

“Dishes and Dusters” and the Dangers of Domestic Femininity in Louisa May Alcott’s
Little Women

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Louisa May Alcott struggled all her life to be a True Woman. True Womanhood, a term coined by cultural historian Barbara Welter in 1966, served as the dominant model of womanhood in mid-century fiction from 1820 to 1860 as Alcott was growing up.¹ Preaching domestic femininity, True Womanhood defined the standards by which a woman was judged by herself, “her husband, her neighbors and society” as to how well she upheld its “four cardinal virtues” of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”² At the heart of this doctrine was for the white, high- and middle-class nineteenth century woman to unquestionably accept her place “by her own fireside – as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother.”³ Its ultimate goal was marriage.

Alcott butted heads with True Womanhood throughout her life, growing up to become a spinster and rejecting at least one proposal from a suitor.⁴ But, beyond struggling to be a feminine girl, and thus what nineteenth century America deemed a good girl, Alcott struggled to *be* a girl. In 1860, she wrote in a letter to Alfred Whitman, “I was born with a boys nature.”⁵ In an 1883 interview with Louisa Chandler Moulton, Alcott asserted, “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.”⁶ Funny, then, that Alcott wrote arguably the most influential work about growing up a girl in nineteenth century America, a book she called *Little Women*.

¹ Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 25.

² Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1966): 152.

³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴ Susan Cheever, *Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 118.

⁵ Entry dated March 2, 1860, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, assoc. ed. Madeline B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 51.

⁶ Louisa May Alcott qtd. in Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (Gloucestershire: Clarendon Press, 1991), 48.

Like her author, the main character Jo March of *Little Women* also struggles with True Womanhood. And she, too, even wants to be a boy. Described as “queer... odd, but rather clever” (194), Jo grumbles (1), speaks in a “gentlemanly manner” (2), and doesn’t care much for girls (40).⁷ Her temper is hot and her writing ambitions are high. She refuses to go by her given name Josephine, preferring the more masculine Jo. She is so boyish that Mr. March even calls her his “son” (349) and her best friend Laurie refers to her as “my dear fellow” (194). Of all the four sisters, she is described in the most active terms: she groans (12, 38), mutters (10, 52), chokes (12), shakes (12), exclaims (7), prances (24), tramps (47, 54), and blunders her way through life (47). Worst of all – she whistles (4, 52, 161-2).

If Jo’s inability to be a proper little woman was ever in doubt at any point in the novel, Alcott puts it in writing. About halfway through Part I of *Little Women*, Alcott offers a simple yet succinct description of the March sisters through the guise of the girls’ self-written paper, the “Pickwick Portfolio.” Its “Weekly Report” on the March sisters’ behavior concludes with the following:

Meg – Good.
 Jo – Bad.
 Beth – Very good.
 Amy – Middling. (162)

But, in the novel, Jo writes the report – and when she writes the report, she includes a societal evaluation of how more masculine qualities make a girl “bad” and more feminine qualities make a girl “very good.” She knows she is bad at being a girl, pitching the evaluation “Jo – Bad” as a kind of joke to comment on how she does not care to be good. In the process, Jo reveals she neither tries nor wants to adhere to a more traditionally

⁷ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Puffin Books, 2008). All subsequent reference to the text will be parenthetical.

feminine model of womanhood. Instead, she wants to be a boy, and that makes her “bad.” Jo is a self-declared problem child – and she is not afraid to admit it.

Whereas Jo struggles with the femininity she is supposed to embody from the first pages of Alcott’s novel, her sister Beth, on the other hand, does not. As the “conscience” (291) to Jo’s “confidante” (62), Beth easily conforms to being a girl from the first chapter, “contentedly, from her corner” accepting the reality of a father gone off to war (1); “ready to share the lecture” as the sisters declare their flaws, only to be told she does not have any (5); and, as the perpetual “peacemaker,” suggesting to Jo that it is “too bad” she cannot be a boy “but it can’t be helped, so you must try to be contented” with her lot (4-5). It is no wonder that Jo declares Beth is the “very good” sister – she does not struggle at all with being a girl, and she is “very good” at it, too. With “a hand that all the dish-washing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch,” a description Alcott includes to gesture towards Beth’s aptitude for a domestic lifestyle (5), Beth even physically demonstrates the ideals of True Womanhood with a vigor that hints that Beth is the sister most likely to reap the benefit of its doctrine: marriage. But Alcott includes a twist. As a True Woman, Beth’s femininity *should* lead to marriage, but it does not. The “very good” sister dies, without marriage prospects, while the “bad” sister marries and lives happily ever after.

This move has stumped critics, who struggle to reconcile how the liberal minded Alcott could create such a conventional seeming text in which every sister, except for Beth, ends up married. This critical field centers on Alcott’s treatment of marriage in *Little Women* and if Alcott betrayed her artistic vision to write a commercial success or if she infused a conventional text with subversive meaning through her portrayal of

marriage. As scholars have noted, Alcott did not want the March sisters to marry – in particular, Jo. Alcott describes in an often cited letter written in 1869 to Elizabeth Powell her conflicting desire for Jo to “remain a spinster” against the clamoring of “so many enthusiastic young ladies [who] wrote to me... demanding that she should marry Laurie.”⁸ Unable to neither buck their demands nor resist her reluctance, she “didn’t dare to refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her” in the character of Professor Bhaer, looking forward to the “vials of wrath” she expected “to be poured out upon” her head in return.⁹ Backed into a corner, Alcott attempted to fix a convention she found stifling through the closest move she could make that would not force her into completely betraying her values. She also inadvertently sparked a critical debate that began a century after she wrote her bestselling novel.

This debate, beginning in 1975 with the publication of Alcott’s previously unknown blood and thunder novels by Madeleine Stern, grew out of a critical revisiting of *Little Women* by feminist critics. While Alcott gained popularity in the American cultural imagination with children’s novels such as *Little Women*, a darker, grittier, more provocative Alcott was revealed in the thriller novels she wrote under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard. Following the discovery of these thrillers, critics were eager to find discrepancies in the text between what Stern calls “the Hidden Louisa May Alcott” (Stern’s chosen title for Alcott’s previously unknown thrillers) and “the Children’s Friend,” as Alcott came to be called.¹⁰ This discovery, coupled with the well known fact

⁸ Entry dated March 1869, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *The Overland Monthly* 15, no. 5 (Nov. 1875): 493-94 qtd. in *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 252.

that Jo was Alcott's literary alter ego,¹¹ resulted in scholarship that primarily used Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer alongside Alcott's biography as a lens to uncover a potentially subversive thread within Alcott's treatment of marriage in the novel.

But the critical focus on Jo in the marriage debate has come at the cost of being unable to come to a consensus. Problem child Jo still remains a problem for critics. Unable to come to a conclusion on the creation Alcott dubbed "moral pap for the young,"¹² scholars continue to debate in a discussion centered around Jo's marriage whether *Little Women* as a text is "adolescent, sentimental, and repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become 'little,' domesticated, and silent,"¹³ or "subversive, matriarchal, and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female domesticity it purports to admire."¹⁴ A brief survey of criticism suggests that

¹¹ Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 252-53.

¹² Entry dated January, February 1877, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1989), 204.

¹³ Ann B. Murphy, "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 15, no. 3 (1990): 564. At one end of the critical spectrum, feminist critics have concluded *Little Women* marks a turning point at which Alcott compromised her values to sell out and create a commercial success that advocates for female self-denial, marking *Little Women* as a conservative text. See Eugenia Kaledin, "Louisa May Alcott: Success and the Sorrow of Self-Denial," *Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (1978): 251; Judith Fetterley, "Impersonating *Little Women*: The Radicalism of Alcott's *Behind a Mask*," *Women's Studies* 10, no. 1 (1983): 14; Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 9. See also on the limitations of Alcott's creativity: Beverly Lyon Clark, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Little Woman," *Children's Literature* 17, no. 1 (1989): 93; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 70, 483. Especially see Patricia Spacks, "Little Women and the Female Imagination," in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 114-19; Greta Gaard, "'Self-Denial was all the Fashion': Repressing Anger in *Little Women*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 17; Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 61, for a discussion on how Alcott's inability to reconcile her personal support of female autonomy with commercial demands for marriage results in a repressive novel which promotes marriages that discipline the sisters' natural temperaments and reinforce the practice of female self-denial as espoused by Marmee, which Gaard further argues must be "cheerfully" done (4).

¹⁴ Murphy, "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*," 564. These later scholars find that contradictory messages within the seemingly covert championing of marriage allow Alcott to subvert the demands placed upon her narrative and create a subversive novel. See Elizabeth Langland, "Female Stories of Experience: Alcott's *Little Women* in Light of *Work*," in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover,

critics are unable to come to any consensus as to whether Alcott sold out to or rebelled against convention. Ann Murphy even argues that the criticism reveals that as a text *Little Women* “does not permit rigid answers.”¹⁵ Yet perhaps this is because we have not been looking in the right place for answers – or, at least, in the right sister.

Considering that, of all the March sisters, Beth and her relationship with Jo dances around the periphery of a discussion focused on what Jo’s marriage means for nineteenth century models of womanhood, I suggest our conversation on whether Alcott is conventional or subversive looks different if we pay less attention to Alcott’s problem child, Jo, and more to her more quiet, “very good” sister, Beth. This decision may seem odd at first glance. While Jo’s tomboyish nature coupled with her puzzling submission to becoming a good wife at the end of the novel continues to be discussed and debated and made sense of as to how the little women grow up to become womanly women, Beth is often relegated into a shadowy corner of academia, like the one she loved to brood in in the novel. In a manner suiting her shy nature, she most often appears in discourse on the margins of articles and chapters, and noted, usually in parenthesis,¹⁶ as the one sister who does not get to experience domestic bliss. But when she does appear, she appears

N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), 118-20; Madelon Bedell, “Beneath the Surface: Power and Passion in *Little Women*, in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), 146. Numerous scholars take on this kind of reading urged and conducted by Bedell and Langland, including the following scholars who find the marriage that has sparked the most critical outrage – Jo to Professor Bhaer – actually subverts ideals of domesticated womanhood by advocating on behalf of true love and equality. See Nina Auerbach, “Waiting Together: Two Families,” in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 62, 69-70; Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and Little Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 161-63; Anne Dahlke, “‘The House Band’: The Education of Men in *Little Women*,” *College English* 47 (Oct. 1985): 572; Michelle A. Massé, “Songs to Aging Children: Louisa May Alcott’s March Trilogy,” in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 339.

¹⁵ Murphy, “The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*,” 565.

¹⁶ See, for example, Julie Wilhelm, “‘Don’t laugh! Act as if it was all right!’ And Other Comical Interruptions in ‘Little Women,’” *Studies in American History*, New Series 3, No. 19 (2009): 66. See also Bedell, “Beneath the Surface,” 147.

alongside our discussion of Jo. This makes sense: wrapped up in the debate on Alcott's treatment of problem child Jo and the marriage problem – is her marriage conventional or subversive? – is a debate on whether or not Alcott upheld the ideals of the more traditionally feminine Cult of True Womanhood, the model that scholars agree Beth most fully embodies. Scholarship accordingly proves that it is difficult to discuss Jo, and Jo's relationship to True Womanhood, without some discussion of Beth. But I find that we have not discussed Beth enough.

When Beth is brought out from her shadowy corner in *Little Women* criticism to the forefront of discussion, she is seen as an instrument to convert Jo into a True Woman. As numerous scholars have noted, Beth's death ushers in Jo's marriage, as über feminine Beth asks for Jo to "take my place" (662) and soon after Jo marries.¹⁷ In this subset of *Little Women* scholarship, the focus is less on Alcott's treatment of Beth and more on its effect on Jo. These critics, especially those most damning of Alcott, Judith Fetterley and Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Lant, do come to one point of consensus: Beth serves as a lesson for Jo to get good, get submissive, and get married.¹⁸ Estes and Lant even go so far to claim that Beth's death in the text is not actually Beth's but Jo's, as Jo seems to

¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 483; Judith Fetterley, "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 37-39; Gaard, "'Self-Denial Was All the Fashion: Repressing Anger in Little Women,'" 16-17; Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, "Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," *Children's Literature* 17, no. 1 (1989): 113-16; Stephanie Foote, "Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott," *College Literature* 31, no. 1 (2005): 78; Michelle Ann Abate, "Topsy and Topsy-Turvy Jo: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and/in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," *Children's Literature* 34 (2006): 76; Marta Miquel Baldellou, "Inheriting Traditional Roles of American Female Growth: From Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* to Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*," in *New Literatures of Old: Dialogues of Tradition and Innovation in Anglophone Literature*, eds. Jose Ramon Prado-Perez and Didac Llorens Cubedo, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 130.

¹⁸ See Fetterley, "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War," 39. See also Estes and Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 101.

become a reincarnated Beth following her death.¹⁹ Beth's death thus brings on the true horror in the text – the mutilation of Jo's spirit – and transfers a horror that Estes and Lant note Leslie Fiedler and James Baldwin have antagonistically attributed to the novel itself primarily onto Jo.²⁰ In essence, *Little Women* becomes the most horrifying thriller that Alcott ever wrote: the real Jo, tomboy Jo, is murdered on Beth's deathbed, and not allowed to grow up, under the guise that Beth is the one who is dying. A married, far less rebellious woman takes her place.

I argue, however, if we look at the manner in which Beth dies, we can see that something equally horrific is occurring with Beth's death – and, by bringing in work on nineteenth century invalidism, we can further see that Alcott makes it clear through the circumstances of Beth's death that True Womanhood is not a model to emulate. As Diane Price Herndl notes, death in nineteenth century fiction resolves the conflict between self-denial and self-interest for the extreme True Woman as any act a woman makes on her deathbed, no matter how small, becomes an act of self-determination because the invalid is by nature dependent on others.²¹ Gilbert and Gubar find that Beth's death appears to be a “prolonged suicide.”²² If we look more closely at Beth's death, and Beth's role in the text, we can see that Beth and her death does not usher Jo into the folds of True Womanhood – it stands as a warning. Upholding the ideals of True Womanhood kills Beth.

Understanding the “very good” is just as important as understanding the “bad.” Just because Beth is “very good” does not mean that she does not have her own problems

¹⁹ Estes and Lant, “Dismembering the Text,” 115.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

²¹ Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 49.

²² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 483.

to solve. In this paper, I propose that shy Beth, who is seen as the most full embodiment of True Womanhood but whose embodiment has not yet been fully explored, does have something to say to us about what type of womanhood Alcott promotes, but Beth is simply too quiet and we have only been picking up on her whispers. I suggest if we listen closely enough to the forgotten sister, we can hear what she is saying and why she has been forgotten. While ironically we have focused on Jo and her more progressive model of femininity as subversive or not, I posit that looking more closely at Beth allows us to come to an answer as to whether or not Alcott's work is conventional or subversive. I argue that looking at Beth reveals that although Beth may be Alcott's most conventional character as the symbolic representation of the Cult of True Womanhood, Alcott's treatment of Beth, and by proxy True Womanhood, is Alcott's most subversive act of all. After all, it is true that Beth is "very good." But with Beth, Alcott hints that perhaps there can be too much of a good thing.

Understanding Beth's Little Womanhood in *Little Women*

To understand *Little Women* is to understand that more than one model of femininity was available for women to emulate in the nineteenth century – it has even been said that the text itself stands as a testament to this truth.²³ Above all, *Little Women* follows the four March sisters as they grow up from little women into womanhood under the guidance of their beloved Marmee. Along the way, the sisters engage with competing models of nineteenth century womanhood. The "cult of True Womanhood," described by Barbara Welter in 1966; the "cult of female frailty" and the necessity of "Able-Bodied Womanhood," both described by Martha Verbrugge in 1988; and the model of "Real

²³ Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 25.

Womanhood,” described by Frances B. Cogan in 1989, are several examples of these competing models offered to women in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ Since Barbara Welter’s discovery of True Womanhood, critics have proposed these various competing models of womanhood to fill in the gaps in Welter’s model, with the differing sisters of *Little Women* representing each type. But, for our purposes, the most feminine doctrine explored by Alcott in *Little Women* is also the most relevant to our discussion: True Womanhood, as embodied by Beth and preached by Marmee.

Critics have often taken a conservative reading of *Little Women* because it seems to overtly advocate for True Womanhood. As the most prominent ideal of femininity in Alcott’s era, True Womanhood is also the one most ostensibly espoused in *Little Women* by the sisters’ idolized Marmee. Marmee encourages her children to follow the tenets of True Womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. She sees marriage as the greatest joy her children can have. She confesses her hopes and dreams for her daughters to her oldest children, Meg and Jo, as:

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. (151-2)

In this passage, Marmee displays all of the qualities of a True Woman advocating for its doctrine: she is pious and submissive, hoping her daughters live the most pleasant lives as “God sees fit to send” without questioning His judgment, and she is domestic and pure, wishing them to have a happy home with “a good man.” Most importantly, Marmee reveals “this beautiful experience” of having a loving marriage is her main wish for her

²⁴ Ibid.

children. In this speech, Marmee discloses that the lessons she teaches her girls – to control their tempers, overcome their pride, and not succumb to their vanities – are all in the effort of guiding the sisters into loving marriages, to leave one happy home to enter another, as a good True Woman should.

And these lessons taught by Marmee do lead to marriage: the March sisters who are still living at the end of the novel are all happily married with children. Although Marmee may not be a perfect True Woman herself, famously confiding in Jo that despite appearances she too is “angry nearly every day” of her life (123), and therefore allowing Alcott to suggest the ideal is unattainable, critics have noted she nevertheless preaches the doctrine up until the novel’s final words. The novel concludes with Marmee declaring to her daughters, “with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility, – ‘Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!’” (777).²⁵ For the reader, and the March sisters, the novel has thus come full circle: Marmee’s lessons have been taught; the girls have learned; and the March family, grown larger as the sisters now have children of their own, lives happily ever after. Except for Beth.

Ironically, Beth proves to be the best student and the most ardent follower of Marmee’s teachings, although Alcott heavily implies that Beth never needed those teachings in the first place. While Marmee may struggle with her temper and her attempts to live up to True Womanhood, Beth easily slips into the True Woman role, never receiving from Marmee quite the lectures given to her sisters. Endeared by her

²⁵ It is also worth noting Marmee’s words are reminiscent of a phrase from the women’s gift book, Mrs. Sigourney’s *Letters to Mothers*: “My friend,” Mrs. Sigourney writes, “in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness.” Mrs. Sigourney, *Letters to Mother* (Hartford, 1838), 9 qtd. in Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 171.

family, Beth is seemingly the only sister who does not have to learn a truly life changing moral lesson on her Pilgrim's Progress. Nor does she seem to need to. When we first meet the March sisters, who are disappointed by the lack of Christmas presents and a father off to war, the girls compare each other's flaws. When Beth enters the conversation, she is deemed flawless:

“If Jo is a tom-boy, 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. (5)

If the reader is to think that Meg is partial to Beth, however, Alcott soon after reinforces Beth's lack of flaws through Marmee. In the same first chapter, the girls share their discussion of their flaws with their mother, who comments, “Each of you told what your burden was just now, except Beth; I rather think she hasn't got any” (15). But, eager to share in the lecture, Beth confesses her flaws to her family – “dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos, and being afraid of people” (15) – flaws that seem to pale in comparison to Meg's admission of her prideful beauty (13), Jo's disgust of domesticity (14), and Amy's claims of selfishness (13). If the other girls are striving to become True Women, Beth is already the exemplar of the ideal Marmee discernibly intends for the girls to become – thus, she has nothing to criticize.

Indeed, Beth never wavers on her adherence to the True Womanhood's four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Marmee and Beth are the two women most connected with religion throughout the text, particularly through the hymns that Beth plays on the family piano. Regarding her purity, although the March sisters' “had no brothers” and “very few male cousins” so “boys were almost unknown

creatures to them” (44), Beth’s purity is never in question, as, with the exception of her father, she finds herself shy around any men in her life, including “old Mr. Laurence” (89). She also finds maintaining the house to be her natural domain, “with a hand that all the dishwashing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch” (5) and “her tranquility... much disturbed” in Marmee’s experiment in which the girls do not keep house for a week (172). Finally, her “submissive spirit” is on display throughout the novel (292), from letting Amy have the rest of the page to write a letter to Marmee when she is away visiting their sick father (271) to uncomplainingly visiting the ill Hummels when her sisters refuse to go (277). Without fail, Beth silently subscribes to the tenets of True Womanhood. Perhaps, Alcott suggests, a little too silently.

The genius of Alcott’s critique of True Womanhood comes from Beth’s silence about her True Womanhood, and that critique is searing. Alcott quietly sets up the idea that True Womanhood is its own burden in the first chapter of the novel when she introduces her readers to each of the March sisters, who in turn lay out their respective flaws – all, except for, at first glance, Beth. To revisit the scene, after Marmee reads a Christmas letter from the girls’ father, who says he looks forward to coming back “fonder and prouder than ever of my little women,” each of the girls lament the respective vice that they will struggle with for the rest of the text (13). For Amy, it is her selfishness: she resolves to not be “a selfish pig” (13). Meg, in turn, vows that “I think too much of my looks, and hate to work, but won’t anymore if I can help it” (13). Jo strives to “not be rough and wild... thinking that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South” (14). And then there is Beth, the last of the sisters to confess her vice, who is noticeably silent:

Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock, and began to knit with all her might, losing no time in doing the duty that lay nearest her, while she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that father hoped to find her when the year brought round the happy coming home. (14)

On the surface, Beth seems a flawless, dutiful daughter. But while Beth may be silent, not seeming to have any burden even in the eyes of Marmee (“I rather think she hasn’t got any”), this quiet declaration is a burden in and of itself: it is the burden of self-denial that accompanies True Womanhood (15). Beth’s vice, Alcott quietly claims under the open insinuation that Beth is without any flaw, *is* her domestic femininity – and, as a good True Woman, Beth will remain silent about any discomfort.

Alcott cleverly disguises Beth’s vice is True Womanhood, and her own critique of its creed, through comedic dismissiveness. When Beth goes on to confess her burden as “dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos, and being afraid of people,” her “bundle was such a funny one that everybody wanted to laugh; but nobody did, for it would have hurt her feelings very much” (15). The stressed, explicitly stated comedic moment makes it difficult to see that Beth has just admitted that unspoken True Womanhood is her burden, as even within the novel Beth’s concerns are not taken seriously. But Beth’s concerns outwardly do deal with the values of True Womanhood: the “dishes and dusters” relate to the domesticity of the home, the fear of other people relates to her purity, and her envy of girls with nice pianos can be connected to her piety and her submissiveness, as music is connected with religion throughout the text and Beth repeatedly does not want to trouble others for what she wants – which is a nice piano. Comedy covers the serious intent, and Alcott systematically critiques the four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood from this moment forward under the guise that Beth is silent

because she has no true flaws, when, actually, her silence indicates the virtues of True Womanhood are her flaws.

Remembering the Forgotten Sister

But the debate over whether Alcott is conventional or subversive left this dimension of *Little Women* concealed behind Jo's loudness as a character. It makes sense that Jo – a problem character in a “girls book” whose conventions her author found problematic – particularly presented herself, too, as a problem for feminist critics to solve.²⁶ Just as Jo's being “bad” overshadowed the complexity behind Beth's “very good,” so does Jo's flawed realness captivate the mind more than Beth's fictional perfection. There is a long history of *Little Women*'s readership becoming enamored with how real Jo seems to them, especially in a time when characters written for a young audience were crafted as mere cutouts.²⁷ One contemporary reviewer describes how the novel feels “so real” because “the characters are so real and sweet.”²⁸ Another young reader in 1878, self-identifying as the Jo March of her family, remarks that “Miss Alcott must have seen us four girls before she wrote the story.”²⁹ Yet another concludes upon the second and final installment of the novel in 1869 “that there is a real Jo somewhere we have not the slightest doubt.”³⁰ They were not wrong.

²⁶ Entry dated September 1867, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 158.

²⁷ Daniel Shealy, “*Little Women* in Its Time,” in *Critical Insights: Little Women*, ed. Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Grey House Publishing, 2015), 29-30.

²⁸ Qtd. in Mary Wright Plummer, “The Work for Children in Free Libraries,” *Library Journal* 22 (Nov. 1897): 684 qtd. in Beverly Lyon Clark, *The Afterlife of Little Women* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 17.

²⁹ Annie Adams, letter to the editor, *St. Nicholas* 5, no. 4 (Feb. 1878): 300 qtd. in *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 88.

³⁰ *The Catholic World* 9, no. 52 (Jul. 1869): 576 qtd. in *Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews*, 78.

Alcott not so secretly served as Jo's real life counterpart, a link that, as mentioned, both readers and critics seized upon. As critics also realized, the problem for Alcott was not problem child Jo. It was writing "a girls book," the novel that became *Little Women*, that her editor, Thomas Niles, urged her to write – she "didn't like" it.³¹ First, she did not particularly like girls. In a line from her journal reminiscent of Jo, she remarks she "never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters."³² Second, a pressing need for money, not creative drive, pushed her to "plod away" at a story about four sisters modeled after her and her sisters' childhoods.³³ Third, although Alcott enjoyed the novel's success, she did not enjoy writing it as she found herself stunted by demands for her characters to be married according to the novel's sentimental and domestic fiction influence. And, as critics have focused on, perhaps because it was personal, Jo's marriage irked her the most. With these considerations in mind – Jo's realness as a character, Alcott's personal connection to Jo, and her especial irritation at having to marry her off – it is little wonder that we would start with Jo to understand Alcott's treatment of marriage and models of womanhood in *Little Women*.

And Jo has long been a center point to understand *Little Women* both for readers and critics. As Madeleine Stern notes, serious academic criticism on *Little Women* has its basis in apotheosizing Alcott's alter ego since 1968, when Elizabeth Janeway declared that "the character of the heroine of Jo alone... converted the novel into a perennial classic... [as] the tomboy dream come true, an idealized 'New Woman'" – an assumption which has since been questioned, but never entirely forgotten.³⁴ This focus on Jo is

³¹ Entry dated September 1867, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 158.

³² Entry dated May 1868, *ibid.*, 165-66.

³³ Entry dated May 1868, *ibid.*, 165.

³⁴ Stern, introduction to *Critical Essays* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 6.

especially understandable due to the novel's status as what Catherine R. Stimpson defines as a paracanonical, or beloved, text for most female critics, a work in which one improves their love of the text "not through an expert's interpretative flurries, but through self-willed, self-authorized rereadings."³⁵ Indeed, there is a long tradition of critics, in attempting to understand *Little Women*, who begin by recognizing the power the work held in their childhood, especially through the character of Jo.³⁶ But our gravitation to Jo has led to a lack of consensus and a lack of understanding all of the March sisters, a gap that only now is beginning to be filled in.³⁷ And, since *Little Women* is about four sisters, not just one, we cannot forget Alcott's intentionally quiet Beth.

One can unravel the significance of Beth's vice being True Womanhood, and how Alcott critiques that vice, by returning to the moment in which Alcott was writing. Situating Alcott in context with contemporary female writers reveals that Alcott was not alone in her crusade against True Womanhood. Sentimental and domestic fiction may have had strict conventions, like the marriage plot that Alcott battled against, but popular fiction produced by women in these genres in the mid-nineteenth century is today understood to have advocated for social change towards renouncing True Womanhood

³⁵ Catherine R. Stimpson, "Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 75.

³⁶ See Carolyn Heilbrun, "Louisa May Alcott: The Influence of *Little Women*," in *Women, the Arts, and the 1920s in Paris and New York*, eds. Kenneth Wheeler and Virginia Lussier (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1982), 25; Lavinia Russ, "Not to Be Read on Sunday," in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), 99; *Ibid.*, 73; Elizabeth Janeway, "Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Louisa," in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), 98. See also Anne Hollander, "Reflections on *Little Women*," *Children's Literature* 9, no. 1 (1981): 28.

³⁷ Although recent scholarship continues to focus on Jo, discussion is being expanded towards including the other March sisters, especially Amy, but still not heavily on Beth. See, for example, Wilhelm, "'Don't laugh! Act as if it was all right!,'" 63-82; Fite, "From Savage Passion to the Sweetness of Self-Control: Female Anger in *Little Women* and 'Pauline's Passion and Punishment,'" *Women's Writing* 14, no. 3 (2007): 435-48; Foote, "Resentful Little Women," 63-85; Holly Blackford, "Chasing Amy: Mephistopheles, the Laurence Boy, and Louisa May Alcott's Punishment of Female Ambition," *Frontiers* 32, no. 3 (2011): 1-40.

and promoting either Frances B. Cogan's Real Womanhood or another progressive model of femininity called Public Womanhood, which particularly argued for women to "work outside the home or benefit the public good."³⁸ Glenna Matthews traces this tradition of sentimental and domestic writers arguing for social change back to Catharine Maria Sedgwick's 1842 novel, *Hope Leslie*, and includes Alcott among the likes of Fanny Fern, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Elizabeth Stoddard, and most influentially Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1851).³⁹ As some of the most popular sentimental novels of the day, "the main characters of these novels were women who served as strong role models for their readers"⁴⁰ – and, as such, these novels, written by and for women, created characters with significant staying power in the psyche of their female readership.

Alcott could take two approaches to comment on True Womanhood: she could either critique True Womanhood through a variety of characters or she could critique True Womanhood right at its source. Looking at Beth reveals that Alcott took the latter course. As we have discussed, whereas Meg, Jo, and Amy face their own trials in their quest to fulfill the ideal of True Womanhood espoused by Marmee, none embody the Cult of True Womanhood so fully as Beth. But, to critique the doctrine, Alcott has Beth embody more than just the fictional ideal – she pushes Beth's True Womanhood to the extreme. It seems that if Alcott would be forced to endorse True Womanhood to sell a novel, she would create the ultimate True Woman to prove a point.

³⁸ Susan M. Crucea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement," *Atq* 19, no. 3 (Sept. 2005): 197, 200.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁰ Petra Meyer-Frazier, "Music, Novels, and Women: Nineteenth-Century Prescriptions for an Ideal Life," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 10 (2006): 48.

Alcott, Beth, and the Creation of the Cult of Truest Womanhood

Although Beth at first glance serves as the exemplar of True Womanhood, an analysis of Beth reveals that she exemplifies an exaggeration of its doctrine, belonging to a kind of Cult of Truest Womanhood, a parody of True Womanhood created by Alcott. Looking at Beth demonstrates how Alcott bucks the system by seeming to fully submit to the system, creating the most true of all True Women that, in its own making, reveals the flaws behind the doctrine of True Womanhood in Part I and the consequences of following True Womanhood in Part II. Alcott showcases through Beth how the tenets of True Womanhood, if fully followed through without question, do not lead to a fulfilling life for women. Through Beth, we see that True Womanhood's purity becomes Truest Womanhood's nunnery; domesticity becomes agoraphobia; submissiveness becomes powerlessness; and extreme piety leads to the conclusion that such a character is better suited for heaven than earth.

To begin, in Alcott's critique of Beth's purity, it is comical how afraid Beth is of all men in the novel who are not her family or do not become her family through marriage, including even elderly, impotent men such as Mr. Laurence. In one instance, when the girls are invited to Camp Laurence for the day, Beth tells Jo that she will only come "if you won't let any of the boys talk to me," with the exception of Laurie, who she likes "to please," and Mr. Brooke, who "is so kind" (190). Beth's opinion of Laurie and Mr. Brooke emphasizes their moral excellence, but also makes clear that if a girl is like Beth, who is as pure as True Womanhood would expect her to be, she would find it very difficult to be married. Although all of the March girls are quite pure in their "little nunnery" (90), the logic behind Beth's extreme purity appears to be, if the goal of True

Womanhood is to be married, a woman must at least talk to a man at some point. But as the exaggeration of True Womanhood, the closest Beth gets to a romantic involvement with a man is Jo imagining that Beth is in love with Laurie when she has taken very ill (507-8). Therefore, Alcott is able to critique True Womanhood by demonstrating that if a woman fully follows at least one of its tenets, she cannot possibly reap its supposed reward of marriage.

But Alcott does not stop at purity. Likewise, Alcott's portrayal of Beth's supreme domesticity reveals that if staying at home were so fulfilling for the domestic woman, there would be no reason for that True Woman to leave the home in the first place. Beth is deemed the girl's post-mistress because she is "most at home" (186), but she also feels no need to venture outside her family's house, unless to take care of the sick Hummels (277-8). When the girls each describe their hopes and dreams in the form of their castles in the air, or what they wish they could have in life, Beth's "contentedly" given answer is "to stay at home safe with father and mother, and help take care of the family," and when pressed by Laurie if she wants more, that "we may all keep well, and be together; nothing else" (225). For Beth, to be domestic means to stay at home – and, if she enjoys her time at home, Alcott implies, there is no need for her to want another home or family. Instead she remains paralyzed within her own preexisting domestic sphere to the point that Beth not only does not want to leave her home, but is afraid to. In a chapter aptly titled "Burdens," when Alcott describes Beth's burden as needing to overcome her shyness to play piano at the Laurence's, Alcott begins with how "Beth was too bashful to go to school; it had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up," and she was homeschooled ever since (58). Her intense connection with the home world

consequently leads to her own entrapment within that realm as a fearful girl who does not want to leave her original home, let alone enter into another through marriage.

Domesticity further becomes a burden that even Alcott herself seeks to relieve Beth of in an episode that wraps the cult's virtue of domesticity up with piety.

Of the four tenets, piety is the least attacked, but Alcott uses Beth's piano playing to signal her piety and to introduce the cost of the burden of True Womanhood she must bear: death. In the nineteenth century American novel, the symbol of a woman playing the piano was strongly connected with femininity and the domestic sphere.⁴¹ Petra Meyer-Frazier further argues that the piano was used in the American sentimental novel to "portray women as pious and spiritual above all else."⁴² She finds the songs that sentimental heroines, such as Beth, *The Inheritance's* Edith, and *The Wide, Wide World's* Ellen, among others, play are more often than not hymns, and that playing the piano often links a True Woman to "the spiritual side of death."⁴³ She notes that the most faithfully true piano playing characters, including Little Eva of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Beth of *Little Women*, die before the courtship ritual can take place.⁴⁴ Building upon Meyer-Frazier's work, I find that by making Beth the only character who could "get much music out of" the March family's old piano (16), Alcott solidifies Beth's pious nature and firm placement within the domestic sphere – and how, because Beth is so heavenly on earth, it is only natural that she will not be able to sustain living on it for long.

⁴¹ See Julia Eklund Koza, "Music and the Feminine Sphere: Images of Women as Musicians in *Godey's Lady Book*, 1830-1877," *Musical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (1991): 103-29; Colleen Reardon, "Music as Leitmotif in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," *Children's Literature*, 24 (1996): 77-8.

⁴² Meyer-Frazier, "Music, Novels, and Women," 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

In the aforementioned chapter “Burdens,” Alcott first fittingly makes the connection between domesticity and music playing clear to demonstrate not only that there is a link between the two, but also to overshadow the link she establishes with piety and death. When discussing the sisters’ burdens, Alcott recounts how Beth’s burden is that she “was too bashful to go to school” (58), marking Beth as so domestic that she struggles to leave the home. Her domesticity is further stressed, lest the reader miss the point, by a description of how “she was a housewifely little creature” who “helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable... never thinking of any reward but to be loved” (58). Then, as the corollary to a True Woman’s marriage was motherhood,⁴⁵ Alcott follows with a description of how Beth nurses the outcast dolls given to her by her sisters, and is unable to help at poking fun at the silliness of a girl acting as a mother by slipping in and commenting in the narratorial voice that “if anyone had known the care lavished on that dolly, I think it would have touched their hearts, even while they laughed” (59). Tangling domesticity up with Beth’s burden of shyness (and, once again, disguising critique through comedy) thus allows Alcott to overtly cement the relationship between domestic femininity and music, and seem to support True Womanhood and all its virtues.

However, Beth’s piano playing burden ultimately provides Alcott a vehicle to gesture towards her imminent death as long as she subscribes to the tenets of True Womanhood. Following the description of Beth’s domesticity in “Burdens,” Alcott notes, “Beth had her troubles as well as the others; and not being an angel, but a very human little girl, she often ‘wept a little weep,’ as Jo said, because she couldn’t take music lessons and have a fine piano” (59). Unable to voice her frustration over the lack of “a fine piano,” Beth’s burden becomes her hesitation to voice her desire for a nicer

⁴⁵ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 171.

piano, as “nobody saw Beth wipe the tears off the yellow keys, that wouldn’t keep in tune when she was all alone” (60). Instead, “day after day [she] said hopefully to herself, ‘I know I’ll get my music some time, if I’m good.’” In this description, Beth is retiring to a fault, and Alcott offers commentary on this submissiveness, following Beth’s hopeful wish that if she is good she will get her music with a foreboding moral sermon:

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. (60)

Alcott quickly breezes over this strange sermon, in what seems to be a moment of foreshadowing, with a comedic anecdote about how Amy sees her biggest flaw as having an unhandsome nose. But this idea that Beth and her music playing is connected with her death is repeated again in the chapter “Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful,” in which Beth musters up the courage to play the piano at Mr. Laurence’s house upon his invitation and is explicitly mentioned as reminding Mr. Laurence of his deceased granddaughter (93, 97, 99). This connection between Beth and death is further encouraged by a description of the drawing room being “haunted” by Beth as a “tuneful spirit that came and went unseen” (94) and the religious language that surrounds Beth when she plays music in the chapter: she has a “rapture” with her mother after playing (93), rushing home to impart the “glorious” news (93), and “sit and smile upon every one in a general state of beatitude” (94), leaving the March girls “speechless by the miracle” of Beth going to thank Mr. Laurence for giving her a piano (98). The spiritual undertones strongly foster an association between pious Beth and the heavenly realm – and the implication that while Beth may be but a “very human little girl,” she certainly seems like an “angel,” and, as an angel, heaven is her rightful domain. Coupled with an association between

Beth and Mr. Laurence's deceased granddaughter, Beth's piano playing, a symbol for True Womanhood, becomes inherently tied up then with not only piety and the spiritual world, but also death.

This death is brought on by the final tenet that Alcott is most damning of: submissiveness. Although Alcott hints at how submissiveness is linked to death in Beth's struggle to assert her desire to play the piano at Mr. Laurence's in "Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful," she most powerfully has Beth create the circumstances of her own death in her most submissive act of all. In the chapter, "Little Faithful," in reference to Beth, Alcott writes that for awhile "self-denial was all the fashion" in the March household following Mr. March's sudden illness requiring Marmee to leave the girls – but only Beth continues to deny her own needs to do the chores that need to be done (275). When Beth asks Meg to visit the Hummels, as "you know mother told us not to forget them," Meg responds that she is too tired (276). When Beth asks Jo, Jo is too busy writing, and so Beth "quietly put on her hood, filled her basket with odds and ends for the poor children, and went out into the chilly air with a heavy head, and a grieved look in her patient eyes" (277). Despite "a heavy head" and "a grieved look," clear demarcations of Beth's actions not aligning with her desires, Beth goes, following the tenets of True Womanhood by submitting to her duties so fully that she sacrifices her own life: as a result of going, Beth, who has never had scarlet fever, becomes exposed at the Hummels and catches a fever that leads to a slow, drawn out death. It is no mistake that, Beth, the child who most follows Marmee's preached virtues of True Womanhood, is not married by the end of the novel, but dead, and that the child who least followed Marmee's lessons, Jo, is married. For being the extreme embodiment of True Womanhood to a fault, Beth arguably suffers

the most of the sisters and suffers the worst lot. Through Beth's exaggeration of True Womanhood, Alcott carries us to the true "logical conclusion" of what being a True Woman entails.⁴⁶ As Gilbert and Gubar have said, "to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead."⁴⁷

Killing the Angel in the House

Killing off a True Woman was not a new idea. The female invalid became a standard feature of American fiction in the mid-nineteenth century and, while historical statistics are up to debate how often real women were invalids, their literary counterparts, who were more often than not True Women who became an Angel in the House on the deathbed,⁴⁸ dropped like flies.⁴⁹ Being too good of a True Woman seemed to equate to being too good for life, at least in the fictional realm. For women who seemed so powerless, however, being on the deathbed in fiction gave the True Woman power over her household in her final days. In Jane Tompkins' groundbreaking *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins describes how the dying True Woman in fiction becomes "an angel endowed with a salvific force," giving her a Christian power to redeem those who veered off the moral true path in life and give those characters a chance to turn their lives around.⁵⁰ She cites Little Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a prime example, as Eva's death results in the mischievous slave girl Topsy's resolution to finally be good.⁵¹

Numerous scholars, building upon Tompkins' work and noting that Alcott was not only

⁴⁶ Judith Fetterley also picks up upon how Beth's death can be read as how dangerous it is to be a good little woman. See Fetterley, "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War," 38.

⁴⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 22.

⁵⁰ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 137.

⁵¹ Ibid.

aware of Stowe's writing but also an avid devotee,⁵² have argued that Beth's death functions as a reworked prototype of Little Eva's since Leslie Fiedler first proposed the connection between the two novels in *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

Those who have been most critical of Alcott's treatment of Jo's marriage, seeing her decision to marry as Alcott's own conventional selling out, have also been the most aware of the importance of Beth's death in the text. These scholars, especially Judith Fetterley and Angela M. Estes and Lant, focus less on Alcott's treatment of Beth's death and more on its effect on Jo, proposing that Beth's death operates according to a Tompkinsian logic to usher Jo into marriage.⁵³ In essence, Beth's death becomes a lesson for Jo to become a good girl and get married. Estes and Lant even claim that Beth's death results in Jo becoming a reincarnated Beth, with the true horror in the text not being Beth's death, but the mutilation of Jo's rebellious spirit following Beth's passing.⁵⁴ But looking at the manner in which Beth dies reveals that something equally horrific occurs with Beth's death – and while Alcott may have been inspired by Stowe's domestic deathbed scene with Little Eva, and even allowed to hide the significance of Beth's death under the conventions of sentimentality as a result, Alcott makes it clear through the circumstances of Beth's death that her model of womanhood is not a model to emulate.

First, beneath the religious language, Beth's death appears as what Gilbert and Gubar call a "prolonged suicide,"⁵⁵ one that has been brought on by her extreme

⁵² Most recently, Michelle Ann Abate offers an excellent analysis of the relationship between Alcott and Stowe to support her found connections between Topsy and Jo within *Little Women*. See Abate, "Topsy and Topsy-Turvy Jo," 59-61.

⁵³ See Fetterley, "*Little Women*: Alcott's Civil War," 39. See also Estes and Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 112-113.

⁵⁴ Estes and Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 115.

⁵⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 483.

fulfillment of True Womanhood and that refuses to be glorified. Resolving to suffer in silence, Beth hides the severity of her illness, but Jo catches on to her secret after returning from her aunt's boarding house in New York:

When Jo came home that spring, she had been struck with the change in Beth. No one spoke of it, or seemed aware of it, for it had come too gradually to startle those who saw her daily; but to eyes sharpened by absence it was very plain; and a heavy weight fell on Jo's heart as she saw her sister's face. It was no paler, and but little thinner than in the autumn; yet there was a strange, transparent look about it, as if the mortal was being slowly refined away, and the immortal shining through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty. (588)

In this opening to the chapter "Beth's Secret," Alcott gently prepares her reader for Beth's eventual death, but she also reveals that Beth's death has already begun: her mortality is quite actually "being slowly refined away," an "immortal shining" taking its place. Furthermore, Beth's death is neither sudden nor unexpected – it is a long, drawn out process: only Jo realizes that Beth has begun to change into a half-living creature, for the changes "had come too gradually to startle those who saw her daily." In this passage, Beth's adherence to the values to True Womanhood most importantly becomes even more pronounced as she nears her deathbed. When caught between life and death, ever-submissive Beth still succumbs to placing the happiness of others over her well-being, taking great pains to ascertain she does not worry others over her failing health. Even then Beth only confesses her secret to Jo once she realizes that Jo is aware of her illness, and when Jo asks Beth why she didn't let her comfort her and help her, instead shutting her out to bear all of the pain alone, Beth replies, "It would have been selfish to frighten you all when Marmee was so anxious about Meg, and Amy away, and you so happy" (591). She prioritizes the needs of others over her own, despite knowing that the end is near; instead she carries around her death like a secret, hence the chapter title. As Beth

does not tell anyone of her sickness up until Jo realizes, aware of the pain that news of her certain death would bring, Beth's long illness cannot be read as a blessing or a sign of a chosen election by God. Instead, her death appears to be a long, slow march towards an imminent end – an end, Alcott hammers home, that has been facilitated by Beth's extreme obedience to True Womanhood.

Just as Beth's submissiveness leads to her catching her illness, so does her own submissiveness lead her to accept her death, notably in a direct contrast to Jo. When Jo struggles to accept Beth's inevitable passing on, Beth reassures her that her death is not worth fighting against: "don't be troubled about me," she urges her sister, "because it's for the best; indeed it is" (590). It is further worth noting that Alcott explicitly comments upon how Jo is more determined to fight for Beth's life than Beth herself. When Jo demands of Beth "you *must* get well," the sisters argue back and forth:

[Beth]: "I want to,—oh, so much! I try, but every day I lose a little, and feel more sure that I shall never gain it back. It's like the tide, Jo, when it turns, it goes slowly, but it can't be stopped."

"It *shall* be stopped,—your tide must not turn so soon,—nineteen is too young. Beth, I can't let you go. I'll work, and pray, and fight against it. I'll keep you in spite of everything; there must be ways;—it can't be too late. God won't be so cruel as to take you from me," cried poor Jo, rebelliously, —for her spirit was far less piously submissive than Beth's. (592)

By contrasting Beth with Jo, Alcott all the more draws attention to Beth's True Womanhood as well as the role it plays in her death. Unlike Jo, who wishes to fight against the tide, Beth's "piously submissive" spirit wishes to swim with the waves. For every day Beth loses a little of her life, she feels more sure that she will never gain it back – and nor does she try. Instead, "she asked no questions, but left everything to God and nature, Father and mother of us all" (593). Alcott couches Beth's death in religious

language, with Beth's submission as a sign of her piety, but, as Gilbert and Gubar pick up on, there is an insinuation that Beth's death is suicidal because of her submissiveness. Unlike Jo, Beth refuses to fight for her life, even when she wishes to; instead, Beth chooses to die because she does not have the willpower to live.

Beth's death may be a direct result of her extreme True Womanhood, but her impending death also serves a secondary function: to free Beth from some of the constraints of True Womanhood, despite her obsessive adherence to the creed, revealing in the process that even the True Woman condemns the doctrine she follows. As Diane Price Herndl notes, death itself in nineteenth century fiction resolves the conflict between self-denial and self-interest for the True Woman as invalids are dependent upon others by nature and so any action she makes becomes an act of self-determination.⁵⁶ Although Beth may continue to uphold the tenets of True Womanhood up until her death, not wishing to trouble her family with her illness, her death also notably gives her a voice that has so often been silenced. It is no mistake that Jo feels that "of all the changes in Beth, the talking change was the greatest, for it seemed to cost no effort now, and she thought aloud in a way quite unlike bashful Beth" (595). But when the quiet sister Beth decides it is time to talk, her words are not full of cheer despite her seemingly cheerful self-denial. When Jo discovers her secret, she confesses:

... I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you; I never made 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. (594)

This confession is significant for two main reasons. First, the consequences of Beth acting according to the Cult of True Womanhood – her lack of thought of marriage due to

⁵⁶ Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 49.

her purity, her lack of plans for herself due to her submissiveness and piety, her inability to imagine herself anywhere but “trotting about at home” due to her full acceptance of domesticity – translate into Beth’s belief that death is her only suitable course of option: she believes it “never was intended” that she “should live long.” To follow True Womanhood then, Beth implies, is incongruent with living and growing up, a rationale actualized by her physical death. This confession secondly showcases how following True Womanhood, as Beth demonstrates, also results in intense self-loathing. Beth describes herself not as the angel that her family sees her as, but as “stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there.” Her life, one in which she lives for others and not herself, results in her conviction of her self-worthlessness. In this passage, Alcott thus reveals how whereas Jo, and Marmee, may struggle with their anger at the world for the roles that they have been forced into, Beth in turn, by taking on the role of a True Woman so flawlessly, more damagingly directs that anger inward onto herself to the point that she cannot even justify fighting for her own life.⁵⁷ As a result, Alcott demonstrates through Beth that True Womanhood, despite its goals, actually prevents her from reaching those goals. It prevents her from becoming a woman and taking on all of the responsibilities – marriage and children – that becoming a woman entails, all while leaving Beth with deep psychological scars.

But critics, in attempting to understand Beth’s death in relationship to Jo, have not been off base in their analysis: Beth on the deathbed at first glance does seem to operate according to Tompkinsian logic in which the Angel in the House saves the sister from her impending doom. It is true that Beth’s death inspires Jo to craft a poem stating her desire for her sister to “leave me, as a gift, those virtues / which have beautified your life”

⁵⁷ See Fetterley, “*Little Women: Alcott’s Civil War*,” 37, who also picks up on this detail.

(660); Beth instructs Jo the necessity of taking her place (662); and soon after Jo is married to Professor Bhaer (757-60). But it is worth looking at Beth and her death in isolation. If we look at what Beth says, and not what Jo does, we discover that Beth's instructions to Jo are not to look to marriage and children – instead, Beth encourages Jo to look at the past, and keep herself there. “You must take my place, Jo,” she says, not to be married, but to “be everything to mother and father when I'm gone” (662). Jo may decide in that moment to give up her ambitions for love, but based on Beth's demands, it is not love in the conjugal sense, but familial. Once again, Beth reveals, to follow True Womanhood does not lead one to marriage and children, but in a perpetual state of childhood, forever paralyzed within the original home. It makes sense then that Beth is described “like a tired and trustful child” passing on, unable to ever grow up (662). True Womanhood results in a stunted growth and, as Beth exemplifies, a stunted, damaged sense of self.

In the death scene, True Womanhood kills off Beth, but Alcott in turn kills off True Womanhood. It is telling that it is only the little girl who lives up to expectations who does not get the life that Marmee wishes for her. Beth's death may seem like a martyr's sacrifice to the True Woman's cause, dying so that Jo can be married, but looking at the circumstances surrounding Beth's death reveals that Beth serves not as a lesson to Jo, but a warning sign to Jo and the reader to not be like her. Her prolonged suicide inspires pity and sympathy, but not emulation: who wants to be like the dead girl in a novel about growing up into becoming a woman? Through Beth's death, Alcott articulates that True Womanhood, followed to its every tenet, is not a viable model of womanhood in real life. Beth's sickness can even be read as Alcott's awareness of the

sickness of True Womanhood with Beth serving as a direct “somatization,” as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Martha Verbrugge would put it, “of the anxiety, stress, and unhappiness” that came as a result of adopting the Cult of True Womanhood as one’s code of behavior.⁵⁸ When Beth dies, the family thanks God “that Beth was well at last” (663). When True Womanhood dies in the process, portrayed as a sickening disease that kills Beth, so too does Alcott imply that perhaps now all can be “well at last” indeed.

“Yours for reforms of all kinds”

Little Women is far more than the “girls book” Louisa May Alcott did not enjoy writing – if anything, because it is a “girls book,” feminist critics have found it worth analyzing. Despite Alcott’s wrestling with creative limitations surrounding the marriage dilemma, she wrote a highly influential book that has been found to be “perhaps the first American book explicitly directed to girls as an audience,”⁵⁹ and thus creating what has been called by Madelon Bedell and highly cited thereafter as “*the American female myth*.”⁶⁰ Most importantly for critics, the legacy of her work offers four different models of femininity that grapple with the central question of how and what is the best way for a young girl to grow into womanhood.⁶¹ *Little Women*, as its title suggests, is intimately connected with femininity and concerns surrounding the female experience. As Elaine Showalter so excellently puts it, to read *Little Women* is “to engage with contemporary ideas about female authority, critical institutions and the American literary canon, as well as with the nineteenth-century ideas of relationship between patriarchal culture and

⁵⁸ Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 24.

⁵⁹ Clark, *The Afterlife of Little Women*, 11.

⁶⁰ Madelon Bedell, “Beneath the Surface,” 146.

⁶¹ Shealy, “*Little Women* in Its Time,” 30.

women's culture."⁶² It is even funnier then that Alcott, who, like Jo, struggled to be a girl, wrote a book that today offers us a glimpse of what it was like to be a girl in nineteenth century America. In the process, she left us with her own judgments upon nineteenth century femininity – and those judgments seem to have stuck in the critical consciousness, explaining why we have often forgotten Beth.

To conclude, our criticism's focus on Jo demonstrates how successful Alcott was in killing off True Womanhood in *Little Women*, presenting the model as unattainable – and unappealing. It is no mistake that Jo, not Beth, captures the hearts of Alcott's readers and the minds of Alcott's critics, and it is not solely due to her loudness and problem child nature. By killing Beth, Alcott establishes True Womanhood as an outdated model of womanhood, one that no longer applies to women, and one that, despite its sentimental death, does not inspire fascination. Instead, Alcott champions a competing model of womanhood through Jo. An intriguing detail of the text is that Beth and Jo, who struggles with all of these qualities that Beth easily develops, both feel a special kinship with the other. As Alcott carefully points out, "Meg was Amy's confidante and monitor, and, by some strange attraction of opposites, Jo was gentle Beth's" (62). Whereas Jo may be Beth's "confidante" (62), Beth in turn is Jo's "conscience" (290). This odd couple is fittingly just as contradictory as the models of womanhood they demonstrate. Scholars have often concluded that Beth died so that Jo could get married, but I suggest that Beth died so that Jo's model of womanhood could prevail.

First, the relationship between Jo and Beth serves as a literary example of how, while True Womanhood was a prominent ideal, it was not the only ideal, as scholars have noted since Welter's original exploration of prescriptive literature in 1966. Since

⁶² Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 44.

Welter's description of True Womanhood, cultural historians have proposed other models of mid-nineteenth century womanhood to account for gaps within the True Womanhood ideal, a rigorous code of feminine conduct that few women could follow – and that many, including Alcott, did not want to follow. The most prominent of these proposed models include Martha Verbrugge's "cult of female frailty" and "Able-Bodied Womanhood," and Frances B. Cogan's "Real Womanhood." In *Able-Bodied Womanhood* published in 1988, Verbrugge finds a "cult of female frailty" existed within literature in the mid-nineteenth century that encouraged a perception of women as innately sickly but no "fixed or universal standard" of "Able-Bodied Womanhood" existed in mid-nineteenth century medical records, although women were increasingly encouraged over the century to become more "able-bodied."⁶³ The year after Verbrugge's publication, Frances B. Cogan suggested that Real Womanhood was one of the most prominent of these standards, a model that progressive fictional female characters, such as Jo, exemplified.

Following Cogan's logic, while True Womanhood as exhibited by Beth and Marmee may have been the dominant ideal offered to women in fiction and women's magazines from the mid-nineteenth century, Jo embodies the model of womanhood that advocated for ideals better suited for real life: Real Womanhood. Whereas True Womanhood may have been the female ideal preached in fiction, Real Womanhood, according to Cogan, was the competing ideal designed for reality. In her study on American white middle-class womanhood in the nineteenth century, Cogan finds that many women "maintained such a steel-engraved image [of True Womanhood] only superficially," instead subscribing to a doctrine of Real Womanhood, which "advocated

⁶³ Martha H. Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8, 195.

intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage.”⁶⁴ This doctrine, Cogan pointedly argues, “demanded that the woman’s duty to herself and her loved ones was not, as True Womanhood seems to suggest... to sacrifice herself, but to survive.”⁶⁵ It is this doctrine that Jo represents with her intellect, or her “busy brain and ambitious mind,” being one of her most defining features (376); her physical health supported by her “romping ways” with Laurie in her youth (241); her self-sufficiency and economic self-reliance from her drive to write stories to support herself and her family; and her eventual careful marriage with a rejection of Laurie in favor of a friendship that blossoms into romance with her intellectual equal, Professor Bhaer.⁶⁶

With its conflicting emphasis on self-sufficiency and strength that stood directly against True Womanhood’s creed of self-denial, the ideal of Real Womanhood reflected a competing set of middle-class values that rang true with real nineteenth century women – values that Cogan finds “more intrinsically republican and indigenous in their expression and attitudes, resulting in the active, intelligent, and self-sufficient portraits of women evident in many domestic novels” – women like Jo.⁶⁷ It makes sense, then, that this Real Womanhood embodied by Jo was picked up as an especially American quality by British critics, according to Beverly Lyon Clark, with Sarah Elbert later arguing that within *Little Women* can be found the first vision of the “All-American girl.”⁶⁸ In other words, to be a woman like Jo was to be an American woman. And, from a scholarly

⁶⁴ Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁶ For an in-depth look at how Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer is a careful marriage between equals and the marriage between Jo and Laurie would not be, see Michelle A. Massé, Anne Dahlke, Holly Blackford, Ann Murphy, John Crowley, and Karen Sands-O’Connor.

⁶⁷ Cogan, *All-American Girl*, 16.

⁶⁸ Clark, *The Afterlife of Little Women*, 15; Elbert, *A Hunger for Home*, 144-66.

standpoint, to be a character with a model of womanhood so thoroughly grounded in the complexities of reality certainly offers more appeal to critics than a character such as Beth, who overtly appears to follow all of the conventional rules of womanhood found within fiction without complain. The lack of analysis around Beth's perfect domestic femininity thus demonstrates how successful Alcott's championed preference for Real Womanhood through Jo was.

Looking at Beth's extreme True Womanhood and death helps us finally realize how Alcott was able to help remove the crown from True Womanhood with lasting effects in fiction and real life. First, writing in a time when the boundaries between children's literature and adult fiction were being formed, Alcott's killing off of True Womanhood cemented the death of True Womanhood as a fictional ideal for future generations of children. Her work is today considered to be "one that changed the landscape of children's works," particularly through her compelling problem child protagonist.⁶⁹ Part of her work's uniqueness was how Alcott went beyond the average fare of juvenile literature through her exploration of marriage in Part II of the novel.⁷⁰ Along the way, Alcott shows how some versions of womanhood are healthier than others by fully following her little women beyond childhood into adulthood, determining which sisters end up in the happiest marriages, the sister who ends up in no marriage at all, and exactly how each of the March sisters got to their individual happy endings. That sister is notably not Beth, whose end comes prematurely before Alcott's novel comes to a close.

Secondly, the legacy of *Little Women* continues beyond its fictional influence: the significance of Alcott's killing off of True Womanhood in *Little Women* is even more

⁶⁹ Shealy, "Little Women in Its Time," 29.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 38.

profound due to its strong influence on the lives of contemporary readers and future generations. As *Little Women* has been lovingly passed down from generation to generation, its legacy has reached into the lives of its readers. Alcott's *Little Women* has noticeably resulted in the creation of what Roberta Seelinger Trites calls "Jo March's progeny:" the writers and public figures who have found their lives and work changed by reading *Little Women*.⁷¹ This list includes Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, Cynthia Ozick, Joyce Carol Oates, and Simon Beauvoir and, as Barbara Sicherman argues, even extends across cultural lines to social worker Jane Addams, economist and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writer M. Carey Thomas, and African American reformers Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells.⁷²

But there is also a prominent record of the power *Little Women* had in the lives of its contemporary readers, readers who reenacted scenes from the text in hopes of being more like Alcott's little women. Following the novel's publication, some young fans created clubs based on *Little Women*. Perhaps the most faithful were the Lukens sisters, who, inspired by the March sisters' *Pickwick Portfolio*, created a family newspaper in 1871 that gained a thousand subscribers across the United States during its three year run.⁷³ Other girls, with more modest ambitions, created reading clubs of their own. One set of girls called themselves the Alcott Reading Club; another, like the March sisters, read papers at weekly meetings, copying many from *St. Nicholas*; yet another did their own writing, including stories "in which Italian princesses and English dukes played a

⁷¹ Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2007), 146.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 146-7.

⁷³ Clark, *The Afterlife of Little Women*, 17.

prominent part,” acting as faithful imitators of their always scribbling idol, Jo March.⁷⁴

The rise of clubs with activities directly based on those from *Little Women* elucidates how these were characters that young girls were inspired by, who young girls wanted to be like. And it is quite telling that the “bad” character is the one whose activities, playacting and story writing, are emulated and not those, the doing of dishes and cleaning with dusters, of her “very good” sister.

In the end, Alcott’s *Little Women* does reform womanhood, killing off a toxic kind of femininity as embodied by Beth in preference for a less dangerous form of Real Womanhood championed by Jo, true to Alcott’s revolution-minded spirit. Fittingly then, as Alcott tended to end her letters with “yours for reforms of all kinds,” so too does Alcott’s alter ego Jo end *Little Women* on her own crusade to reform the world through education: running the Plumfield School with her husband, Professor Bhaer, living the dream of marriage and parenthood that once seemed promised to Beth. Perhaps this success is because, unlike Beth, Jo does not swim with the tide, but creates her own waves. Jo may seem to have it all at the end of the novel by the standards of True Womanhood, but she does not submit or give up on her dreams in the process, denying herself like Beth. Reflecting on the fulfillment of her own castle in the air, Jo acknowledges that her castle does not quite look like the one she had once hoped for, but “I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet,” she says, “I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these” (774). The curtain thus closes on Alcott’s domestic drama with Jo in pursuit of creating her own world – a world, thanks to Alcott and the sacrifice of her sister Beth, of writing and reform without “dishes and dusters” and the dangers of domestic femininity.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

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