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LITERATURE

Aleksandra Sobczak

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland
ola.sobczak.1999@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0324-2412

Patrycja Rogala

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland
patrycja.rogala.1999@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2555-7978

"I'm Not Afraid of Storms, for I'm Learning How to Sail My Ship." Facets of Womanhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868)

Abstract. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is a timeless piece of writing about four sisters living in the late 19th-century Concord in America. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy who, albeit raised within the boundaries of the same social setting, represent different facets of womanhood. Whereas Meg displays a traditional model of femininity from that time, Jo may be viewed as a rebellious tomboy combining both male and female features within her. Amy stands for artistically gifted women, while Beth exhibits the transcendent ideal of womanhood, which cannot be achieved. Since the types of femininity they represent differ, they are analysed separately to then be juxtaposed to highlight the differences between them. This paper proposes the analysis of the four sisters with respect to different facets of femininity they display. It uses intertextual practice to show the resemblance between the fates of the March girls and Alcott's life. The comparative analysis proves that there is no universal answer to the question of what it means to be a woman as there are countless feminine types, which may partly overlap. By creating four March sisters, the representatives of distinct types of femininities, Alcott proves that every female is allowed to offer her own definition of femininity, depending on the ideals she represents.

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, femininity, *Good Wives*, intertextuality, womanhood

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Introduction

Ever since its publication, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), her most enduring work, has been widely researched and reimagined. Not only has it been revised in the form of its sequels, i.e., *Good Wives* (1869) and *Jo's Boys* (1886) created by Alcott herself, but it also has lived to see its film adaptations directed throughout the years, the most recent one coming in 2019. Interestingly, not all female characters from the text have drawn the attention of both critics and adapters in an equal way. For instance, since Jo is considered an empowered female character, she is usually set as an example in feminist criticism. Although Meg and Jo have proved to be the most researched, this paper attempts to analyse all March sisters in the intertextual context with a view to displaying different facets of womanhood they represent.

The fortunes of the eponymous little women are preluded in Mrs. March's heart-warming tale: "'[o]nce upon a time, there were four girls, who had enough to eat, and drink, and wear; a good many comforts and pleasures, kind friends and parents, who loved them dearly, and yet they were not contented" (Alcott 2012b, 77). Interestingly, the title refers not only to the adolescent ages of the girls at the beginning of the story but also to the situation of females in the times of the creation of the novel (Rudin 2014, 116). Arguably, the title itself belittles their role within society.

Historically speaking, the adventures of the 'little women,' i.e., Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth, took place in 19th-century Concord, Massachusetts. Specifically, the story of the four March sisters was set in tempestuous times of the Civil War. At the very beginning of the novel, the readers are introduced to the political context of "the fighting" in which the heroines' father actively participates (Alcott 2012b, 6). According to the historical evidence, the aforementioned American Civil War (1861–1865) began on account of the newly-elected president, Abraham Lincoln, intending to abolish slavery in the United States. Eleven states opposing his idea formed the Confederacy, whereas the twenty-five remaining states, which supported the president, were called the Union. The state of Massachusetts, where Concord is situated, was a part of the Union. The sisters' father, Mr. March, was a representative of the forces who repelled slavery.

This political situation within the country influenced women, who were not allowed to actively participate in the war. Instead, they were obliged to stay at home without the support of men and obediently wait for their return (Rudin 2014, 116). At that time, very few women were employed and earned their living, so the absence of their fathers and husbands had a negative impact on their financial situation. Due to the fact that the March sisters' once-prosperous father lost his fortune before going to war on account of helping a friend in need, the women offered to earn their living; "the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least" (Alcott 2012b, 64). Thus, Foote argues, "it is one of the ongoing trials of at least two of the daughters to reconcile themselves to their economic fall" (2005, 69).

Both the events recounted in the novel and their historical context are loosely based on the lives of Alcott and her family members. For Susan Cheever (2011, 199), "[t]

he March family is clearly modelled on the Alcotts, but in writing this book Alcott allowed herself to create, instead of her real family, the family she had always dreamed of having". Such an instance of an intertextual relationship between real life and a fictional text was explored by Ryszard Nycz, who studies in intertextual terms how literary texts refer not only to other texts, but also to cultural environments. In Nycz's understanding, intertextuality may be divided into three types of relations, i.e., *text-text*, *text-genre,* and *text-reality* (1990, 101). The latter kind regards *Little Women*, as there is an intertextual relationship between the story of Alcott's family life as we know it, based on biographical evidence, and the altered, idealised portrayal of her family members in the novel, which confirms that no piece of writing exists in a vacuum and it may refer to previous literary works, literary genres, and real-life events known from such sources as history books or biographies.

As far as *Little Women* is concerned, "Louisa May Alcott drew on her own life and experiences to write [the novel]" (*Good Wives* Appendix). Her family agreed with Abraham Lincoln's view concerning the abolishment of slavery. The author's father was against the slave trade, which is reflected in the literary figure of Mr. March, who fought in the Civil War (*Good Wives* Appendix). Jo March is a literary equivalent of Louisa May Alcott, who wanted to become an active participant in warfare. Since it was unattainable for women to do it, so she went to Washington to look after injured soldiers. In *Little Women*, a similar journey is undertaken by Mrs. March, when her husband is wounded (*Little Women* Appendix). These are only some examples of the parallels between the Alcotts and the Marches. They will be further described in the following analysis in correspondence to Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy.

This paper discusses four different facets of womanhood represented by the March sisters and the light they shed on femininity. The aim of the paper is to provide a literary character analysis of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy to show their contrasting feminine traits within the intertextual boundaries.

1.1 Margaret "Meg" March

Meg, the eldest sister, may be treated as an ideal of femininity in 19th-century America. She possesses traits which every woman at that time was expected to exhibit. For Susan Kent (1987, 30), "[w]omen inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so-called inherent qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness [...]". By creating the literary figure of Meg, Alcott highlighted the situation of women at that time, which may be considered an example of *text-reality* relationship.

The traditional model of womanhood, anchored within both literature and culture, is portrayed by Meg's physical appearance:

> Margaret [was] *very pretty*, being plump and *fair*, with *large eyes*, plenty of *soft brown hair*, a *sweet mouth*, and *white hands*, of which she was rather vain. (Alcott 2012b, 10; emphasis added)

Meg is fully aware of the ideal traits she possesses. She takes delight in her looks and is very concerned about how other people perceive her. Consequently, the fact that her family is poverty-stricken bothers her, as she cannot afford fashionable items of clothing to be able to impress potential suitors as well as her affluent friends. Frequently, Meg "thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted," which also displays her occasional vanity (Alcott 2012b, 6).

Having received an invitation from the Moffats, her well-off extended family, Meg is enthusiastic at the thought of entering the social scene. She is so desperate not to stand out from the crowd that she lets her friends dress her in clothes which do not belong to her, even though she is conscious of the reason why they try to 'help' her. Their aid does not come out of kindness of heart but instead, their actions are dictated by their pity and boredom:

> As Meg went rustling after, with her long skirts trailing, her earrings tinkling, her curls waving, and her heart beating, she felt as if her 'fun' had really begun at last, for the mirror had plainly told her that she *was* 'a little beauty.' Her friends repeated the pleasing phrase enthusiastically; and for several minutes she stood, like a jackdaw in the fable, enjoying her *borrowed* plumes, while the rest chattered like a party of magpies. (Alcott 2012b, 155–56; emphasis added)

Meg's femininity is reflected not only in her looks but also in her behaviour. When her father comes back home, he immediately notices the progress which she has made in performing womanly tasks, such as knitting and sewing. His appreciation is most precious to her because it may be thought to symbolise universal male validation, which she anticipates:

Meg, my dear, I value the womanly skill which keeps home happy, more than white hands or fashionable accomplishments; I'm proud to shake this good, industrious little hand, and hope I shall not soon be asked to give it away."

If Meg had wanted a reward for hours of patient labor, she received it in the hearty pressure of her father's hand and the approving smile he gave her. (Alcott 2012b, 378)

The deplorable financial situation of Meg's family makes her take a job as a governess to provide for her relatives. As a representative of the ideal womanhood, she chooses a typically feminine job. Meg's family's dire financial situation forces her to take on the role of a governess to support her relatives. In her pursuit of the ideal of womanhood, she opts for a traditionally feminine occupation. However, during that era, this was one of the few roles open to women, placing Meg in a particular position on the social hierarchy. Paradoxically, her employment becomes even more challenging because, as a governess, she works for members of the upper classes - the very social circle she aspires to join. Meg struggles at all costs to be faithful to the moral commitment she made to her family to support them financially and not to be a vicious person. Sometimes, Meg is fatigued by "teaching those dreadful children nearly all day, when [she is] longing to enjoy [herself] at home" (Louisa May Alcott 2012,

7). Her bitterness comes from the fact that she is a passive observer of the life she is unlikely to live due to her low income. The wealthy people who employed her are constant reminders of her financial inferiority and unreachable dreams and expectations towards her adult life:

Margaret found a place as nursery governess, and felt rich with her small salary. As she said, she *was* 'fond of luxury', and her chief trouble was poverty. She found it harder to bear than the others, because she could remember a time when home was beautiful, life full of ease and pleasure, and want of any kind unknown. She tried not to be envious or discontented, but it was very natural that the young girl should long for pretty things, gay friends, accomplishments, and a happy life. (Alcott 2012b, 65)

Even though Meg's teenage years are far from her expectations, she has never lost faith in a better future. When she is pondering upon her prospects, she seems rather optimistic that fortune will smile upon her. In her dream-like description, she highlights her feminine ideals which she wants to live up to:

> Margaret [...] said, slowly, 'I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit. How I should enjoy it! for I wouldn't be idle, but do good, and make every one love me dearly.' (Alcott 2012b, 244–45)

In *Good Wives,* the sequel to *Little Women*, Meg learns to take pleasure in small things. As Murphy (1990, 570) observes, she "abandons her vanity and materialism and becomes submissive to her comparatively impoverished future husband." Although her life turns differently than she previously expected, she learns to enjoy her marriage to a not well-off tutor, Mr. Brooke. Once, she makes a comparison between her relationship and that of Ned Moffat and Sally Gardiner, her rich friends from adolescent years whom she used to envy. She gladly concludes that happiness does not stem from material goods and even though she is not as affluent as she wanted to become, she is no less happy than her acquaintances; she has fallen in love with her husband, despite him not being wealthy. Her transformed appearance and her newfound outlook on life are a clear reflection of her happiness:

Meg had spent the time in working as well as waiting, growing womanly in character, wise in housewifery arts, and prettier than ever; for love is a great beautifier. She had her girlish ambitions and hopes, and felt some disappointment at the humble way in which the new life must begin. Ned Moffat had just married Sallie Gardiner, and Meg couldn't help contrasting their fine house and carriage, many gifts, and splendid outfit, with her own, and secretly wishing she could have the same. But somehow envy and discontent soon vanished when she thought of all the patient love and labor John had put into the little home awaiting her; and when they sat together in the twilight, talking over their small plans, the future always grew so beautiful and bright, that she forgot Sallie's splendor, and felt herself the richest, happiest girl in Christendom. (Alcott 2012a, 3–4)

Meg wants to follow a traditional female role of being an obedient wife and caring mother who enjoys her domestic chores. Her actions make her the archetypal female of 19th-century America. As Smith puts it, "[t]hrough Meg's criticism of Jo's constant displays of masculinity, Alcott aligns Meg as the correct and respectable version of young womanhood and forces Jo to inhabit the opposite" (2021, 2). Initially, Meg is pleased with her feminine qualities and cares about her beauty as her main goal in life is to find a prosperous husband who would be able to provide a comfortable life for her and their prospective children. For Smith, "Meg is the prototypical 'little woman,' representing women who strictly adhere to society's depictions of how to correctly be a woman" (2021, 2). Her attitude slightly changes when she encounters the lifestyle of the rich while staying with the Moffats. Having realised that she does not belong to their circle, she reduces her expectations and finds love by Mr. Brooke's side. Even though he is not well-off, Meg achieves happiness in their relationship and, finally, is able to fulfil herself in the role of wife and mother. It means that she is transformed from a vain adolescent girl into an obedient wife - the ideal of the woman from that time.

1.2 Josephine "Jo" March

Jo is the second of the March sisters. She blends masculine and feminine traits within her appearance and behaviour. Although she possesses womanly looks, she seems to be uncomfortable with them. Since she longs for freedom, which is associated with masculinity, she adopts male-like behaviours to pursue her dreams. As Smith (2021, 1) observes, Jo "broadens the meaning of femininity and encourages a more diverse definition of what it means to be a woman." By doing so, Jo achieves both independence and success, which was highly unlikely for a conventional female.

Unlike her elder sister Meg, Jo wants to accomplish more than a typical woman of that time was expected to gain. Instead of focusing on her looks and attracting prospective suitors, she chooses to centre on her literary career. She is referred to as "a bookworm" (Alcott 2012b, 6) and "a tom-boy" (Alcott 2012b, 10). For Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 62), such a straightforward presentation of a literary figure may be considered a case of *direct definition*, i.e., the type of character presentation in which the narrator and/or another character names directly the traits of the character in question. The unambiguous expressions highlight Jo's being an unconventional woman in 19th-century America:

> […] Jo was very tall, thin and brown, and reminded one of a colt; for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it. (Alcott 2012b, 10–11)

Since the father is absent in the March household, Jo assumes the role of the head of the family. Her longing towards masculinity is represented by her very name, which is shortened from Josephine in a male-like manner. Her name becomes a character indicator (*sensu* Rimmon-Kenan). As observed by her sister Beth, Jo "must try to be contented with making [her] name boyish, and playing brother to [them] girls" (Alcott 2012b, 10). For Smith, "[a]s a child, Jo's actions are typical of those of young boys and foreshadow her inclination towards a more masculine trajectory in life" (2021, 2).

As far as Jo's desires for the future are concerned, she wants to develop her career as a writer and obtain freedom reserved, at that time, to men. She is bothered by the fact that women's activities are reduced to the domestic sphere and their leisure time is full of sewing and taking care of their appearance. For Jo, such life is pointless and pitiful:

> Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid; what it was she had no idea; but left it for time to tell her; and, meanwhile, found her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn't read, run, and ride as much as she liked. (Alcott 2012b, 67)

For juvenescent Jo, the literary career equals independence and thus, she vests her hopes in her writing talent. This way, she wants to gain the ability to express herself in the literary form. To avoid limitations imposed on women, Jo takes advantage of masculine traits within her to make her dreams come true. Moreover, she perceives her literary career as a way to gain her family's appreciation, which sets her apart from many other women of her time. It is what Jo believes will bring her happiness. As a literary figure, Jo struggles to reshape the notion of womanhood by blending femininity and masculinity to obtain financial independence in a world which, at that time, was strongly dominated by men (Smith 2021, 1). By achieving economic autonomy, Jo redefines the contemporaneous notion of femininity:

Jo's breath gave out here; and, wrapping her head in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears; for to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved, were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end. (Alcott 2012b, 268)

Since Jo values masculine traits, it is not hurtful for her to sell her gorgeous hair to acquire money needed for the treatment of her father.[1] Being a tomboy enables her to sacrifice her most treasured external quality to save her beloved relative. The commitment does not go unnoticed because Mr. March recuperates and praises Jo for her kind-heartedness. He highlights the fact that even though his daughter has cut her

[1] The parallel motif of a poverty-stricken woman having her hair cut with a view to obtaining money may be found in O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" (1905). Such an act is a proof of unconditional love which drives people to make sacrifices for their beloved ones. It may be argued that O. Henry's piece of writing remains in *text-text* intertextual relationship with *Little Women*.

hair short and thus, resembles a man, she is full of womanly spirit. Her brave deed is a maturational experience for her and symbolises her coming of age: Jo learns that sometimes one must devote oneself for the good of others. Moreover, by making the sacrifice, she gains her father's approval. For Mr. March, the change of Jo's appearance does not attenuate her feminine traits:

'In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the "son Jo" whom I left a year ago,' said Mr March. 'I see a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug, as she used to do. Her face is rather thin and pale, just now, with watching and anxiety; but I like to look at it, for it has grown gentler, and her voice is lower; she doesn't bounce, but moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way, which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl; but if I get a strong, helpful, tender-hearted woman in her place […].' (Alcott 2012b, 379)

To be able to support her family financially in her adulthood, she stoops to creating stories distant from her ideals. She temporarily abandons her moral principles to suit male publishers' tastes. Even though in secrecy she wants her writing to include timeless messages to the readers, she decides to focus on fast-paced action to encash her talent:

> Jo hardly knew her own MS. again, so crumpled and underscored were its pages and paragraphs; but, feeling as a tender parent might on being asked to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new cradle, she looked at the marked passages, and was surprised to find that all the moral reflections,—which she had carefully put in as ballast for much romance,—had all been stricken out. (Alcott 2012b, 191)

In *Good Wives*, the sequel to *Little Women*, Jo's dreams come true. She becomes a prosperous writer who can make her own living out of her work as an author. Although she initially is adamant towards marriage, she finds peace by Mr. Bhaer's side: "When Jo does finally marry," Murphy argues, "she turns to the elderly and impoverished scholar, Professor Bhaer, and she does so not in passion but in need, companionability, and loss" (1990, 578). Probably, it happens because she is influenced by Meg's tales about her gratifying family life as well as Amy's letters about her blossoming love to Laurie. It is her husband who shows her that a formal relationship does not have to be an obstacle on her career path and thus, she fulfils the roles of both wife and writer, for one does not eliminate the other. Having inherited Aunt March's mansion, and with the support of her husband, she transforms the building into a school for young boys whose fortunes are described in greater detail in, yet another sequel entitled *Jo's Boys* (1886).

According to Smith (2021, 1), as far as Jo is concerned, she may be viewed as "a model for dismantling the narrow barrier between masculinity and femininity" (Smith 2021, 1). Yet, her masculine traits such as being aspiring and determined to achieve financial independence do not exclude feminine urge for happiness and gain-

ing success. Throughout the novel, Jo refuses to adjust to gender norms present in 19th-century America and eventually, she manages to achieve great victory in the masculine sphere, i.e., writing (Smith 2021, 1). Jo's efforts to enter the masculine world make her an unconventional female. As Phoehl (2014, 107) puts it: "Jo subverts gender norms [...] primarily through 'boyish' clothing, outdoor activity, aggressive outbursts, and even physical violence." Alcott's idea to blend femininity and masculinity within Jo, as Smith argues, "critiques the stiff gender roles of antebellum America that cultivated acquiescent womanhood" (2021, 1). Consequently, Jo gains power essential to reconceptualise what it means to be a woman. It may be argued that Jo's journey towards independence reflects Alcott's struggle to come into existence as a female writer (Smith 2021, 1). Unfortunately for Jo, she is ultimately forced to conform to social norms as she marries the overbearing Bhaer. In other words, there is "a discrepancy between Jo's character and her ending" (Smith 2021, 1). The inconsistency, Smith maintains: "exemplifies the constraints that Victorian women suffered, and that Jo's marriage reveals a harsh reality that many women were forced into marriages" (2021, 1).

Jo may be considered an equivalent of Alcott herself within her writing. She wanted to go to war, but being a woman, she could not. Instead, she decided to begin her literary career to financially support her family (*Little Women* Appendix). Such a parallel may be treated as an instance of the *text-reality* intertextual relation. For Smith, "Jo March's literary journey to womanhood mirrors that of Louisa May Alcott's, authenticating that Jo, although fictional, reflects a deeper truth about nineteenth-century women" (2021, 9). Thus, it creates a clear example of yet another *text-reality* subgroup of intertextuality. Moreover, in the case of Jo, *text-genre* intertextuality is also applicable as she is the archetypal tomboy figure, distinctive for coming-of-age novels written by females.

1.3 Elizabeth "Beth" March

Beth, the third March sister, represents the ideal of the Victorian woman as she is kind-hearted and selfless. Her fragile character traits are reinforced by her appearance:

> [Beth] was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression, which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her 'Little Miss Tranquility,' and the name suited her excellently; for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved. (Alcott 2012b, 11)

The above-mentioned nickname, which she was given by her family, i.e., "Little Miss Tranquility," reflects her peaceful attitude towards life. Her shyness influences her relationships with other people. She is deeply devoted to her relatives and, at the same time, feels uncomfortable in the presence of strangers. Her trust is not easily gained, for instance, when her family befriends the Laurences, their neighbours; Beth is withdrawn at first.

It is music that allows Beth and Mr. Laurence to bond. She is given the piano, and she expresses her gratitude in a very womanly way, since she makes a pair of slippers for her benefactor. This gesture is feminine, which befits Beth as a Victorian ideal. At the time, women were reduced to the role of the angel in the house, and Beth is completely happy with such a function. She seems to be fully devoted to her family and domestic chores. Occasionally, she takes pleasure in playing the piano:

> '[My wish] is to stay at home safe with father and mother, and help take care of the family,' said Beth, contentedly.
> 'Don't you wish for anything else?' asked Laurie.
> 'Since I had my little piano I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well, and be together; nothing else.' (Alcott 2012b, 245–46)

Beth's selflessness and devotion to others turn out to be fatal for her. During the absence of her mother, who has gone to Washington to take care of ill Mr. March, Beth decides to help the Hummels, less fortunate neighbours. When she discovers that the children are unwell, she immediately heads for their dwelling, even though she is ill herself. In the light of her sisters' indifference towards the fates of Hummels, she takes matters into her own hands. Unfortunately, while trying to comfort the dying baby, she contracts scarlet fever and barely makes it out alive. Beth suffers long-term complications of the disease, as she never fully regains her health. The change in her caused by the illness is also reflected in her appearance and thus, it is immediately noticed by her father when he comes back home after his long absence:

> 'There's so little of her I'm afraid to say much, for fear she will slip away altogether, though she is not so shy as she used to be,' began their father, cheerfully; but, recollecting how nearly he *had* lost her, he held her close, saying, tenderly, with her cheek against his own, 'I've got you safe, my Beth, and I'll keep you so, please God.' (Alcott 2012b, 379–80)

Despite the plenitude of positive traits, Beth also has flaws. Since her biggest love is music, she suffers every time she must abandon her piano in order to fulfil her down-to-earth chores. However, devoted to her family, she bravely endures her daily hardships:

> Beth had her troubles as well as the others; and not being an angel, but a very human little girl, she often 'wept a little weep,' as Jo said, because she couldn't take music lessons and have a fine piano. […] She sang like a little lark about her work, never was too tired to play for Marmee and the girls, and day after day said hopefully to herself, 'I know I'll get my music some time, if I'm good.' (Alcott 2012b, 69)

Beth does not want to complain even when she is nearing her death not to be a burden to her beloved relatives. In other words, even when on her deathbed, Beth does not want to disrupt her family's life. She dies only when she is sure that her sisters

have achieved happiness and married respectable gentlemen. She does not abandon her kind-heartedness to others until her last moments. Her ultimate task is to please people with small hand-made gifts. Thus, Beth may be thought to die, as Murphy puts it, "from her inability to distinguish between nurturing others and the radical self-denial expected of femininity" (1990, 571).

The moral of Beth's story is brilliantly captured by the narrator, who concludes that:

> There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully, that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind. (Alcott 2012b, 69–70)

Beth March may be considered an ideal feminine model from the Victorian era. Selfless and caring, she assumes the role of "the angel in the house" (Alcott 2012a, 4). Beth's being the angel in the house is an instance of *text-text* intertextuality, as it refers to Coventry Patmore's narrative poem (1856), which ponders upon the perfect traits that a Victorian female should possess. Since Beth's feminine traits are ideal, they become unobtainable. For Clare Bender, "Alcott uses Beth's death to symbolize the death of the ideal woman. In doing so, Alcott is challenging the idea that such a role is the only acceptable female lifestyle" (2017, 141). In other words, Beth creates the "unattainable ideal" as she both "displays the correct form of feminist" and "internalises the virtues to which women must aspire" (Smith 2021, 3). By creating the character of Beth, Alcott struggles to highlight how superficial the preferred form of womanhood was at that time and to show that being a perfect woman is merely an abstract concept (Smith 2021, 3).

1.4 Amy Curtis March

Amy is the youngest and thus, the most spoiled of the March sisters. Unlike Beth, she values her own comfort and well-being most. She is a delightful child who becomes a lady with great devotion to art: "'I have lots of wishes; but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world,'" (Alcott 2012b, 246) she claims.

Amy also feels inferior due to her family's poverty. As a young lady, she feels rather uncomfortable when she must wear second-hand clothes and fulfil her household duties. To avoid being looked down on, Amy tries to conceal her unfavourable financial situation by boasting that the Marches were once well-off:

> [Amy] was a great favorite with her mates, being good-tempered, and possessing the happy art of pleasing without effort. Her little airs and graces were much admired, so were her

> accomplishments; for besides her drawing, she could play twelve tunes, crochet, and read French without mispronouncing more than two-thirds of the words. […]

Amy was in a fair way to be spoilt, for every one petted her, and her small vanities and selfishnesses were growing nicely. One thing, however, rather quenched the vanities; she had to wear her cousin's clothes. (Alcott 2012b, 70–71)

Amy's grotesque snobbery is visible in the way she speaks. For instance, she is the only sister who uses her middle name while writing letters or designing official documents. Moreover, she strains to employ sophisticated vocabulary into her daily speech. Sometimes, her struggles have a comical effect as she confuses certain words. Yet, she does not get discouraged and continues to add elaborate expressions to her casual utterances:

> 'I don't believe any of you suffer as I do,' cried Amy; 'for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice.'
> 'If you mean *libel* I'd say so, and not talk about *labels*, as if pa was a pickle-bottle,' advised Jo, laughing.
> 'I know what I mean, and you needn't be "statirical" about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabilary*,' returned Amy, with dignity. (Alcott 2012b, 7)

Amy's artistic skills do not escape her relatives' notice. She is referred to as "little Raphael," alluding to Raphael Santi, the great Italian painter. The allusion to the remarkable artist is an example of *text-reality* category of intertextuality, as Alcott draws on the readers' awareness of who the man was to fully understand Amy's potential.

Amy herself is fully aware of her talents. For instance, when she decides to draw up her last will in case of unexpected death, she bequeaths her little artefacts to her beloved relatives. Her decision proves that she values her artistic skills and wants to follow Horace's famous phrase *non omnis moriar*, expressing the hope that an artist's body of work will be remembered and thus, survive beyond death:

> 'Little Raphael,' as her sisters called her, had a decided talent for drawing, and was never so happy as when copying flowers, designing fairies, or illustrating stories with queer specimens of art. […] She got through her lessons as well as she could, and managed to escape reprimands by being a model of deportment. (Alcott 2012b, 70)

For Blackford, "[i]n the course of the novel Amy is transformed from an artist to *objet d'art*, from "little Raphael" to "My Lady," from self-assured and opinionated materialist to agreeable wife and daughter-in-law [...]" (2011, 2; emphasis added). Adult Amy possesses good manners, which compensate for her presumptive flaws, such as vanity and selfishness. Yet even Amy's undesirable character traits derive from her submissiveness towards patriarchal society and willingness to become an ideal female.

Amy initially seems to be an absent-minded artist who cares only about her needs but then, she is transformed into a lady who conforms to social norms. As an artistically gifted female, she may be considered "[t]he truly modern figure" (Curtis 1968, 879). Moreover, she is naturally charming even though she is not a bright person. Even though she has not acquired formal education, she is fluent in social behaviours (Curtis 1968, 879). Her traits allow her to marry Laurie, who is a representative of an aristocratic family. For Murphy, Amy may be described as "the least likeable and most narcissistic and ambitious of the four" (1990, 570).

Conclusions

Even though the March sisters are young women of a similar age, inhabiting the same American setting, they display different facets of womanhood. Their personalities vary and thus, they may be considered representatives of separate feminine types. By creating the four March sisters in the image of her own siblings, Alcott proves that there is no universal answer to the question of what it means to be a woman. Consequently, every female is allowed to create her own concept of femininity, depending on one's traits. Different facets of womanhood are rather fluid and thus, may be displayed as a continuum – from a tomboy to an angel in the house. Alcott's novel shows that the society at that time was varied, and therefore, distinct feminine types were depicted in literature. Being acquainted with Alcott's biography, the readers are able to draw the intertextual parallels between her life and the fortunes of the four March sisters. All in all, *Little Women* is a legacy which proves that femininity is a complex phenomenon, and it has many guises.

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