WOMEN EARLY OLD: A PERSONAL READING OF LONELINESS IN *LITTLE WOMEN*

JULIET MONIREH BOGAN

ABSTRACT: With *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott inspired generations of girls to declare, "*I* am a Jo." The novel explores the stifling reality of girls becoming women in the nineteenth century, and the lessons the March sisters endure continue to resonate. I grew up rereading my massive copy of the novel and dreaming of ice skating on lakes; and rereading it as an adult, in the wake of a debilitating depressive episode, I cannot help but feel I have somehow grown alongside it. This paper does not attempt to remove me from my analysis. Using my experience with depression as a lens, I argue that in *Little Women*, maturing into womanhood is a process of becoming lonely. And, conversely, I treat the novel as a part of the personal archive which marks my coming of age, a miniature portrait of growing up and growing lonely. I work chronologically through the sisters' imaginatively lush childhoods into their repressive and isolating adulthood, engaging with the novel's portrayal of marriage, independence, creative expression, and death. And finally, I wonder about hope and solitude, a possible balm to the burden of loneliness.

I am an infant in my earliest memory. I can't yet speak. My father, droopy eyed, rocks me in his freckled arms. He sings "You are my sunshine," and it breaks my freshly born heart. I begin to cry. Already I understand that through this song, my father is telling me that he loves me, and already, across the melodic motion in his grainy voice, I sense the existential temporality of his love. In my first memory, I experience profound loneliness.

Of late, I have been arrested by childhood photographs. She is little; she was born little, little enough to worry her mother; she grew fast, into knobby limbs she moved about with unmitigated enthusiasm; and in most photographs between the ages of four and six she insists on popping one hip out and planting both hands on her waist. In one photograph, she looks right at the camera, right at me. She is young, maybe two or three. She is open-mouthed, mid-sentence, chin raised, hand brushing her father's arm as he sits focused at a piano. And as we stare at each other I begin to cry. I remember being her, and so I say, "I'm sorry."

Fig. 1. (Bogan, Photograph of the Author and Her Father).

It had taken a fifteen-minute call for the psychiatrist to tell me, in her scratchy voice and thick Long Island lilt, “Okay, so you’re clearly clinically depressed,” and subsequently prescribe me a low dose of Bupropion. The diagnosis did not surprise me, as I sat up in a bed I had laboriously peeled myself off from, nearing 23 years old, with a decade or so of debilitating sadness filed away in my memories and stored like pockets of fat in my tummy and thighs and arms. I nod, but the psychiatrist can’t see me, so with tears stumbling down my cheeks, I say, “Okay.”

Introduction

I read Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* about, I want to say, four billion times as a kid. My copy from childhood is frayed from wear, has that perfect book smell. Middle school Juliet was a voracious reader. I brought a book with me everywhere. I read on the playground steps during recess. I plopped onto the velvety couch in the women’s restroom lounge at country club weddings or Persian New Year’s celebrations. I would bring a book to my grandparents’ house for family dinners, so that I could hide away after the meal. I liked how lonely reading made me. I particularly enjoyed how my copy of *Little Women* was over 700 pages long and imbued me with a certain academic exceptionalism *nobody* could ignore as I trailed my mother around Costco.

I have carried one scene in particular with me all these years, the words of the passage burned into the back of my eyes. Laurie has married Amy and Beth has passed away and, reunited with Jo, he reflects, “You *are* older; here’s a line, and

there's another; unless you smile, your eyes look sad, and when I touched the cushion, just now, I found a tear on it. You've had a great deal to bear, and had to bear it all alone" (Alcott 688). Even as a child, my love for *Little Women* was founded upon my love for Jo's profound loneliness. I loved her for being lonely, because *I* felt lonely. Her loneliness, brought to the surface when Laurie recognizes her tear on the pillow, romanticized my own loneliness.

Summer of '23 had been a vaguely positive one, because I refused to be alone. I smothered myself with constant playdates, paraded around the city with friends to discover slow ways to pass the time. Nothing particularly phased me. Except at night, ripped from my friends' sides, I lay in bed unable to fall asleep, wondering why I felt so empty. By August I could be accurately described as a cicada shell, you know, like the ones kids would pluck from sticky tree bark and plant secretly on their friend's shoulders during third-grade recess. A shadow of a body. Sticking to people.

September 5th, the first day of classes, and suddenly everything I had been tucking dully into my body burst from its poorly constructed dam with full force. A weight pulled on me, and I would consider submitting to the temptation to lie down on the delicious Claremont Avenue sidewalk on my trudge to class. Other than the momentum of classes to drag me from my room each morning, I spent my time lying catatonic in bed. I spoke to nobody and saw nobody. I lost the ability to raise or move my fingers. I forgot what I looked like. I was seeing things that were exhausting to see.

Well, until the Bupropion kicked in ceremoniously at the two-week mark; I fragmented an essay writing all-nighter with a midnight comedy show in Brooklyn, attended a birthday party, and insisted, to a perplexed and unsupportive friend, on deep cleaning their bathroom. But despite my mental and physical renewal, faced with a backlog of shirked September assignments, I found it difficult to separate myself out from my academic responsibilities. I was rereading a text I had last read when I was likely nine or ten years old, and I rushed back into myself. At once I was the young woman nearing the end of her college career, and the scuffed-kneed girl plopping that enormous, 700-page volume down and declaring, "*I'm* a Jo."

Near the end of *Little Women*, Professor Bhaer shares with Jo a poem she had published which touched him deeply. "In the Garret" chronicles the four chests once belonging to her sisters, now tucked away in the attic of their childhood home where only she remains. Meg lives with her husband and children; Beth is gone; Amy is freshly married. When describing her own chest, she reflects upon its contents, "Hints of a woman early old / A woman in a lonely home" (738). And rereading these lines I realized that I had grown alongside the Jo I had identified with as a child. As I read *Little Women*, I cannot remove myself from the pages, and I cannot remove the girl in those photographs from the pages, because the story feels like a part of *my* story.

Sari Edelstein opens her essay, "Little Women, Overgrown Children, and the Problem of Female Maturity," with a quote from G. Stanley Hall, a nineteenth-

century psychiatrist who focused on human life spans. He asserts, "'Woman at her best never outgrows adolescence'" (qtd. in Edelstein 71). Thus, as I consider my own maturity as paralleling Jo's maturity, I am confronted by nineteenth-century theories on female maturity. Edelstein analyzes how Alcott, in *Little Women*, calls attention to the limitations imposed upon women as they age in order to "[thematize] coming of age as unnatural, fraught, and rife with anxiety" (73). While for white men maturation is not only biological but also economic and political (they can own property, vote, hold positions of power), women in the nineteenth century are confined to a purely physical and emotional puberty. Female coming of age is mostly interior, except for the tightening grasp of societal expectations. As Edelstein asserts, "there is no way to grow up without succumbing to a rigid gender role," and the March sisters conform to the social pressure to become little women and good wives (72). Perhaps it is this pressure that explains why Jo's womanhood is marked by devastating loneliness.

Using my own experience with depression as a lens, I argue that for the sisters in *Little Women*, maturing into womanhood is a process of becoming lonely. And, conversely, I treat *Little Women* as a part of the personal archive which marks my coming of age.

Vital to my argument are the distinctions between the different terms I will employ—because although related, alone and lonely are not the same, and neither are isolation and solitude. When I use the term *alone*, I refer to a spatial positionality, rather than a judgment or feeling. To be alone is to be "unaccompanied," to be "on one's own" ("Alone," def. A.1). I will apply the term *aloneness* as a state of being alone. To be *lonely*, on the other hand, is to be "dejected by want of company," and "sad at the thought that one is alone" ("Lonely," def. A.4). When I use the term lonely, I will refer to the melancholic feeling; loneliness is the state of being lonely. The term isolation has a double significance: to be isolated is to be "placed or standing apart or alone," but the term also has a psychological context which is important to understanding my own symptoms of depression ("Isolated," def. A.1). Used as a noun, an isolate is a "person who, either from choice or through separation or rejection, is isolated from normal social interaction" ("Isolate," def. N). Isolation is a term which thus holds personal and social significance in the context of *Little Women*. And finally, I will employ the term solitude to signify a purposeful, potentially positive form of loneliness. Solitude does not differ much from loneliness in its exact definition; it is "the state of being or living alone; loneliness, seclusion, solitariness (of a person)" ("Solitude," def. N.1). However, in combining both the physical state of aloneness and the emotion of loneliness, I want to examine the agency of solitude, as opposed to the hurt of loneliness or isolation. In solitude, perhaps there is also peace.

This paper is a small portrait of growing up and growing lonely; I will work chronologically through *Little Women*, first grounding my analysis in a girlhood tucked away in the private, gendered, domestic space. I will examine, there, the freedom and vibrant imagination of girlhood, the joy of familial company, and the peace of solitude. I then argue that in order to become women, girls are made

small, their desires and emotions diminished. Thrust into the public sphere, girlhood is confronted by a classed and critical gaze which creates a form of isolation I will call *othering*. I then investigate two branches of womanhood off the feet of adolescence: marriage and independence. In both these cases, I track the loneliness that blooms once the March sisters are severed from their childhood home. Finally, I will look at endings, goodbyes, deaths, and Jo's writing, and wonder about hopeful futures.

A Girlhood in Private

Jo wants to run. Laurie insists she does. She is hesitant, grumpy, desperate to move freely; and so, she looks around, and when the coast is definitively clear, she breaks into a downhill sprint.

But her sister Meg discovers her catching her breath below a tree and realizes, "You have been running, Jo; how could you?" (Alcott 235).

Jo's aching response: "Don't try to make me grow up before my time, Meg; … let me be a little girl as long as I can" (Alcott 235).

Jo spends much of the novel insisting upon her boyishness— "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," she says (Alcott 6-7). She's "dying to go and fight with Papa" (Alcott 7). She calls herself "'a businessman'" before correcting herself— "'girl, I mean'" (Alcott 79). Jo's behaviors are labeled unladylike and boyish, especially by Meg, and Jo's frustration throughout the novel arises out of the desire to express herself with the freedom reserved for boys, and to practice the same economic and social freedoms as men. And yet, to Meg, she begs that her *girlhood*—not her childhood, not her boyishness—be preserved. While Jo certainly expresses a developed understanding of the differences between her own rights as a woman and the rights of men, she also associates her girlhood with a greater sense of freedom than the impending womanhood society—and her sister—threaten her into.

A portrait, brief; I would corral my younger cousin and little brother into various playing-pretend escapades, most of which were an opportunity to announce—after they had declared that they could control fire or minds or could speak to animals or whatever—that *my* power was *all* magic. I didn't grow much hair until I was around six and then suddenly I had *tendrils* of it, which I wore down and swung around, or up in a ponytail and swung around; I competed with myself to constantly best my Skip-It high score (because I had a Skip-It that took track of how many skips you successfully it-ed); I would mix a goopy ratio of dirt and water into one of the dented pots my parents had stored in the garage to make 'soup' my neighborhood friends and I could sip as we 'lived off the earth.' I wanted to construct a world and then live in it. When I look back on my childhood, I bear witness to an unapologetic, adventurous, active, proud, curious, eager, loudly imaginative girl. I was happy.

The March household of the sisters' childhoods is never lonely. Instead, Alcott describes it as vibrant, loud, warmed by the Christmastime fire. And,

notably, the space is entirely female. The female domestic sphere of the March sisters' childhood granted them privacy to express themselves freely and imaginatively, setting up the imagination as a space for peaceful, generative solitude. The crowded, liberating privacy, and the possibilities of the imagination, introduce the domestic sphere as a profoundly un-alone foundation from which the March girls can only *become* lonely women.

Alcott grounds the sisters' girlhoods in a decisively feminine domestic space. Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, their servant, Hannah, and their mother, Marmee, solely occupy the March household throughout the girls' childhoods. But not only is the space dominantly female—it is also haunted by an emphasized *absence* of the father. Mr. March is away at war. Early in the first chapter, the sisters mourn the absence: Jo laments, "We haven't got Father, and shall not have him for a long time" (Alcott 3). Alcott deliberately emphasizes the father's absence, setting up a private sphere where the women are abandoned by men. Kathryn Manson Tomasek names the March home a "feminist utopia," a site where women generate female-centric thought (237). The gendered dynamic in the March household ensures that the women create a system in which they can express themselves outside of a patriarchal gaze.

When isolated from society, and in particular from men, the March women are granted *privacy*. Privacy is controlled aloneness. In the female domestic sphere, it grants freedom of expression. Privacy gives Jo the confidence to run freely, to exercise the boyishness which she understands, as Meg reminds her, is unbecoming of a young woman. Privacy is the sphere of girlhood, a dawning-place of experimentation, the prelude to becoming a "fully gendered" adult (Gaard 7).

Without a male presence, the girls communicate unreservedly with one another. While attending a dance, Meg sprains her ankle and cannot walk home. Laurie, after spending the evening with Jo, offers his carriage to take the sisters home. When Laurie takes the seat outside the carriage so that Meg may prop up her knee, the sisters climb into the car alone and "[talk] over their party in freedom" (Alcott 51). Though a brief scene, it illustrates the freedom privacy provides to women and girls the moment men are absent. The carriage, here, serves as an extension of the dynamic in the March home.

Privacy allows the March women and girls to express a full range of emotions which they stifle in public. In one scene, the family wakes up collectively irritated. Jo, after her siblings' grumblings swell into cacophony, exclaims, "There never *was* such a cross family!" (Alcott 54; emphasis added). Amy retorts, "You're the crossest person in it!" (Alcott 55). And Meg contributes, "Beth, if you don't keep these horrid cats down cellar I'll have them drowned" (Alcott 55). The sisters engage in rage-fueled and violent outbursts. Privately, they can be angry with one another. They can be flawed. The solitude fostered by the domestic space gives the girls room to express themselves and their emotions freely.

I owe my freedom of expression primarily to my limitless imagination, and the March sisters use their imaginations to express themselves outside of restrictive gender norms. The sisters form the Pickwick Club, in which they publish a column lined with familial goings-on and their own fiction writing, and during the meetings they take on male Charles Dickens character personas. They use male pronouns, the male characters' names, and the narration moves fluidly across gendered descriptions of the siblings. In one sentence, for example, the narration switches from, "Jo's sudden change of tone made the girls laugh," to; "but all looked rather anxious, and no one said a word, as Snodgrass took his seat" (Alcott 159). Here, the narration adopts the perspectives of the sisters by referring to Jo simultaneously as herself and as a male-pronounced Augustus Snodgrass. As such, Alcott layers multiple identities upon the girls as they play freely with their imaginations, and she brings the reader into this imaginary realm. The girls themselves feel these layers. Jo's change in tone makes them laugh, but *Snodgrass'* motion to sit makes them anxious—they are both personas at once. The insistence at the narrative level that the sisters are both girls *and* men renders their imaginations reality and emphasizes how privacy grants them freedom to be whatever they would like to be.

Jo's imagination flourishes for the most part in solitude. When she wants to read or write, Jo escapes to the home's garret, alone. The garret is "Jo's favorite refuge; and here she loved to retire with half a dozen russets and a nice book, to enjoy the quiet and the society of a pet rat who lived nearby" (Alcott 37). Alcott gives Jo a "favorite refuge," a space which is hers, a space that is always safe. The chapter in which she publishes her first story, "Secrets," opens with her tucked privately away in her writing-nook; as such, Alcott highlights Jo's writing process as safe, solitary, and productive. Jo is "absorbed in her work," and barely notes her surroundings; she is observed only by the sun, which, "for two or three hours…lay warmly in the high window, showing Jo seated on the old sofa, writing busily" (Alcott 226). Her solitude is generative, warm, and victorious, as the work which Jo exclaims is her "best" ends up published (Alcott 226). The private space, populated by the imagination, renders aloneness peaceful and positive, and grants Jo, as a young creative, the space to explore her identity as a writer and succeed.

Sue Standing argues that the imagination is also a liberatory space for Jo, and more broadly all girls, because it "becomes a way to create the life one wants to live" in a contextually limiting society (175). Her essay, "In Jo's Garret: *Little Women* and the Space of Imagination," is an autobiographical study of her relationship to the novel and additionally compiles interviews with other women raised on their love for *Little Women* and for Jo. What stands out for me in this essay is the portrait of girlhood pleasure in imagination. Many of the interviewed women express that Jo's garret inspired them to "eat apples whenever [they] read," implying that they found the solitude they witnessed Jo experience not only inspiring but satisfying—it literally fed their appetites (Standing 178). Standing highlights how the imaginary space is liberatory because it is "a way of

gaining control, especially for young girls who have little, if any, explicit power," and at the same time examines how a part of this lack of power is the inability to publicly express anger, be physically active, or engage in "autoeroticism" (175). She connects the freedom found within the imaginary realm to the restrictions girls experience on exploring their own pleasures. Standing quotes Sven Birkerts, who writes, "Early childhood reading is the free indulgence of fantasy and desire, done because it feels good" (qtd. in Standing 174). The imagination allows girls to both exercise agency and experience pleasure. Their solitude is creative, liberatory, and pleasurable.

As a girl, I owed much of my joy to the ecstasy I experienced in solitary imagination. The opportunities my imagination fostered made me crave being alone; I loved long showers, late nights curled in the crawlspace between my bed and the corner of my room, even sitting on the toilet when I didn't particularly have to go. Any private space was a space where I could be who I wanted. As I began to age, and the blurriness of the borders between the real world and the imaginary world wore off, the possibilities of who I could be narrowed. I felt myself shrink, felt uncomfortably self-conscious, felt imprisoned by my inability to escape into backyards and basements to play pretend. In showers, bathrooms, crawlspaces, under covers, I salvaged my girlhood as best I could—I made up stories. I wrote.

Jo, begging Meg not to make her grow up too early, recognizes the temporary freedom allotted to her childhood. This temporality fills her with sadness. To both hold her girlhood in her heart with gratitude, and to witness the rapidity with which it fades away creates a conflict within Jo twinged with rage—at who, at Meg? At what her constant reminders represent, at societal constraints and sorrow? After Jo begs Meg to let her remain a little girl, the narration continues, "As she spoke, Jo bent over the leaves to hide the trembling of her lips, for lately she felt that Margaret was fast getting to be a woman" (Alcott 235-6). Meg is Jo's example of a woman leaving her girlhood, and it frightens her. It threatens the utopia of their shared childhoods, threatens the togetherness of their family.

Although the domestic space of *Little Women* is private and solitary, it is not lonely. Raised together in a vibrant female utopia, the girls experience freedoms of expression in their privacy, and Jo experiences ecstatic solitude during her creative process. However, their girlhoods are edged by the tide of womanhood. The process of becoming women—a process of suppressing the fullness of their emotions and expressions—moves them towards the inevitable loneliness of their adulthoods.

Becoming Little Women

I feel, generally, very small.

I was made small. I used to be big, back when I was little. When I was a girl, I asked questions, told expressive stories, made up elaborate games to play,

wasn't afraid to move my body around, wasn't offended by my own loudness. I began to be made small when I got my period, that tragicomic first sign of womanhood—I was eleven, was attending a friend's birthday party. I had slipped into the bathroom and pulled down my pants only to find that my underwear was lined with thick, brown sludge, and had concluded, rattled with dumbstruck humiliation, that I had shit my own pants. My period was sort of like one of those Barbie doll sets that comes with an extra pair of shoes and a phone and a horse or something, in that my period came with big boobs, cramps, crushing despair, and thick, dark body hair that made one boy in my fifth grade class cry out when I raised my arms over my head to drive home one of those aforementioned expressive stories.

After that initial blow, anything really could succeed in whittling me down to smallhood. When my passionate stories were received with, "You already told us that one;" when my grandfather would announce to the family that "Juliet can't have dessert;" when my parents told me to go back upstairs and change because I was drawing too much attention to my 14-year-old breasts—I was being trained to make myself quieter, smaller, less noticeable. When I write in journals for a couple years that I don't want to exist, it might be to fulfill what the people who love me want me to become.

Fig. 2. California, '04 or '05. Take note of my brother's embargo on clothes and my (aforementioned) popped hip (Bogan, Photograph of the Author and Her Brother)**.**

My experience transitioning from girlhood into womanhood is not unlike the process Greta Gaard asserts occurs in *Little Women*. Gaard argues that in order for the March sisters to grow into womanhood, they must learn self-sacrifice and self-discipline. She highlights how Marmee instills these qualities in her daughters from a young age in order to "diminish a girl into a little woman" (Gaard 14). In response to her daughters' complaints over the burdens they feel in their lives, Marmee delivers a moralizing story centering on the advice, "When you feel discontented, think over your blessings, and be grateful" (Alcott 69). Marmee curbs her daughters' expressions of their discontent and confines it to their minds, where thought might transform dissatisfaction into gratitude. Her storytelling process already works to silence her daughters; the narration interjects, "Here Jo looked up quickly, as if about to speak, but changed her mind, seeing that the story was not done yet" (Alcott 69). Minimizing the girls' emotions and sentiments to the confines of their minds repositions the safety of privacy to a purely internal space. Jo calls this process "self-denial," and so Gaard does as well: a process of suppressing the self throughout girlhood in order to become "fully gendered, grown females" (Alcott 126; Gaard 7). In making the girls' freedom of expression so private, Alcott intends to illustrate the lack of freedom women have.

There is a tension, then, in the domestic sphere. While I argue that it is only in the home that the March sisters can exercise freedom, it is also the first space where they are introduced to the confining expectations of womanhood. Alcott deliberately designs a domestic space populated only by women not only to give the girls a space of agency, but also to highlight how patriarchal influence remains whether or not men have been physically removed from a space. The influence of societal expectations for women marks Jo's anxieties about growing up, threatens the togetherness of her family and her freedom of expression, and introduces the sisters—Meg, in particular—to a form of social loneliness I call othering.

The process of self-denial reveals that privacy is, ultimately, antithetical to freedom. Marmee admits privately to Jo that, despite her outward-facing calmness, she experiences constant rage. When Jo expresses frustration to her mother about her uncontrollable anger, her mother assures her, "I'm angry nearly every day of my life, Jo" (Alcott 122). The surprise Jo expresses— "Why, you are never angry!"—signals that Marmee successfully represses her anger, and that she has realized the only free place to express her anger is internally, in her personal privacy (Alcott 122). She tells Jo, "I've been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it…. I still hope to learn not to feel it" (Alcott 122). Repressing anger takes exertion. It is unnatural, difficult. Marmee's confession signals that while privacy might allow women and girls to express themselves, privacy and freedom are ultimately incompatible. Rather, privacy compartmentalizes a girl's emotion to ensure that women repress the fullness of their characters until they are "cured" of any inconveniencing emotions, opinions, intellects, and insights.

Although Marmee teaches her daughters to repress themselves, she does so on behalf of the looming, patriarchal voice present in the lasting influence of their father. Jo recalls, upon hearing her mother's account, how her father would "put his finger on his lips, and look at you with a very kind but sober face" (Alcott 125). Marmee confirms that this was Father's silent way of reminding her of her behavior when he sensed her temper threatened to burst. And while she speaks of her husband's reminders with gratitude, his presence is an actively repressive one. Gaard reminds us that "Marmee knows it is her job to transform her girls into gendered females, but she is really only an instrument of the father" (10). Through Marmee's praise, the father's patriarchal authority maintains control over the family.

Despite Marmee's centrality to the entire novel, the father renders her invisible. In response to Father's silent reminder not to get angry, Jo observes how Marmee "always folded [her] lips tight and went away" (Alcott 125). The father's influence silences her, beyond simply stifling her anger. Her anger, in this sense, represents "a form of self-defense, a response to the violation of rights" (Gaard 11). The father suppresses her anger and thus suppresses her voice and her character and muffles her agency. Marmee's anger makes Jo feel "nearer and dearer to her mother than ever before" (Alcott 123). To learn of her mother's anger is to learn about her mother, to realize pieces of her mother's whole self which have not only been repressed, but which Jo herself shares.

By repressing their anger and unwomanly qualities, the girls and their mother become double-selves—which Alcott highlights, in the domestic sphere, through her inclusion of performances and plays. When Alcott introduces Marmee in the first chapter, she describes her as having a "cheery" voice, a "'can-I-help-you' look about her," and adds, "She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman, and the girls thought the gray cloak and unfashionable bonnet covered the most splendid mother in the world" (12). Alcott introduces Marmee as doubled. She does not dress in a way that suggests who she is; despite her clothes, she has a "noble" attitude to her and is seen by her daughters, underneath the mask of her garments, as the "most splendid mother." However, we have unpacked how the process of self-denial creates a dissonance between internal feelings and external self-expression; thus, the disconnect between her clothes and her attitude foreshadows that her splendidness is itself a mask. Gaard highlights how Marmee's cheeriness signals her astute training in the appropriate attitudes of a woman: "mere self-denial," she writes, "is not enough; the little woman must not sulk, pout, complain, or express her anger while she denies her personal desires" (4). Self-denial does not simply repress emotion, it alters self-expression. Alcott introduces the March family in terms of performance, and as such toys with the doubleness of women's identities and foreshadows how the March sisters will have to conform to the self-denial their mother has mastered.

In fact, self-denial transforms the domestic space into a performance of the public sphere. Stephanie Foote argues that the novel "[uses] the home not as an escape from the potential social injuries of the public but as a stage on which

the March girls can rehearse the proper ways of behaving and the proper ways of feeling" (68). Marmee directs their performance, first through example and eventually through a series of lessons on transforming negative emotion into gratitude or silence.

However, while both Foote and Gaard identify that becoming women is synonymous with becoming small, I also want to emphasize the emotional toll self-denial takes on the March sisters. When their mother rushes to Washington to care for her deathly-ill husband, the sisters exchange letters to ask after their parents' well-being and to relay the situation back home. Jo, in her letter, inserts a poem which situates the sorrows and anxieties she feels over her father's condition into the housework she conducts. She writes:

> Along the path of a useful life,
> Will heartsease ever bloom;
> The busy mind has no time to think
> Of sorrow or care or gloom;
> And anxious thoughts may be swept away,
> As we bravely wield a broom. (Alcott 262)

Jo's poem uses the performance of domestic tasks to express how she quells her underlying, complex emotions. In grounding the poem in housework, she succeeds in highlighting the exhaustive effort of self-denial. However, in naming her internal strife—her "busy mind," her "sorrow" and "care" and "gloom," her "anxious thoughts"—she does not repress them. She masks the emotions in usefulness and bravery, yes, but she creates a doubleness by insisting the busy mind "has no time to think" just before listing all that she thinks about. She describes the process of self-denial ("anxious thoughts may be swept away"), without rendering her internalized feelings invisible, and as such she illustrates the emotional turmoil that erupts out of laborious double-selfhood.

Jo reveals, in her poem, that she has a keen sense of the process of becoming a double-self, of expressing oneself differently than how one feels. She also understands that doubleness limits her freedom. Interestingly, alongside her longing to be a boy, she also expresses, "I wish I was a horse; then I could run for miles in this splendid air, and not lose my breath" (Alcott 235). She associates freedom not only with the limitless exploration reserved for boys and men, but also with the animal. The horse, effectively, has more freedom than she. Jo diminishes her station as a woman to fall below that of the horse, a symbol of the wild freedom she knows she, as a girl, cannot express.

At the same time, however, Jo also aligns women with horses in order to address how the process of self-denial is similar to the process of domesticating animals. When Meg catches Jo running, she "[regards] her disheveled sister with well-bred surprise" (Alcott 235). Using the animalistic language "well-bred" aligns Meg's good behavior with the domestication of horses, aligns her politeness with captivity. Meg and Jo fight about Jo's behavior—this is the bit where Jo begs to stay "a little girl"—and eventually, Meg walks on "with great dignity," a shifted language which implies that the narration privileges Meg's perspective now,

rather than Jo's, and therefore that Meg does not perceive her good behavior with the same critical eye that Jo does (Alcott 236).

In this scene, Meg is distinguished from Jo and Laurie to highlight her age, as well as how she already performs womanhood. As she walks away, Jo and Laurie "followed, laughing, whispering, skipping stones, and 'behaving like children,' as Meg said to herself, though she might've been tempted to join them if she had not had her best dress on" (Alcott 236). First, Alcott expresses that Meg does not consider herself a child—she is seventeen, not quite a woman, not quite a girl. She borders on womanhood. However, the narrative also emphasizes that the only thing preventing Meg from behaving like a child, and even being a child, is her "best dress." Womanhood, Alcott implies, is simply costuming, putting on a mask, performing. If she had not been dressed as a woman, she would've felt more comfortable behaving like a child.

Meg is the first little woman in the novel, and her performance of womanhood as a young woman is inextricably linked with her class perception. Meg is hyper-aware of class. This first manifests mostly in her desire for more stuff, because she "could remember a time when home was beautiful," and thus feels the family's poverty more than her younger sisters (Alcott 57). However, her awareness soon transforms into a commentary on her and her family's social positioning. Reflecting upon her distaste of the end of the holidays, and with it the reinstatement of the sisters' jobs or studies, Meg says, "But it does seem so nice to have little suppers and bouquets, and go to parties, and drive home, and read and rest, and not work. It's like other people, you know, and I always envy girls who do such things; I'm so fond of luxury" (Alcott 53). Meg, here, lays down a definition of luxury, complete with food, flowers, parties, vehicles, and rest. Her emphasis on rest stands out in particular. While before, in her personal struggle with poverty, the challenge seemed situated primarily in things, her analysis of the ability to rest or to abstain from labor as a mark of wealth gives the impression that she has a deeper understanding of class politics. She does not just associate wealth with money, but with earning money; she is aware that while in wealthier families, girls may "do such things" as rest and go to parties, she and Jo and her mother, in their poorer family, must work. Thus, she analyzes, they live outside of luxury not only because they do not have as much material means as wealthier families, but also because the older women of the house must labor.

However, what strikes me most about this passage is that in her critique of labor, Meg creates a vocabulary of isolation: she refers to those who live in luxury as other people. The term "other" here denotes what I want to categorize under the branch of social loneliness as an awareness of difference. Stephanie Foote emphasizes that "Class is not merely about how much money one has, it is more finely about the kinds of feelings subjects experience as dangerous or natural or powerful" (66). Meg does not only have an understanding of the relationship between class and labor, she also indicates that class awareness is a site of *feeling*. Differentiating her family, and their need to work, from other, wealthier people, Meg identifies a way in which she is different, and thus

separate, from the girls she is envious of. Although she shares the "girl" identity, she cannot classify herself in the same pool of girl as them because of the luxuries they are each, separately, afforded. And so, while privacy can be a liberating, domestic form of solitude, Meg shows us that othering is a public, classed form of isolation.

Meg experiences othering during the Vanity Fair. Dressed in her finest, albeit modest, wares Meg feels the judgmental gazes of her wealthy friends upon her. The quality of her dress stands in sharp contrast to the others' and, though they say nothing, their silence speaks louder than the compliments they ultimately shower her with. She reflects "but in their kindness Meg saw only pity for her poverty, and her heart felt very heavy as she stood by herself, while the others laughed, chattered, and flew about like gauzy butterflies" (Alcott 133). Meg experiences not only socially perceived isolation but also physical isolation; she stands "by herself," and does not socialize cheerfully like the other girls, even if they throw compliments her way. *Their* doubleness—performed kindness gilding social superiority—is symbolized as "gauzy butterflies," where "gauzy" might refer to the translucence of their beautiful facades. And while the lightheartedness of the wealthy girls is encompassed by the image of fluttering butterflies, Meg feels starkly heavy-hearted. Class difference isolates Meg by making her feel different and othered.

Meg, from the start of the novel, demonstrates her successful submission to submissive womanhood; even her material desire is extinguished by her experience at Vanity Fair, when she admits to her mother that she liked being praised and admired, and her mother responds, "That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion, and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things" (Alcott 149). She can like, but not passionately desire. Her mother then tells her, "excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty, Meg" (Alcott 149). The lesson, then, is to attract by being small—while Meg took up extravagant space at Vanity Fair, she attracted attention twinged by upsetting gossip; if she attracts through both her beauty and her modesty, perhaps the attention she receives will be just as pure as she.

Barbara Welter outlines the expectations designed and publicized for women in the mid-nineteenth century in her essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood." She divides the expectations "into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 152). Her examination illuminates the goal of self-denial as it stifles girlhood: to create True Women. True Women, little women, small women—to become a woman, Welter explains, a girl must be religious, pure, submissive, and resigned to the home. As the sisters of *Little Women* are molded out of their childhoods, the lessons they learn teach them to constrict themselves into the expectations of True Womanhood.

Self-denial is the project undertaken by girls to become socially acceptable, True Women. It is a project of performance, of becoming a double-self, the internal emotion dissonant with the external expression. It is also, thus,

tied to classed society; the process of becoming woman is also a classed process for the March sisters, who live on the periphery of wealth, just as they begin the novel on the periphery of womanhood. But what leads this process of unbecoming free, unencumbered, expressive girls to a lonely womanhood? *Little Women* is not simply a novel which traces the March sisters through self-denial; much of the conflict arises in the girls' success or failure to deny themselves, to become True Women. And, quite tragically, whether a girl grows into a successful woman or a failed woman, her story appears to be marked by an inescapable loneliness—a loneliness which blossoms when women ripen into wives.

Lonely Marriage, Lonely Independence

In *Little Women* the March sisters must get married to be True Women, but this does not mean they will not also be lonely. Meg's marriage splits up the female utopia, leaving behind marriage-hating Jo; but marriage is also internally lonely, as Meg finds herself practicing a self-denial her husband need not worry about for himself. Jo, unmarried, displaces family into her writing, and becomes a lonely writer.

The novel's perception of marriage is mostly crafted by Jo. She loudly dislikes the threat marriage poses to the idyllic family union she experiences at home. Laurie reveals to Jo that Mr. Brooke, his tutor, has held tight to a glove Meg had misplaced, and confided in Laurie that he is in love with her. When Jo reacts gravely to the news, Laurie exclaims, "I thought you'd be pleased," to which Jo responds, "At the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away? No, thank you" (Alcott 234). Jo considers marriage not a union but a severance. In fact, her conception of marriage centers her own family rather than the family born of wedlock—she says to her mother, "I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" (Alcott 309). Sisterly love is, here, interchangeable with romantic love; and more than that, it is preferable to Jo. She fears that marriage will "take Meg away" and wants to instead "keep her safe in the family." For Jo, marriage tears a family apart more than it binds together a new one.

Jo's relationship to Meg's impending romance is, in her mind, interwoven with her own self-prophesized spinsterhood. Surprised to see her sister suddenly so romantic and blushing, "Jo felt as if, during that fortnight, her sister had grown up amazingly, and was drifting away from her into a world where she could not follow" (Alcott 150). Jo not only fears the loss of her family, she also senses that when her sisters get married they will leave her behind. She does not want to marry—when he proposes, she tells Laurie, "I don't believe that I shall ever marry" (Alcott 561-2). She sees marriage as a "world" which she will never occupy; she comprehends an uncrossable boundary that will divide her and her married sisters, and as such, she presumes her own loneliness.

Jo's prophecy was true: Meg marries, Amy goes to Europe, she to New York, and the family divides. However, in their new, independent journeys, the

girls are not unhappy; even when Jo refuses Laurie, she does so in part because "I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty" (Alcott 562). Her solitude is much like the solitude of her childhood; it comforts and secures her. Amy, in Europe, writes to the family she has left behind, "I really feel like a dissipated London fine lady, writing here so late, with my room full of pretty things, and my head a jumble of parks, theaters, new gowns, and gallant creatures" (Alcott 485). Only briefly homesick, she explores grandly, reconnects with the Fred Vaughn she met in childhood, and kindles a gentle romance with him. But, despite her fresh union, it is *Meg*, not independent Jo, or burgeoning artist Amy, who experiences the first brush with loneliness.

Fig. 3. Meme I saved, September 18, 2024 (Bogan, Meme).

In marriage, Meg discovers—whether consciously or not—that self-denial makes her alone. Meg and John have their first big fight when he comes home one day expecting a much needed meal and a settled house, while Meg has suffered busily the entire day and failed to make a successful jelly, throwing off the trajectory of cooking supper. She tells her husband, "I am so tired and hot and cross and worried!" and clarifies, after he prods, that she suffers because "The—the jelly won't jell" (Alcott 423). He laughs, and then sighs, "Is that all? … for heaven's sake don't have hysterics" (Alcott 424). His response diminishes her day's labor, making it less than his "long day's work" which makes coming home to "a chaotic house, an empty table, and a cross wife … not exactly conducive to repose of mind or manner" (Alcott 425). Instead of recognizing her struggle as legitimately difficult, he laughs at the smallness of "the jelly won't jell" and waves her emotion off as "hysterics." John makes his wife's frustration, exhaustion, and labor invisible, and in doing so makes Meg invisible. Diminished,

her emotions made small, Meg is left alone to feel them and wonder about their fullness. Her husband's authority justifies her self-denial and isolates her.

Meg expresses that she feels forgotten and alone, but the couple's argument only leads her to feel more confirmed in the loving potential of self-denial. John adds that he has invited a colleague to dinner, and Meg's patience runs out. She exclaims, "You ought to have sent word, or told me this morning, and you ought to have remembered how busy I was" (Alcott 424). Meg recognizes that she has been wronged, that her husband has diminished her own busyness, and has neglected to key her into their mutual, domestic affairs. She loses her temper, refuses to cook dinner, and retires, while John "excused his little wife as well as he could" to his dinner guest (Alcott 426). In her fury, Meg is but a *little* wife. However, when their mutual frustration does not dissipate, she remembers her mother's advice to her, to "Be careful, be very careful, not to wake his anger against yourself," and to "Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err" (Alcott 428; Alcott 429). Rather than continue along her path of recognizing what John "ought" to have done, Meg is reminded to "be careful" and "watch herself," lest *her* wrongdoings—and John does think to himself, "She was wrong, of course"—ruin *their* relationship (Alcott 427). The responsibility to right both their wrongs falls to her, and she complies to extinguish the largeness of her emotion for the preservation of her husband's pride and their marriage.

Just as successful self-denial within a marriage isolates Meg, Jo's unsuccessful self-denial, in her independence, also leads to isolated suffering. Although Jo battles with and represses her anger and her more boyish tendencies throughout the novel, oftentimes with success, she cannot shake her defiant character. When asked by her aunts how she takes to favors, she responds, "I don't like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent" (Alcott 458). Jo associates freedom with independence. But independence is also, in a sense, self-isolation. She cuts herself off from support and faces the consequences. Throughout her youth, Jo had clung to the dream of traveling to Europe to pursue her artistic craft—but after her aunt observes her and Amy, who responds to their proposition with a pleasant, "I am willing to work.… Patronage does not trouble me when it is well meant," she asks the latter instead (Alcott 457). Jo is devastated, her dreams squelched. Her aunts—and the narrative—punish her for the solitude she brightly championed in her girlhood and in her aversion to marriage. She reprimands herself, "Oh, my tongue, my abominable tongue! Why can't I learn to keep it quiet?" (Alcott 475). She recognizes that in her failure to quell her own desires, in her failure to self-sacrifice, she cannot realize her dreams, cannot be rewarded. And the once-cheery solitude she had previously treasured begins to melt into bitter loneliness. While Amy sails off, fearful of leaving her family but buzzing with the excitement of something new, Jo retires to "her refuge, the garret"—this time to "[cry] till she couldn't cry anymore" (Alcott 777-8).

Jo is not entirely lost, entirely unhappy, entirely diminished by the disappointment of being refused the Europe trip. Rather, she stands up for her jittery desires, and tells her mother, "I want something new; I feel restless, and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning more than I am" (Alcott 507). She travels to New York, and there finds a second home, a friend in Professor Bhaer, and focuses on writing.

Independent Jo replaces family with writing. She writes a couple "sensation stories" in the hopes of pleasing American audiences and selling some stories, and she succeeds (Alcott 532). But as she writes, the narration portrays her relationship to her stories as one between parent and child. Sorely affected by a publisher's generous alterations to one of her stories, Jo "[feels] as a tender parent might on being asked to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new cradle" (Alcott 534-5). Her writing becomes her family; and when it does, it does in the context of mutilation. Jo aches when she loses her writing, and in those moments, she feels she does not simply lose a product of labor, but a child she has birthed and reared. The alignment plays a double role: it emphasizes her independence and isolation by shrouding her with the company of her own work, and it also foreshadows the greater losses she will experience, once she refuses Laurie's proposal and eventually, and much more devastatingly, once Beth dies.

Jo is altered in her independence; she struggles; and her change in character, her dwindling strength and confidence, is exemplified in the altered relationship she has with her writing. Although she regards revision as the mutilation of her children, Bhaer's critique impacts her relationship with writing so drastically that she resolves to burn three months' worth of manuscripts (Alcott 548). The brief moment contrasts starkly with the dramatic scene of her childhood, when an angry Amy revenges Jo by burning her stories. Jo is so infuriated that her "hot temper mastered her, and she shook Amy till her teeth chattered in her head, crying in a passion of grief and anger, 'You wicked, wicked girl!'" (Alcott 116). Her temper manifests violently, her voice and her body lashing out with sharp words and brute force. The outburst is a far cry from her later self-defamation that it's "my tongue, my abominable tongue!" which has ruined her dreams (Alcott 475). Returning to her girlhood emotions, here, I am struck by how raw, complex, and potent they are. She follows her outburst with bitter grief: "Jo wanted to lay her head down on that motherly bosom, and cry her grief and anger all away" (Alcott 117). She still regards her writing as family when she reaches New York, but the Jo of the March girlhood burst with much louder emotion and considered her little book of scribbles more precious than the impact of forgiving her "wicked" sister.

And so, by the time Jo burns her own stories with nothing more than a, "Yes, that's the best place for such inflammable nonsense," I can't help but feel, more than anything, that Jo is defeated. She has been smothered, battered. As I step back and review the map of Jo's life, my heart aches as I see it fall. I am reminded of the path I walked down into womanhood. Alcott writes, in Jo, a

bold, deeply lovable character, and her narrative punishes her for all her defiance. She resists becoming a True Woman by failing to self-deny again and again; but this only leads her to an independence absent of her family and eventually, of her writing. At the same time, Meg, successfully suffocating her emotions and privileging her husband's anger and pride, also succumbs to a lonely womanhood. Jo's journey, however, is not over. Called to Beth's side as her life fades, Jo finally realizes the full weight of a lonely life—and becomes a True Woman.

Death and Love

I can say a lot about death.

Death tastes sweet to me. Death rhymes with peace, and serenity, and nothingness, and detachment. In high school my love affair with death rested on Hamlet's lips when he said:

To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep (Shakespeare 3.1 59-63).

I never craved death so much as I just wanted eternal sleep. My body was exhausted. I felt the heartache, felt the thousand natural shocks. On September 4th I wrote, "Life makes me want to wail. I do not see much of a future for me. I think I'm living as though I'm already dead." On September 5th I wrote, "I feel like I just need someone to hold my hand and help me make it to each task. I just want to not exist. That is the only thing that makes me imagine joy. I imagine it very peaceful."

I return, here, to Jo's poem, "In The Garret." It is a love poem to her sisters and a lonely poem for herself. She reflects upon their lives and the girlhoods they have abandoned and she hands us the vocabulary through which she understands the narrative of her life: "Hints of a woman early old / A woman in a lonely home" (Alcott 738). She mourns her womanhood, and she does so alone, abandoned by Meg and Amy's marriages and Beth's passing.

Beth's illness is a turning point for Jo in her sense of her own loneliness. When Beth's fight with scarlet fever, contracted from caring for the Hummels, appears grimly hopeless, Jo confides in her caring friend, Laurie: "[S]he doesn't look like my Beth, and there's nobody to help us bear it; Mother and Father both gone, and God seems so far away I can't find Him" (Alcott 281). Jo expresses a physical distance from her parents—her mother is away caring for the sisters' wounded father—and a spiritual distance from God. She is isolated. She has "nobody." And while her parents' absence is concrete, her sense of God's absence connects the hopelessness of isolation to her dwindling faith.

But Jo doesn't only feel that her parents and God have abandoned her: she also feels abandoned by Beth. She doesn't recognize her sister ("she doesn't look

like my Beth") nor does her sister behave as she used to. Earlier she tells Laurie, "[S]he doesn't know us, she doesn't even talk about the flocks of green doves, as she calls the vine leaves on the wall" (Alcott 281). Illness has changed Beth, and, in her inability to recognize or be recognized by her family, it seems to have removed her from her body altogether. In the extreme height of her scarlet fever, Beth's identity shrinks to nothing. Illness, thus, powerfully isolates Beth not simply from the outside world but from *herself*. And this self-isolation impacts Jo. While later in the novel she dedicates herself to serving Beth, and through service develops her bond with her sister, the early manifestation of Beth's illness conversely isolates Jo from the dear person she seeks to heal.

Jo does not only express her loneliness through her external relationships; her isolation also manifests in the body. The passage continues: "As the tears streamed fast down poor Jo's cheeks, she stretched out her hand in a helpless sort of way, as if groping in the dark, and Laurie took it in his, whispering as well as he could, with a lump in his throat: 'I'm here. Hold on to me, Jo, dear!'" (Alcott 281). Jo's loneliness manifests at an interpersonal level (familial absence), a spiritual level (absence of God), and, interestingly, a *corporeal* level. She sobs, stretches out her hand, gropes in the dark, and retreats to such an acute interiority that Laurie must grasp her hand in order to ground her in physical reality. Perhaps loneliness is just that: a retreat into oneself. Just as Beth seems to have disappeared, so too does Jo. She becomes isolated not just from others but from reality as a whole, and as such, her loneliness locates itself primarily in the body.

The establishment of a corporeal loneliness also serves a religious purpose. In her grief, Jo feigns blindness—she stretches her hand out "in the dark." The loneliness she has just expressed affects her ability to see, to identify the space she occupies and the details which surround her, and even to remember that, in this moment, she is physically not alone. Laurie has to assure her, not just with his voice, but with the earnest touch of his hand: "I'm here. Hold on to me, Jo, dear!" It is this physical contact which succeeds in relieving some of Jo's anguish. The passage goes on: "She could not speak, but she did 'hold on,' and the warm grasp of the friendly human hand comforted her sore heart, and seemed to lead her nearer to the Divine arm which alone could uphold her in her trouble" (Alcott 281). Jo does not strictly identify *Laurie's* touch as her savior but rather a "friendly human hand"—implying that the contact itself, rather than the identity of the comforter, leads her to, ultimately, remember her *faith*. She is able to resolve that God is the ultimate support to her grief, and as such, Jo does not feel the presence of Laurie as much as she senses a Divine presence. Her loneliness is, thus, spiritually soothed: she can *never* be alone.

And yet, by the time Beth *does* die, Jo is not exalted by God's (and Beth's angelic) presence. She is woefully alone, exhaustingly lonely. Laurie recognizes this when he tells her, "You've had a great deal to bear, and had to bear it all alone," a statement which he connects to the proof of her aging in the "lines" on her face (Alcott 688). Her womanhood is marked upon her body and her heart, and her aging is inseparable from her loneliness.

Beth's death transforms Jo into a woman: she has aged, fully realized the extremity of her loneliness, and, in the process of caring for and losing Beth, she finally succeeds in her own self-denial. Called to Beth's side from her adventures in New York, Jo at once resolves to "[dedicate] herself soul and body to Beth" (Alcott 578). Whereas Jo's desires throughout the book were centered around herself—her "Castle in the Air," for example, is to "write books, and get rich and famous"—her love for Beth, and her desperation to see her better, are strong enough desires to quench the self-centered desires of her girlhood (Alcott 219). Gaard, however, takes this argument a step further, asserting, after Beth insists to Jo, "Take my place … and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone," that "essentially, Jo *becomes* Beth" (Alcott 645; Gaard 16). Jo does not simply achieve self-denial; "the implication," Gaard continues, "is that, in essence, Jo dies too" (16). She has become so isolated from the desires and actions that once made her who she was that she experiences a symbolic death—or at least, the symbolic death of a journey towards a resolution which reconciles her girlhood dreams.

With every reread I weep at Beth's passing. I never forgot the moment that "Beth said the needle was 'too heavy,' and put it down forever," and I felt, as a girl, that I held and strained against that heavy needle myself (Alcott 640). I carried with me always the image of Jo, who "never left her for an hour since Beth had said, 'I feel stronger when you are here'" (Alcott 641). Beth's painful journey towards death pained me as a young reader not necessarily because I held a deep attachment to Beth—except that she was purely good, and that her love burned thick, even through the pages. I wept because her death drips with love, and because I couldn't bear for Jo to lose her dearly loved sister.

"In the Garret" is not the first poem Jo writes about losing Beth. "Beth"—a work scribbled onto a folded paper tucked into Jo's copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, captures Jo's dreaded loneliness before Beth passes away, and, perhaps, complicates Gaard's proposal that Jo symbolically dies when she replaces Beth. Beth herself finds the poem, and we the reader have it read to us through her eyes. Jo grounds us in a clear temporal space. She writes, "O my sister, passing from me" (Alcott 643). Her poem situates her grief in the anticipation of death, the process of her sister's painful decay. The poem goes on, begging Beth to pass all her good qualities onto her—and resolutely Jo prays:

Thus our parting daily loseth
Something of its bitter pain
And while learning this hard lesson,
My great loss becomes my gain (Alcott 643).

While Gaard interprets the exchange of Jo's virtue for Beth's as a dual death, Jo herself desires to acquire all of Beth's good qualities so that she might not lose her, so that her sister might live on—and so that, through the grief of "great loss," she will instead "gain" the qualities necessary to survive the pain. Jo does not die when Beth dies. Instead, yearning for Beth's presence, I interpret Jo's desire to replace her sister as an attempt to avoid inevitable loneliness; she displaces herself into Beth, and in herself she refreshes lost companionship.

Beth, warmed by the love of Jo's poem, implores her, "Have I been all that to you, Jo?" and her sister responds tearfully, "O Beth, so much, so much!" (Alcott 644). In the springtime, "on the bosom where she had drawn her first breath, she quietly drew her last, with no farewell but one loving look, one little sigh" (Alcott 646). When Beth dies, Jo finds her "promise of self-abnegation" a harder promise to keep when left alone suffering from grief (Alcott 666). Her grief and pain is wrapped up with the other heavy emotions which burden her loneliness with greater intensity; in the chapter aptly titled "All Alone," Jo grieves how her life—as opposed to those lives, like Amy's, which seem easily content—has settled into "only disappointment, trouble, and hard work" (Alcott 667). Her loneliness causes her great despair, and she dreads the thought of staying long in the lonely home that was once the warm, vibrant playhouse of her childhood.

Jo compares herself bitterly to Amy; and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser argues that Amy might serve as a truer heroine of the novel. Keyser posits that Amy, arguably the more successful artist, "manipulates the forms of little womanhood but rejects their self-sacrificial essence," stipulating that although Amy finds success through self-denial, she does not diminish herself entirely into submissive True Womanhood (92). Amy is a surprising woman given how prickly and antagonistic she is as a child. But in adulthood, her cheery politeness secures her Jo's trip to Europe, and Jo's proposal from Laurie. Simultaneously, she gives Laurie a hard time about his laziness, refuses Fred Vaughn's proposal, and alongside her good behavior she practices a more skilled defiance than boyish Jo ever had; it is successful in merging with her womanhood. When Laurie proposes to Amy, the two row together; Amy exercises her power and her womanhood without submission. At the same time that Amy is, for Jo, symbolic of the easy life which makes Jo's look all the more dark, she is also, conversely, an interesting departure from the novel's upholding of True Womanhood.

But in Jo's self-disappointment, and in her grief, Alcott offers us—and Jo—small redemptions to her story. Waking up thinking she has heard Beth's voice, Jo is greeted only by her sister's empty bed, which "made her cry with a bitter cry of unsubmissive sorrow, 'O Beth, come back! come back!'" (Alcott 667). The desperation of her voice illustrates the devastating loneliness she feels, but in this moment Jo also expresses "unsubmissive sorrow," an unrestrained emotion which, although heart-wrenching, calls back to the completeness of her emotional expression in her girlhood, and resists the narrative that she has succumbed to the submissive True Womanhood.

Her lonely longing is also, here, interrupted. Jo mirrors the scene in which she reaches out blindly for Laurie when this sorrow does *not* cause her to "stretch out her yearning arms in vain; for, as quick to hear her sobbing as she had been to hear her sister's faintest whisper, her mother came to comfort her" (Alcott 667). While, during Beth's initial fight against scarlet fever, Jo had "stretched out her hand in a helpless sort of way" which I had interpreted as both a symptom of corporeal loneliness and a reminder of God's presence, here, her mother replaces the need for this expression. Her desperation and loneliness are interrupted.

The chapter is a bit of a love letter to Marmee, first as her love and affection go unrecognized by Jo but emphasized at the narrative level, and then eventually when Jo professes her appreciation of her mother's love. Jo responds to her mother's care by saying, "Mothers are the *best* lovers in the world" (Alcott 675). We are reminded of Marmee's guidance and wisdom throughout the novel, and when she needs her most, Marmee makes sure that her daughter is not abandoned.

Fig. 4. Mommy and I in '03 (Bogan, Photograph of the Author and Her Mother).

But what Jo realizes in this chapter is that, faced with loneliness, her family's love isn't enough; she craves, to her own surprise and distaste, companionship. Just as she sings her mother's praises she also admits that, "the more I try to satisfy myself with all sorts of natural affections, the more I seem to want…. [My heart] is so elastic, it never seems full now, and I used to be quite contented with my family" (Alcott 675). Jo would once have married her own sister just to keep the family together. But she can no longer interchange familial love and romantic love; her acquired wisdom is in recognizing that the loves she experiences are distinct, and that in her loneliness, she has learned to long.

She longs so desperately, in fact, that she even says, "I *am* lonely, and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said Yes" (Alcott 675). Jo once abhorred marriage, but she carries the heavy burden of loneliness with such pain that she changes her tune. And she does marry—she marries a man who proposes to her when he perceives that she is sad and lonely, and in need of companionship. Much scholarship has exerted energy renouncing Jo's marriage to Bhaer as uncharacteristic, and likely a symptom of the revisions publishers made to Alcott's work (just as they mutilate Jo's writing); but I also cling, as I do in her "Beth" poem, to the desires which grip her heart in her lonely womanhood. Yes, Jo has

changed; she has experienced what feels like an endless onslaught of pain, disappointment, and loss, and it has crushed her into a womanhood marked most darkly by her loneliness. As a reader, and as a lover of Jo, I am disappointed that she marries the Professor. But as a lonely woman, the union made me glow for her. She is getting her wish, however changed it might be from her childhood.

If I were to propose an alternative redemption to Jo's loneliness, it would, perhaps, be her writing. The only balm to her loneliness which seems to reconcile the energy of her girlhood is solitude, rather than the companionship which concludes the novel. In the wake of her darkest, loneliest days, Jo turns to writing. Upon her mother's urging, and despite her own reservation and wounded spirit, Jo retires once more to the garret and scribbles out a story that "went straight to the hearts of those who read it," a surprising reaction, she gathers, for such a "simple" story (Alcott 672; Alcott 673). But her father explains, "There is truth in it, Jo" (Alcott 673). Writing about her grief, her sisters, her family, their sorrows and joys, not only rushes Jo with emotional relief, it also connects her to an audience. Solitary writing, therefore, holds magnificent importance. It recalls the gentle, liberatory loneliness of her girlhood, before the process of growing up whittled down her spirits; it connects her to her family and to that umbilical cord of love whose importance she recognized and praised throughout the novel; and it connects her to an audience—and so at the same time that she may bask in solitude, she is also, firmly, not alone.

September 16th; so spooked by my own mind, and so disturbed by my inability to recognize myself, and so exhausted by my own exhaustion, I resolved to devote the day to painting self-portraits. On my bed, creamy sunlight pouring through my spectacular Riverside-facing windows, stripped of anything but underwear and a ratty, black tank top, and with a cloudy jam jar of paint water and two brushes balanced on the windowsill, I painted six self-portraits. Each looks entirely different, none are particularly spectacular, but they did the job; my mind was eased that day. One painting, in particular, I reflected upon with glossy eyes. In it I am naked, lounging on the bed I lounged on when I made it; my legs are propped up against the windows in the way I had gotten in the habit of doing to calm my mind and cool my (unairconditioned) body during the sweltering late-summer days. In November I reflected in my journal on the painting:

I stared back at my self-made image and observed a purity, a representation of me that was entirely my own, a tenderness in her shape which felt completely detached from any molding my family had done and which, most breathtakingly, felt peaceful. The room fills with gold. I can hear Ella Fitzgerald crackling through my phone speaker.

Serenity

I love this book. I love this book, and I love to reread and reread, to melt into Jo's triumphs, and sink into her sadness, and taste the bittersweetness of her happiness on her family's behalf when she herself feels lonely; and I love Jo. I

love her, in the way that I can't help but love my baby-face in old photographs, and my little hands and teensy fingernails, and the silent sound of my voice in my memories. How odd nostalgia is, making me love the very person I struggle so much to accept now.

Little Women traces the March sisters' journeys from girlhood into womanhood, a process of unbecoming and self-denial which resolves into loneliness. But I also hope to hope; and I suppose, after revisiting this novel, I do feel that in Jo's story I grasp at serenity. I cling to the garret, to her writing; I cling to my writing, to my imagination. And I accept that I have changed, just as I can accept that Jo changed.

We are women early old.

Fig. 5. (Bogan, Self-Portrait).

WORKS CITED

"Alone, *Adj.* (1)." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6155357863.

Alberghene, Janice M., and Beverly Lyon Clark, editors. *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*. Garland Pub., 1999.

Bogan, Juliet M. Meme Saved by the Author. 9 Sept. 2024. Author's personal collection

---. Photograph of the Author and Her Brother. Author's personal collection.

---. Photograph of the Author and Her Father. Author's personal collection.

---. Photograph of the Author and Her Mother. 2003. Author's personal collection.

---. Self Portrait. Author's personal collection.

Edelstein, Sari. "Little Women, Overgrown Children, and the Problem of Female Maturity." *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age*, Oxford University Press USA, 2018, pp. 72-91. Oxford Academic.

Foote, Stephanie. "Resentful 'Little Women': Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott." *College Literature*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2005, pp. 63–85. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115246.

Gaard, Greta. ""Self-Denial was all the Fashion": Repressing Anger in "Little Women"." *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1991, pp. 3. ProQuest, https://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/self-denial-was-all-fashion-repressing-anger/docview/1300139927/se-2?accountid=10226.

"Isolate, *N.*" Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5124977767

"Isolated, *Adj.* (1)." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1952389239

Keyser, Elizabeth L. "'The Most Beautiful Things in All the World?': Families in Little Women." *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, edited by Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark, Garland Pub., 1999, pp. 83-96.

"Lonely, *Adj.* (4)." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4064594090.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Dr. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

"Solitude, *N.* (1)." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6907232557.

Standing, Sue. "In Jo's Garret: Little Women and the Space of Imagination." *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal*

Essays, edited by Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark, Garland Pub., 1999, pp. 173-183.

Tomasek, Kathryn M. "A Greater Happiness: Searching for Feminist Utopia in Little Women." *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, edited by Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark, Garland Pub., 1999, pp. 237-259.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151–74. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.

JULIET MONIREH BOGAN, BC'25, is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn. She graduated with double majors in American Studies and English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She merges visual and prose storytelling to explore Persian American diasporic identity, place-making, and spirituality. She is currently publishing a comic and learning how to grow saffron. She is happy.