

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S REFLECTION IN "LITTLE WOMAN" ON MALE DOMINATED SOCIETY

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Abstract

Louisa May Alcott's book Little Women was published in 1868; most reviewers described it as wholesome reading that depicted worthwhile models for young girls. She was not only a revolutionary writer, but also a devoted abolitionist and women's rights protester. The female characters drawn by Alcott for Little Women stand for a significant break from the distinctive late-nineteenth-century New England housewife image. This article aims to explore a looks at the parallels between Alcott's life as an eccentric female promoter and writer and her headstrong character, Jo, and demonstrates the similarities of the two women's struggle as they discover their way throughout life and push the limits as writers in a male dominated society. Despite the fact that there were countless sacrifices and struggles, she worked through them and carried on with an extraordinary life. Louisa pushed the limits of a male dominated society in the mid 1800s by her solid character, through which her family helped to shape, her achievement as a writer, and her freedom as a woman willing to remain without anyone else and achieve her life's ambitions.

Key words: Revolutionary, Housewife, Unconventional, Accomplishment, and Ambition.

Louisa May Alcott was an outstanding female writer and pioneer of her time in the field of literature. Louisa was born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania as the second eldest of four girls. The family was finally settling in Concord, Massachusetts after having lived there on a few distinct events. Her neighbors are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who created impact, helped, and support Louisa's writing. In addition her father's influence too in her writings and she delighted writing from childhood. These things

made her and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth and Abby May, to form their own secret society.

As previously in *Little Women* Louisa spins a tale that is alike to her own actuality which rising up during the American Civil War in New England, Louisa felt like a man trapped inside a woman's body. She was affectionate and strong in her vision about certain aspects of society. She committed her life to writing, worked hard to help her family, putting their needs, and desires before her own. Similarly, Louisa's protagonist reflects as alter ego, Jo is a willful independent personality that behaves as the man of the house while her father is away and conveys several times how she longs to be a boy. Louisa was like Jo longed for liberty and independence from the burden society placed on women. These are the similarity between Alcott's life as an unconventional female activist and writer and her willful character as Jo in *Little Women*. It shows the similarities of the two women's struggle as they find their way in life and push the limitations as writers in a male subjugated society. Louisa uses Jo's character to express, even to enlighten, her passion for writing to the world and where it all started. Both women move forward societal restrictions in the way that they go about living their lives as writers and their detached attitude of how society views them, both in actuality and fictionally. Louisa and her sisters learned the values of working hard and the importance of depending on family. They learned to take care of one another through the ups and downs of life.

Louisa's parents taught her liberty and strength of mind which resulted in her self-reliant nature. In journal, "Her Life, Letters, and Journals" she wrote of the experience, "I was born with a boy's spirit under my bib and tucker. I can't wait when I can work; so I took my little talent in my hand and forced the world again, braver than before and wiser for my failures" (85). She wrote short stories, several novels, plays and kept a journal from an early age. After her publishers suggested she write a children's novel about her family experiences, and keeping in mind the much sought after income, she produced *Little Women* in 1868. Society and her family, made a significant impact on Louisa's writing. The hot topics of the mid to late 1800s were abolition and women's rights. With Louisa's mother, Abigail, already holding strong beliefs on these issues, it was only a matter of time before the daughter became an advocate of both. Attending as many anti-slavery meetings as she could, Louisa expressed in "Her Life, Letters, and Journals" how she wanted to do her part society.

I became an Abolitionist at a very early age, but have never been able to decide whether I was made so by seeing the portrait of George Thompson hidden under a bed in our house during the Garrison riot, and going to comfort "the poor man who had been good to the slaves, or because I was saved from drowning in the Frog Pond some years later by a colored boy. However that may be, the conversion was genuine; and my greatest pride is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war which put an end to a great wrong. (29)

Louisa's ability to hold on to her strong beliefs during that revolutionary time in history was quite remarkable. Even though society allowed slavery, embarked on war with itself, and oppressed women, Louisa saw things differently and wanted to make a change. This added the energy to her spark that she needed and these attitudes can be seen throughout her writing, especially with such a strong female protagonist, Jo, in *Little Women*. This novel would go on to become one of her most well known works and beloved children's books of all time.

Drawing from her own reality by using characters and themes present in her own life, it does not come as a surprise that in Louisa's *Little Women*, she creates a tale about all sisters and their adventures and struggles while growing up together. The novel is set in Concord, Massachusetts during the Christmas season and opens with the introduction of the four March sisters. The eldest sister, Meg, is beautiful but vain, and complains about the work she must do and longs for the life of luxury. The second eldest and protagonist of the novel, Jo, is quite the opposite who longs for adventure and loves to write. She feels the responsibility to be the "man of the house" while her father is away. Beth, the third eldest, is the dearest of all. She never complains about anything and is quiet and polite and loves to play the piano. The youngest March sister is Amy. She loves to draw and thinks very highly of herself as a young lady (1).

In addition to portraying her three sisters in this novel, Louisa also includes her mother Abigail. She pours all of her mother's qualities of tenderness and guidance into the mother character, Marmee, who is a stalwart figure to her daughters in the novel. Her father, Bronson, is also a strong figure recurring throughout the novel and offers guidance and praise to his daughters, although rarely physically present. Louisa uses the fictional character of old Mr. Lawrence as the friendly neighbor who lets Jo indulge herself in his library, such as Emerson did for Louisa. However, unlike Emerson, Mr. Lawrence never becomes a literary mentor to Jo. Whereas Louisa receives encouragement from both inside and outside of the home, Jo is prepped with nothing but the love from her family and her own imagination.

Louisa's first short story that was ever published in the newspaper, "The Rival Painters," was also the name she used in the book for Jo's first story to be published. While a few of the names have changed, the personalities seem to persist. When asked by her fan base as to whom the characters represent, Louisa stated in her letter:

Little Women"—The early plays and experiences; Beth's death; Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences; Meg's happy home; John Brooke and his death; Demi's character. Mr. March did not go to the war, but Jo did. Mrs. March is all true, only not half good enough. Laurie is not an American boy, though every lad I ever knew claims the character. He was a Polish boy, met abroad in 1865. Mr. Lawrence is my grandfather, Colonel Joseph May. Aunt March is no one. (193)

As the protagonist in *Little Women*, Jo is decidedly different than all three of her sisters.

From the very beginning of the novel to the end, Jo's character always reveals an adventurous and "masculine" way of thinking and acting, as opposed to her sisters' lady-like behavior. In beginning of the novel Jo refers to herself as having to be the "man of the house" while father is away at war and is always being reminded throughout the novel to stop her boyish behavior, such as running and talking slang. Jo's wild and adventurous behavior is recaptured from Louisa's recollections in her journal as she speaks of her own childhood: I always thought I must have been a deer or a horse in some former state, because it was such a joy to run. No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race and no girl if she refused to climb trees, leap fences, and be a tomboy. (30)

As secret societies were very posh at the time, the Alcott sisters were no exception. Louisa and her sisters created personas while writing their weekly contributions to the paper. This is one of the many creative outlets that Louisa had when she was younger. Jo, like Louisa, being an adventurous spirit, leads the March sisters to construct a secret society writing and acting club, named the Pickwick Club after their fondness for Charles Dickens. After reading the weekly report in their different personas, Jo suggests they induce Laurie, their beloved neighbor, as a new member into the society. Afterwards they construct a "mailbox" in the hedge between the two properties as a means of communication where either party can leave letters and gifts to one another (10). On one such occasion, Laurie sends Meg a song that has been translated from German by his tutor and only one of her two gloves that has gone missing. Jo receives two letters, a book, and an oversized hat that is out of fashion, but practical. Beth receives an invitation from old Mr. Lawrence to play piano for him, and Amy a box of chocolate drops and a picture (12). They were continuing their adventures such as these for many years, and enjoy themselves immensely.

Jo is often very awkward and gangly in her youth when she speaks of comparisons between herself to her more attractive sisters. However, Jo's most admired feature, her long beautiful hair, is sacrificed in exchange for the much needed money for Marmee to travel and visit her ailing father in the hospital. To her sister's dismay they exclaim, "Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty" (15). This act of self-sacrificing shows how Jo is constantly thinking of the greater good of the family above any selfish desires she may have. This display of self-sacrifice is also prevalent throughout Louisa's life, shown in what she gives up in order to help keep her family happy and financially afloat. Working on her "burden" of having a quick temper for a year, and wanting very much to please her father, Jo improves her behavior and appearance much to her father's delight, "In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the 'son Jo' whom I left a year ago" (22).

These few examples show how Louisa writes through Jo's character, perhaps even unawares, of how badly she is in need of her family's approval. Louisa's alter ego, Jo, is almost a mirror image of herself growing up. As stated above, Louisa also lived for many

years in Concord, Massachusetts, like her protagonist Jo and her family. Many happy memories came from this place, making it the perfect setting for her novel. Also, several adventures from Louisa's childhood are preserved in the pages of *Little Women*. Both women begin writing at early ages and have supportive families, which give them a good foundation in their passion of writing. Both share a love for literature, passion for writing, and struggle to help the family rise above poverty. Louisa and Jo both want to be fighters and stand up for what they believe in. However, in reality Louisa does many things for the women's rights, civil war, and abolition movements, whereas Jo's passion is with wanting to help in the war where her father is involved. Both women want to fight, but only Louisa was able to contribute as a nurse for the cause. Louisa and Jo are both very passionate and family oriented women with a writer's spirit. They long for freedom above the restraints that society places upon women in the mid 1800s. Jo represents Louisa's writing aspirations through her boyish demeanor and drives to continue to write even in a time where women are supposed to just sit pretty. Writing as a means of supporting one's self is the path that both Louisa and Jo eventually go down. Through pushing societal boundaries in this manner, gives Louisa aspiration to go from writing short stories and essays to eventually a career in writing.

As the years passed, Louisa's health began to deteriorate even more, due to supposed mercury poisoning in order to treat an illness she contracted during her stint as a hospital nurse serving war victims 20 years prior (Hirschhorn, Norbert, and Greaves 243-44). Between taking care of her family and her writing career, there was not much time left to take care of her. He dabbled, however, in holistic medicine, which brought only temporary relief. In her journal Alcott wrote:

Home, and begin a new task. Twenty years ago I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps, but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose. (182-83)

While coming to visit her dying father at his bedside, Louisa knew that she must say her Good bye. A few days later, on March 6, 1888, Bronson Alcott died. Shortly after, Louisa had an enormously painful headache that sent her into a coma and followed her father up to heaven only two days later. She died of a severe stroke on March 8, 1888 at the age of 55. Louisa finally had the rest her body needed after working tirelessly for years. She was buried beside her parents and Sister Elizabeth along with her old mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Louisa May Alcott's dreams of being a writer, abolitionist and female rights advocate all came true. Jo's representation of Louisa in her writing aspirations were able to show the world all of the emotions she felt through all of her life's adventures, whether it be family, career, or romance. Even though there were many sacrifices and struggles, she worked through them and lived an extraordinary life. Louisa pushed the boundaries of a male dominated society in the mid 1800s by her strong character, through

which her family molded her accomplishments as a writer, and her independence as a woman willing to stand on her own and accomplish her life's ambitions.

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