

### Independence and Structure in *Little Women*

Since its publication in 1868, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has delighted generations of readers. The tale is set in the middle of a tumultuous period in America's history, when the Civil War threatened to destroy the lives of Americans across the country. Drawing upon and paralleling *Pilgrim's Progress* to some degree, Part One of the story focuses on four young sisters throughout the year of their father's absence as he serves in the war while Part Two begins three years later and follows the sisters on unexpected journeys of love, marriage, and death. During these times, each young woman experiences heartache, joy and various lessons, learning what it means to mature and accept change, even if that change threatens to tear apart everything familiar. In her novel, Alcott creates a scenario in which each March girl represents a "type" of young woman, with one in particular seizing the opportunity to demonstrate a theme of structured independence from societal etiquette, standards, and expectations.

When reading *Little Women* and evaluating its treatment of female independence, it is important to not infuse the text with a 21<sup>st</sup> century Gloria Steinem-type feminist mindset. Any work is best understood through a contextual analysis, and *Little Women* is no exception. As such, to properly examine this novel, we must first become familiar with the role of women, politically and socially, in this time period and determine whether or not Alcott's depiction of women reflects this role. Although the 1800s did not make huge legal advancements for women, certain events hastened the woman's ability and need to stand on her own. For one, the Civil War all but required many women to become a crucial part of the war effort, as they were drawn upon to pick up where the men left off. This began to create a society in which women now became breadwinners and providers, along with the everyday duties demanded as mothers and housewives. The war, then, naturally provided an environment in which women were being forced to step outside of the boundaries created for them by government and society.

Although women at this time were denied many of the legal rights given to men, some were still involved in a variety of important activities and worked toward social freedoms. Individuals like Harriet Tubman, Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, and

Elizabeth Cady Stanton showed that women at this time were not lazy or idle, nor were they incapable of carrying out complex tasks or demonstrating leadership skills. These deeds, however, were not overtly publicized or even looked at cohesively until much later. Concurrently, women were also expected to display a certain degree of propriety and feminine behavior, continuing to manage their households and teach their children. Notwithstanding, many women of the Civil War era found the taste of “feminist” liberation to be too strong for their liking and continued to follow the dictates of societal decorum. Alcott’s novel, on the other hand, gave the country an immediate look at young woman who did defy many social norms, especially in her distaste for proper, “womanly” behavior.

Against this backdrop of a woman’s growing role in maintaining a functioning society, Alcott uses the character of Jo March to better develop the idea of female independence. While she may have been too young to participate in social movements or partake in the war effort, Jo certainly defies convention in her own way. For one, she has no use for a dainty, ladylike, or proper way of life. This is evidenced in the very first chapter, where Alcott wastes no time aiding the reader in understanding each of the March sisters. As they sit around the fireplace, Jo begins to whistle, and is immediately chided by Amy on the grounds that whistling is “so boyish.” Jo promptly replies that this “boyish” reputation is exactly why she continues to whistle. Throughout the novel, Jo revels in her tomboy ways, filling with pride any time Laurie calls her a “fellow.” She is not too concerned with what others think, wearing an “old-fashioned” Leghorn simply because it was comfortable, and even in planting her flower garden, Jo demonstrates her free spirit once more in that her bed was never alike two seasons in a row. When attending a party with Amy, Jo has a terrible time getting dressed and makes it quite clear that she is not out to impress anyone. Nearer to the end of the first part, Jo separates from the more level-headed Meg and encourages Laurie to seize his own independence, especially from his grandfather. Clearly, Jo is never quite content to stick with what is familiar, and she undoubtedly questions accepted behaviors of women. No doubt a reader at this time is not surprised to find that the generous but feisty and headstrong Jo grows into one of aforementioned women, working to bring about change through the creation of her boy’s school.

Jo's independent nature is also exemplified through her carefree attitude toward romance. For example, she succinctly explains to Laurie that she does not want a beau of reckless abandon. She just wants a "simple, honest, respectable boy." (ch. 14) When it comes to romance, she scoffs at the silly, school-girl ways of love. Interestingly, she opts here for a boy who does meet conventional standards. Later on, when pressed by Laurie, she expresses no desire to talk of "lovers and such absurdities." (ch. 24) At this point, many a reader no doubt expects Laurie and Jo to overcome their strong wills and fall hopelessly in love. Here, Alcott herself demonstrates her own independent spirit, defying readers' expectations by refusing to provide a tidy solution to this problem. When the very impassioned Laurie proposes, Jo refuses, on account that she will not be boxed into a loveless marriage simply because it is convenient or, as Laurie points out, expected. Instead, Jo needs someone who can challenge and lead her without suppressing her natural independent nature. As such, the character of Mr. Bhaer enters the scene, becoming a sort of muse for Jo. Though neither young, rich, nor particularly handsome, the German professor is clearly a very intelligent man and shares Jo's enthusiasm for Christianity, even defending religion with "all the eloquence of truth." Yet, as Alcott describes it in chapter thirty-four, Bhaer's eloquence of truth made his "plain face beautiful," especially to Jo. Although she tried to fight her feelings, Jo stands on her own once more by forgoing a match of wealth and convenience for one of love and intellect.

As the novel progresses, though, Alcott takes care to show Jo's restrained side. Halfway through the story, Laurie tries to persuade her to run away with him and meet her father. Jo, rather reluctantly, refuses, stating that she is a "miserable girl" and therefore "must be proper and stay at home." (ch. 21) Although this kind of trip would certainly suit her adventurous nature, Jo clearly refuses his suggestion out of love and respect for her mother and probably even Meg too; she realizes that her independence can affect others and she chooses not to exploit it. Then, in chapter twenty-nine, Amy, Alcott's representative of convention, comments that "women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive." Jo, here, actually agrees with her sister, knowing that that there is a time and place when certain activities, no matter how liberating, are not appropriate.

The theme of independence is not conflicted in Alcott's novel because it is not portrayed in contradicting ways; it is just not as black-and-white as some would hope for or expect. If anything, it is merely paradoxical in nature. For one, Alcott demonstrates that an independent woman cannot be independent for independence's sake. Through Alcott's description, we see that the independent woman does not think only of herself, for the headstrong Jo, the beacon of female independence, often finds time to serve others, no matter how minute a task it might seem. For example, on Christmas morning, Mrs. March asks her daughters to give up their breakfast to a poor woman and her six children. Jo is the first to very affably exclaim her support. (ch. 2) Later on, in chapter five, Jo sweeps the snow away to make a pathway in the garden, all for Beth and her invalid dolls to walk in. Jo exhibits her fiercely giving ways once more when she pushes vanity aside and sells her beautiful hair for twenty-five dollars needed to bring her ailing father home. She is often seen caring for her family and reaching out to Laurie when he most needed a friend and a surrogate family of his own. At one point, she receives one hundred dollars for a manuscript, and her first thought is not one of herself, but of Beth and Mrs. March. Jo promptly and cheerfully sends her beloved sister and mother to the seaside for some rest and relaxation.

Alcott also takes great pains to show that no matter how independent one is, no one can be completely self-sufficient. For example, when Mr. March finally returns home, Alcott reminds us that although five energetic women seemed to rule the house, Mr. March was "still the head of the family." (ch. 24) In addition, any reader will realize that *Little Women* is steeped in Biblical tradition. Whether or not one agrees with Alcott's inclusion of Biblical themes and verses, it cannot be denied that this ideology plays a subtle role in the way Mrs. March helps shape the mindsets of her daughters. So then, in this depiction of independence, Alcott creates situations in which this very independent girl must still find a measure of humility and rely on others for help. For all of Jo's independent ways, she in particular comes to a point where she cannot do everything herself and must simply bow her head and pray. When struggling with her unrestrained anger and subsequent remorse after Amy's near-drowning, she is comforted by her mother's words of the love of a Father who will sustain and give her strength. She is told that the more she loves and trusts him, the less she will depend on human power.

After listening to her mother, Jo is humbled and then depicted praying the “sincerest prayer she had ever prayed,” no doubt praying for help in controlling her fiery emotions. (ch. 8) As a result, we see that for Alcott, independence is not an unchecked pass for all types of behavior. She points out that there are still moral absolutes and that certain things are always wrong, like selfishness and unbridled anger. Finally, in Beth’s death, Jo is rendered powerless once more, only finding solace through “tears and prayers.” (ch. 41)

*Little Women* is no doubt an interesting read for today’s modern readers, given that in the tale, Alcott favors a controlled or structured independence. The idea of four girls “playing pilgrims” might sound ludicrous to many young girls today, especially those with no particular Catholic or evangelical religious training or exposure. However, there is an innocence in the plight of each March girl, an innocence that although somewhat uncommon these days, might also pique the curiosity of the reader. The March girls here are not depicted drinking, maliciously disobeying their authority figures, or engaging in sexual activity. Gang activity, street warfare, and drug use are not the remotest of problems for them. Instead, Alcott here presents a world in which chastity goes unquestioned, idleness is frowned upon in favor of family and household domesticity, daughters listen to and respect their parents wholeheartedly (and parents are deserving of this respect), and Biblical practices are upheld and sought after with purposeful intent. And through all this, a sense of female independence is still maintained.

Given society’s current (and often negative) views toward chastity, domesticity, and Biblical tradition, modern readers might rather classify independence as rebelling against these ideas rather than upholding them. After all, women today are not suppressed by the government in the same sense that they were in Alcott’s day. Today, female children and teenagers live in a world in which women are allowed to vote, hold public office, and even quite convincingly run for the President of the United States. They cannot imagine a world in which these rights do not exist and thus have a much more difficult time understanding the plight of those who lived in the absence of these rights.

As a result, if modern readers can get an accurate picture of the context of *Little Women*, they stand a much better chance of understanding its ideals of female independence. As the family unit has begun to restructure itself in recent decades, adolescents have learned to adapt to various family compositions. Many of today's children live in single-parent homes and majority of the single-parent homes are headed by a woman. In this sense, modern readers might be able to draw a connection to the characters of *Little Women*, because as we have seen, the shifting Civil War family structure almost demanded a measure of independence from the women. In Part One, the protagonists are four young daughters learning to live their day-to-day lives without a constant father figure. In fact, they do not even have a substitute father figure. Mr. Lawrence only makes an occasional appearance to bestow gifts and young Laurie is still making the transition from adolescent to adult. As a result, they are forced to learn self-reliance, and in place of their father's absence, Jo rears her own independent disposition once more and resolutely declares herself to be the "man of the family." (ch. 1)

Adolescents today, especially females, might appreciate Jo's ability to stand up for herself and her determination to be a strong support for her family. In Part Two, Jo's experiences teach readers to not settle in matters of love, no matter how attractive (physically and economically) the bearer of love may be. In guiding readers through these universal issues, *Little Women* can offer a great deal to today's adolescent generation.

For a book promoting a structured female independence, it is not surprising that men play a prominent role in each storyline. In Part One, the girls and Mrs. March clearly needed their father, and in Part Two, each of the three sisters found that they were not complete without their chosen husband. Perhaps with this method, Alcott suggests that women need not be abjectly independent of men or convention, as some feminists today might argue. Rather, as depicted by Jo March, women should be freely allowed to pursue their own ambitions and goals without having to adhere to a rigid societal regime of propriety and etiquette. Not only should they be allowed, but they should also be encouraged, as illustrated by Mrs. March and Mr. Bhaer. If anything, *Little Women* leaves an enduring reminder to all the Jo Marches of the world today – care for others, deal with your flaws, and simply be true to yourself.