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THE HERO'S JOURNEY: The March Sisters as American Heroines

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Resumo

A Jornada do Herói: As Irmãs March como Heroínas Americanas

A noção do monomito de Campbell, comumente denominada como ‘A Jornada do Herói’, é um padrão de narração prevalente em diversas culturas e gêneros literários. Ela tende a envolver um protagonista – o herói – e seu processo de crescimento através de uma série de eventos um tanto previsíveis, resultando em uma mudança literal ou metafórica no ambiente da história. Adicionalmente, Carl Jung propôs uma teoria de arquétipos, que, apesar de não ser útil ao seu original campo de Psicologia, provou-se vantajosa para análises literárias. Utilizando estes conceitos, este estudo busca estabelecer o perfil do ‘Herói’ e as características de sua jornada em relação ao romance de Louisa May Alcott de 1868, *Little Women*. A protagonista, Jo March, parece uma candidata provável para concorrer a esta posição, mas o seguinte estudo busca estabelecer que a maioria das irmãs March merece este título. Esta dissertação tem como objetivo explicar as formas nas quais o heroísmo tem sido definido sob um contexto patriarcal, e desta forma influencia a maneira como se tende a analisar personagens. Similarmente, será investigada a relação entre as personagens e o contexto dos Estados Unidos da América durante o século XIX, tendo em consideração o que era possível, social e profissionalmente, para o sexo feminino, bem como o paralelo entre a formação da identidade do país, das irmãs March e de várias modalidades de feminilidade em discussão, assim contribuindo para uma definição do conceito de ‘Heroína Americana’.

Palavras-chave: *Little Women*, crítica literária arquetípica, monomito, heroísmo, análise feminista.

Abstract

The Hero's Journey: The March Sisters as American Heroines

Joseph Campbell's notion of the monomyth, commonly termed 'The Hero's Journey', is a storytelling template prevalent across cultures and genres. It tends to involve a protagonist – the hero – and their process of growth through a somewhat formulaic series of events resulting in a literal or metaphorical change in their world. Additionally, Carl Jung proposed a theory of archetypes, which, while not necessarily useful to its original field of Psychology, has proven advantageous to literary analyses. Using these concepts, this study seeks to establish the profile of the 'Hero' and the characteristics of their journey in relation to Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel *Little Women*. The protagonist, Jo March, seems a likely contender to earn this position, but the following study seeks to establish that most of the March sisters are in fact deserving of this title. Through excerpts, examples, and investigation, this thesis aims to explain the ways in which heroism has been defined under a patriarchal context, and thus influences the way characters are usually analyzed. Similarly, the relationship between the characters and their context in 19th century United States of America will be investigated, taking into account what was socially and professionally possible for the female sex, as well as the parallel between the formation of the identity of the country, the March sisters, and the many modalities of femininity under discussion, thus contributing to a definition for the concept of an 'American Heroine'.

Keywords: *Little Women*, archetypical literary criticism, monomyth, heroism, feminist analysis.

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1. Introduction

There are multiple ways to approach the concept of a 'hero'. In literature, particularly, there is no unified definition of the term. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I will be drawing mainly from the theories of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung to delineate a suitable definition for this term, grounded in both Literary Studies and Psychology, taking into account the specific historical and cultural complexities of what it means to be an 'American Hero'. The goal of this first section is to ascertain a definition of heroism that, based on Campbell's and Jung's works, can determine what the literary hero typically embodies. The aim of this paper, then, is to argue that most – if not all – March sisters can be considered 'American Heroines'.

1.1 The Novel

Little Women tells the story of the March family, primarily the four young sisters, in their New England home. The novel follows Jo, Meg, Amy and Beth as they navigate growing up amid the American Civil War, the reason their father is currently absent. Somewhat impoverished, each of the girls deals with their position in the world in a different way, some resigning themselves to domestic labor and others going in pursuit of artistic greatness or financial security through marriage. Although most characters are fleshed out in the novel through the narrator's commentary, Jo is very clearly the protagonist in this story. Her exploits and uniqueness are recounted throughout the book in such a way that compels one to root for her, beyond all others. To this end, it is much emphasized how "un-feminine" this particular character is. Described by the narrator and by the other Marches as "rude", "active", "boyish" and "unladylike", Jo expresses her wit, bravery and rebellion at every turn,

without failing to also be kind, generous and compassionate towards others. Though born female, Jo often expresses her dissatisfaction with being a woman, many times because of the societal expectations that are placed upon her as such. She disdains vanity and sentimentality, as well as other concepts associated with femininity: “It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott, 3), she says, before the book’s first chapter is over. At the time, femininity was associated with piety, domesticity, subservience and purity (Cruea, 188), concepts that have not significantly changed in the past hundred and fifty years or so (Gaucher et al.). Louisa May Alcott herself seemed to share Jo’s views, claiming that her own sisters were the only girls she liked (Myerson et al., 22). Alcott published *Little Women* in 1868 as a means to provide for her family, and much of it is thought to be autobiographical (Waxman). In her journals, much evidence can be found to the point that the author’s experiences heavily influenced the plot of the novel, including the death of one of her own sisters (Cheney, 199).

1.2 What is a Hero?

When Joseph Campbell first published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949, he defined a heroic figure as “the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations” (15). In the context of the 19th century United States, afflicted by poverty and war, the March family surely shows no shortage of historical limitations. In addition to that, Alcott provides us with a number of personal battles faced by each character throughout the novel, many connected to the oppression and suppression of women and their voices at the time, as well as with the March’s sisters’ triumphs in spite of this.

As a prominent professor in the fields of mythology and literature, Campbell is considered an important figure for writers. From his work, emerged a “guide” that drew from mythology, folklore and classics. Based on Campbell’s books, a screenwriter named Christopher Vogler popularized ‘The Hero’s Journey’ in Hollywood, to the point where we can almost blame him the industry’s penchant for formulaic scripts. In Campbell’s view, most literature and mythology followed a predictable arc, a structure that repeats itself despite its diverse contents. This template is comprised of twelve stages: the “ordinary world”, “call to adventure”, “refusal of the call”, “meeting the mentor”, “crossing the threshold”, “tests, allies, enemies”, “approach to the inmost cave”, “the ordeal”, “reward”, “the road back”, “the resurrection”, and “return with elixir”. Traditionally, this quest will be undertaken by a male protagonist faced with incredible circumstances (Anaz, 262). This ‘hero’, from Heracles to Captain America, has been brave, strong and often ambitious. They display, as Brit Marling writes in her *New York Times* opinion article (2020), “masculine modalities of power”. The Three-Act structure, so common and revered in storytelling, is a direct reflection of Campbell’s monomyth as well as a male paradigm of narrative. Set up is followed by confrontation and resolution, as men seek to mythologize other men (Tatar, 6). Marling notes that the sequence of “inciting incident, rising tension, explosive climax and denouement” closely match a male orgasm, and is often positioned as the default pattern for stories.

In spite of Campbell’s brief inclusion of women in his main definition of heroism, neither he nor Jung positioned women as heroes, having in fact tended to relegate and confine them to their roles as mothers, wives, or temptresses:

The biological function of women is to bring forth life and nourishment,” Campbell intoned in one work after another. What do women represent in mythology? The

answer is simple: the “nature principle,” for “we are born from her physically.” The male, on the other hand, represents “the social principle and social roles,” we are told in Campbell’s meditation on goddesses. “The father is the initiator into society and the meaning of life, whereas the mother represents the principle of life itself.” In other words, anatomy is destiny. (Tatar, xv)

Tatar denounces Campbell and his limited view of heroism multiple times in her book, contesting his suggestions that self-actualization, especially when attained through language, is exclusively reserved for individuals born male. To Campbell, it seems, the woman is one who inspires poetry, not one who writes it. Of Campbell’s notion, Tatar writes: “Women don’t need to make the journey. In the whole mythological tradition, the woman is there. All she has to do is to realize that she’s the place that people are trying to get to.” (22)

Jung, though he seems to value women more than Campbell, shares with him a limited view of the female role in the world and in literature, arguing that the most important relationship of childhood is the relation to the mother (Jung, 236). “The magic authority of the feminine”, he writes, includes wisdom, spiritual elevation beyond reason, kindness, care, nourishment, sustenance and growth (Jung, 92); all very motherly characteristics which agree with the 19th century notions of ‘True Womanhood’.

From these excerpts, we can infer that both Jung and Campbell, in their perhaps well-intentioned efforts to acknowledge the importance of women, perpetuated harmful ideas about the role half the population plays not only in literature, but also in the larger cultural and social spheres.

Researcher Elaine Kinsella and her colleagues affirm that “the concept of a hero is flexible enough to accommodate both stereotypically masculine and feminine hero exemplars” (7). In both genders, heroism seems to require bravery and courage, though

neither of these is enough on its own. “Moral integrity, honesty, altruism, compassion, and humility, which give insight into the motivations and behaviors of heroes” (9), complete her team’s definition of heroism. If heroism is a set of values which consists of overcoming undesirable circumstances, then it is not and cannot be limited by gender, just as the term “mankind” does not exclude women from humanity. But this must be made explicit, as heroic characteristics have often been equated with what Marling defines as “masculine modalities of power”: “It’s difficult for us to imagine femininity itself – empathy, vulnerability, listening – as strong. When I look at the world our stories have helped us envision and then erect, these are the very qualities that have been vanquished in favor of an overwrought masculinity” (2020), she writes. Asserting the equal value of non-males, in the world and in storytelling, is a heroic act in and of itself. Overcoming the patriarchal structures imposed upon us may not require as much muscle as slaying a Hydra, but it certainly demands strength, perhaps of an undervalued kind in our patriarchal society.

Especially within the framework of archetypal psychoanalytical literary criticism, an archetype is a template, an empty form filled by cultural and historical characteristics (Anaz, 255). Campbell’s ‘hero’ is an archetype based on Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, a collection of notions shared by people. In Ancient Greece, for instance, a hero was a man successful in battle. In the *Oxford Dictionary*, it is a person admired for their brave or “good” deeds. Campbell acknowledges that the image of the hero evolves over time, and depends on cultural context (195). Jung’s notion of the hero archetype is similarly predicated on this: “What we seek in visible human form is not man, but the superman, the hero or god [...] who symbolizes the ideas, forms and forces which grip and mold the soul” (Jung, 178). As such, Jung’s and Campbell’s ‘hero’ figure would be an individual who can represent the values,

aspirations and ideals of a particular society or culture, but also overcome their own shortcomings.

The figure of an American Hero, specifically, is even more elusive than the hero itself. The United States, emancipated from British rule in 1776, have always sought a distinctive identity. In the literary arena, this is most evident in 'The Great American Novel', a concept introduced by John William DeForest in an article published the very same year as *Little Women*. This endeavor was introduced in order to solidify a national identity, and its characteristics include ubiquity, notability, and morality. With over a dozen stage and screen adaptations since 1912 and a constant stream of sold copies, *Little Women* easily fulfills the first two criteria, having influenced countless people over the past one hundred and fifty-four years. As for morality, it is easy to recognize a barrage of Christian values sprinkled throughout the narrative. Alcott's novel shows no shortage of "love thy neighbor" moments, with the March family especially committed to sharing what little they have, and to attending to the less fortunate at nearly every opportunity – even if it does require a bit of convincing on Marmee's part. In the context of the United States, therefore, it seems that to be a hero means being widely known, admired, and morally prodigious. However, it must be kept in mind that the United States of America are an extremely plural country, and that no culture is a monolith; despite establishing its national identity in this way, and the many studies which investigate and assert "American values" such as self-reliance, individuality, and freedom (Althen, 4), there are inherent contradictions, differences, and invisibilities to any culture, which is why this thesis focuses on symbolic representations of American heroism, as embodied – in this case – by the March sisters:

Every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once.

Including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, (crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once). (Jameson, 95)

It has been previously established in this introduction that Campbell's definition of the hero entails overcoming personal and historical limitations, as well as going on a journey, whether that journey is physical – such as travel into a mythical land – or symbolic – the transition from childhood to adulthood. Jung's notion of heroism is predicated upon an individual or character embodying its time and culture's ideals of excellence. As such, an 'American Hero' in New England during the Civil War may look drastically different from current notions of American heroism. Nevertheless, Jung has written about the hero in Campbell's sense, noting that "he is first and foremost a self-representation of the longing of the unconscious [...] for the light of consciousness" (205), despite the ultimate unattainability of complete consciousness in Jung's theory. As such, it can be interpreted that Jung's hero is the ideal of ultimate self-actualization, usually in accordance with the values of one's culture, but always through a journey of personal growth, which aligns with Campbell's view. The American Hero, therefore, would be a remarkable and widely known individual with unquestionable morals who has struggled to overcome internal and external challenges, and succeeded. However, as mentioned, it can be easy to equate these feats of resilience, courage and strength with masculine modalities of power. For this reason, I will seek to establish not only the profile of the American Hero, but that of the American Heroine.

1.3 The Heroine and her Journey

Although the notion of heroism has its roots in Greek demigods and exceptionally skilled warriors, our increasingly complex world shows no shortage of metaphorical battles to be fought, especially by marginalized demographics. At a time when women could not vote, own property, or participate in most professions, the March sisters are shown going to school, teaching, writing and pursuing other creative exploits. Maria Tatar (38) mentions Thomas Carlyle's iteration of the heroic archetype, the 'man of letters', as one who participates in writing or printing: "the great deeds of heroes like Achilles, Aeneas, or Regulus would be nothing without the literary labours of Homer, Virgil, or Horace", he lectures in 1841. This, Tatar argues, is where the notion of the heroine begins to flourish.

With fierce curiosity, determination and intellectual prowess, figures such as Jo March, Anne Shirley¹ (*Anne of Green Gables*), and Francie Nolan² (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*) pave the way for countless female characters whose acts of heroism hinge upon their literary voices. "Heir to the prophets, poets, and seers of times past, this hero conjures with words", Tatar writes (38). In the absence of opportunities to demonstrate or fulfill masculine modalities of power, such as physical strength and ambition, female heroines exercise their courage and resilience not only by existing in a world which continuously oppresses them, but also by expressing themselves authentically, often through writing. "The rebel and her cause are often right there, in plain sight, though not necessarily where the heroic action has traditionally been located" (Tatar, 6). As women became steadily more

¹ L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* was first published in 1908.

² Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was first published in 1943.

literate and educated over time, new avenues for artistic expression were open. Virginia

Woolf writes:

Aphra Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind, but was of practical importance. A husband might die, or some disaster overtake the family. Hundreds of women began as the 18th century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing. (Woolf, 54)

This cultural shift, which seems to have begun in the 17th century, directly affected Louisa May Alcott, who wrote to support her family. Consequently, her work of autofiction reflected a brave young writer whose needs and ambitions dovetailed to create a new and inspiring kind of heroine: the writer. Whether naturally outspoken or demure, this figure of the female writer demonstrated intelligence, persistence and agency simply by committing to the act of writing, which was still a male-dominated field. Additionally, “For women, language is often a complex way of coping with, or all-out resisting, oppression” (Montell, 130). Self-expression, resiliency and authenticity, however, are not the sole characteristics of this heroine. Firstly, a number of books and articles seems to agree that the ‘hero’ and the ‘heroine’ are separate entities, each with a defining identity: “Simply putting a woman into the traditional hero’s journey does not necessarily create female version of the journey” (Emerson, 133).

Differentiating between attributes generally perceived as 'masculine' or 'feminine', Emerson (2009) argues that a female version of the journey requires emphasis on feminine qualities, not biology. Using Chihiro³ (*Spirited Away*), Lucy Pevensie⁴ (*The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*) and Dorothy⁵ (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*) as case studies, the author posits empathy, nurturance, connection with community, and negotiation as characteristically female traits, whereas physical strength, courage, independence and self-reliance would be their male counterparts. In his essay "*Innocence as a Superpower*", Emerson argues in favor of a new perspective on heroism, framing traits such as innocence, authenticity, and compassion as prominent values that could figure in the 'heroine's journey'. The analysis Emerson presents is predicated on Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, a notion that encompasses the basic patterns of stories the literary critic found while researching comparative mythology. Although the term was initially coined by James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*, Campbell's monomyth equates to a sequence of events which commonly appears in stories, and is so named because it can be applied to countless myths and legends. Campbell termed it monomyth due to the nature of the pattern found by him, prevalent across eras and cultures. Among Homer, indigenous tales, and the Brothers Grimm, there seemed to be a template underlying most narratives. Observing this, he set out to map and characterize 'The Hero's Journey'.

When Campbell detailed this process in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he included stages and characters that tend to be present. In the first stage, called "ordinary world", the protagonist – or 'hero' – is established in their natural habitat, prior to the Journey

³ Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* was released in 2001.

⁴ C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* was published in 1950.

⁵ L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published in 1900.

(Voytilla, 2). The audience is given a chance to identify with this character, understanding their basic traits and motivations. Stories tend to present problems, or Central Dramatic Questions (CAD), which are intended to disrupt the hero's Ordinary World. In order to solve this problem, the hero must often enter a different world, which is unfamiliar and can be unsafe. The second stage, therefore, involves the introduction of the Special World as an initial solution to the hero's problem. When the hero is challenged or disrupted by this issue, Campbell says he is *called* to adventure. If accepted, this Call leads to the next stage, "meeting the mentor". If refused, however, the risks and stakes of the Journey are exposed, as well as the necessity of resolving the CAD. The Mentor archetype provides the hero with information, training, confidence, or anything else required for the Journey ahead. This Mentor, marked by wisdom and experience, has the purpose of guiding the hero. Once committed to his path, the protagonist must "cross the threshold" between the Ordinary and Special worlds. This stage is irreversible. Having crossed the threshold, tests, allies and enemies await the hero as he learns about the Special World. This allows both character and audience to become acquainted with the new *status quo*. In the following stage, "approach to the inmost cave", the hero prepares to face the central ordeal, seeking to solve the CAD. The ordeal itself is a principal crisis that finds the protagonist confronting their greatest challenges, often a fear, and experiencing a symbolic – or literal – death. At this point, the journey seems doomed. This stage sees the hero pushed to his limits until he is finally reborn, more capable and powerful than before. Following this rebirth, the hero earns his sought-after reward. "Whatever the treasure", Voytilla writes, "the Hero has earned the right to celebrate" (5). This allows both audience and character to release tension before it is built again for the final climax and resolution. "The Road Back" involves a recommitment to the Journey's completion, sending the hero on his way through the threshold home to the Ordinary World.

Now stronger, wiser, and more committed to his path, the hero is confronted with a final trial, his “most dangerous meeting with death” (Voytilla, 6).

This ordeal proves the hero's ability to apply his newfound knowledge and strength, carrying it back with him to the Ordinary World. This so called “Resurrection” can symbolize a final transformation necessary to the character's return. The challenge may be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or any combination of these. However, it is important to point out that the protagonist's heroism lies not on his victory, but the sacrifice being made for the benefit of the Ordinary World; by resolving the CAD, the hero may save countless lives or perhaps the world itself. Often, this will take the form of a confrontation between the Hero and his Shadow, a dark mirror image which projects his fears and flaws onto a villain, organization or situation that must be resolved. In the final stage, having – hopefully – vanquished the problem, the hero experiences a return to the Ordinary World, carrying what Campbell calls an Elixir, a final reward to be bestowed upon his peers. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus's mere presence is a boon to the people of Ithaca, torn and impoverished by the suitors who sought to take his place. In George Lucas's saga *Star Wars*, it can be argued that Luke Skywalker's return after the Death Star's destruction provides the galaxy with hope. Usually, this stage brings closure to a cycle, even if there is potential for future adventures: “Balance has been restored to the Ordinary World, and the Hero may now embark on a new life, forever influenced by the Journey traveled” (Voytilla, 7).

I write ‘hero’ and ‘protagonist’ here as primarily male entities because, as previously evidenced, Campbell made clear that a woman's participation on this journey tends to be an exception rather than the norm (Cousineau, 109). Nevertheless, this template tends to apply to stories led by characters of all genders, although the characteristics to which we refer –

'strength', 'power' – often vary. Emerson, for instance, argues that young literary heroines are often propelled by their own perceived powerlessness, which can compel others to protect them (145). Although this is not the case with all the March sisters, it can certainly be noted in Beth, whose quiet and scared demeanor tends to motivate compassion and action on the part of others. This can be seen early in the book, when Mr. Laurence not only allows the girl to make use of his piano when he notices she is frightened of him, but gifts one to her when she sends him a pair of shoes as thanks, after which she is no longer fearful and walks over to his house to thank him personally (Alcott, 36).

During a time when agency was not always an option available to women, it is necessary to search deeper for their heroic feats. Similarly, considering the domestic sphere as Campbell's and Veytilla's *Ordinary World* would be harmful, as women were not expected – or often allowed – to leave home much. To this end, this study will be considering the Journey of the March girls one through adolescence and into adulthood. This will be explored later among the character analyses.

In any case, it is important to note that novels, especially those prior to the advent of feminism, exhibit journeys that tend to be more literal for men, whereas for women these are strictly symbolic. For instance, J. R. R. Tolkien's Frodo Baggins⁶ travels from his home in the Shire all the way to Mordor in order to destroy a powerful ring that corrupts all who wear it. On the other hand, Austen's heroines often do not leave their sheltered, highly domestic and marriage-focused lives, because their journeys tend to be internal: In *Emma* (1815), we see a spoiled and classist young girl grow into an open-minded, kind woman.

⁶ Tolkien's first book in the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was published in 1954.

In *Pride and Prejudice*⁷, it is perceptible how Elizabeth overcomes her assessment of Mr. Darcy, having initially misjudged him. Over the course of these novels, Austen's female characters learn to negotiate their lives in terms of their position as women during the 19th century, balancing the needs of their families and their own values, as well as adapting and growing when necessary.

Just as the March sisters embark on a journey from childhood into adulthood, the journeys of Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet as heroines involve leaving their comfortable, Ordinary Worlds of preconceived notions about other people and stepping into a new land, one where the absolutes they once held as immutable truths are not only challenged, but in some cases left behind entirely.

The heroine, then, is a female character whose qualities are not necessarily aligned with those society expects of her, but rather those which often go uncelebrated: curiosity, imagination, determination, intelligence, authenticity, compassion. According to Emerson, the "twin skills of nurturing and healing" can be considered "feminine attributes" (143). As such, the heroine's motivations are often more important than the traits she displays; Whereas the heroes of the past tended to seek glory and immortality, the heroine is often on a journey of self-discovery and care for others. This is certainly true of the March sisters, who found themselves pursuing their interests while caring for their family and community: despite her hard-won independence in New York, Jo hurries home the moment she is notified of her sister's illness, and remains to take care of her until the end, as well as her family in the aftermath of Beth's death.

⁷ Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813.

The American Heroine, however, might be expected to display distinctly “American” values, like individuality and self-reliance (Althen, 4). In Delphine Laire’s *Little Women, a Feminist Study*, it is stated that “American heroines often seek independence” (14), further confirming this assumption. Moreover, the most prominent American literary heroines are often seen exploring and developing their sense of agency, and in many cases are engaged with the search for freedom and equality. For Dorothy, L. Frank Baum’s protagonist in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, being a heroine entails not only returning home (Emerson, 137), but also providing her new friends with the fulfillment of their dreams and needs, as well as liberating Oz from the terror of the Wicked Witch of the West. Simply by acting according to her values, Dorothy enlists the help of many powerful allies and manages to leave the Special World she finds herself in better than she encountered it. Similarly, Scout Finch from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) defies social norms and expectations as she learns about racism and inequality. Raised by a deeply moral father, Scout embodies courage, compassion and self-expression to denounce the injustices happening in her hometown.

As this thesis labors to establish the concept of heroism and the profile of the American Heroine, the aim of this essay is to analyze the characters in *Little Women* and examine their claim to the titles of Hero and Heroine, especially as it pertains to their position as women during the American Civil War. This position will be explored in the following section.

1.4 Womanhood in 19th Century America

In her essay *Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth Century Woman Movement*⁸, Susan Crucea discusses the “templates” of femininity available to women over the course of the 19th century. In addition to the traditional ‘True Woman’, the classic image of the frail, pious homemaker, these other ideals for women included the ‘Real Woman’, the ‘Public Woman’ and the ‘New Woman’.

According to Crucea, the True Woman was first described by Barbara Welter as “the symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home” (Welter, 21). The “heart” was considered a woman’s value, whereas a man’s was his mind. Under this logic, “intellectual pursuits were strongly discouraged” (Crucea, 189) and women were expected to raise children, care for the home and provide spiritual comfort. In the first half of the 19th century, it seems society’s ideal for women was to have them “bound by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience” (Smith-Rosenberg, 13). In a way, Marmee and Beth perform this role to perfection, as they are the designated keepers of the home in both the physical and spiritual senses; Beth is assigned the majority of chores and is largely considered the “angel” of the family, whereas Marmee is the moral ideal the March girls tend to seek and look up to in their times of need. Her guidance is sought often for spiritual matters, though she seems to have no intellectual ambitions of her own. Her main role is to be a mother and a wife. Additionally, “it was a True Woman's duty to sacrifice herself in order

⁸ Prior to the conception of feminism, the woman movement saw countless individuals – mostly women – advocate for universal suffrage and other issues concerning gender equality. The Seneca Falls Convention was one such event which became a landmark in Women’s Rights history.

to turn her father, brothers, husband, and sons from their sinful ways” (Showalter 134).

Interestingly, the True Woman's spiritual strength was often offset by her physical frailty, a trait that can be clearly seen in Beth March. Cruea writes of the True Woman: “she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness” (189). In keeping with this portrayal, Alcott records of Beth: “Beth did have the fever, and was much sicker than anyone” (111).

Real Womanhood, a notion which developed during and after the Civil War due to necessity – women filled the absence of many men in the workforce who had been drafted –, “encouraged healthy exercise and activity, permitted women a minor degree of independence, and stressed economic self-sufficiency as a means of survival” (Cruea, 191). At this point, education was viewed as an asset to women, insofar as it aided domestic management and child-rearing. Furthermore, it was helpful in attracting men who would make good husbands, which is something Meg and Amy March seem to be keenly aware of. As intelligent women aware of their position in a society which does not afford them independence and expects them to make advantageous marriages, these sisters negotiate a balance between their personal values and cultural expectations. As this ideal of womanhood did not look down upon employment, both at one point sought education and an income – Meg as a governess, Amy by accompanying Aunt March in her travels to Europe. “While a career was not encouraged because it would distract from domestic responsibilities, work played a central role in Real Womanhood, which demanded that women be "employed" in charitable, domestic, or salaried work since it taught the woman self-reliance. Conversely, idleness was strongly discouraged as it promoted dependency and could lead to moral temptation” (Cruea, 193). This seems to be what Marmee wished for her children, as she often expresses her wish

for them to marry kind men and to not be idle. In fact, there is an entire chapter of the book dedicated to Marmee teaching her daughters the value of not wasting time.⁹

Public womanhood was a slightly more controversial paradigm of femininity, as it involved visibility, which was often associated with promiscuity – the term Public Woman initially referred to sex workers. Because of long-standing prejudices such as these, gaining public access in the second half of the 19th century was an uphill battle for American women. Meanwhile, a public man was defined as "one who act[ed] in and for the universal good" (Cruea, 194). Beginning to engage in the cultural realm, the Public Woman starts to – somewhat respectably – earn an income by writing, and consequently influence culture: “the popularity of the novel enabled a great number of women to contribute their voices to a traditionally male-dominated culture”, Cruea (196) writes. The novel increased the worth of female subjectivity and made it possible to bridge the gap between the private sphere and public expression. Louisa May Alcott herself could be considered a Public Woman, as she engaged in the publication of works which revealed female interiority, and even sparked cultural changes. Similarly, Jo March was intent on sharing her interiority through her writing, and – ideally – to not only be taken seriously, but also admired.

Lastly, the notion of New Womanhood appeared, ready to demand changes its predecessors could scarcely have conceived of. To them, it was not enough to be publicly visible and slightly independent; the expectations that had been placed upon women for so long were now being largely contested. Marked by the arguments of Enlightenment Rationalists, New Womanhood brought a desire for true equality: equal opportunity and access to employment, education and general human rights. It was also important to this part

⁹ Chapter eleven, “Experiments”

of the Movement that women be freed from social conventions. To this effect, Jo March is a true New Woman. At every step, she contests the expectations placed on the gender, questioning tradition and arbitrary norms. In the following excerpt, Meg lectures Jo about her “unfeminine” behavior:

You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady. (Alcott, 4)

To which Jo replies: “I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty” (Alcott, 4). Protected from societal expectations placed on women, Jo seems to take shelter in the freedom childhood allows her. “Imagination is fine so long as it stays in childhood”, Tatar confirms (177).

Between the 1870s and the 1920s around forty to sixty percent of female college graduates were unmarried, “at a time when only 10 percent of all American women did not” (Smith-Rosenberg, 253). This, however, was too extreme for Alcott's publishers, who famously demanded Jo's character be married by the end of the novel.

While Real Womanhood and Public Womanhood permitted women to work outside the home in cases of necessity or to benefit the public good, a woman's primary concern was still expected to be the wellbeing of her family. (Cruea, 200). Renouncing marriage and motherhood was considered radical by the general public in the 19th century. Expressing “distressing disinterest in the female domestic sphere—especially an overt disgust with housework... and a shocking desire for 'fellowship' with men” (Cogan 258), the New Woman was often met with the same reactions as Jo in the beginning of her journey; reproachful and often disdainful of her behavior, multiple characters scold and warn Jo of her transgressions

against gender expectations. She does not simply Jo refuse Laurie's proposal and suggest she is ill-suited for marriage in general; Jo truly desires a life of creative accomplishment and financial independence above all else. Unfortunately for her, succeeding at and prioritizing a career was frowned upon for women. Jo wanted to – as Cogan (259) put it – exercise her skills and exist in a man's sphere. This solidifies her identity as a New Woman: "The New Woman also set about establishing her own economic and civic identity. She demanded the same rights as men to economic independence and political power." (Cruea, 200)

As this thesis has established, each March sister has a different personality and response to living in a patriarchal society. Meg is aware of the complexities of her position as a poor woman, but ultimately marries for love and seeks employment to aid her family's income. Her primary identity is as a homemaker, having acted maternally to her younger sisters before she had children of her own. In this sense, it can be posited that Meg is more closely associated with Real Womanhood. Beth seems like the childhood version of the True Woman, as she does not live long enough to marry, but exhibits all the qualities tied to this ideal. Jo, as discussed, takes on many characteristics belonging to Public and New Womanhood, whereas Amy spends much of the novel unsure of how to gain societal approval as well as accomplish her dreams. In chapter thirteen, "Castles in the Air", Amy confesses that her favorite dream is "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott, 92). Whereas she understands the conventions she as a woman is beholden to, and does not seem to shun them for the most part – she enjoys wearing beautiful dresses and is deemed the "hope" of the March family, having always asserted she would marry a rich gentleman –, Amy March has lofty and "unfeminine" ambitions of her own. Caught between the societal acceptance of Real Womanhood and the

allure of being a Public Woman, at least to some extent, Amy proves to be one of the most complex and interesting characters in Alcott's novel.

1.5 The American Heroine

To determine the identity of the American Heroine – as a template or archetype in its own right –, a review must first be made of the previous definitions given for heroism in this study. For Jung and Campbell, a hero seems to be an individual who (1) overcomes their internal and external limitations, (2) embodies the ideals and values of their culture, and (3) goes on a journey of transformation. For Tatar and Emerson, a heroine is a female character who displays characteristics such as curiosity, determination, intellectual prowess, authenticity, and countless other virtues that are considered “feminine” and therefore defy our societal expectations of strength. With a strong emphasis on connection, communication, and empathy, these heroines tend to demonstrate their agency in a way which benefits themselves and others, whereas male heroes tend to seek glory and recognition. This can be observed, for instance, in many of Homer's heroes, such as Achilles and Odysseus.

The American Hero, as has been discussed, can follow the characteristics set forth by the idea of the Great American Novel – ubiquity, notability, and morality – and embody some of the values upheld by the United States as being a part of the country's national identity, such as self-reliance, individuality, and freedom. In the 19th century, specifically, there was a clash of values, as the North and South battled for political and cultural supremacy. On one side, the thirst for profit and tradition, which hinged upon practices such as slavery and inequality. On the other, democracy, freedom and opportunity; The North was less intimidated by progress and change, it would seem, than the South.

Nowadays, although the prevalent capitalist and individualist culture of the United States still depends somewhat on the exploitation of lower classes, and although issues such as racism and sexism are by no means a thing of the past, the ideals of democracy, self-reliance, progress, freedom and opportunity remain crucial to the idea of “America”, a mythical version of the country created in the collective imaginary of countless citizens.

Having become independent from England in the 18th century, the United States did not follow the European traditional model of bloodline-based class structure; Rather, it was based on wealth. As land was neither scarce nor ancestrally held by the North American Pilgrims, the notion of wealth and importance was developed on the basis of “meritocracy”, as a function of Social Darwinism. Adapted to a socioeconomic context, Charles Darwin's writings were soon applied to the American social structure, in which the “strongest” were successful. Therefore, social status was positioned as a reward for independence, ambition, and hard work (Cruea, 189). Surely, class mobility in the United States was considerably more likely than in European countries governed by aristocratic ideals. Nevertheless, the “American Dream” of achieving wealth and status regardless of one's starting point, strictly through effort, contributed far more to the idea of America as a mythical land than to the country itself. In fact, even in the 21st century this notion attracts a swarm of immigrants in search of opportunities for social mobility, despite evidence indicating that these opportunities they seek become increasingly scarce (Connor & Storper, 1).

American Heroines in the North of the United States, then, especially during the 19th century, would represent and embody such values as democracy, freedom, opportunity, progress, change, and equality, in addition to those very American notions of ambition and individuality. Thus, the notion of the American Heroine by which this study will analyze the

March sisters consists of a character who displays the qualities discussed above and whose journey is focused on self-exploration and community, rather than more selfish and often shallow aims.

2. Methodology

2.1 Foundations of Archetypal Literary Criticism

The tradition in criticism to analyze literature under the framework of myth and legend is often named archetypal or mythological literary criticism. Interpreting texts by focusing on archetypes and symbols, the narrative and characters can often be traced back to and grouped with similar types or templates. Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung and literary theorist Northrop Frye are proponents of this framework, having written prolifically about it.

When Plato first wrote about his notion of an archetype, it was defined as the “ideal form”, the essence of an object or concept. As an illustration, the abstract concept of a horse will never be equal to a single existing horse, insofar as every material object is an approximation of this ideal mental form. However, despite the color of their manes or the amount of fur around their eyes, horses are recognizable as such due to a number of characteristics also present in their platonic conception: the presence of hooves, the sound of a whinny, the capacity for galloping. Although these characteristics, individually, may not be sufficient to determine a horse – i.e., giraffes and deer also have hooves –, the ideal form of a horse will most likely include them in most people's understanding, and by comparing a specific, existing horse to one's notion of the animal, it is possible to recognize it as such, despite minor variations from its archetypal form. Similarly, characters often possess a combination of traits and motivations which somewhat aligns with a literary archetype – or

multiple. In the Analysis section of this thesis, the relationship between the characters in *Little Women* and the archetypal categories with which they most closely identify will be explored in further detail. For now, it is important to note that Carl Jung explained his notion of an archetype as a universally recognized pattern, a consequence of what he called 'The Collective Unconscious' (Jung, 154). Though somewhat elusive, the basic definition of the Collective Unconscious is a shared collection of patterns, allegedly recognizable universally among humans (Jung, 155). Represented across people and cultures, the themes and images that form Jung's archetypes can be expressed through art, and can be understood precisely because, as he theorizes, humans share these mental concepts and patterns innately. As previously discussed, the template of a Hero in Ancient Greece could be occupied by characters such as Heracles and Perseus, as they were both warriors fathered by Zeus whose feats of bravery and strength survived thousands of years. Although the extent to which this is true is subject to much debate, it is undeniable that similarities between characters and narratives can be found in a variety of times and spaces. This phenomenon, which propelled Campbell's writings on the monomyth, was ultimately Jung's interest as well; whereas Campbell was enthralled by the narrative structure, Jung was – unsurprisingly – interested in the psychological component. In Jung's theory, the existence of archetypes with representations across nations and time indicated the presence of the Collective Unconscious, this innate psychological apparatus which allowed for both the recognition of characters as belonging to certain archetypes and for the creation of personas to populate these categories. These cognitive patterns would assist human beings in interpreting and attributing meaning to objects and behaviors (Anaz, 256).

As empty, unrepresentable forms, archetypes exist by definition as an ideal. These forms are filled by images due to specific cultural and historical characteristics (Anaz, 255).

This means that the same archetype may be represented by different images in different cultures at different moments, while the archetype itself is theoretically universal and timeless. In this thesis, the main archetype of concern will be that of the Hero. Archetypal literary criticism argues that these templates of character and narrative layer the form and function of literature, such that the meaning of a text can be shaped by cultural and psychological myths (Abrams). An example of this can be found in the entire *Shrek*¹⁰ franchise, which implicitly and explicitly subverts a plethora of forms in the genre it supposedly belongs to, from using fairytales and their motifs as the introduction to the Ordinary World, to exposing the dissonance between internal morals and outward perception – e.g., the ugly ogre turns out to be “prince charming” and seemingly heroic or wise characters turn out to be anything but. This is possible because the writers were aware of existing and common templates such as the noble hero in children's tales, whose task it is to rescue the princess. In this case, however, although Fiona expects a prince, she is rescued by and eventually falls in love with a creature who is supposed to play the role of the monster. This contributes significantly to the film's component of comedy, and to much of its popularity and acclaim.

Similarly, by knowing the Hero's Journey and the archetypes, it is possible to understand the meaning layered into art and literature, whether conventions are followed or subverted. This will be further explored in a later section. In *Little Women*, it can be argued that 19th century protocol would dictate women to be primarily caregivers and innocents, according to the notions of True Womanhood (Cruea, 188). Pious, pure and submissive, the True Woman was valued for her morality and heart, a figure existing almost always in service

¹⁰ The first *Shrek* film was directed by Vicky Jenson and Andrew Adamson and released in 2001.

of others. However, Louisa May Alcott subverts this, not only by creating four distinct female characters who react to these ideals in different ways, but also by ascribing them characteristics belonging to other – male-dominated – archetypes; In this case, the Hero. Although the March sisters do mostly go on to become wives and mothers, this is never positioned as the main part of their identities.

2.2 Archetypes in the Hero's Journey

In addition to the hero archetype, which usually corresponds to the protagonist of a story, there have been other templates of roles filled by a variety of characters. In Campbell's monomyth, the function and goal of a character in a story determines their archetype. The hero's is to serve and sacrifice; As the central character, the hero must incur personal growth, leaving the Ordinary World in service of the Journey (Voytilla, 13). The objective of the hero must be driven by universal needs in order to be relatable to readers or audiences, such as love, success and justice. Voytilla suggests "to win a competition, to heal a wound, or to find love" (7). As the main agent of the story, the hero represents the ego and is responsible for integrating all other archetypes (Anaz, 262). It has also been previously discussed in this study that the hero must go through a transformation, facing literal or symbolic death. In *Little Women*, it is noticeable that, although Jo is the novel's focus more often than not, the March sisters all undergo significant transformation at one point or another, in such a way that more than one character may be included in the category of hero.

The Hero's mentor is an essential figure, providing encouragement and insight, thereby assisting the main character on their journey. This often happens in preparation to the Hero's trials and transformations. "The Heroes of Western, as well as detective and noir Thrillers, may not have a physical Mentor, but instead may be guided by an Inner Mentor, a code of honor or

justice that must be served”, Voytilla writes (7). Teacher and guide, the Mentor in *Little Women* is often Marmee, whether she is advising Jo on how to control her temper, tending to Beth and her sickness, reassuring Meg of the joys of marrying for love – rather than money – or educating Amy on her gifts and flaws.

The Guardian archetype – or Threshold Guardian – aims to protect the Special World, as well as to test the Hero regarding their commitment and work. According to Voytilla: “Guardians may be characters, a locked door or secret vault, an animal, or a force of nature such as a tornado” (8). When it comes to the March sisters, considering their journey is a more symbolic one, this archetype may be age itself or the context they are inserted in, as most of the obstacles faced by the girls are connected to their historical limitations and their growth into adulthood, facing their flaws and overcoming their circumstances.

The figure of the Herald is relatively simple: their role in the story is to deliver a message, issuing a challenge or announcing an imminent significant change. These often appear as the messengers of the “Call to Adventure”, luring the Heroes to leave the Ordinary World and venture into the Special one. Essentially, the Herald is the catalyst of a narrative:

A character may wear the Herald's mask to make an announcement or judgment, report a new flash, or simply deliver a letter. The Herald can reside within the Hero in the form of *dreams* and *visions* that push the Hero to change his lie. An external event, such as a declaration of war or a storm, can serve the Herald's agenda. (Voytilla, 8)

In Alcott's novel, the telegram from Mr. March can be regarded as the Herald, as it marks not only the reader's introduction into the life of the Marches, but also the beginning of their journey into growing up.

The Shapeshifter archetype has the role of deceiving the Hero. They may mislead the protagonist by concealing an identity, intention, or motivation. Their existence and actions cause doubts to emerge in the Hero, often introducing suspense into the narrative.

The Shadow in Campbell's monomyth tends to be the antagonist, their goal being opposite to that of the Hero's. According to Anaz, the shadow represents repressed or hidden emotions and traumas, the dark desires or rejected qualities that could potentially cause the Hero's destruction (262). In this sense, the Shadow in *Little Women* is the main flaw that each sister possesses:

The burdens are different for each of the girls; they must overcome their personal flaws. Meg must deal with her vanity, Jo with her dreadful temper, Beth must defeat her shyness and little Amy her selfishness. And so the theme is set, for they must conquer their own flaws in order to live up to their parents' expectations as wives, mothers and as citizens. (Laire, 21)

Over the course of the story, each Hero will most likely also come across an ally, which is mentioned in the "Test, Allies, and Enemies" section of the Hero's Journey. The ally can be a Mentor or a friend, humanizing the Hero and adding dimension to the character's personality (Anaz, 262).

Lastly, the Trickster archetype aims for disruption, laughter, or chaos: in a nutshell, for change. Transforming the Ordinary World through their interventions, Tricksters use humor as a mechanism to present and induce change, often acting as comic relief. Their role is to question the status quo, whatever this may mean in their narrative.

2.3 Thinking and Rethinking Character

Literary analysis over the years has advanced considerably. In their book *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019), Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski and Toril Moi investigate aspects of character-focused literary analysis and criticism, as well as the readers' relationships to this narrative element. While inviting readers to think about characters in new ways, their essays also explore the guises in which characters have been analyzed so far. Citing Claude Simon and Nathalie Sarraute, Amanda Anderson notes that, to 20th century French writers, a character was "but a note in a textual network" (Anderson, 3), nothing but a consequence of writing. Further developing on Vladimir Propp's theories on the seven roles of characters¹¹, authors such as these believed that characters existed solely to perform actions that moved the plot forward. Jonathan Culler further commented on character being a convention, a stereotype based on cultural models, which in this sense is highly allusive of the archetypes the current study discusses, i.e., characters adhering to pre-set templates that execute certain functions in story (3).

Multiple literary critics sought to distance the notion of characters from reality, but in doing so they have failed to consider the possibilities of expanding their analyses. Especially in the work of Louisa May Alcott and other autofiction writers, it is not entirely necessary or advantageous to separate between the worlds of story and reality. In cases such as this, they often blend into each other in crucial and unexpected ways: "certain kinds of new writing [...] put the difference between fiction and reality under pressure, in which authors are characters, and characters are declared to be real." (Moi, 67)

¹¹ Somewhat similar to the archetypes outlined by the Hero's Journey, Propp outlines hero, helper, villain, false hero, donor, sought-for person and the sought-for person's father.

Additionally, there is an argument to be made against the confinement of characters even to the initial context they emerged in: “Fictional characters [...] are not just effects of language but possess a relatively independent status that allows them to move freely across genres and media” (4), Anderson, Felski and Moi assert. As such, they are not exclusively bound to the work they first appear in, which justifies not only sequels like Alcott’s *Little Men*, but also fanfiction and the countless screen adaptations of the novel, each interpreting the story and its inhabitants in a novel way. According to the authors of *Character*, “our responses to characters [are] not only situated within ideological and sociohistorical contexts but also as importantly moral and affective in ways that much of the historical work in the field has left unexplored” (7). Citing Murray Smith, Anderson, Felski and Moi comment on the ability characters have to engage readers and viewers; As schemas of fellow humans, most cannot help but identify with characters on one level or another. Evolutionary psychology seems to suggest an innate instinct to be curious about the inner lives of others, which in turn fuels the connection with fictional characters, especially of the literary variety, as these tend to present their interiorities more easily through narration, even if it is unreliable.

As important as rational analysis is, it would be foolish to completely discard the emotional aspects of human involvement with fiction and all its elements. In fact, there is evidence to suggest human brains are virtually incapable of telling the difference between real and fictional people, based on their emotional responses (Broom, 542). Some articles even comment on the capacity of fictional characters to temporarily substitute real friendships, providing a feeling of connection and belonging. Additionally, identification can cause the feeling of “seeing” situations through a character’s perspective.

In novels such as *Little Women*, readers are presented with the interiority of characters, which is essential to learning their motivations, emotions and characteristics. In doing so, they can be understood and identified with. Identification, in fact, is all but unavoidable to readers, whether a character is itself human or not (Felski, 77). As long as there is animation, motivation and/or agency associated with a character, the human brain will forge a connection or identification with the set of words or images before it. In the case of Jo March, uncountable young girls have reported feeling a personal connection to the character, her personality, and her struggles, including – but not limited to – Simone de Beauvoir, Ursula Le Guin and Gloria Steinem. Tatar goes so far as to assert the character “set the stage” for other female characters who longed for artistic careers, citing Anne of Green Gables, *Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw and others (xxii). Toril Moi adds:

[Characters] can place claims on us, claims we may feel compelled to respond to. We can love them, hate them, acknowledge them, imitate them, be inspired by them, carry them in our hearts and minds, think about them when we want to understand our own lives. We can also invent further adventures for them, and we can imagine what they would be like if they lived in our place and time. To understand all this is to understand what fiction is. (27)

Philosopher Stanley Cavell is credited to have questioned the arbitrary origin of this “character talk” taboo in 1969. Surely, even laypeople are aware of the distinction between fictional characters and real people. This should not directly create an impediment to analyze the psychology and motivations of literary inhabitants. Since T.S. Eliot and his ilk believed the critic's task was to bring out the “patterns” of the text, their focus was far more associated with language itself – with form – than with content. This bias prevailed in literary criticism

for quite some time. Nevertheless, “there is no fundamental conflict between paying attention to language and paying attention to characters” (Moi, 39), and literary forms are not isolated from their uses or their contents. Form can have political effects, but meaning, form and content are always intertwined. The novel, for instance, is credited to have emerged in the late 18th century, alongside the European Romantic Period in literature. This is relevant to the connections between form and function because the novel as a literary format not only revolutionized literature, but also surfaced around the time of the French Revolution, which marks the symbolic fall of Feudalism across Europe and the establishment of centralized nations. In parallel, prose narrative became more centralized in the form of the novel. An article from the British Library elucidates:

The publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 was an extraordinary event in the history of literature. There had been prose narratives before this book, but never so sustained a fictional account of one individual's experiences. This man's story was singular and new. What distinguished *Robinson Crusoe* were elements that now seem essential to the novel as a genre. It told of an ordinary individual, even if his ordeals were extraordinary. It placed great emphasis on his inner life [...], involved the narrator's unwavering commitment to minute, objective description and circumstantial detail, Daniel Defoe's brilliantly unliterary prose doing justice to the facts of one particular person's experience. (Mullan, 2018)

Defined as a fictional narrative of usually over forty thousand words, the novel tends to explore the human experience. Composed habitually of a plot, characters, a setting, a narrative method and a point of view, this literary format can be interpreted as historically and politically charged. In fact, Frederick Jameson writes that all things are social and historical, and therefore political. Following Jung's logic of the collective unconscious and

Marx's philosophy of historical materialism, Jameson proposes the existence of a political unconscious, a pre-existing interpretation of literary works:

We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (Jameson, 9)

In many ways, literature has changed alongside politics. Language is not constrained by the meaning of nomenclature; it largely mirrors the culture in which it is embedded, and often reflects the biases a society holds. “The link between language and culture is inextricable: language has always been, and continues to be, used to reflect and reinforce power structures and social norms” (Montell, 9). One example Montell gives is the process of pejoration that occurred to the word “madam” over time; Whereas “sir” and “madam” used to simply designate “formal terms of address” (25), but while the male word remained a sign of respect, the female term devolved, and now has come to mean the manager of a brothel. Similarly, Jameson argues that “culture is [...] the expression of the underlying political, juridical and economic instances” (39). But form should not be dismissed either; As noted by Toril Moi:

We make a mistake when we forget that literature is not just form, forget that it is made up of world-bound language that always conjures up themes, ideas, images, situations—contents—too. In my experience, it is perfectly possible to combine humanly interesting discussions of characters with formal analysis. (Moi, 64)

In many aspects, meaning is moulded by and for the content it seeks to express, which in turn is influenced by the form it takes. The political effects of form – in this case, the novel –, bear connection to its content. Virginia Woolf pondered why the great female writers that preceded her, such as Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, tended to write novels, when “the original impulse was to poetry” (98). These middle-class, childless authors, Woolf concluded, would have had a single sitting room in which to write undisturbed, and even so would have likely incurred numerous interruptions. She affirmed that “it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play” (100), because it requires less concentration. Given that women were confined to the domestic arena and would often be forced to hide their literary work, Woolf aids the argument that the form of literature can be as political as its content. Jameson advocates for prioritizing political interpretations of literary texts. Thus, in addition to archetypical literary criticism this study aims to explore the ideology lurking behind Alcott's words. The political situation of women being largely excluded from political and professional life gave rise to the novel as it is known:

All the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels. (Woolf, 100)

Much like Moi argued, however, it is important to go beyond formalist tradition and explore the contents of the novel as much as its form. Literary critic John Frow has long explored the duality of characters as pieces of writing as well as mental responses (2014).

Apart from their obvious roles as words on a page, characters are an essential element of stories that provide readers kinship and identification. Due to the many similarities between characters and the readers that connect with them, on any level, it is perhaps interesting that the literary analysis of fictional characters includes research from psychology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and phenomenology. How meaning is assigned to characters and the emotions they evoke in millions of people is subject to much discussion in these areas, but seems to be mostly avoided by literary critics, perhaps for fear of infringing on the Formalist tradition. This study highlights the importance of not neglecting content and the natural human responses to it:

[Humans] naturally and effortlessly respond to fictional characters with emotions, affects, identification, and moral and political judgment. This is our (public and shared) way of dealing with fictional characters. To Frow, this practice is at once remarkable and puzzling. His wonder arises from the fact that he takes as axiomatic that 'character' is split into two parts: words or images here, 'person-like entities' there. (Moi, 51)

Identification with characters can happen in a multitude of ways, but there are four main strands which facilitate this process: allegiance, alignment, recognition and empathy (Felski, 82). Allegiance has to do with the values held by characters, by the author, and conveyed the work itself. The audience's political beliefs play a role in the response to nearly every work of art, if not all. Even if there is open-mindedness regarding the ethics and morality presented in the work, "fiction serves as an ethical laboratory that allows for all kinds of experimentation with values" (Felski, 100). Alignment refers to the strategies a text employs in order to shape a reader's perspective of character, and can range from the

descriptions given to the point of view adopted in order to narrate the story. The information an author chooses to provide and conceal ultimately aids the reader's opinion of a character. In *Little Women*, Jo March is the most described character, and her actions often move the plot forward, which suggests an effort on Alcott's part to actively promote identification or affinity with Jo. Additionally, the seemingly omniscient narrator in the novel is even caught agreeing with the character, despite the book's mostly detached third person narration: "And I think Jo was quite right" (Alcott, 17). There are many ways to encourage and manoeuvre reader's expectations and feelings: "Narratives offer varying blends of reliability and unreliability, intimacy and distance" (Felski, 94), and these elements come together to influence how the text is read. For instance, it is not common for audiences to give a character named "Cruella DeVil"¹² the benefit of the doubt, but Craig Gillespie's 2021 film *Cruella*, told from the titular character's point of view, managed to reverse much of the negative sentiment towards the villain. Recognition is the process by which readers are able to apprehend a project in its totality; an example would be perceiving a collection of pixels as a unified, humanoid image: "Viewers rely on perceptual cues (especially body, face, and voice) to distinguish human agents from other aspects of a film and to understand them as being individuated and continuous" (Felski, 100). Similarly, in literature, the descriptions, actions, and interiority of a character can contribute to readers understanding them as a whole. Finally, empathy corresponds to "sharing someone's feelings and responding with concern to these feelings" (Felski, 105). It is understood that books, particularly novels, play an integral part in developing empathy in readers:

¹² Walt Disney Studios' 1961 animation *101 Dalmatians* featured Cruella as an unmarried, child-free woman who wanted to purchase her employee's litter of dalmatians in order to make a coat with their fur.

Feeling a sense of empathy with fictional persons, according to Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, can expand the limits of experience, engender a sense of solidarity with distant others, and do valuable civic and political work. Since the eighteenth century, literary empathy has been hailed as a means of encouraging altruism and of binding readers into a community-working against strong social and economic pressures toward egoism and self-interest. Empathy is also a gendered term: that women are more empathic than men is taken for granted in daily life, popular commentary, and much psychology and neuroscience. (Felski, 106)

After reading *Little Women*, one almost wonders if Alcott herself aware of this, given that she fosters this sense of understanding and compassion at every turn, perhaps knowing her young readers had much to benefit from it.

2.4 *Little Women*, the Heroine's Journey and the myth of America

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy can be considered children and teenagers at the beginning of *Little Women*. Grappling with a moment of historical and personal importance, these girls are introduced by Alcott on Christmas Eve, each exhibiting a different level of discontentment at the absence of their father, who is serving in the Civil War, and of the presents which they will not receive this year. Jo laments it, Meg expresses unhappiness at being poor and Amy argues – in her own way – about the injustice of inequality. Beth, on the other hand, expresses contentment with the mere existence of her family. The difference between each of these characters is perceptible in the very first page of the novel, and the order in which the sisters are introduced is not to be neglected either; Despite being the eldest, Meg is not the first sister to be mentioned. Jo, outspoken and rebellious, is the first and loudest voice in the book. These characters continue to be explored in the coming chapters, as each makes

remarks and decisions that give readers insight into their nature. It can be observed that Meg, although vain, acts in a very motherly manner towards her sisters. She teaches children in order to help support her family and is described as sweet and beautiful. Her talent is acting, though she shows little interest in making this a career. Amy is the youngest, an artist. She goes to a school for girls and shares Margaret's love for beauty and luxury. Chatty and emotionally reactive, Amy's main flaws are immaturity and selfishness. Beth, on the other hand, is the perfect picture of domesticity. Shy, demure, caring, and selfless to a fault, she is often referred to simply as "good" (27). She loves music dearly and delights all by playing the piano. Finally, Jo is a bookworm and a writer. She is fierce, stubborn, and unconstrained by social norms, seeming in fact to actively go against them. At fifteen years old, she is a smart and vocal girl employed by her rich aunt, to whom she tends and often read in the afternoons. She is frequently reprimanded by her family for being 'unladylike', though this only appears to increase her ambition further. Unlike many female characters at the time, Jo March is determined to become a successful writer, a somewhat uncommon occupation for women in the 19th century:

I'd have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie's music. 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, 87)

Discouraged from pursuits away from the home, women were confined to maternal and wifely roles, and here, I believe, lies Louisa May Alcott's genius. By creating a story centered upon the domestic environment, Alcott was able to subvert expectations and create a new kind of adventure. Whereas Mark Twain's Huck, in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), flees his home in order to find excitement, the March sisters embrace it, whether or not they yearn for fulfilment beyond their constraints. They put on plays and create to their heart's content, bringing the wonders of the world to them when they cannot seek them out. As such, the March sisters are not in a position to take a traditional journey if they are to be considered heroines. Rather, their journey lies in the transition between childhood and adulthood. Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson argue that "Alcott's novel may be seen as a synthesis of the coming-of-age novel, or Bildungsroman (which is usually male-oriented), and domestic fiction, to form the female Bildungsroman" (69).

The Bildungsroman can refer to "almost any novel that focuses on the development of a young protagonist" (Morgenstern et al., 647). If Jo is considered the protagonist of the novel, it can even be said that *Little Women* is a Künstlerroman (Bailey, 444), i.e., "artist's novel", as it not only follows Jo's process of maturity into an adult, but also as a writer. In Greta Gerwig's 2019 non-linear film adaptation of the novel, the culmination of all the events in the narrative is the publication of Jo's book. Interspersing scenes of the school Jo founded as an adult with the process of printing her book, as well as the young March sisters playing in their attic, Greta Gerwig creates a powerful final moment in the film without the use of dialogue, wherein Jo March holds what is assumed to be the very first copy of *Little Women* to her belly, as a pregnant mother would, caressing it and smiling.

The Bildungsroman is, as discussed, a coming-of-age novel, and the Künstlerroman is one of its subcategories, as it pertains to the growth and development of an artist into maturity. In this study, it will be proposed that the Bildungsroman – at least in the case of the March sisters, but I suspect in many more – equates, in a way, to the Heroine's Journey. The idea here is that women, prevented on multiple level from engaging in adventures outside the home, much less to venture into Special Worlds, tend to journey through time rather than through space in the literary realm. Therefore, the March sisters, for all their domestic adventures and even trips to Europe in Amy's case, are more transformed by their passage into adulthood. In this sense, this thesis will consider the Ordinary World to be childhood and the Special World to be adulthood, designating a journey in which the “boon” or “elixir” cannot be brought back to oneself in the Ordinary World. “In her introduction to the Modern Library's 1983 edition of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Madelon Bedell argues that the novel has ‘a quality of universality,’ and proposes that it may be ‘*the American female myth*,’ (xi, italics hers).” (Mohler, 60)

As a female American myth, then, *Little Women* is especially equipped to be used as a case study for the Heroine's Journey, especially that of the American Heroine, an independent and trailblazing figure:

The nineteenth century gave us the novel of adultery, but it also witnessed the flourishing of the coming-of-age story, adapted by Louisa May Alcott to show that girls possess as much, and possibly more, imaginative energy, investigative drive, and social concern as their male counterparts. Since it might not be safe to write about bold, ambitious women, why not engage in a stealth manoeuvre and construct heroic girls and portray all the

forms of care and concern that constitute their larger social mission? Who better to lead the charge than Jo March, the girl who writes to make her own way in the world? (Tatar, 154)

Tatar lauds Alcott and her willingness to showcase girls as “bold, daring, and adventurous, at least in their imaginative worlds, if not always in real life” (xxiii). The desires which often earn women such fervent criticism from society can be, as she puts it, safely expressed during childhood. The imagination and curiosity that girls such as Jo March possess is closely linked with the obtainment of knowledge, which has long been restricted to women. As children, then it is considered acceptable to write and self-express as an expected part of fun and play. As they age, however, girls like Jo are subject to increasing criticism and scrutiny: “Imagination is fine so long as it stays in childhood” (177), Tatar warns. From fairy tales to the Biblical first woman, curiosity has also been strongly discouraged along gender lines; Whereas men, literary or not, are more often than not supported in their adventures and scientific inquiry, “curiosity is framed in derogatory terms, signalling a need to rein in curiosity when it manifests itself in women.” (Tatar, 156). Especially in male-dominated fields such as writing and other intellectual pursuits, women were faced with numerous challenges, especially societal disapproval:

The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing? (Woolf, 79)

This hostility seems to be directly linked to women's limited opportunities as writers. Women are not born with less capacity or will to write; They acquire strong societal messaging over time which disapproves of them as writers:

I thought all the stirring tales of courage and adventure were opening a door into my own future, though a few years later—ten, eleven years old, perhaps—the world began to close in around me and I realized the songs belonged to my brothers, not me. (Barker, 49)

Even in the 21st century, the female access to the literary canon is restricted. By 2019, only fifteen out of over a hundred literature Nobel laureates were women; Despite making up around fifty percent of the world's population, women correspond to less than thirteen percent of recipients.

In time, and in large part due to Alcott and her body of work, the possibilities for female characters expanded beyond gender norms. Despite ending up married and somewhat domesticated as an adult, Jo March continues in her mission of care and curiosity by opening a school, having already planted the rebellious seed of a writing career for women: “If Jo and Anne give in to the twin tugs of heterosexual marriage and domesticity, they still reveal the joy that girls can derive from creativity and self-expression.” (Tatar, 173) It is also important to recall that Alcott did not wish for Jo to be married, but was forced by her editors to give her a romantic interest. It is no wonder, then, that literary heroines that followed often viewed “romance as a threat to their hard-won independence” (Tatar, 226).

If we consider the emerging identity of the United States as a nation in parallel to the development of the March sisters into adult women, it can be observed that America's own coming of age and its internal battle for identity based on conflicting values can, to some extent, be seen mirrored in the March sisters. During the Civil War, the United States of America underwent conflicts and change, just as the characters in Alcott's novel did.

Confronted with a way of life and production which contradicted its manifest ideals for the sake of wealth and expansion, the United States grappled with creating a unified national identity in the face of irreconcilable differences. These differences in economic and cultural values, especially with regard to slavery and centralization of power, gave rise to an armed conflict between the Northern and Southern states.

In Thomas Jefferson's words, immortalized in the U.S.A.'s 1776 Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". If these are the fundamental building blocks upon which the United States identified with the myth of America as an exceptional nation were conceived and constructed, then the American national identity must, in some way, include equality, freedom and the possibility or opportunity to strive for something – perhaps this can be clarified as *ambition*, even if it does not necessarily pertain to material success. Nevertheless, it is impossible to construct a national identity based on these values while maintaining slavery as a mode of production. This was initially acknowledged and critiqued in the Declaration of Independence, but there was a lack of consensus, therefore the topic was eventually stripped from the document.

There is, in the country, a fragmentation of identity based on how it perceives and deals with the oppression of a group of people, just as can be observed with the March sisters. In a deeply sexist society where women are not allowed to own property, vote, or hold most employment positions, this group of strong-willed girls emerges with sharp intellects, solid morals, and minds of their own. Whereas the South would at this time consider heroes military men such as Jefferson Davis and the North diplomatic leaders like Abraham Lincoln,

the intention of this thesis is to steer away from the 'traditional' notion of heroism, which often highlights individuals – as mentioned, usually men – already in positions of power. Therefore, these ambitious, moral and spirited characters are fine examples to assist this notion towards a more diverse and inclusive view of heroism. The March sisters can also be considered American heroines, specifically, because the values of equality, freedom and ambition are echoed in most, if not all, of these characters.

This is why the elements of the heroine and the characteristics that determine the American heroine must be considered in addition to those that define the “traditional” hero. There is an infinite number of forms that heroism can take at any given time and place. In this case, the characteristics we have outlined as prerequisites to being considered heroic are all present in the March sisters in some form or another; As we will see, Meg is content to take a husband and raise a family instead of becoming an actress, but Amy attempts to become a renowned painter in Europe when given the opportunity. Jo also seizes a chance to move to New York and writes while working as a governess to support herself, initially shunning the constraints of marriage and family. The displays of heroism put on by the March sisters may not adhere to conventional – masculine – standards, but should be considered no less heroic because of this. The intelligence, compassion, ambition and bravery each of these characters displays exemplifies that not all heroism can be perceived at first glance.

2.5 Limitations

Critical theories, such as feminism, Marxism or queer studies, aid readers in interpreting media. Beyond the surface themes and contents of any book, literary critical theories can be used as instruments to investigate underlying ideologies and biases. Frederick

Jameson reminded readers that “all literature must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious” (70). Similarly, literary criticism is not created in a vacuum.

Archetypal literary criticism, in particular, assumes that most – if not all – stories follow a predictable pattern, as previously explained.

This literary approach based on recurring patterns is no doubt useful, but it is not without its faults. Because it relies so heavily on the literary canon in order to prove itself, the monomyth can fall into a trap of only representing the stories of white, male, cisgendered characters and authors. As this thesis has established, much of the literature considered “classic” or held to a standard of excellency is limited by the conventions of patriarchy and white supremacy. This study does not seek to disprove the merits of Homer or Mark Twain, but that these authors are far more often included in school curriculums, for example, is undeniable:

If we keep *Little Women* private, almost as if it is a rite of passage for girls to keep secret along with their books about puberty and their changing bodies, are we not saying that it's exclusively about female identity and thus not about “American” identity? Perhaps that is why it is rarely mentioned as a candidate for The Great American Novel and has never been a part of the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read program, which has sponsored 1,225 one-month programs in cities across the country. (*Tom Sawyer*, of course, has been a Big Read book.) (Rioux, 2018)

Given that the structures of books written by dominant demographics – such as white cisgender males – are the ones often studied and lauded by critics, it can limit the amount of work to which this method of analysis can be applied. Additionally, searching for instances of archetypes and common story progressions can invite reductionism (Wallach, 133). Not

every humorous character is a “trickster”, just as not all narratives follow the monomyth. Novels by women and people of colour, especially, are unlikely to follow the set paths myth criticism looks for. Novels such as Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), for instance, are near-impossible to categorize in terms of archetypes; Her flawed characters and circular storytelling are not plot-focused enough to abide by the conventions of the Hero's Journey.

Angela Carter and Roland Barthes understood myth to be “an ideologically charged construct, an effort to naturalize man-made concepts and beliefs” (Tatar, 142). This goes to show that no single method can fully encompass and decipher the complexities of literature as a whole, but due to the nature of *Little Women*, it can be applied to enrich the reading of Alcott's *magnum opus*.

3. Analysis

This section of the study aims to provide, in addition to glimpses of the novel's plot and a basic characterization of each of the main characters, a summary of their coming of age and how this aligns with the structure of Campbell's monomyth. There will also be explanations as to why each sister can be included in the definition of “hero” and “heroine” according to the theories of Jung, Tatar, Emerson, and others. What differentiates this analysis from most is that, to the current author's knowledge, there have been no studies explicitly linking the mythical structures and the notions of heroism to *Little Women*. Therefore, although Jo March may be informally referred to as a heroine at times, this may be the first study to investigate the Bildungsroman as a female version of Campbell's heroic journey. Additionally, as mentioned previously, it is an objective of this thesis to examine characters beyond language patterns and “textual nodes”, taking an interest in their

trajectories and what they may mean to readers, especially as representations of different ways to negotiate womanhood in a sexist society.

3.1 Meg

Meg, the eldest March sister, is time and again described as “sweet” and “pretty”. Devoid of Jo’s and Amy’s explosive temperaments, Margaret is a young girl of about seventeen when the book opens, one who seems to admire her mother as the ultimate role model. Calm and motherly, Meg is an artist in the sense that her acting and sewing are praised throughout the novel. Nevertheless, her principal role is primarily as a caretaker: first, for her sisters, and later, for her children. She is perhaps the most conventional of the four, with romantic tendencies and a taste for luxury. This is evidenced in her choice of writing when the girls write *The Pickwick Portfolio*, a pretend newspaper in which all participate. Meg’s contribution, ‘THE MASKED MARRIAGE (A Tale of Venice)’ is a love story between an artist and a noblewoman who has been promised to a Count. In it, the couple wears masks on their wedding day, only to reveal the man behind the mask is not the groom her father had originally intended, but the artist, who has risen in station and become a rich Earl. Thus, they are happily married (59). Between the emphasis given to wealth and marriage and Meg’s seeming penchant for the dramatic, Alcott reveals to her reader a number of things about this character, perhaps in a way even foreshadowing what is to happen in her life. Firstly, she is aware of society’s expectations for a young woman such as herself. She knows the importance of a “good” marriage and recognizes the tensions between love and security. She knows what is considered appropriate and seems to be influenced by this, but ultimately prizes true affection and goodness over wealth and appearances. This is later confirmed by her marriage to John Brooke, Laurie’s tutor, as Aunt March threatens to

disinherit the girl if she marries him. Kind and supportive, Mr. Brooke seems to treat Meg as his equal, admiring and respecting her independence. Although she may seem conventional, having chosen the constitution of a family over an acting career, Meg is true to herself, a value which perhaps constitutes the heroine on a journey. Through authenticity and agency, she becomes a wife while maintaining her job as a teacher, and continues to be a beloved sister and daughter.

Like her sister Amy, she is proud and vain, but lacks the selfishness characteristic to her younger counterpart. She tries to live up to her mother's expectations, which often align with patriarchal conventions, but seeks to be useful in addition to her accomplishments and generosity. She can be envious and at times ashamed of her family's poverty, but ultimately acknowledges and attempts to suppress her desire for riches, focusing instead on her authenticity and morality.

If we follow Meg's narrative thread with the Hero's Journey in mind, her sisters' and her Ordinary World begins where most women's throughout history has: at home. Dreading a Christmas without gifts, Meg is characterized as a fundamentally kind person, despite her vanities and desire for "pretty things", as Alcott writes: "[Mother] thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don't" (1). Her basic traits and motivations are outlined, and it is soon clear that poverty and the shame it brings Meg are issues she must come to terms with. Ultimately, however, *Little Women* is a coming-of-age tale, such that the trials all four girls face will represent overcoming girlhood and becoming adults. In this way, the sisters may enter a different, unfamiliar world, but they cannot return from it without being changed. The Special World in the novel can then be seen

as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. In this adventure, Meg is happy to work to support her family as well as indulge in her sister's plays. Both her mother and at times Laurie function as her mentors, reminding her of the things that truly matter. In chapter 9, "Meg goes to Vanity Fair", Laurie finds her dressed up in the clothes of a rich friend. Her "call to adventure", so to speak, is her first social function as a developing woman rather than a little girl. At this event, she functions to those wealthier guests as a human doll, being called "Daisy" and behaving poorly. He expresses disappointment in her and she soon regrets acting as frivolously as these peers. She knew this from the start, but got carried away and required guidance from Laurie:

Perhaps Meg felt, without understanding why, that they were not particularly cultivated or intelligent people, and that all their gilding could not quite conceal the ordinary material of which they were made. It certainly was agreeable to fare sumptuously, drive in a fine carriage, wear her best frock every day, and do nothing but enjoy herself. It suited her exactly, and soon she began to imitate the manners and conversation of those about her, to put on little airs and graces, use French phrases, crimp her hair, take in her dresses, and talk about the fashions as well as she could. The more she saw of Annie Moffat's pretty things, the more she envied her and sighed to be rich. (Alcott, 48)

Both Laurie and Marmee then, with their teachings, can be considered mentors to Meg as she negotiates adulthood in a challenging world; Her position as a somewhat poor woman doubly jeopardizes her position in society, and Meg must learn how to deal with this.

The irreversible stage of the Hero's Journey, the crossing of the threshold, is when Meg falls in love with Mr. Brooke, who is a kindhearted but a somewhat poor man. Even fearful Beth feels safe in his presence due to his demeanor: "I'm not afraid of Mr. Brooke, he

is so kind” (Alcott, 73). Having offered himself to escort Mrs. March to Washington upon hearing of Mr. March's illness, John Brooke grows ever closer to Meg and her family, much to Jo's dismay:

For a week or two, Jo behaved so queerly that her sisters were quite bewildered. She rushed to the door when the postman rang, was rude to Mr. Brooke whenever they met, would sit looking at Meg with a woe-begone face, occasionally jumping up to shake and then kiss her [Meg] in a very mysterious manner. (Alcott, 94)

Jo often glowered at Mr. Brooke and expressed feeling as if Meg was being “stolen from the family: “I knew there was mischief brewing. I felt it, and now it's worse than I imagined. I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family.” (Alcott, 123). This was the beginning of Meg March's tests and trials. Finding an enemy of her will in one of her dearest allies, Meg was faced with a transitional moment in her life, a change she was ready to make but not to impose on her beloved sister. Additionally, although her parents were fond of the match, Meg was only seventeen, and they would rather she was married after twenty.

Meg's approach to the inmost cave happens as she nears an engagement to John, which she refuses at first instance, relishing in her power over his feelings: “Meg, taking a naughty satisfaction in trying her lover's patience and her own power” (Alcott, 138). Decided upon pleasing her sister and obeying her parents, Meg refuses advancements from Mr. Brooke. Nevertheless, her aunt belittles the man and his station, which softens Meg's resolve. Somewhat intertwined, Meg March's approach to the inmost cave and her ordeal mirror her central conflict towards 19th century womanhood: to choose between financial security and the fulfilment of her vanity and love for luxury. Whereas Marmee instilled in all her

daughters the value of being loved and living a useful life over wealth and social status, Aunt March longs to see the girls married to men of high station, ensuring their safety and comfort. Especially at the time, both views provide valid insight, as women often had to choose between emotional fulfilment and financial stability through marriage.

Marmee admits the importance of currency, but believes that self-respect, peace and true love are more important than money, even in marriage. Thus she encourages her daughters to become more than just beautiful, beloved, admired and accomplished and so on, but to be at peace and to know the pleasures of self-respect. (Laire, 25)

As she is already in love with John Brooke, the ultimate ordeal is her aunt's ultimatum, which threatens disinheritance should she marry him. As we know, she chooses to marry for love, and – despite some financial hardships – is ultimately rewarded with affection, support, and a healthy, happy family of her own. The symbolic death of her potentially rich self is reborn as a fully-grown woman, capable, self-assured, and loving. As such, when she returns to her sisters, she may play the role of the Mentor, and provide the Elixir – wisdom, support, love – to those around her. Having been the first to cross the threshold to the Special World, Meg is uniquely qualified to guide her sisters through their own journeys.

Because Meg opts for love over wealth, it can be argued that agency feeds into her position as a heroine, willingly accepting a material life of hardship in a society that often forced women into loveless relationships lest they experience poverty. Like Campbell and Jung posited, Meg's heroism has to do with representing the values of American society as well as overcoming her personal and historical limitations. By going on the journey, Meg transitions from a creative, nurturing girl into an independent and loving wife and mother,

thus fulfilling Tatar and Emerson's criteria for the heroine as well. Furthermore, as her husband professed: "Young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves." (Alcott, 81). All the evidence this section has reviewed points to Meg being a fine example of an American Heroine. Nevertheless, it is important to question whether she received the "boon" classic heroes usually enjoy. As she cannot, herself, return to the Ordinary World of childhood, she is limited to assisting her sisters and children as they traverse their own thresholds. Her "rebirth" into a new identity, one of a working mother, provides her with some level of love and fulfilment, but does not extend her reach from the domestic sphere. Whereas the first half of *Little Women* establishes the brilliance of the March sisters, with their many skills and fascinating personalities, as well as the relationships between them, the second part of the book seems bleak compared to the optimism and possibilities presented in the beginning. Somewhere between girlhood and womanhood, especially in the 19th century, their dreams of full personhood and free choice are slowly encroached by the reality of a deeply sexist society. Therefore, it is important to note that even though Meg can be considered an American Heroine, she is still restricted from the rewards traditional – male – heroes receive.

3.2 Jo

Rebellious, innocent, quick-tempered Jo March is the second-born March sister. She was described by Alcott as "very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way" (2). With her long hair as her "one beauty", it is certainly transgressive that Alcott made her main heroine unhandsome. Many narratives tend to equate virtue with physical beauty, a convention that the author seems to intentionally subvert: "healing and wholeness are

embodied in beauty, an attribute of the heroine" (Tatar, 134). Very clearly opposed to the established notions of femininity, Jo often confronts her family members in an attempt to distance herself from the expectations placed upon her gender: "if turning up my hair makes me one [young lady], I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty" (Alcott, 5).

More than once, Jo's flaw is said to be her anger, which she shares with Amy to a degree. The two girls fight often, and Amy once goes so far as to burn Jo's manuscript because she was not allowed to accompany her older sisters and their friends to the theater. Marmee at one point confesses to Jo that she, too, is often angry, but that she has learned to control her temper and wishes the same for her daughter, encouraging her to repress her feelings and thus behave "properly". Subduing Jo's temperament is a main theme in the novel, marked by her ultimate "domestication": "The narrative of female self-discipline that is so central to the domestic novel might be viewed as a kind of civilizing process in which the woman plays the role of both civilizer and savage." (Kaplan, 601)

Within the first few pages of *Little Women*, Jo is characterized as a bookworm, and is defined several times by her relationship to literature, both as a reader and as a writer. This, rather than any characteristic of femininity, is central to her character. As has been discussed, Jo feels disappointed by her own gender, and seeks to identify with it as little as possible:

Jo's gender transgression becomes a strong part of who she is. She does not like to wear dresses, she does not want to have to wear gloves, she would rather fight instead of her father, she longs to go to college, she hates needle work and other domestic chores, and she loves to run wild and cherishes independence. Her rebellion will determine her character and her life. Indeed, Jo becomes the democratic and independent heroine. (Laire, 27)

It is possible that Jo did not disdain womanhood itself, but rather felt constrained by the demands of society upon women, and wished to be free from them. Unlike her sisters, she does not accept the condition she is subject to, and instead chooses to challenge the norms presented to her at every turn. Jo “does not wish to be confined within the home and does not want to be feminine, as she associates women with the domestic confinement, submission and restraint, whereas men are independent, empowered and can be writers” (Laire, 26).

Curious and imaginative, Jo begins her journey in the “Ordinary World” of childhood, putting on plays with her sisters and writing stories of adventure and intrigue. As this thesis has discussed, these interests are somewhat protected while she remains young. When she first meets Laurie, Jo is delighted to have a friend, especially one which she feels understands her so well, and does not regard him in a romantic manner until he proposes. The reader may perceive that, in her opinion, nothing need change, for she is perfectly content to go on as a free child, despite the hardships of war, poverty and tending to grumpy Aunt March. She is introduced multiple times to the “Special World” of womanhood, as her family – except Beth – urges her to act appropriately for a young lady. She refuses this “call to adventure” multiple times, and is only seriously faced with and threatened by lasting change when Meg displays an interest in Mr. Brooke. Upset by the prospect of losing her sister to this foreign and despised realm of womanhood, Jo once again expresses her grief for not being born a man, this time extending the feeling to her sisters also:

She read the short reports he sent more than she did your letters, and pinched me when I spoke of it, and likes brown eyes, and doesn't think John an ugly name, and she'll go and fall in love, and there's an end of peace and fun, and cozy times together. I see it all! They'll go loving around the house, and we shall have to

dodge. Meg will be absorbed and no good to me any more. Brooke will scratch up a fortune somehow, carry her off, and make a hole in the family, and I shall break my heart, and everything will be abominably uncomfortable. Oh, dear me! Why weren't we all boys, then there wouldn't be any bother. (Alcott, 123)

Though her mother is beloved and at times very wise, Jo's mentor is perhaps her own ambition, which guides her through life unfailingly, providing courage and strength. She submits stories to the newspaper, defies the gendered expectations of her society, seems to abhor marriage, moves to New York by herself and becomes financially independent and continues to work on her craft throughout, hoping to become an author; This dream she refuses to give up on carries her through the most difficult parts of her journey, including the loss of Beth. As the reader learns more about how important writing is to Jo, one may begin to understand her aversion to femininity after all: not only does it seem impossible to become an author while female in the 19th century, the representations of women available in literature are less than thrilling. Between the Victorian angel and the madwoman, Jo perceives no escape from a woman's terrible fate, except to identify more closely with masculinity, which would then allow her to fulfill her wishes:

Indeed, she does not wish to be confined within the home and does not want to be feminine, as she associates women with the domestic confinement, submission and restraint, whereas men are independent, empowered and can be writers. (Laire, 26)

The literary scene has been dominated by men and as a result our Western literary history is patriarchal. If a woman would want to write, she would not face her predecessors, as there are none, but she would have to challenge the entire patriarchal literary tradition. (Laire, 31)

And challenge the tradition Jo does, inching ever closer to her lofty goals of becoming a renowned writer. It can be said that Jo's irreversible crossing of the threshold between the Ordinary and Special World comes after Meg is married and the sisters begin to drift apart, when Jo moves to New York to become a governess as she continues to pursue writing. There, two events initiate the tests and trials of Jo; Meeting Professor Bhaer and learning of Beth's worsening condition. Presented as an ally, Bhaer appears to Jo as a friendly figure, and their relationship develops over the course of the novel. Most of Jo's trials at this point in the novel have to do with authorship. Jo starts writing stories without morals for newspapers, which goes against her inner moral code, but attempts to distance the feelings of guilt by rationalizing that the money she earned from her stories would benefit her beloved Beth: "the little hoard she was making to take Beth to the mountains next summer grew slowly but surely as the weeks passed" (Alcott, 211). Such stories were published anonymously by Jo, such that she kept her identity – and gender – a secret. While attempting to negotiate her identity as both woman and writer, seeking autonomy and individuality, Jo incurs in her own erasure, for perhaps at the time there was no other alternative in her mind.

Jo's approach to the inmost cave happens as she loses perhaps her favorite sister, Beth: "Meg was Amy's confidant and monitor, and by some strange attraction of opposites Jo was gentle Beth's" (Alcott, 22). As she prepares to face her own adulthood, Jo realizes she is more alone than ever; The only unmarried sister at only the very beginning of her writing career, Jo has refused Laurie's proposal, keeping true to her beliefs – she would rather trust her own writing and support her family while incurring hardship than marry a man she does not love and secure financial safety for her mother and sisters.

Though she already cared for Professor Bhaer and respected him greatly, it can be argued that Jo perhaps did not feel much romantic inclination towards him until after she discovers Teddy's marriage to Amy. On the day of this discovery, Jo confesses to her mother that she cares more to be loved, and that she might have accepted Laurie's proposal had he tried again, for she feels deeply lonely in spite of her loving, growing family:

It's very curious, but the more I try to satisfy myself with all sorts of natural affections, the more I seem to want. I'd no idea hearts could take in so many. Mine is so elastic, it never seems full now, and I used to be quite contented with my family. I don't understand it. (Alcott, 264)

The point of inflection in the novel is perhaps Beth's death, at which point Jo must reconcile her dreams and her position in the world. On one hand, she writes more beautifully than ever, having found her voice:

Jo has learned to write again, not for the world, but for her family [...] Her new story is published and praised by everyone, as it went straight to the hearts of those who read it. The reason for this new approval is that, though she still uses humor and pathos, she writes from her heart, from her life. She does not write for money or for fame. This new style could only be achieved after pain and sorrow. (Laire, 64)

On the other hand, Jo begins her process of domestication, so to speak, no longer opposing marriage so fiercely and learning to control her temper. Her Ordeal of womanhood is resolved by matrimony to Professor Bhaer, which is a canonical event in the novel, but not what Louisa May Alcott seemed to wish for the character. Jo's "rebirth" as a wife and mother indicates the strength of patriarchy, even in the face of mighty Jo March. It is interesting to note that, despite her love of and commitment to writing, Jo signals some inferiority when

faced with male authorities. Although she is proud of her work and enjoys sharing it with her mother and sisters, Jo diminishes her accomplishments before her father: "I made a 'pome' yesterday, when I was helping Hannah wash, and as Father likes my silly little things, I put it in to amuse him" (Alcott, 104). As her ultimate fate and reward, Jo receives a contented life close to her family, which seems at first to align with the wishes she had for herself: "to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end" (Alcott, 96). Her mother's teachings on the importance of love over wealth informed her marriage to Professor Bhaer; She displayed altruism and integrity by opening a school in which to educate boys and girls when her Aunt March and left Jo her house; She had battled for her individuality and won, despite the concessions made along the way. It was mortifying for Jo to admit she would bow to the restraints she had so fiercely tried to escape:

Jo couldn't even lose her heart in a decorous manner, but sternly tried to quench her feelings, and failing to do so, led a somewhat agitated life. She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence. (Alcott, 282)

Nevertheless, Jo continued as a New Woman in her conviction that women should be regarded as respectful and worthy regardless of their marital status:

Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragic romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the sober gowns, and many silent sacrifices of youth, health, ambition, love itself, make the faded faces beautiful in God's sight. (Alcott, 265)

Even if, in Alcott's novel, Jo did not achieve the glory and immortality she longed for, she displayed an array of heroic qualities, and ended up immortalized as an immortal literary heroine in her own right. Challenging and overcoming her personal and historical limitations, Jo March still serves as a role model for girls everywhere. Her self-reliant, ambitious spirit has inspired multiple generations, and granted many permission to question and dispute gender assumptions and constraints. As Tatar writes, "The cult of the girl as author leads almost directly from *Little Women* through fiction for girls to screen fantasies about writing as professional work" (xxii). Resilient, curious, and compassionate, Jo March is neither defined by her feminine qualities – such as empathy, authenticity and innocence – nor by her masculine ones – ambition, assertiveness, agency. Alcott's main heroine is so transcendent precisely because she resists categorization at every turn. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that her solid moral compass, independence and love for freedom make her an exemplary American Heroine.

3.3 Beth

The perfect image of True Womanhood, Beth March is a "rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen" with "shy manners" and a "timid voice" (3). Between her bashfulness and the kind of work she does – teaching herself and doing chores –, Beth is somewhat invisible to the world, despite being loved dearly by her family. She does not leave the house much, being "a housewifely little creature", and seems content in her confinement:

There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind. (Alcott, 25)

“Little Miss Tranquility”, as her father nicknamed her, cared for a slew of dolls and cats, seemingly devoting her life to the service of others. She plays the piano beautifully, but differs from her sisters in that she does not feel compelled to expose her accomplishments, only to provide others with pleasure: “In the American novel music is used to portray women as pious and spiritual or as the typical Victorian Angel in the house” (Laire, 68). This holds true for Beth, as she is clearly the most selfless of the girls, seeming to have fully absorbed her mother's teachings. When Marmee is away tending to their ill father and they must pay a visit to a poor sick family the Marches have assisted in the past, the other sisters are too preoccupied with their own matters to leave the house with supplies and care for them. As a result, Beth goes alone and becomes ill with the scarlet fever, which will accompany her for many years until she ultimately succumbs. In this sense, it can be argued that her selflessness betrays her, as it will bring her eventual undoing: “Never thinking of any reward but to be loved” (Alcott, 21), Beth admits later in the novel that she wants for nothing, and that she wants to stay home taking care of her family. Since she has her piano, she says, she is perfectly content and can ask for nothing more. At one point, already very ill, she states:

I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up. I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away and the hard part now is the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven. (Alcott, 226)

Devoid of an individual purpose, a love interest or a life outside the home, Beth reveals the fate of many women resigned to their marginalized positions. As a symbol of

purity, however, it was necessary that for Beth to truly embody the ideal of True Womanhood (Cruea, 190), she could never be a wife or a mother, for that would have implied being a lover at some point, or losing her “purity” at some point, even after marriage. For Beth to truly represent the journey of a woman in her position, living up to society’s ideals, she could not truly be allowed to become a woman. Therefore, in isolation, she does not trouble anyone through the transition between childhood and adulthood, being instead overtaken by the disease, and carries on as she always has, never truly being transformed, which is the premise of the Hero’s Journey. In addition to not displaying the characteristics common to Heroes or Heroines, especially in a country such as the United States, which preaches and praises rising above your current circumstances, Beth’s lack of ambition and resignation to oppression kept her from truly developing into a Heroine of any kind, despite her exemplary morality and selflessness. Perhaps Beth’s death reinforces the notion that the traditionally feminine role, one of domesticity and selflessness, cannot endure. In her servitude to others and lack of her own voice, Beth is often referred to as an ideal rather than an individual, the archetype of the True Woman, and can be considered the furthest away from the notion of American Heroine; in a hyper-individualistic culture, young Beth’s pull towards collectivism and dependency on her sisters goes actively against the national identity the United States of America were attempting to construct, especially in the North. While all her sisters sought employment, marriages or education, Beth demonstrated no ambition of her own, and in doing so shows no interest in perhaps one of the most valued American ideals: freedom. As remarked by Laire,

Beth, who is as accomplished in playing the piano as her sister Amy is in drawing and Jo in writing, is too shy and timid to prove that she can play more than what people expect of her. Indeed, unlike her sisters, she does not want to prove or exhibit her accomplishments. She always refuses to play in public and though she yearned —for the grand pianol, she can

not pluck up courage to go and play, just as her sister would do. It is only by tricking the poor girl and by many secrets arrangements that she finally does play the grand piano. (68)

Whereas Beth can be a heroine in accordance with Tatar's and Emerson's models – innocent, authentic, caring, compassionate –, she cannot ultimately be considered an American heroine, as she did not go on the heroine's journey towards womanhood or, arguably, refused the Call of the Special World and died while still inhabiting the Ordinary World, thus not having completed her journey. Even if we consider the parameters of what was accessible to women at the time, Beth seemed unwilling to exhibit individuality, thus failing to categorize herself as a heroine. Tatar writes:

Today we are reframing many stories and histories from times past, recognizing that women were also able to carry out superhuman deeds, often without ever leaving (or being able to leave) the house. Their quests may not have taken the form of journeys, but they required acts of courage and defiance. Like Penelope in *The Odyssey* or Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, they used their homespun storytelling craft or drew on arts related to textile production to mend things, offer instructions, and broadcast offenses, all in the service of changing the culture in which they lived. They are rising up now to take their places in a new pantheon that is reshaping our notion of what constitutes heroism. It requires not just intelligence and courage, but also care and compassion: all the things it takes to be a true heroine. (xxviii)

Having nearly perfectly conformed to the culture and gender norms she was raised in, Beth excels at care, compassion and empathy, which might qualify her as a heroine according to the new standards Tatar proposes. Nevertheless, she does not use any of the devices at her disposal – music, sewing, knitting – as a tool for self-expression or storytelling, and

repeatedly asserts her musical talents exist solely for the pleasure of herself and others.

Although she can often seem courageous – such as she did when opening up to Mr. Laurence and playing the grand piano in his house –, Beth does not ultimately defy the environment of oppression that surrounds her and her family, and does not seek to participate in the world outside of her comfortable domestic sphere. This, however, seems to be her own choice, though one cannot truly be certain of Alcott's intentions for the character and her true motivations.

Beth does not fully overcome her shyness, though she makes significant progress towards it. Beth represents the aspirations and contradictions associated with the True Woman, as puritan culture would have women “keep the house” and “talk to few” (Armstrong, 19). As a child, she is allowed to be an innocent and domestic entity, interacting with a limited number of people and playing with her dolls. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, it would have been strange to see marry and have kids, as she is so closely associated with the figures of the Victorian Angel, and, later, the Angel of Death:

From the eighteenth century onwards this idea became quite popular, encouraging young girls to actually become this Angel-like woman. [...] This selflessness was very extreme in her domestic solitude, but during the nineteenth century, the Angel-like women changed from the memento of otherness to a memento mori. (Laire, 70)

Presented as perfectly content in her Ordinary World, Beth must overcome her shyness, but is otherwise of no consequence to the plot until her death. Even then, she is but a motivator to the other sisters – especially Jo: “Meg was Amy's confidant and monitor, and by some strange attraction of opposites Jo was gentle Beth's.” (Alcott, 22) –, who look up to her

as a paragon of virtue. Graceful, pure and modest, Beth was always held in the highest regard by all who met her, and seemed to engender no criticism:

“If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?” asked Beth, ready to share the lecture. “You’re a dear, and nothing else”, answered Meg warmly, and no one contradicted her, for the ‘Mouse’ was the pet of the family. (Alcott, 4)

Additionally, whereas all of the March sisters were somehow “softened” into fitting the mold of society – they become wives and mothers, even rebellious Jo –, Beth had no transformation to undergo in order to fit 19th century society’s standards: being the least ambitious sister, she was content with her homely life and lacked the intention – or romantic interest – to become a wife, becoming instead the unfulfilled *idea* of one. As adulthood would have been entirely compatible with her shyness under Puritan values, there was no “rebirth” necessary for young Beth, such that her death was the only narrative conclusion for the character.

When it comes to Jung’s ‘Hero’, Beth may perhaps be considered a heroine after all. As a master of her own flaws, Beth seems to overcome her social fears and interacts with multiple characters she is not related to throughout the novel, including Mr. Laurence and Teddy’s friends. The American Hero, as we have seen, often exhibits characteristics such as ubiquity, notability and morality. There is no doubt that the character of Beth excels at the moral requirements. Nevertheless, as she possessed a tendency to diminish her accomplishments and to keep to herself, it is evident that she could never fulfill the other two. Her demure servitude is not only this character’s most distinguishable trait, but precisely what keeps her small and invisible, just as patriarchal culture had envisioned. Lastly, the values we had previously evidenced as the hallmarks of an American Heroine –

independence, self-reliance, and agency – are all but lacking in Beth. This self-effacement, of course, serves as a contrast to her sisters, highlighting the rewards of their journeys towards these values. In parallel, we may affirm that, on a wider social and cultural level, the independence of the United States from Britain has similarly contributed to the nation's growth, especially towards self-reliance, which would not have been possible without rebellion, dissatisfaction with the oppressive colonial arrangements, and affirmation of a distinct national identity.

In summary, Beth seems to adhere well to Tatar's model of heroism, but seems to neither embark on Campbell's model of the Hero's Journey, nor on the Heroine's Journey, which in this case would be more symbolic; a transition from the Ordinary World she is familiar and content with – childhood – into an unknown Special World, replete with challenges she has no wish to face and rewards she has no interest in receiving. Instead, this study proposes that the idea of Beth has become a mentor to the remaining March sisters, who love and admire her even in death:

The spiritualized Victorian woman will lead a posthumous existence. Indeed, though exorcised from public life, denied the pleasures of sensual existence, the Victorian angel in the house was allowed to hold sway, Beth will continue to influence her sisters after her death. (Laire, 71)

Laire further cites Nina Auerbach, proposing Beth as a symbol of domesticity and childhood fun which incited a chain of events that allowed Amy and Jo to eventually abandon girlhood and get married; It is implied that the remnants of the March's childhoods lived on in Beth, and her demise was the catalyst which prompted Jo to release attachment to her

girlhood. Amy and Laurie are also said to have married abroad after receiving the news, so that they may return home without a chaperone. Her death is also instrumental to the final domestication of Jo, who takes up Beth's tasks in the household. Although a mentor and perhaps a heroine, Beth ultimately cannot be considered an American Heroine.

3.4 Amy

Amy March is a deliciously complex character. Initially a spoiled, vain, sensitive, selfish twelve-year-old, Amy is creative, outspoken, artistically gifted and has a quick temper like her older sister Jo:

She and Amy had had many lively skirmishes in the course of their lives, for both had quick tempers and were apt to be violent when fairly roused. Amy teased Jo, and Jo irritated Amy, and semioccasional explosions occurred, of which both were much ashamed afterward. Although the oldest, 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, 46)

The two, in fact, engage in several conflicts throughout the book, for a number of reasons; It is the most prominent antagonism in the novel, and the closest *Little Women* comes to having a villain. To think of this sisterly antagonism in the context of a clash between modalities of womanhood is fascinating, in the sense that Jo perceives in Amy everything she despises about womanhood: affectation, social conventions, vanity. Amy,

unlike Jo, understands and complies with 19th century gender norms (Laire, 22), and seems to resent Jo's performance of gender: "I detest rude, unladylike girls!" (Alcott, 3).

In addition to their childhood conflicts, it would appear that the introduction of Laurie into the narrative stirs a rivalry between Jo and Amy: Jo attempts to secure her position next to Laurie as an equal at the same time as Amy tries to gain one, albeit in a more romantic context. It is clear from the beginning that Amy is envious of Jo on some level, if only of her freedom to leave the house and play with her friends. She does not, however, display any animosity towards Meg, who is also involved in the same activities: her resentment seems limited to Jo. It is as if the two constantly battle over the attention of the Laurence boy, for very distinct reasons. Jo enjoys the company of her friend and expresses envy of his position as a man, as she would have liked to go to college and become a writer, events that were very unlikely for women, especially those of her financial condition. Amy, on the other hand, seems infatuated with Laurie and seeks out opportunities to be in his presence. Interestingly, the narrator is also partial to Jo and seems critical of Amy for her "grandiose desires of social advancement" (Foote, 74):

Amy symbolizes how easily a woman's desires for such advancement can become tragic, as is the case in this chapter. The word of Amy's limes gets out and Amy is punished. The narrator describes her punishment as a dreadful ordeal little Amy has to undergo. (Laire, 22)

Despite her vanity, Amy's main flaw appears to be her selfishness. When forbidden from accompanying her two eldest sisters to an event, Amy's revenge is enacted by setting fire to Jo's beloved manuscript. In one of the novel's first descriptions, Amy is portrayed as arrogant:

Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least.

A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.

(Alcott, 4)

Even kind Marmee worries for her daughter's character after an incident at school:

You are getting to be rather conceited, my dear, and it is quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit spoils the finest genius. There is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long, even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty. (Alcott, 44)

She is said to be the family's savior by Aunt March because she is determined to marry rich: "One of us *must* marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all round." (Alcott, 199) This is important because, although Jo is described as the only truly rebellious March, Meg married a poor man and Beth never seemed to be expected to marry, in such a way that the burden of financial security for the Marches fell solely upon Amy. Although she has her own ambitions of becoming a renowned painter – "I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world." (Alcott, 92) –, Amy is aware of her duty to her family as a woman, and is determined to "make a good match" (Alcott, 255). Due to her belief in Amy, Aunt March decides to take her to Europe in Jo's stead, which does nothing to appease their antagonism, as Jo was the one who worked for Aunt March: "It's

always so. Amy has all the fun and I have all the work. It isn't fair, oh, it isn't fair!" (Alcott, 191). Ultimately, however, the girls reconcile and find true sisterhood instead of antagonism: "You've a deal more principle and generosity and nobleness of character than I ever gave you credit for, Amy. You've behaved sweetly, and I respect you with all my heart." (Alcott, 191)

Amy's journey begins, then, as a spoiled, selfish child, not yet called to the adventure of womanhood, but eager to initiate her quest. Presented somewhat as a foil to Jo, Amy slowly warms up to the reader, as she is punished for any misdeeds she might commit – for instance, she falls into the frozen lake after burning her sister's manuscript. As the youngest of all Marches, Amy is perhaps the last to cross into the Special World, despite having prepared for it more than Beth and Jo did. Amy's mentors seem to be her mother and Meg, as both love her dearly but do not hesitate to provide her with guidance. Her central issue – selfishness – is what she must overcome before fully achieving womanhood, which she seems to do by indulging a wealthy man's affections though she herself does not love him.

Although by the time she leaves for Europe Amy has grown considerably as a character, it can be considered that the irreversible crossing of the threshold into the Special World coincides with her journey abroad. A lady of impeccable manners and increasingly educated, Amy travels through the "Old World" with joy and ease, recounting her adventures through letters. Aware of her duty to marry well for her family's sake, she spends quite some time in the company of Fred Vaughn, a wealthy acquaintance. When she runs into Laurie at a social function, she serves as his mentor, scolding him for his idle and selfish ways:

"You [Laurie] are none the better for it, as far as I can see. I said when we first met that you had improved. Now I take it all back, for I don't think you half so nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you like gossip, and waste

time on frivolous things, you are contented to be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and beauty, ah you like that old Vanity! But it's the truth, so I can't help saying it, with all these splendid things to use and enjoy, you can find nothing to do but dawdle, and instead of being the man you ought to be, you are only..." there she stopped, with a look that had both pain and pity in it. (Alcott, 256)

Although momentarily wounded by the harsh words, Laurie appreciates this warning, and perhaps this allows him to complete his journey into adulthood; His love for Jo, even his proposal of marriage, can be considered as an attempt to preserve childhood insofar as both of them are their childhood selves together. Described as wild, Jo and Laurie hinder each other from fully coming of age. Laurie expresses discontentment at attending university, whereas Jo fantasizes about going in his stead. He encourages her rebelliousness and she magnifies his love for fun. By becoming closer to Amy, Laurie accepts Jo's refusal and starts to work towards "being the man he ought to be". Seemingly, he becomes kinder and more responsible, accepting the end of their childhood and becoming an ally to Amy.

After this, Amy faces an important trial of adulthood, a variation on the one Meg grappled with years prior: does she accept the proposal of Fred Vaughn, thus sacrificing herself to a loveless marriage that can save her family from financial ruin? Or does she decline it and attempt to marry for love, possibly dooming her loved ones to the poverty that has made her suffer so much as a child? Amy ultimately chooses to reject Fred Vaughn and is to an extent rewarded with something no other March sister boasted: a marriage that confers her both love and wealth.

Perhaps her ordeal, having crossed into adulthood, is to accept the death of her sister, and deal with her grief once reunited with family. The character of spoiled, selfish Amy March no longer exists; In her place, a worldly and self-possessed woman is reborn. Like her sisters, Amy becomes a wife and bears children, leaving her dreams of being a famous painter behind. Her boon is the same as her sisters': to live peacefully in community with her loved ones, and to not struggle financially as she did in childhood.

Though not an intellectual, Amy certainly displays feminine qualities that would earn her the title of heroine in Tatar's and Emerson's views. She is determined, curious, authentic and resilient. Additionally, over time, she learns to prioritize compassion just as her mother taught her. Like Jo, Amy easily fulfills the criteria for the "American" portion of American heroism, as she is ambitious, self-reliant, and develops her individuality admirably. Having overcome her selfishness and solving the issue of poverty in her family, it is safe to assert Amy was able to surpass her personal and local historical limitations, just as Campbell and Jung postulated. Moreover, if one considers "the values, aspirations and ideals" of American culture and society to be the patriarchal norm of an advantageous marriage, then Amy represents Jung's heroine perfectly, as she was the only sister to have attained a loving partnership and material comfort. If, however, the American Heroine is determined through the same lens as the Great American Novel, then perhaps none of the sisters in the novel achieve this status, given that they all went on to live relatively anonymous lives, completely opposed to the ones Amy and Jo wished for themselves. Nonetheless, due to the success of Alcott's novel, the characters can perhaps be considered just as remarkable and widely known as the book itself, such that they are all American heroines. In most instances, therefore, Amy March can be considered a true American heroine.

3.5 Other characters

As previously discussed, the March sisters are the main characters portrayed in Alcott's novel. Nevertheless, there are several other important figures to consider. Marmee, their mother, is a near-perfect representation of Republican Motherhood, which encouraged women to be good citizens and teach their children the same:

Though Marmee may be analyzed as a guidance to the sisters in the novel, she is also [...] responsible for their transformation into little women, encouraging her daughters to stamp out their envy, pride and aggression and to be more like perfect Beth. To some readers, Marmee was successful, for at the end of *Good Wives*, all three sisters are married and seem inert women who lack a life and identity of their own. (Laire, 86-87)

Laurie, Jo's best friend and eventually Amy's husband, goes on a journey of his own, initially facing loneliness – "I haven't got any mother, you know" (Alcott, 31) – and later having to give up his childhood alongside his surrogate sisters. Unlike many characters, he does not shun the company of young girls, and seems to respect them as equals despite their uneven standings in both gender and wealth¹³.

Aunt March is presented as a bitter, lonely old woman, who is allowed to be a spinster because she is rich. Though she is often dismissed as traditional and a bit abrasive, Aunt March is ultimately a figure of feminine empowerment, as she understood that a rich woman had more opportunities and freedom than a poor one, and merely encouraged her nieces to seek out that freedom through the avenue available to them – marriage. In fact, upon her

¹³ The character of Laurie, though instrumental to Alcott's novel, is only mentioned briefly in this section because the study is focused upon the four March sisters and their claims to the title of American Heroines.

death, she leaves her house to Jo; This was highly unusual at the time, because property rights for women were extremely limited. Thus, a woman inheriting property from another woman marked a certain progressiveness on Aunt March's part. Nevertheless, she is often overlooked and disliked, by both characters and readers, in part due to her age and gender:

Nothing has ever been heard of the old woman. The sparrow is silenced when the old woman cuts its tongue, and the woman too is silenced when "horrible creatures" assault her and carry her off. The last sentence in the story silences the woman as powerfully as the cutting of the sparrow's tongue, and it seems almost perverse that it is an old woman, living on her own, who is demonized as the enemy of song and beauty. (Tatar, 102)

Since before the emergence of publishing and print culture, stories written by older women tend to be relegated to children's literature, not enjoying the same prestige men of the same age often receive. This also happened to the author herself, Louisa May Alcott: although *Little Women* was a commercial success and has never been out of print, the novel has consistently been considered children's literature, and girl's literature specifically. Anne Boyd Rioux writes "The erasure of *Little Women* is part of a larger silencing of women's voices in literature classrooms, which has only become more profound as issues relating to women's lives have become more socially volatile" (2018). She explains that of the assigned reading for an "exemplary" tenth-grade English class, only a few poems over the entire school year were written by women¹⁴. Some of the books included in the program, which allegedly focused on the Individual and Society, were "George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*,

¹⁴ In this instance, the poems were written by Sylvia Plath.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (the only book they read *about* a woman)" (Rioux, 2018). Rioux argues that *Little Women*, or many other novels written by and about women, could have contributed similarly important perspectives on being an individual – especially a young adult – in America. "Instead", she writes, "the individual remains male." (2018)

This phenomenon, to a certain extent, begs a question this thesis cannot yet answer: does heroism depend on acknowledgment?

If so, this study hopes to have sufficiently acknowledged Louisa May Alcott and her characters, as they are surely deserving of the title, at least as much as any male author.

4. Conclusion

No single heroine dominates or endures [as heroine]. Instead, heroines keep evolving, challenging authority and legitimacy, rebelling, resisting, and demanding makeovers. Traditional hierarchies of heroism are forever being reshuffled and rearranged as cultural values shift and are rebalanced. This holds true for both heroes and heroines. (Tatar, 281)

The present study exists because, for centuries, women have sought to occupy the many spaces denied to them. As mentioned, Aphra Behn was a role model to women such as Louisa May Alcott and Virginia Woolf, proving women could derive a livelihood from their intellect just as men did, despite the constant messaging from society that they shouldn't. Writers such as these, in turn, crafted stories and characters which have influenced women for decades, creating increasing space for female advancement and perspective: "Storytellers can now channel the histories of heroes and heroines, creating communities of memory that keep alive the words and deeds of those who came before us and earned not just glory but also dignity and humanity." (Tatar, 48)

In highlighting the difficulties women continue to overcome, as well as the often-overlooked traits that have allowed them to do so, it is possible to finally acknowledge the heroism that has always existed in courageous traits such as opposing the patriarchal status quo. Work such as this is important because, as previously discussed, literary analysis and the canon are still largely dominated by male writers and critics. Author and scholar Maria Tatar understood better than most that it is important to actively include women and their perspectives rather than simply not excluding them.

There are important differences between heroes and heroines, and the features that make them commendable or laudable change over time. Heroes and heroines have deployed different strategies for earning merit [...] one rousing and percussive in most cases; the other, stereotypically veiled and still, yet also quietly creative and deeply inspiring. (Tatar, 8)

The hero, however impressive, perpetuates ideas of masculinity that fail to celebrate the strength required to be curious, compassionate, and authentic. In memorializing the selfish and adventurous spirit of Twain's Huck Finn or Melville's single-minded Ahab, readers miss out on the richness of community, empathy, and vulnerability. Narratively speaking, these themes often provide the most interesting interiority, and can create a culture in which it is encouraged to share thoughts and feelings with others nonjudgmentally, in a way that helps promote equality. This is why literature written by women often focuses on knowledge, justice, and social connection (Tatar, 289). *Little Women* is no different:

The first part of the novel focuses on the intimate bond that defines their sisterhood and their relationship with their mother. In the second part of the novel we see how

this sisterhood is tested, as Meg marries, Amy leaves for Europe and Jo for New York. Nonetheless, within their close surroundings they still relate chiefly to other women and to each other. Marriage and men are often less important. (Laire, 46)

In addition to accentuating the importance of an education, the March sisters “begin as victims, but the arc of their stories takes them to a position enabling them to speak for themselves and to a culture in ways that let them live on in story and song” (Tatar, 77), thus providing a novel outlook for women at the time. Laire affirms that Alcott created a new kind of fiction aimed at young girls, which portrayed realistic female characters and plots, a far cry from “preceding models of womanhood in fiction” (77). In this sense, Alcott is credited with the increase in opportunities for women, as well as enlarging the female sphere. “In creating a place where women could be more than just domestic housewives, Alcott endorsed her readers new opportunities for women, such as education and career” (Laire, 77). In doing so, the author created a new role model – a heroine – which represented and inspired future generations of girls.

When it was first published, perhaps *Little Women* was a tale of optimism and triumph, in which poor sisters manage to overcome poverty with dignity and joy. In the 21st century, it can often be interpreted as a tragedy: despite their talents and – successful – efforts to become better people, the sisters were not rewarded with the fulfilment of their own dreams, but rather with society's limiting expectations for them. Meg did not end up managing the luxurious household she so desired; Jo did not become a famous author, but rather opened a school... for boys; Beth was not allowed to continue peacefully living in the company of her family, and in death became a symbol of “goodness”; Lastly, Amy did not

become a painter, but married Laurie and raised a family, such that by the end of the novel the March name is extinct – Meg took John's surname Brooke, just as Jo did Bhaer and Amy took Laurence. Unfortunately for these characters, Alcott's success in propelling female advancement happened almost entirely outside the novel. Thankfully for readers, the book created new role models of independence and individuality, female heroes that one could look up to: "The refusal to remain silent becomes the hallmark of today's new heroines, in art as in life." (Tatar, 105)

Little Women is at times dismissed as a superficial novel, but it contains numerous layers which a single study is incapable of fully addressing. However, one of the main takeaways is that under the façade of domestic bliss and female submission, lies a passionate tale of humanness and gender equality:

Alcott is successful as her novel does advocate the possibility of being more than just a wife to a man, for she emphasizes the importance of education and career opportunities for women. Indeed, the novel strongly celebrates the individuality of young girls [...] gradual expansion of the female sphere and increasing opportunities for women in the 19th century are well depicted in the novel. (Laire, 94)

All suitors portrayed in the novel – Laurie, Mr. Brooke and Pr. Bhaer – are conventional heroes and will be equals to their wives. As such, the matrimonial unions in the novel are not emblematic of Victorian society, as the girls are not forced into the role of Angel in the House, typical of the rigid Victorian domesticity. Instead, a new domesticity is acquired, where women can speak freely, aspire to having careers and being treated as equals. (Laire, 95)

The goal of this study is to expand the definitions of heroism, as well as to call attention to society's gendered notions of heroic acts. Using Louisa May Alcott's novel and its backdrop of 19th century U.S.A. in order to establish the concepts developed in the text, I expect to have explained some notions regarding archetypal literary criticism and how they were used to investigate the March sisters' claims to the title of American Heroine. After discussing the origin of the notion of a hero, an expansion of heroism was proposed, and thus began the specifications of heroes and heroines in the context of the United States. As Tatar and others have agreed, the idea of heroism has evolved admirably in the past few centuries, but it is exciting to wonder how it will change into the 21st century and beyond.

Therefore, using Campbell's mythological approach to literature and a compilation of research on heroism, this study has established that the March sisters are, in general, more than qualified to be considered American Heroines, as they possess heroic qualities and have embarked on a journey which ultimately transformed them.

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