

GOD SAVE THE GIRL CHILD: NARRATIVES OF JUVENILE FEMALE ILLNESS IN LITTLE WOMEN AND THE MORGESONS

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Introduction: The Sickly Saint¹

A girl dies. A girl dies of tuberculosis on an antebellum plantation. A girl dies in London before she can be rescued by friends. A girl dies in bed in another girl's arms. A girl goes blind from what her sister will write is scarlet fever, though really it is meningitis. A girl dies. A girl dies and her sisters agree she has gone to a better place. A girl lives. What now?

English literature of the nineteenth century abounds with ailing, dying, and dead little girls. These girls, besides their collective invalidism, share a tendency towards moral uprightness and a sweet disposition that serves both to fend them from fear of impending death and to inspire others spiritually. The sick girl is sexually pure. She is often blond. Readers of American literature may recognize her most clearly in the character Evangeline St. Clare, a paragon of the saintly sick girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Evangeline, known popularly as Little Eva, is a pious and cheerful child who dies of tuberculosis only after she has managed to take an enslaved little girl under her wing, teach love and tolerance to her aunt and father, and spread the word of god to the people her family enslaves. Stowe writes of Eva, "There was about [her form] an undulating and aerial grace, such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being" (168). Indeed, Eva, far from a realistically rendered child, *is* an allegorical being, a symbol of Christian virtue and child's innocence. She embodies the role of the sickly, saintly little girl so immaculately that we will treat her here as the typical norm to which later writers would respond.

The sheer popularity and cultural impact of Stowe's book – it would become the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century – may assure us that the Little Eva character would have been known to fellow nineteenth-century American novelists Louisa May Alcott and Elizabeth Stoddard. Alcott and Stoddard both write ill girl characters – respectively Beth March in Alcott's *Little Women* and Veronica Morgeson in Stoddard's *The Morgesons* – whose elder sisters serve as their novels' protagonists and who meet tragic fates. The women published their novels within five years of each other, both writing about the coming of age of girls in Civil War-era New England. Despite this, the books differ greatly – in tone, in style, if not technically in subject matter – not excepting the characterization of their invalid characters. In the following pages, I will examine the novels' use of illness and of the ill girl character, namely Beth March and Veronica Morgeson.

Beth March's death is perhaps one of the most famous in American literature, a classic and tragic demise many readers will know about before even cracking open the book. Timid, generous Beth, the second youngest of the four

March sisters, contracts scarlet fever in the course of assisting a destitute German family whose children have been stricken by the same disease. As she battles her illness, Beth suffers delirium and fever, nearly dying in the chapter appropriately titled “Dark Days.” But, under the care of her sisters and their housekeeper, Beth does recover. The recovery, though near miraculous, is incomplete, and Beth later dies from lingering complications of her scarlet fever at the age of nineteen.

Despite her youth, Beth faces her impending death with equanimity that, were this not placid Beth March, might be startling. Dr. Perri Klass, in writing on illness and dying in classic children’s novels, aptly describes her passing as “a slow but beautiful (and religious) death” (“Fever Dreams”). So it is; Beth takes five years to die after her initial bout with scarlet fever and divines her fate long before her family can be made to accept it. She dies in springtime, in her mother’s arms, surrounded by babies and kittens. Aside from her own foreknowledge, Beth seems doomed to die by dint of history; readers more versed in Alcott know that *Little Women* is based on the author’s own family. Lizzie Alcott, the real-life Beth and the second youngest Alcott sister, died after a long invalidism at the age of twenty-two. And so the short arc of Beth’s life seems straightforward: Beth, who is Lizzie, will be loved, will become ill, and will die. The reader knows, Beth knows, and the March family eventually knows, too, what will happen to her. She takes her place in a literary canon of saintly and ill girls. But to read Beth’s fate as absolutely predetermined is to oversimplify the literary ramifications of her illness and how the device of illness is employed in the domestic novel.

We would do well to remember that it *is* a device. Carmen Maria Machado, writing on Lizzie Alcott, describes the actual Lizzie without *Little Women*’s romantic literary sheen; the consequent portrait is of a wasted young woman incensed by her fate (“The Real Tragedy of Beth March”). Lizzie Alcott died an ugly, heavily medicated death, three years older at the end than her literary counterpart. Such disparity between the fictional and the real underscores Louisa Alcott’s willingness to take artistic liberty with the facts of her sister’s life. Her literary choices concerning Beth may therefore be regarded as – in equal measure – related to, but independent of, what happened to Lizzie.

The Morgesons, a little-known 1862 bildungsroman by Elizabeth Drew Stoddard, tells the story of Cassandra Morgeson, a young woman growing up as the eldest daughter in a relatively prosperous New England merchant family. Cassandra, lusty and attractive, clashes often with her younger sister Veronica. Like Beth March, Veronica is the invalid sister, a shut-in who experiences bouts of ill health. Unlike Beth or Little Eva, Veronica is supremely unsaintly. Prickly and strange, she plays tricks, dabbles in kleptomania, and cultivates an air of otherness that frequently alienates her family.

The medical nature of Veronica’s affliction remains dubious throughout the novel. Scholars have diagnosed her variously with hysteria, anorexia, agoraphobia, even with a manipulative and shrewdly directed self-destruction aimed at soliciting her family’s attention.² A doctor in the novel diagnoses her

rather uselessly with “delicacy of constitution” (Stoddard 26). Cassandra describes one of Veronica’s fits:

Veronica could not speak, but she shook her head at me to go away. Her will seemed to be concentrated against losing consciousness; it slipped away from her occasionally, and she made a rotary motion with her arms, which I attempted to stop, but her features contracted so terribly, I let her alone. [...] Her breath scarcely stirred her breast. I thought more than once she did not breathe at all. (Stoddard 146-7)

The composure with which Cassandra relates such a scene suggests that such symptoms are typical of Veronica’s attacks: trouble breathing, spasmodic movements, fainting. Certainly *something* is wrong with her. Exactly what that is proves secondary in the novel to how Stoddard wields Veronica’s illness. Veronica’s frantic grasp for control shown above and the rejection of her sister’s help will assist in understanding her as an ill character in later analysis.

In scrutinizing the use of illness in these texts and the narrative device of the sick girl, we will use five main lenses through which to view Beth March and Veronica Morgeson. They are as follows: spirituality, sexuality, womanhood, domesticity, and maternity. Each provides a unique entry point to the texts and builds upon the sections previous, creating a dialogue between the five main lenses which should assure the reader that there exists no one proper way to approach analysis of these novels, of the sick girl type, or of Beth and Veronica.

Phantom Pains: Spirituality

Little churchgoing occurs in either *The Morgesons* or *Little Women*. In the former, Cassandra Morgeson regards with some disdain the religious revival consuming villagers in New England and the hypocritical meanness of her religious grandfather; in the latter, the March sisters pore over prayer books and listen faithfully to their chaplain father, but Alcott never writes them into a church. Nevertheless, the Morgesons and the Marches both engage with the spiritual realm. The most metaphysical sister, in both families, proves to be the frailest one, the one who has danced most closely and consistently with death. How these two – Veronica Morgeson and Beth March – engage with the spiritual, especially in the context of their struggles with ill health, reveals a good deal about the characters and their narratives’ relationship to the inner life of the soul.

When writing on illness in literature, it behooves one to turn to Susan Sontag, the expert, for reference. Though Sontag’s primary focus in her seminal work on illness is the literary representation of tuberculosis and of cancer, her insights may be carefully applied elsewhere. In *Illness as a Metaphor*, Sontag writes that tuberculosis is more culturally romanticized than cancer in part because of its location in the body. Cancer may manifest anywhere – the prostate, the breast – without regard to human shame, and is therefore considered baser. Tuberculosis primarily affects the lungs, or what Sontag calls “the upper, spiritualized body”

(Sontag 17); its direct interaction with the breath of life makes it “metaphorically, a disease of the soul” (Sontag 18). Neither Beth March nor Veronica Morgeson suffer from tuberculosis, but Sontag’s metaphorical hierarchy nevertheless proves helpful in reading their respective illnesses.

If affliction of the lungs indicates a heightened spirituality in the sufferer, an affected heart must be more elevated still. Per Sontag, cancer traditionally has had more lowly symbolic implications, as it can affect any parts of the body, even the basest. But the heart is the home of love, the home of life itself (not merely breath), the organ the ancient Egyptians considered so vital to the soul of the possessor that they left it, alone of the organs, in the body after death. What ultimately kills Beth March is a damaged heart, ravaged by the effects of her original bout of scarlet fever. Per Sontag, Beth’s literal heartsickness places her within the literary realm of those spiritual sufferers of tuberculosis whose deaths make an “assertion of an angelic psychology” (25). More concretely, Jo observes Beth in her final illness taking fervent interest in her little book of prayers. As Little Eva evangelizes, so Beth prays. Her overt display of devoutness is sincere, but conventional.

Understandable and predictable as Beth’s Christian bent may be, she possesses some mystical properties not so traditional as Little Eva’s smiling evangelism. Strangest of these is her apparent premonitory talent: Beth knows that she will die. If Beth is to be believed – and she is, among her many virtues, an honest creature – she has had a notion of her own early death from before she ever even fell ill. She tells Jo that she never imagined her own future as a child. Indeed, earlier in the novel the March sisters fantasize their castles in the air and Beth’s is “to stay at home safe with father and mother, and help take care of the family” (Alcott 151). But Beth, then thirteen, does this already, what she will continue to do for the remainder of her short life. Six years later at nineteen, she tells Jo that she knows she’s dying and dies within months. Beneath Beth’s orthodoxy lives something beyond mere faith, something that allows her to see her future with uncanny and perhaps unearthly clarity. Her family calls her an angel; Mr. Laurence, as we will discuss presently, sees her as something of a ghost. Heartsick Beth possesses some grip on the spiritual realm that her loved ones perceive, but, in their health, cannot grasp.

Contrary to Beth’s ailment of the heart, Veronica Morgeson’s illness presents in a manner so diffuse that it seems to manifest without the body entirely. If Veronica causes it through severely restricted eating, perhaps her illness is entirely base, a version of the sin of self-slaughter. But Julia Stern takes a less abject view, labeling the strange and dreamy Veronica one of “those who dwell in the spirit” (“Twisted Appetite” 110). Stern is also among those who entertain the possibility that Veronica is doing this deliberately to herself. If we take both ideas – Veronica as spiritual and as self-saboteur – as true, then Veronica becomes a figure of the Franciscan variety, embracing an asceticism that brings her closer to god. When her illness intensifies, her self-denial seems to as well. When sick, “[o]ne of her amusements was to cut off her hair, lock by lock, and cut it short before she

was well enough to walk about” (Stoddard 256). That Veronica appears to take satisfaction in such behavior, in such rejection of the material, certainly designates her a member of an otherworldly if not religious realm.

The cutting of her hair also places Veronica’s illness in conversation with that of Little Eva, who famously distributes locks of her own hair to the enslaved people congregated around her deathbed. Having extolled to the party the importance of Christian prayer, Eva then instructs them: “when you look at [the curl of my hair], think that I loved you and am gone to heaven, and that I want to see you all there” (Stowe 333). The lock becomes talismanic, a relic of spiritual import. On the other hand, Veronica’s discarded hair vanishes into the ether for all the reader knows. If she engages in the haircutting as an “amusement,” as Cassandra claims, she seems to be at once subverting and trivializing Eva’s earnest if sanctimonious act. Veronica keeps her hair for herself; Veronica laughs at the cutting of her hair. She keeps the spiritual realm to herself and fails to spread the good word. Veronica is no Helen Burns who passed her wisdom to just one person before her own death. She hoards the spiritual, turns it inward.

Though temperamentally dissimilar, Beth and Veronica experience the process of spiritual enhancement with marked similarity:

[A] heavy weight fell on Jo’s heart as she saw her sister’s face. It was no paler, and but little thinner than in autumn; yet there was a strange, transparent look about it, as if the mortal was being slowly refined away. And the immortal shining through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty. (Alcott 393)

We did not perceive the process, but Verry was educated by sickness; her mind fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it. The darkness in her nature broke; by slow degrees she gained health, though never much strength. Upon each recovery a change was visible; a spiritual dawn had risen in her soul; moral activity blending with her ideality made her life beautiful, even in the humblest sense. (Stoddard 59)

It goes: the young woman suffers and in suffering gains a spiritual insight, characterized as a light (“shining” or “dawn”) that grants her a humble but exalted beauty. That the girls respond to their conditions with such apparent congruity seems to position Veronica with Beth in the canon of the girl-martyr. The two of them diverge, especially in the excerpts above, in that Veronica’s spiritual transformation goes unnoticed by her family around her. Jo, at least, explicitly observes Beth’s mortal being burning away. Beth resembles Little Eva in this way, in that her holy suffering has the effect of teaching Christian lessons; Alcott writes that, for Jo, seeing Beth enduring her last illness “did more for [her] than the wisest sermons, the saintliest hymns, the most fervent prayers” (441). Her illness is so spiritually powerful that it elevates the spirituality of an entirely separate being – and it’s the illness that does it, more powerful than prayer. Where Beth’s spiritual purification reaches beyond herself, the interiority of Veronica’s transformation

hews with the self-concernedness of her haircutting exercise. Similar to the way she “masters pain,” Veronica, so internal, seems also to master the spirit. She exerts a power over her illness that the passive Beth never can. But this spiritual control will prove deficient as Veronica grows older and out of her role as sick girl.

Writing on Veronica Morgeson and “the uncanniness of her identifications,” Stern concludes that Veronica, by the time of her mother’s death in the girls’ early adulthood, has retreated from the literal and into the spiritual to a drastic degree (“Twisted Appetites” 117). Indeed, Veronica is “appalled by the physical horror of death,” rather than its metaphysical horror, with which the reader may justifiably believe she has already grappled (Stoddard 206). She cannot bear to witness her mother’s corpse, leaving it and the funeral preparations to the more grounded Cassandra. She refuses to attend the funeral. The physical self-mortification in which she has constantly engaged implies an indifference to her own body that would make it easy to leave it behind. The problem is: Veronica does not die. She gets well in this life, and not in the next like Beth March (Alcott 445). If Beth’s illness spiritually refined her in preparation for her ascent to heaven, then Veronica’s has left her stranded in the real world with only otherworldly resources at her disposal.

Left with the spiritual fruits of her illness and disidentified with the real, Veronica stands on tremulous ground when she embarks on her romance with Ben Somers. It seems clear enough that her wedding marks some kind of irreversible crossing-over to Veronica. The transformative process begins as soon as she agrees to the marriage; Louise Penner points out that upon the engagement Veronica immediately seems “like an ordinary mortal” (Stoddard 159; “Domesticity and Self-Possession” 141). She burns her papers, calling them “rubbish” (Stoddard 236). She makes and holds fast to a resolution to wear a black silk as her wedding gown. In the time leading up to the wedding, Cassandra had warned Ben Somers that “it is the literal [he] will hunger for” (Stoddard 226), and indeed Veronica seems to be preparing to literalize, to trade away the illness-borne spiritualism of her earlier days in becoming a wife. Neither the threat of relapse nor her spiritual gifts desert Veronica until the very end. On the eve of the wedding, servant Temperance frets that if Veronica is to fall ill again, now will be the time. “Don’t let her dream,” she orders Cassandra (Stoddard 237). But Veronica does dream, and in doing so has the most profound and astonishing spiritual spell of her life. In the dreamscape, she meets Desmond Somers, and together they predict that he will marry Cassandra. Dream-Desmond pierces Veronica’s arm with his dagger, and she awakes with the mark on her arm. This final burst of spiritual revelation apparently exhausts Veronica’s power. She marries Ben. She evidently has no more visions. Sybil Weir writes that Veronica “dies spiritually at the novel’s end,” and indeed this seems to be the case (“Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman” 430). Veronica, who spent such time and effort creating a spiritual world of the self, gives herself up to marriage and motherhood. In the book’s final pages, Cassandra writes of Veronica: “her eyes go no more in quest of something beyond” (Stoddard 252). Twice, first when she fails to die and again when she surrenders her individual self, Veronica

loses out on a certain spiritual ascension. She becomes, ultimately, an ordinary mortal.

That's Sick: Sex and the Subversive

From the first, illness and the erotic appear hand in hand in *The Morgesons*. Cassandra's first love tries to romance her, then dies of the measles (Stoddard 56). Cassandra's second love, Charles Morgeson, lets passion get the best of him and dies as Cassandra herself is plunged into (temporary) nervous debility (Stoddard 123). In contrast, the deeply un-erotic *Little Women* has, Meg serving lemonade instead of wine at her wedding and Jo romancing a middle-aged German, and yet, darkness creeps in. However much Alcott tries to make Beth's death peaceful, the wrongness of her own experiences, of Lizzie's suffering, lingers in the text. Certain perversities litter the books, and illness usually accompanies them, a shadow and a light, a companion to the characters' suffering. Examinations of later texts can help us understand the associations between illness and prurience (and other perversities) in these.

Writing on the representation of the erotic tuberculosis in literature, Dan Latimer considers Gabriele of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Gabriele, a consumptive, conducts a relationship of "perverse love" (Latimer 1029) with an aesthete called Spinell at the sanatorium where she eventually dies. Spinell encourages her talent as a pianist; Latimer writes that the musical connection is "the best image of the mediated eroticism she and Spinell share [...] the repeated foaming up under her laboring hands of the dark musical passion [...] of Wagner's music" (1029). The illness engenders the music; the music engenders the passion; illness, music, and sexuality form a dark, because terminal, literary triumvirate. When Gabriele dies, writes Latimer, she does so orgasmically.

Latimer does not present *The Magic Mountain* as exemplar of the illness narrative; rather, he uses it as literary evidence of what he considers the perplexing eroticization of a disfiguring disease. As established, neither Beth March nor Veronica Morgeson is tubercular, and they are certainly not lascivious. But they are gifted pianists whose frequently circumscribed passions seem to play out in musical recital. Music may create, for the characters or to their authors, an avenue through which to express eroticism, certainly, but also subversive ideas, elements with a certain impurity not otherwise expressed.

Alcott's musically gifted invalid reads superficially as nothing but pure. In fact, Beth's music positions her as almost an angel, namely the angel of elderly Mr. Laurence's long-dead little granddaughter. Mr. Laurence does little if anything to disguise his conflation of the girls, facilitating the association through music. Having invited Beth to the Laurence mansion to play the piano any time she likes, he arranges sheet music for her. He sends her an extravagant gift in the form of the granddaughter's own piano. The friendship results in such touching scenes such as this:

That night, when Beth played to Mr. Laurence in the twilight, Laurie, standing in the shadow of the curtain, listened to the little David [...] and watched the old man, who sat with his gray head on his hand, thinking tender thoughts of the dead child he had loved so much. (Alcott 155)

Beth is the little David, the anointed one, enchanting with the harp. But the reverence Mr. Laurence has for her, and she for him, cannot efface what ghoulish significance exists therein. The appellation of “David” carries with it David’s own sexual transgressions – with Bathsheba, maybe with Jonathan. Though the kindly Mr. Laurence is no Saul, he does engage in solipsism. Beth serves as a conduit for him, and not a unique one either; after Beth has died, Mr. Laurence tells Jo, “You must be my girl now” (Alcott 475). He requires the role of “my girl” be continuously filled, this turnover enabled by the first two girls’ untimely deaths and his own disquieting myopia. Though not erotic, Mr. Laurence’s entitlement to this series of young girls does create a small and very gendered hierarchy enabled dually by sex (he above she) and the infirmity of the female party.

Veronica Morgeson, when faced with one of the few instances of literal role playing in the novel, seems to scorn the idea. The Morgesons, visiting Boston, attend a performance of *Hamlet* that leaves Veronica unimpressed. She laughs at Hamlet, and at Ophelia, too, proclaiming “It is not Shakespeare” (Stoddard 67). It’s an amusing episode – Cassandra and Mrs. Morgeson have no idea what if anything at all Veronica knows about Shakespeare – and seems to portray a Veronica who scorns artifice and dramatics (remember how she spoofs the haircutting.) Hamlet and Ophelia are both sexually tormented characters whose machinations within the dramatic performance are dramatic performances in themselves. That Veronica laughs at the play’s two primary metatheatrical players reinforces the impression of her scorn. But just before *Hamlet*, Veronica and Cassandra have had the following exchange: “I hope you wont be ill again, Verry? ‘I shall be,’ she answered with a shudder; ‘I need all the illnesses that come’” (Stoddard 67). Veronica *needs* illness; that she acknowledges this need in herself so frankly seems in agreement with scholarly assertions that her sickness is self-imposed. If her sickness *is* self-imposed, it might be considered a kind of role. Does Veronica perform her illness? Does Ophelia perform her madness? Veronica – possibly a hysteric – judges the classically hysterical Ophelia; self-punishing Veronica laughs at her self-slaughtering counterpart. If we accept Veronica as an Ophelia figure, even only incidentally, we also may see where their fates diverge. Recall that Veronica’s illness is rendered incomplete – she survives. Ophelia’s sickness, of the mind or of the heart, consummates itself in her suicide and immortalization on the stage. Veronica’s consummates in consummation; that is, she gets married. Such a conventional, acceptable social decision voids the drama. Veronica drops her role of sick girl, thereby surrendering that romantic afterlife that the dead sick girl, through death, achieves.

In addition to performing sickness – if she does perform – Veronica, like Beth March, performs music. Both Morgeson sisters do, but Cassandra only sings

passably well, while Veronica plays piano with virtuosic skill. Veronica and Beth together form a sort of overlapping triangle of the kind that Latimer observes in subsequent literature of the early twentieth century, that relation between sex and music and illness. When Veronica plays, her music draws Ben Somers helplessly to her, siren-like (Stoddard 161). She plays in an eroticized version of Beth and Mr. Laurence's replacement game; writes Sandra Zagarell of Veronica's marriage to Ben Somers, "[he] turns to her as a substitute for the more formidable Cassandra" ("The Repossession of a Heritage"). In turn, shy Beth cannot help but perform while in the grips of her scarlet fever, playing phantom piano on the blankets and attempting hoarsely, grotesquely, to sing (Alcott 193). Their respective maladies cast a certain pall – a sensuality, a showiness, a depressing little girl swap – not realized in the earnest piousness of a death like Little Eva's.

Apropos of such darkness and despite Beth March's morbid innocence, her illness remains inextricable from a certain sexual overtone. Jo – when she is trying so hard to ignore Laurie's love for her – mistakes Beth's symptoms of dying with the symptoms of desire. She serves a Mr. Laurence-ish role here, displacing her own troubles onto Beth. On observing Beth observing Laurie, witnessing her lament "How strong, and well, and happy that dear boy looks" (Alcott 343), Jo comes to the rose-tinted and wildly inaccurate conclusion that Beth is in love with him. Not stopping to consider that her feeble sister may be mourning her own *lack* of strength, health, and happiness, Jo pursues her personal fancy, with a motivation at least threefold. For one, Jo loves her sister dearly and naturally inclines towards optimism in Beth's case; for another, Jo senses and seeks to escape Laurie's growing love for *her*. And still, Jo thinks she knows what longing looks like. She has made such a mistake before.

Years prior, during Beth's initial recuperation from scarlet fever, Jo approaches her mother with worries that John Brooke loves her sister Meg. Reluctant to consider losing her sister to marriage, Jo insists that "In novels, the girls show [love] by starting and blushing, fainting away, growing thin, and acting like fools. Now Meg don't do anything of the sort" (Alcott 214). (As in the case of Veronica, the model for love (sickness) is a dramatized character. Fiction rather than reality informs perceptions.) As she describes her idea of a woman in love, Jo seems unaware she is describing exactly the symptoms from which Beth has just recovered. Perhaps this confluence in Jo's feelings – death and love – indicates the strength of her subconscious; Jo, after all, abhors the idea of her sisters getting married and leaving her. Just because she does not rail against this phantom union of Beth and Laurie, as she did against Meg and John Brooke, does not mean Jo has separated her conception of love from that of loss.

But Jo may not be so misguided in her discomfiting ideas. Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant, writing together, argue that Jo will ultimately lose herself to marriage, and that Beth's illness plays a crucial role in this transformation. Jo dreads, they write, "the psychological rape [...] that await her if she grows up and takes her proper feminine place in the heterosexual world" ("Dismembering the Text" 113). This rape, according to Estes and Lant, consists of the loss of the

woman's independent self. Jo, so spirited and opinionated, naturally dreads this loss, while passive Beth would be an ideal candidate for it, were she to live. But Beth of course does not live, and Estes and Lant argue that, as she dies, Beth exerts such powerful influence over Jo that in death she subsumes her entirely, killing the "real Jo" and creating a passive, romantic Jo ready for the heterosexual world in her place. The theory disturbs, but how similar it is to Beth's replacement of the Laurence granddaughter! Even if one rejects the theory, even if one likes Professor Bhaer, that pattern of substitution, this girl for that, her life for hers, reads undeniable. And as (or if) marriage neuters Jo, so too with Veronica, who loses her ironically vivifying illness drama as she transitions into life as a married woman.

Girl, Indisposed: Womanhood

Both novels being in the coming-of-age tradition, the March sisters and the Morgeson girls start their respective stories very young; Beth is thirteen and Veronica nine. Veronica, at least, comes of age. She mellows, studies, marries. Beth, already such a dear at the beginning of her story, changes little, but does reach the age of nineteen before she succumbs to the effects of scarlet fever. The womanhood to which the girls' sisters look forward is one of sexual maturity and social sophistication, marriage, family. But of course, illness and its attendants, its prescriptions, complicate the process of maturation for these girls. As sick girls, they have no script for womanhood; their precursor Eva dies before the age of ten and is rewarded with "the dawning of immortal life in that childish soul" (Stowe 339).

When she dies, Beth has barely achieved the lower reaches of adulthood, and perhaps not at all if one considers that any burgeoning sexuality she may have otherwise experienced was usurped and replaced by her own experience of dying. Despite her status as one of four Little Women, womanhood seems unachievable to Beth, almost an abstraction. This is most explicit in her speech to Jo, who has only just conceded that her sister will die: "I only mean to say, that I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up; I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth" (Alcott 397). One mourns the fact that Beth's sisters never move to contradict this notion of herself. Beth, educated by Jo, cannot possibly be stupid. But she does read, even in the novel's first pages, as certainly "little." At thirteen, she still believes in Santa Claus and plays with dolls (Alcott 23). She seems younger even than her younger sister, Amy, who nurses ambitions of becoming a lady and a great artist, and who is brave enough – braver than Beth – to endure school. But Beth does possess that unearthly intuitive bent; she has failed to see a future for herself because there isn't one to see. She won't achieve adulthood. Beth's purity preserves perfectly in illness as if in amber, sickness reaching impossibly into her past self to repress even imaginings of womanhood – that is, of growing up and getting married. One might posit that her young age of nineteen is to blame for Beth's distance from womanhood. Yet as this conversation takes place, her

younger sister Amy is across the ocean in Europe, maturing vigorously and falling in love.

Interestingly, Beth's foresight falters in regards to Amy. She mentions shortly after this speech that she hopes she will see her younger sister again. The anticipated reunion is not to be; only after Beth has died and been buried, Amy returns to the March family home in a state of flourishing womanhood. Though we have touched upon the Estes/Lant idea that Jo replaces Beth after she dies, Amy here seems to have superseded her sister as well. She even returns married to Laurie, with whom Jo, of course, had once suspected Beth of being in love. So Beth dies having been surpassed in maturity by a younger sister, replaced in the inexorable process of growing up by a sister who will see womanhood. Once Amy surmounts Beth in age as well as in maturity, Beth will become the youngest daughter forever, incorruptible in death, pure.

Veronica Morgeson's story, in line with Stoddard's iconoclastic tendencies, complicates this idea of the eternal child. Beth dies as Little Eva does, embodying innocent girlhood, although not in body still a girl. Veronica has a knotty relationship with maturity; characters in *The Morgesons* casually but frequently disagree as to whether she is stunted or preternaturally adult. Cassandra observes that Veronica, at thirteen, looks as old as she herself does at sixteen (Stoddard 51). Time and again she laments in herself the lack of composure and development that seems to have come so easily to Veronica. And yet upon the engagement of his youngest daughter, Mr. Morgeson, incredulous, exclaims, "Are you grown a human woman?" (Stoddard 233). Actually Veronica *is* a human woman, and has been for some time – she is in her mid-twenties when she marries Ben Somers. But if one indispensable aspect of womanhood is marriage, as Beth March seems to think, then Mr. Morgeson is perhaps correct to think that only now, on the threshold of Veronica's married life, can she be considered grown. That he adds "human" to his assessment makes fascinating an observation by Sybil Weir in her "The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman," wherein she labels Veronica, for her exaggerated womanly qualities of "spirituality, [...], ignorance, and the delicacy demanded by her society" a "human freak" (430). In Weir's view, it is exactly Veronica's inhumanly perfect womanhood that sets her apart from the more imperfect but narratively successful Cassandra. And yet, Veronica's more puerile traits complicate Weir's reading. Veronica is not so placid. Veronica has a temper.

Cassandra Morgeson sees her sister's apparent maturity, as above, but also observes incidents in which such womanliness belies Veronica's petulance and unsophisticated temper. Veronica acts out, especially when ill, such as one instance preceding a sick fit where she lifts the servant Fanny bodily from the floor (Stoddard 145). Such fearsome behavior on Veronica's part seems to persist until Mrs. Morgeson's death, at which point Veronica vows to Cassandra that she will never lose her temper with her sister again. This conversation comes directly after another servant, Temperance, has proclaimed Veronica "a bigger child than ever" (Stoddard 210). Veronica seems to be reacting, however obliquely, to a consensus

about her immaturity. Soon after, when Cassandra calls her “Child-Verry,” Veronica demurs: “I was never a child, you know; but I am always trying to find my childhood” (Stoddard 217). If we remember that Veronica’s early life saw more serious and more frequent bouts of illness than her young adulthood, and that her bouts of ill temper correlated strongly with such physical illness, then we may infer that Veronica’s quest for a childhood she believes she never had involves doing away with anger and sickness both. Of course, by this point she has bypassed actual childhood. Stuck in a limbo, immature and mature, Veronica strikes out into womanhood by marrying Ben Somers, and loses herself in the process.

Veronica might have saved herself, had she not lived too long to return to her childhood. Beth, on the other hand, will never really leave childhood. “Why, mother, Beth’s eighteen; but we don’t realize it, and treat her like a child, forgetting she’s a woman,” Jo tells her mother, loath to believe her beloved sister is dying (Alcott 342). Such insight seems eerily drawn from Alcott’s own life; Carmen Maria Machado, writing on Lizzie Alcott’s funeral, quotes John Matteson: “Everyone seemed to forget that they were not burying a child, but a woman of twenty-two” (“The Real Tragedy of Beth March”). Perhaps Alcott is looking to comfort herself when she, writing Beth’s death, surrounds her surrogate sister with symbols of new life: kittens, infants, a spring day. By doing so, she gives the impression that Beth is not dying but being reborn into something newer, higher, better. If she can forget Lizzie’s womanhood, the real circumstances of her death, and replace them with the story of a child carrying to heaven her “childish soul,” perhaps she can save her sister. Beth, deceased, is “well at last” (Alcott 445). Veronica’s directionless, soulless womanhood pales to Beth’s glorious death.

Homesick: Domesticity

While hard at work in the business of grand spiritual undertakings, neither Beth March nor Veronica Morgeson undertake much to leave their respective homes. As *Little Women* and *The Morgesons* are both domestic novels, most action takes place in a home or a family setting regardless. Yet Beth and Veronica stand out by staying in; the particulars of their respective illnesses pervade the domestic space they are confined to, and the domestic pervades in turn. Even before they grow or fail to grow into womanhood, the girls tend toward being penned in, shut up, and internal. Their physical maladies aside, there exists a scholarly precedent for pathologizing both Beth’s and Veronica’s social problems in and of themselves. Beth might have social anxiety², Veronica, agoraphobia³. Such speculation is understandable – Beth, for example, dreads the outside world to the point that she cannot attend school. But the interest in such diagnoses lies not in their psychologizing, but in the fact that the girls’ withdrawn tendencies – in an era during which domesticity was expected in women – strike scholars as so unusual as to garner diagnosis at all.

It is the nature of illness that an ill person will be restricted in his or her movements, often confined to the home if not to bed, but Louisa May Alcott

writes Beth's illness itself as a kind of restricted thing, as the Marches work frantically to keep it from even other Marches. This is not a quarantine measure – though Amy does indeed have to be sent away to protect her from infection – but a conspiracy of secrets. When Beth contracts scarlet fever, Marmee has already been absent from the March family home for several days, attending to the ailing Mr. March at an army hospital in Washington, DC. She has left Hannah, the Marches' cook and housekeeper, in charge of the girls, and it is on Hannah's orders that Jo and Meg conceal Beth's condition from their mother. In issuing such an order, the servant Hannah – *the domestic* – situates Beth's illness not in the family sphere but in the domestic one, in the home. In turn, Hannah keeps secrets from the girls, namely about Beth being “much sicker than anyone but Hannah and the doctor imagined” (Alcott 193). With the advent of sickness, the domestic servant has risen to match rank with the doctor and begun to exercise unprecedented authority. Jo and Meg, neither sick nor in power, feel suddenly discomfited by the domestic space – “how sad and lonely the house [...] while the shadow of death hovered over the once happy home!” (Alcott 194). Laurie lurks “like a restless ghost” (Alcott 194). Neighbors and town merchants enquire after Beth's condition. The house is haunted and Beth isn't so friendless after all – illness seems somehow to have upended the order of household life but maintained the supremacy of the household.

As illness breaks the March household, Veronica Morgeson takes direct action by breaking the house. Even as fits of illness confine her to her bed, Veronica seems bent on further retreat from the world. Sick with measles, she is observed making “little pellets of cotton which she stuffed in her ears and nose, so that she might not hear or smell” (Stoddard 56). Veronica seals herself into herself, recalling her egocentric spiritualism. But she revolts against the external enclosure of the home, breaking windowpanes and ripping down curtains. Her isolation is as self-directed as Beth's is imposed by others, but far more confused. It resembles her conflict with age in that no one seems able to agree on whether Veronica is a domestic creature or not. “Home [...] was her sphere” (Stoddard 60), Mr. Morgeson claims of his younger daughter, and indeed Veronica does seem to favor her home over anywhere else. She makes sure Ben Somers knows that in the case of their marrying, she will not leave her hometown of Surrey, a request to which he accedes (Stoddard 225). Writing on Veronica's domesticity, Penner argues that Veronica “likes the enclosed nature of their domestic situation” because it allows her a delineated space in which she may exercise control over herself and her desires (“Domesticity and Self-Possession” 140). We have seen that Veronica covets control in the spiritual realm; it follows that she would do the same in the more mundane world of the home, where she may clutch her lover close and stay shielded from the sea. The sea! “Veronica hates the sea [...] a symbol of immersion in life and death,” writes Weir (“Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman” 429). A young woman who has spent so many years resisting the tides of life, who has harnessed disease itself for her own purposes, naturally shrinks from the wild and

irrepressible forces of the sea. She stays home. She chooses the bedroom with no ocean view, to avoid reminders of its power.

Though a hopeless homebody, Veronica feels no apparent inclination towards the actual duties of domestic life. While Hannah of *Little Women*, empowered by sickness, cooks, cleans, and nurses, Veronica little credits such work. Discussing the servant Fanny, Mrs. Morgeson suggests the girl should show some gratitude for the domestic position she's been given. Veronica cannot see why people should be grateful to do such work (Stoddard 129). Years later, when Mrs. Morgeson has died and the sisters have taken over the household, Cassandra notes that Veronica avoids practical housekeeping at all costs: "Veronica thought that her share of my plans must consist of a diligent notice of all that I did, which she gave, and then went to her own life, kept sacredly apart" (Stoddard 224). Such behavior diverges sharply from that of Beth March, who so faithfully takes to domestic work that upon her death "something of her housewifely spirit seemed to linger round the little mop and the old brush" (Alcott 460). This might read as an issue of class, the Morgesons being initially much better off than the mildly impoverished Marches, but none of the other March girls show nearly the domestic affinity of sickly Beth. Even when the Morgesons lose their fortune, Veronica gives no indication that she will learn such domesticity. It seems to be a fundamental difference between the two of them, a difference not explicated by turning back to our archetype; Little Eva, being an angel and an allegory, does little more than romp and read the Bible.

But perhaps we may turn to Little Eva for another point of entry into the girls' narrative domestic. Each character – Eva, Veronica, and Beth – inhabits an extraordinary bedroom, a sickroom cultivated to her tastes and peculiarities. Eva's "spacious apartment" has been lavishly appointed by her indulgent father, with Parisian rugs and religious statues (Stowe 326). The Marches, not nearly so wealthy, nevertheless furnish Beth's sickroom with aplomb; "Father's best books found their way there, mother's easy chair, Jo's desk, Amy's loveliest sketches" (Alcott 439). Meg daily brings over her twin babies, and the Marches haul in Beth's piano, too. This room is for a girl, not a symbol, angelic as the girl may be, and overflows with the earnest, humble touches of a loving family in a way that Eva's luxurious chamber does not. Veronica, in contrast – and in character – does all of her decorating herself. Her aesthetic choices – green rug and blue curtains, red leaves, a bird's nest, a hole in the window through which she spends time gazing – have the effect of bringing the outside in. Stern writes: "Veronica's 'nature,' contra Emerson's, exists exclusively inside" ("Twisted Appetite" 127). In a sort of reverse-transcendentalism, Veronica yet again exerts herself rather than giving in, creating in the domestic space an area of her own power. Beth's space, though highly personal, has been imposed upon her by her well-meaning family, as each member has inserted himself or herself into Beth's idea of bliss. Beth demonstrates no aversion at all to this, which may help explain her devotion to domestic duties. Having no desire to assert herself, Beth takes the simplest route available to a homebound girl – she works in and for the home. One wonders if this comes from

a personal place for Alcott; if she, like the Marches, imposes herself in the same benevolent way, writing a Lizzie who could be perfectly content in the home to which she is confined.

Mother of All Ills: Maternity

Beth, when not engaged in being “a housewifely creature,” practices maternity in her caretaking of a collection of dolls (Alcott 41). She pets them, even feeds them, and because they have been passed down to her from her sisters there exists “not one whole or handsome one among them” (Alcott 41). Their physical brokenness prompts Beth to imagine them invalids, and to care for them in the context of running a hospital for dolls. Her especial pet is a mutilated specimen named Joanna, a hand-me-down from Jo missing all of its limbs and the top of its head. Beth keeps Joanna beside her on her deathbed. Estes and Lant rather appropriately consider Joanna an extension of Jo, Joanna being a “Jo” herself. That Beth disproportionately ministers to Joanna and that Jo is, of all Beth’s sisters, her favorite and most trusted, serve to concretize the comparison. Estes and Lant note that Joanna – “a lobotomized amputee” – reflects what they view as Jo’s state at the end of the novel: a shadow of herself, lopped into the shape of good housewife to Bhaer (“Dismembering the Text” 118). Regardless of Jo’s fate, Beth’s mothering of Joanna does not seem to turn out nicely; when Beth dies, Joanna disappears from the text.

Caretaking and death go hand in hand from the beginning of *Little Women*, as evidenced in the vignette in which Beth, participating in an all-play no-work experiment with her sisters, accidentally and fatally starves her pet canary, Pip. Pip dies with his claws outstretched “as if imploring the food, for want of which he had died” (Alcott 119). Beth discerns Pip’s cause of death immediately, immediately and accurately blaming herself, and Amy makes the well-intentioned, macabre, and rather culinary suggestion that Beth resurrect Pip by warming his corpse in the oven. It’s an uncharacteristic lapse in Beth’s otherwise habitual nurturing and might be negligible if not for the fatal overcorrection she makes several chapters later.

There are few cadavers in *Little Women*, Beth’s pet canary being one of them, and the Hummel baby another. Significantly, Beth interacts closely with both. As if in penance for her earlier mistake with her pet (remember how Beth is “the pet of the family”), Beth, when Mrs. March is absent, takes it upon herself to deliver service to the poverty-stricken Hummel family in the form of company and babysitting (Alcott 6). The Hummel mother is absent at work, so Beth takes the maternal role in caring for the children and the baby, all sick with scarlet fever, and the baby dies in her arms. “I just sat and held it softly till Mrs. Hummel came with the doctor” Beth tells Jo of her time with the child (Alcott 187). The scarlet fever she catches from the Hummel children is what eventually kills her; in attempting to play mother, Beth has doomed herself to illness and death. But see how the maternal fails once and again in this episode: Mother March is gone, and so is Mother Hummel. This double, fatal case of mother’s neglect seems unusual in a novel in which Marmee serves as the infallibly warm heart of the March household. But it makes sense in the context of Alcott’s own life. Carmen Maria Machado writes that, during Lizzie Alcott’s initial bout with scarlet fever, the family failed to send for a doctor. Can her anger towards her mother for failing her sister account for Alcott’s writing Marmee’s uncharacteristic lapse?

Veronica Morgeson certainly struggles with her own mother. Or, rather, her mother struggles with her; Cassandra observes of her mother that “She did not love [Veronica] as she loved me; but strove the harder to fulfill her duty” (Stoddard 13). When Veronica falls ill, Mrs. Morgeson watches over her but does not touch her, which appears not to fulfill Veronica’s understandable need for motherly love. Julia Stern notes that Veronica “subsists on a regressive diet of milk and buttered toast, the automaternal dimensions of which are suggestive indeed” (“Twisted Appetite” 108). Veronica, who persists in this diet for years, appears to self-mother as one might tend to an infant – milk and toast – rather than a young woman. This lack of proper maternal care, in addition to a childhood restricted by illness, serves to create the Veronica that emerges, spiritually rich but otherwise stunted, into the adult world. Veronica never quite achieves any fulfilling maternal relationship, and not for lack of trying. Stern, an adherent to the theory of Veronica’s self-induced illness, suggests that Veronica “dictates the household’s solicitous responses to her mysterious maladies” in quest of “the motherly touch” (Stoddard 116). That is to say, Veronica attempts to manufacture a mother for herself through manufactured malady. If indeed this is her goal, Veronica somewhat succeeds. Mrs. Morgeson still does little in the way of nurturing her daughter, but family servants Temperance and Hepsy do take the maternal role. The servants, most especially Temperance, pet and indulge Veronica as her mother never does, indulging her whims and sewing her quilts. Temperance, after a spell of Veronica’s, tucks her in and calls her “her best child” (Stoddard 147). Veronica, therefore – whether purposely or not – creates in the family servants a mother figure which otherwise she might do without. It’s another instance of Veronica’s surprising self-sufficiency, another power of hers borne out of illness.

Perhaps reacting to the kindness of the servants, Veronica develops in turn a particular compassion for the less-fortunate and the serving class. If she’s out of the house, it’s usually because she’s waiting for the shipping vessels to come back so she may see if any sailors have died (macabre and amusing) or because she’s out performing charity work (shocking for a character so devilish as she). As Beth, at her sickest, keeps herself occupied making gifts for passing schoolchildren and becomes “a sort of fairy-godmother,” Veronica offers candy to a set of “cadaverous,” motherless children she encounters on a rare excursion to Boston (Alcott 440; Stoddard 65). They react poorly to her solicitousness – “No; she didn’t give me enough,” complains one child – but Veronica appears undaunted (Stoddard 65). The next day, she purchases gifts for them all. Perhaps she recognizes in these unnurtured urchins the mothered, motherless child she was herself.

Perhaps illness arises as a failure of mothering. Little Eva has, at best, an inattentive mother, and is obliged to teach kindness to her mother figure, her Aunt Ophelia. Veronica functionally has no mother, is neglected for her strangeness and forced to find mothers elsewhere. Beth has a mother, an adoring mother, but a mother whose absence may leave just enough room for illness to slip in and kill her. When Veronica becomes a mother – the only one of the three girls to do so – she does so to tragic result. The baby, unnamed, ungendered, and inert, seems not to face a promising future. It will have a mother, an aunt, a great aunt, and an uncle even, but little else. Having survived the role of sick girl, Veronica, as Sandra Zagarell puts it “fades into near-catatonic passivity” (“The Repossession of a Heritage” 51). Where Beth does her best, most successful caretaking at her sickest, Veronica, no longer sick, can’t mother even as she becomes one.

Conclusion: It's Terminal

If only Veronica had died. As a reader, one wants Veronica to live. She's unpredictable and fascinating, beautiful, a genius, a freak. But in outliving her character type, Veronica emerges on the other side of sick girl with nowhere to go but down and away. She loses herself entirely and serves as the absolute tragic figure of the end of *The Morgesons*. Perhaps she's being punished for ascribing to the sick girl role. Little Eva becomes extraordinary, even exalted, in her illness. Veronica maybe fabricates her illness, and she certainly apes Little Eva at least once, and she certainly receives attention, so maybe she deserves to be punished for her aspiration to a type no real girl could achieve. But Veronica isn't, after all, a real girl. Perhaps in creating such a rich character, only to flatten her entirely, Stoddard isn't punishing Veronica but punishing those readers who take the Little Eva character to heart, subverting and mocking the type. Stoddard certainly likes to subvert. Either way, Veronica's ending stings.

If only Lizzie Alcott had lived! Even without the context provided by Machado, one can see the grief Louisa May Alcott held for her sister in her writing about the angel Beth, the best girl, the most beloved. We cannot know her motivations for writing Beth as she did, but we may read Beth with Louisa's life in mind. To do so opens us to a reading of Beth as more than an angel, more than an Eva. Beth peers into the future and becomes a ghost. Maybe she eats her sister. But she does remain, ultimately, an optimist in the face of death, a talented musician, and a terrible keeper of birds. Had Lizzie indeed lived, perhaps we wouldn't have received a Beth too good to live, a Beth whose innocence needed preserving in death. Had Lizzie lived, we might have had a more interesting Beth, a Beth still good but not so perfect. Had Lizzie lived, Lizzie would have lived.

The interest in examining the type of the sick girl lies in where she diverges from the norm. Beth diverges in that she was a real girl once, whose complications were excised for the sake of the living. Veronica diverges, of course, in that she lives, but also in her fierce and ultimately doomed independence. *Little Women* and *The Morgesons* diverge from each other in that one girl dies and the other lives, but neither can shake the tragedy of the thing. The suffering of women and girls remains horrible either way. Alcott and Stoddard, not authors who write suffering for suffering's sake, allow their sick girls to speak for themselves. Beth and Veronica transcend type. For a time, however brief, Beth and Veronica live.

ENDNOTES

1. In order, the characters and novels referenced in the introduction: Evangeline St. Clare of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe; Nell Trent/Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens; Helen Burns of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë; Mary Ingalls of the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder; Beth March; Veronica Morgeson.
2. Writing for the Guardian, Veronica (Veronica!) Horwell diagnoses Beth with "severe social anxiety."

3. Louise Penner, in "Domesticity and Self-Possession in *The Morgesons* and *Jane Eyre* declares Veronica "both an agoraphobic and anorexic figure."

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