood, “a transformation as startling in its way as the abolition of slavery or the coming of the machine age” (174).

The concept of New Woman, which emerged in the antebellum era but gained widespread acceptance following the Civil War, suggested that women “were morally superior to men and valued family relations, but could and should be as self-reliant and competent as men” (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 9). Unlike conservatives, liberals were of the belief that the domestic sphere should not restrict women’s rights but rather establish conditions based on “nurturance, love, and morality” while eliminating social concepts such as female dependency and submission (9-10). Furthermore, the liberal message advocated that women should be granted a legitimate right to participate in society outside of their homes as well as achieve independence within the domestic sphere. Additionally, based on the new philosophy, this decision was not supposed to be considered adverse by society, regardless of whether it required a woman to abandon the domestic sphere completely in order to establish herself in society (12-13).

During this period, many suffragists argued that “women were, most importantly, human beings like men with aspirations for achievement and only incidentally wives and mothers with their special responsibilities” (12). A primary goal of the Vision of New Womanhood was to spread the message of “the justification for

women's participation in many new areas of society" in which their opportunities were severely restricted, such as the fields of employment, politics, and culture (10). Over the nineteenth century, an increasing number of male and female individuals lost faith in the cult of True Woman and adopted the more progressive Vision of New Woman. With an expanding base of supporters, its public actions started to yield results, significantly impacting how women's social standing changed in American culture over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One of the most notable effects of this transformation was the change in working conditions for women. Until the early nineteenth century, most women worked at home, tackling household chores such as "cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and helping husbands or fathers run family businesses or farms" (Macdonald 1999, 10). While upper-class women had servants—and "in the South, slaves"—who handled most of the domestic tasks, middle-class women generally did not have the luxury of employing servants to assist them with household responsibilities (10). Therefore, ordinary women were responsible for performing physically demanding tasks independently. Women's work was not rewarded either way, despite the class disparity in the amount of labour carried out, as women were regarded as mere "junior partners in the shared family enterprise" whose share was not even up for discussion within the family (10). The situation, however, would change once the first manufacturing facilities began popping up in England in the twenties of the nineteenth century (11).

As a consequence of the technological advances, "ordinary women's pattern of working" also changed (11). As a result, women began working side by side with men, receiving a monthly fixed salary. However, DuBois (1975) argued that women's factory life was regarded as "a brief episode before marriage" came into the scene (64).

At the time, women occupied the majority of jobs “in the food-processing, clothing, footwear, cigar-making, and printing trades” (Macdonald 1999, 12).

It would be also important to consider the role of women during the Civil War. In the absence of their fathers and brothers, women assumed all men’s jobs, provided for their families, and managed the household (21). Throughout *Little Women*, Mrs. March was portrayed as a mother raising four daughters while her husband was away fighting in the war. Since the female members of the family performed all household chores, each girl felt obligated to stay positive during hardship and continue to work hard to overcome obstacles for the sake of their family’s welfare. Chapter 1 discussed how the girls planned to spend the money they had earned. Megan, nevertheless, recommended her sisters to refrain from spending a penny, explaining the reasons:

You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it’s going to be a hard winter for everyone, and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly (Alcott 2016, 5).

Even though women were not permitted to serve in the armed forces, they were determined to take every opportunity to contribute to the war effort. The majority of women eventually joined the army as nurses, while others pursued creative endeavours and wrote literary works describing the horrors of war. Some “daring women disguised themselves as men” to join the front line (Macdonald 1999, 20-21). The Civil War showed that women “could be just as brave, hard-working, and responsible as men”, regardless of the image of feminine vulnerability and fragility perpetuated by society (21). However, women continued to be treated as “second-class citizens” even

following the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 (22). Consequently, after the Civil War, feminist movements agitating for gender equality and voting rights for women “took up the struggle once more” (21).

Along with the ongoing struggle for their right to vote, women fought against oppressive state laws that restricted their independence. The most prominent areas of discrimination were “marriage, education, and careers” (23). Although women had the privilege of working in antebellum America, it was regarded as “a brief intermission before marriage” due to the perception that “the domestic ideal was still marriage”, according to the cult of True Woman (Laire 2009, 7). The fact that women were free to choose their partners in response to their preferences provided them with a certain level of autonomy, yet “true independency was still very difficult to obtain” (7). Due to widespread recognition that marriage was “the basis of a well-run society”, many women encouraged the idea of getting married, having children, and living happily ever after while being subordinate to their husbands (Macdonald 1999, 24). The Civil War demonstrated that women could be equally self-sufficient as men, thereby making this antebellum ideal obsolete. While the family as a social unit “continued to perform many important social functions”, a woman’s life no longer revolved exclusively around her private sphere (DuBois 1975, 64). This shift in women’s thinking occurred in the 1860s and 1870s, leading to new social roles available for women in the public arena that were “not defined by their subordinate position within” marriage (64).

During Louisa May Alcott’s time, the ideal of True Womanhood evolved into the ideology of New Womanhood, which the author exemplified through her two main heroines in *Little Women*, Meg and Jo. The novel portrayed Meg as a young woman

concerned about maintaining her position as a lady, and any deviation from this idealized model of behaviour was against her principles (Asriyanti, Arafah, and Abbas 2022, 793). She was also constrained within a social frame that limited her ambitions owing to “[f]ear of losing femininity” (793). As an ordinary woman, Meg wished to eventually get married and start a family to fulfil her domestic duties and the joy of being a housewife. Therefore, Meg could be considered a symbol of the True Woman, as illustrated by this sentence:

I should like a lovely house [...] I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit. How I should enjoy it! For I wouldn't be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly (Alcott 2016, 183-184).

As opposed to her sister, Jo had no intention of conforming to the social norms defined by the patriarchal society. Despite her upbringing in this traditional environment, Jo was determined to escape the domestic sphere shortly to achieve independence (Asriyanti, Arafah, and Abbas 2022, 793). Thus, the young girl could be considered the New Woman, given the following:

I'm the one that will have to fight and work [...] I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all, some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favourite dream (Alcott 2016, 182-184).

According to Macdonald (1999), feminist activists advocated providing women with “the chance to have an independent role outside marriage” in addition to granting them equal rights in the private sphere (24). Due to the development of the cult of severe femininity and elegance in society, women were expected to conform to these

idealistic standards by all means, sacrificing their emotional and physical well-being due to constant judgment from their communities and discomfort with their uncomfortable gowns and corsets. Feminists of the late sixties and early seventies advocated for women's clothing that resembled men's mainly because they considered it more practical, particularly for women living in the South of America (27).

Besides improving the domestic sphere, the reforms significantly impacted education. The American educational system underwent dramatic changes towards the end of the Victorian era. In traditional society, women were not encouraged to pursue "an academic education" due to the belief that men were expected to perform "an active, decision-making role in society" rather than women (28). However, feminists opposed this traditional viewpoint and called for changes to the educational framework for women. Women's rights campaigns were largely founded on the belief that women required education "to lead interesting lives, or follow well-paid careers, without having to depend on men" (28). Despite the presence of so-called "feminine subjects, such as music, needlework, and art" in schools, the humanities and scientific fields of expertise were also emphasized as part of the girls' overall development (28).

Regarding the career opportunities available to women at that time, teaching was considered one of the most promising (Laire 2009, 7). There was a widespread view among teachers that "they had a duty to help girls develop their minds, fulfill their ambitions, and escape from a life of housework or boring, badly paid jobs" (Macdonald 1999, 29). However, women's ambitions to advance in other professions, particularly in traditional "male" occupations, "such as engineering, medicine, or law", were still restricted (28-29).

The position of women authors is also worth mentioning. While “[t]he innovations in printing and in women’s education” contributed to the growth of the American female authors’ community, they were also constrained by a specific set of rules that profoundly affected the narrative of their writing (Howe 1975, 530). Moreover, as Victorian culture controlled “the ambiguous nature of cultural messages”, women authors were essentially “rendered [...] invisible” within society during the antebellum period (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 7). Consequently, one could notice a relatively conservative position in many works of women authors of the Victorian era, especially with regard to the portrayal of female characters. Many of these authors emphasized the importance of “genteel manners, hard work, and the social importance of familial ties” to build young ladies’ character (8).

Nevertheless, as the feminist movement achieved greater recognition, themes related to women’s independence and empowerment, as well as gender equality, began to be addressed more frequently in the works of female authors. Some of the most popular authors between the 1840s and the 1880s included Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Abigail Dodge, Margaret Fuller, and Louisa May Alcott (2-3). Despite the writers’ increasing popularity among women, they were still subjected to a great deal of criticism, especially from the male audience. In light of the literary creativity and intelligence of their writings, women authors were often referred to as “bluestockings” and “strong-minded women” (16).

To conclude the discussion regarding the status of women in the mid and late nineteenth century in the United States, it would be worthwhile to observe that, in contrast with early nineteenth-century England, American women were indeed given greater opportunities to participate in the public sphere. Over the nineteenth century, an increasing number of women rejected the ideals of the cult of the True Woman in

favour of a philosophy that was more liberal, the Vision of New Womanhood. Consequently, women were given a chance to express their dissatisfaction with their subordinate role within the domestic sphere and demonstrate that they were independent and self-sufficient individuals not bound by traditional gender beliefs. In addition, the nineteenth century marked the emergence of an enormous new audience of women authors who significantly changed the creative course of their works of literature by depicting strong and ambitious female characters willing to challenge conventional Victorian norms. Among these heroines was Jo March, the main character in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. With her restless attitude and aspirations to become a widely recognized author, she was able to defy patriarchal culture and attain independence. Jo was joined by her sisters in striving to be independent individuals with their own personal goals. However, one might take a step back before analyzing the portrayal of female independence in the novel *Little Women* by initially examining Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, whose representation of independence will be discussed in the following chapter.

The representation of female independence in *Pride and Prejudice*

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Elizabeth Bennet's independence as the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. After discussing the historical background of women's position in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the first chapter, the focus of this section is mainly directed at the heroine herself, Elizabeth, who defies conventional norms of women's behaviour within society in order to demonstrate her independent spirit. Besides challenging traditional patterns, she remains faithful to her convictions and beliefs throughout the journey. To conduct an in-depth analysis of the selected novel, the author of the paper will frequently employ direct quotations from Jane Austen's work.

During the early nineteenth century, when Jane Austen's works were published, English women were expected to stay at home in order to perform domestic duties since “[w]omen were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men”, making them a good fit for the household sphere (Hughes 2014). In view of the fact that they were required to remain at home, their “property rights, legal rights, or control over their own destinies” were mainly in the hands of men (Chang 2014, 77). Women were severely limited in their rights to establish relationships with their lives due to traditional duties and expectations imposed by society, such as selecting a future partner, controlling their conduct, having children and raising them, and self-educating. Additionally, young ladies “were trained to become wives” as marriage was regarded as the only available opportunity for them to achieve financial security and social status (Gunn 2017, 1).

When Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published, the author “needed to adhere, within reason, to the patriarchal societal rules and conventions of the time”

(Long 2022, 81). In order to express her dissatisfaction with the women's position and the constraints imposed upon them by social norms and expectations that limited their freedom, the author had to seek a means of addressing this issue. Arguably, through writing her novel in a satirical tone, Jane Austen managed to create powerful and opinionated female protagonists who were not hesitant to stand for their viewpoints and influence their fate (Chang 2014, 77).

Elizabeth Bennet, one of the main female characters in the novel, is a literate and perceptive individual who acknowledges her dignity and self-worth, and, despite other people's perspectives, remains committed to her thoughts, beliefs, and judgments. In addition to pursuing her interests regarding marriage, Elizabeth defies conventional patterns and challenges established norms of women's behaviour in society. Therefore, the young woman could be considered a figure representing female independence.

Prior to discussing the truth of this assertion, one must, however, initially define Elizabeth's position as a female character in the novel. Jane Austen (1992) portrays Elizabeth as a complex individual with "an abominable sort of conceited independence" (33). Despite not possessing Jane's classical beauty, the young lady distinguishes herself among her relatives and the aristocratic society by virtue of her sharpness of mind, wit, and self-confidence. In one of the novel's final chapters, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy discuss his choice in selecting her as the woman he wishes to marry. Upon demonstrating that she does not seek his approval through flattery, she contends that she is the first woman to have altered his arrogant behaviour through "the liveliness of [her] mind" (318). By defying gender conventions and standing up for what she values, Elizabeth has further defended her independence and dignity:

The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them* (318).

Elizabeth's independent spirit is illuminated in varying degrees by each character in the novel, based on their relationship with her. In her description of the young lady, Caroline Bingley states:

Eliza Bennet [...] is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But, in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art (37).

As for Elizabeth's unwillingness to marry Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet defines her as "a very headstrong, foolish girl" who "does not know her own interest" (96). Consequently, Mr. Collins responds as follows:

[B]ut if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation [...] if liable to such defects of temper, she could not contribute much to my felicity (96).

It might be worthwhile to consider Lady Catherine's viewpoint as well. She believes the young woman "give[s] [her] opinion very decidedly for so young a person" (140). However, the narrative gradually changes the older woman's perspective on Elizabeth. Through Elizabeth's acceptance of Mr. Darcy's proposal, Lady Catherine suggests the lady's independence reveals her lack of education and

manners on account of her refusal “to obey the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude” and reject his marriage (300).

Although Elizabeth is subjected to relentless criticism from society, it is her independent nature that ultimately draws the attention of a man as proud as Mr. Darcy, as he states in the following quotation:

What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased (308-310).

Furthermore, Mr. Darcy’s sister also believes that “a woman may take liberties with her husband”, as Elizabeth demonstrates this principle in her relationship with Mr. Darcy (324). The significance of Elizabeth’s independence could be further reinforced by including Mr. Bennet’s assessment of his daughter’s intention to accept Mr. Darcy’s hand. The patriarch of the Bennet family asserts that Elizabeth cannot be contentedly married unless her right to equality and freedom is guaranteed:

I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery (315).

Since Elizabeth stands up for what she believes and contests prevalent assumptions regarding women, it is reasonable to presume she could be defined as a feminist character. According to Cano and Lesley (2022), the young lady experiences

an inner conflict “between moral justice and societal stigmas” that promote male superiority over women (10). Nevertheless, Chang (2014) emphasizes that Elizabeth’s position does not exemplify “feminism in the extreme sense”; rather, it illustrates how a female character can maintain her dignity while asserting independence from social constraints (76-77).

Given the patriarchal nature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one must wonder how Jane Austen’s heroine succeeds in displaying a sense of independence. Nonetheless, when addressing Elizabeth’s autonomy, one predominantly means her intellectual independence since complete independence remains unheard of in Regency times. Morgan (1975) asserts in her study “Intelligence in *Pride and Prejudice*”, that Elizabeth’s actions do not represent “a rejection of society even though [...] they are related to her sense of personal freedom” (57). The heroine’s intellectual independence is not demonstrated by opposing the aristocracy directly. By contrast, it is justified by the desire for “a freedom from becoming involved” in social structures established within a male-dominated paradigm in which men are viewed as being superior to women (57). While Elizabeth’s remarks may appear sarcastic, she remains “an intelligent observer of her world,” believing that “understanding, intelligence, perception” are the critical elements to achieving her independence (57). Nevertheless, society regards the girl’s behaviour as inappropriate since this approach breaks the normal scope of scenarios.

The question of marriage appears frequently throughout the work since “[i]t is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1992, 3). Due to the limitations of women’s options, marriage considers one of the few ways to establish themselves at that time. During

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, marriage “[is] the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune” to guarantee their security and stability (105). The novel illustrates the traditional pattern of women striving to marry as soon as possible to conform to the domestic sphere. In the case of Elizabeth, however, she feels inclined “to override the community’s norms and defy prejudice” (Cano and Lesley 2022, 10). Hence, to verify this assertion, it would be necessary to shift attention to one of the novel’s other female characters, Charlotte Lucas, to analyze how the heroines’ perspectives on marriage differ.

When analyzing Charlotte’s situation, it is vital to consider that “marriage had always been her object” (Austen 1992, 105). She aspires to be “well married” because of her financial struggles to develop a reputation as an individual in society and achieve stability (20). According to her, neither happiness nor love is equated with marriage since “[h]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance [...] and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life” (21). The decision made by the young woman illustrates the limited options available to women if they wish to establish themselves in an aristocratic society. Besides, it indicates the helpless situation in which women are placed when selecting their future husbands, forcing them to conform to social convictions and expectations:

I [Charlotte] am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state (108).

To remain loyal to her judgements and beliefs, Elizabeth cannot agree with her friend’s viewpoint since she has an entirely different perspective on marriage – she

does not intend to marry only for pragmatic reasons such as social status and wealth. With this approach, she demonstrates a strong sense of self-worth and autonomy:

She [Elizabeth] had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she had not supposed it to be possible that, when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage. Charlotte the wife of Mr. Collins was a most humiliating picture! And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen (108).

While Elizabeth does not oppose marriage in its broadest sense, she does criticize the circumstances under which women are forced to marry. While Elizabeth's inner circle, including Charlotte and Mrs. Bennet, urge her to seek a partner based on practical considerations, she persists in her desire to find a partner with whom she can share a marriage primarily based on love, shared values, and mutual respect. In chapter 50, Elizabeth draws an analogy between her relationship with Mr. Darcy and that of Mr. Wickham and Lydia. The young woman believes that marriage to Mr. Darcy "must have been to the advantage of both" owing to the couple's "tolerable independence" developed during the course of their romantic relationship (259-260). As Elizabeth states in her remark:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her [...] by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance (259-260).

Chang (2014) asserts that Elizabeth's struggle to overcome the stereotypical notion of "the typical female fixation on marriage" is evident throughout *Pride and Prejudice* (81). Among the defining moments concerning this phenomenon is Mr. Collins' marriage proposal. It appears from Mr. Collins' confession that his motives to marry Elizabeth are primarily pragmatic due to his obligations to his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Since Elizabeth does not intend to satisfy either Lady Catherine or Mr. Collins, and if she were to do so, all of her principles and beliefs would be questioned, such as her commitment to marry for love. Therefore, "it is impossible for [her] to do otherwise than decline" his proposal (Austen 1992, 91). In addition to pursuing her interests regarding marriage, Elizabeth defies conventions and challenges established norms of women's behaviour in society by refusing to marry a wealthy man. Despite her opponent's counterarguments, Elizabeth intends to convince him that her decision has already been made and cannot be altered. However, Mr. Collins is confident that the young woman will reconsider her decision and ultimately accept his proposal since Elizabeth's "portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your [Elizabeth's] loveliness and amiable qualifications", in Mr. Collins's opinion (94). Elizabeth, however, states that she will not abide by these rules as follows:

I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so. [...] You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say (92).

Mr. Collins contends that a woman's sole means of ensuring her position and security is through a wealthy husband:

My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration, [...] it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you (92-94).

Nevertheless, Elizabeth is determined not to marry only for practical reasons such as social standing and prosperity to remain faithful to her judgments and opinions. She is displaying a strong sense of independence in this way:

I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. [...] My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart (94).

It is also critical to discuss Elizabeth's independence in relation to her marriage convictions by referring to Mr. Darcy's first proposal, which the young woman reasonably rejects. Elizabeth does not intend to acknowledge Mr. Darcy's affection despite his earnest confession, as she has "every reason in the world to think ill of" him (164). It is evident from her assessment that the young woman is dedicated to upholding her dignity due to the fact that Mr. Darcy has been the first man to insult her at the onset of their interaction disrespectfully:

I might as well inquire, [...] why with so evident a desire of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will,

against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse of incivility, if I *was* uncivil (163-164).

Similarly, Elizabeth is reluctant to overlook Mr. Darcy's interference in Jane's personal affairs since he is “the man who has been the means of ruining [...] the happiness of a most beloved sister”, which causes her to disapprove of his actions (164). Elizabeth's response to this matter demonstrates her commitment to pursuing her interests, which concern her sister's welfare.

Besides following her feelings, Elizabeth also defies conventions and challenges gender assumptions regarding how women should conduct themselves by refusing to marry a wealthy gentleman. This is further clarified in Elizabeth's subsequent comment:

From the very beginning, from the first moment, I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form the ground-work of disapprobation on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry (166).

As Cohen (1994) points out, Elizabeth's steadfast stance in this dialogue is an indication of her “self-confidence and self-knowledge”, which she does not intend to conceal (6). By expressing her opinion, the young woman also violates “the conventional behavior associated with good manners and agreeable discourse”, which is relatively uncommon for women during the Regency period (6-7). In light of this,

one might argue that Elizabeth acts independently since she is determined to retain her unfeminine traits (Long 2022, 83).

Elizabeth also remains firm in her position during her conversation with Lady Catherine about the young lady's decision to accept Mr. Darcy's second proposal. In addition to affecting the trajectory of her life, Elizabeth's choice also frustrates Lady Catherine's intention for her daughter to marry Mr. Darcy. Consequently, Lady Catherine accuses the young woman of being the cause of this issue. In implying that lower-class women should not marry men from higher classes, Lady Catherine condemns Elizabeth for her social inferiority within the aristocratic society to which the governess belongs:

[W]e planned the union: and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished in their marriage, to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family! [...] The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. [...] If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up. [...] You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us (Austen 1992, 296-298).

Despite being socially inferior to her interlocutor, Elizabeth is determined to express her viewpoint regarding Lady Catherine's interference in the young woman's private affairs. By refusing to disclose her marital status to Lady Catherine, who considers it appropriate to insult her, Elizabeth demonstrates a solid commitment to respecting her dignity. The willingness of Elizabeth to pursue her interests despite

Lady Catherine's disapproval demonstrates her independence in challenging social expectations:

I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. [...] In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal. [...] Whatever my connections may be, [...] if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you. [...] You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. [...] How far your nephew might approve of your interference in *his* affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine (296-299).

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* reveals Elizabeth's literate and perceptive nature as a self-sufficient individual. The protagonist of the novel commits to her thoughts, judgments, and beliefs despite societal norms and expectations. As well as demonstrating self-worth, Elizabeth acknowledges her value and power in such circumstances.

In the novel, Elizabeth also conveys a "protest against female idealization", particularly in the context of women's conduct and education (Cohen 1994, 6). With the independent thinking of her heroine, Jane Austen challenges the widely held pattern that women are expected to attract prospective spouses through "artificial accomplishments" (6). One must examine a discussion in *Pride and Prejudice* to understand Elizabeth's inner conflict regarding the idealistic standards of women's behaviour. Chapter 8 describes a dispute concerning women's accomplishments. Contrasting men's and women's viewpoints on this topic is vital since they have

distinct perspectives. It is the opinion of the male party, in particular Mr. Darcy, that an accomplished woman not only needs to “have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages”, but “she must [...] add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (Austen 1992, 35). Elizabeth, however, strongly objects to the claim since she “never saw such a woman [...] never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you [Mr. Darcy] describe, united” (35). It comes as no surprise to Elizabeth that the young man “cannot boast of knowing more than half-a-dozen, in the whole range of my [Mr. Darcy’s] acquaintance, that are really accomplished” (35). According to Elizabeth, women cannot be considered adequately accomplished within the idealized standards imposed by patriarchal society. By disputing Mr. Darcy’s opinion on the matter of women’s education, the young lady demonstrates her independence.

In addition, it is equally important to acknowledge the importance of the heroine’s parents in cultivating her independent nature. In the early nineteenth century, as the chapter on English women’s position noted, parents and governesses played a significant role in young girls’ academic development. Younger generations of women were mostly influenced by the environment in which they were raised. Jane Austen emphasizes the difference between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s values that they instil in their daughters to illustrate the parents’ impact on Elizabeth’s independent character in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mrs. Bennet represents an antagonistic character in the story. She is more concerned with ensuring her daughters’ marriages are grounded in practical considerations than mutual love, respect, and, most importantly, their welfare. As Long (2022) asserts, the reason for this woman’s intentions lies in the lack of opportunities

for women “for supporting themselves, apart from marriage or becoming a governess” (82). In addition to imposing these ideas onto her daughters, she tends to disregard their feelings and ambitions due to her obsession with finding them wealthy partners. It is through Elizabeth that Jane Austen exposes the criticism of “the social convention of securing a good marriage on economic grounds” (Chang 2014, 77). Although the young woman eventually marries a wealthy man, Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth does so out of love rather than pragmatic factors. In the eyes of the matriarch of the Bennet family, Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins’ proposal proves that she ‘will never get a husband at all’ (Austen 1992, 98). As for Elizabeth, she remains committed to her beliefs and principles “sometimes with real earnestness and sometimes with playful gaiety”, despite Mrs. Bennet’s attempts to manipulate her daughter’s emotions by stating that she has “no pleasure in talking to undutiful children” (97-98). Consequently, it can be concluded that women are expected to marry to fulfil their duties during the Regency period. In violating this task, Elizabeth represents her independent spirit.

While Mr. Bennet adheres to patriarchal norms, he does not support his wife’s wishes to “make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins” (96). In his view, forcing Elizabeth to marry a wealthy man she does not respect would ruin the life of his beloved daughter. This marriage could indeed enhance the family’s financial situation and social standing within the community; however, he intends to sacrifice it to ensure the well-being of his favourite daughter. Long (2022) claims that Elizabeth’s “father appreciates her intelligence and independence” even though these traits “were not the qualities of an ideal lady”, by allowing her to pursue her endeavours (83):

An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again

if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do* (Austen 1992, 97).

It is necessary to compare Elizabeth's personality with Jane's prior to arriving at a conclusion regarding Elizabeth's independence throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. It appears that Jane is "a typical Regency-era woman", acting according to the expectations of what is considered "the ideal woman" (Chang 2014, 79). Jane struggles to admit her love for Mr. Bingley throughout the novel due to conventional beliefs that young ladies are expected to suppress their emotions "in order to secure a husband" (79). It is evident from Austen's work that Jane Bennet is unable to find happiness due to the social restrictions imposed on her behaviour. Further, despite her deep affection for Elizabeth, Jane frequently fails to comprehend the reasons for Elizabeth's independent actions, advising her not to "give way to such feelings as these. They will ruin your [Elizabeth's] happiness" (Austen 1992, 116).

While Jane's actions are dictated by her emotions, Elizabeth's behaviour is guided by her wisdom and prudence. Having gained an understanding of how an aristocratic society truly functions, she is unwilling to adhere to its rules. It emphasizes numerous occasions in the novel when the protagonist rejects these socially established expectations of women's behaviour. In chapter 10, Elizabeth's refusal to dance with Mr. Darcy illustrates it. In refusing to dance with anyone who disrespects her, she demonstrates her commitment to preserving her dignity:

You wanted me, I know, to say "Yes", that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have,

therefore, made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all - and now despise me if you dare (47).

Regardless of their differences, each sister feels responsible for ensuring the well-being of the other. For instance, Elizabeth understands Jane's vulnerability with "all loveliness and goodness as she is" and her inability to advocate for herself within society (160). In addition to serving as her sister's primary protector, Elizabeth stands up for her in need in front of a judgmental public, including Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley, thus proving to be an independent young woman.

A conclusion to this chapter might be made by observing that Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrates an exceptional degree of independence in various aspects of her daily life. Throughout the novel, the young woman expresses her critical viewpoint regarding the limitations placed on women in areas such as marriage, behaviour, and education. In this way, Elizabeth is presented to readers as an intellectual, morally upright individual who seeks to stand up for her ideals and remains determined towards the end of the literary work. Austen's novel also emphasizes that Elizabeth does not appear to be a typical middle-class woman, embracing her independence despite patriarchal principles, as evidenced by her interactions with other male characters and her contrasted values with those of other female characters. Considering that the early nineteenth century in England is characterized by a social framework that is much stricter than the latter half of the century in America, Elizabeth's independence in *Pride and Prejudice* is presented from a different perspective than the March sisters' independence in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the disclosure of

women's independence in both literary works, it is necessary to discuss the representation of female independence in *Little Women* in the following chapter.

The representation of female independence in *Little Women*

This chapter aims to examine the March girls' independence in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, with a particular emphasis on Jo. As part of the discussion regarding the historical context of American women's situation in the mid-nineteenth century, a number of topics were addressed, including Victorian values, women's labour, the cult of True Womanhood, and the Vision of New Womanhood. In this section, however, one is interested in exploring how these societal factors affected the independence of female protagonists. Since Jo is regarded as one of the most prominent independent heroines of the novel, the emphasis of this work should be shifted to her. Nevertheless, it is also essential to consider other March sisters' journeys to attain their independence. For a thorough analysis of this selected work, it will be necessary to incorporate direct quotations from Louisa May Alcott's novel.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Louisa Alcott's works started appearing, a slight, yet noticeable shift in women's standing occurred, American women at the time enjoyed greater freedom than their English sisters, since they were earlier allowed to work and earn a living on their own terms, independently of patriarchal authority. Stehnová (2022) argues that the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in a change in the position of working-class women within American society, increasing their "job opportunities" (21-22). According to Laire (2009), "women were allowed to work"; however, they were required to conform to the social framework of marriage and household chores since family was regarded as "the appropriate foundation of a moral life for women" (7).

In 1868, half a century after Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published, Louisa May Alcott released the first volume of *Little Women*. Upon its release, the

novel became extremely popular among young ladies and women in the aftermath of the American Civil War since it provided female readers with an insight into their everyday lives, which revolved around household responsibilities and labour. Additionally, the novel depicted the sisterhood of the four sisters, Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth, further enhancing women's interest. Some critics, nevertheless, consider *Little Women* a controversial work of literature. Sometimes it is argued that Louisa May Alcott promotes traditional values through her novels, "telling women to be domestic, submissive" (Hollinger and Winterhalter 1999, 176). Others see Alcott as one of the pioneers of American feminist literature, succeeding at portraying heroines who are not hesitant to challenge patriarchal society with their actions, ambitions, and aspirations to become successful women. Jo is one of the leading female characters in the novel, who "hates needle work and other domestic chores, and she loves to run wild and cherishes independence" (Laire 2009, 27). In light of this, Jo could be considered a strong and self-sufficient young lady who demonstrates her independence. Despite social constraints, the open-minded girl strives to establish her position regarding her future by being an ambitious, determined, and hard-working individual. Jo and her sisters share the dream of becoming independent individuals with their personal goals.

As the title implies, the novel revolves around the March family, which consists of Marmee, the family's matriarch, and her four daughters, Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth. In view of the fact that the father is away fighting in the Civil War, the female members of the March family are expected to take over responsibility for all household duties.

Jo, the family's "tomboy", is one of the primary protagonists, who "was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (Alcott 2016, 8-9). According to Jo, she

has assumed the role of “the man of the family now Papa is away, [...] he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone” (10). As the reader proceeds through the novel, it is evident that the girl with her “decided mouth” embraces masculine characteristics and does not conform to Victorian ideals of a true lady (9):

I hate to think I’ve got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games, and work and, manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with Papa (8).

Laire (2009) describes Jo as an individual who “challenges the normative patriarchal society and does not try to fit in” (26). Rebellious behaviour on the young woman’s part reflects not only her differences from the rest of her family but also her concern about gender norms relating to women’s conduct. It is through the observations and actions of the young woman throughout the book that Louisa May Alcott conveys Jo’s independent character (26-27).

Meg, “the eldest of the four”, feels she is responsible for looking after her sisters (Alcott 2016, 9). This young lady tends to set a good example for other girls by embodying the image of the True Woman. Meg, who complies with her mother’s wishes, aspires to “be prudent, [and] watch over [her] sisters” (214). Notably, Megan primarily wishes to devote herself to her husband and remain within her domestic sphere of influence. Asriyanti, Arafah, and Abbas (2022) describe the young woman as having a strong “Cinderella’s Complex” characterized by “the importance of lady-like behavior and appearance” and “[f]ear of losing femininity” (793). Yet, despite the opposing personalities of the elder sisters, Meg, along with Jo, demonstrates her

independence by ensuring the well-being of her family during times of hardship, such as the Civil War:

[T]he two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least. Believing that they could not begin too early to cultivate energy, industry, and independence, their parents consented, and both fell to work with the hearty goodwill which, in spite of all obstacles, is sure to succeed at last (Alcott 2016, 49).

Similarly to Jo, Amy, the youngest, aspires to challenge social conventions, stating that “Jo and I are going to make fortunes for you all. Just wait ten years, and see if we don’t” (203). Aside from this, the girl has “lots of wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (184). Despite Amy’s ambitions to become an independent woman, she still adheres to stereotypes of women’s behaviour as she “always [carries] herself like a young lady mindful of her manners”, as does her elder sister Meg (10).

In contrast to her siblings, Beth, “Little Tranquillity”, is a vulnerable and gentle young girl “with a shy manner, a timid voice” (9). Even though she is passionate about music, the girl’s goals are predominantly domestic in nature since her “favourite dream” is “to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family” (184). In this regard, Beth might be considered “the typical Victorian Angel in the house”, eager to remain within her domestic sphere where she finds a sense of belonging (Laire 2009, 68). Laurie’s subsequent comment further confirms this: “We’re an ambitious set, aren’t we? Every one of us, but Beth, wants to be rich and famous, and gorgeous in every respect” (Alcott 2016, 185). However, Beth supports her independent sisters wholeheartedly and encourages them to pursue their personal

goals: “If people really want to go, and really try all their lives, I think they will get in, for I don’t believe there are any locks on that door or any guards at the gate” (183).

Although most March women demonstrate a sense of independence within their household, they are nonetheless bound by Victorian social conventions. One of the dominant elements of American Victorianism, as previously noted in the chapter on women’s position in the mid-19th century, was the implementation of strict “moral, didactic, and patriarchal approaches to life” (Coultrap-McQuin 1990, 7). As opposed to the English culture of the early 19th century, American women were raised with an emphasis on supporting their families and fulfilling their own needs. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* reflects the American social narrative that women must perform diligent work and endure hardship in that time period. Throughout the book, the girls show a strong desire to earn their parents’ approval as well as to gain a sense of independence by working hard: “We can’t do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly” (Alcott 2016, 5-6). Adding that: “[F]or though we do have to work, we make fun for ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say” (7). So “We’ll work like bees, and love it too, see if we don’t” (152).

Marmee, as the female head of the family, is also dedicated to promoting the virtues of hard work among her daughters since she believes “it keeps us [women] from ennui and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us [women] a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion” (152). Moreover, the mother teaches her daughters to refrain from “[going] to the other extreme, and delve like slaves. Have regular hours for work and play, make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well” (152).

As a starting point for discussing Marmee's influence on the main characters' independence, it is essential to note that she also raises her daughters with a set of values associated with the importance of work and the concept of domesticity. Besides providing her daughters a platform for developing their discipline and authority, Marmee propagandizes messages directly related to the cult of True Womanhood (Rivas 2014, 55).

As previously indicated, the concept of True Womanhood was defined in accordance with four pillars: "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 1966, 152). Rivas (2014), in his article "Defining Nineteenth-Century Womanhood: The Cult of Marmee and Little Women", examines Marmee as a "primary moral authority" for her daughters (55). Throughout her girls' childhood, Marmee constantly attempts to impart Victorian values, such as narratives about the necessity for women to perform household chores since "to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear or forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all" (Alcott 2016, 151). The mother of the family also expresses her view that marriage "is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and [she] sincerely hope[s] [her] girls may know this beautiful experience" (127). Yet, she does not force them into marriage as she believes that "better be happy old maids than unhappy wives or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands" (127). In this regard, it is interesting to compare Mrs. Bennet, who is adamant that marriage has a pragmatic nature, with Mrs. March, who places a greater emphasis on her daughter's welfare than finding them suitable matches:

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and

wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives. [...] My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting. Money is a needful and precious thing, and when well used, a noble thing, but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace (127).

Even though Marmee is devoted to imparting Victorian values to her daughters, especially in the domestic sphere, she still encourages them to be independent since “[y]oung ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves” (171). In light of this, another topic for discussion arises, or more specifically, a question, regarding whether her daughters embrace the Victorian foundations imposed by society or strive to challenge patriarchal beliefs concerning submission and domesticity, thereby demonstrating their independence.

The novel's main heroine, Jo, who possesses a high degree of independence, might be considered an effective vehicle for exploring this issue. As the story unfolds, Louisa May Alcott constantly describes occasions when Jo assumes the position of an opponent of Victorian culture rather than its devotee. One of the most prominent features of Jo's personality is her boyish behaviour. According to Abate's article “Topsy-Turvy Jo: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and/in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women”, Jo's inclination to defy gender norms “[is] caused by the suffocating society she finds herself in” (cited in Laire 2009, 26). Upon comparing the

heroine's behaviour to that of her sisters, it becomes apparent how dominant her masculine characteristics are. In fact, she even finds herself "to be contented with making [her] name boyish, and playing brother to us girls [her sisters]" (Alcott 2016, 8).

In contrast to other March girls, Jo has no intention of conforming to societal expectations. This is reflected in her boyish manners and lack of concern for social validation. For this very reason, Meg and Jo end up in a dispute. Megan serves as Jo's moral beacon by encouraging her to behave in a ladylike manner in the context of a patriarchal society:

You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady (8).

Meg's lectures do not seem to have any effect on Jo's unwillingness to change her supposedly boyish personality and behave like a proper lady. Additionally, the girl's sense of independence and self-confidence are displayed in this conflict:

"I ain't! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. [...] "It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa" (8).

Jo's conversation with Meg regarding the young lady's whistling, a behaviour that is deemed to be highly inappropriate for women at the time, further illustrates her masculine nature:

“Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!”

“That's why I do it.”

“I detest rude, unladylike girls!”

“I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!” (7).

Within her research paper “Analysis of Feminism in the Novel of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott”, Desmawati (2018) asserts Jo's attitude in the context of how it supports feminist theories (94). The author states that the young girl advocates a philosophy known as “existentialist feminism”, which contrasts with the so-called “definitions, labels, and essences” imposed upon women (94-95). Jo's ambition is to celebrate her independence without considering how Victorian society perceives her (95). This supports Jo's comment: “I'm the one that will have to fight and work, and climb and wait, and maybe never get in after all” (Alcott 2016, 182).

With the advent of the Civil War, the idea of the True Woman was gradually losing its relevance as society embraced the principles of the New Woman. Through the main heroines of *Little Women*, Meg and Jo, Louisa May Alcott exemplifies the transition between the ideologies. In keeping with the model of the True Woman, the elder sister intends to devote herself to household duties in the future. Jo, however, presents a more modified version of American woman, the New Woman, with

aspirations for independence and dreams of pursuing a career as a writer. Jo is unwilling to “stay home and knit like a poky old woman” (8).

Through this trying period, Jo stands out as a strong and independent young woman capable of supporting herself and her family. Jo attempts to acquire “useful accomplishment[s], which no woman should be without”, primarily in order to ease the hardships suffered by her mother and sisters (151). Nevertheless, this does not imply that she is repressed or limited in her independence as the New Woman. Throughout *Little Women*, it is evident that Jo is a courageous individual who is willing to sacrifice a great deal for the benefit of her March ladies as well as for her own freedom. This can be seen in Jo’s decision to chop her hair off. Since the daughter is aware of the dire financial situation in which her family is in, she chooses to make such a “contribution toward making Father comfortable, and bringing him home” (208). Jo symbolically exhibits her independence:

“No, it’s mine honestly. I didn’t beg, borrow nor steal it. I earned it, and I don’t think you’ll blame me, for I only sold what was my own. [...] I hate to borrow as much as Mother does, [...] It came to me all of a sudden that I had one thing to make money out of, and without stopping to think, I walked in, asked if they bought hair, and what they would give for mine” (208-209).

She also asserts her autonomous spirit by publishing her first piece of writing in order to “be able to support [herself] and help the girls” (201). One of Jo’s “favorite dream[s]” is to “write books, and get rich and famous” (184). Jo has attained a sense of independence by taking this first step in her career journey. In addition, it

demonstrates a fundamental change in the circumstances within the community of female authors that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century:

Jo's breath gave out here, and, wrapping her head in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears - for to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end (201).

Meg, meanwhile, chooses to adhere to the conservative beliefs prevalent in Victorian society. As previously pointed out, Megan behaves in a manner that is characteristic of an average Victorian middle-class girl who perfectly embodies the attributes of the True Woman. Although the Civil War demonstrated that women were no longer bound to devote their existence solely to the private sphere, a significant percentage of women persisted in holding onto their idealized image of True Womanhood, eager to fulfil their household duties. Among these women is Meg.

She still believes that she should appear as the perfect young woman by “acting and dressing like a lady” (Asriyanti, Arafah, and Abbas 2022, 793). In this case, Meg's reasoning is largely determined by her desire to be accepted by the Victorian patriarchal structure, which directly reinforces ideas such as women's obedience and submissiveness. While Jo aspires to become an independent woman by “fight[ing] and work[ing]”, Meg believes that she should remain dependent upon men, “so I [she] never need[s] work a bit” (Alcott 2016, 182-184). Having concluded that “[p]eople don't have fortunes left them in that style nowadays: men have to work, and women to marry for money”, Meg does not perceive the necessity of climbing the career ladder or seeking out public exposure beyond her domestic scope of interests (203). Throughout *Little Women*, Meg is convinced that the only way to be truly happy and

content in life is to marry a wealthy man and acquire “a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things: nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money” (183). The gradual unfolding of the story, however, reveals Megan’s pragmatic ideals to be unattainable:

Then it was that Margaret, sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy: in love, protection, peace, and health, the real blessings of life (234).

Through the process of reevaluating her previous convictions, the young woman discovers a sense of independence, which is evident in her determination to stick by her judgments and decisions. The discussion with Aunt March serves as evidence of this. Given that the conversation is centred on Meg’s romantic involvement with John Brooke, it is crucial to consider the young lady’s agency regarding Aunt March’s interference:

“I’ve something to say to you, and I must free my mind at once. Tell me, do you mean to marry this Cook? If you do, not one penny of my money ever goes to you. Remember that, and be a sensible girl,” said the old lady impressively.

[...]

If Aunt March had begged Meg to accept John Brooke, she would probably have declared she couldn’t think of it, but, as she was peremptorily ordered *not* to like him, she immediately made up her mind that she would (294).

In an attempt to influence Meg's decision, Aunt March says the following while playing on the young lady's emotions and financial hardship:

You ought to marry well and help your family. It's your duty to make a rich match, and it ought to be impressed upon you. [...] So you intend to marry a man without money, position, or business, and go on working harder than you do now, when you might be comfortable all your days by minding me and doing better? I thought you had more sense, Meg (295-296).

Meg does not intend to adhere to the old lady's commands and fulfil this "duty" as she is keen on acting independently and charting her own path in life. Despite societal norms and expectations, Meg remains committed to her thoughts, beliefs, and judgments. Furthermore, the young woman demonstrates her self-worth by acknowledging her value and power in such circumstances:

I shall marry whom I please, Aunt March, and you can leave your money to anyone you like, [...] My John wouldn't marry for money, any more than I would. We are willing to work, and we mean to wait (294-296).

Meg, despite her status as the True Woman, still portrays herself as a young lady capable of defending her beliefs while displaying a high degree of independence: "Meg hardly knew herself, she felt so brave and independent, so glad to defend John, and assert her right to love him, if she liked" (295). In this regard, Megan March and Elizabeth Bennet share similarities since they both feel strongly about acting independently and violating social conventions, and neither intends to follow the advice of their interlocutors (Lady Catherine and Aunt March).

Prior to reaching a conclusion regarding the March girls' independence, it is imperative to consider younger sisters, Amy and Beth. Having focused exclusively on the first part of *Little Women*, the researcher has noted a limited number of cases in which both heroines demonstrate independence. Based on the examination of the first book, the younger sisters tend to adhere to Victorian narratives rather than challenge them.

As for Beth, "the symbolic Angel in the house of the Marches", the character is portrayed as "an oppressed character and not in the least bit empowered" (Laire 2009, 68-70). Indeed, Beth does not possess Jo's determination to accomplish "something heroic, or wonderful" as she progresses through her journey (Alcott 2016, 184). In contrast, the young girl is "perfectly satisfied" with her "little piano" and "wish[es] we may all [her family] keep well and be together, nothing else" (184). In the same way as her sisters, Beth is committed to helping around the house, doing all of the chores: "Beth is as regular about her tasks as a clock, and never forgets what you [Marmee] told her" (217). However, this reflects her domestic nature rather than her independence. Given her conformity to the Victorian ideal of the True Woman, Beth lacks the autonomous personality that is so characteristic of Jo.

As previously stated, Amy wishes to pursue a career in the arts and become as independent as her sister Jo. It is in the second book of the series, *Good Wives*, that she will be able to fulfil her deepest aspirations, including her desire for creative independence. *Little Women*, however, depicts Amy still as a 12-year-old girl, and her independence is more a reflection of her young maximalism than an indication of her true independence. For this reason, Amy decides to destroy Jo's story as a form of revenge for not being invited to the play. Similarly to her elder sisters, Amy carries

out her mother's orders: "Amy minds me nicely, and I take great care of her. She does her own hair, and I am teaching her to make buttonholes, and mend her stockings. She tries very hard" (218). However, this demonstrates the child's obedience rather than her independence.

Upon concluding the chapter, it is imperative to observe that Jo has a strong drive for independence compared to her sisters Meg, Amy, and Beth. Although Meg discovers a sense of independence by the end of the novel, Jo remains faithful to her objectives throughout the entire narrative. Throughout *Little Women*, the young girl frequently illustrates how the expectations of "an ideal" lady may be restrictive for women's dreams and ambitions. Jo confronts this patriarchal image and establishes her independence through her "boyish" habits, dissatisfaction with gender inequality, and desire to pursue a career. Alcott's novel emphasizes that Jo does not behave as expected of a typical True Woman. While the young girl presents herself as the New Woman, she behaves as an independent individual striving to define her identity and purpose outside the domestic sphere.

Conclusion

The thesis aimed to examine the portrayal of female independence in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Given that these literary works were written in different periods and countries, I attempted to compare both the representation of heroines' independence in the novels and the cultural and historical context regarding women's position in the nineteenth century.

The first chapter provides an overview of the social standing of women during the nineteenth century in English and American societies. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, English women were subjected to various restrictions on their rights, which affected their education, behavior, manners, and, most importantly, their independence. Following the ideology of separate spheres, women were expected to preserve the appearance of perfect ladies, marry young, be submissive to their husbands, and perform domestic duties. Traditionally, a woman's life was centered around her marriage. Deviations from the narrative were viewed as inappropriate and unfeminine, thereby compromising her reputation and chances of finding a partner. Consequently, from the analysis of English culture, it was evident that female independence remained taboo. Similarly, independent women were condemned by society.

American women were given more liberal opportunities than their English sisters by the middle of the nineteenth century. Over the course of the period, Britain had a profound impact on American society, resulting in the emergence of American Victorianism. Due to Victorian ideology, American women were also required to adhere to the cult of domesticity and the concept of separate spheres, thereby restricting the degree of their independence. However, American women were raised

with the Victorian notion that every citizen should devote themselves to hard work and endure hardship regardless of gender. Additionally, American Victorianism promoted the concept of the True Woman, whose primary scope of interests was her domestic sphere and willingness to obey her husband. With the onset of feminist and suffragist campaigns and the outbreak of the American Civil War, the narrative gradually lost its relevance. Consequently, the more progressive vision of the New Woman was adopted. With the advent of the New Womanhood movement, women were encouraged to step out of the private sphere and participate in public affairs alongside men. Those who embodied the principles of the New Woman were proclaimed as independent, self-aware, and proud of their female identity. Through the study of the social structure of American culture, it became apparent that conventions still restricted women's rights. However, women in the United States of America gained greater independence due to the New Woman campaigns, which had a wide range of influence.

Numerous female authors also addressed the situation of women. Through their writings, women writers attempted to criticize the established system that restricted their independence and empowerment. Among them were Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott, whose selected texts were examined in the second and third chapters, in order to investigate if Elizabeth Bennet and the March sisters could demonstrate their independence and challenge social conventions.

Based on the analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, it was possible to conclude that Elizabeth indeed demonstrated a great deal of independence in a wide variety of areas. Nevertheless, when referring to Elizabeth's autonomy, it was primarily her intellectual and emotional independence that was being discussed, as true

independence remained unheard of at the dawn of the nineteenth century. By virtue of her sharpness of mind, wit, and self-confidence, the protagonist stood up for her beliefs and challenged prevalent assumptions regarding women. The primary focus of the novel was the question of marriage. This was the reason that prompted Elizabeth to express her viewpoint frequently. In response to the two proposals from Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth declined them both, firmly believing that love, mutual respect, and shared values should be the foundation of marriage rather than pragmatic considerations. Thus, the young woman managed to assert her independence. Similarly, she opposed the idealistic standards of women's behavior promoted by the culture of so-called accomplishments, which confined women to the domestic sphere. The young lady also displayed her independence from established norms by criticizing the lack of educational opportunities for women. Elizabeth's rejection of the stereotypes associated with a typical Regency lady was another crucial aspect of her independence. Unlike other heroines, such as Charlotte Lucas, Caroline Bingley, and Jane, Elizabeth was not inclined to portray herself as a submissive or frivolous young woman merely to gain men's attention. In the same way as Louisa May Alcott's Jo, Elizabeth strove to embody her unfeminine qualities. The chapter also discussed Elizabeth's parents' impact on her independence. By defying her mother's orders and following her father's liberal approach, especially with regard to marriage, the young woman demonstrated that she was a self-sufficient individual who valued her independence. Therefore, it could be concluded that Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen's protagonist, illustrated a strong sense of independence.

The analysis of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* revealed that Jo, out of all her sisters, displayed a great deal of independence. While all of the March women worked extremely hard due to their upbringing in a culture that placed a high value on

providing for one's family and fulfilling personal needs, the other girls, Meg, Amy, and Beth, still adhered to Victorian norms. This chapter also discussed Marmee's parenting style and its impact on her daughters' independence. By promoting the cult of the True Woman, the female head of the family symbolized traditional Victorian values. Jo, on the other hand, strove to establish herself as the New Woman, willing to become independent in both her professional and private spheres. In the same way as Elizabeth Bennet, Jo was not interested in conforming to societal expectations. This was evident through her willingness to contradict gender norms and standards of ladylike behavior. Jo was seeking ways to assert her masculinity in defiance of social conventions. It can be illustrated by the boyish nickname she was given, her propensity to whistle or use profanity, and her desire to become the leader of the March family. As well as working tirelessly, cutting off her hair, and selling her story, Jo put forth every effort to prove that she intended to support her family. It was thus reasonable to conclude that Jo March, Louisa May Alcott's protagonist, demonstrated a strong sense of independence.

In comparing Elizabeth's and Jo's views on independence, it was evident that Elizabeth asserted her independence by judging social restrictions imposed on women while remaining confined to the domestic sphere; however, Jo strove to portray herself as an independent individual capable of escaping the private sphere in order to achieve her dream of becoming a famous author. The study could thus prove that despite the noticeable cultural differences between England and the United States in the nineteenth century, both young women were striving to overcome a discriminatory framework within their patriarchal culture in which women were perceived as incapable of standing up for themselves, their opinions, and their rights in order to be considered independent individuals. Therefore, the thesis demonstrated that Elizabeth

Bennet and Jo March, the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women*, can be considered independent women.

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