The Hidden Feminist Agenda and Corresponding Edification in the Novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

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Abstract

Originally published in 1868, Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* has become one of the most beloved books among young adults and has been translated into dozens of languages. Not surprisingly, it has been extensively researched, with reviews emphasizing certain factors often in accordance with the period of research. In the present article, a new reading of the novel is proposed, i.e., a compound feminist approach involving liberal, radical and materialist feminist ideologies based in a thematic study of the book. The following three prevalent themes are posited in regard to the classic American drama about the five March women: the challenging of an education system that preserves and consolidates the inferiority of women; the presentation of a subversive femininity that advances a new perception of femininity and masculinity free of social stereotypes; and married life as the basis for equality between the sexes, ultimately leading to greater equality among races and classes. Analysis of these themes highlights the importance of this pioneering novel whose messages are valid today in the 21st century just as they were in the 19th century.

Introduction

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) is considered a key novel in American literature. After having already published various stories for children and adults, the author was commissioned to write this novel. The first volume was written in a burst of creativity during the months of May to July 1868, and the second book was written during a similar period several months later between November 1868 and January 1869. The manuscript was initially received coldly and even termed "boring." However, after several copies were given to young girls to read, and subsequently received their praise, the publishing house decided to print it (Cheney, 1995, pp. 139-141). The first volume was issued in October 1868, and the second in April 1869 (Shealy, 2005, p. xxiv). This time, the critics received the novel enthusiastically, claiming that both adolescents and adults would enjoy it (Stern, 1996, pp. 176-177). Even so, there were also those who charged it with localism, failing to perceive its universal aspect (ibid.). The novel transformed Alcott into a cultural icon in American society, and she herself became the subject of prominent academic attention. Many researchers of literature examined the connection between the novel and the personal biography of the writer, viewing the book as an adaptation of her personal life (see: Cheney, 1995; Elbert, 1984; Englung, 1998; MacDonald, 1983; Shealy, 2005; Stern, 1996).

Alcott was encouraged by the success of her novel and the readers' love of her writing enough to author a series of books based on the first volume of *Little Women* and a second one (published under the title, *Good Wives*, despite the writer's objection) shortly later. In *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886), the story of the extended March family continues to unfold, as the girls and then their own children grow up. While writing the popular series, Alcott shifted between two primary options–the impulse to succumb to the curiosity and demands of late 19th century readers versus the desire to refrain from satisfying the expectation of romantic unification along patriarchal modes of thought. Alcott in fact chose not to adhere to the accepted formulas of the "adolescent novel," essentially challenging the above noted patriarchal mindset (MacDonald, 1983, p. 11). Still, she had to navigate between public demand for a sentimental novel and her own desire to express her

progressive ideas regarding social reforms in the American society of her times.

In addition to granting her literary acclaim, feminist research has discussed Alcott's role in advancing liberal feminist ideas. These values advocated equality in the homes of women as well as in the public sphere, manifested in the rights to self-realization, work and vote (Elbert, 1984, pp. 144-150). Alcott's vision, as reflected in *Little Women*, was to create a democratic home where both sexes could shed gender stereotypes. In this fashion, women could work and participate in political life and men could be partners in managing the household, raising and educating children alongside women (ibid.).

Prima facie, this is a feminine novel of initiation that follows the four March daughters as they become functioning citizens of society, fulfilling their feminine and religious duties, and fully adhering to the chauvinistic dictates of the period. The title of the novel–*Little Women*–does not only refer to their ages at the onset of the narrative (the protagonists start out as little girls and adolescents; the book then follows their stages of growth into womanhood), but also to their so-called place in male society. They are women on the home front, in their households, while their father (or fiancé, in Meg's case) is at the front, fighting for the North in the American Civil War. These are ladies on hold, waiting for their future partner, trying as much as possible to be "good" and "obedient" in keeping with the Protestant values that the book advances. They seemingly accept the spatial enclosure characterizing their lives, and turn their home into a vibrant world–a space of love, benevolence and support.[1]

The five elements comprising radical feminism, according to

Shadmi (2007, pp. 26-30), are vision, a personal element, a feminine element, a political element, and interconnectedness. These appear throughout the novel, emphasizing Alcott's pioneering message.

- The *vision* guiding radical feminism is the possibility of another future, a different and better world. Radical feminism aspires to bridge between the physical now and the vision of the future–to motivate social change toward a new possible existence, including alternative institutes that will replace the ones of that period and the existing structural order in general. For example, Jo's school is an alternative school that defies standard concepts as well as the typical racial separation of those years in the United States.

- The *personal element* indicates the necessity of applying radical feminist ideas to the daily lives of women. Not only will male mechanisms of control be exposed for what they are, but new and alternative interactions should be implemented in the personal lives of every woman. This is what Mrs. March, the mother, preaches when she educates her daughters to instigate changes in their home, since this will lead to the reshaping of their lives, as her oldest daughter Meg learns.

- The *feminine element* stems from the radical feminist belief in the uniqueness of women, and the acknowledgment of female pride that develops from female experience and not from biological differences. This element does not support the view that women are necessarily better than men, or similar to one another, but rather highlights their contribution to the world, recognizing similarities as well as differences between them. The second-oldest daughter Jo demonstrates a subversive femininity and is proud that her literary works promote female experience as well as the notion that this type of writing has a genuine place in society.

- The *political element* of radical feminism relates to the connection between the personal and the political, between that which takes place in the woman's world and the patriarchal structure

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1 The expression "little women" trickled into Anglo-American literature after *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens was published in 1852-1853. In Dickens' novel, girls are described as "little women." See an intertextual analysis of these works in Elbert (1984, pp. 151-152).

of control in society. This gender gap requires engagement in a political struggle in order to overcome the system of male control. Acts of charity conducted by the novel's protagonists undermine capitalist ideology and advance female morality as an alternative to male-dominated warfare. When Mrs. March tells Meg not to isolate herself from politics, this is in preparation for the day when women will gain the right to vote and will in fact exercise this right.

- The *element of interconnectedness* stresses that all forms of oppression are interrelated, and advances the idea that all forms of oppression are similar. The various guises of oppression–gender, class, ethnic, racial, national, and other–are linked to one another. They build, reinforce and sustain each other, and only the elimination of all mechanisms of oppression and power relations will bring about the true liberation of women and other marginal groups. Recognition of the relations between various forms of oppression emphasizes that the patriarchal system of control at the center of feminist discourse is the fountainhead and basis of other systems of oppression. Hence, the struggle of the protagonists for African Americans, the poor or the needy, underscores their efforts to achieve the legitimacy to sound their voices and be equal to the men at their side. It also intimates that solidarity among minorities is pivotal to liberation from the yoke of hegemony.

A radical feminist reading of *Little Women* in accordance with the three overarching themes explained below shows how Alcott structures a subversive text involving two contradicting messages. The external message seemingly supports acceptance of the hegemony of the prevailing chauvinistic culture; however, this is contradicted by the internal message of a composite feminist criticism–liberal, radical and materialist–regarding the existing order and the price it exacts from women.

In this article I shall examine three themes: a defiance of conventional education, a presentation of subversive femininity, and a certain characterization of married life.[2] I shall demonstrate how these themes in fact pose a challenge to the external message, while the novel maintains its mantle of "a genteel girls' novel." Moreover, male perspectives are shattered by the author, one after another, as Alcott shows the displeasure of characters with their marginal place and their obligation to adopt values contradicting their own essence and will.

A. In defiance of conventional education

According to Orly Lubin (2003, p. 22), *Little Women* presents:

> ...a process of taming that the four sisters undergo during the Civil War in the United States, in a stifling and repressive home. [...] they indeed become "little," and furthermore, quiet, voiceless, and mainly–as educated by their mother–devoid of anger. The four sisters are raised according to principles of goodness bordering on total self-sacrifice, so that their world is diminished and stunted to near annihilation.

Lubin also notes the critical tone of the text in the wake of Beth's death, since–as Lubin claims–Beth could not distinguish between supporting the other on one hand, and total self-denial on the other, and as a result she is crushed. Unlike Beth, the three other sisters Jo, Meg, and Amy, find a balance between the need for self-sacrifice and the demands of their respective characters (ibid., p. 23) and accordingly survive or prosper, to various degrees.

Lubin's analysis describes how negotiations are conducted between the four girls and society surrounding them. Society's

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2 In Elbert's opinion, the novel comprises the three following super-themes: (a) running one's home; (b) building an individual identity through work; (c) true love (Elbert, 1984, p. 153).

central agent–their mother–serves as the mouthpiece of patriarchy, whose intent is to teach the girls how to swallow their repressed rage and yet at the same time continue to function as women at the margins of life. The approach maintaining that the mothers of children serve patriarchy is extensively expounded in Adrienne Rich's book, *Of Woman Born* (1976). In this text, Rich notes that patriarchy views mothers as quasi-agents, embodying in their personality religion, social, and national consciousnesses. From the perspective of the establishment, the role of motherhood is to grant further validation to institutions upon which society is based, and to inculcate patriarchal values during the stage when mother-child relations are intimate and private (Rich, 1976). Mrs. March, the girls' mother, reflects this insight, as we observe the wife of an absent chaplain who educates her daughters to sacrifice themselves for others, to be modest, loving of their family, and repressed. However, despite her preaching, it is interesting to see how the chaplain's wife still enables her daughters to exist in an alternative female space that does not include an educating male presence (since the father is away at the war), and they can be educated more or less as they see fit.

The four girls do not attend school, and each has her own "explanation." Meg and Jo explain that they left school for financial reasons which forced them to help provide for the family. Hence, Meg became a governess and Jo was a companion to Aunt March. Beth's shyness kept her from going to school, whereas Amy did in fact attend school at the beginning but then decided to leave, with her mother's approval, after being struck by her teacher, Mr. Davis. Amy became emotionally distraught due to the humiliation she suffered in front of her fellow students. Her mother denounced this use of violence and allowed her to stay home and study with Beth. Her education with Beth included both formal learning as well as the assimilation of values, since in her essence Beth represents the loftiest moral values in the novel, i.e., that of a modest humble person who strives to benefit her surroundings. Later on, Aunt March finances Amy's art lessons at home and, having been subject to physical abuse at school–which is located in the public sphere, Amy goes back to studying in the protective environment of her house, and is thus spared further violence.

While the two older sisters are excluded from the educational system for objective financial reasons, there is no substantial cause for the failure of the two younger ones to attend school, other than the violence in the school space which the mother wishes to spare her daughters. The shy Beth turns out, as the story unfolds, to be totally un-shy. This is evidenced by her relations with unfamiliar men such as the neighbors, Laurie and his grandfather, old Mr. Laurence; the episode in which she joins the picnic with her sisters, Laurie, and his English friends; and her charity endeavors that include going out on her own to visit the impoverished Hummel family–an act that exposes her to scarlet fever and endangers her life. Hence, her "shyness" becomes a quasi-code word for her displeasure with expressions of vulgar violence. She prefers to educate herself at home and on the basis of her own values, surprisingly, with her mother's approval. It seems that the purpose of remaining at home and being self-educated is primarily to preserve Beth's uniqueness, and to prevent the development of defense and survival mechanisms that are necessary for contact with the external world.

The author's analysis of the event that leads to Amy's withdrawal from school is described in great detail, unlike most descriptions relating to the public sphere in the novel. This accentuates Alcott's criticism of the nature of the educational model, and explains why the novel demonstrates a mistrust of the system and encourages girls to study at home. At the same time, the purpose of autodidactism is not to silence and strand the girls at home, but rather to enable their self-expression and realization of their talents.

Amy experiences a humiliating and demeaning ritual after bringing limes to school against Mr. Davis' will. One of the girls "tells on her" to the teacher, and then the description of the punishment episode begins. First, the teacher orders Amy to throw the limes out the window, thereby expressing a careless attitude toward food. This is in contrast to the values of her mother, who educated her daughters to respect food and give to the needy. Second, Mr. Davis calls Amy to the front of the class in order to hit her. Amy's response is described in the following manner: "Amy started, and put both hands behind her, turning on him an imploring look, which pleaded for her better than the words she could not utter" (*Little Women*, p. 118).

Amy is not spared and after the teacher strikes her, the narrator notes: "For the first time in her life she had been struck; and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down" (*Little Women*, pp. 118-119). After enduring the ritual of corporal violence, she is told to stand on a platform, like an outcast, in front of all the girls at school. This humiliating position completes the punishment ceremony, as well as Amy's formal period of institutional schooling:

> During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. To others it might seem a ludicrous or trivial affair; but to her it was a hard experience; for during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before (*Little Women*, p. 119).

When recess begins, Amy runs away from school, and the narrator indicates that "No notice was taken of Amy's flight" (*Little Women*, p. 120) in order to emphasize the lack of sensitivity characterizing the school. When Amy arrives at home, her mother and sisters denounce the teacher's behavior and Mrs. March sends a letter to the school although the contents are not disclosed to the readers. This is quite contrary to other letters that appear in the novel for the readers' perusal. The letter of denouncement is absent from the text since, outwardly, Mrs. March shows full compliance with patriarchal social norms and does not seek to undermine the existing social order of her times. However, the mother's approval that her daughter "have a vacation from school" (*Little Women*, p. 121), which ultimately does not end since Amy continues to study at home with Beth, implies to the readers what the contents of the letter might have been. Later on, Mrs. March's words, "I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls. I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching" (*Little Women*, p.121), show that for the mother, male authority does not take precedence over the nature of her daughters' education. When a clash takes place between her values and those of the establishment, she does not exhibit weakness or acquiescence and instead stands her ground. Mrs. March, as well as her daughters, sees her values as superseding those of the establishment, even at the price of taking steps that are seemingly opposed to her non-rebellious and restrained character.[3]

Hence, the fact that Mrs. March allows Amy to stay at home and not return to school does not stem from her desire to prepare her for a future role as a submissive woman, quite the contrary. While Amy demonstrates submission to the teacher who strikes and

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3 Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992) does not describe motherhood as a "style," but rather is aware of the social impact upon the mother and society's demands which place her in a dire crisis. In this predicament, she has to choose between bowing down to external dictates or rebelling against them. This conflict builds the character of the "ambivalent mother"–the mother who is torn between her own soul, and social dictates deriving from insensitive socio-economic considerations. The only tool the "ambivalent mother" has, according to Estés, is courage. If the mother cannot cope with the ambivalent conflict, she becomes the "broken mother," namely one who has lost her sense of self due to the emotional rupture. Amy's school episode confronts the mother's personal values with social dictates, and it is clear at this point that the mother remains true to her path, even at the price of rebelling against the establishment.

humiliates her (her pleading look replacing the act of a defiant and protesting utterance), in their non-violent home Amy can speak her unconstrained voice and furthermore study in quiet, basking in feminine friendship, love and mutual giving.

In the hierarchy delineated in the novel, chores considered "feminine," i.e., associated with managing the household, become central in importance, so that the status of the concepts of "home front" and "(war) front" are inverted. The narrator refrains from describing the war, and does not accompany the mother on her visit to the father in Washington. A hierarchy develops in which the events of the public sphere are subjugated to those of the private sphere, and household chores become no less important than "masculine" tasks mentioned in the novel. Such tasks include fighting (Mr. March, the father, serves as a chaplain in the Civil War), obtaining a higher education (Laurie, the boy next door, goes to college), and working at the "office" (e.g., the case of John Brooke, Laurie's tutor and bookkeeper to Laurie's grandfather).

The girls at home combine household work with art, and the message implied in the novel links artistic creation to an anti-establishment inclination. Beth plays the piano and sings, Jo writes, and Amy paints. The girls' intellectual curiosity is not related to their studies but rather to their souls and the values they absorb at home. Hence, their lack of formal education in effect promotes their artistic side. Although Jo works for a living instead of attending school in the story's present-time, this does not prevent her from publishing her first story in a newspaper at the age of sixteen. This is an honor usually bestowed upon those older and more highly educated than her. Jo's precocious occupation as a writer calls attention to the fact that she has not been educated according to accepted norms. It is at home, and not at school, where her intellectual skills have been recognized and cultivated. Nevertheless, this does not reflect upon her talent or her hard work at polishing the stories she has written,

in addition to reading literary works in preparation for the role of an author.

Thus, the novel presents a strong dissonance between establishment-collective educational values and the personal values of the March family. The author's choice to construct characters of girls living outside the framework of formal schooling presents a conflict between values that uphold morality, sensitivity and loyalty, as opposed to values advocating obedience, hierarchy and violence. This dissonance is resolved as each girl in turn leaves school–an act that allows them to preserve their family values and forego internalization of the conventional ones. If school is generally an agent of initiation that enables children to become citizens who are beneficial for society, then, in the novel *Little Women*, the domestic initiation is anti-establishment. This tendency is bestowed upon the girls by their mother while at the same time their artistic soul guides them in the world.

According to Mircea Eliade, through the process of initiation, children learn to function as adults in their respective societies. They assimilate society's spiritual and cultural values, as well as patterns of behavior that are required and inculcated by the major institutions of society. Moreover, they are exposed to religious-tribal traditions and myths sanctified by the society in which they will live as adults (Eliade, 1958/1965, p. X). Eliade's description is particularly relevant to a normative hegemonic initiation, while Alcott's story in fact opposes this manner of initiation and strives to construct a counter-myth. Although American society advocates capitalism, the mother urges her daughters to refrain from attaching undue importance to material matters in their lives. Furthermore, while the school teaches the pupils that they must be punished by violent means, the novel makes it clear that the individual's conscience is the best punitive tool. Examples are Jo's feelings of guilt regarding Beth's illness and Amy's fall while she is ice skating, Amy's remorse

after burning Jo's book, and Beth's sentiments when her canary dies. These are all incidents that contribute to the girls' process of maturation and becoming adults who thus assume responsibility toward themselves and society.

At a much later stage, the author closes the circle by presenting an alternative to conventional education, when Jo decides to found and direct, together with her husband, a school for boys. Clearly, Jo has absorbed her father's Socratic approach to educating children (for example, see the episode in which Mr. March is quizzing his grandson, Demi), and wishes to teach and instill knowledge through the support, caring, and love of her pupils. She thus manages to rectify the wrongs of the cold and violent education that drove away her sisters (and probably herself as well), and to transform establishment education into a pioneering notion that sprouted from within her after long years of her mother's initiation. Jo understands that the foundations of initiation and behavioral change are love, mutual appreciation and morality. Surely, these could not come from a person who would strike her sister and subsequently fail to be aware of her reaction. Evidence of Jo's success is the boys at her school who are full of admiration for her, unmistakably stemming from her devotion. An additional component in the process of Jo's becoming an educator, and her undermining of the conventional school system, is expressed in her stories. As a novice writer she has to remove the moralizing segments from her stories to suit the requirements of the publishers, yet in her second round of writing—after taking a break to care for Beth and consolidate her poetic style—Jo no longer makes compromises. Conveying a "truth" (*Good Wives*—volume two of *Little Women*, p. 317), her fiction reaches the hearts of her children readers, since these stories are immersed in her own life experience. After her story is published, Jo's statement that, "If there is anything good or true in what I write, it isn't mine; I owe it all to you and Mother and to Beth" (ibid.), demonstrates

that her writing is the product of the education she received at home and its inherent values find their way to her readers.[4]

B. Presenting subversive femininity

In the first part of the novel, the reader faces a problem, as noted by Elbert (1984, p. 144), in deciding whether Laurie, the child neighbor, is a boy or a girl, perhaps a type of "fifth sister" (ibid.), and whether Jo is a girl or maybe a boy. The doubts and deliberations involved in determining the sex of the characters, and the extra effort required of the reader to match a masculine name with the female sex and a feminine name with the male sex, portrays one of the novel's central themes,[5] i.e., the desire to detach sex from gender and to present both sexes as free of gender stereotypes. Although Jo is described along "masculine" lines, and generally prefers the company of boys and men to women (except for her sisters and mother), she does not lack traits perceived as running counter to her roughness–for instance, a sensitivity to her surroundings. Similarly, she succeeds in realizing herself both in the home sphere, having learned to sew and cook, and in the public one, when she leaves for New York and works as a governess, publishes stories, and later manages an educational institute.

According to Stephanie Foote (2005), the novel *Little Women* is primarily associated with the boyish character of Jo rather than with her sisters. Jo is not only the object of identification of girl readers, but also the protagonist with whom Alcott identifies. This is observed in Jo's professional choices, her personal preferences, and her concern with her family (reflecting Alcott's concerns, etc.)–a matter expounded in many biographies about the author (MacDonald, 1983, pp. 1-9). Foote notes Jo's divergence from the

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4   Regarding children literature as an educational tool preparing the child for his or her role as an adult who shares the values of society, see Shavit, 1986.
5   See also Keyser, 1995, p. 81.

female ideal described in American literature in the second half of the 19th century–an ideal that advanced the stereotypical female image of women exhibiting compassion and sympathy as antithesis to the rough, external world (Foote, 2005). Gustavus Stadler (1999) claims that Jo's character in fact enables Alcott, inter alia, to remove the concept of "artistic genius" from its male construction.

According to the definition of Israel Hameiri (2001, pp. 1-40) regarding the appearance of the Other, Jo's Otherness[6] derives from a combination of external and internal elements. According to Hameiri, the concept of the Other refers to the existence of a key human-distinguishing factor. Otherness may be perceived as "external"–social, political, or national–or it may be "internal"–emotional, sexual or even conceptual. This Otherness is perceived as contrasting with the essence which is the "self." While the "self" represents the "accepted" human factor, dictating and maintaining a norm or group of norms, the Other represents that which deviates by will or by force from societal norms, occasionally even threatening them.

From the beginning of the novel, Jo is characterized by gender-Otherness that depicts her as a manly girl, both externally and internally. Her looks, temperament and fields of interest challenge those that are customary among girls of her period (and in her family). However, the people around her, except perhaps for her father, accept her Otherness lovingly, and even with admiration. This "subversive femininity" is associated with the creation of a new gender mixture of traits, some of which are perceived by society as "masculine" and some of which are labeled "feminine." It relates as well to a complex self-perception that involves an ongoing struggle among the various forces in Jo's soul. Framing gender as a social rather than biological construct, Roberta Seelinger-Trites (1999) stresses the role-like, "performative" nature of gender. She argues that in "Jo's refusal to perform her prescribed gender role [there] lies a critique of heterosexuality that can be read as a strong affirmation of lesbian politics" (p. 33).

The following are several "manly" descriptions of Jo preceded by their context:

Body gestures: "…cried Jo, examining the heels of her boots in a gentlemanly manner" (*Little Women*, p. 7).

Language: "Jo does use such slang words" (*Little Women*, p. 8).

Behavior: "…you are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady" (*Little Women*, p. 9). "…but Jo, who didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood about with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower-garden" (*Little Women*, p. 48). "…she seemed to understand the boy almost as well as if she had been one herself" (*Little Women*, p. 94). "Jo wanted to lay her head down on that motherly bosom, and cry her grief and anger all away; but tears were an unmanly weakness" (*Little Women*, p. 131). "Don't praise me, Meg, for I could box his ears this minute" (*Little Women*, p. 216). "…but Jo felt quite in her element, and found it very difficult to refrain from imitating the gentlemanly attitudes, phrases, and feats, which seemed more natural to her than the decorums prescribed for young ladies" (*Good Wives*, p. 6). "She thought she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character" (*Good Wives*, p. 180).

Self-perception: "It's bad enough to be a girl any way, when I like boys' games, and work and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (*Little Women*, p. 9). "…well,

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6   Hameiri's concept of Otherness is not equivalent to the sociological term of "otherness" and therefore is without quotation marks, capitalized, and explained in the following in-text sentences.

I'm Jo, and never shall be anything else" (*Little Women*, p. 292). "I don't mean to plague you, and will bear it like a man" (*Little Women*, p. 384).

Jo's characterization by Beth: "you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls" (*Little Women* p. 9).

External characterization: "Fifteen-year old Jo was very tall, thin and brown, and reminded one of a colt" (*Little Women*, p. 10).

Role: "I'm the man of the family now papa is away" (*Little Women*, p. 12). "Don't go to school; I'm a businessman–girl, I mean" (*Little Women*, p. 88).

Her talents: "'You're a regular Shakespeare!' exclaimed Beth" (*Little Women*, p. 15). "Language cannot describe the anxieties, experiences, and exertions which Jo underwent that morning; and the dinner she served up became a standing joke" (*Little Women*, p. 196).

Hobbies: "No gentlemen were admitted; so Jo played male roles to her heart's content" (*Little Women*, p. 32).

Desires: "...for to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved, were the dearest wishes of her heart" (*Little Women*, p. 268). "I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" (*Little Women*, p. 345). "If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home" (Little *Women*, p. 362).

These "manly" descriptions are combined with Jo's sensitivity to her surroundings, and it reaches a peak in her devoted care for dying Beth and supporting her parents after Beth dies. Jo gradually learns to carry out the household chores, and takes "special credit to herself because she could use a needle as well as a pen" (*Good Wives*, p. 81).

Jo also manages to conquer two contrasting spheres: writing–attributed to men, and household chores–attributed to women. An episode related to the former is her comparison to Shakespeare and the fact that Professor Bhaer, the German immigrant who Jo meets in New York city and later marries, presents her with a volume of Shakespeare as the key to literary writing (in contrast to thrillers). This gender mixture of writing books and performing household duties grants novel content to the category of "woman," leading to its redefinition in a manner that does not contrast with masculinity, but rather fuses masculinity and femininity together. In this way, the categories of "man" and "woman" lose the stereotypical binarity constructed by patriarchy.[7] Beth describes Jo's male functions as a game; however, Beth herself does not undergo a gender crisis in the novel. Still, her character differs from the "typical" girl stereotype because she doesn't fall in love; rather, she is involved with art and charity, and immersed in her own private world. However, her description of Jo's behavior as "play" is necessary for her in order to settle the gender conflict and Jo's mixed gender appearance.

The labeling of Jo's behavior as "play" seems to allude to pretence, yet throughout the novel–even when she is grown up–Jo still has to bear the weight of gender mixture and her subversive femininity, which both cause her to feel out of place. The episode of Jo's and Amy's social visits clarifies to the reader that Jo is indeed playing, but only in circumstances that demand of her to exhibit the *atypical* (for Jo) social stereotype of the "woman" category.

Jo's character enables Alcott to introduce a self-reflexive point of view and the theme of the novel regarding female writing and its status in the described period, since–as research has shown (MacDonald, 1983, pp. 1-9; Shealy, 2005, pp. 94)–Jo's professional trials and tribulations are related to those of Alcott, who published "popular" stories under a male pen name in order to make a living and provide for her family. In Jo's case, she has to temporarily

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7   According to Butler's typology in her description of "the loss of gender norms." See further: Butler, 1990.

forego her own writing, which is at the center of her life from the beginning of the novel. She is directed by publishers and men in her life to write in a way that will satisfy their wishes rather than hers. Her temporary desistance from writing is not the result of her marriage or a creative crisis, but is rather due to constraints she encounters when she writes and wishes to publish what she calls her "rubbish." The label "rubbish" does not derive from the feeling that she lacks talent, but rather from her obligation to write commissioned stories that suit the readers' desires. Mr. Dashwood, the New York editor, tells her not to include "morality" sections in her stories. Her future husband, Professor Bhaer, despises popular writing which he considers immoral. Jo writes in this manner to suit her editor, who then simplifies the text due to financial reasons. The children's story she writes later on in order to avoid writing shallow stories is shelved since the man financing its publication wishes to harness the story to his own religious beliefs (*Good Wives*, p. 192).

These self-reflexive descriptions bear upon the author's personal biography, in view of the fact that she, too, has experienced financial plight and had to resort to writing "commissioned" texts (one of which was supposed to be *Little Women*). Moreover, these descriptions criticize the male attitude toward female writing—a problematic, oppressive attitude that does not accept antitheses and new styles. When Jo leaves the sphere of writing for a while, this indicates a declaration of lack of faith in the literary establishment—similar to *Alcott*'s criticism after her first novel. This uneven criticism, which teaches us nothing despite Jo's wish to learn from it after the novel is published, reflects literary research at the end of the 19th century and its attitude toward literature created by women. In her writing, Jo seeks to create a model that undermines stereotypes associated with women's writing. She does not reconcile herself to writing a sentimental romance, but rather, along with Protestant qualities, she aspires to employ elements also perceived

as "masculine" in that period. These include suspense plots combining representations of crime and deviations from the norms, thus breaking the romance picture by introducing real-life details.[8] The breaking of genre boundaries is also described in relation to Amy's art work, which is characterized by "utter disregard to all known rules" (*Good Wives*, p. 30). Thus, Amy challenges the ordinary perception of painted objects as she attempts to generate a defamiliarization of her works.

Jo's first stage of writing ends with her realization that the men surrounding her–her father, her future husband, and the editors of her texts–will not enable her to write in her own way, but rather will try to direct her writing into representing *their* world and views. This "ritual" is described by writer Amalia Kahana Carmon (see Besser, 1994) in the following way:

> When every new book of mine is published, people approach it like the generals who in every new war want to devour it with the tools they had created in the previous war. And if these tools don't succeed, they complain that this war isn't working well. Because it hasn't replicated the previous one. (p. 29)

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8   According to Irigaray, if women adopt the male discourse, they will speak (and write) like men, thereby losing their voice. The feminine voice will disappear as well as the woman's ability to connect with other women (Irigaray, 1977/1985). Since language directs the speaker, women are directed by male discourse. Hence, to Irigaray's mind, language should be changed so that women will be freed of men's binary perception and classification (ibid., pp. 68-85). Since every reality is based upon and defined by discourse (ibid.), the discourse must be changed to a female one that will establish female identity and sexuality. After taking a break from writing, Jo writes a story sent by her father to a journal. The story is accepted for publication since it has "truth" (*Good Wives*, p. 317). This truth reflects Jo's loyalty to her personal style, her liberation from external dictates, and the fusing of her life experiences with her writing. Writing grants her the identity denied her, and in her second stage of writing, she uses her real name rather than a pen name. It also restores her belief in herself as a writer who can excite her readers. If Irigaray calls upon women to adopt female discourse, then Jo adopts a subversive feminine discourse that suits her disunited essence.

Ultimately, Jo infuses her writing with her gender perceptions, although there is a basic difference between her attitude toward herself and her attitude toward her writing. Jo accepts her Otherness, as do those around her. She does not have to struggle with external factors since her family members support her, and–except for Amy–they do not try to turn her into a representation of a feminine stereotype. Jo helps her mother who regards her second daughter as a male substitute while their father is off to war, and also later after his return. Laurie, too, is attracted to Jo, despite her roughness and boyish descriptions, and he doesn't demand that she change. He prefers the hierarchy between Jo and himself, characterized as *he* is by fluid masculinity, with the description of his feminine hands and because he does not fulfill the gender performance of a stereotype "male." Hence, he is attracted to the four sisters; he befriends them and relates to their activities.

Contrary to the tolerant home, external society does not accept Jo's writing as it is, and from the very first moment of her encounter with the publishing world, she must engage in constant battle. Her first book is finally printed after most of it, much to her chagrin, has been eliminated during the editing process. Her short stories are published in New York without her name since she is ashamed of them. Faced with this reality, in which she needs to sacrifice her values to have her stories published, she chooses to suspend her writing efforts in order to refrain from cooperating with the existing establishment, and the alternative she offers is engaging in progressive education.

Jo's decision to manage an educational institution together with her husband is the very solution she finds suitable to the social decay surrounding her. In the spirit of radical feminism that strives to change the system rather than focus only on equality, Jo chooses to educate boys according to her values, and not to acquiesce to the hegemony values of her time. This choice does not contradict her destiny as a writer, "for, while her pen lay idle, she was learning other lessons beside German, and laying a foundation for the sensation story of her own life" (*Good Wives*, p. 193). Eventually, Jo goes back to writing and consolidates her unique and uncompromising style. Moreover, it is her very writing that restores her object of love to her, since Professor Bhaer reads her poem and understands that it is suffused with emotions for him. From the moment she rejects the constraints placed upon her art, Jo's stories gain the readers' love and appreciation, and are no longer labeled "rubbish."

Radical feminism both defines the problems inherent to the balance of power between male and female, and sets a course of action. According to radical feminism, women as a social group are oppressed by men and the fundamental tool of oppression is patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined as a universal system of values that changes its modes and ways according to cultural and historical periods, and is committed to male hegemony in all realms of life. This system grants personal privileges to men both in the private and public spheres, and intends to preserve these privileges and perpetuate female subjugation at various institutional levels (e.g., law, religion, family, political ideology, sexual socialization). Radical feminism enables transparency of patriarchal mechanisms, as manifested in the realms of birth, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and motherhood (Rowland and Klein, 1996). Jo's return to the masculine-oriented education system as a teacher, rather than a female drop-out, enables her to reshape the norms she sought to establish in her writing and behavior, and to pass them on to her pupils.

Although the gender drama is primarily played out by Jo, her mother's character is central in purveying the vision conceived by Alcott regarding a democratic home and the equal division of roles between the sexes. As noted by MacDonald (1983, p. 14), Mrs. March constitutes the center of the home, serving as mentor and

instructor to her daughters. When they are in a state of confusion and/or perplexity, the girls confess to her and learn from their mistakes with the aid of her experience. She is always ready to help them and is strong, loving, and resourceful. At first glance she is perceived as a traditional mother, however, her human frailty is revealed later on, as well as her struggle to overcome her stormy temperament.

If Adrienne Rich claims that the relations between mothers and daughters have been pushed to the margins of cultural discourse and are "a story not yet written to this very day" (Rich, 1976), then *Little Women* is proof of the centrality and eternalness of the connection between mothers and daughters, which is presented in this novel as an ongoing and empowering initiation. As described by Nancy Chodorow (1992), Mrs. March challenges patriarchal motherhood that "produces" daughters who internalize chauvinistic patterns of behavior, and I agree with Chodorow, since Alcott's Mrs. March does not educate women to fulfill roles completely distinct from male roles. She even notes that "...better be happy old maids than unhappy wives" (*Little Women*, p. 168). She educates her daughters and Laurie, who sees her as a mother, to marry for love so as not to be subjugated to a rich man who would most likely treat them as an object. Mrs. March preaches honest work and does not want her daughters to be mere decorations for male society. She encourages them to explore the public sphere (Amy travels to Europe; Jo leaves for New York; Meg is relieved of her home chores; Beth is encouraged to help out the impoverished Hummel family), and uses the power of her influence to educate her daughters to assimilate an egalitarian approach in regard to gender, thus instilling in her daughters an inner strength and sense of self-worth. If Jo exhibits subversive femininity, this is because her mother has empowered her to do so, and has demonstrated her own progressive perception of femininity.

C. Characterization of married life

Monika Elbert (2000, pp. 4-5) notes that despite Alcott's status as an author educating women in domesticity,[9] she preferred to remain unmarried and childless all her life. Researching Alcott's writings (such as, the three texts, *Hospital Sketches*, *Moods*, and *Work: A Story of Experience*), Elbert presents a clear picture indicating that the author supported explicitly feminist messages summoning women to realize their abilities in the public sphere, and not just to settle for their traditional roles in the private sphere (Elbert, 2000, pp. 4-5). Alcott emphasizes the empowerment of women specifically outside their homes, and presents their role as initiating social change. In her diaries, she writes that after publishing the first volume of *Little Women*, girls sent her letters asking who the protagonists would marry. Alcott's reply was cynical: "As if that's the only ending, or the sole purpose in a woman's life." This segment ends with the sentence: "I will not wed Jo to Laurie just to satisfy somebody's wishes" (quoted in Cheney, 1995, p. 141).

In a letter Alcott wrote at age 25 to a girl friend, she mentions that she had bold plans, but there were household chores until she found her way (Shealy, 2005, p. 94). The letter shows that the domestic period for Alcott was a transitional stage enabling her to gather strength and insights while on the quest to realizing her goals. Similarly, Mrs. March's speech to Meg demonstrates Alcott's vision according to which women must not imprison themselves in their homes and give up their identities for the sake of a maternal identity: "Too much confinement makes you nervous" (*Good Wives*, p. 246). "Don't shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world's work, for it all affects you and yours"

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9   Apparently the book was perceived in this manner by readers at that time. However, what readers considered a typical patriarchal family drama in effect was a type of "a Trojan horse" concealing feminist messages.

(*Good Wives*, p. 248).

Moreover, Mrs. March makes it clear to Meg that she is not alone in taking responsibility for the house and children, and that she has to include John in the children's education: "…don't shut him out of the nursery, but teach him how to help in it. His place is there as well as yours, and the children need him; let him feel that he has his part to do, and he will do it gladly and faithfully, and it will be better for you all" (*Good Wives*, p. 247).

Her mother's advice is meant to set Meg free of the role she had assumed due to her mistaken perception of a woman's characterization. The narrator calls Meg a "captive mamma" (*Good Wives*, p. 242) and describes her dire emotional state as deriving from "too much devotion to that idol of American women, the teapot" (*Good Wives*, p. 244). Mrs. March's subversive solution promotes a shattering of the monolithic concept of femininity as it was shaped by patriarchy–in order to restructure the roles of *both* sexes. Both men and women have to take on household chores, and that is the key to women's liberation. If liberal feminist thought advocates equal rights for women, and argues that their existence is equal to that of men in the world, then Alcott's liberal feminism contends equality between women and men cannot be achieved if men do not adopt part of the roles traditionally perceived as "feminine."

Similarly, when her mother admonishes Meg for her spatial and intellectual withdrawal from the world, she is calling upon women to be more active in politics–a realm that the patriarchy considers masculine–since events in the public sphere impact upon the private one as well. All of these correspond with an additional message portrayed by the novel, which relates to the liberal and radical feminist messages advanced by Alcott, and is presented in the following paragraphs.

The novel alludes extensively to the class awareness of the four sisters, as demonstrated by Foote, who notes the way in which their class-related feelings of frustration are channeled (Foote, 2005). The family's state of poverty is a prominent motif of the novel, and deliberations about married life are interwoven with deliberations on the family's economic resources. After Meg marries a poor man, and Jo remains unmarried, Amy decides to marry a rich man in order to help her family financially. Amy is willing to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of her family, hence her willingness to accept Fred's anticipated marriage proposal. This episode pinpoints the role of the institution of marriage as a tool of social mobility, since the mother also mentions at the beginning of the novel that she objects to a marriage of convenience and wishes her daughters to marry for love: "I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world–marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes, because love is wanting" (*Good Wives*, pp. 167-168).

Amy's decision, as she claims that "women should be agreeable, particularly poor ones" (*Good Wives*, p. 94), and her determined search for a rich husband, contrast with Jo and Meg, and emphasize the materialist feminist ideology that Alcott presents. The materialist feminist approach addresses political-economic factors that discriminate against women and perpetuate their inferiority. Its position on the oppression of women maintains that women are not a natural group. Society is the factor which turns women into a group and "produces" women and femininity. According to Monique Wittig (1992), who is associated with this feminist orientation, "the human being is not born a woman." "Man" and "woman" are socio-political categories created through social construction that assigns a role to each category.

The materialist feminist approach claims that women must reject the masculine political-economic power structure and refuse to be "women." Just as there are no slaves without masters, when "man" disappears, the accompanying and inferior concept of

"woman" will cease to exist as well (Wittig, 1997). Wittig calls for a class definition of the status of women (just as Marxism called for the proletariat to define itself as a separate class), and to eliminate the mythical concept of "woman." According to Wittig, whereas Marxism did not deal with men-women relations or the ensuing struggle, and did not define women as a separate class but rather dealt with the workers' struggle against owners of capital, materialist feminism demands recognition of women as an independent class whose definition is not a derivation of the class of men. She believes that Marxism viewed women as belonging to men; hence, the status of a woman was the product of the man (whether father or husband) beside her. Recognition of women as belonging to an independent class will eliminate the subjugation of femininity to masculinity, and enable a more progressive self-definition of women. The solution offered by materialist feminism corresponds with that of radical feminism, i.e., the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system in which women are oppressed by men, and the construction of a new and rectified system (Wittig, 1997).

The themes appearing in *Little Women* were written three decades ahead of even the radical manifestations of materialist feminism such as in the texts of philosopher Emma Goldman (1869-1940). According to Goldman (1972, pp. 146-150), people marry as part of a socio-economic arrangement granting women "life insurance" (in other words, ensuring their economic status) and men–social approval. Hence, marriage is a social institution subscribed to by individuals who choose to satisfy the desires of the public. After the wedding–presented as the pinnacle of the woman's life, she sells her body and being to the man, and becomes a servant for life. She becomes a "toy" and sacrifices all her identities for the man and home she will have to look after.

Alcott was aware of these mechanisms and wished to show her readers how, despite the temptation to turn marriage into a

bartering deal enabling women to upgrade their inferior status by selling their body and soul, the three sisters chose to marry for love. In this manner, Alcott removes the institution of marriage from the economic domain, and restores it to a domestic, anti-economic discourse based on equality, values and love. At the same time, she demonstrates that the institution need not hinder women in their efforts to access the public sphere. It is easy, therefore, to understand why Alcott's representation of marriage was in fact accepted and adopted by the public, while Goldman was (and still is) considered an anarchist feminist whose writings, due to the radicalism that characterizes them, remain on the margins.[10] Amy's process of maturing reaches its peak when she actually foregoes a marriage of comfort to Fred, and accepts Laurie's proposal–for, although Laurie's status is higher than hers, he does not possess the assets that Fred has, and Amy's love for Laurie is sincere and not pragmatic.

If the home in feminist writings is perceived as a means for oppressing women and preventing their entrance into the public sphere, Alcott presents a reverse image in her reconstruction of this concept. She shows that despite the oppressive and imprisoning potential of the home, the spatial violence of married life may be transformed into other variants through sharing, inspiration and the equal division of functions between women and men.[11] A respectable example of transforming the home into a space that contains a combination of forces–private-familial and socio-political–is portrayed at the end of the novel, when Jo inherits her aunt's estate and converts it into a school for boys. The final chapter presents the ideal form: The extended family sit together

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10   Also see Goldman, 2005.
11   For further explanation about *the home*, which appears to be a haven while it actually serves to imprison and normatively constrain the woman to a position of domestic anticipation and of non-participation in external events, see Rudin, 2012.

and celebrate the 60th birthday of the mother of the family, with the participation of the boys from Jo and Professor Bhaer's school, who have also prepared an artistic program. Moreover, the narrator speaks of an African-American boy among the pupils and this reflects the theme from Alcott's life, since there was an African-American girl in her own father's school, which caused an uproar and forced him to shut down his school (MacDonald, 1983, p. 2). The introduction of the racial struggle for the equality of African Americans corresponds with the women's struggle for equality in the novel, and clearly establishes the basis for further connections. In a society that oppresses one minority (women), it is not surprising that there will be violence against another minority (African Americans), and minorities should therefore show solidarity and support one another.

Mrs. March's education toward equality among classes, races and sexes is bequeathed to her daughters and guides their actions. At the end of the novel, when Professor Bhaer proposes to Jo, she accepts but only upon the condition that the professor will enable her to also engage in "drying tears and bearing burdens" (*Good Wives*, p. 385). Jo requests that her future husband let her share the responsibility and treat her as a full partner: She will not marry him without full equality. After they decide to get married, the narrator notes that "Jo never, never would learn to be proper" (*Good Wives*, p. 386), for Jo kisses Bhaer without waiting for him to initiate it. Alcott means, of course, that Jo will never cast off her essential nature and will never assume constricted and constricting gender perceptions.

Jo marries a man of her status, a poor man, with whom she can share her personal vision. Life with him will not confine her to the personal sphere, rather it will encourage her to find her place in the public sphere. Professor Bhaer is not a man of means such as Laurie, and furthermore, he raised his nephews all alone. Similar to Jo, he presents a gender mixture of femininity and masculinity since he is motherly, shy and naïve despite his "masculine" profession–a philosopher. Poverty as a central theme of the novel plays a crucial role in the ideology that Alcott advances regarding the vision of the "democratic home," since it is poverty that compels the couple to fully cooperate, both in running the household and in earning a living. Alcott's well-known words, that "liberty is a better husband than love to many of us" (in Elbert, 1984, p. 150), is realized in the novel in Jo's refusal to give up her freedom and to only marry the man with whom she can maintain that freedom.

The initiation novel has received various and ambivalent feminist readings, as noted by Tami Amiel-Hauser (2016). This type of novel emphasizes individuality and freedom, such as, freedom of imagination and thought which often characterizes the protagonist from childhood. With the aid of his or her unfettered imagination, the protagonist develops plans for the future, builds up a world of principles and aspirations, and even consolidates criticism of his or her surroundings (ibid., pp. 43-44). However, individual freedom takes shape not only as an ideal but is also subject to clear constraints. The individual is located in a particular historical era, and must learn to act in accordance with contemporary concepts and categories. Ultimately, freedom is replaced with civic reason (ibid.). The structure of the initiation novel presents the central character in a gradual, customarily linear and ongoing development, based on a series of encounters between the protagonist's subjective needs and demands of the social order (ibid., p. 47).

Feminist criticism contrasts the male initiation novel with the female one, claiming that the female protagonist of the initiation novel undergoes a process of alienation and weakening. Her path of maturation is not a challenging journey through freely encountered experiences leading to happy maturity, rather, it is a process of reduction in which the vibrant girl learns to restrain herself as a

woman, and forgoes the chances for active participation in socio-political life (ibid., p. 51). Analyzing the novel *Little Women* on the basis of the theme of married life demonstrates that Alcott viewed matrimony as a necessary stage in the initiation of women; however, this is a stage that constitutes just a part of their growth and development as a person, and it is not necessarily a stage that impedes it. In their marriages, Jo, Meg and Mrs. March exemplify Alcott's call to women to refrain from reducing the essence of their nature in consequence of the state of matrimony.

Conclusion

"The world of the March girls is rich enough to complete itself" (Auerbach, 1978, p. 55). In this vein, the novel *Little Women* combines liberal feminist ideas of equality of the sexes together with radical feminist ideas regarding change in the very essence of the definition of the gender categories, "male" and "female." In addition, it promotes a transition to a renewed definition that undermines cultural stereotypes relating to these categories. The radical feminist slogan according to which the "personal is political"[12] is illustrated in the novel by presenting the stories and ways of a family in New England during the American Civil War. Gradually, it is emphasized that this is not an average American family of its period since embedded in the novel we find a vision of new values. This far-seeing perspective envisions how, equality in the private sphere will produce a society willing to deal with feminist notions in the public sphere. The liberation of women, according to Alcott, begins at home. One cannot fight for equality in the political realm without women first fighting over the change of the order in their homes. The integration of men into various household chores will free women from the yoke of domesticity that customarily rests square on their shoulders, and thus will render them the possibility of self-expression in the public sphere.

Both the focus on class awareness and the depiction of the pecuniary poverty of the characters strengthen the messages of materialist feminism and Marxist feminism–emphasizing the pride of the working person who should not feel inferior to members of the upper class. The latter are requested to donate some of their assets and time to society. A further notion is the difficulties that women who suffer from double marginality often experience. These are women who are subordinated to men and at the same time are poor and subordinated to the capitalist order. In this context, work is presented as a tool affording women access to the public sphere as well as a means of social mobility, and a means of appropriating a status of power at home and outside of it.

The importance of this pioneering novel is especially evident when we follow the three overriding themes of the novel: challenging the educational establishment that preserves and consolidates the inferiority of women; a presentation of subversive femininity that advances a new perception of female and male concepts free of social stereotypes; and married life as the basis of equality between the sexes, thus leading to a greater equality among races and classes. These messages of Alcott's novel are relevant to the beginning of the 21st century to the same extent as they were at the end of the 19th century.

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12 Shadmi (2007, p. 28), explaining the radical feminist slogan, "the personal is political," states that "the hierarchy begins at the level of the personal, intimate, familial and is connected to the level of the political, social and establishment [...]."

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