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FROM LITTLE WOMEN TO GOOD WIVES: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARCH
SISTERS

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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Anotace

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analýza a komparace postav sester Marchových mezi první a druhou částí románu americké spisovatelky Louisy May Alcottové *Malé ženy* (1868, 1869). Na základě analýzy postav jednotlivých sester v první a v druhé části bude práce zkoumat, jak Alcottová tyto postavy rozvíjí a proměňuje mezi jejich dětstvím a dospělostí, tedy mezi obdobím, kdy jsou součástí jedné společné rodiny a obdobím, kdy se od této původní rodiny oddělují, vstupují do manželství a zakládají rodiny vlastní. Práce se zaměří například na měnící se ambice sester, na to, jaké momenty přispěly k jejich proměně a jaký význam tyto proměny mají pro celkové vyznění románu.

Klíčová slova: Louisa May Alcottová, *Malé ženy*, sestry Marchovy, dětství, dospívání, dospělost, společnost v 19. století

Abstract

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to analyse and compare the characters of the March sisters between the first and second part of the novel *Little Women* (1868, 1869) by the American writer Louisa May Alcott. By analysing the characters of each of the sisters in the first and second parts, the thesis will examine how Alcott develops and transforms these characters between their childhood and adulthood, that is, between the period when they are part of one joint family and the period when they separate from this original family, enter into marriage and start families of their own. The thesis will focus, for example, on the changing ambitions of the sisters, what moments contributed to their transformation, and what significance these transformations have for the overall message of the novel.

Key words: Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, March sisters, childhood, maturing, adulthood, society in the 19th century

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Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, remains successful among readers even to this day. With its examination of relevant topics such as family relationships, marriage, sisterhood, and womanhood, it captivates readers of all generations. The novel was originally published in two parts, titled *Little Women* (1968) and *Good Wives* (1969). Alcott introduces a rich selection of characters, including the four March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Set in nineteenth-century America during the Civil War, Alcott presents the struggles of her female characters as they navigate their lives, exploring their individual personalities, ambitions, and growth.

In my thesis, my attention will focus on the portrayal of the March sisters' characters as Alcott transforms them from childhood to adulthood. My work intends to analyse the differences of their characters between the two parts of the novel, and how they evolve based on their gained experience throughout the story. In the first part, they begin to form their personalities, dreams, and values. Each of the sisters establishes her ambition, and vision for their future lives. The second part introduces us to more mature women experiencing new sides of society. Readers can see what stayed the same and what changed in terms of the characters. The sisters one by one start to leave their comfortable home and broaden their horizons. They get to know good and bad parts of the world as they come into contact with new people and visit new places. In the beginning, they just fulfil their role of daughters and sisters. However, later, they need to learn how to adapt to their new position in society as their roles change into grown women, wives, or even mothers. Through the sisters' struggles and accomplishments, Alcott provides us with the opportunity to explore topics of friendship, family dynamics, love, and personal identity.

The thesis has three chapters and each of them is divided into a few subchapters. The first chapter provides us with the novel's cultural and historical context. It focuses on the

restricted position of women in nineteenth-century America, their limited opportunities, and differences between women and men. Then I will comment on Alcott's role in this context and the influence her works had at that time as she depicted strong female characters who challenged societal norms. It is also important to briefly mention Alcott's background and upbringing, how her non-traditional life experience and the expectations of nineteenth-century society impacted her thinking and shaped her work. This information is relevant to the thesis as her own family and friends served as a huge inspiration for *Little Women*. The next part concentrates specifically on the novel's background and what role it plays in its context. It talks about how exactly the March sisters break societal stereotypes of the nineteenth century and what types of discussions it managed to spark. The second subchapter describes the novel's structure and themes and what is the centre of attention of the two parts of the novel. The first deals with the sisters' childlike naivety and innocence as they experience their first trials and failures. The second centres around their adulthood, newly gained responsibilities and roles.

For a better understanding of the thesis' goal, the second chapter summarises in more detail the sisters' transformation from childhood to adulthood. First, I will introduce the March sisters in their childhood when they are still part of one family, living together at home, forming their personalities, and undergoing their first struggles. Then I will continue with their adulthood, as they step into the world and grow into adult women creating their own families, leaving their home to build a new one with their husbands. This part will provide a demonstration of how their goals, ambitions, and priorities changed throughout their lives.

The third and final chapter will analyse some of the major moments in the sisters' lives that significantly influence their journey. It is divided into five subchapters, each focusing on a different aspect of their growth. The chapter will analyse how the sisters'

nature and ambitions have changed, and whether their future development reflects their behaviour in these individual moments. It shows what the sisters needed to go through to develop into sensible, resilient, mature women able to take care of their families.

1 The Cultural and Historical Context

1.1 Louisa May Alcott and Women in the Nineteenth-Century American Society

It is important to explore Louisa May Alcott's background to understand the world she creates in *Little Women* as she draws from her own life and the experience of her family members and friends. In this chapter, I will examine the author and her novel in the context of the position of women in nineteenth-century American society and show how the historical and cultural context shaped Alcott's work.

1.1.1 Alcott and the Role of Women

American women in the nineteenth century were primarily expected to fulfil the domestic roles of mothers and wives. They were supposed to prioritise marriage, motherhood, and household duties. Their lives were "devoted to the rearing of children, the supervision of servants, and the creating of a domestic haven for men, who were doing important work in business or industry" (Keyser 6). Married women were subordinate to their husbands, could not do anything by themselves, and were supposed to serve others and always remain amiable:

With no legitimate function in life, women will not be tolerated unless they are agreeable; only through a life of cheerful service to others can they justify their existence and assuage the guilt that derives from being useless. Women must watch themselves because they are economically dependent on men's income and emotionally dependent on their approval. (Fetterley 376)

It was not acceptable for women to be negligent of their housekeeping duties because of the fact they did not have to fully work. When a married woman had to work, it was a disgrace to the husband, because it meant he was not able to provide for the family. Because of their position, women wanted more options and fought for that, they did not want to be

subordinate to men anymore. Alcott served as a very influential figure in the women's movement, her "work offers important insights into nineteenth-century constructions of femininity, masculinity, authorship, war, and nationhood" (Young 440). In her works, she challenged societal norms by depicting strong and independent female characters who have dreams, ambitions, and the ability to contribute to society beyond the given traditional gender roles. Her women characters even tried to earn money through their art and that was not suitable for women of the nineteenth century. Alcott herself was a person who provided her family with money to pay off debts and contribute to its income, in that sense she did not fulfil the given role of a woman who did not work, and it also provided her with insight into the challenges and limitations faced by women during that era. Alcott wanted to prove that she could support herself and also her family, she wrote in her journal: "I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it" (Cheney 89). She would rather work and maybe live a little harder life than be tied to a man without a chance to live freely and independently.

Alcott's life and upbringing reflected these progressive views as she was not raised in a "typical American family" but in a "highly unusual" one, in an environment surrounded by transcendentalist ideas that supported equality, individualism, and self-reliance (Halttunen 234). Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a transcendentalist philosopher, educator, and writer, advocating progressive ideas and views on education. Her mother, Abigail May Alcott, was an American activist and social worker involved in several social causes, "including the abolition of slavery and the establishment of women's rights" (Keyser 4). Both of her parents encouraged Louisa and her sisters to be open-minded, they wanted them to keep journals and write letters; they were fully free to express their natures without fearing ridicule or criticism (Cheney 50). As they were "raised in the heady intellectual milieu of mid-century Concord, Louisa May Alcott was encouraged in her literary aspirations to a

degree unusual in Victorian America” (Young 446). Alcott never liked the idea of marriage; she wrote in her journal: “I’d rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe” (Cheney 122). She received several offers of marriage during her life, but never accepted one and continued in her writing career until she died, as Cheney says:

Louisa had no inclination toward matrimony. Her heart was bound up in her family, and she could hardly contemplate her own interests as separate from theirs. She loved activity, freedom, and independence. She could not cherish illusions tenderly; and she always said that she got tired of everybody, and felt sure that she should of her husband if she married. (Cheney 94)

Alcott herself spent some time working as a nurse in a Union Army hospital in Georgetown during the Civil War and this experience shaped her perspective on women, it helped her explore women’s roles beyond the domestic ones. “Louisa constantly wrote to the family of her experiences” there and published many of those letters in a book called *Hospital Sketches* (Cheney 139). This book brought opportunities into Alcott’s life and established the direction of her career (Keyser 8).

At first, Alcott was not fond of the idea of writing a girls’ book as her “fancy had always been for depicting the life of boys rather than girls”; but she eventually decided to try to write it and wrote her most successful book (Cheney 189). Its success was not something she expected and, in her journal, she says: “We really lived most of it, and if it succeeds, that will be the reason of it” (Cheney 190). Alcott associates the success of *Little Women* with the fact that it is based on the true events that she and her sisters went through. It was necessary for Alcott to suppress her rage, intelligence, and her overall style to be able to write *Little Women* (Fetterley 370). Although her goal was not to be a writer of sensational stories, she “aspired to be recognised as a serious writer”, but these types of books were successful and

people read them, so she continued writing them as they earned the money she needed to support herself and help her family (Keyser 8).

1.1.2 *Little Women* and the Role of Women

The novel was written and also set during a significant period in American history, influenced by various cultural and historical factors of the nineteenth century. Its portrayal of female characters aligned with the emerging movements advocating for equality and expanded opportunities for women in nineteenth-century America. It was published shortly after the American Civil War, a time of immense social disruption. The war brought attention to issues of equality, social justice, and the changing roles of women. All these issues are reflected in the novel as the women characters contribute to the workforce and participate in charitable activities and it “maps a fierce and uneven struggle for female independence” (Young 441). The novel portrays womanhood that breaks societal norms and at the time of its publication, it served as a transformative book that redefined the representation of women in nineteenth-century America, “it accurately reflects the position of the woman writer in nineteenth-century America, confronted on all sides by forces pressuring her to compromise her vision” (Fetterley 382). Alcott’s female characters, the March sisters, break the stereotypes given by society. Although trying to navigate the social expectations, they portray independence, strength, courage, and resilience and each of the sisters carries distinct personalities, ambitions, and struggles. Through the characters of the March sisters, Alcott depicts the complexities of women’s lives and their aspirations in living life beyond marriage and the domestic role; she emphasises their desires for personal growth, education, and careers outside the domestic sphere. In *Little Women*, Alcott managed to create not only one, “but several authentically human women characters”, and that sets her apart from other

women writers of that time who were constrained by stereotypes and did not create authentic, original, believable, and individual characters (Baym 299).

Although the March sisters end up marrying, it is not the main ambition of their lives and Alcott originally did not envision her characters, especially Jo, getting married, “but the demand of the publisher and the public was so imperative” that she changed her mind and decided to come up with Jo’s suitor (Cheney 192). After the publication of the novel’s first half, Alcott wrote: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won’t marry Jo to Laurie to please any one” (Cheney 201). Here it can be seen that Alcott did not want the message of her novel to be that women must marry. Marriage in the novel is not viewed as something particularly positive, Jo sees Meg’s marriage more as an “ending than a beginning”, even their mother views it “with resigned acquiescence rather than joy, and their father’s voice breaks as he performs the ceremony” as if it was a funeral (Auerbach 21).

In addition, the literary and educational landscape was evolving during this period. Alcott prompted society to recognise the importance of education for women, as it is essential for their personal growth and empowerment. *Little Women* contributed to discussions about women’s capabilities and the need for expanded opportunities, for example, highlighting the importance of education for women in a time when formal education for them was often limited. Alcott provided moral lessons while also challenging the norms of femininity through strong female characters. Alcott, like other female authors at that time, encouraged women’s education, her female characters have a need to learn and have knowledge of various topics. According to Nina Baym, “The women authors saw cultivation of the mind as the great key to freedom” (Baym 31). The only key to freedom and independence was to educate yourself and improve your knowledge.

1.2 *Little Women* Structure and Themes

For the understanding of my thesis, it is important to be aware of the novel's structure and how it is relevant to the topic of my thesis. Alcott's novel employs a linear narrative structure that spans over several years, showing the lives and growth of the characters of the March sisters. The novel is divided into two distinct parts that cover different stages of the sisters' lives. The story was originally divided into two books titled *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, then it was combined into one book under the title *Little Women*. As Jill P. May argues in her article, it is "a piece of women's autobiography that depicts female aspirations, family life, and women's career choices" (May 20). Each part contributes to the overall development of the characters from their childhood to adulthood, offering a portrayal of womanhood, family relationships, and societal expectations of the nineteenth century.

The first part focuses on the childhood and youth of the March sisters. We are introduced to the members of the March family and the struggles they go through during the American Civil War while their father serves in the war and they are growing up in a patriarchal society while being poor. This part also establishes the specific personalities of the March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, their routines, relationships, ambitions, and dreams. Then the novel explores the sisters navigating the challenges that come with their adolescence and young adulthood, focusing on their individual pursuits. Meg longs for traditional family life, Jo aspires to become a writer, Beth is gentle and loves music, and Amy develops her artistic ambitions. The last section of this part shows the sisters' interactions with society, their neighbours and friends, and their first encounters with prejudices, gender roles, and other's opinions of them. The fact that most of the sisters' childhood is spent in their home with their family, not outside in society, allowed them to dream big and have big plans for their future without thinking that they were not suited for all those things they envisioned.

The second part of the novel explores the sisters' personal growth and struggles even deeper as they evolve and transition from adolescence into young adulthood. It examines loss, love, independence, the pursuit of dreams, and societal expectations as each of the sisters takes a different path and shapes her future. The central themes of this section are Jo's journey as a writer facing rejections but remaining firm in her ambitions, Meg's experiences with the joys and difficulties of married life, Beth's declining health due to scarlet fever, and Amy's pursuit of refinement through travel and art. The end brings closure to the individual storylines while leaving some things unresolved. It shows the sisters' maturity, the lessons they have learned, and the ambitions they fulfilled or on the other hand did not fulfil.

Little Women covers various topics that reflect the experience and challenges faced by the characters of the March sisters within the context of women in nineteenth-century America. The novel emphasises family relationships, especially those among the March sisters and their mother, Marmee. It focuses on the love, support, and conflicts that appear between them in the course of the story. Alcott emphasises the individuality and independence of the sisters: each sister possesses a distinct personality and longs for some type of independence in a time when women's options are limited. The novel also challenges the gender roles and expectations of the nineteenth century mainly through the character of Jo and her pursuit of an intellectual career of becoming a writer. Another topic covered in the novel are various aspects of romantic relationships, portraying the sisters' encounters with love, courtship, and marriage. It examines the different choices they make and how those choices influence their future lives. Alcott also touches on the themes of morality and virtue, how it is important to be kind, empathetic, and reasonable in interactions with others. It provides us with information on what it requires to be a "little woman". The novel tells us that "women must not have, much less act on, negative emotions", such as anger or repression (Foote 65). The novel comments on the importance of education and personal

development and advocates for women's intellectual growth. Through the numerous challenges faced by the March family, including Beth's illness, the absence of their father, and the financial struggles, the novel delves into the themes of loss, resilience, and strength in unfortunate times. There is also the theme of social class, as we can see the difference between the poor March family and the wealthier Laurences.

2 *Little Women* and the Transformation of the Characters of the March Sisters

For my thesis, the transformation of Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth is crucial. The following subchapters will summarise it and show how exactly the three sisters are different between the two parts of the novel. There are, of course, visible differences between the sisters' characters as Alcott develops them from their childhood to adulthood. In the first subchapter, I will comment on the sisters' childhood and how they have changed in the course of the one year narrated in the novel's first half. In the second subchapter, there will be a commentary on the sisters' lives as they grow into married adults forming their own families.

2.1 The March Sisters as Children and a Part of One Family

The story of the first part of the book spans approximately one year, from one Christmas to another. In the course of this year, the March sisters grow, change, and develop into someone we would not recognise at the beginning of the novel. They are not adults yet but they learn to better their wrongs and be the best versions of themselves. The fact they are part of a family struggling with poverty and the absence of their father during the Civil War forces them to grow and mature quickly, as they take on responsibilities to support their family.

Alcott introduces the character of Jo as a wild, loud, quick-tempered girl using inappropriate language. Her behaviour is usually viewed by her family and other people as improper, not ladylike. Jo does not have the ambition to become a proper lady, she would rather be a boy, claiming "It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, 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, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" (Alcott 3). To become a typical woman with household duties does not look like a desirable future for her. She does not yearn to grow up quickly and settle into an adult married life, saying to Meg: "Don't try to make me grow up before my time...let me be

a little girl as long as I can” (Alcott 153). She struggles with change, and for that reason, Meg’s sudden interest in John Brooke makes her uneasy and scared of what it could mean. When the March sisters and Laurie discuss what their dream future looks like, Jo claims, “I’d have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie’s music” (Alcott 143). The fame and wealth that her writing would bring would allow her the independence and ability to support herself and her family she longs for. Jo carries several burdens, be it her quick temper, selfishness, or her need to be somewhere else or do something else, she tries to work on each of them and be the “little woman” her parents wish for. Throughout this first part, experiencing several eye-opening moments, Jo’s character develops into a less selfish and more caring person with a compassionate part which was not present before. She is no longer a crazy quick-tempered girl using inappropriate language, but a “young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug...”, and who has a gentler face and lower voice (223). However, she still carries the same strong determined nature, refuses to get married, and wants to pursue an unusual artistic career.

Beth functions as probably the most selfless character, always thinking of others, and taking care of them without expecting anything back. She carries this very optimistic, soft, peaceful, and calm atmosphere that transmits to others. For the most part, Beth stays isolated, in “a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved” (4). Her biggest wish is to be loved and play the piano, having those two things would make her the happiest girl in the world. The mentioned love for music also serves as a motivation for her to go out of her shell and make a new friend. She never really mentions her own personal ambitions, her dream is to “stay at home safe with father and mother, and help take care of the family” and for all of them to be happy and healthy (143). Although Alcott writes Beth as someone very happy and generous, she also carries certain burdens that

weigh on her. She mentions doing “dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos” (10). The problems she tries to work on the most are her “overwhelmingly timid” personality and fear of people (Burrows 292). All of these burdens limit Beth’s opportunities, for she does not expose herself to the outside world. In the end, her personality seems less shy, but the sickness she underwent made her weak, pale, and small, and she never was the same.

The character of Amy probably goes through the biggest change. In the beginning, she is very selfish, and self-centred, not thinking about others’ needs and bragging about her possessions, talents, and beauty. She wants to appear sophisticated and refined, acting overly proper and using very exaggerated big words although usually in the wrong context. Her biggest dream is to become an “artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (Alcott 143). In this, she matches with her sister Jo, they both want to pursue artistic careers, become famous and rich, and be able to provide for their family. Same as the others, Amy works on her burdens and tries to not continue being so selfish and proud. She experiences many situations that expose her to different perspectives and views that influence her future development. Amy’s character learns “to think of other people more, and of herself less” and turns into a “lovable daughter, with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others” (224). She realises the importance of being a good person rather than just a talented artist and starts to help with household duties and regulate her temper more effectively.

At the beginning of the novel, Meg’s character complains about a lot of things and does not appreciate what she has. Alcott presents her as a rather ungrateful, naive, lazy girl. She dislikes her governess job and hates “poverty and discomfort” which the March family struggles with (Burrows 292). She holds the opinion that wealth and beauty are the most important things and without them, she cannot enjoy living the same way others do. Her innocence and inexperience in particular areas of life cause misunderstanding in some

situations she appears in. Meg's dream is to be mother, wife, and mistress of a "lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money", have "plenty of servants" and do not need to work anymore (Alcott 142). However, the following year proves her wrong and she realises what carries real importance. She gets exposed to more awful aspects of society and that changes her opinions. She becomes more grateful for her home and the love she receives there: "It does seem pleasant to be quiet, and not have company manners on all the time. Home is a nice place, though it isn't splendid" (95). She does not live in a big house with fancy dresses and furniture, but she has got a roof over her head, food on the table, and a loving family surrounding her. She has been rich in "things more precious than any luxuries money could buy; in love, protection, peace, and health, the real blessings of life" (184). Meg learns the importance of work and the fact that she started to fall in love with poor John Brooke shows her growth and how her priorities have changed.

At first, Alcott presents the March sisters as "selfish little beasts who want all sorts of things they won't be permitted to have" (Auerbach 18). They long to be somewhere else, have a different life, and think that will make them happy. Despite that fact, they end up realising what a beautiful home they have, that they are surrounded by love and happiness. We enter the second part of the book with "little women" that Mr. and Mrs. March are proud of.

2.2 The March Sisters as Adult Women Creating Their Own Families

The plot of the second part starts three years after the first one ended and spans several years following Jo, Beth, Amy, and Meg's lives. The March sisters are growing into adults and that significantly influences their characters as they are faced with completely different challenges. Some of them manage to step out of their family circle, experience different parts

of the world, meet other kinds of people, and “expand beyond the constraints of their familial home” (May 21).

In this part, Jo undergoes several failures and heartbreaks in all sorts of areas, be it her writing, family, or personal life. But various great moments help with the creation of a well-established woman. Jo continues writing and even starts to receive checks for some of her stories, getting a taste of having money, feeling like a “woman of means” (Alcott 238). Thanks to that, she is able to contribute to the comfort of their home, providing everyone with the things they want or need. She reaches her ambition of becoming independent and enjoys “a taste of this satisfaction, and ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need to ask no one for a penny” (269). Her previous rejection of marriage remains and she makes her decision known to everyone saying: “I don’t like that sort of thing; I’m too busy to be worried with nonsense, and I think it’s dreadful to break up families so” (246). She views marriage as something that causes families to break up and does not see a reason for that. In certain respects, Jo’s appearance and manner have significantly improved, however, she still has her unwelcoming icy attitude, does not care what people think of her, sometimes struggles with her selfishness, and acts somewhat improperly. She is aware of her weaknesses and tries to work on them. After some time, she gains the ability to not only long for complete independence but also to accept other people in her life. She changes her opinion about marriage, is “cheerful all the time”, learns to “work with a will, and take more interest in other people”, behaves more properly, and fulfils her expected duty as a wife and mother (344). Her wish to do “something splendid” comes true when she devotes herself to her father and mother and tries to make home a happy place (435). She alters her ambitions and dreams and includes other people than herself in them. Although her writing dream is pushed to the side, she does not forget about it and is ready to achieve it as soon as life allows it. In the end, Jo is content with her life, not planning

to call herself “unlucky Jo” when she has a happy home, husband and lots of boys to take care of (488).

Beth’s storyline in the second part revolves mainly around her gradually deteriorating health. Despite the fact Beth’s fever is gone, it immensely affects her well-being and overall character. She is no longer “the rosy, healthy creature”, but remains “hopeful, happy, and serene, busy with the quiet duties she loved, every one’s friend, and angel in the house”, so no one notices her poor state (238). However, as time goes by, she grows weaker and frailer, “slender, pale, and more quiet than ever...”, with a sad expression in her eyes (249). With each day, Beth becomes more certain her life approaches an end, though her selfless nature does not want to add any stress to the already existing struggles, so she keeps her failing health a secret for a long time. There comes a time when it is no longer possible to hide her sickness and her family sees it, in the way she sings, talks, behaves, and carries herself. Later in the book, she starts to change and gets worse very quickly, and soon after that, her life comes to an end, taking her last breath, “with no farewell but one loving look and a little sigh” (419). Beth’s life ended too early, but all her life, she accomplished her ambition, to take care of everyone, and bring happiness and peace into their lives. She certainly left a legacy in the world and kept surviving in the hearts of the people who knew her.

Amy replaces Jo at Aunt March’s and for her service, she receives drawing lessons which greatly help with her artistic dream. She prospers and grows into a woman possessing grace, elegance, and tact. She is very mature for her age, always saying and doing the right thing and pleasing everyone. She still desires to be part of the high and wealthy society and to associate with people who possess things like “money, position, fashionable accomplishments, and elegant manners” (257), without realising these are not the most important parts of a successful life. Amy acts very conscious of the environment she steps in, always caring about how people perceive her, and what they think about her. She hates being

poor and plans on marrying a rich man who will change it: “I hate poverty, and don’t mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help” (318). Although she is not in love with Fred, she would rather take the risk and marry him than be poor anymore. When she visits Europe, the world opens up to her, and her ambitions are taken care of, however, she never forgets home and always thinks about it and misses her family. Although she longs for money and a comfortable life, she eventually chooses love and happiness, rejecting Fred’s proposal. In the end, Alcott presents Amy’s character as someone who achieves the wealthy life she dreamt of, but most importantly the “wealth of love, confidence, and happiness” (448). Her ambition of being able to provide for others comes true thanks to Laurie: “That was always one of my dreams, to have the power of giving freely; and, thanks to you, the dream has come true.” (459). With the money they possess in their marriage, they can help the ones in need who are not as lucky as them. Her priority now is to be a great wife to her husband and the best mother to her daughter, but she does not give up her artistic dream, still creating art despite her new duties.

Meg and John are finally ready to get married and move into their own little home. Meg still sometimes craves a richer life and envies those who have it, but her love for John and gratefulness for all he does are stronger. During the past three years, she spent time “working as well as waiting, growing womanly in character, wise in housewifery arts, and prettier than ever” (237). She matures even more, getting the sense of having to earn the things one wants and feeling ready to fulfil the role of a suitable wife and be “a model housekeeper” (273). She becomes more humble, not even caring about having a “fashionable wedding”, being satisfied with a small one, and even making her wedding gown (248). Nevertheless, it should be noted that married life forces Meg to face new and unexpected challenges she must learn to solve and overcome. She learns to recognise what is important in life but still experiences moments in which she craves something different having enough of

the poverty. Becoming a mother to twins brings even more challenges and situations that Meg and John must resolve. She becomes very tired, devoted to her children, and forgets about her husband. Eventually, she serves as a role model to her sisters because she manages to create a home full of love and happiness. She recognises a “woman’s happiest kingdom is home” where she rules as “a wise wife and mother” (399). In her childhood, Meg aspired to live in a nice home with her husband and children, and she got that wish, claiming to be “the happiest woman in the world” (489).

The March sisters mature even more in the novel’s second part as they face new challenges and experiences. Even though they end the first part as improved women, they still have a lot to work on. Throughout the remaining chapters, they have to navigate love, loss, and personal growth while remaining true to themselves and their ambitions. They are faced with far more challenging and life-changing situations that contribute to their development into well-established adult women they eventually become.

3 The Moments Contributing to the March Sisters' Transformation

Several specific moments contribute to the transformation of the March sisters from innocent children to experienced adults. Throughout the whole novel, the sisters undergo challenges and trials of life which influence their growth and maturing. In this chapter, I will comment on these moments and show how they affect each of the sisters and if their nature and ambitions change in any way.

3.1 The Sisters' Venturing Outside Their Home

The March sisters live in a very loving, lively home, maybe quite isolated from the outside world and its worst parts. However, there are moments through which they venture from their home and get into contact with other people, in more public settings. Whether it is Meg's visit at Moffats, Jo's teaching job in New York, or Amy attending school, everywhere, they are somehow confronted by topics they were not particularly aware of before. While appearing in this "greater world" (Foote 65), they get a chance to experience the prejudices and gossip which emphasise the class and gender differences between the Marches and other families. The sisters get to experience moments of "class shame and humiliation" (Foote 68), often forced to feel ashamed of their poverty and envy the others, wanting to fit in and have what they have.

In this matter, one must look at Meg's visit to Moffats, a greatly wealthy family. For the first time, she gets exposed to the distinctions others make between their families. Meg herself notices all the "Annie Moffat's pretty things", envies her, and longs to possess the same wealth (Alcott 85). Although she observes they are not that great kinds of people, they still have this luxurious house with glamorous things and at that time, these were attributes Meg found the most important. The more she looks at all the things around her, her own home "looked bare and dismal as she thought of it, work grew harder than ever, and she felt

that she was a very destitute and much injured girl” (85). She starts to be ashamed of her only simple dress and feels a need to let the wealthier girls change her appearance, dress her up, and make her look and act completely different. As a result of this transformation, Meg recognises the power of “fine clothes which attracts a certain class of people, and secures their respect” (91). The people who did not even look at her when she wore her own dress now suddenly want to speak or dance with her. Just because she wears a better-looking and more revealing dress, she is suddenly a suitable woman worth noticing and having an interest in. When Meg overhears some women talking about her and Mrs. March’s plans concerning Laurie, she feels ashamed to be “the subject of such a vulgarly economic discussion” (Foote 72). After hearing all of this gossip, “a new world” opens up to her, and disrupts “the peace of the old one, in which, till now, she had lived as happily as a child” (Alcott 88). Meg’s previous life gets disturbed, her innocent friendship with Laurie is spoiled, and her trust in her mother is shaken (88). However, this visit does not bring just negative emotions into Meg’s mind, it helps her grow into a more mature woman, losing her naivety and innocence. She learns to handle uncomfortable situations with more caution and realises the importance of her own identity.

Jo’s venture to New York and getting a teaching job at Mrs. Kirke’s boarding house largely contribute to her character’s change. It is the first time she leaves home, starts to regularly write stories, receives checks for them, and meets Professor Bhaer, who will later become her husband. According to Foote, New York is a place where Jo learns “to internalize and naturalize class and status distinctions as if they were natural” (Foote 79). By learning this lesson, she is ready to return home and be domesticated. The main impulse for Jo’s departure to New York was the escape from Laurie and giving space for him to fall in love with Beth. On the other hand, “Jo liked the prospect, and was eager to be gone, for the homestead was growing too narrow for her restless nature and adventurous spirit” (Alcott

331). She always wanted to go somewhere else and gain more independence, this would make her wish come true. She was ready to experience a new environment and people and thought it would be beneficial to her writing. The gained experience does not particularly influence her writing, but she comes across a style of writing not that appropriate for a woman like her. She writes “sensation stories”, for which she is not proud, calling them “all-perfect America read rubbish”, but anything but these “thrilling tales” gets rejected, and this provides her with the money she needs to give Beth everything she wants (345-46). To successfully write these types of stories, Jo has to research all kinds of incidents, crimes, articles, and people, both bad and good. She comes into contact with bad society, and surrounds herself with a company of poor quality, thinking “she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character” (349). Eventually, Professor Bhaer convinces her to give up writing these types of stories as they are harmful to her. Jo feels ashamed of her behaviour and as she values Professor Bhaer, she listens to him and burns the remains of the stories. After that, she puts a pause on her writing career. To conclude this section, Jo’s venture to New York brings her new but bad writing experience, husband, and improved knowledge of class distinctions. All of these aspects contribute to the formation of Jo’s character we see at the end. Throughout Jo’s whole writing journey, she undergoes several trials including the harsh criticism after she publishes her first novel earlier in the book. At first, the criticism is hard to process, but later, she realises the value of all the opinions and feels “wiser and stronger” as she uses them to perfect her writing (272).

The first time Amy experiences the side of life she did not know before, is when she gets punished for having pickled limes under her desk at school. At home, everyone treats her very kindly, mainly with love, and she is not used to the type of treatment she receives at the school, therefore it serves as a “hard experience” for her, “and a blow of that sort had never

touched her before” (69). She has to stand in front of the whole school, “the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot” (69). Even though this situation in a certain way traumatises her, she probably needs to go through it. She learns being a lady does not require showing off your possessions but rather how modestly you present yourself through your manner. She learns her lesson well indeed, one can see it in the way she responds at Aunt March’s, her proper behaviour earns her the right to go on the trip to Europe. While in Europe, Amy greatly prospers and she becomes an even better woman:

as sprightly and graceful as ever, with the addition of that indescribable something in dress and bearing which we call elegance. Always mature for her age, she had gained a certain aplomb in both carriage and conversation, which made her seem more of a woman of the world than she was. (380)

She no longer despises her poverty but works with it and uses it for her advantage: “Foreign life polishes one in spite of one’s self; I study as well as play...I am used to making the most of my poor little things” (387). She comes into contact with all kinds of people that influence her development. Her main intention is to go to Rome and find out if she can become an artist and put her lifelong dream into action, saying: “It isn’t a mere pleasure trip to me...It will decide my career; for if I have any genius, I shall find it out in Rome, and will do something to prove it” (308). She sees the city as a deciding point concerning her life that will tell her in which direction her career will go, whether she will become an artist or someone who teaches the art to others. Unfortunately, Rome ends up not really what she expected it to be: “Rome took all the vanity out of me, for after seeing the wonders there, I felt too insignificant to live, and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair” (405). She finds out that having talent is not enough, to be a great artist, one needs a genius she does not have. For someone, the talent would be enough, but Amy does not just want to be the most famous artist in the world, her goal is to be a great successful artist of good quality, so she gives up her dream: “I want to be

great, or nothing. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more" (405). The time outside the home provides her with a noticeable amount of benefits, she gets to know herself better, shapes into a more cultured and sophisticated woman, and even decides to marry for love and not just for money, for in the past it would be the only possibility for her.

All the experience the sisters gain while venturing outside their comfortable home support their journey to adulthood. They go through moments that influence their naivety and innocence. They get exposed to situations they would not be in if they did not step out of their home. The sisters learn how to react or behave in different situations and through them, they get to know themselves better. Each of the sisters chooses her own path, what her future will look like, whether they achieve their artistic, childhood ambitions or get married and settle in a new home. Through the sisters' ventures and Alcott's exploration of her female characters' roles beyond the domestic ones, we see their desire for personal growth and careers somewhere outside the domestic sphere as they get jobs, earn money, and explore the world.

3.2 The Laurence Family

The very wealthy Laurence family, consisting of Laurie and his grandpa Mr. Laurence plays a significant role in shaping the lives of the March sisters. When joyful and lively Laurie comes into their life, they gain a new friend, who quickly becomes a valuable part of their family, participating in each of the sisters' journeys to adulthood. Mr. Laurence serves as a fatherly figure in their father's absence, bringing a sense of stability and security. For example, he keeps them company while Marmee goes to Washington or sends them supper on Christmas evening after they give their breakfast to the Hummels. At first, they are hesitant to receive favours from them or visit the Laurence house because of the economic and social differences

between them. The moment they conquer these fears, they make the house their second home and start to use it as a place helping them train how to behave in social situations (Foote 71). As a wealthy family, they introduce the March sisters to higher parts of society, educating them on proper manners, and teaching them profitable lessons that prepare them for their future as sophisticated young women. The dissimilarity in the social status of the two families does not interfere with their genuine relationships, however, people outside their circle view it differently, often creating unexpected and unpleasant situations for the sisters. They do not accept the possibility of the two households being equal, the only thing able to erase the inequality is the marriage between one of the sisters and Laurie.

The Laurence family mainly contributes to the development of Amy and Jo's characters, however, they also bring some valuable elements into Meg and Beth's future. Mr. Laurence profoundly influences Beth's growth and development. He recognizes her love for music and provides her with access to his piano and collection of music which she uses to make progress in her playing skills. His support encourages Beth to be more confident and not be afraid to express her feelings through her art. Mr. Laurence gives her a chance to realise her musical dream, and opens a world of new possibilities and a sense of purpose for her: "She enjoyed herself heartily, and found, what isn't always the case, that her granted wish was all she had hoped" (Alcott 61). He even gifts her her own piano, making her "the happiest of all happy faces" (63). To everyone's surprise, the gratefulness and happiness she feels because of this gift provide her with the power she needs to go to the Laurence house, express her biggest thanks, and hug Mr. Laurence. He is a driving force behind her decision to overcome her shyness and fear of approaching him. Mr. Laurence's presence in Beth's life makes her timid personality braver and more cheerful. He serves as a paternal figure in Mr. March's absence to all of the sisters, but especially to Beth as she is the most fragile of them all, offering her a needed sense of stability and friendliness. Beth feels as if she does not have

her own place in the world and her friendship with Mr. Laurence brings her a sense of acceptance, helping her navigate the challenges she encounters during her adolescence. His kind and gentle spirit inspire Beth to cultivate her already gained values of selfishness, generosity, and love. Thanks to their conversations, she learns important lessons she carries with her for the rest of her life.

As far as Meg is concerned, Laurie's repeated affectionate gestures and statements about her beauty provoke romantic ideas and feelings in her. She starts to explore her desire for a romantic relationship. His affectionate gestures also help to raise her confidence as he validates her beauty and attractiveness. Although Laurie does not become her lover, thanks to him, she is introduced to John Brooke, his tutor. John's appearance greatly contributes to the direction of her future. He not only becomes her husband but also someone who shakes with her plans of living a luxurious life because he does not have the means to give it to her. In addition, Laurie's prank with the fake letters also affects Meg's once-calm mood. It awakes unexplored emotions in her, puts a new idea into her head which she cannot get rid of, thinking about John "a good deal, dreamed dreams more than ever" and secretly writing "Mrs. John Brooke" on pieces of paper (217). Laurie helps Meg's feelings come to the surface, quickening the development of her and John's relationship.

For nearly the course of the whole novel, the relationship between Jo and Laurie holds a considerable amount of importance in Jo's character's life. Their shared interests, mutual understanding, and adventurous nature support Jo through adolescence and young adulthood. The emotional support Jo receives from Laurie provides her with a companion she can rely on in challenging times. His always present belief and support encourage her to not give up her writing regardless of all the obstacles standing in her way. Laurie and his growing fondness for Jo drive her decision to leave for New York and there she meets Professor Bhaer, her future husband. Probably the most significant is Jo's infamous rejection of

Laurie's proposal. According to Murphy, the rejection is "a self-defeating, pointless decision that denies her heterosexual erotic fulfillment" (Murphy 568). At the time when Laurie asks the question, Jo lives under the belief that she will never get married or be able to love someone romantically: "I don't believe I shall ever marry; I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (Alcott 365). Jo's decision breaks the societal expectations of that time, and violates the standards of her world, for refusing to get married to a handsome, wealthy, kind boy is a very unexpected choice (Murphy 568). It symbolises the process of transitioning into adulthood, she decides to make her independence and personal ambitions a priority, fearing she will lose them in a traditional marriage.

Laurie's character also impacts Amy's growth in several crucial ways. Earlier in the book, he admires and encourages her art and that gives her the confidence to pursue her artistic dreams. When Laurie gets rejected by Jo, he leaves for Europe where he turns into quite a wild and disagreeable gentleman who abandons himself "to laziness in the name of a broken heart" (Foote 77). In France, he crosses paths with Amy, they start to spend time together and gradually grow closer as they get to know each other better. First, Amy notices Laurie's change and views him in a "new light, —not as "our boy," but as a handsome and agreeable man, and she was conscious of a very natural desire to find favor in his sight" (381). She now sees him as a man, not just a flirtatious neighbour, and she wants to use her new-found qualities to show him her beauty and womanhood. Laurie's appearance and the pleasant time spent with him awakens new feelings and desires in her, and she starts to fall in love with him. However, Amy also recognizes how miserable Laurie is because of Jo, how lazy, mean, and selfish he has become. For that reason, she gives him a speech which visibly demonstrates her values, she tells how disappointed she is and how she despises the man he has become:

I don't think you half so nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you like gossip, and waste time on frivolous things; you are contended to be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and beauty...with all these splendid things to enjoy, you can find nothing to do but dawdle, and instead of being the man you might and ought to be, you are only—. (408)

Amy's monologue functions as a driving force for Laurie's want to improve and make himself suitable for her again. Laurie's behaviour causes Amy to get mad with him, and that pushes him to make himself better, and when they meet later in the book, Amy, because of her own doing, sees a proper suitor in him. Even though their communication after he leaves is limited to letters, and Amy's previous plan to marry Fred works out as he asks her to marry him, she still rejects his offer because she realises her love for Laurie and "that something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart so full of tender hopes and fears" (425). Thanks to Laurie, her deep-rooted belief that she needs to marry a wealthy man whether she loves him or not, gets crushed. She no longer cares to be "a queen of society", and just wants to be a "lovable woman" (425). To her luck, Laurie provides her with both.

The Laurence family leaves a significant mark on the March sisters' lives. They introduce them to a different type of society and social behaviour, which helps in their future experience. Laurie in particular encourages the sisters in their dreams and in many cases, he is responsible for their next steps in life.

3.3 Controlling Negative Emotions

The topic of trying to control one's temper and negative emotions is present throughout almost the whole novel. Some of the sisters struggle with it more, the others less. The

consequences they face are sometimes very harmful and crucial to their own and other characters' development. The sisters need to conquer these negative emotions to avoid the occurrence of harmful situations. Concerning this manner, Fetterley suggests the contrast between men's and women's anger, the women's must be suppressed and the male's requires recognition and attention from women (Fetterley 376). It is not appropriate for women to externally express their anger, one can see it in Marmee's character who hides it basically her entire life. All the March sisters use some type of distraction from revealing their emotions, redirecting them to other activities: Jo has her writing, Beth her music, Amy her art, and Meg focuses on domestic duties keeping the house in order.

Jo's character is known for her wild and uncontrollable demeanour, and it repeatedly punishes her and the people around her. When she does not take Amy to the theatre, she in the heat of the moment burns Jo's cherished stories. Here is visible Amy's failure to control her anger. Consequently, Jo gets angry and refuses to take Amy skating on a river with her and Laurie. Despite that, Amy decides to go anyway and for her unawareness, she falls into the ice-cold water. Jo knows Amy will probably fall but decides to not say anything and let it happen, just because of her uncontrollable anger and inability to forgive Amy, "taking a bitter, unhappy sort of satisfaction in her sister's troubles" (77). The almost fatal consequences of her actions prompt her decision to try to control her quick temper: "It's my dreadful temper! I try to cure it... I'm afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me" (79). These moments of self-reflection contribute to her character's growth as she learns to handle her emotions more effectively. She worries about her behaviour and asks her mother for help. She gives her probably the most valuable lesson, telling her she has been successfully suppressing her anger for so many years, "the knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it, made her own easier to bear, and strengthened her resolution to cure it" (79). It encourages Jo to resemble her

mother's model and try to do the same. From this moment, she is certain to make every effort she can to control herself and not let anything similar happen again, for she would undoubtedly regret it. She succeeds wonderfully indeed, for her manner in following chapters is improved, she manages to take a step back in situations that would trigger her before and takes a deep breath to avoid unnecessarily heated reactions. Later in the novel, she once again faces a situation when her fierce temper causes her rejection of Laurie's marriage proposal, she loses a chance to settle in a likely fulfilling relationship. Despite all her efforts, Jo's anger eventually results in feelings of isolation and loneliness, she pushes the people around her away, and her behaviour is misunderstood as cold. Jo's uncontrollable anger, however, does not only result in negative matters, it plays an important role in her development, thanks to the situations she appears in, she learns lessons about self-control, empathy, and that she needs to nurture relationships with people she loves.

Another moment demonstrating this issue comes after Meg and Jo refuse to go to the Hummels, a German immigrant family. Consequently, Beth must go there, after already going for the whole past week. Meg and Jo's laziness and selfishness result in Beth getting scarlet fever from the Hummels' kid and falling into a seriously sick and horrible state. The majority of the guilt falls upon Jo as visiting the Hummels has been her responsibility during Marmee's absence, she calls herself a "selfish pig" letting Beth go and staying writing "rubbish" (178). She turns into a kindhearted motherly figure, taking care of her sick sister every minute of the day. The negative emotions constantly invading Meg's mind are jealousy and envy. She desires financial stability and social acceptance, and she envies the wealthier families that do not struggle with it. Her longing to reach the same status as her friend Sallie results in her spending too much of John's earned money for useless items: "I can't resist them when I see Sallie buying all she wants, and pitying me because I don't; I try to be contented, but it is hard, and I'm tired of being poor" (283). However, she does not allow

these negative emotions to consume her, she resolves the problem by selling the dress she bought and then buying John a coat instead. She learns to live a more modest life at the cost of a happy family. Fetterley suggests an interesting concept: John has a right to need and deserve the coat because he goes out to work, but Meg does not need or deserve it as she stays at home (376). There are visible less apparent signs of gender differences at that time and the women's limited options.

Jo's rebellious behaviour during the first part of the book is funny and charming to others, but it makes her "a most unhappy young woman, misunderstood and often lonely" as she grows into an adult (Foote 75). She manages to injure her relationships with Aunt March and Mrs. Gardiner, her wealthy friend. Aunt March represents the traditional values of the older generation and Jo's personality often troubles her, she criticises her unladylike behaviour and unconventional ambitions. Jo's attitude is also the reason for her missed opportunity to go to Europe. Her "blunt manners and too independent spirit" result in Aunt March's decision to rather ask Amy instead of her (308). It is her fault she misses the chance to explore the world, raise her position in society, receive financial support, and evolve as a writer. She again regrets it and does not want to continue being like that, she recognises it does not bring her any benefits: "Oh, my tongue, my abominable tongue! why can't I learn to keep it quiet?" (308). Through this situation, Alcott represents that Jo's desired independence causes her "exclusion, not freedom" (Foote 76). She watches how Amy and Meg find their places in society as she stays at home not understanding why she is so miserable after all the effort. However, her independent and determined nature helps her grow, and develop into an accomplished adult, and even supports her successful writing career as she uses her unique voice and experience she gained throughout her struggles.

The negative emotions women were forced to suppress in Alcott's time are visible even in *Little Women*. The moments mentioned in this chapter show the consequences of the

sisters' negative emotions when they are not handled correctly. After experiencing these moments, they gain new knowledge and recognise the importance of certain attributes and it helps with their transformation from children to adults. We see the difference in the way they managed their emotions in their childhood in contrast with them as adults. After seeing the negative outcome of their actions, they learn how to properly deal with them.

3.4 Getting Married

Looking for a suitable man and getting married are two of the most frequently occurring aspects of the second part of the novel. The March sisters enter their adulthood, and as a result of that, their ambitions and views on the world naturally start to change. All of the sisters, except for Beth, who sadly passed away, eventually marry and settle into a traditional family life fulfilling their given duties. They replace the dreams they created in childhood with the ones that are suitable for the “contemporary cultural interpretations of family obligations”, typical for women in nineteenth-century America (May 22). However, they do not completely give up their ambitions, they just tailor them so they fit their present family life.

The first to disrupt the March family's flow is Meg, marrying John Brooke. Especially Jo takes it badly, for the first time experiencing such a big life change, with Meg moving out and starting a completely new family: “You can't know how hard it is for me to give up Meg...It can never be the same again. I've lost my dearest friend” (234). Meg enters marriage with much happiness and satisfaction, thinking about how bright their future looks, even though they must begin modestly. She determinedly wants to be “a model housekeeper” and despite all the obstacles she runs into she succeeds in bringing “love, energy, and cheerfulness” to her work (273). With marriage, there come new challenges, Meg needs to learn to face her and John's first arguments and must deal with them with a high enough level

of patience and love. The married life becomes quite lonely for Meg, as John works all day and she stays at home alone, taking care of all the household duties. Meg also experiences moments in which she wishes to not be poor anymore and again finds herself having the wrong idea of what is important. After gaining the right perspective, she learns “to love her husband better for his poverty, because it seemed to have made a man of him” (284). When Meg finally learns what she needs to do to maintain a successful marriage, a disturbance in the form of two babies appears. When Meg becomes a mother, she gets “entirely absorbed in her children” and excludes everybody else, including her husband (388). She struggles with balancing her role as a mother and wife, not being able to attend to both without neglecting one of them and forgetting her duty to John because of the love she has for her children (397). She also neglects her household duties, leaving her house untidy and not preparing a pleasant evening with a cooked dinner for John. She feels like all the hard work is up to her and also longs for some amusement, the problem is she does not ask for it, so John does not know what to do to help. Thanks to “plenty of wholesome exercise, a little pleasure, and much confidential conversation with her sensible husband” (399), Meg finds her true self again and makes their home a place full of love, happiness, and contentment. She learns the importance of love, putting her husband in the centre of her attention, and keeping herself busy to avoid boredom (Fetterley 373). Meg and John learn how to communicate better, help each other in their marriage, and make each other happy. She even becomes a role model to Jo who sees her overall improvement, how well she behaves, and how happy she seems in her married life. Jo somehow changes her opinion on marriage partly thanks to Meg and desires the same for herself, to be this happy and content in her own home.

Next comes Amy, falling in love with Laurie and marrying him in Europe. Amy’s marriage to Laurie raises her social status, as she becomes part of the wealthy Laurence family. This newly reached status exposes Amy to a new world and she must navigate the

expectations and responsibilities that come with it. Additionally, it helps improve the overall perception of the March family in the world. The marriage also provides Amy with a sense of security and stability, as Laurie enjoys taking care of her well-being and comfort. They not only can provide comfort for themselves, but also for others who are not as lucky, and that makes Amy feel purposeful. The love Amy has for Laurie makes her even a better woman than she was before, and her parents take notice of it:

For Amy's face was full of the soft brightness which betokens a peaceful heart, her voice had a new tenderness in it, and the cool, prim carriage was changed to a gentle dignity, both womanly and winning. No little affectations marred it, and the cordial sweetness of her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for it stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she had hoped to become. "Love has done much for our little girl". (448)

In a letter Amy sends home, she writes about the love between her and Laurie, how happy and humble she feels because of it: "I love my gallant captain with all my heart, and soul, and might, and never will desert him, while God lets us be together" (438). His affectionate gestures and declarations of love confirm her worthiness of love and partnership. After experiencing and receiving all the love from Laurie, Amy feels like never before, not aware of "how much like heaven this world could be, when two people love and live for one another!" (438). Laurie's commitment to her strengthens her confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, the marriage marks a significant turning point in her journey from childhood to adulthood. She acquires new roles and responsibilities, becoming a wife and a mother. The marriage to Laurie brings her fulfilment and happiness, she gets both, wealth and love. Once settling in marriage, she stops creating art, the reason she returns to it again is to create a likeness of her sick daughter "so that whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel" (489). Amy puts her art in "the service of home and family", making it the means

that will hold their family together even after her daughter's death by creating "a private memorial" for her (Fetterley 373). In the past, she wanted to create art for the purpose of becoming famous and successful, but in the end, her motivation has changed, she is inspired by her love for her child (Fetterley 373).

The last to marry is Jo, who all her life despises the idea of marriage, refusing to devote herself to the traditional model of a nineteenth-century woman. However, after Beth's death, with Meg married to John, and Amy madly in love with Laurie, she falls into a lonely state, changing her mind about marriage. When Jo hears about the magnificent love between Amy and Laurie, she starts to long for someone like that for her, "Amy's happiness woke the hungry longing" for someone to love as much as Amy and Laurie love each other (438). In this self-pitying mood, Jo remembers Professor Bhaer: "So kind, so good, so patient with me always; my dear old Fitz. I didn't value him half enough when I had him, but now how I should love to see him, for every one seems going away from me, and I'm all alone" (439). When she rejects Laurie's proposal, she loses a chance to have a loving, more fulfilling marriage. She does not escape the commitments as she thought so, she marries Professor Bhaer, "blatantly nonerotic father-figure and tutor", closing rather unromantic partnership (Murphy 568). With marriage, Jo gives up a sense of maturity and responsibility. She turns into someone who is settled in one place, focused on her husband and children, rather than longing for complete independence and freedom. Her acceptance of marriage means also acceptance of the principles of a "little woman", she becomes a well-behaved wife to her respective husband. However, her independence and artistic ambition stay, but in a way that is adapted to a married life. Her ending reflects the position of a female writer in nineteenth-century America forced to compromise her ambition, and not able to fully devote herself to the art, women at that time had to marry to achieve a successful life.

Marriage functions as the last step in the sisters' transformation into adult women.

With marriage, new challenges occur and they have to learn how to deal with them, overcome them to remain agreeable, and manage to create a happy home. They need to adjust their own needs and ambitions to fit the model of a good wife.

3.5 Beth's Sickness and Death

When Beth catches scarlet fever, her sisters are greatly impacted by it, especially Jo, putting on herself the responsibility of taking care of her and not leaving her side. Beth's illness strengthens the bond between the sisters as they develop a deeper appreciation for each other. They take on additional responsibilities, taking care of Beth and realising how much she does for them. It brings out new emotions from the sisters, including sadness, grief, fear, and empathy. For the first time, they are forced to confront mortality and the fragility of one's life. Until Beth's death, they do not come into contact with death, so it is an important moment of loss and growth for them. Each of the sisters reacts to Beth's illness differently. For example, Jo recognizes "the beauty and the sweetness" of Beth's unselfish nature (Alcott 184). And Meg and Amy discover the importance of prioritising family and relationships over material possessions and societal expectations.

Jo and Beth have always had a special bond, and these hard times make them even closer, the bond deeper. She cannot imagine her world without Beth in it: "Beth is my conscience, and I can't give her up" (186). Fetterley argues that the main purpose of Beth's presence in the novel is to deliver life lessons to Jo (Fetterley 381). Spending time with dying Beth teaches her some of the most important ones: "charity for all, the lovely spirit that can forgive and truly forget unkindness, the loyalty to duty... and the sincere faith that fears nothing, but trust undoubtingly" (416). She learns to express her emotions more openly which helps in relationships with her loved ones and also in her writing. Gradually, Beth

starts to become “an external source of inspiration” for Jo’s writing (Stadler 670). In the past, she wrote to become famous and rich, but now, after spending so much time with Beth and learning the beauty of the qualities she possesses, her work is more successful, for she writes with heart. Beth is the reason she is inspired to write such heartfelt pieces of work. In the second part of the novel, when Beth feels her declining health getting worse, she encourages Jo to publish her novel, the first work under her name, implying her time is slowly but surely shortening. In a sense, Beth’s illness is the reason for the beginning of Jo’s open publishing. However, during her last moments, Beth asks Jo to take up her role in the house, so basically, she wants her to give up her dream and devote her life to taking care of their parents, making the house a cheerful place even in Beth’s absence:

You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to father and mother when I’m gone. They will turn to you—don’t fail them...you’ll be happier in doing that, than writing splendid books, or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy. (418)

Consequently, Jo decides to give up her old ambition and commit to the new one. The problem is Jo is not Beth, she cannot change her whole personality and lock herself at home. She finds herself in a state of “loneliness and grief” (432). She gets consumed by the loss of Beth and at the same time the loss of any prospects of an enjoyable and successful life. While trying to keep the promise she made to Beth, Jo reaches quite a desperate life phase, not being able to restrict her lively nature to one quiet house with not much to entertain herself, “devoted to hum-drum cares, a few poor little pleasures, and the duty that never seemed to grow any easier” (432). Nevertheless, after some time, she recognizes the beauties of life, decides to work with what she has, and starts to make the home happy again, “humming the songs Beth used to hum, imitating Beth’s orderly ways, and giving the little touches here and there that kept everything fresh and cozy” (434). She tries to give up her dreams, plans,

desires, and hopes to replace Beth's bright, selfless presence that everyone misses. And it works for a limited period of time, for she is not cut out for that type of life, and eventually returns to her writing and lives more actively.

Meanwhile, Amy has to move to Aunt March's house so as not to catch the scarlet fever from Beth. While separated from her home and her family, she realises the significance of Beth, "how many neglected tasks those willing hands had done for her" (184). Thanks to the time spent separated from everyone, she learns how insignificant material things are, and that Beth's survival is the most important subject matter she needs to pray for and think about:

Beth isn't selfish, and that's the reason everyone loves her, and feels so bad at the thoughts of losing her. People wouldn't feel so bad about me if I was sick, and I don't deserve to have them; but I'd like to be loved and missed by a great many friends, so I'm going to try and be like Beth all I can. (201)

She recognises her selfish character and decides to better herself and become someone so kind that her loss would be as great as Beth's. Beth causes Amy's character improvement, she now cares about other people more than herself and does not complain about everything. Forced to be introduced to the idea of losing Beth forever makes her recognise the fragility of her own life. For that reason, she writes her will, so her possessions are "justly and generously divided" in case she gets ill and dies (195). Beth's death is also the main reason Laurie comes back to Amy in Europe and that results in their marriage. They end up meeting again after Laurie makes himself suitable again, and Amy has a reason to return from Europe.

The character affected the most by the death is, of course, Beth herself. Her story does not continue anymore, she ends without marriage and without achieving her ambition of taking care of her family. Beth's death suggests that if a woman does not have some glorious ambitions, there is no place for her: "To be a little woman is to be dead" (Fetterley 380). She

represents the model of a “perfect little woman” (Fetterley 379), however, her ending reflects what she had to sacrifice to be this selfless character, devoting one’s life to others’ needs. All of the effort she gives to be a little woman results in “exhaustion of vitality” which eventually leads to her death (Fetterley 380). Beth believes her place can only be in the house, doing her duties, she would not be useful anywhere else. This is probably the reason Alcott has to kill her, Beth herself describes her feelings of worthlessness, not having a place in this world:

I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I’m not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I’d do when I grew up; I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn’t seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away, and the hard part now is the leaving you all. I’m not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven. (374-75)

Beth’s death causes her family to fall into a state of grief and mourning. Her absence leaves an empty place in their lives, as they struggle to come to terms with life without their cherished Beth. Despite her physical disappearance from the story, she continues to survive in the hearts of her family members as they remember her kind, gentle, and selfless soul. She serves as an example to her sisters throughout their maturing process. Thanks to her, they learn to navigate the challenges of life with love and gratitude and keep on honouring her memory through all their actions and achievements.

In conclusion, this chapter describes several moments that contribute to the March sisters’ transformation from selfish and inexperienced children to resilient and established adults. We can see how each of them influences the sisters’ in a different way. However, every moment plays a significant role in their development and gradually helps to form the sisters’ personalities. With each hard experience they go through, they become stronger, and all the people they come into contact with somehow influence their overall growth.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to demonstrate how the March sisters transformed between the two parts of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*. The first chapter dealt with introducing the period of time when the novel was written and took place. This was crucial for the understanding of women's position at that time. Their options were limited to household duties and they were expected to get married and not pursue their personal ambitions. In the novel, Alcott in many ways broke these expectations, by writing female characters who worked and raised money to help their family and support their own needs. For example, the character of Jo pursued a writing career, prioritising her ambitions before marriage. Then a brief introduction to Alcott's personal life was provided. By learning about her background, we can better understand her work and find some connections between her life and the novel as she drew from her own experience while writing it. During her life, she advocated for women's education and capabilities, pursuing unusual careers, and breaking gender standards. All those elements can be seen in *Little Women*. In this chapter, also the novel's structure and themes were described as it was important for the understanding of the thesis, to get to know what each part focused on.

The second chapter provided a summary of the sisters' differences in personalities and how their ambitions changed between the two parts of the novel. The first presented their childhood dreams, the things they struggled with, and how they managed to get rid of their negative emotions and be better women. The second showed adult women trying to find their place in the world, figuring out who they want to be in their future, while still battling their emotions and new challenges that come their way. We could see how they used the lessons they learned before and if they succeeded in achieving what they envisioned in their childhood.

By learning about the sisters' transformation, it was possible to move on to the next and last chapter which described the specific moments that contributed to their growth. I picked some of the most impactful ones that affected the sisters' development the most: their first encounters with broader society, becoming close with people outside their family, dealing with the consequences of their actions, or for the first time experiencing grief. Through the examination of all these moments, we could see how they progressively shaped from selfish, always complaining, ungrateful children into empathetic, kind, mature, and strong women. All the people they met, the failures and accomplishments they went through, in some way or another caused them to grow into the women readers see at the end of the novel.

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