

## Academic Book Report

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### Castles in the Air: Jo March and the Role of Words in Her Journey of Self-Discovery

Enchanting emanation from a book published long ago still entices readers to this day, inviting them to embrace a tale about love, family, grief, duty and identity. Louise May Alcott's timeless American novel, *Little Women*, continues to capture hearts of young girls as it has done since its publication in 1868.

Alcott told the story of Jo and her three sisters – the March sisters – who experienced coming-of-age during a time when societal expectations were more important than the desires of the heart, and when the desires of the heart were less important than duty.

While living in a home nestled in a quaint New England town (against the backdrop of the American Civil War), each of the sisters battled with the adolescent drama that transcends time and culture as they struggled with unique, personal experiences and new, raw emotions. The author said it best, "...if they had been perfection they would not have been real girls, and you could not have wept over their trials and laughed over their pleasures." ("A Quote from *Little Women*", goodreads.com).

Of the four March sisters, there was one – Josephine (or "Jo" as she so boyishly liked to be called) – who fearlessly reinforced her independence with her choice of words and daring antics, only to suffer the consequences because of it.

PBS' Nancy Porter said it best: "Jo March is a dazzling and original invention: bold, outspoken, brave, daring, loyal, cranky, principled, and real. She is a dreamer and a scribbler, happiest at her woodsy hideout by an old cartwheel or holed up in the attic, absorbed in reading or writing, filling page after page with stories or plays. She loves to invent wild escapades, to stage and star in flamboyant dramas. She loves to run. She wishes she were a boy, for all the right reasons: to speak her mind, go where she pleases, learn what she wants to know — in other words, to be free." (Porter, "The Character of Jo March")

"'Wouldn't it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in them?,' said Jo, after a little pause" (Alcott, 2004, p. 150).

Jo seemed to believe that she would find her worth, value, overall identity and purpose in the "castles in the air." Her personality consisted of an "imagination...fired by the thoughts of daring exploits" (Alcott, 2004, p. 153) and thus, suggested a passionate idea to her companions.

“If we are all alive ten years hence, let’s meet, and see how many of us have got our wishes, or how much nearer we are them than now,’ said Jo, always ready with a plan” (Alcott, 2004, p. 152).

Jo once said, “I’ve got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the door remains to be seen,” (Alcott, 2004, p. 151).

As Jo March continued growing up, she slowly realized that she no longer needed to look to the “castles in the air” for who she was. Despite her challenges, Jo searched for her individuality, her God-appointed purpose, and the path to her destiny, all the while recognizing that it would be in “good, strong words that mean something” (Alcott, 2004, p. 38) where she would find the answers she had been searching for all along.

### Changes, Challenges, and Castles

Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, titled the thirteenth chapter, “Castles in the Air.” The appropriate, foreshadowing title was unlikely a random, impulsive choice or spontaneously created. Alcott made a wise literary move when she coined the phrase “castles in the air” to illustrate the quirky imagination and fanciful whims for which Jo March lived.

Throughout *Little Women*’s first few chapters, Alcott’s descriptions of Jo March encompass the full implications of an adolescent who is both ‘hoydenish’ and ‘obstinate’ (personality idiosyncrasies that Jo would eventually deem both challenging and in need of changing).

“‘Jo does use such slang words,’ observed Amy, with a reproving look...Jo immediately...began to whistle.

‘Don’t, Jo; it’s so boyish.’

‘That’s why I do it.’

‘I detest rude, unlady-like girls.’

‘I hate affected, niminy piminy chits” (Alcott, 2004, p. 5).

Jo would then get reigned back in – ashamedly – to practice and apply what was expected of her: proper, lady-like conduct.

[Words from her father’s letter to her mother] “‘I know they [the four sisters] will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.’...

‘I’ll [Jo] try to be what he loves to call me, a little woman, and not be rough and wild’ but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else,’ said Jo, thinking that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South” (Alcott, 2004, p. 11).

Readers quickly discover that Jo’s heart was passionate, but her spirit was suppressed in a world filled with war, female oppression and the painful difficulties of growing up.

Jo was all frustration at not having been born a boy. When Mr. March was in residence, he referred to his wild daughter as my “son Jo” (Alcott, 2004, p. 236). Her sisters consoled their “brother” as best they could during her gender complaining bouts.

“So you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls,” said Beth...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, 2004, pp. 6-7).

According to “Louisa May Alcott is my Passion”, “women were trained to be self-sacrificing and live in a private sphere whereas men were trained to go out and conquer the world.” And that is exactly what Jo March wanted to do!

As a teenage girl, Jo was in hot pursuit of her “castles in the air” where money and fame ruled as king and queen. She hoped to attain her dreams of success from the ambitious springboard of a writing career. “Jo’s ambition was to do something very splendid; what it was she had no idea, but left it for time to tell her’ (Alcott, 2004, p. 40);...‘ I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream” (Alcott, 2004, p. 151).

Jo was in a constant state of self-improvement and discovery. She was resolved to exterminate all flaws of character and try to become the best version of herself that she could be.

“Jo had the least self-control, and had hard times trying to curb the fiery spirit which was continually getting her into trouble; her anger never lasted long, and, having humbly confessed her fault, she sincerely repented, and tried to do better. Her sisters used to say, that they rather liked to get Jo into a fury, because she was such an angel afterward. Poor Jo tried desperately to be good, but her bosom enemy was always ready to flame up and defeat her; and it took years of patient effort to subdue it” (Alcott, 2004, p. 78).

Jo knew that her “castles in the air” were illuminating endless possibilities in which a stark contrast against her reality was evident; Jo lived in New England during the American Civil War (in which her father served as a Union Chaplain). Faced with the painful process of growing up, in addition to the family’s financial stressors, a temporary but single-parent home, and a war raging close by – brother against brother, while her father was in its midst – Jo sought those things that would absorb her imagination entirely so as to shield herself from having to face her reality.

While Jo was with her best friend, Laurie – a neighbor boy and close companion – she reacted in excitement and delight upon hearing him say that he had prepared a surprise for her. Jo cried out, “‘What is it,’ ...[only to begin] forgetting her woes for a minute in her wonder” (Alcott, 2004, p. 197). Jo desired to be lost in wonder as often as possible so as to hide from the painful,

tragic truth of reality. As her sister, Beth, lay in bed ill, Jo said to Meg: "If life is as hard as this, I don't see how we ever shall get through" (Alcott, 2004, p. 199).

Even at her young age, Jo fought the societal expectations of fulfilling gender-based roles along with the stigma put on those individuals in the female populace who would rather chase "castles in the air" than sweep a floor, bake a pie, or continue to participate in the Civil War Sewing Circle. Jo could not blame them for she had the same sentiments as well.

"I ain't! and if turning my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a Chinaaster. It's bad enough to be a girl any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" (Alcott, 2004, pp. 5-6).

"Part of the fascination with the novel is its treatment of gender roles, which balances tradition and gender distinction with more forward-thinking, proto-feminist attitudes. We fully expect that readers will be considering and debating issues of gender in this novel for many decades to come" (Shmoop Editorial Team).

As readers continue to absorb the beginning pages of Louisa May Alcott's famous work of fiction, they will realize that Jo March was floundering in an adolescent identity crisis (a circumstance that is common among youth and continues to transcend time today). Jo was searching for her individuality and her sense of self in the areas she most valued. However, she limited the search for who she was down to her accomplishments, her ability to make money, her ability to work and write, and use "good strong words"; again, she mistakenly believed the entirety of her essence was solely in the attainment of her "castles in the air." Jo March must have believed that the entirety of her value and worth was measured by all that she was doing – and not by just simply being. She desired to live in those airborne castles where she could shut out all of life's challenges and the inevitable change that takes place because of them.

"I know I shall break away and do something desperate if somebody don't come and help me," she said to herself, when her first efforts failed, and she fell into the moody, miserable state of mind which often comes when strong wills have to yield to the inevitable" (Alcott, 2004, p. 459).

As Jo continued to change, handle challenges, and learn more about accepting her reality in place of the "castles in the air", readers will watch as she discovered who she really was, what her purpose was all about, and how words helped her realize the answers.

### Singing, Sisters, and Stories

As Jo grew up and began the long awaited search for her identity, she was comforted and encouraged by the constant presence of her loving, devoted sisters – Meg, Beth, and Amy. Jo's three sisters played a significant role in Jo's journey for self-discovery; it was when Jo wrote

plays for the four of them to perform or wrote songs for the four of them to sing that she was able to successfully combine the fantasies of her imagination with the reality that was this: she had sisters who she loved and who loved her in return. "Much elated with her success, Jo did 'tell on,' all about their plays and plans, their hopes and fears for father, and the most interesting events of the little world in which the sisters lived" (Alcott, 2004, p. 53).

Meg was the first of the four to be married, and Jo was entirely disheartened by the idea of Meg's matrimony. She once told Marmee (the mother of the four sisters), "I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" (Alcott, 2004, p. 215). Jo knew what would happen if Meg left and even told Marmee so; if Meg left, she would "go and fall in love, and there's an end of peace and fun, and cosy times, together. I see it all! They'll go loving round the house, and we shall have to dodge; Meg will be absorbed, and no good to me any more" (Alcott, 2004, p. 216; emphasis added).

Jo was afraid of losing Meg because Meg played a significant part in Jo's self-discovery journey; Jo needed all of her sisters to continue performing in her plays and listening to her stories lest she lose the bits and pieces of herself that she was beginning to get to know. Jo did not want anything to change but rather desired for her family to "be jolly together as [they] always [were]" (Alcott, 2004, p. 216).

There was an element of wholeness and completeness in Jo when she was with her family; it was during those times that the most satisfying emotions filled to the brim of her heart. "We must have our sing in the good old way, for we are all together again, once more', said Jo, feeling that a good shout would be a safe and pleasant vent for the jubilant emotions of her soul" (Alcott, 2004, p. 479).

But as a result of Meg's marriage, Jo learned a great deal about love and matrimony and continued to grow. Meg's powerful and thought-provoking statement to Marmee in chapter twenty-five, was a quote in which readers saw that Marmee's wishes for her daughters and the lives they were to lead were granted. On the day of her vows, Meg says to her mother: "Don't feel that I am separated from you, Marmee dear, or that I love you any less for loving John so much..." (Alcott, 2004, p. 271).

Marmee's wish was that her "daughters [would] be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience...I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace." (Alcott, 2004, pp. 102-103)

Jo threw her heart and soul into her writing after that. Her stories were the "pride of her heart, and were regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise" (Alcott, 2004, p. 79). Jo decided that her future would have nothing more than a "pen for a spouse, a family of stories

for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps” (Alcott, 2004, p. 466).

Meg’s marriage pushed Jo even closer to the brink of reality, where Jo resolved to stay away from. Her writing helped her avoid that particularly dangerous boundary more than anything else. She “did not think of herself a genius by any means; but when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, which she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh” (Alcott, 2004, p. 284).

Jo’s family noticed how important her writing was to her, as well, and was cautious while in her vicinity so as to protect the writer’s sacred literary sanctuary.

Every few weeks, she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and ‘fall into a vortex,’ as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace...[there was a] beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family, who, during these periods, kept their distance, merely popping in their heads semi-occasionally, to ask, with interest, ‘Does genius burn, Jo?’ They did not always venture even to ask this question, but took an observation...” (Alcott, 2004, p. 283).

Jo March believed her identity was built on her brilliant ability to successfully write words in stories, poems, songs, letters, telegrams, notes, and journals. While growing up, using the right words became more and more critical for Jo as did recognizing all the things in her life in which to be grateful; it was during this time, as well, that Jo tried to prepare for the painful and agonizing undertaking of having to say goodbye to someone she loved.

### Goodbyes, Gratitude, and Growth

When a child says, “goodbye,” more times than not, it leads to their loss of innocence – in whole or in part – and escorts them across the threshold from childhood to adulthood. Jo March had to say “goodbye” quite often in *Little Women*. Though readers do not know the details, Jo first said goodbye to her father when he went off to war; she then said “goodbye” to Meg upon her sister’s marriage and then again to Beth upon her death; Jo also said goodbye to her younger sister, Amy, as she left for Rome; and lastly, to the rest of her family and friends when she left for New York.

Marmee once told her: “My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all... the more you love and trust [God], the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom” (Alcott, 2004, p. 86).

When Jo left for New York, a world waited for her that she only read about in stories or newspapers. Jo left her friends “to nibble her pens and taste her ink” (Alcott, 2004, p. 157). She was determined to make something of herself by writing and learning as much as she could. She ambitiously and boldly submitted two items for review and anxiously awaited the decision if they were to be published. She told Laurie the news and only Laurie.

“Well, I’ve left two stories with a newspaper man, and he’s to give his answer next week,” whispered Jo, in her confidant’s ear.

‘Hurrah!’...

‘Hush! It won’t come to anything, I dare say; but I couldn’t rest till I had tried, and I said nothing about it, because I don’t want anyone else to be disappointed.’

‘It won’t fail! Why, Jo, your stories are works of Shakespeare compared to half the rubbish that’s published every day...shan’t we feel proud of our authoress?’

Jo’s eyes sparkled, for it’s always pleasant to be believed in; and a friend’s praise is always sweeter than a dozen newspaper puffs” (Alcott, 2004, pp. 160-161).

It was during that same day when her sister, Meg, irritated Jo to such a state that she lashed out with strong and deliberate words that unmistakably gave readers a deeper insight to her character. ““Don’t try to make me grow up before my time, Meg; it’s hard enough to have you change all of the sudden; let me be a little girl as long as I can” (Alcott, 2004, p. 162).

As Beth lay dying, Jo devoted herself “day and night” to her care (Alcott, 2004, p. 193). Beth was Jo’s “conscience” after all (Alcott, 2004, p. 196), and encouraged her to try to get her writing “printed soon” (Alcott, 2004, p. 289). Jo wanted to find worth and value so much in being a great writer that she “laid her firstborn [first manuscript] on her table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre. In the hope of pleasing everyone, she took every one’s advice; and, like the old man and his donkey in the fable, suited nobody...it was printed, and she got...plenty of praise and blame, both so much greater than she expected, that she was thrown into a state of bewilderment, from which it took some time to recover” (Alcott, 2004, p. 289). Jo had also said that even though she’s “perfectly miserable”, she’ll tolerate it if they “like me” (Alcott, 2004, p. 308).

Jo March was growing into an adult that was finally beginning to understand that there was “no use pretending” (Alcott, 2004, p. 312) and that she needed “a little change” (Alcott, 2004, p. 312). With Jo, “she preferred imaginary heroes to real ones, because, when tired of them, the former could be shut up...and the latter were less manageable...But having given the rein to her lively fancy, it galloped away with her at a great pace; and common sense, being rather weakened by a long course of romance writing, did not come to the rescue” (Alcott, 2004, p. 344). That is until Jo moved to New York and began keeping company with Professor Bhaer.

Throughout her journey, one of the most significant lessons Jo learned was that “hearts cannot be handled rudely” (Alcott, 2004, p. 349). She knew it was time to move on when she realized the “home nest was growing too narrow” (Alcott, 2004, p. 352)

It was while Jo was living in New York that she lost her innocence and discovered that “castles in the air” were only dreams – beautiful, wonderful, fantastic ideas – but not reality and not anything Jo wanted to continue to pursue. She discovered that who she was would be found – not in the air – but on solid ground – and it was the kind of ground on which she wished to plant her feet.

The first phase of losing her innocence was when she realized the quest for achieving her dreams – or reaching the “castles in the air” – became more important than finding herself. “She thought it would do her no harm, for she sincerely meant to write nothing of which she should be ashamed, and quieted all pricks of conscience by anticipations of the happy minute when she should show her earnings and laugh”...( Alcott, 2004, p. 370).

Jo needed to be on her own and away from the safety of her home and family, to see if when pushed from the nest, her wings would sustain her and to have the same desire to soar as she. “Jo soon found that her innocent experience had given her but few glimpses of the tragic world which underlies society; so, regarding it in a business light, she set about supplying her deficiencies with characteristic energy...She thought she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously, she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character. She was living in bad society; and, imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us...She was beginning to feel rather than see this, for much describing of other people’s passions and feelings set her to studying and speculating about her own, - a morbid amusement, in which healthy young minds do not voluntarily indulge. Wrong-doing always brings its own punishment; and, when Jo most needed hers, she got it” (Alcott, 2004, p. 371).

While living in New York, Jo “introduced herself to folly, sin, and misery” (Alcott, 2004, p. 371) and while “endowing her imaginary heroes with every perfection under the sun, Jo was discovering a live hero, who interested her in spite of many human imperfections” (Alcott, 2004, p. 371). But it wasn’t until Jo and Professor Bhaer – the hero – attended a select symposium with Miss Norton, that “her reverence for genius received a severe shock...and it took her some time to recover from the discovery that the great creatures were only men and women, after all...Imagine her dismay...Turning as from a fallen idol, she made other discoveries which rapidly dispelled her romantic illusions” (Alcott, 2004, p. 373).

But it wasn’t until her close friend (and future husband) Professor Bhaer overheard a negative and dishonoring discussion about religion and faith that she saw character outdo propriety.

Despite his diffidence, Bhaer rose with “indignation, and defended religion with all the eloquence of truth – an eloquence which made his broken English musical, and his plain face beautiful. Somehow, as he talked, the world got right again for Jo; the old beliefs that had lasted so long, seemed better than the new. God was not a blind force, and immortality was not a pretty fable, but a blessed fact. She felt as if she had solid ground under her feet again; and when Mr. Bhaer paused, out-talked, but not on whit convinced, Jo wanted to clap her hands and thank him...She did neither; but she remembered this scene, and gave the Professor her heartiest respect, for she knew it cost him an effort to speak out then and there, because his conscience would not let him be silent. She began to see that character is a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty; and to feel that if greatness is what a wise man has defined it to be, -‘truth, reverence, and good-will’ – then her friend Friedrich Bhaer was not



only good, but great” (Alcott, 2004, p. 374).

#### Worth, Words, and Women – (Little Women)

Jo once said that a “conscience is inconvenient” (Alcott, 2004, p. 378). It sounds like a typical idea and/or belief coming from the lips of a teenager. But as an adult woman, Jo March reflected on times in her history when she learned that written words – words which stay forever and cannot be changed – were not as powerful and effective as words that were never spoken at all. Jo knew it first hand, too. During the incident in which Amy’s anger toward Jo resulted in her destroying Jo’s manuscript, “no one spoke of the great trouble – not even Mrs. March – for all had learned by experience that when Jo was in that mood words were wasted” (Alcott, 2004, p. 80).

Mrs. March also taught her daughter the importance of words when feeling angry. “I’ve learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips; and when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away a minute, and give myself a little shake, for being so weak and wicked” (Alcott, 2004, p. 84).

The day Amy almost drowned, “the sincerest prayer she had ever prayed left her [Jo’s] heart, without words” (Alcott, 2004, p. 86). Jo then went into where Amy slept and saw her “hold out her arms, with a smile that went straight to Jo’s heart. Neither said a word, but they hugged one another close, in spite of the blankets, and everything was forgiven and forgotten in one hearty kiss” (Alcott, 2004, p. 86).

Jo’s sister Beth believed that “a loving word [could] medicine most ills” (349); but Jo “[remembered] words which had been her undoing” (Alcott, 2004, p. 328). Jo grasps on to a valuable life-long lesson as she reaches a milestone in her self-discovery journey when she says: “Well, the winter’s gone, and I’ve written no books – earned no fortune; but I’ve made a friend worth having and I’ll try to keep him all my life” (Alcott, 2004, p. 381).

As Beth was dying, Jo realized that “she was right – there was no need of any words when they got home, for father and mother saw plainly, now, what they had prayed to be saved from seeing” (Alcott, 2004, p. 398).

And when Jo found a generous amount of success in her writing towards the end of the novel, she states that she was “more touched by her father’s words than by any amount of praise from the world” (Alcott, 2004, p. 463).

When Jo saw Laurie after he married Amy, readers were able to grieve and remember the good times with her as she said to him: “...we never can be a boy and girl again – the happy old times can’t come back, and we mustn’t expect it. We are man and woman now, with sober work to do, for play-time is over, and we must give up frolicking. I’m sure you feel this; I see the change in you, and you’ll find it in me; I shall miss my boy, but I shall love the man as much, and admire him more, because he means to be what I hoped he would. We can’t be playmates any longer, but we will be brother and sister, to love and help one another all our lives, won’t we, Laurie?”

(Alcott, 2004, p. 471).

Words seemed to have been of great importance to Louisa May Alcott. Of the forty seven chapters in *Little Women*, over ten of them have titles directly related to the use of words in one way or another. Chapter titles include “Letters” (Chapter 16) and “A Telegram” (Chapter 15) to “Jo’s Journal” (Chapter 33) and “Gossip” (Chapter 24).

“The character of Jo, modeled after Alcott herself, is most often cited as the reason for the novel’s enduring popularity: She rebels against conformity but succeeds in both her professional work as a writer and in her personal life as a wife and mother. Despite the conflicted feminist message inherent in Jo’s eventual marriage—for even though she disparages marriage throughout the novel, she willingly acquiesces to Friedrich Bhaer—she remains a model of assertiveness and independence” (“*Little Women Analysis* - eNotes.com”)

When all was said and done, by the end of *Little Women*, Alcott must have just wanted her characters to “lay at rest like storm-beaten boats, safe at anchor in a quiet harbor” (Alcott, 2004, p. 212).

Conclusion

Louisa May Alcott never intended for Jo March to be the heroine of *Little Women*. In Chapter forty two, she said: “Now if she had been the heroine of a moral storybook, she ought at this period of her life to have become quite saintly, renounced the world, and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in her pocket. But you see Jo wasn’t a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others, and she just acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic, as the mood suggested...Jo had got so far, she was learning to do her duty, and to feel unhappy if she did not; but to do it cheerfully – ah, that was another thing! She had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard; and now she had her wish, - for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to father and mother, trying to make home as happy to them as they had to her? And, if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl, than to give up her own hopes, plans and desires, and cheerfully live for others?” (Alcott, 2004, p. 461).

According to the editors of the *Little Women SparkNotes.com* article, “Jo gives up her writing and marries Professor Bhaer, which can be seen either as a domestic triumph or as a professional loss, since Jo loses her headstrong independence...Because she displays good and bad traits in equal measure, Jo is a very unusual character for nineteenth-century didactic fiction. Jo’s bad traits—her rebelliousness, anger, and outspoken ways—do not make her unappealing; rather, they suggest her humanity. Jo is a likely precursor to a whole slew of lovably flawed heroes and heroines of children’s books, among them Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*” (SparkNotes Editors).

Throughout the whole novel, Jo is striving for wealth, fame, and success through her writing. But by the end of the novel, (and after Jo has successfully secured a sense of self), readers find

out that “her pen lay idle” as she lays “a foundation for the sensation story of her own life” (Alcott, 2004, p. 379).

And it was Beth that taught her the lesson of a lifetime. Jo recalled her departed sister, whom she loved so much, telling her: “Remember that I don’t forget you, and that you’ll be happier in doing that [taking care of father and mother] than writing splendid books, or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go...” (Alcott, 2004, p. 444).

Jo became “a very happy woman” (Alcott, 2004, p. 515) who “told no more stories” (Alcott, 2004, p. 515). She knew that “into each life some rain must fall” (Alcott, 2004, p. 519); she was no longer the girl she once was. Instead, she was a woman in love with a man, and when together, they “cared little of what anybody thought, for they were enjoying the happy hour that seldom comes but once in any life – the magical moment which bestows youth on the old, beauty on the plain, wealth on the poor, and gives human hearts a foretaste of heaven” (Alcott, 2004, p. 503). Jo March had learned that one needs to “be worthy of love and love will come” (Alcott, 2004, p. 506).

When all of them had grown up, Amy inquired of Jo:

“Do you remember our castles in the air, Jo?”

‘Yes, I remember; but the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now. I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these;’ and Jo pointed from the lively lads in the distance to her father, leaning on the Professor’s arm, as they walked to and fro in the sunshine, deep in one of the conversations which both enjoyed so much, and then to her mother, sitting enthroned among her daughters, with their children in her lap and at her feet, as if all found help and happiness in the face which never could grow old to them.” (Alcott, 2004, p. 518).

Louisa May Alcott undoubtedly made this wish for her readers as they finished her most famous work: “...however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!” (Alcott, 2004, p. 520). After all, there is no greater happiness than that of Josephine “Jo” March in the classic American novel that is, *Little Women*.

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