Autotheoretical and Queer Desires in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Autotheoretical and Queer Desires in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, recalls and reimagines the everyday lives of the Alcott family and their lived experiences during and after the American Civil War. This paper utilizes autotheory and José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer horizons to explore the text's possibilities for providing contemporary women and queer folk an accessible format in which to write about everyday acts of desire and self-liberation. Through close readings of the text, Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation, and TikToks, I analyze glimpses of an ecstatic space and time in Alcott's attempts at queer worldbuilding. Although *Little Women* is not considered a queer text, I argue that the autofictional genre itself and Jo March's contentions with gender, sexuality, and coming-of-age narratives enacts a troubling of cisheteropatriarchal and colonial understandings of the self, further revealing new hopeful and collectively formed horizons designed by ecstatic desires.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Tamara Jo Smith. As your middle name indicates, you are my Jo March—the book, the story, or character that I return to.

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INTRODUCTION: BECOMING AND BLOOMING

On the front page of my first copy of *Little Women* (1868, 1869), my mother wrote: "May you too become enchanted with the noble women of this story as I did at a young age. And someday, I hope you will visit this special place and stand in wonderment with your imagination ablaze!... 'Little women grow into Great Women.' And that is what I watch from the sidelines with you each precious day." In that late August of 2008, my mother visited the Alcott house in Concord, Massachusetts. I speculatively imagine her learning through the now preserved and fixed legacy of Alcott's womanhood and career what it means to unfold. This unfolding shaped the performances or complexly frustrating processes of understanding the self that soon became inherited, observed, and internalized by my siblings and me.

At seven years old, I was not aware of the love, hope, and desire my mother was attempting to present to me. In fact, I did not pick up *Little Women* until the summer before I left for university. I return to this brief moment of vulnerability inscribed into my copy of *Little Women* to remind myself that we were both, for the rest of our lives, simply trying to make sense of our becomings. With *Little Women*, I became a teacher of the self or an early theorist of becoming amidst a collective of women and queer folk that wanted to transform expressions of care and love. Alcott did not provide a blueprint for this work but delivered an invitation to my mother and I to empathetically understand and teach one another.

Little Women is an influential text in popular culture that continuously transforms across space and time, showing its readers glimpses of or steps towards self-liberation in everyday acts. By reading alongside Alcott, Jo March, and the many folks who have picked up the text, we can begin to critically think about our own lives and reimagine our futures to create a communal theory of queer worldbuilding based upon inherited knowledges, lived experiences, and desires.

Firstly, I argue that to read *Little Women* as a practice of autotheory or performance of the self, rather than solely autobiography or fiction, allows readers to better understand Alcott's own embodiment of her sociopolitical position of a white woman during the American Civil War and First Wave Feminism. Additionally, I argue that revisiting *Little Women* as an autotheoretical practice or reading the text autotheoretically is important to observing queer, ecstatic potentialities derived from the text's attempts to operate between two realities: that of a capitalistic wartime designed by heteropatriarchal systems of power, and one of blooming, ecstatic desires for a new space and time. *Little Women* is not traditionally and academically acknowledged as a queer text despite its connections with queer fandoms and audiences; however, I believe it offers a model in which queer folks and women can utilize self-description to step outside of heteronormative timelines of being in their daily writing practices and routines such as journaling or other forms of life writing.

In the first novel of *Little Women*, Jo March consistently expresses feelings of displeasure with her gender and sexuality. Additionally, Alcott details special, everyday moments that allow Jo to briefly enter an ecstatic space and time. These two narrative factors of the novel that I will detail in this essay illustrate how Alcott and readers exercise the inherently political and queer act of autotheoretical reading and writing to contemplate upon a past, present, and future self and its relations to normative violences informed by structures of power. In the second novel, Jo and her sisters contemplate what it means to transition into womanhood, mourning a childhood that they refuse to let go despite heteronormative social impositions of inevitable linearity. Jo's moments of desperate longing for childhood bliss, the loss of her sister Beth, and the balancing of love and marriage continue to unravel and deflect a coming-of-age narrative of assimilation. Instead, we as readers live through Jo and Alcott's glimpses and reimaginings of Alcott's own

futurity, further reminiscing upon our own past struggles with the tug and pull between desire and structure. Lastly, I discuss the present moment usages, adaptations, and autotheoretical relationships that girls, women, and queer folk create with *Little Women* through fandom spaces and digital landscapes like TikTok. Whether they are cosplaying as Jo, making TikTok edits of Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation, or more generally being inspired by Alcott and Jo, young adults of the 21st century are returning to the text in new and old ways, utilizing its story as a sort of theory for futurity to reimagine their own identities or concepts of adulthood.

In this paper, I have three sections structured by theme and chronology. In section one, "Gendered Desires, Ecstatic Time, and Jo March," I discuss the first novel, Jo's childhood, and her budding relationship to queer utopian desires through her tomboy identity and ecstatic acts of writing. Section two, "'Let me be a little girl as long as I can': Childhood, Marriage, and Futurity," details Jo's continual rejection of heteronormativity and adulthood through conversations about marriage as well as how Alcott's abolitionist beliefs impact the controversial ending and concepts of futurity. Lastly, in section three, "*Little Women*'s Cultural Impacts & Autotheoretical Horizons," I discuss reinterpretations, adaptations, and the blooming, autotheoretical uptakes of Alcott's novel, which results in communal practices of reclaiming the body from colonial, white narratives of self and becoming. While the essay works through content in a chronological fashion, the themes of gender, sexuality, race, and childhood exhibited in both parts of *Little Women* circle back, or spiral through, our contemporary moment, bringing Alcott into our current and future conversations about pop culture, representation, and ideas of ecstatic belonging.

Little Women is generally considered a coming-of-age novel about transition and becoming women, but the act of becoming insinuates an epiphany or inevitable, unavoidable

change, which Jo and Alcott consistently attempt to reject within both the narrative structure and content. Instead of becoming, I prefer the term blooming. Blooming entails a continuous cycle or spiral of growth and return rather than pre-established and prescribed steps. Blooming allows for a return to a past self rather than a complete erasure when entering adulthood and an innate desire to move forward into a future within your own time.

Becoming is put into relation with our processes of coming-of-age, especially through the trope of the hero's journey. We become adults. We become parents. We become functioning contributors to society. These roles and identities that we become are checked off in timely manners, highlighting where we have succeeded in life or failed. In this case, to become is to succeed in the timeframe which heteronormative, capitalistic conceptions of space and time have created. Stayci Taylor's article, "Not Getting Your Story Straight: Queering Heroes' Journeys and Heteronormative Timelines" (2024), argues that the hero's journey, like the Volger's Hero's Journey, has created a dominant and homogenized story structure model that glorifies normative violences and assimilation. Additionally, Taylor argues that the story structure of the hero's journey has influenced generalized storytelling for youth, further centralizing and universalizing "male, ableist experience, heteronormative life narratives and a colonial paradigm of problem-resolution" (175). Overall, this linear trajectory isolates and rejects queer narratives and defines success and progression as individualistic yet universal experiences that focus solely on achieving goals, expectations, or standards of normative living.

Contemporary writers like Ocean Vuong who also create within autobiographical and autofictional genres recognize the dominant presence of the hero's journey amidst the descriptions and embodiments of individual coming-of-age stories. In an interview with Oprah for his novel *Emperor of Gladness* (2025), Vuong describes the ways in which writers and

readers “fetishize” a Westernized hero's journey narrative that emphasizes a process of overcoming or “escape.” Vuong notes escape is not always an option, leaving those who must stay to ask themselves, “How do I make do without escape?... How do I make do with this body if I can’t leave it” (03:24-04:15). The privileged option to escape may take the form of a physical removal from the home (college, The Grand Tour, etc.) or a mental state in which an epiphany about the rejection of childhood and nonnormative desires results in an acceptance of romanticized, normative traditions. By conforming to a universal narrative of adulthood and transition, young adults deprive themselves of a life and understanding of a self structured by personal and collective desires.

José Esteban Muñoz describes this “autonaturalizing temporality,” or hero’s journey, as “straight time:” “Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” (22). As a young adult, I read *Little Women* during a challenging yet joyous point in my life where I was finally able to locate the words to describe my queerness. Recognizing Jo as a character who took her time in discovering her desires, even if that meant becoming the town spinster, provided me a different type of timeframe within which to imagine my body. Essentially, I found myself rejecting becoming, as it continuously assimilated me back into a “straight time” framework or translated my queerness into a more digestible and comfortable narrative for others. Blooming, on the other hand, entails nonstatic and fluid opportunities for accessing an “ecstatic time,” or the moment in which “one feels ecstasy” or “contemplation” of one’s past, present, and future (32). Rather than becoming and returning to normalcy, blooming supports a constant spiral of nourishment and growth like tracing the petals of a rose to its bud.

Muñoz adds that although a queer space and time is not present in a here and now, it can be glimpsed through an ecstatic horizon. To imagine queer futurities and possibilities, we must "squint" or "strain our vision and force it to see otherwise" (22), leading us towards a "path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25). To step outside of "straight time" requires an act of self-description that scrambles, dissects, and rejects the hero's journey embedded into our coming-of-age narratives.

Jack Halberstam's theory of Gaga Feminism from Bloomsbury's *Posthuman Glossary* (2018) builds upon Muñoz's ecstatic time and queer potentialities by arguing that what lies beyond the here and now (straight time) can be formulated through "going Gaga." Halbertsam summarizes "going Gaga" as: "an intensification of confusion and chaos and the embrace of social, political and representational anarchy on the way to the next incarnation of the queer, the strange and the beautiful" (172). While *Little Women* does not exhibit queer anarchy and chaos within its content or story, I argue that it invites queer audiences to self-describe daily life and senses of self in an accessible, introductory, and somewhat private manner to reach a similar goal. The sense of confusion and chaos that lies in Alcott's *Little Women* is exhibited through the slippery and illegible "I," or Alcott's performance of the self through Jo that fans across time have begged for clarity and control over. To access an ecstatic time, Alcott utilizes the genre of autofiction to reimagine possibilities of the self beyond the systematic boundaries of capitalistic and heteronormative timelines that shape her role as a young, white woman during the American Civil War. By fusing, subverting, and manipulating the two genres, Alcott challenges the commonly accepted coming-of-age trope that fetishizes the hero's journey as the progression of overcoming and assimilating. Alcott's fictionalization of her autobiographical self enacts a

careful and meticulous embracing of the body, self, and all its chaos or potentiality rather than escaping it or becoming through it.

Autotheory, briefly described as a theory of the self, can further reveal the intricacies of the writing practices utilized to create *Little Women* and its cultural impact. Lauren Fournier's book on transdisciplinary and feminist autotheories, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), describes autotheory as "modes of working that integrate the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical, in ways attuned to interdisciplinary, feminist histories" (7). Additionally, in the MIT Press collection of essays on autotheory, *Authotheories* (2025), editors Alex Brostoff and Vilashini Cooppan, like Fournier, argue that autotheory contains a certain political power that enables the autotheoretical writer or subject as "philosophical category, political agent, and narrative voice," further allowing multiplicities of self and the space to openly reimagine futurities and possibilities through bodily desires (14). Echoing Muñoz, Bronstoff and Vilashini point to autotheory's capability to reflect or contemplate upon a past, present, and future self to create "both uncanny resurgences and speculative futures, places into which we have yet to arrive," or a space and time beyond the here and now (18).

Alcott, a feminist thinker, abolitionist, and participant in American Transcendentalist thought in New England, consistently practiced theorizing and philosophizing about American life, existence, and morality in her fictional writings and journaling. *Little Women*, one example of such thinking, is written in the genre of autofiction, but its practice is founded in an autotheoretical approach of creative and performative acts of self-description and lived experience to further engage with the challenges of her time that often when unpublished. In her book *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (1997), Stacey

Young, credited for coining the term autotheory, further defines autotheoretical practices as a "political strategy" that empowers the use of inherited and felt knowledges from communities that are not institutionally acknowledged within traditional scholarship through a mixture of autobiography and theoretical reflection (62). Young returns to this text in the MIT Press *Auotheories* in her essay, "Our Autotheoretical Lives," to state that autotheoretical texts, or counternarratives, are a "currency of power" that inspire audiences to unpack and understand their identities as they are shaped by structures of power (123). From these interconnected and ever-changing definitions of autotheory to Muñoz's theories of straight and ecstatic time, I am interested in seeing how *Little Women* can act as a case study or bridge between the two theoretical fields that showcases the usages of autofictional writing to evoke glimpses of ecstatic time.

A large part of Alcott's attempts at envisioning queer utopianism and worldbuilding is informed by her abolitionist thinkings and beliefs, highlighting that colonization and whiteness impacts formations of self, community, and futurity. Alcott's personal relationship with the New England Abolitionist Movement and its members, like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, transforms her writings about the challenges imbedded in a coming-of-age narrative that emphasizes heteronormativity and whiteness as the endpoint of assimilation. While *Little Women* does not contend with enslavement in ways that are visible on a surface level, her abolitionist beliefs about emancipation are not completely devoid from the text. According to Karen Sands-O'Connor's article, "Anything to Suit Customers: Antislavery and *Little Women*" (2001), Alcott carefully and meticulously included brief conversations about enslavement and abolition in both novels through Jo's connections to the popular concerns of equality and liberation of women during the Women's Suffrage Movement. Alongside Douglass's beliefs of universal suffrage,

Alcott ends *Little Women* on a similar note with a glimpse of collective reform, as symbolized through the opening of Jo's school for white and Black children. Sands-O'Connor recognizes the limitations and extent in which Alcott is successful in making such connections to the Abolitionist Movement and enslavement but ultimately argues that, given the rejection of abolitionist literature at the time, Alcott "places slavery in a context acceptable to her audience" and has "domesticated the issue of slavery" (35). Her intended audience of the time, young white girls, are provided accessible conversations about freedom within the private, domestic spaces in which women are frequently surveilled or silenced.

With the financial success of the first novel, Alcott had a more freedom to express abolitionist content that had been removed or suppressed from popular publishers after the Civil War. For example, right before her success with *Little Women*, Alcott's book about being a nurse during the Civil War, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), was revised for its explicit and critical content about Confederate soldiers (35). Ultimately, Alcott, desperate to provide for her family, was expected to write about the relationship between the North and the South as one that was healing, further providing a false narrative for the nation and its youth. However, Alcott combats this violent erasure or rewriting of history throughout the course of *Little Women*. Ideas about race and the seeds or buds of Jo's understandings of the self accumulate and bloom, drawing readers to and beyond an ending founded upon themes of liberation and emancipation. However, while progressive for her time, Alcott's attempts at creating a parallel between women's suffrage and enslavement falls short considering its attachments to white feminist beliefs that dominated First Wave Feminism. Yet, the novel has continuously been utilized as a space to meet and develop inherited knowledges and lived experiences, transforming in our current moment as a pinnacle text for young women and queer folk to teach and unpack intersectional feminisms.

Alcott may not have witnessed her ideas of a utopia built upon reform and community within her lifetime, but she gave future generations both hope and the tools to assist in the practice of self-description and identifying fluid, multifaceted selves to reimagine our everyday lives. *Little Women*, when understood through a queer and autotheoretical lens, is written for the purposes of playing with the embodiment of narrative and time to combat and unravel colonial captures of the body, space, and time. Game designer, critic, and teacher, Mattie Brice, builds upon this concept of play in video games in her Ted Talk, "Using Play for Everyday Activism" (2017). Echoing Muñoz's queer horizons and futurities, Brice admits that a queer utopia is not yet here. Additionally, she acknowledges that the work we do to reimagine collective futurities is not only ongoing, but never-ending, as it does not and cannot exist in a straight time and place: "Utopia is not just this endpoint. Utopia is never going to arrive. I will die in a racist world" (06:48-07:03). While the imagining we do in our contemporary moment may not come into fruition in our lifetimes, we create, desire, and dream in the hopes that we have created steppingstones or glimpses for future collectives. Brice argues that we can utilize play as a "gesturing" or "signaling" towards queer utopias that stem from our imaginations. Rather than recreating gaming models that rely on winning, quests, or linearity (like the hero's journey), Brice advocates for models, designs, and narratives that value connection and educational glimpses at creating desirable worlds (06:39). While Brice is talking about an experience of play located in video games, her general arguments and concept of play is also evident in *Little Women* due to its transformation of coming-of-age narrative models and its autoficional form. By rejecting the formats, genres, and conventions of the hero's journey that Alcott and Jo are forced into, she reclaims herself and the act of storytelling, passing us the pen and paper to continue the work of describing our desires and forming new connections and worlds out of them.

Reading *Little Women* autotheoretically rather than through the academic traditions of autobiography and fiction allows fans and Alcott to enact wonder, play, imagination, and ecstatic existence beyond a here and now as a collective. Autobiographical studies and writings are traditionally made up of dominant discourses and academic communities constructed by white, cisgendered men that rely on colonial histories and timelines to express themselves, causing marginalized folks to transform and found adjacent or completely new genres like autotheory. Scholar Max Cavitch's article, "Everybody's Autotheory" (2022), describes autotheory as a "signifier of a contemporary disturbance in the autobiographical field" from queer and Black feminist thinkers that reject an autobiographically formed "I" founded on the concept of a universal male (83). Additionally, Cavitch argues that autotheory relies on interpersonal encounters and relational ontologies that inherently combat neoliberal individualism and the "psychological myth of the isolated mind and the philosophical myth of the monadic, solitary ego" that are present in autobiographical texts (98). To read *Little Women* beyond autobiography challenges readers to explore the dominant discourses founded in the genre that are imposed upon her fluid, queer sense of "I" as well as her acts of self-description.

GENDERED DESIRES, ECSTATIC TIMES, AND JO MARCH

In the opening chapter to *Little Women*, "Playing Pilgrims," Jo and her sisters voice their desires to have more money and presents during Christmas. This leads to a sisterly debate over who suffers more and reminders of their mother's lessons of being selfless during the Civil War. The "'tomboy,'" Jo, socially recognized in New England as Alcott herself, continues to complain about the ways in which being a woman both entails a monotonous future and prevents her from being a heroic figure like her father who is fighting in the war:

> I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! 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. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman! (6)

At a young age, Jo articulates the concerns and fears she has with the gender binary during the 1800s. While girls are made to be passive and like material decoration, such as gowns, boys are considered active and contain purpose through financial gain or heroic acts. Jo's comparison of womanhood to a process of becoming to appear "'as prim as a China Aster'" contains a colonial subtext, equating the female body to commodified material and colonial object. To Jo, becoming a woman is to be devoid of character and personhood as the body is forcefully assimilated into colonial, patriarchal projections of the gendered self. The China Aster was brought to the West from Asia in 1730 by a Jesuit missionary and botanist named Pierre Nicolas d'Incarville (Taylor 24). While the China Aster is considered a natural, beautiful, and delicate flower, it has been replanted in America through colonial extraction. Forced and transplanted growth rather than a blooming of one's own making defines Western femininity as a colonial project of virginal

neatness and containment for preservation. Jo's rejection of appearing like the China Aster flower conjures budding thoughts about the Western imagination formed through colonization and its impositions upon the body, further planting the seeds of race's impact on selfhood and worldbuilding that are fleshed out through the rest of the novel. Additionally, Alcott's choice to open the novel with a debate formed by economic and gendered desires sets the stage for Jo's internal struggles with the clashing of social expectations for women and her financial duties to her family.

To escape the colonization of her body as a container for heteronormative reproduction and normative violence, Jo believes that she must become as close to a man as possible with power through that of financial security. Yet, becoming a male and escaping her imposed gender and sexuality occurs through Jo's whiteness. To be an adventurous, heroic male in control of these normative violences, one must also be white. As the story progresses, however, Jo finds that escaping herself through the privileges of whiteness only continues to suppress the self she is blooming into and continues colonial cycles of oppressive assimilation.

According to a variety of Alcott scholars, *Little Women* does not realistically display the intense struggles the Alcotts faced with money. Their father, Amos Bronson Alcott, tried to provide for the family through his teaching and writing, but failed, causing him to be an absent character throughout Jo's childhood. Anne Boyd Rioux's book, *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why it Still Matters* (2018), details the Alcott's financial situation thoroughly, showing that Alcott wrote *Little Women* because she wanted to help her family, especially as her mother found no choice but to ask for help and her sister, Elizabeth (Beth in the novel), became ill. Additionally, Rioux notes that despite the charming realism of the text, her family's darker struggles such as suicide and religious radicalism were left out. Ultimately, a straight time and

place shaped by the capitalistic, American desires of the 1800s informs Alcott and Jo's perceptions of gender and sexuality. Writing her father into the war as a soldier both reimagines him as a heroic figure and represents her desires regarding gender and sexuality.

As the first novel progresses, many of the chapters with Jo contain a remark about her gender, sexuality, and feelings of misfortune at being a girl. In fact, it is her desire to be a boy, or like one, that leaves her somewhat socially outcast. In Chapter 3, "The Laurence Ball," Jo and her sister Meg attend a ball, wearing their best dresses and curling their hair for the occasion. While Meg socializes, dances, and daydreams about living in luxury, Jo stands off to the side, observing and longing for a conversation with someone who understands her unladylike desires. Jo is described as a wallflower who "didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood about, with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden" (37). Overhearing a group of boys discussing skating, Jo becomes sad knowing that it would be socially unacceptable to join their conversation, further leaving her alone to observe the rest of the attendees "rather forlornly" until a boy approaches her to ask for a dance (37). It is here that she anxiously slips away to another room behind a curtain and meets Laurie, her next-door neighbor and childhood best friend whom fans would beg Alcott in countless letters to romantically to pair with Jo. In this scene, Jo exhibits both an aversion to romantic and sexual male attention and a deep longing to be accepted as she is. It is her gender that makes Jo believe she cannot be her truest self and that her desires for a nonnormative life are unacceptable or unrealistic. However, the description of Jo as like a wallflower or a "colt in a flower garden" highlights that she is someone who queerly blooms in the margins, on the outside, or through and from between the cracks rather than with the majority in the contrived garden of high society.

Meeting Laurie provides Jo a moment of ecstatic hope. Behind the curtain, Jo connects with Laurie over their shared feeling of being socially "'strange'" at the ball (37). As they get to know each other, Jo admits that she hates being called Josephine, as it feels too "'sentimental'" (39), or girlish. Laurie respects her decision to be called by her nickname, Jo, making her more comfortable, and Jo puts Laurie at ease with her "gentlemanly demeanor" (40). While Laurie inevitably gets turned down by Jo in part two, it is clear that their friendship provided a certain comfort for Jo during her childhood. Laurie acts as a mirror or foil, showing Jo that she does not have to be in the body of a boy, or contained within a gender binary, to be loved for who she is. Later in this scene, Laurie asks Jo if she would like to dance the polka, but she refuses since it would be shameful and embarrassing to publicly dance in her scorched dress. Laurie offers an alternative: dance secretly in the long hallway just outside the main room. They danced briefly but "'grandly'" and were full of "swing and spring" in the empty, liminal space of the hallway (42). In this moment of a true and vulnerable performance of the self that departs from the perfect American girl that Jo is often pressured to become, I argue that both Jo and Alcott enter an ecstatic moment in space and time. The pleasure of a dance to the point of being lost for breath indicates a stepping out of straight time and into a moment of childhood ecstasy and rebellion. For Alcott, this could be the moment of contemplation of her past self, reliving or reimagining a ball she was forced to go to or a secret dance she enjoyed with a friend.

Jo continues to enter brief moments or glimpses of ecstatic time through her relationship with books and writing. For example, in Chapter 4, "Burdens," the narrator takes a moment to reveal bits of Jo's character, especially as it pertains to her writerly ambitions and sense of wonder. The narrator notes a moment in which Jo recalls memories of her relationship with her Uncle March and his grand library, or the "wilderness of books, in which she could wander

where she liked" (52). It was in this library, where Jo the "regular bookworm" now works for her Aunt March, that she "devoured" the arts, literature, and poetry. In the following passage, we see a glimpse of how Jo recalls the past to conjure up a future:

> Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid. What it was, she had no idea as yet, but left it for time to tell her, and meanwhile, found her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn't read, run, and ride as much as she liked. A quick temper, sharp tongue, and restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series of ups and downs, which were both comic and pathetic. But the training she received at Aunt March's was just what she needed, and the thought that she was doing something to support herself made her happy in spite of the perpetual "Josy-phine!" (53)

Combined with the description of a library as a forest, this passage explores Jo's speculative futurities for herself and an embracing of not exactly knowing what it will contain. Rather than daydreaming about the steps in life contained by straight time such as marriage, Jo lives through the idea that she must take her time but lead her life with love and curiosity. It is through this detachment from straight time that Jo steps into an ecstatic future shaped by her ever-changing and open desires.

On the other hand, Jo's passion for writing becomes an oppressive and gendered act as she finds herself to be the man or father of the house with their father away at war. It is by imagining her future as a writer and providing for her family that she feels the most pride and joy; however, this joy and her sense of self is dependent upon financial gain. Once again, in "Burdens," Jo comforts her sister Meg who cries over feeling unattractive as a result of their financial situation. Jo joyously states, "'Poor dear, just wait till I make my fortune, and you shall revel in carriages and ice cream and high-heeled slippers, and posies, and red-headed boys to

dance with'" (50). In some ways, Jo has not only become the father or caregiver but the husband-like provider, ensuring that she can formulate a lavish and romantic future for her sister. For example, posies, a traditional and small bouquet popular during the Victorian Age, symbolizes romantic invitations and confessions. The comforting image of Meg being surrounded by these bouquets suggests that Jo, like a father, can position Meg within society for marriage through economic means, or, like a husband, will be the one to supply such gifts. Similarly, in Chapter 14, "Secrets," Jo surprises her sisters by revealing that the story they had been reading in the newspaper was written by her. In celebration with her sisters, Jo gleefully states that by writing stories she can happily support herself and "'help the girls,'" emphasizing that she is now transitioning into being the man of the house. The narrator wraps up this joyous scene by noting that Jo found the most happiness in being "independent" and by earning the "praise of those she loved" (203). Yet, this complex reliance on making money for her family to be happy bleeds into and affects her personal relationships with gender.

In Chapter 15, "Telegram," Jo cuts off her hair to provide money for her mother to travel and see her father who has been injured in battle. As a reader, our understanding of Jo up until this point is that she has never been concerned with her vanity, yet, later in the evening, she finds herself crying over the loss of her hair or her "'one beauty'" (214). Jo's relationship with gender in this scene is more complex than a vulnerable moment in which her performance as father of the house falters. Jo has allowed the curtain to fall on her negative emotions about being a girl but is dramatizing the physical costume or appearance of a boy through her shorter hair. Jo's connection to her hair is also a bodily tie to her womanhood and conceptions of beauty. Through her girlhood, Jo has had the loving experience of forming a feminine collectivity with her mother and sisters and of exploring the limitations of gender within a straight time and place. Jo is

attempting to transform a present and future self in ways that can be difficult to do alone and without guidance, resulting in confusing and nonnormative experiences. In Alcott's lived experience, she cut her long hair that fell almost to her ankles due to a dangerous case of typhoid pneumonia after being a nurse in the Civil War (Rioux 10). Here, Alcott may be utilizing Jo as a way to work through her complex feelings of being both the sacrificial man of her house as well as a woman with attachment to her physical attributes.

It is important to note that although Jo is attempting to step into ecstatic time and expressing queer desires, most of her earlier ideas of gender and futurity during the first novel are inspired by and based upon a male hero's journey. She ultimately believes that to have an accomplished life she must become a hero or soldier. To be an individual that can produce meaning and legacy, she must be a male. Ultimately, while she is rejecting a heroine's journey defined by docility and restraint from childish rebellion, she is also assimilating into another heteronormative timeline of being. Yet, this connection that Jo has to girlhood and femininity as it is revealed in vulnerable moments expresses a raw and deep struggle with wanting to love and be loved. Interestingly, Jo is typically described as outspoken and opinionated, one of her many unladylike qualities. Perhaps her boyish qualities act as a desire for control and a mask, making her appear tough and strong for herself and family when she is struggling to imagine a ecstatic future.

As Karin Quimby's article, "The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire" (2003), points out, Jo's tomboy identity and longing to be a boy is representative of the concept that the gender roles of man and woman are unstable and "not anchored to any secure, incontestable foundations" (1). Rather than following a gendered narrative of becoming, Jo's tomboy identity destabilizes the idea that "gender identity

is natural," further allowing young readers to understand that the "possibilities of identification and desire are vast, perverse, and ultimately unmanageable" (2). Rather than attempting to re-establish normative order into adulthood or return to a natural, womanly state, Jo resides in a blurry and othered space and time, utilizing the male hero's journey as a starting place to reimagine her life. Attempting to balance her boyish desires and her embodied relationship to womanhood causes Jo to encounter obstacles, but she does not embark on a traditional route to resolve them. As readers, we are tasked to squint and reflect alongside Jo's celebrations and struggles, imagining a new horizon of being that nurtures our blooming.

For example, when I was about Jo's age during the first novel, I exhibited a similar relationship to tomboyism, but in a way where I was attempting to curve or release an embodied, anxious struggle with safety. Crying to my mother in dressing rooms over clothes that shaped my curves, I did not want my form of self-expression through clothing to create an invitation for fatphobic and pedophiliac comments about my body. In a way, being a tomboy allowed me to reject an inevitable womanhood that I felt was physically taking over my body—that I could grow up in my own time and manipulate my body to follow suit. While I was desexed or degendered by fatphobic bullies, I was also hypersexualized by older men. Being a tomboy shattered these two imposed extremes, further allowing me, like Jo, to spend more of my time imagining and reclaiming futuristic desires of my own making despite how lonely that path felt. Reading *Little Women* affirmed for me that my ever-changing relationship with aesthetic and a gendered self is reminiscent of a spiraled desire to respect and care for my body in new, ecstatic, and joyful ways. My mother gifted me Jo March as a way to verbalize the lonely confusion that has often times made up womanhood and transform it into a collective rumbling of possibility.

Through the displeasure, tears, and countless celebrations, *Little Women* is a text suspended between straight and ecstatic time. Its realistic and playful portrayal of girlhood and perspective on internalized gender roles allow readers to find a solid and accessible foundation from where to begin to contemplate upon their own pasts and reimagine an ecstatic future.

“LET ME BE A LITTLE GIRL AS LONG AS I CAN”: CHILDHOOD, MARRIAGE, AND FUTURITY

Before part two of the novel was released to the public, readers were left in suspense with Meg’s impending wedding and Jo’s dissatisfaction over it. In Chapter 14, “Secrets,” Laurie details to Jo the rumor that Meg has been engaged, so she becomes irritable, claiming that she is “‘disgusted’” (198) over the idea of a man ‘‘coming to take Meg away’” (199). Instead of consoling her, Laurie tests Jo’s feelings about love and marriage, claiming that she too will be taken away one day. To cope, Jo runs down a hill with Laurie and daydreams about being a horse so that she can “‘run for miles in the splendid air’” and never run out of breath (199). The literal act of running away from her fears of normativity allows Jo to mentally exist in a liminal and preserved state of childhood, ecstatically suspending her in the memories of her past self that are systematically taken away from her with the growing pressures to become a woman. Returning home to see Meg, Jo is scolded for her messy hair, causing her to deliver the infamous line: “‘Don’t try to make me grow up before my time… let me be a little girl as long as I can’” (200). Throughout the first novel, Jo repeatedly expresses fear and anger over the idea of being married or losing her sisters to marriage. The prospect of marriage is a reminder that she must take the next step in the heteronormative timeline of a woman's life, which during her time period comes at a much younger age.

In the opening chapter to part two, “Gossip,” Jo is re-introduced with the characterization of a tomboy: “…Jo felt quite in her element, and found it very difficult to refrain from imitating the gentlemanly attitudes, phrases, and feats, which seemed more natural to her than the decorums prescribed for young ladies” (310). After three years have passed and the war has ended, Jo, still rejecting domesticity and adulthood, has slowly accepted Meg’s marriage by

ignoring the topic altogether. In fact, Jo openly considers conversations about marriage nonsensical and boring. Additionally, Jo has begun to transition and force herself into the role of "'old maid'" or spinster (321). In order to continue rejecting adulthood and the imposed role of wife, Jo has skipped it all together. This rejection of womanhood and performance of the town spinster is most evident in Chapter 29, "Calls," when her sister Amy convinces Jo to dress up in the proper, ladylike fashion and behave in a "'calm, cool, and quiet'" manner for an afternoon visit with the Chesters, an upper-class family (376).

As Amy picks and prods at Jo's appearance, she preaches to Jo that poor women should be more "'agreeable'" and respectable; however, Jo finds that her opinionated and "'crotchety old'" self is beyond being silenced (384). Yet, hilariously, Jo follows Amy's requests at the gathering to the point where she was practically silent and "blandly unconscious" when the Chesters asked her questions (377). After a quick scolding and debrief from Amy, Jo is tasked with transforming and performing the charming aristocrat with May Chester as her model. Jo gossips loudly, exposes some of Amy's private behaviors, and is overly affectionate with guests. After being scolded again, Jo resumes her tomboyish role and decides to converse with the young men and boys at the event about their college adventures and pet turtles. It is here with the young boys that she feels "'young and brisk again,'" as if she is in the body of an older woman who was reminiscing on her childhood (383). While Jo remains outspoken and determined in her views about womanhood, marriage, and identity, she now utilizes the excuse of being too old to mitigate her actions and speech. Even Jo's dress prioritizes comfort and mobility, emphasizing: "'If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don't wish to see them'" (374).

The ultimate rejection to heteronormativity and womanhood is exhibited when Jo leaves to work in New York in Chapter 32, "Tender Troubles," and when Jo turns down Laurie's

marriage proposal in Chapter 35, "Heartache." After revealing to her mother that she has discovered Laurie is in love with her, she pitches the idea of moving to New York to teach, explore the city, and write short stories. The act of leaving the home, especially in reaction to a man proposing to her, defies expectations and narrative conventions for girls and women in the coming-of-age timeline. In this case, Jo is participating in a hero's journey plot point of a call to adventure, which is not typical for girls to have found representation of at the time. Additionally, readers can see an honest conversation about love and marriage between a mother and her daughter who both agree that marrying Laurie would not result in true happiness despite his wealth and social standing. Rather than partaking in the adventure to locate the challenge or task that one must overcome or defeat to achieve adulthood, Jo echoes the sentiments of self-liberation and embodiment of desire she shared with Laurie in Chapter 14. In New York, she would have a space of her own, financial support, and a separation from the imposed gender roles and pressures stemming from the space and time imbedded within domestic homes to dream, imagine, and write. By conjuring up the ecstatic space and time located in her dreams and desires for a space beyond the here and now (1860s New England), Alcott and Jo reclaim their sense of futurity and attempt to strain their visions and minds over what is considered possible for themselves.

Despite the endless fan mail and requests for Alcott to marry Jo to Laurie, Alcott remained adamant on what Jo's future would look like. In response to the adamant demands to couple the two characters, Alcott wrote, "I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone" (qtd. in Rioux 15). In fact, Alcott intended Jo to remain a literary spinster until the end of the novel. Alcott herself remained unmarried, so it would make sense to have Jo do the same. However, the publishers and her fans continuously pressured her to conform Jo and her sisters to a typical

heteronormative timeline. Yet, as Chapter 35, "Heartache," shows, Alcott would not give up a more queer, alternative narrative for Jo. As Laurie desperately pleads, cries, and even attempts to manipulate Jo into marrying him, she stands strong, claiming that although she wishes she could, there is no world that exists in which she could be in love with him: "'…I don't know why I can't love you as you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't'" (473). Repeatedly, Jo tells Laurie that she is incapable of loving or marrying "'any mortal man,'" especially since it would require sacrificing her happiness as well as her "'liberty'" (476). Laurie, distraught and angered, believes that by marrying him, Jo would be fulfilling a certain goal, and that is expected of her to finalize this chapter of her life through institutional coupling: "'Don't disappoint us, dear! Everyone expects it…'" (476). Laurie embodies the male gender roles he is meant to perform and utilizes the normative violences of the time to attempt to manipulate Jo into seeing a marriage between them as a reasonable and safe option. Jo and Alcott stand their ground, publicly acknowledging that marriage is not a step within their ideas of futurity.

By the end of the novel, Jo, now having taken her time to explore her wants and desires, realizes through the death of her sister Beth that the nature of her defiance has caused her to self-isolate to the point of loneliness and depression. Alcott, or the narrator, stands in for Jo in "All Alone," acknowledging that this change in thought is not derived from a narrative about a "heroine of a moral storybook," but is a realistic portrayal of the everyday, "struggling human girl" who needs space and time to explore themselves, heal, and transform their desires (569). It is through writing about her life and the community that is her sisters that Jo expresses and materializes her desires, blocking out the "'rest of the world'" and the obligations she has imposed upon herself to meet others' expectations (570). The book she ends up writing, *Little*

Women, reminds Jo that the reflections of her past and childhood are more than just memories, but guides for her future self. While controversial, this future consisted of a marriage, but one that was founded upon mutual love, intellectual connection, and choice—qualities that would not have been found in a marriage with Laurie or any man that would have tried to marry Jo at a younger age when she was not ready.

In the end, Alcott was pressured by her publishers and fans to marry off Jo, but most of the narrative leading up to Jo's marriage is nonconventional and transformative for young female and queer readers. This ending may feel like seepage of straight time and capitalistic endeavors that shape the publishing industry; however, Alcott does not completely deprive readers of alternative and liberating utopias. Alcott nourishes community and attempts to leave us lingering in a queer horizon and potentiality in the final scene of the novel, leaving readers with a glimpse, suggestion, or working idea of futurity. Years later, Jo opens a school for young boys out of a home she inherits in her aunt's will. Jo, her family, and the boys of the school come together to perform and sing a song for Marmee's birthday, and the sisters reminisce about their childhood dreams. Although the ending is sentimental and somewhat dreamy, Jo has found herself in a community of her own making, defying the strong imposition that life is an adventure to be experienced and survived alone.

As the narrator describes this scene of musical merriment, they note that Marmee, shocked by the surprise celebration, "insisted on shaking hands with every one of the featherless birds, from tall Franz and Emil to the little quadroon, who had the sweetest voice of all" (640). Scholar Carlos E. Cortés defines the term, "quadroon," in *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia* (2013) as a description for "a person of one-quarter African descent." Additionally, Cortés notes that abolitionist literature of the 19th century utilized quadroons to "evoke sympathy

from white audiences for the plight of black Americans" (1771). Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House provides further details as to why Alcott may have included this ending with Jo's school on their learning activity worksheet titled "Object Lessons." They note that the Alcott family opened a small school outside of their home in Boston and believed that children, no matter their gender or race, deserved an education. Through archival work, they discovered that one of the students was a young Black girl named Susan Robinson. Mr. Alcott faced criticisms over admitting Black students and soon had to shut down the school due to white fears of racial integration (17). Alcott's use of white abolitionist literary tropes is limiting to actual Black and multiracial experiences during the Civil War period. However, Alcott's act of writing in this case is an example of speculative reimagination of the school her father opened in Boston: What if that school was a success or socially celebrated? With her abolitionist ideas of worldbuilding, opening a school for white and Black children is a glimpse at or step towards queer utopian thinking for her time, but not a fully realized agenda. Alcott concludes the novel on a new beginning rather than a definitive ending, further extending the text forward and asking readers to collectively continue speculating and imagining into the future alongside her.

Some literary critics believe *Little Women* does more bad than good for young adult women, especially considering the ending of the novel appears to preach a return to womanhood through institutional marriage despite Jo's consistent rejection of it. Christy Rishoi, for example, views Jo's transition into adulthood as one of combating independence with "interdependence." In Rishoi's book, *From Girl to Woman* (2003), Rishoi argues that female readers of *Little Women* are not led to believe that they should work towards "self-efficiency" or individuality in comparison to coming-of-age works for men. Instead, when female characters like Jo March "deviate" from "continuing interdependence," they are met with "tragic" and/or "pathological"

ends (65). Ultimately, women are considered socially dead or mentally unstable if they step outside gendered transitions and order or if they redefine their identities beyond the roles of mother, sister, or daughter. According to Rishoi, it is not an option for women in the coming-of-age genre to be multifaceted or successful. Rishoi further argues that Jo March is an "outsider" who has "accepted" or become complacent with the assumption that she must become socialized with the rest of her sisters (66). Although Rishoi admits to having a love for Alcott's *Little Women* and its aspects of feminine collectives, she generalizes Jo's "passive" nature as a negative message for young girls:

> *Little Women* teaches female readers the value of serving others and forgetting themselves, of setting ambition aside for marriage and family, and of hiding their negative feelings. But they also learn how a community of women nurtures one another despite women's differences, through all of life's passages…The central action of the novel serves to socialize Jo to accept and appreciate her place in a circle of women, forgoing the agency of the hero in favor of the passivity of the heroine. (67-8)

Rishoi and similar scholars continue this train of literary critique regarding *Little Women* and its relationship to feminist beliefs of independence that stem from the 1970s-80s. Anne Boyd Rioux documents this shared critique in academia as a general debate between female scholars over whether *Little Women* is a "submissive" or "subversive" text due to Jo's marriage (150). Rioux argues that the text's ambiguous reception over time is indicative of the "competing identities" which Jo must contend with, resulting in both a "fractured text" and a "fractured heroine" (154). Rioux's use of the word "fractured," I believe, is not meant to be interpreted as broken in the sense that Jo is someone who must be fixed by traditional womanhood, but rather queerly re-oriented. A fractured Jo in the context of an ecstatic, queer space and time may be better

understood as an uprooted self, lost in order to step out of and beyond straight time's linearity and assimilative constructs.

Rishoi's take on Jo from *Little Women* values one of individualism, which puts a binary limitation (career/family) on women who want to be able to reside in and beyond private and public social realms. More importantly, Rishoi's understanding of Jo's acceptance into gendered spaces like her family home deprives Jo and Alcott of a complex identity or narrative. Returning home to take care of her dying sister or starting a school with her husband are not sacrifices but acts of communal love and agentic reimaginings. Rather than submitting to a white, capitalistic, and patriarchal understanding of American life and futurity, Alcott attempts to shape the narrative of Jo March as one that combats a certain individualism that is inherent in white American citizens and their livelihoods.

LITTLE WOMEN'S CULTURAL IMPACTS & AUTOTHEORETICAL HORIZONS

Little Women has never had a moment out of print and has been adapted into a variety of formats including radio, ballet, musical theater, anime, and film. Additionally, the text has been translated into over 50 languages, transhistorically and transnationally allowing audiences to explore and practice its themes of family, womanhood, and selflessness. At the time of its release, *Little Women* was considered a mundane novel or model for girls and women rather than a piece of iconic female literature, especially as the profession of writing and studying literature became an academic endeavor taken up by white men in the US. Over time the novel had been popularized through American nationalistic purposes of showcasing ideal families, childhoods, and democracies during World War II and The Cold War, even to the extent in which the Soviet Union believed the novel was a piece of propaganda to persuade European countries to align with the US (Rioux 118). Despite the political notions to utilize *Little Women* to define national morality and assimilation, writers and women around the world, especially during the time of Second Wave Feminism, continuously gravitate towards and credit the novel for its welcoming introduction to feminism through the practice of self-description.

For example, in bell hooks' novel, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), hooks describes a moment in her childhood reading *Little Women* and biographies of Alcott, noting: "I find remnants of myself in Jo, the serious sister, the one who is punished. I am a little less alone in the world" (77). Similarly, Ursula K. Le Guin and Simone de Beauvoir have commented on Alcott and Jo's influence on their decisions to become writers, emphasizing that it was Jo's relatability that made writing appear accessible and desirable (Acocella). In my experience, Alcott has captured the hearts of both my mother and I, bringing us all together in Alcott's attic to her desk where our calloused fingers soften up at the touch of a pen. From the handful of

poems my mother has written that she has allowed me to read, I know we write similarly—with sentiment, rumination, and scribbled cursive. I like to think we developed our quick and hasty writing style from Jo, pinning down our thoughts before they could get the chance to float away. We three have somehow created an unspoken, collective bond that flourishes on paper and in splashes of ink.

Rather than reading *Little Women* as a model for morality and feminism, we can read autotheoretically and beside Alcott with the desire to better understand the practices and impacts of autotheoretical writing. In Emma Lieber's essay from *Autotheories*, "Impossible Professions: Autotheory, Psychoanalysis, Pedagogy," Lieber observes how the practice of writing and reading autotheory in her class has allowed her students to better articulate and understand their own thoughts, beliefs, and inherited knowledges. Lieber notes that it is the desire to communicate and share knowledges of the self that makes autotheory so transformative for both individuals and collectives: "Autotheoretical texts put desire on display, and they make desire the center of the act of transmission, with the understanding that it is in witnessing the desire of another speaking subject that one's own comes to life, and that it is by way of the flourishing of desire that change occurs" (37). The practice of reading *Little Women* autotheoretically provides readers, fans, and audiences with a similar effect, as showcased through the consistent call backs to the story in popular culture ranging from its various adaptations to TikTok aesthetics.

To contend with *Little Women* is to also contend with its vast and deep fandom. Scholars such as Kristina West and Beverly Lyon Clark have discussed the complex and tricky nature of recognizing fandom's influence on the novel. For example, in West's essay, "From Baby Lit to *Lusty Little Women*: Age, Race, and Sexuality in Recent *Little Women* Spinoffs" (2019), West describes various ways in which authors and fans have recreated and modernized the story,

including erotic reimaginings and racial inclusivity. Additionally, West unpacks this desire to recreate and transform *Little Women* across space and time as a means to identify and describe daily forms of disruption from normativity. However, as Clark argues in "Who Owns *Little Women*? Adapting Alcott in the Twenty-First Century" (2019), attempts to reimagine *Little Women* are consistently troubled by its attachment to origin, or the autobiographical aspects of the novel. Yet, it is this unstable sense of self or "I" that Alcott creates in *Little Women* through its autofictional form that allows readers to mobilize characters as their own and simultaneously observe Alcott's creation of Jo to reflect on her own life. Ultimately, understanding *Little Women* as a model of autotheoretical practice for queer reimagining provides further yet undiscovered reasons for its popularity across space and time. *Little Women*'s sociopolitical impact in allowing girls, women, and queer folk to both understand and practice self-description alongside Alcott positions the novel in a long line of autotheoretical tradition and warmly invites us each time we open our well-loved copies to continue contemplating upon our blooming.

21st century women and queer folk have returned to *Little Women* as a space to reimagine and articulate identity through Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation. Gerwig's *Little Women* attempts at reaching a middle ground, recognizing the autobiographical aspects of the story as well as its infinite ability to mirror sociopolitical concerns for women and queer folk across space and time. Gerwig enhances the narrative of the story and its outreach towards contemporary folks through the repetition of stills and scenes centered in literal horizons. The attention to horizons in physical landscapes and figures creates a similar manifestation or representation of a theoretical horizon described in Muñoz's work of queer futurity and worldbuilding. Rather than squinting, Gerwig places exactly what we need to see in the horizon line: the March home, feminine collectivity, and the agentic decision to dream.

Gerwig directs the girls to frequently stand in clusters or in a line, slightly obstructing or conjoining with the view of natural horizons or vanishing points. For example, in the scenes leading up to Beth's death, Jo (Saoirse Ronan) and Beth (Eliza Scanlen) lay on the beach discussing their futures. With the money Jo has accumulated in New York selling short stories, she moves back home and takes Beth to the beach in the hopes that Beth will heal. Beth admits that she knows she is dying, and Jo reveals that the struggles she has been having with her writing have led her to quit all together. It is here that Beth insists that Jo must keep writing and should write about her memories growing up together: "Write something for me… Do it for someone else," (1:09:45- 1:10:05). At the seafront, Jo writes and reads the original first chapter of *Little Women* to Beth.



Fig. 1 Jo and Beth sit on the beach. *Little Women*. Directed by Greta Gerwig, SF Studios and Sony Pictures Releasing, 2019, 01:09:06.

In Figures 1 and 2, Gerwig captures this pivotal and highly emotional moment of sisterly affection, love, and collective imaginings with the help of the beach's landscape and horizons over the water. Beth and Jo are placed in front of the horizons surrounding them, holding each

other and supporting one another to simply keep living and dreaming. Their huddled mass remains unmoved against the wind; time continues forward, yet they remain. In Jo's writing, the memory of Beth and their childhood transcends beyond the limitations of existence defined by birth and death in the constructs of straight time. Collective memory is proof that a nonlinear space and time exists, as it allows us to use the past to form our futures.



Fig. 2 Beth lays her head in Jo's lap on the beach. *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig, SF Studios and Sony Pictures Releasing, 2019, 01:20:30.

Similarly, Gerwig places the March home (the actual Alcott house) within horizon lines. In one of the beginning scenes to the film, Gerwig settles on the image of the March home in a snowy landscape and in line with the row of trees behind it (see Figure 3). The path leading to the March house centers their door as the vanishing point. Warm light peeks out of the windows on the first floor, bringing our attention to the shared living spaces. It is in the shared spaces of the living and dining room that the sisters put on plays for the town, rant to one another, and enjoy their individual passions. Rather than signaling to their rooms or Jo's attic, the warm light on the first floor is an invitation for formulating horizons through collective desires and ecstatic

joy. While scholars like Rishoi may conclude that placing domestic spaces and time within horizons reiterates a harmful oppression of female ambition and individuality, I argue that Gerwig and Alcott are instead pointing us to a starting point in accessing opportunities of collective imaginings: our family, chosen or by blood. As Jo discovers by the end of the novel and film, her individualistic path to capitalistic success and fame is overcome by a rejection of progression and a desire to establish a new hope that helps her family survive the death of Beth.



Fig. 3 The March house surrounded by snow. *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig, SF Studios and Sont Pictures Releasing, 2019 00:28:07.

In the scenes of their childhood, Gerwig also constructs horizons out of the bodies of the March sisters. When Beth is gifted a piano from Laurie's grandfather, James Laurence (performed by Chris Cooper), the sisters huddle in front of it, holding on to Beth and celebrating (see Figure 4). Similarly, during a Pickwick Club meeting, the sisters, mocking scholarly gentleman with their fake pipes and top hats, discuss the recent literary gossip in a horizontal line in the attic (see Figure 5). These moments of childhood fun, ecstatic joy, and feminine collectivity form new bodily horizons, emphasizing a subversion of female coming-of-age

narratives that are defined by oppression and death. Additionally, putting attention on the female body decenters the fetishized male gaze and embraces lived experiences as self-knowledges or embodied informers of queer worldbuilding and futurity.



Fig. 4 Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy read a letter from James Laurence in front of a piano. *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig, SF Studios and Sony Pictures Releasing, 01:18:14.



Fig. 5 Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy attend a club meeting in the attic. *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig, SF Studios and Sony Pictures Releasing, 2019, 00:41:13.

The popularity of Gerwig's *Little Women* is evident in fandoms spaces and digital landscapes, especially through that of TikTok where women and queer folk collectively discuss their opinions on Jo's marriage, wonder about which sister they are most like, or bond over queer desires to exist in a self beyond the here and now. In the last couple of years, *Little Women* has inspired young adult women and queer folks to share artistic practices and teachings of the text with online communities to create a sense of feminine belonging and move the text into contemporary imaginings of a queer worldbuilding. For example, one creator, @authoroliviablack, showcases the manuscript of her novel on her computer. In the background, Meg's speech (performed by Emma Watson) from the 2019 film about futurity and dreams plays, and the caption states, "Little women supremacy." While the video itself is not directly about *Little Women* and its content, this creator is indicating that it was Alcott and Jo who inspired her passion for writing. Jo and *Little Women* become accessible models of blooming, allowing marginalized folks to imagine themselves outside and beyond a heteronormative, domestic timeline of being that does not affirm personal desires.

In addition to *Little Women*'s social impact on inspiring its readers to create a writerly legacy founded on queered desires, the text and film have become catalysts for communal, anti-institutional forms of teaching, especially regarding themes of race, gender, and sexuality that are historically embedded in the novel. For example, writer and professor, Morgan Jerkins (@mjerkins,) autotheoretically discusses her connections to *Little Women* and Alcott through a combination of an autobiographical account of her memories watching the film (the 1994 version) as a child and what she discovered about Alcott's abolitionist beliefs as an adult. Jerkins says, "…on film, *Little Women* centers whiteness entirely, but there was something that stayed with me as a Black girl watching it. The March family believed in education. They believed in

moral clarity. And something I didn't have the language for at the time, they believed in freedom" (1:00-1:19). Jerkins continues to provide educational information about the Alcotts, their relationships to popular abolitionists, and the history of the Alcott home as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Finally, Jerkins concludes their mini lecture on Alcott with:

> None of this was taught to me when I was a child watching the film. I just knew I love the story where I thought allowed to exist, where my spirit could wander freely even if my body wasn't represented on screen. And I think that's the magic of movies. They meet us before we understand why. They stay with us, and one day, if we're lucky, they reveal that what moved us was never accidental. It was history, values, and longing finding us early. (1:56-2:27)

Jerkins's focus on "spirit," "longing," and freedom here is vital to *Little Women*'s popularity and accessibility. Additionally, sharing autobiographical accounts of interacting with the story expands upon an established community or fandom that was predominately made up of young white girls in the 1800s. Another user, @kk_monet1, responds to Jerkins's post, writing, "…I wish I could've met other Black girls [that] felt connected to the Alcotts and the March family."

Similarly, *Little Women* has created new forms of representation that TikTok users have transformed through their lived experiences with mental illness, disability, and neurodevelopmental disorders. Creator, @filmsis, argues through the text overlaying her video that Jo March has autism or is "for the autistic girlies." @filmsis writes, "…jo march is autistic. she has meltdowns at the drop of a hat when things don't go how she planned. she has a specific direct way of talking and sticks to a lot of the same vocab words. has 'childish' interests…" While the comments of this video have been turned off, the current 21.2k likes and almost 2,000 saves indicates that a large group of people with similar experiences agree. There is scholarship

on Beth/Elizabeth's potential diagnosis of anorexia and Jo/Alcott's struggles with depression, yet there is more to be said about the matter, especially regarding mental health's role in conforming to traditional coming-of-age narratives.

Of course, the decade long debate about *Little Women*'s ending and the public reception of it makes up a bulk of the TikToks under the #littlewomen tag. Comment sections of such TikToks have sparked complex feelings about Jo's marriage, contemplating how to balance Alcott's original intentions and the black and white thinking that further boxes in Jo's character. Creators like @cinematic365girl recognize a common misconception of the novel being a story solely about romance and love triangles, as seen through the text overlaying her video: ""little women is one of my favorite movies and not just because of the romance but because of the sisterhood and how every sister is different but still I relate in different ways." The top liked comment on this post by @hxneyimhxme details a shared experience of adoration for the story due to its themes of sisterhood, feminine collectives, and complex ideas of womanhood: "the movie makes me feel immensely seen in a way no other piece of media ever has. I love how the film sees female experiences throughout multiple beautiful and realistic lenses, and not one linear idea of what a 'good' or 'strong' woman is…" Similarly, user, @clementinesarchive, shares a glimpse of her experience with *Little Women* and its ability to mirror the relationships she has with her own sisters: "…i have a sister and the way i can see each of the marc[h] sisters in both of us is just the most magical thing!!..."

Sadie Megan (@sadie.megan) takes this comment about the attention on the romance plot in *Little Women* a step further in her comedic video about common, public debates over whether Jo should have married Laurie or not. In the caption, she writes, "HER TRUE LOVE WAS WRITING!!!" Many fans of the film and novel on TikTok share similar sentiments, siding with

Alcott and the idea that Jo should have never been married in the first place. On the other hand, some users have responded to this video confused as to why marriage may be considered oppressive or if there is a possibility for Jo to be seen as someone who has chosen both love and writerly passions. Despite the difference in opinion, the overall passion to dissect the multifacetedness of the story beyond romance, question institutions like marriage, and self-describe through the March sisters indicate a desire to return to *Little Women* through new, critical lenses.

Alcott and her fans across space and time have redefined the academic theorist, philosopher, or teacher through a reckoning of *Little Women* and its themes. It is those in our communities, family members, and friends that become our worldbuilders, reinventing and replanting possibilities that support our survival and legacy. While Alcott planted the seeds or ideas in the original text, the garden of relational thought and collectivity that has emerged from its pages over time evolves into the horizon in new forms and landscapes.

CONCLUSION: POETIC ARRANGEMENTS

In the backyard of my childhood home in San Diego, there is a rose dedicated to me and each of my three brothers. When spring rolls around and my rose bush, the Heirloom, is in full bloom, my mom sends me a picture. Each time I respond in celebration by writing, "I'm blooming!" To me, blooming is a relational process that I am unable to animate or get willfully lost in alone. In an attempt to embrace said blooming and challenge my hermit nature, I spontaneously performed a poem inspired by my early thoughts and research on *Little Women* at a local bookstore in Eugene, Oregon. For some reason, I felt as if I could not continue to write about the novel if I had not enacted the process of blooming, sharing, or witness in community. Amidst the comfort of strangers, I delivered a poem titled "Magpiper"—a nickname my mother's family gave me as a child due to my love of singing, crying, and songbirds:

The California poppies are disappearing
more and more each year.
Did you know
that Dad and I would pull over
on the side of the road to
sing Stevie Nicks to the poppies
on our way home,
the same way I
sang as a child for you?
But with my back turned away,
shy, facing a photo

you just framed of us

by the Chicago Bay.

The same wall that housed a corner

Where I was forced to practice Irish dance points

and caress rosary pearls.

I sing to the roses in our backyard

when you are up in your room

with your desk in front of the window

like a real Jo March

with calloused fingertips

on legal note pads:

The woman I always wanted to be.

When I sing to the roses,

I sing to you,

and I sing for me.

I sing to us

and our blooming

like those songbirds that formed a nest

above my window

that you always love to recall

because you thought it was funny

that I would sing along.
Your own songbird,
screaming magpie,
your heirloom rose.

A study on blooming is
the focus of my life-long work,
sifting through my internal archive and
observing when I changed
from a stormy, raging, undisciplined child
to a docile adult.
Daisychaining all that I have cultivated,
or can even remember,
I know that I have failed.
Yet, my limbs burn and
my fingertips are berry stained.

Maybe the act of blooming
isn't clarified through the form
of some epiphany,
but in knowing how the wind feels
on petal-like skin,
holding hands with calloused fingers,

or allowing nostalgia to guide rather
than control.

Maybe blooming isn't an act or performance,
but a privilege or birthright,
beckoning you like
the juiciest strawberry in your garden
or the warmest cake on your birthday,
waiting for you to notice that
you have been blooming all along
in the rosy buds of your cheeks as a child
and your tired, tried eyes full of tears
as an adult.

I know you feel it too.
I'm blooming Mom, *we're blooming*.

Looking back on childhood memories, just as Alcott did, I become more aware that writing is not a matter of skill and genius but an ability to process or practice the animation of space and time. My mother's and my obscure lives become part of Alcott's legacy that winds or weaves through the lives of women and queer folk that feel just as touched. It is this desire to connect that Alcott nourishes, allowing the fractured, fluid, and slippery self to create fields or gardens in the cracks and openings of straight time.

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