

Southern New Hampshire University

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Me, her Reader

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

By

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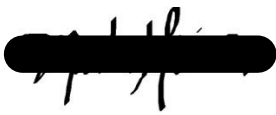
Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2023



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5/11/2023

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## Abstract

At the beginning of her book, *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott presents Pilgrim's Progress as a guidebook for living to the March sisters. In turn, *Little Women* itself allows the female reader to use Alcott's text for their own journey to their feminist self. This paper illustrates how Alcott's book, *Little Women* influences the develop of agency in its reader. Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century female writer, Louisa May Alcott continues to have relevance and influence toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, reflecting the link between feminist thought and literature. By using autoethnography within this paper I am using my own voice and my experiences to illustrate the discovery of how *Little Women* affected me and my role in society. This paper uses a combination of the theoretical frameworks of both feminism and the reader-response literary theories. The reader-response theory allows me to illustrate my own reactions to Alcott's book and how I could look up to Jo March as a role model and her sisters as friends. The feminism lens illustrates how Alcott modeled aspiring writer Jo March as herself therefore illustrating how young women can reach their full potential despite how they perform their gender. This paper incorporates arts-based research (ABR) and the form of creating with collage to illustrate creating art provides the creator with the empowerment of agency.

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, Feminism, Reader-Response Theory, Collage, Agency

## Introduction

*It is early January 1995, and I am sitting in a Loews movie theater with a hot cappuccino in my hand. As the movie credits start for the 1994 film adaptation of Little Women, I feel a sense of affinity with Louisa May Alcott and her characters. I am sipping a warm drink on a cold winter's day wearing my discount-priced cherry red Christian Dior full length swing coat with its 19<sup>th</sup> century vibe. Little Women, the story that has been part of my life since my early teens, is about to begin.*

My copy of *Little Women* was an update to the 1947 edition with beautiful painted illustrations by the artist Louis Jambor. I thought I was too old for the book, but my mother said she loved the illustrations. However, upon looking at the book's cover depicting the four March sisters, I realized they seemed slightly older than me. As a young girl, I felt that I could look up to them like a younger sister would. I think of Mrs. March in Chapter 1, on Christmas Eve reminding the March sisters of when they used to play *Pilgrim's Progress* and directing them as Alcott writes, "Look under your pillows, Christmas morning, and you will find your guidebook" (21). Just as the sisters discover their books, I woke up to find my beautiful copy of *Little Women*. Just as *Pilgrim's Progress* became their guidebook, *Little Women* allowed me to use these women as my guides to find my own feminist self. By using autoethnography, I will show how *Little Women* influences the development of agency in the reader. Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century female writer, Louisa May Alcott continues to have relevance and influence toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, reflecting the link between feminist thought and literature. As a child of the 1960's my journey to my feminist self is different from the young women I now meet through my academic and social life. The books I read, particularly Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* had a profound effect on me. *Little Women* lit a fire in me to create like Jo March did, at a time

when women were starting their fight for equality during the 1970s. In creating I was finding my voice.

Scholarship on *Little Women* has flourished across theoretical frameworks within the last five years due to the book's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2018-2019. Yazicioglu uses the philosophical framework, drawing upon Harvey's and Foucault's idea of space, asserting there are two separate heterotopias of labor in the March house. Yazicioglu illustrates the character of Jo March, "in terms of her function in both heterotopias, and to show she constantly negotiates between these domestic and intellectual labor heterotopias in an attempt to empower her sisters" (1), alluding to Jo's dual roles as a daughter and a sister downstairs and upstairs in her garret as a writer. Daly-Galeano uses the cultural framework to examine *Little Women* as a late subject of the cultural phenomenon of "horror mashups" (393) reflecting the trend when 19<sup>th</sup> century classics were rewritten to portray the protagonists as monsters. Both Messina and Grand wrote novels rewriting *Little Women* titled as *Little Vampire Women* and *Little Women and Werewolves*, respectively. The reworking of these 19<sup>th</sup> century classics, Daly-Galeano states, "illustrate, then, is the newness of fad. They offer readers something unusual, a form slightly different from previous fads. Ultimately, they are more old than new. While these projects boldly captured the attention of audiences from 2009-2011, they could not sustain the attention" (404). We know that fads come and go, and even a fad based on classic literature has no sustainability. It is the classic itself has longevity.

### **Autoethnography & Theoretical Framework**

By utilizing the method of autoethnography, the study of the self and how events and experiences affect the individual, I am bringing myself and my experiences into the story and experiences of the March sisters in *Little Women*. Autoethnography is itself a tool of bringing

agency to its writer, giving them the allowance to have a voice to articulate the personal power they have to demonstrate. Rowe and Silverman write of autoethnography:

Each autoethnographic work and autoethnographer frames and justifies the style different, the tropes of autoethnography remains the same—that writing is a tool for discovery of the Self and the Other, that writing about lived experiences and experiences of the body bring new ways of understanding and being in the world, and that those new understandings have liberatory potential. (92)

The discovery of the self through autoethnography builds our own capacity of understanding ourselves and others. As a woman born in 1963, the women's liberation movement would not start until I was closer to my preteen years. The views on further education and marriage were different from my parents to my own as I matured in school. Even a career in writing would not be thought of for decades. It was literature, especially *Little Women* which would light the fire of wanting to be a writer like Jo March, emulating how she hid in her garret to write, as I would search my house for such a place to make an attempt at writing a story or play. Elizabeth Mackinley uses letters written to the female writers she admires, "I might write autoethnography in a way that response-and-sense-abilities of being in rationality with them as a white-settler-colonial-woman. It is a gift I am still working to return, with love" (xi). The autoethnography in my essay will be performed by including italicized reflections of my life and collage to interpret my own personal response to Louisa May Alcott's book, *Little Women*.

This essay will be framed within both the feminism and reader-response literary lenses. Hubler has been teaching *Little Women* since 1997 states, "my reasons are myriad: in addition to its history of inspiring female readers' resistance rather than accommodation to damaging aspects of femininity, the novel is explicitly about the process by which girls become women"

(447). Smith looks at how Alcott modeled the character of Jo after herself, stating, Alcott, “prepares Jo for the financial freedom and independence that should be permitted to all adults, regardless of gender. Alcott supplies Jo and her readers with the ultimate lesson of womanhood: that one must find a way to acquire and protect their own happiness, especially in a world determined to restrain female potential” (9). In modeling Jo after herself Alcott illustrated to her readers that they are responsible to live their best life. Alcott writes of discovering their full potential which is agency. Howell states, “Agents can of course understand themselves as strategists, schemers, accommodators, or even resisters but they do not have to be so explicitly intentional. What matters is that they disturb, perhaps even permanently alter, the cultural, social, economic, or political system that constrains them” (28). Through literature and art women today like Jo and Amy aspire to reach their full potential, which Alcott voices through *Little Women* in the characterizations

For me to engage with *Little Women* the way I did allowed me as Spirovska writes of reader response theory, “the reader-response theory views the text and reader interaction as mutually dependent. The text is influenced by the reader’s understanding and perceptions. The reader has an active role in shaping the text” (23). I did not look upon *Little Women* as a story, but as providing me with friends I could look up to which would actually, unknowingly to the little girl I was, lead me on my way to my feminist self. *Little Women* has helped me find my voice and take on both personal and professional challenges. I loved each of the March sisters, but Jo was the one I felt more affinity with especially as I matured. First, I wanted to create – write something whether it was a poem, short story, or even a letter. The beauty of Alcott’s text is exemplified by one literary device she uses. A narrator, Alcott’s voice, appears but only often enough to provide a jolt, smile, and a giggle from the reader. After Mrs. March returns home



just as Beth breaks her fever, and before Amy is aware of Beth's recovery, Alcott begins the next chapter writing:

I don't think I have any words in which to tell the meeting of the mother and daughters; such hours are beautiful to live, but very hard to describe, so I will leave it to the imagination of my readers; merely saying that the house was full of genuine happiness, and that Meg's tender hope was realized; for when Beth woke from that long, healing sleep, the first objects on which her eyes fell *were* the little rose and mother's face. (219)

The beauty I found in Alcott's writing was illuminating to me even as a young girl because through her narrator's voice popping up out of the blue, she was talking directly to me.

### **Art-Based Research and Collage**

This thesis also incorporates art-based research. Largo explains Arts-based research (ABR) as "emergent critical theorizing led by the researcher's artistic practice. As a practice-based form of inquiry, it is carried out through creative materials and techniques that give rise to data of individual or social significance" (313). As a girl growing up when women, my mother's age, were just starting their fight for their own liberation; therefore, they were responsible for teaching their daughters, like me, how to push 'the glass ceiling'. As my mother's daughter, I struggled to find myself and my agency from the idea of going to college when both my parents never went to finding my own identity as a feminist. By combining both autoethnography and arts-based research I am combining two methods to illustrate the discovery of my feminist self. Largo states, "qualitative researchers in the social sciences have recognized the limits of existing methodologies in capturing all the complexities, affects, and nuances of lived experience" (313). In my own autoethnography I am expanding new limits to these methodologies.

Arts-based research will be incorporated through the art form of collage. Collage, Sarma argues is “a visual mode of feminist curiosity disturbs the division between the personal and the public when relying on a highly personal process that utilized artistic insights and intuitions while pushing for a public recognition that this is a relevant mode of research” (6). As a method, collaging provides the sense of empowerment which Sarma defines as a “psychological and social process that enhances my (and others’) agency” (1). The process of assembling a collage taking pieces of unrelated pieces, as Knelman states, “making poetry out of collisions has long been the purview of collage: to forge from familiar elements something strange, to hide and reveal, deconstruct and reconstruct. Like speculative fiction, collage relies on fragments of experiences as a way of teasing out the fantastical” (70). The act of pasting together pieces of unrelated material gives me the sense of agency that I can create something new. The pieces of my collage will be illustrated at the end of several chapters in my essay culminating in its finished form prior to the essay’s conclusion.

### **Performing & Gender Performance**

*As I began at my young age to look up to Jo March and her creator Louisa May Alcott, I wanted a space hidden away to attempt writing a story just like Alcott’s character Jo had her quiet place in the garret. At one point I found solitude on the cold stairway separating the basement from outside. But with no light I would only freeze with my paper and pen, using a cold concrete step as both my seat and my desk. I finally succumbed to the realization that there was no ideal hidden space in our house. I took my black trunk from sleepaway camp, stored in our basement, and I brought it upstairs to my room. I found a fringe shawl my mother once purchased to hang over my shoulders as I attempted to write something, even a letter to a cousin. In my own way I was imitating Jo March writing in her garret – performing as Deshwal and Rao*

write, “Performativity is a deliberately designed performance and because it is deliberately designed it is often excessive, actually it is often dramatic, it is spectacular and is often larger-than-life. It produces emotions such as awe, reverence, fear, respect, love and sometimes a combination of all these emotions” (Deshwal and Rao 110). My younger self was hoping that by imitating Jo – performing like she did I would in effect, create like her. *Even as I write this I imagine myself sitting on the floor next to Louisa May Alcott’s desk at Orchard House, her home, as an adult, in Concord, MA. As if her spirit could help me write my story. Earlier in my childhood my friends and I would present short skits in my backyard with a white sheet hung between tree branches as the backdrop of the stage. We worked all day on planning the festivities, and we took turns on the stage with our skits. We made swords with aluminum foil and used the remnants of our parents old clothes for costumes.* These skits were nothing to brag about, but they were invoked by the March sisters in performing their play on Christmas:

Very clever were some of their productions; paste-board guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter-boats...The furniture was used to being turned topsy-turvy, and the big chamber was the scene of many innocent revels. No gentlemen were admitted; so Jo played male parts to her heart’s content, and took immense satisfaction in a pair of russet-leather boots given her by a friend, who knew a lady who knew an actor. (Alcott 26-27)

From this early mention of Jo’s preference to play the male characters, we see how gender roles and gender identity are reflected in Alcott’s book. Smith states, “Alcott’s blending of femininity and masculinity within Jo March critiques the stiff gender roles of antebellum America that cultivated acquiescent womanhood, equips Jo with the masculine attributes necessary to redefine womanhood and gain independence” (1-2). My own response to Jo is so different today than when I was a child reading the book due to my own awareness of gender roles and gender

identity. Spirovska attributes empathy as a response stating, “which includes personalizing the text, relating the text with students’ own lives and sympathy with some of the characters.

Readers are interested in characters and the motivation of characters in more complex terms, analyzing not only actions but also consequences” (7). In characterizing herself as Jo, this may have been her way to her way to build the characterization of Laurie. Wadsworth asserts Alcott deliberately designed the characters of Jo and Laurie as halves, “while Jo is headstrong; Laurie prefers music to commerce, and Jo longs to sell her stories and venture beyond the domestic sphere” (10). The opposite nature of Jo and Laurie attracts them to each other, but it provides a completeness of two halves making a whole – a partnership in friendship.

By rereading *Little Women*, I saw that feminine and masculine traits are fluid between the sexes. The character Theodore Laurence, nicknamed with the feminine moniker, ‘Laurie’, becomes best friends with Josephine, nicknamed ‘Jo’. Wadsworth focuses on the symmetry between the two, “both are ‘bashful,’ both hate their given names, they are the same age, and both are ‘gentlemanly’ (Laurie by implication, Jo explicitly described as such” (387). The two enjoy a close friendship, mutually feel restricted by their gender identity as Wadsworth writes:

Although Alcott makes clear that Jo and Laurie are more alike than different, socially prescribed gender roles differentiate them, while, ironically individual gender expression brings them closer together. Jo and Laurie are alike even in their difference: as numerous readers have observed, both have a certain “queerness” or, as some critics put it, androgyny—that is, each possesses a name, demeanor, some physical characteristics, and interests typically attributed to the opposite sex. (388)

*My first friendship as a student in middle school was with a boy named George. He would help me with my painting, walk to class together, see each other at Church, but it was not until senior*

*high school that we would have classes together and gravitate our desks near each other. This was the year of hosting parties, and a close girlfriend and I would each host a party so we could just invite George. I was starting to develop a crush on him in senior high school, and he broke my heart when he told me that years ago in middle school he wanted to ask me out! "Back then? Not now?" is what I thought to myself. It was during our early twenties we would bump into each other in Manhattan. It was then he started talking constantly about one male friend—never shutting up about him. I clearly saw a change in George's character in those years when we were both navigating adulthood. I realized then we were drifting apart. We last bumped into each other the year we both turned thirty, serendipitously outside the front door of the building I worked in. We only talked briefly that cold winter night, but I could see he was no longer the boy who was my friend and then the object of my crush. In Little Women Jo and Laurie say goodbye to their former relationship as Laurie writes to Jo asking if there "was the least hope of her changing her mind" ...It came at last, and settled his mind effectually on one point, - for Jo decidedly couldn't and wouldn't...Then she begged him to be happy with somebody else, but always to keep a little corner of his heart for his loving sister Jo" (Alcott 456). I sometimes think that as George, and I were growing into our adulthood we would never be the same as we were as teenage students together wondering what our futures would bring. Part of me feels George and I knew in our early twenties that our journeys would not include each other. Wadsworth writes of Jo and Laurie:*

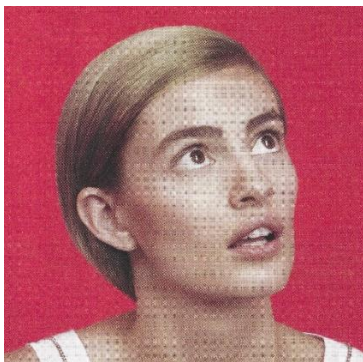
Ideal cross-gender friendship proves to be unsustainable—and for the same reason: once Jo and Laurie grow past the privileged space of adolescence, the social possibilities for cross-gender relationships become constricted in ways that force a redefinition of their roles. Ideal (or near-ideal cross gender friendship is only possible in volume one, when

Jo and Laurie advance in years from fifteen to sixteen, and where there we see the friendship beginning to strain. (38-39)

Jo and Laurie's friendship reminds me of my friendship with George. Alcott could not let her alter ego, Jo March, enter a romantic relationship with Laurie just I could not enter one with my childhood friend George.

*My friend Marianne, and I are having dinner during one of her short trips Cambridge, and we start talking about gender traits and gender identity. She is really upset, as an older French woman she prefers to wear her short. She is also extremely tall and skinny. Marianne is elegant with her grey hair dyed white giving her a modern look, but after a day shopping in Boston she is near tears. She laments to me over dinner how she was mistaken for a man in a department store. Is it wrong for women to wear their hair really short? Do heterosexual women like her, who are open to the idea of meeting and dating a man after being a widow need to have long hair to convey to others our sexual identity and traits? In Little Women Jo has her long hair shorn off for payment she receives in order buy the train ticket her mother needs to journey from Boston to Washington D.C. to nurse her ailing husband. Jo tells her shocked family when she reveals her shorn hair, "It will be good for my vanity; I was getting too proud of my wig. It will do my brains good to have that mop taken off; my head feels deliciously light and cool, and the barber said I could have a curly crop, which will be boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order" (Alcott 180). At the age of nineteen I was starting my career in Manhattan and for my interview I had my hair cut into a pixie cut which suited my very petite stature. My French Canadian mother greeted me with so much gratitude for what I did. I wore my hair this short for several years, and the hairstyle made me feel empowered, so maybe it helped my own brains as Jo March hoped her haircut would for her. I did not care what men thought. I was*

living my life as I wanted to. I met my former husband when my hair was this short, but then I grew it shoulder length until after we married when I cut it short again. His initial reaction was to drive me back to the hair salon to complain to my stylist! In *Little Women* the sisters form the Pickwick Club with a newspaper. Each of the girls adopt a masculine name. Wadsworth points that Laurie is welcomed into the society as peer and equal...the “queering” of friendship in *Little Women* facilitates nonromantic cross-gender relationships and, by extension, equity in a highly patriarchal society” (389). Our society today may not be the same patriarchal society it was a century ago, but as my French girlfriend with her glamorous white short hair, short hair on a woman is still synonymous with masculinity and sexuality.



**Collage Hint #1**

## **Education**

Alcott only includes a scene of formal education in one chapter of *Little Women* depicting twelve year old Amy March’s corporal punishment by her teacher, Mr. Davis. As one of fifty female students Amy, an “altogether too conceited and important girl” (Alcott, 82) tries to keep up with her more affluent classmates by bringing the latest fad or ‘fashion’ to school. Her older sister, Meg, sympathizes with Amy, “ ‘Are limes the fashion now? It used to be pricking bits of rubber to make balls;’ and Meg tried to keep her countenance, Amy looked so grave and important’ “ (Alcott, 77). Meg provides Amy with a full bag of the contraband fruit, and Amy becomes the most popular girl in class that day, showing off by exchanging her limes in

exchange for invitations to parties and loaned jewelry. However, one girl, 'Miss Snow' who previously teased Amy on her looks is told when she offers help in math, "You needn't be so polite all of a sudden, for you won't get any" (Alcott, 77). Amy's misbehavior is discovered by her teacher, Mr. Davis. Amy, standing in front of the class, is about to be struck on the palms of her hands with a ruler by Mr. Davis when Alcott's narrator chimes in:

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. She was rather a favorite with "old Davis," as, of course he was called, and it's my private belief that he *would* have broken his word if the indignation of one irrepressible young lady had not found vent in a hiss. That hiss, faint as it was, irritated the irascible gentleman, and sealed the culprit's fate. (79-80)

It was Amy's pride that got her to this state when she did not bring the full amount of hidden fruit from her desk to her teacher when told to do so and for wanting to increase her status amongst her classmates. At home, Amy is given a lesson by her mother when she questions Laurie's accomplishments and talent and lack of being conceited:

"I see; it's nice to have accomplishments, and elegant; but not to show off, or get perked up," said Amy, thoughtfully. "These things are always seen and felt in a person's manner and conversation, if modestly used; but it is not necessary to display them," said Mrs. March. "Any more than it's proper to wear all your bonnets, and gowns, and ribbons, at once, that folks may know you've got 'em," added Jo; and the lecture ended in a laugh. (Alcott 83)

Alcott provides a lesson that it is not proper to show off one's wealth, especially in view of those who may be less fortunate. *My own response to this text is from my own memories of being 'the*



*other' in high school. In my senior year students were given the choice of electives, one of which was along the lines of marriage and family which included the topic of budgeting. Mr. Smith was questioning Victoria on the subject of personal budgeting asking Victoria to itemize the clothing she was wearing. Victoria came up with the price tag of approximately \$750.00. As I sat just a few seats away from Victoria and watched her I went over what I was wearing that day. Everything I wore that day did not even equal to \$150.00.*

*Being the daughter of parents who were very young during the great depression, and who understood the value of hard work and being paid for it was part of my life early on. My father, a union member, worked for one company his entire career, New York Telephone, as a computer lineman. He would often work the night shift and holidays so he could bring home the extra pay. He never went to college and neither did my mother. My father only once spoke of my college education, voicing his preference for Computer Science as a major. My parents paid for my Liberal Arts degree in the community college, and for secretarial school, but when I returned to school at the age of twenty-four to finish my Bachelor's degree at CUNY Baruch College in Manhattan, we cashed in all the savings bonds to pay for school. I never minded going to a lower cost school than a more prestigious school. My time at Baruch was fulfilling to me as a woman as I enjoyed my roles as President and Treasurer of the Baruch Collegiate Chapter of the American Marketing Association even taking home a prize for the school at the AMA Collegiate Conference in New Orleans. In going to school in Manhattan I remembered Jo March as she travels to New York to start her career as a writer.*

### **Career in Manhattan**

As Jo's literary ambitions continue, Alcott decides to bring a realistic view of an aspiring writer into the story, providing a view of her own life. Alcott starts the second volume of *Little*

*Women*, originally called *Good Wives* with Jo reading the reviews of her new first novel with the narrator entering into the text, “Another says, ‘It’s one of the best American novels which has appears for years’ (I know better than that); ‘and the next asserts that ‘though it is original, and written with great force and feeling, it is a dangerous book.’”(298). If Alcott is referring to one of her own books, it is forward thinking as she takes Jo on a new adventure to New York. Jo tells her mother, “I want something new; I feel restless, and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning more than I am. I brood too much over my own small affairs, and need stirring up, so, as I can be spared this winter I’d like to hop a little way and try my wings” (Alcott 357), Alcott further writes of Jo’s career in writing, of being away from her writing while working as a teacher, “All the better for the change. I shall see and hear new things, get new ideas, and even if I haven’t much time there, I shall bring home quantities of material for my rubbish” (358).

*I first read this passage as a young girl, and the bustling city of Manhattan was just a 45 minute train ride away. At the age of twenty I found full-time employment right in the heart of Rockefeller Center. I spent lunch hours exploring the city, taking the elevator up to the rooftop of 30 Rockefeller Centre. I had my own money to buy clothes and purchase jewelry for my mother at the diamond district just across the street from my office. By literally walking the streets and parks of Manhattan I was finding myself. I was not a girl anymore. I was growing into a woman.*

*However, after eighteen months of an exhausting commute, and my young twenty-one year old self witnessing how the homeless were living on the streets it affected me I had to decide. I would go back to Long Island to find work.*

There was a side of the city that Alcott allows her character Jo to see in *Little Women*. For inspiration on stories, Jo “searched newspapers for accidents, incidents, and crimes; she

excited the suspicions of public librarians by asking for works on poisons; she studied faces in the street, - and characters, good, bad, and indifferent” (Alcott 378). However, she takes a second look at the stories she has sold based on her research and realizes they have fault, “and filled her with dismay” (Alcott 385). Alcott has Jo refrain from writing more trashy short stories, and she takes “a course of Mrs. Sherwood, Miss Edgeworth, and Hannah More, and then produced a tale which might have been more properly called an essay or a sermon, so intensely moral it” (386). Alcott has Jo March struggling when she first arrives in New York attempting to find inspiration on what topics to focus her writing on, but she finally discovers her right path through her journey in New York just as I did.



**Collage Hint #2**

### **The Other**

*The summers spent putting on plays, and walking to my two girlfriends houses on my block with my Barbie dolls were long over when we started moving into our preteen years. One year on one of my birthdays as a preteen, my mother called the mothers of these two girls to invite them to my birthday party. I don't remember much of the day, but the photograph I saved says it all. I give the camera focused on me, a smirky smile, while my brother acts up for the camera. Meanwhile, the two girls to my left in a photo, my two earliest playmates that I could walk safely with my dolls in hand to their houses in the early 1970s, stand staring at the camera, almost posing with no sign of camaraderie among our group – with one telling me years later of my mother's call to her mother. One issue of difference between my former friends and I was*

money. Struggles with money was shown to me as a child, when the union my father belonged to went on a lengthy strike. My mother had to find a job during this time – the first job she had since before my birth. Meanwhile, we were one of three families on the block who were Catholic. The difference was shown to me as a child when Lily, the Rabbi's Belgian wife, our neighbor would frequently provide us with groceries. Lily was hidden by nuns in a convent during World War II, so she always felt compelled to aid us during the union strikes my father engaged during his career. Lily was the one whom I learned about World War II from. I am forever grateful to her memory that my early education of the war was focused on women using their agency in hiding children from the enemy. As my former two girlfriends were increasingly identifying with their heritage and preparing for their Bat Mitzvahs, my friendship with these girls completely faded into dust. I was no longer part of their world as they started going to Hebrew school multiple times a week. It was the rich middle to upper class families whose children I went to school with and who I later as a young adult found myself within their society.

In 1986, as a 23 year old, I was invited as my boyfriend's guest to his brother's wedding in San Francisco. The bride's extended family were wealthy, and the wedding's venue, The Fairmont, on Nob Hill in San Francisco was synonymous of the wealthy from its use as the setting for a weekly drama series called *Hotel* during the 1980s. The only dress my mother and I could find to fit my petite body was a deep cut metallic blue dress accessorized with costume jewelry made up of fake diamonds and sapphires purchased from a cheap dress shop in the shopping mall. As I met up with the family and friends of the bride I noticed that they looked me up and down with their eyes. The girls and mothers who looked me up and down were dressed in real jewels and designer gowns, whereas my sapphire and diamond necklace and earrings were cheap costume jewelry, and my dress was just cheap sparkly material. In a way, I was

*performing, pretending to be like them.* Deshwal and Rao state, “Performativity is a deliberately designed performance and because it is deliberately designed it is often excessive, actually it is often dramatic, it is spectacular and is often larger-than- life. It produces emotions such as awe, reverence, fear, respect, love and sometimes a combination of all these emotions” (110). *Even though my date, the groom’s best man, thought I looked beautiful, and I posed for photos in the opulent surroundings within the hotel, I felt out of place. I had even felt out of place earlier in the day when I called my mother and cried that I did not belong at a Nob Hill function with these rich people.* In *Little Women*, the chapter “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair” Meg, the oldest of the March sisters, is invited to a fancy ball by her wealthy school friend. She is made up by her friend and the other female guests, “powered, and squeezed, and frizzled” (Alcott 109) to resemble a rich woman rather than a poor one, similar to how I felt I had done to myself.

Deshwal and Rao write, “Literature, offers the platform which would be the buffer between the real configuration of gender, the unreal configurations of gender and the theoretical configurations of gender” (110). Meg lets her simple feminine self be disguised as a fancy haughty woman that she was not. This is just what I had let happen to myself. When Marmee gives advice to Meg it is as if she is giving advice to me. On the issue of actually being made up to look different, Alcott writes, “That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion, and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things. Learn to know and value the praise, which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people, by being modest as well as pretty, Meg.” (111). From the viewpoint of my 21<sup>st</sup> century self, Marmee is telling her daughters to not try to stand out in the crowd, but to be modest. My response today, decades later, as I reread *Little Women* mirrors Cronin as he writes:

We know from psychological research that readers understand texts primarily in terms of their own experience. That personal experience is essential to the process of reading literature. Since the brain is blind and the physical mechanics of reading and comprehension are so complex, we can only make sense of what we read in terms of what we already know. Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game, and we are able to read successfully only because our unconscious mind is selecting material from our long term memories. (22)

*My week in San Francisco was gut wrenching at times as I felt so repressed by the elitist society I was amongst. To go shopping and bump into the members of the wedding party and be looked up and down was humiliating.* This was my 23 year old self's reaction, but today, I see the wisdom of Alcott in her characterization of Marmee as Cronin writes, "a student's experience of literature is essentially a transaction between reader and text, a transaction in which both are modified" (23). *As a child I would read Marmee's lectures to Meg differently to as I reread them as an adult women who has undergone subjugation by my school friends and by those who strangely stared at me at the wedding in San Francisco.* When reading *Little Women*, the mention of *Pilgrim's Progress* had no significance for me. But, now I appreciate that as the March sisters used *Pilgrim's Progress* as their guidebook, *Little Women* became my guidebook.

### **Poverty**

Alcott did not just focus on the March family. The poor fatherless Hummel family are introduced at the beginning of the book on Christmas Day morning as Marmee asks her four daughters to give up their breakfast, "Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire...My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?" (Alcott 24). Both Mrs. March

and the Hummels are trying to survive without a man in the house. Jo March is determined not to be dependent on a man as Smith states, “Jo March represents girls and women who refuse to adhere to the restraining gender standards forced upon women and who vow to deliver themselves from the tragic fates of submission or destitution” (7). *When I read Little Women in my preteen years I had no idea what poverty and destitution was. It was not until I entered junior high school at the age of twelve that I came face-to-face with those who face real poverty and destitution every day. Theresa was the oldest of no less than six children. My mother would soon include her in our weekly carpool to our religious education classes across town from our school. It was during these initial car rides my naïve younger self would badger her with questions. I could not understand why Theresa lacked knowledge on the pop culture of the 1970s represented in television programs which launched the careers of John Travolta, Ron Howard, and Henry Winkler. She only replied hesitantly that the family only owned one television set in their one story home. When I did visit her home I could see that the house and the large diverse population in it would not be conducive for children sitting around watching television. I was also stunned when she admitted she shared one bed with multiple siblings so when I did see the actual bed I vaguely remember being surprised that it was not as wide as a king size bed. Eventually her mother would deliver another child, Kathleen, who I saw only once before she died of meningitis at less than a year old. Kathleen’s mortal illness reminds me of the Hummel baby in Little Women, passing away. Alcott writes, of the baby dying in Beth’s arms:*

‘I just sat and held it softly till Mrs. Hummel came with the doctor. He said it was dead, and looked at Heinrich and Minna, who have got sore throats. ‘Scarlet fever, ma’am; ought to have called me before,’ he said, crossly. Mrs. Hummel told him she was poor,

and had tried to cure baby herself, but now it was too late, and she could only ask him to help the others, and trust to charity for his pay.’ (195)

The doctor has a rough attitude toward Mrs. Hummel’s poverty, but my own mother as she held Theresa’s sobbing mother in her arms at the funeral home standing before Kathleen’s casket showed her own woman’s strength during this heartbreaking event we would never forget. Just like Mrs. March helps Mrs. Hummel, my mother emotionally supported Theresa’s mother. *Not only did she support Theresa’s mother emotionally, but my mother also gave her clothes my brother and I outgrew, which I was unaware of at the time. When I saw Theresa one day walking to school wearing the same coat I wore years before I felt a strong emotion. My mother who was born in 1929, the year of the great depression, was given empathy by Lily’s the Rabbi’s wife, and now she was giving the same empathy to Theresa’s mother. Up until this moment on seeing Theresa wearing my coat I had no concept of empathy – I was just a naïve self-absorbed preteen. I was embarrassed for my own self. However, when I later reread Little Women I became aware that poverty transcends generations. I decided I would never allow myself to fall into such a situation and would become self-reliant even though the norm in my generation was to get married and depend on a husband. Later when I separated from my first husband when my son was very young it was no surprise, but the mental effect on my was devastating. I was scared that I would become a destitute woman and no longer in control. It was during this time I felt like I was losing my femininity as I look at photos from this time. In a way I was like Mrs. Hummel. She did not call the doctor for her baby because she could not pay him. I would not spend money on myself. I started keeping monthly trackers of my income versus expenditures, which I kept up for over ten years. The monthly trackers would keep me calm on airplanes during takeoff as I doodled on them to stop from having anxiety attacks of shortness of breath.*



*In a way Little Women was very comforting to me during this time as I knew I was not alone. No one knew of my anxiety about money. Liang, et al. state, “single parenthood as a common risk factor for depression, anxiety and stress” (255). My anxiety about money lasted for over a decade. When Jo tells Amy “They know we are poor, so it’s no use pretending” (Alcott 320). Amy’s reply mirrors my own those thoughts during the trying financial times during my time as a single mother, “You needn’t go and tell them all our little shifts, and expose our poverty in that perfectly unnecessary way. You haven’t a bit of proper pride, and never will learn to hold your tongue” (Alcott 320). I was a single mother with a young child. When my son started school, and I became involved in his activities and meeting other parents I could only try my best to limit our social gatherings to those that would not expose any stress over money. I was going to listen to Amy’s advice to Jo and be quiet about my status.*

### **Marriage and Subjugation**

Due to the high popularity of the first volume of *Little Women* as Alcott began writing the second volume she was under pressure to deliver on her readers’ demands for the March sisters to marry. The first volume, Doyle states, “was a children’s novel, much more so than its sequel, which ultimately takes the story at least fifteen years into the future, when marriage would have been assumed to be a virtual certainty for her characters” (7). Alcott, who never married herself, was known by, Doyle states, “Her grousing about having to ‘marry off’ her heroines is well known, both from her journals and letterers” (7). Alcott was able to voice her own thoughts of marriage onto her alter ego, Jo March when she refuses Laurie’s marriage proposal, “I don’t believe I shall ever marry; I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man” (Alcott 395). In this line Alcott portrays the reality of marriage for women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the subjugated role they would enter into upon marriage.

If she were to marry off her characters Alcott would have to be cognizant of each character's personality and how she would design the narrative of their individual lives, the partners they chose, and their entrance into marriage. Rudin argues a prevalent theme in *Little Women* is "married life as the basis for equality between the sexes" (115). Alcott marries off the older sister Meg to Laurie's tutor, John Brooke, who is not wealthy, and will not be able to give her the castle she describes earlier in the book, "I should have a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people and heaps of money...with plenty of servants" (Alcott 159). After Meg accepts John Brooke's proposal, Jo finds the couple, as Alcott writes, "the aforesaid enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strong-minded sister enthroned upon his knee, and wearing an expression of the most abject submission" (255). Meg, the oldest daughter to marry is only seventeen when she becomes engaged, and she worries right away about all that she is taking on, "'I've got so much to learn before I shall be ready, it seems a short time to me,' answered Meg, with a sweet gravity in her face, never seen there before" (256). Meg is portraying to herself the duties and skills that wives were required to have in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a children's book, Alcott illustrates in the first volume of *Little Women* a teenage Meg worrying on the knowledge of marriage and wifedom more from an education stance on her evolution from a girl to a woman.

*During my youth growing up in the 1970's my family were regular viewers of the television program All In The Family. Archie Bunker, the patriarch, is mostly seen sitting in his chair in front of the television set while his wife, Edith, his married daughter and son-in-law maneuver around him. This was my parents own type of marriage. My father would sit in his chair, read the newspaper and wait for my mother to serve dinner. He was the breadwinner, and she played the roles of chauffeur to her children, cook, grocery shopper, and cleaning woman.*

*One evening while my former husband and I were briefly living with my parents my mother insisted I cook dinner for him. I had worked late into the evening, and I was exhausted from the commute home from the city. My former husband took advantage of my absence to go to the bar after work with a friend, and he arrived home shortly after I did showing the effects of alcohol. My mother, obviously disgusted at my husband's state, just looked at me and told me to prepare his dinner. I was suddenly being told to turn into a subjective wife from the working woman that I was. I was not the 19<sup>th</sup> century woman like Meg who worried about all she had to learn to keep a home for husband, but I was an independent woman. However, that evening I had to become a subordinate wife like Meg would become to her own husband.*

After Meg mentions her worries about all she has to learn, her fiancé, John Brooke, provides a hegemonic retort to Meg, “You only have to wait. I am to do the work,” said John beginning his labors by picking up Meg’s napkin, which an expression which caused Jo to shake her head, and then say to herself, with an air of release, as the front door banged, ‘Here comes Laurie; now we shall have a little sensible conversation.’” (256). Alcott uses an expressive italicized “I” to stress John’s hegemonic response to his new fiancée, Meg, between his insistence of being responsible for working and to pick up Meg’s napkin.

As a reader to this text of John’s response to Meg’s worry, I can use my own experience to process my reaction. Cronin states, “students can relate to the classics from the past in a deep and more personal manner. For example, students can ask themselves what mental operations they go through when they process a text” (24-25). *John’s response to Meg reminds me of my 1990 honeymoon in London with my first husband. This memory has always been fresh in my mind due to my willpower to share roles. We had purchased a handheld video camera for the trip, and we took it everywhere with us. However, my husband took full control of taking all the*

*movies. After a week of starting and stopping a walk or tour in order to use the camera I was losing my patience. I wanted to have some fun and enjoy taking movies of what I saw in London and Bath. I finally said I wanted to use the video camera. It was not just his camera, but ours as a newly married couple to create memories of our trip. He was not happy at all and after arguing for some time he finally relented, and he even took a picture of me holding his beloved camera. In looking at this photo, and the smile over my face, this moment was my first instance in using my voice and agency as a wife to push back on the hegemonic authority my new husband tried to have over me. I look at the photo, and the young woman looking back at me says, "I have it now!"*

Once Laurie meets up with Amy and she tells him how lazy he has become. He replies, "Saint Laurence on a gridiron" (Alcott) provides Amy with her reply illustrating the patriarchal gaze of men:

'I supposed you'd take it so You men tell us we are angels, and say we can make you what we will; but the instant we honestly try to do you good, you laugh at us, and won't listen, which proves how much your flattery is worth.' Amy spoke bitterly, and turned her back on the exasperating martyr at her feet. (Alcott 441)

Alcott uses the word, 'angel' to describe the Victorian woman, whom Goswami and Kumaran state, "was expected to be the 'angel of the house' defined by the male patriarchy, passive, feeble, sympathetic, self-sacrificing and last but not least pure" (67). Amy and Laurie are not married at this point, and Amy uses her voice to illustrate the male gaze over women and how lowly a man's flattery toward a woman really is.



**Collage Hint #3**

### **Art and Europe**

Alcott introduces the character Amy as the artist in the family, “‘Little Raphael,’ as her sisters called her, had a decided talent for drawing, and was never so happy when copying flowers, designing fairies, or illustrating stories with queer specimens of art” (50). Alcott writes of Amy’s evolvment as an artist, “If ‘genius is eternal patience,’ as Michaelangelo affirms, Amy certainly had some claim to the divine attribute, for she persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time she should do something worthy to be called ‘high art’”(282). Amy’s own desire to mature into a woman is to have character and be unspoiled, “I can’t explain exactly, but I want to be above the little meannesses, and follies, and faults that spoil so many women” (Alcott 335). By using these words to describe Amy’s goal of being above spoiled women, Alcott is in line with what Largo states of Arts-Based Education

Research (ABER), being “in more recent iterations, adopts critical theoretical architectures, which are intent on the goal of emancipation” (314). Amy wants to be free of the patriarchal gaze that lurks over women who are spoiled and taken care. When Amy and her sisters and Laurie talk about their “castles in the air” (Alcott 159), Amy’s reply “‘Here’s mine!’ and Amy waved her pencil,” (Alcott 160) illustrating her tool for finding agency.

Amy is ultimately invited to go to Europe with her rich aunt, and upon the invitation, tells her family, “‘It isn’t a mere pleasure trip to me, girls,’ she said impressively, as she scraped her best palette. ‘It will decide my career; for if I have any genius, I shall find it out in Rome, and will do something to prove.’” (Alcott 337). Amy’s desire to become an artist, and not be known as a bedazzled young woman is evident as she “began to sort her colors and pack her pencils that evening , leaving such trifles as clothes, money, and passports, to those less absorbed in visions of art than herself” (Alcott 337). She desires a career in creating art, but she also knows she may not succeed, “‘Then I shall come home and teach drawing for my living,’ replied the aspirant for fame, with philosophic composure; but she made a wry face at the prospect, and scratched away at her palette as if bent on vigorous measures before she gave up her hopes” (Alcott 337).

Female travelers in Europe where Amy is touring did not have access to formal education, but they had to train themselves, as Quark states, “there was not a strong association between the attainment of prestigious educational qualifications and women artists’ market value” (12). As a young American woman travelling in Europe, Amy is practicing her craft with the intention of making a living as an artist. Amy sketches Laurie who visits her in Nice. When she opens her sketchbook and begins to sketch Laurie, she tells him, “ Stay as you are, and go to sleep if you like. I intend to work hard,’ said Amy, in her most energetic tone” (Alcott 435). Amy’s words illustrate the agency in her voice and her determination to succeed. She does not want Laurie to

disturb her by talking to her while she paints, but Amy tells him to go to sleep. Without the male gaze over her, she is free to create without regards to time or distractions of conversation.

*I am visiting an exhibit on impressionism painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston when I come across a glass case containing the 19<sup>th</sup> century American painter Mary Cassatt's case of pastels. I used pastels as a child and looking at Cassatt's collection of her pastels the desire to learn more about pastel painting encourages me to take a course in pastels given by the museum. Every Thursday for nine weeks I bring my pastels to class, and I learn and practice the different techniques to create art. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic prematurely ends our class. During the first few months of the lockdown my husband gifts me with more pastels, paper, instruction books, and an easel. From one of the instruction books I try to create an Edgar Degas pastel painting. I go over and over the image, refining it until it is perfect. I do not listen to comments that it looks good. I want my painting to look perfect. For the first time during the lockdown, I feel empowered. I still go over and over perfecting my recreation of Degas, and as I do my confidence increases so that I can call myself an artist.*

*I continue to look over my pastel painting instruction books, and I remember the paintings I saw in the Louvre in Paris. I fled there after a romantic breakup, as Laurie does in Little Women. Laurie goes with his grandfather, and my mother accompanies me. We go to art museums, the opera, the Fontainebleau, and we go shopping. My mother interacts with the Parisians in her native French. I was only 22 years old on this trip, and I still remember how my mother would say it was me who took her to Paris.*

## **New Beginnings**

Alcott ends *Little Women* with Amy and Laurie marrying in Europe and then returning to the United States. After telling Jo he has married Amy, Jo asks Laurie, “but which rules?”

(Alcott 479), Laurie responds, “I don’t mind telling you that she does, now; at least I let her think so, -- it pleases her, you know. By and by we shall take turns, for marriage, they say, halves one’s rights and doubles one’s duties” (Alcott 479). Amy likens the state of marriage to weather, “Lovely weather so far; I don’t know how long it will last, but I’m not afraid of storms, for I’m learning how to sail my ship” (Alcott 489). In reading Amy’s response from the reader response theory Alcott uses the metaphor of a ship for Amy’s sense of self and learning how to maneuver herself within her bond of marriage. Savolainen states, “reading can be conceptualized as a form of information use because the decoding of symbols is based on the interpretation of signs, words and sentences” (440). In addition to using the boat as a metaphor for Amy’s self, the boat stands for a marriage. Laurie and Amy will steer their boat together.

Alcott writes of the effect of motherhood on marriage, “In America, as everyone knows, girls early sign a declaration of independence, and enjoy their freedom with republican zest; but the young matrons usually abdicate with the first heir to the throne... Whether they like it or not, they are virtually put upon the shelf” (Alcott 419). Cronin states, “how can we citizens of modern American make sense of this text from the past?” (23). When Meg is despondent over the state of her marriage, Marmee tells her, “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.” (Alcott 424). Alcott illustrates that as women are equal members of society, and to take part in what is happening in the moment. It is only when we are happy and fulfilled that we can support the happiness and fulfillment of those around us.

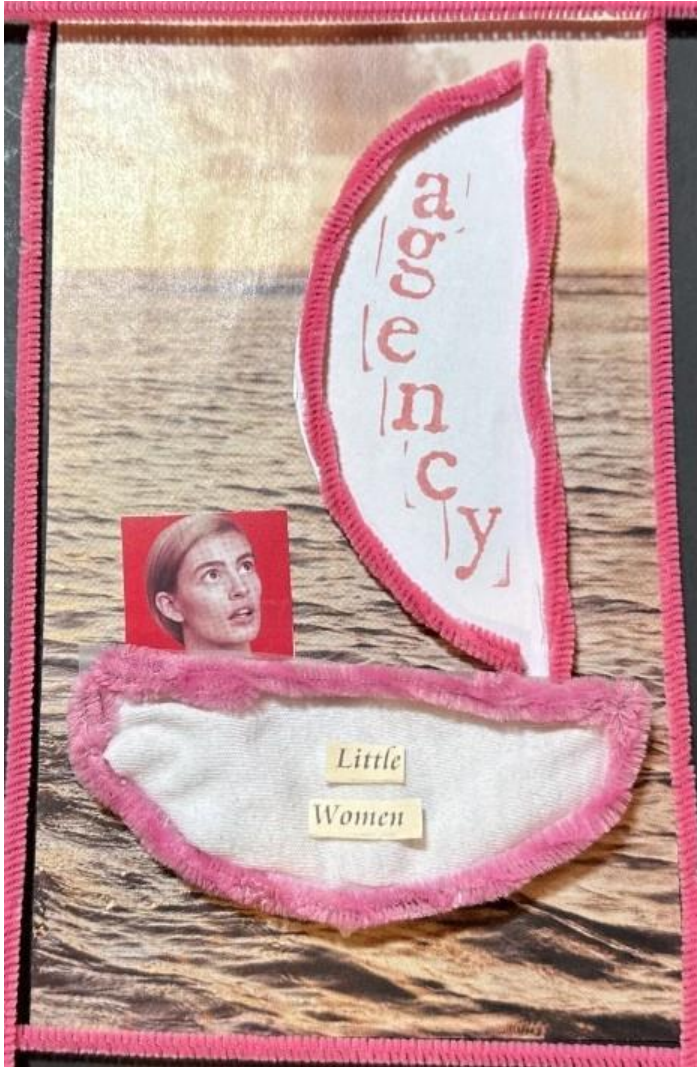
*It is September 2022, and I am part of the online audience of women from around the world on a live presentation by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of The Madwoman in the Attic. I have quoted from their book in several essays I have written, and I am teary eyed*



*as I watch these two women on my computer screen. They recount the story of how their latest book, Still Mad American Women Writers And the Feminist Imagination was written after the 2017 Women's March when thousands of women throughout the world, wearing pink hats, march to defend gender equality. I am not afraid to wear or use the color pink. It is no longer to me a color for youth, but it can be used by anyone.*

### **My Collage**

My collage is inspired by Chapter 21 in Little Women, "My Lord And Lady", depicting Amy's metaphor of a ship to marriage. However, in my interpretation I use a simple sailboat to portray a woman's journey through life. Fabric in white, symbolizing "unity and commitment to defending the rights of women and disenfranchised groups" (Lang) fills in the outline of the boat. The sailboat is trimmed in pink to honor women, reminiscent of the women who wore pink in the Women's March of 2017. The name of the boat, set on a plaque on the side of the boat is "Little Women." A young woman's face, wearing the short hair I did, looks up at the sail with her expression showing astonishment and wonder. The white sail is designed with just one word, 'Agency.' The message of my collage is that women have agency. Women face many issues in life, but if they exercise the empowerment that agency gives them they can successfully sail through the challenges life gives them.



## Conclusion

When I read Louisa May Alcott's book *Little Women* as an adult I see more deeply the effect it gave me through recognizing the way her characters lived, and how I lived. As a child I wanted to create like Jo March did, and today, as a student, I create by writing. In writing within the framework of reader response and the feminist lenses I can use the method of autoethnography to use my voice which is in itself agency. I can tell my story the way I want it told. The purpose of this essay was to illustrate how *Little Women* influences the development of agency in the reader, therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century female writer Louisa May Alcott continues to have relevance and influence toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, reflecting the link between feminist

thought and literature. Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were constrained by the male gaze. Alcott was ahead of herself as Goswami and Kumaran state, “Alcott’s characters show subtle deviation from the expected stereotypes of the patriarchal society” (68). Jo gets to play male parts in the plays the sisters put on, and Marmee advises Meg and Jo, “better be happy old maids than unhappy wives” (Alcott 112) than to pretend to be someone they are not. Between their deviation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotype woman in gender performance, and Marmee acknowledging they do not need to marry, Alcott was already illustrating *Little Women* was ahead of itself in acknowledging a woman can be happy and fulfilled.

In performing autoethnography I was able to read *Little Women* like I never did before in the prior times I read the book. Alcott’s first voice narrator is rarely seen through the book, but when she jumps out the response from the reader, me, was almost like saying, “Oh, hi there!” I felt like Alcott was speaking to me directly across time. This was my own reader response, and by writing in autoethnography I have the agency to write my response in my own words. Autoethnography allowed me to become one with the text, becoming more familiar with it than a traditional scholar. When Jo remarks on “sensible conversation” (256) it is Alcott’s voice in Jo critiquing the conversation between John Brooke and Meg on the traditional domestic roles of a husband, the breadwinner, and the wife, the housekeeper and cook.

The limit I found with autoethnography was in the framework of the feminism lens and being honest with events through my life. I have changed all names except Lily, the Rabbi’s wife who I shall always remember and admire for the way she gave back to the community. There are scenes in my life portrayed in this ethnography that I wish I could forget, for they show me under the patriarchal gaze. Rowe and Silverman write of autoethnography, “As each contributor moves through their writing, the politics of identity materialize and, in that

autoethnography becomes a form of resistance” (2). In my use of autoethnography I am illustrating how I was subjected. However, autoethnography is a vehicle for freedom for letting me use my voice.

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