

FALLEN CASTLES IN THE AIR: MARRIAGE, LABOR, AND SUPPRESSION IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LITTLE WOMEN

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At the start of *Little Women*, all four March sisters are in the same economic position: poor. Throughout the course of the novel, each of the sisters has dissimilar opinions on their family's financial status and different ambitions in terms of changing their fortunes, from generating their own wealth to marrying rich to being complacent with their financial misfortune. At the book's start, they each have different roles in the family due to their different ages. The expectation is that they are either working (for the older two daughters) or learning (for the younger two daughters). By the novel's conclusion, all four sisters have arrived in divergent positions socially and economically, with varying success in achieving their goals. Author Louisa May Alcott mobilizes different ambitions and life trajectories for the March sisters to make the case that a woman in the nineteenth century could not "have it all" and had to suppress her ambition to maintain a happy marriage, often giving up her career goals in the process.

Each of the "little women" must adjust their relationship with labor to accommodate marriage, excepting Beth, who dies toward the end of the novel. For jealous Meg, *Little Women* closes with her still in a marriage with John Brooke, but one in which she must constantly change herself in order to please him and meet his steep demands. Meg comes to terms with her family's state of poverty and spends her days maintaining the house and childrearing without the fine things she spends the novel desiring. Hot-tempered Jo is able to be an entrepreneur when she and her husband Professor Friedrich Bhaer open a school for boys together. Despite this apparent success, *Little Women* concludes with Jo not receiving the widespread acclaim and wealth from her writing for which the first half of the novel sets her up. Moreover, her ambition to create her own fortune never occurs; in fact, she inherits all of her money from her Aunt March, a character who shamed her wild ways and unladylike, ambitious behavior. Fearful Beth dies of complications from her scarlet fever; and selfish Amy gives up her artistic ambitions and settles down to be a lady of leisure with wealthy, boy-next-door Laurie.

In the journal *Elementary English*, David Curtis argues that *Little Women* portrays the March sisters as the four distinct types of women in the post-Civil War era and Alcott gives each a unique path and storyline to reflect the broadening opportunities for the different types of acceptable women at the time (879). When looking at the text of *Little Women*, this claim appears true. Meg is bound by the confines of traditional motherhood, Jo is boyish and practical, Beth exemplifies Victorian goodness, and Amy reflects the burgeoning modern woman. Each of the

“little women” has varying desires for and beliefs around careers that change throughout the novel as they mature and move away from their childhood home. Only one takes on a similar role to Marmee, one can have a career, and one can join the upper class. However, despite these different paths, each of the March sisters must suppress their desires and passionate emotions in their ultimate position, emphasizing suppression as a universal experience of womanhood. This essay will discuss the relationship between suppression, careers, and marriage within *Little Women*, dissecting the varying paths the four sisters take and how, despite these different trajectories, none of them finish the novel completely satisfied with their circumstances, having changed themselves in the process.

Away from the home, the March sisters’ flaws are exposed and the path to suppression begins. By the lake, Jo’s wrath almost allows her to leave Amy to drown, Meg learns that her envy for wealth and glamour is corrupting at Annie Moffat’s house, and Amy’s selfishness is exposed when she realizes that she cares more about Aunt March’s turquoise ring than Beth’s scarlet fever. When they return to the home, the sisters can begin the process of growth, conforming closer to the models of womanhood expected of them. The return to the domestic following these struggles leads them on paths to overcome their flaws. What separates Beth from her sisters is that she lacks the ambitious flaws that her sisters possess. She is complacent with never leaving the domestic space and never confronting her demons besides her shyness, which is written more as a defining character trait than a flaw. Thus, she never has this moment of reckoning. Beth is unable to marry in *Little Women* because she does not have these moments to learn suppression. Beth has an opposite response to her sisters and is forced to leave the home as she is so shy and suppressed that she fears new people, specifically, men. For her to experience growth, she must overcome her fears and leave her home, the opposite of her ambitious sisters who must return home following unfortunate experiences outside the safety of the domestic sphere. These traits of ambition—the anger, jealousy, and selfishness the sisters feel—are suppressed after they feel guilt about their previous actions by returning to the domestic sphere.

March sisters’ growth centers on removing these flaws and turning the young girls into model wives for the future; the ambitions and desires that drive them toward careers and self-sufficiency are taught to be pushed down and ignored. Frances Armstrong argues that the use of “little” to describe the March sisters is a binary, set against the “greatness” of men. She discusses how the time period of the 1860s situates the sisters in an era right before when women could confidently begin careers as doctors or artists without as much stigma around working outside of the home. The little women of the 1860s, Armstrong argues, are “full of unvoiced hope and anger,” so close to achieving their dreams but not given the opportunity, since they will only be seen as “little” and thus meant to be meek, little wives (454, 462). This interpretation of Alcott’s choice of the word “little” shows the larger implications of the March sisters’ struggle between ambition and marriage: they were always meant to fail,

because they could never break away from the little/great binary that Alcott sets up. By the end of *Little Women*, the three surviving daughters have “overcome” their flaws and read almost as shells of their old selves. The hope for something more—for careers or wealth—has diminished, and they are simply “little” women living in the shadows of their husbands. Bhaer is the running educational force at Plumfield, Laurie completely finances Amy’s societal ambitions, and Meg lives at the whims of her husband.

The sisters laugh about their childish desires and ambitions and revel in the motherhood they all experience. They have all become what Mr. March considers to be a little woman: one who will “do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves ... beautifully” (Alcott 18). They have overcome their flaws, renounced their ambitions, and have become dutiful wives, dedicated to aiding their husbands and children, often in betrayal to the ambitions they held as children. Each of the March sisters becomes complacent, describing themselves as “happy wom[e]n” despite failing in their ambitions and instead focusing on their domestic lives (Alcott 542). While they may find enjoyment in elements of their lives, the March sisters were forced to deprive themselves of experiencing their true emotions and the opportunity to chase their ambitions in the process of becoming wives. Even if they are happy in the lives that they live, the reader is still left wondering what if? since the lives they had imagined as children—for Jo and Amy, successful careers, and a leisurely marriage for Meg—were abandoned in the process of preparing themselves for marriage. Ironically, Meg performs the most physical labor out of all of her sisters, Amy receives the life of leisure, and Jo marries without establishing a fruitful literary career for herself. The process of becoming “happy wom[e]n” comes at the expense of becoming successful women and seeking lives outside the domestic sphere. Though Jo is an entrepreneur and runs her school, she takes on a more motherly role with the students, while Professor Bhaer is more involved in actually educating them. Despite Jo beginning a school, she does so to be “a mother” to the boys enrolled, adhering much more to the domestic than to a career. The same industrious spirit that defined Jo in the first book of *Little Women* is replaced by complacency with solely being a mother and a wife, even in what is supposed to be her career.

Labor is the central factor that burdens the March sisters and inflames their flaws, forcing the four to confront them daily. Meg’s flaw is described as envy, Jo’s flaw is anger, Amy’s is self-centeredness, and Beth’s burdens are described as “dishes and dusters” and fear. Beth is the only March sister that possesses both tangible and intangible burdens. When each sister lashes out, it reflects the compatibility of the March sisters’ actual jobs with their flaws, meant to enflame them. Armstrong argues that the sisters confront their flaws daily in their labor or schooling outside the home, connecting the sisters’ flaws with the labor that they perform. Meg’s jealousy is exacerbated daily as she teaches the wealthy Kings as a governess. Jo is expected to act like a lady under the strict direction of Aunt March. Beth does not enjoy the housework

she performs daily and is too fearful of the world to attend school, and Amy attends school, where her lack of wealth makes her feel inadequate. Armstrong makes the claim that the literal “dishes and dusters” each of them interact with daily are more “burdensome” to the March girls than their flaws (Alcott 20; Armstrong 467). The daily burdens of physical work and yearning that Armstrong discusses highlight how leaving the home provides the little women with the opportunity to learn how to suppress their emotions since these are locations that inflame their deepest desires, either in wanting to mirror those surrounding them or wanting to break away from the expectations set for them in their place of work. By accepting these jobs or educational positions and the reality they must contend with, the March daughters continue to work on suppression by coming to terms with their less-than-ideal circumstances—what they will experience as wives. The toll their work takes on them is integral to the March sisters’ development into women able to suppress their emotions, because they must interact daily with what is preventing them from becoming good wives.

The March sisters do not fulfill their personal ambitions in the roles they take up in the first book of *Little Women*—to take care of their family, be a wealthy wife, or be successful. However, they still do their “duty faithfully” even though they must confront their flaws, which are accentuated in the work they perform. However, it is not the direct contact with their greatest flaws while performing labor that allows them to overcome them and begin the process of suppression, but instead, it is individual experiences outside of these roles that begin this process. When they act outside of the expectations set for them by displaying large, unsuppressed emotions expressions, the sisters experience their greatest lessons about suppression and further tailor themselves for the domestic sphere and wifedom with these lessons.

Holly Blackford argues that Jo needs to be “exorcised” of her “demonic writing.” Blackford describes this as the “burning fits” Jo falls into whenever she starts to write, whether the work is sensational or not. She continues that the artistic demons that Jo must ward off are physically manifested in Laurie. When Jo is able to “exorcise” her literary demons away, Laurie begins his romance with Amy; Blackford argues that Laurie latches onto Amy because he has been removed from Jo and needs another host—Amy is sacrificed to satisfy a Jo-less Laurie. Alcott prevents her protagonist from marrying a Byronic hero (Laurie), as he is an inciting figure for Jo’s demonic writing (Blackford). Blackford’s interpretation of Jo’s writing is rooted in the belief that Laurie has a strong hold on Jo, one that does not consider her rejection of him, ending the childhood stage of their friendship. Moreover, this argument fails to acknowledge that Jo feels shame over her sensational literature; it is not a reflection of how she feels or any “demonic” emotions inside of her, but instead is a reflection of popular literature that others in society, not Jo, enjoy. Nothing comes over her to make her write “demonic” literature, rather, she voluntarily takes it on so that she can use the money to fund Beth’s trips to the seashore and other luxuries for her family. Instead, it should be argued that Jo is not “exorcised” but taught to suppress the

negative emotions inside of her like the rest of her sisters. The Jo's anger does not disappear, but she is able to teach herself how to not openly show it and to control it—just like it is an active effort for Meg to not feel jealous of Sallie Moffat or for Amy not to be thinking of herself.

For protagonist Jo, her main change comes from the suppression of her anger. *Little Women* treats Jo's anger as the great malice when Amy lights her manuscript on fire after Jo does not invite Amy to the theater with her, Meg, and Laurie. When Amy sets the pages ablaze, *Little Women* spends little time discussing whether Jo was “wronged” by Amy, instead focusing on how Jo reacts and the inappropriateness of her expressing her anger. Amy's actions are depicted as wrong, but Jo is scorned following the book's burning because she reacts with anger. This bubbles over when Jo does not rush to save Amy from drowning in the lake that she, Jo, and Laurie are skating on. Following this, Jo is taught to suppress her rage, her immoral behavior by Marmee. Jo is encouraged to “conquer her fault” and overcome the anger that plagues her as Marmee previously had to learn herself through “check[ing] the hasty words that rise to [her] lips,” and even physically removing herself from the situation by “go[ing] away for a minute, and give [herself] a little shake for being so weak and wicked” (Alcott 94-95). Marmee then undertakes to “help” Jo overcome her anger, though she continually emphasizes that it was taking on the role of a wife and a mother that allowed her to “save” herself from her anger. Jo is taught not to express her anger and instead to attempt to “be good” and repress her anger so “home peace” can be restored. Jo follows her mother's direction, and ever character forgets the lost book—and Jo's murderous ambition. Sentimental literature like *Little Women* has long been criticized by feminist critics because it glorifies and highlights “positive emotional responses” like compassion, empathy, and submissiveness and discourages women from speaking their minds about what is troubling them (Foote 65).

For the March sisters, home becomes the place where they learn how to suppress the emotions that make them unladylike and unmarriageable. As seen with Jo's harsh treatment from Marmee when Amy burns her book when one of the sisters presents too large of an emotion, they are scorned by Marmee. She encourages that specific sister to return to the home and hone in their skills of suppression in order to prevent another flare up. Creating a scene and being unsatisfied are not womanly tendencies, and thus should be suppressed; the little women are taught to hide their anger and be a “devoted little wife” who does not speak out or feel scorned. Stephanie Foote argues that, in *Little Women*, the home becomes a “testing ground for the pressures of the outside world” in which the March sisters learn how to suppress their emotions while dealing with the everyday struggles they will confront in adulthood. The home becomes the cure for bad attributes, and domestic enterprises are idealized because they center around the home, an ideal place for little women to grow out of the traits that would not make them ideal wives (Foote 65). The home is a site to teach young women to taper their emotions, even when their labor is

destroyed or they are personally offended by the actions of their loved ones. Just as the focus was on Jo when Amy burned her book, the little women's responses to the frustrations they experience in the "testing ground" become the point of criticism. Their response, rather than the action itself, is the primary focus, since no matter what has occurred to the young women, they have failed in the expectations set for them. In failing to suppress their emotions within the "testing ground" of the home, the sisters are showing that they are not yet perfect wives and must continue working at suppressing their emotions.

In the early months of her marriage, Meg attempts to make her home a "paradise" for her husband in which "he should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously every day, and never know the loss of a button" (Alcott 353). Meg sets her own rules within her household, but these over-the-top expectations of what it means to be a wife become the expectation of her husband, who scorns her when she does not meet them. John Brooke's rules and expectations John Brooke extend to him forcing her to accommodate his friends without any prior notice, arranging her day's work for his desires rather than her convenience. Meg's labor transitions from being a governess to being a "model housekeeper" that expresses "love, energy, and cheerfulness" to the husband she dotes on (353). She is expected not to be "scolding" or to present any "discomfort," masking herself as a "cheery wife" who adheres to his every whim as she attempts to make the home his "paradise." However, John pushes back against Meg's labor in giving him "dainty dishes" and "ungratefully demanded plain fare" (353). Meg's high expectations that she set for herself as a wife are expected to adjust when her husband desires a change as her ability to satisfy his every whim supersedes all her other desires as a wife. The expectation of Meg to adapt becomes the standard to which Brooke holds her and all of her actions as a homemaker.

Still, Meg must suppress her frustrations and her desire to "threaten" him for losing his buttons and ignore how "tired" she is and instead is expected to remain a "beauty" and the perfect "little wife" (Alcott 353). The labor that Meg produces in her marriage is incumbent upon making sure that she does not appear "tired" and to make sure her beauty is not "diminished" as the work continues to wear her down (353). While these are expectations that Meg has set for herself, the power to dictate whether she is fulfilling those expectations is taken by her husband, who begins to expect that Meg adhere to what she sees as the requirements of being a perfect wife. She loses the power to dictate what she will provide for him, and, instead, Brooke begins to hold the power. The value of Meg's labor lies in her ability to please Brooke and to fulfill his expectations while suppressing her frustrations and maintaining the illusion of perfection that has become the standard for her husband.

Meg's biggest test in the novel is when she attempts to make jelly for her husband and is unable to meet her and her husband's expectations for herself as a wife—expectations of "a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good dinner." "She reboiled, resugared, and restrained, and that dreadful stuff wouldn't 'jell,'" failing to

fulfill what she sees as a feminine duty (354). As a result, she is unable to maintain the “no flurry, no scolding, no discomfort, but a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good dinner” rule that she had previously established for her husband (355). When “Mrs. Brooke, with her apron over her head, sat sobbing dismally,” John minimizes the extreme exhaustion and disappointment Meg feels about the jelly and her position. To her, this is an utter failure of her womanhood and her promises to him and herself to be the perfect wife; to him, it is something to make fun of. She is “so tired and hot and cross and worried!” a clear sign of exhaustion from the labor expected of her by her husband and by herself, but he cannot move beyond her failures and instead laughs at her. Brooke “laughed then as he never dared to laugh afterward,” at Meg sobbing on the ground about something that distresses her with his friend in the background (357). Brooke expects labor from Meg. He expects a home-cooked meal that can also accommodate his friend, he expects a neat house when he returns home. However, when Meg takes these responsibilities seriously and is extremely distressed by not being able to meet these expectations, he makes fun of her and subsequently becomes angry with her. Meg’s labor is his expectation, but it is seen as less valuable than his own. Brooke and his friend do not see her labor as something to be taken seriously and an investment of time and effort, but rather a joke that she took too seriously. Still, despite not taking the labor she sees as important to her role as a wife to be equal to his own, Brooke remains frustrated that she does not comply with the strict requirements of being a good wife that he has come to expect from her.

While Meg has internalized her failed jelly experiment as one of her greatest failures, John is “aggrieved” that she did not meet the expectations that he had come to expect; her suffering and exhaustion is merely an inconvenience to which he takes personal offense: “I never tried it before, and hang me if I ever do again!” he states. For the first time in their marriage, he is beginning to see Meg not meet the expectations that have become the norm, and his response signals that he does not think that Meg can meet those expectations, now that she has failed. Even as he “restrained himself,” Brooke continues to demand a meal from Meg, requiring even more labor from the “tired” woman. In fact, it is the expectation of a husband to continue to demand this labor and be provided said labor with no complaint from the wife. John is allowed to mock her and show anger and frustration with his wife, even when he is trying to be “restrained.” Even though Meg is devastated by her husband’s mockery and her failure with the jelly, she is expected to suppress her anger and sadness and put back on the mask of a “cheery wife.”

The only way to avoid the additional labor is for Meg to pretend to die, at least according to her. This emphasizes that she believes there is no end to the exhaustion of labor and expectations for her, as the expectations that she set—that her husband has begun to expect—will continue to be a source of exhaustion for her. “Tell him I’m away, sick, dead, anything,” Meg says to Brooke when he announces that he brought his friend over for dinner (314). To Meg, the only way that it becomes

societally appropriate for her to have failed in this way is to have succumbed to disease or death, emphasizing the ever-constant homemaking responsibilities expected from her. It is not merely the humiliation that prevents her from seeing Mr. Scott, but because she has not fulfilled her responsibilities as a wife to Brooke. These are equally weighed when Meg states, “Take him away at once. I can’t see him, and there isn’t any dinner” (314). By stating these reasons—Meg’s lack of perfection at that moment and the lack of food on the table—the little perfect wife expectation that she has set for herself is not met, forcing her to send Mr. Scott away, even if that means feigning death.

Though she is in distress, Meg must put on a show to win back the favors of her husband: “she dressed herself prettily, and sat down to wait for John to come and be forgiven” (313). There is a dual meaning within this statement, in that it can be interpreted that Meg will forgive John, but also another that John will forgive Meg. The former presents Meg as the one who holds the power in the relationship and that Brooke respects her enough to understand that he was hurtful, even if he does not value her labor as he does his own. The latter keeps Meg in the passive position, waiting for her husband to return and to forgive her for wronging him by not maintaining their sky-high expectations. Still, even in the interpretation in which Meg is able to exert some authority over her husband, the implication that she must maintain her perfection remains. Even if it is a moment where Meg can experience forgiveness from her husband, she is expected to dress “herself prettily” and “wait” for him; Meg cannot portray true emotion or an unpolished self. She cannot be the aggressor and seek out the apology herself, but must be passive and “wait” for him to decide to give her one. The passivity that Meg presents in waiting for Brooke to return matches the suppression expected from her in her everyday life. Either demanding an apology or seeking him out to profusely apologize to him would be large displays of emotion, which suppression is supposed to taper. To “wait” is to maintain her composure and suppression after she made herself beautiful once again; Meg once again puts on the mask of the perfect wife for her husband.

Meg is the only March sister with her (too tight) shoe in the door of womanhood at the novel’s start; quiet, beautiful, and prim. At the age of 16, she is destined for traditional marriage and motherhood far before she comes to accept that this is what she wants. However, Meg’s romance with John Brooke is dependent on her meekness, consistent beauty, and willingness to be submissive to him. Brooke is described as loving Meg for her ability to be a “little wife,” her striking beauty, and because she can maintain a home to Brooke’s satisfaction. However, in some instances, such as when she attempts to make jelly for her husband, Meg is unable to keep her cool and is unable to suppress her frustration and exhaustion. Meg wants to take on the role of the perfect wife, but in losing her cool and failing to suppress her emotions, Meg proves that she is not entirely prepared for the wifely expectation of total

suppression. In presenting such emotion to her husband, Meg shows how she was not fully prepared for married life, having not fully mastered the art of suppression.

In Book 1, Meg takes a trip to Annie Moffat's to spend time with her wealthy friends. This trip is only able to happen due to circumstances outside of Meg's control. She is only able to attend because the King children contracted measles, which she refers to as "the most fortunate thing" (98). Only when working is no longer an option for Meg is she able to spend this time with the rich. Labor hinders her ability to wine and dine, and she must base her ability to do so on what occurs with the wealthy family she works for. Meg's choices are, in the end, not her final decision. She is dependent on the circumstances of others to be able to pursue things that she wants, like the trip to Annie Moffat's. In the first half of *Little Women*, Meg's actions are determined by the yearnings of the rich, while in the latter half, they are decided by her husband. She never demonstrates the autonomy to control her experiences.

It is at the Moffats' home where she is made up into a "doll" when she is "crimped and curled" and "polished" before she meets eligible men at the party. It is not initially Meg's choice to make herself into a glamorous figure at the Moffats'; instead, Meg is lent Belle Moffat's dress, since hers was torn earlier in the week. Even though Meg is "proud" and feels "uncomfortable" with the Moffat family's view of her family's financial situation, she "couldn't refuse" Belle's offer (119). The temptation "to see if she would be 'a little beauty' after touching up" is more than her pride (119). To "be a little beauty" is to take on the beautiful illusion of suppression and passivity expected of wifehood, and Meg cannot say no to this offer. The actions to doll Meg up are all done to her; she does not make herself up on her own. In the home of the Moffats, Meg is laced into a corset "which was so tight she could hardly breathe and so low in the neck that modest Meg blushed at herself in the mirror" (119). Meg is literally suffocating against the expectations of beauty and womanhood put on her, with her bosom the only part of her exposed—an element of her sexuality. "She felt as if her fun had really begun at last, for the mirror had plainly told her that she was 'a little beauty,'" Alcott writes, highlighting Meg's lack of choice within any manner of her life (120). She is not given a choice in her role or circumstances, expected to simply accept what happens to her because she is eager to take on the role of an adult and to be a "little beauty," and this is what little beauties do. Meg is naïve enough to believe that "her fun had really begun at last" because there was no labor involved in her becoming a "little beauty" (119). Instead, other women are the ones to doll her up. While Meg initially is excited about the maturity she believes that she is presenting, she is unable to present the effortless suppression and womanhood that is expected of her when putting on Belle Moffat's dress. Meg can enjoy her time as a young woman of society until she and those around her realize that Meg is not ready to take on that role. She "couldn't refuse the offer" of being laced into the dress and being sexualized. Alcott's use of passive tense in writing "the mirror had plainly told her that she was 'a little beauty'" emphasizes Meg's lack of control in the situation. While the watchful

eyes in the mirror evaluating her are her own, Meg is still not directly able to call herself beautiful. It is the mirror that “plainly told her,” highlighting that, even when information is blatantly stated, “little beauties” cannot be involved in active participation. Instead, their own actions are put into the passive tense or thrust onto an object.

In Meg’s struggles with the corset, her exposed chest, and her face full of makeup that makes her look like a “doll,” Meg is revealing the labor and unnaturalness of making a woman into a “little beauty.” The people at the party she and the Moffats attend believe that she is doing far too much and is far too ornamented. She is unable to masquerade as a woman of society and instead is presented as over the top and clownish. Meg is unable to be a “little beauty” because it is evident that it is the clothes and makeup putting her into this position rather than her own beauty. In comparison, Meg’s wedding attire made her look “very like a rose herself,” providing her with the beauty that she had always wanted, but still looking like “our own dear Meg” (284). In effortlessly presenting her attractiveness and not putting in an overwhelming amount of work curating herself, Meg is able to finally be the “little beauty”—she is just unable to do so in a high society situation, as presented with the Moffats.

This is where she fails and Amy succeeds at curating herself in such a way that it appears natural and becomes part of her rather, than putting on a show, as it does for Meg. Amy “improves every day” at embodying these attributes and making these elements of womanhood second nature to her (Alcott 332). The labor involved with the process becomes less evident and being the perfect woman no longer looks like work. At the party, because it is so obvious that Meg does not belong in the role that Belle Moffat put her in, a man says “they have spoiled her entirely; she’s nothing but a doll tonight,” emphasizing that when the illusion is pulled back, a woman and the illusion of perfect womanhood is “spoiled” (107). She simply becomes “a doll,” something that is inherently and knowingly unreal. Meg’s own transition into a “little beauty” occurs when her beauty is effortless at her wedding, when she chooses not to put on the many “ornaments” that she wore with the Moffats that presented her beauty as artificial. Meg is only able to have this role with her natural beauty intact, unable to enhance elements of her beauty since she makes it appear very artificial. In contrast, Amy’s feminine skirts of “illusion” allow her to become the “little beauty” and enhance her good looks, making her the perfect woman to marry, because it does not appear like work to make her appear this way. Amy spends the entire book trying to mold herself into this figure, so that by the time she does reach adulthood, it is second nature. Amy is able to suppress elements of herself to provide the illusion of a “little beauty.” Meg is unable to do this—and is seen at her most beautiful at her wedding when she lacks ornamentation—which is why Amy can achieve the life of leisure that Meg had always wanted. Meg’s desire to join the rich is stifled when she cannot make herself into a “little beauty” at a high-society party; Amy is able to

accomplish this feat time and time again. In suppressing all the traits that don't make her a "little beauty," Amy is able to avoid a life of physical labor and instead only has to work on perfecting herself and becoming an "ornament to society." Meg, on the other hand, is unable to master the illusion, and thus cannot join the upper class. Instead, she must complete physical labor on top of appearing perfect by suppressing her emotions to be the ideal wife for her husband.

Since the early chapters of *Little Women*, Jo desires to gain fame and wealth through her writing. While she enjoys writing and is said to be talented, when Jo realizes that she can make a career out of writing that no longer fully satisfies her, and she quickly devotes herself to writing sensational literature to support her family. Her childhood talent proves able to supplement her family as her other positions with Aunt March and as a governess did not. During her time in New York, Jo values her family's happiness more than the nature of what she produces with her labor. This extra income and the ways that it helps her family, such as paying for Beth's trips to the seashore, allow Jo to justify writing stories that do not satisfy her, stories that embarrass her. Jo's view of literature differs from that of her friends and loved ones, which leads to several conversations between Jo and her family members about how she should be approaching her writing and her ability to make a career out of it. From the time that she was young and having the conversation about her "castle" with her sisters and Laurie—her castle being her ideal life—Jo discusses how she wants to live an independent life as a writer. "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream," Jo says, emphasizing that her literary dream is centered around being able to make a profitable career out of her writing (166). For much of the book, Jo, a natural writer, is more concerned with being paid for her writing than literary merit. She continues to put out sensationalist work that she does not morally agree with, because it provides her family with a substantial supplemental income. Though it does not fulfill her "castle" dream, Jo's burgeoning career as a sensationalist writer provides her with enough financial reward to justify her continuation of her literary endeavor, even if she does not morally approve of it. While supportive, both of Jo's parents push her toward finding her voice rather than seeking a paycheck. Her family and best friend Laurie champion her writing, consistently comparing her to Shakespeare (14, 200). They find value in the quality of her writing, whereas Jo's primary focus is the ability to make a career and earn money for herself.

Professor Bhaer is the first main character to push back against Jo's family's largely supportive attitude toward her writing and the utilitarian view of the protagonist herself. In addition, he shames Jo for the sensational nature of her writing and, thus, her financial pursuits. Alcott writes that Bhaer "saw a good deal more than people fancied" and immediately allows him to understand that Jo writes sensational fiction. Still, he shames the work that she performs to make a living, declaring that he would "rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash" (399). Jo must

defend the money she makes from sensational stories to both Professor Bhaer and herself, “for her emaciated purse grew stout, and the little hoard she was making to take Beth to the mountains next summer grew slowly but surely as the weeks passed” (395). However, she feels “embarrassed” by the writing she sells and the lack of “morals” it possesses.

Bhaer’s rejection of sensational literature and his further rejection of Jo’s defense that “if there is a demand for it, I don’t see any harm in supplying it” insinuates that he believes those who write sensational fiction—who are able to make a career out of their writing—produce work that those under his tutelage should avoid. To Bhaer, the danger and possibility of injury from “gunpowder” is a safer alternative to sensational literature. It is not just the perceived immorality of the stories, but also the immorality of the writer. To him, a person who makes an “honest living” through writing what is profitable is inherently not “honest” but instead should be seen as “poisonous,” despite there being “a demand for it.” He then suggests that the writer of sensational literature should “sweep mud in the street” rather than write (399). The not honest writer, according to Bhaer, should return to the domestic sphere of cleaning tasks instead of being able to support themselves through literary careers, if those careers do not adhere to his morals. The decision to write sensational literature makes them unlike the “good young girls” Bhaer believes should “put [sensational literature] away from [themselves]” since it is corrupting. When a writer makes money writing—within the world of *Little Women*, this often only appears to be the case for female writers when one is writing sensational fiction, as “morals didn’t sell”—they are no longer of marriageable quality, since they are no longer a “good young girl” and are instead “poisonous.” “In the Garret,” one of the few other works that Jo sells, is not defined by the monetary amount provided for it, unlike her other writings. The lack of financial gain associated with “In the Garret” highlights sensational fiction as one of the only literary genres stated in *Little Women* profitable for women to participate in. A profitable literary career, one that allows a woman writer to finance herself and their family solely on their sensational writing, prevents them from being seen as an advantageous match since they are not “honest,” making the marriage and a literary career incompatible. For Jo specifically, she must learn to suppress her urge to make a career out of her writing, since the only profitable option she encounters is sensational writing, which is inherently immoral.

However, as Amy does in the early part of the book, Bhaer plunges the magazine into the fireplace, symbolically ending Jo’s ambition for money. Bhaer gives her Shakespeare to read, allowing her to have a taste of the writer that she was once compared to. This can be interpreted as Bhaer allowing Jo to interact with what he views as real writing rather than writing for the sake of commercial value. “I never knew how much there was in Shakespeare before, but then I never had a Bhaer to explain it to me” (387) Alcott writes. This is a moment that can be interpreted as Bhaer pushing back against the praise that Jo has received her whole life, stripping her of the

“Shakespeare” title. Instead of taking on the figure of “the writer,” Jo settles into the more passive role of “the reader.” As when Amy gives up her ambitions to be an artist when she experiences the finest artwork of Rome, when Jo reads works arguably among the best literature has to offer, she takes the back seat and begins focusing on observing his work, not on working on her own. In putting Jo in the passive position of the reader, she can finally observe what fine literature looks like and compare that with the praise she had received and work she had produced, forcing a hard conversation about whether financial success from her literary career is enough to sustain it, as sensational literature conflicts with her morals.

Before she enters her “castle,” Jo hopes to write books to become “rich and famous” (165). The castle Jo refers to can dually refer to death and the home, posing the possibility that her literary career and time to seek fame could end either by the stroke of death or simply because Jo gets married. While in New York, Jo finds some financial success from her writing. However, she still feels shame about the work that she produces, though she is calmed by the idea that she is supporting herself financially and is able to take Beth on a trip to the seashore. Jo pursues sensational writing for the money and “she sincerely meant to write nothing of which she would be ashamed” (394). However, her morals and “all pricks of conscience” are not enough to make her solely satisfied with her earnings from writing sensational literature, her “well-kept secret.” Jo cannot let go of the “shame to own” she feels over the sensational writing, physically distancing herself from the magazine she sees when she is in the presence of Bhaer. This is the period in which she begins developing intensely reverent, if not romantic, feelings toward the professor. By trying to hide her writing from him, Jo is admitting that she agrees with his beliefs that sensational writing, and, thus, the funds and self-sufficiency that come with it cannot be reconciled with being a “good young girl,” one who is worthy of his respect. Jo hides her sensational writing from Bhaer to preserve his view of her, embarrassed by what she was publishing and from Bhaer’s disrespect of the type of writing that supplements her family’s funds. She can justify her sensational writing to herself by being able to provide Beth with trips to the seashore, but Bhaer is unmovable in his lack of respect toward sensational writers.

Little Women portrays a defeminization, the stripping of a wife and mother role, for the acceptance of money. When Jo sells her hair to finance Marmee’s trip to Washington D.C., she loses her “one beauty” to gain the 25 dollars. Jo, who is described as awkward and unfeminine, loses the one attribute with the potential to make her into a “little beauty.” This is a look that is described as “boyish” and “rough,” one that contrasts with the feminine description of Jo’s long hair and the “beauty” expected of the wives in the novel. To make money of her own, Jo must sell a part of her, “what was [her own],” just like she sells some of her soul with each sensational story she publishes, losing her femininity and position as a “good young girl” (211). Instead of the ink stains and utilitarian clothing, Jo gives up her financially-lucrative writing career and the actions that keep her from being a “good young girl,” someone

who is not wife material. Following this, she begins focusing more on her appearance and gains the physical attributes that are more traditionally female to make her into an ideal wife. While “she sang about her work, did up her hair three times a day, and got so blooming with her evening exercise,” Jo’s feminization is daunting to her and one that she initially tries to reject. While Jo struggles against her emerging feminine side and “sternly tried to quench her feelings” of feminine love toward Bhaer, she is “mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence” (597). However, even though she still wants to maintain her “independence” and her ambition to remain a spinster, she is unable to succeed and continues to fall for Bhaer, fretting over him and taking on more of the role of the blushing bride.

Jo and Amy are the two sisters who initially attempt to seek independent fame and fortune, the former with her writing and the latter with her art. However, these play out in very different ways as Jo fights against societal expectations in pursuit of her ambitions while Amy thrives within the structure of appropriate behavior for young women at the time. As a result of their ambition and hot-headedness, the pair fights throughout Book 1. Jo is usually painted in a sympathetic light while Amy is mocked. However, following their reckonings with their flaws, the March sisters begin to grow up, and the tables turn for Jo and Amy. As her two surviving sisters have societal grace and acceptance, Jo begins feeling lonely as they leave her behind. Amy becomes the one succeeding in society, as she is able to conform. Amy is far younger than Jo is when she forgets about her artistic career and turns her focus into becoming the perfect wife. Amy is able to acknowledge in Rome that her “talent isn’t genius” and she has no ambition to have a career that lacks genius (455). Instead, she refocuses her attention to becoming an “ornament to society” (455). To become a lady of leisure, the stakes are lower for Amy than the high expectations of “genius” from herself and her art career. All that Amy must do to become an “ornament” is simply to “polish up [her] other talents” and does not require the “genius” that a fruitful career as an artist could have provided her (455). Learning young that “Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive,” Amy’s ability to become “agreeable” entering Book 2 allows her to succeed in a society where Jo flounders (331). While Amy is punished for her desire to repay the rich in Book 1 when she brings pickled limes to school, she is praised for the same attribute in Book 2. Amy’s ability to be “agreeable” causes her to reap the patronage of Aunt March with the trip to Europe. Jo is able to suppress her rage, but she is never able to overcome her differences from the traditional society girls and become “agreeable” when she lives with her family. When Jo works for the Kings, she does not push back against their rules and expectations as she did with Aunt March, not breaking from the mold of a laborer that the Kings expect from her. By working as a governess without acting “boyish,” Jo begins to be seen as “agreeable,” since she can begin to conform to the expectations of a young woman.

Foote argues that Amy is rewarded for her ability to accept the expectations of social class and womanhood as Jo is punished for her refusal to conform to them. Jo is considered “cold” and not proper by the wealthy women in her life that could be a patron to her as they are with Amy. Amy is unable to afford the clothing and culture that she requires to be a high society woman; she depends on the wealthy people she associates with to pay for these for her. Jo sees herself robbed of an opportunity she had desired since childhood by her younger, and seemingly less-deserving, sister solely because Amy had mastered the refined gracefulness Jo had fought against (Foote 74-76). Amy is kind to Aunt March and polite to the wealthy girls at Mrs. Chester’s fair who talk about Amy behind her back. In completing social calls and learning social graces from the older women around her, Amy masters the art of pleasing the wealthy women in her life who help propel her back into the upper class through gifts like art classes and a tour around Europe. Amy tells Jo that making these calls and constantly being kind to the wealthy people around them are “a debt [they] owe society,” since the lifestyle she wants can only be given to her if she does pander to the wealthy people who can patronize her (326). The “illusion” that Amy is able to put on to become the perfect woman of society allows her to easily meander between her “reduced gentlefolk” household and the upper class she wants to join. A wealthy husband would provide Amy with a steady stream of funds that could maintain a luxurious lifestyle for her. To get her foot in the door to meet wealthy men and to appear an eligible woman, Amy depends on the patronage of rich people to provide her with the opportunities to set the stage for her marriage to a wealthy man—opportunities where she can show off her ability to suppress her emotions to present herself as the perfect woman. As such, she learns to suppress herself into a mold of what these women desire from her, preparing to be the ideal society wife.

Jo only accepts this lesson about society in New York when she begins to play by the rules of womanhood when working for the Kings. No longer pushing back against expectations as she did when she worked for Aunt March, Jo has finally begun suppressing herself enough as a governess for the Kings that she can be seen as “agreeable.” This is around the period when Jo begins to feel shame about her ambitions and the lengths she is willing to go to achieve them. Only when she gives up her “bad trash” sensational writing can Jo begin to let go of her hatred of prim femininity. While not fully adhering to the strict expectations and rules that Amy does, Jo spends more time on her appearance; gives up “her independence” and changes her lifelong ambition to be “a literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame” in order to marry Bhaer; and she is only then rewarded with the fortune she desires in Plumfield, at the cost of losing herself (Alcott 493).

Little Women’s two books are both mercenary and vindictive at times. Alcott proudly wrote “I won’t marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone,” and instead paired her up with a “funny” match instead of her initial path to be a literary spinster (Alcott &

Littlehale 176). Instead, Amy, who is villainized as the anti-Jo, receives the trip to Europe, the popularity, and, most importantly, the boy next door. Meg's marriage continues to be built on a foundation wherein she lies about enjoying politics to entertain Brooke. Beth, marked for death since the novel's start, is the only sister who follows the path Alcott initially set forth for her. Still, even Beth does not fulfill her castle dream, passing away and not able to remain with her mother and father.

Not even wealthy and male Laurie succeeds in his quest to "never to be bothered about money or business, but just enjoy myself and live for what I like" (Alcott 164). While he remains unconcerned with money, Laurie's musical ambitions are squashed by his marriage to Amy. It is her ideas about her artistic career—that "talent isn't genius"—that convince Laurie to give up his compositions. Instead, at her insistence, he matures and pursues business with his grandfather. However, the difference in this situation compared to the March sisters is that Laurie voluntarily chose to begin composing music with the hope of a career, while they were unable to decide whether they wanted to perform labor or not. Alcott writes that "Laurie began to wish he had to work for his daily bread," highlighting that even though he has failed, he does not have to jump into his next venture like Amy had to become an "ornament" (474). Laurie's status as a wealthy man does not prevent him from failure; it is possible for him to do so without suppression or the expectation of marriage. However, without the added social pressures of not-wealthy womanhood, Laurie is able to be idle because he neither has to find a husband nor "work for his daily bread," a sharp contrast to the March sisters who never can escape from the strict expectations of womanhood and their next capital pursuit.

Eventually, Laurie's concerns begin to focus on taking the burden of their failing daughter's health off of Amy while "devoted" to baby Beth's care. However, some scholars, such as Ann Dalke, see Laurie as a fifth March sister, wrapped in a femininity that strips him of the privileges of a man. Laurie is not written as a laborer, but rather a loving mother at the end of the book, who "devoted himself to the little ones" so much so that he misses the final reflection on their castle dreams, a conversation he was initially a part of (Dalke 574). The castles were what each of the sisters and Laurie had hoped for in their life, and in reflecting on these childhood dreams, the three remaining little women can acknowledge how different their lives turned out from what they had wanted. However, Dalke's interpretation of Laurie fitting into the same failure-to-succeed mold as the March sisters fails to account for the class differences between Laurie and the Marches and the ways that impacts their trajectories toward their castle. While Laurie does pay attention to his children, he lacks the extra labor of womanhood beyond simply maintaining a family that the March sisters must conform to. He does not suppress himself; instead, he becomes more "strong and firm" (Alcott 546). His labor toward the family is completely voluntary, unlike the sisters', and does not require the social niceties that motherhood does; instead, Laurie is championed by Amy for simply choosing to support her. As a man,

especially a rich man, Laurie is able to continue through life passively conducting labor. In the same way, Jo describes Amy's philanthropy work by giving the credit for the good deed to Laurie, stating that he is "doing heaps of good with your money" (540). Though Amy and Laurie are married, and it is her efforts that spearhead their charity work, Laurie's status as a man gives him the credit for the labor. The labor that Laurie is lauded for is not labor that he conducted himself, continuing the passive labor of the elite and ignoring the efforts of those not in that social class, like Amy, who continues to actively work on herself and these philanthropic initiatives.

However, as with the sisters, Laurie's transition into a family-oriented character comes when he gives up his ambition. When he ends his quest to become a famous musician, Laurie's attentions turn to Amy, becoming an ideal husband to her, and, subsequently, the model father for their daughter. However, unlike Meg, Jo, and Amy, Laurie does not have to suppress any desires. Instead, he just gives up on that dream and enters into a new career. There is never a discussion about the arduous experiences of working for his grandfather or any feelings that Laurie himself must stifle. Simply, he works and lives a happy life. Laurie does not participate in the "castles conversation" about his desired ambitions which he fails to achieve like the sisters as he tends to the children. Except for Beth, the little women envision a self-focused "castle" dependent on their personal desires. The final manifestation of these characters is community-facing, wherein they turn their pursuits to the betterment of children and the domestic sphere rather than toward themselves. For Laurie, his status as a wealthy man means that he still has the choice to focus on himself and only voluntarily decides to be so active with his sickly daughter, in comparison to the sisters, who are expected to be thinking solely about their family.

Little Women has been described by David Curtis as "the last reading experience of childhood," and, in many regards, its two-part structure exemplifies this (878). The coming of age in *Little Women* is a hard-knocks reality painted with a positive, sentimental brush. To have a successful marriage, the March sisters must put their own ambitions on the backburner and focus on masking their disappointment, anger, or sadness. Being a good wife means that one is expected to suppress their emotions, allowing their meekness and wifely duties to shine through, rather than any larger emotions or ambition. Even the end of Book 1 is a callback to the true purpose of Alcott's writing: not to tell a family-oriented story, but rather for economic reward she can receive from adhering to readers' taste. "So the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Whether it ever rises again depends upon the reception given the first act of the domestic drama called *Little Women*," Alcott writes in chapter 23's final sentence (268). Despite the sentimentality of the book, the novel is first and foremost an opportunity to profit and its continuation was based solely on the "reception" of Book 1.

What is interesting about this passage is that Alcott is very open about her non-sentimental intentions. Sentimentality is not reliant on profits, nor is it reliant on

anything but the author's desires. When Alcott writes that continuation is dependent on Book 1's profitability and reception, some of the sentimentality is stripped from the novel. Jo returns to sentimental literature once she decides to abandon sensational writing and profitability; Alcott is making it apparent that this is not her. Her sentimental novel will only be finished if she can profit from it, distorting the view of sentimental literature presented within *Little Women*. This is a sharp turn from the actual text of *Little Women* which encourages sentimentality, sticking strong to one's morals, and being a good daughter and wife. The March sisters are "happy wom[e]n" at the end of the novel, highlighting what a great life it is to be a wife and a mother, even for those like Jo who did not want to take on those roles earlier in their life (546). Alcott may be encouraging the sentimental lifestyle in *Little Women*, but the mercenary addition to the conclusion of Book 1 underscores the false nature of such a view, at least from Alcott's perspective. In refusing to write the second part of her book unless she receives a financial reward for the first, Alcott is equating the prospects of marriage for the March girls with her financial success as a spinster—one cannot occur without the other.

A novel's meaning can be informed and modified based on the author's intentions. When they are open about desires for profit, it can influence a reader's perception of the texts that they are consuming, since many readers cannot separate their interpretations of the art from the artist themselves. Stylistically, it was an interesting move for Alcott to include the final passage, but its placement was apt, considering the central topic of Book 2. Jo and Amy's ambitions for fame and fortune become more central to the novel in the second book; this is where Jo's scribbling and Amy's drawings go from being a hobby to being a potential career that is forgotten. The inclusion of the final passage is bringing the struggles of Book 2 to the forefront. In the same way that Jo must sacrifice some of her voice and style to suit the tastes of what people want to read, Alcott makes it explicit that her writing is dependent on commercial success—she will not continue unless *Little Women* is profitable. Alcott, whom scholars have argued based Jo off herself, veers from her literary counterpart and is much closer to Amy within this regard. Amy realizes that she could not make a career doing her art, because she would not be the best; Alcott recognizes that unless her book gets critical acclaim she cannot continue writing it. Each career is dependent on being able to cater to the wants of the people and creating a product of great value, something Amy recognizes that she cannot do and quits outright, but a goal for Alcott herself that she speaks directly to the audience and urges them to help her with.

Little Women shows the important relationship between labor, marriage, and suppression. Marriage and careers remain at odds, with one taking precedence over the other for young women, with thoughts about marriage or romance often stifling their ambition. I have argued that labor outside the home is utilized to highlight the March sisters' unpreparedness for marriage, since, in these situations, the sisters are unable to keep their cool and instead express large emotions unsuitable for a wife. I

subsequently argue that following these experiences, the subject sister returns home to further practice the art of suppression. These instances prepare the little women to take on the constant labor they will participate in—labor in making themselves into the perfect, suppressed wives, but also the physical and emotional labor of completing their daily tasks. In this process, the girls begin to lose their ambition toward their careers and begin looking toward marriage and motherhood as their ideal circumstances, even if that had not been the case before.

This essay links together previous scholarship on suppression, anger, careers, and wifehood in *Little Women*, but also in sentimental fiction as a genre. Moving forward, I believe that my paper raises questions about the ways that men perceive women's labor in *Little Women*, more specifically, why does the tactic of suppression work so well for Amy but fail spectacularly for Meg? What is it about the difference in their labor that provides each woman with a very different result? Moreover, it raises the possibility of scholarship about the role of Beth March and why she does not need the same type of suppression education that the rest of her sisters do. Does this lack of education doom her or does she innately possess it? And, finally, when thinking about Jo, future research could delve deeper into why Jo's suppression education only truly manifests when she leaves the home.

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