Louisa May Alcott in Conversation with Margaret Fuller: Transcendentalist Feminism and Jo

By

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Abstract

I argue that Louisa May Alcott was influenced by Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy regarding gender roles, male and female friendships, and marriage. I analyze how Jo's character and relationships in *Little Women* reflect Fuller's philosophy. I use biographical research to show how Margaret Fuller was a friend and colleague of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father. As is seen in his journals, Bronson Alcott aimed to raise Louisa May Alcott and her sisters in Transcendentalism, including Fuller's feminist ideals. My analysis reveals that Fuller's philosophy of the fluidity of gender roles is present in *Little Women* through Jo, who holds traditionally masculine traits and seeks to engage in the public sphere. Jo's relationship with Laurie also shows Fuller's idea of harmony between the masculine and feminine since Laurie holds traditionally feminine traits. Fuller promoted friendship as being the basis for marriage. However, even though Laurie and Jo do not marry, Fuller's philosophy of friendship can still be seen in their relationship. Alcott builds on Fuller's philosophy of friendship being the basis of marriage to show that male-female friendship can be valuable independent of marriage. Finally, I argue that Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer is a cautionary tale about rushing into an inegalitarian marriage due loneliness and fear of becoming an "old maid." My thesis provides an alternative view of the conclusion of *Little Women* and a deeper understanding of how Alcott was influenced by and builds on feminist philosophy. In doing so, my thesis enriches our perspective on feminist thought within literature preceding the First Wave of Feminism in America.

1. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott once famously wrote, “I like good strong words that mean something” (38). These words were said in *Little Women* by Jo, the protagonist who is well known for being strong-willed, independent, and charming. *Little Women* was originally published in two parts, the first half in September 1868 and the second half in April 1869. This novel was widely read and highly acclaimed by many people of different genders, ages, and social standing. Today, this fame continues with the novel appearing in households, in the English classroom, and on the movie screen. This novel has then become timeless and a must-read since its publication (Eiselein).

What many have found interesting about this novel is the realism of the story and how the novel details the realistic lives of women as they are “coming of age” during the nineteenth century. Scholars, including Rachel Griffis in “Stories for ‘Good Young Girls’: Louisa May Alcott, Gender, and Realism” also argue that the novel has many autobiographical components based on Alcott’s real life. Griffis states, “The autobiographical elements in this passage are unmistakable regarding Jo’s publishing experience” (270). Griffis discusses parallels between the masculine control of men in Alcott’s life to the masculine control of Professor Bhaer over Jo. We also see parallels of how Louisa May Alcott came from a family of four girls, just like the March sisters. It is also theorized that growing up, she was close friends with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s son and had a walking path between their two houses (Scharnhorst 34). So, given how widely read this novel was and how based the novel is in the real life of a woman during

this time, we can therefore use the text as a window into life of women during the late nineteenth century.

During this time, the first wave of feminism in the United States began to take place, with the start of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. This rise in feminist thought, "took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage" (Rampton). So, given the events of the time, I aimed to research how feminist thought influenced Louisa May Alcott and is displayed in *Little Women*, especially since the novel is a strong reflection of society and life during this time. One of the foremost feminist philosophers at the time was Margaret Fuller, a notable Transcendentalist philosopher, journalist, and literary critic. She most importantly wrote "The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men, Woman *versus* Women" in 1843, which was then expanded to a full work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845 (Levine 694). In these texts, she discusses relationships and marriage between men and women and the role of women within society. In reading and analyzing these works, I saw strong correlations between Margaret Fuller's philosophy and *Little Women* on the concepts of harmony between masculine and feminine, strong relationship with self, female authorship, egalitarian friendships and marriage, and promotion of women to engage in the public sphere and become "old maids."

I therefore argue that Louisa May Alcott was influenced by Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy regarding gender roles, male-female friendships, and marriage. This is then reflected in *Little Women* through Jo's character

and relationships. The evidence for Margaret Fuller influencing Louisa May Alcott is then strengthened by how Margaret Fuller was a friend and colleague of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father. This is significant because Bronson Alcott aimed to raise his daughters as the perfect, modern Transcendentalist women. So, Louisa and her sisters were educated on Transcendentalist philosophy from a young age, including the philosophy of Margaret Fuller. We therefore see Fuller's philosophy of the fluidity of gender roles in *Little Women* through Jo, who holds traditionally masculine traits and seeks to engage in the public sphere. Jo's friendship with Laurie also demonstrates the harmony between masculine and feminine since Laurie holds traditionally feminine traits. However, Alcott builds on Fuller's philosophy of friendship being the basis of marriage and shows how male-female friendship can be valuable outside of marriage. Finally, I argue that Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer is a cautionary tale of rushing into an inegalitarian marriage due to solitude and loneliness.

This thesis is significant because while scholars have demonstrated a connection between Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller, a connection between Fuller and Louisa May Alcott has not been made. Here, I demonstrate this connection and how Margaret Fuller was known by Louisa May Alcott and how Alcott was strongly influenced by Transcendentalist thought. Then, I offer a deeper understanding of not only how Alcott implemented this philosophy, but also how she built upon it in regard to the value of male-female friendship within society. I also offer an alternative view of the conclusion of the novel. These conclusions then enrich our perspective on feminist thought within literature preceding the first wave of feminism in America. So, as Jo said, I seek to demonstrate how these "good strong words… mean something."

2. Louisa May Alcott's Upbringing and Education

In this essay, I am looking to show how Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy is reflected in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, especially within the characters Jo and Laurie. To further prove that Alcott likely took inspiration from Fuller, I demonstrate how Margaret Fuller was connected to Louisa May Alcott, especially through her father, Bronson Alcott. Bronson Alcott raised Louisa by utilizing Transcendentalist principles in order to raise her and her sisters as the model, modern Transcendentalist women of society. This included instilling values of the philosophy of other Transcendentalists that Bronson surrounded himself with, especially in Louisa's later childhood when the family moved to Concord. Given that it is commonly believed that *Little Women* is autobiographical of Louisa May Alcott's life, it is likely that she implemented and was influenced by her Transcendentalist education, including the ideas of Margaret Fuller.

Louisa May Alcott was born on 29 November 1832 to Amos Bronson and Abigail May Alcott. Similarly to *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott was one of four girls. Her other sisters included Anna, Elizabeth, and Abigail. Alcott tended to draw frequently from her childhood when writing *Little Women*, drawing on memories of her and her sisters performing plays, adding some of her favorite items as possessions of the characters, etc. The character Jo is also seen as representative of herself with the two sharing many characteristics. These included "boyish" traits, being the second oldest sister, being a writer, enjoying the sensationalist genre, etc. Reading *Little Women* as a reflection of Alcott's real life, one would believe that she had a fairly normal upbringing. However,

being the daughter of the infamous Transcendentalist philosopher and teacher, Amos Bronson Alcott, she had anything but (Eiselein).

In September 1834, Amos Bronson Alcott founded the Temple School in Boston, Massachusetts in a few rooms on the top floor of the Masonic temple. This school was founded on the principle that young students must be brought up to be aware of their inner spirit. Spiritual nature and Transcendentalist principles must therefore be perfected in order for students to have "an awareness of their own divinity" (Matteson 53). This would then bring them to a higher level of intellect and human capability. Children were therefore capable of achieving "moral perfectibility" (Flint 79). Azelina Flint in her article, "'Here are the model children!' Revisiting Louisa May Alcott's Representations of Her Parents' Educational Theories," discusses the effects that Bronson and Abigail Alcott's teaching had on Louisa May Alcott and her writing. Flint particularly wrote about how Bronson "prioritized the world of ideas, or 'spiritual culture' above the physical desires, temptations, and appetites" (81). In practice, Bronson Alcott ran a strict and ordered classroom. Elizabeth Peabody, a scholar and assistant at the Temple School, called his methods "autocratic" (Matteson 58). However, Bronson still aimed to foster a learning environment conducive for fostering the "mind and spirit." On the first day, he enquired with the children that the aim of their lessons was "to learn to feel rightly, to think rightly, and to act rightly" (58). However, he often had strange methods for doing this. For example, he used limited punishment of individual students. If a student was being disruptive or speaking at all, he would pause the lesson. This was to demonstrate that the negative actions of a few affected the group as a whole. Also, one day, two of Bronson's students were especially disruptive and disobedient. So, he called them to the front as he was holding a

ruler. However, instead of hitting their hands, he had them hit his own. This was to teach them that inflicting pain is worse than receiving it. Therefore, your negative actions not only affect others, but could hurt them. (58-59) So, you can see how everything that Bronson did within his class was to teach a moral or spiritual lesson.

Not only was his theory and method of education put into place at the Temple School, but also in his parenting practices in raising Louisa May Alcott and her three sisters. (52-54) Bronson Alcott believed that while the education of his school was important to him, the parental guidance a child receives must take precedence. He therefore treated the raising of his daughters as a Transcendentalist experiment, wishing to raise the model, modern, Transcendentalist women of society (Dassow Walls)[1]. He wished to crack the code of "the secret to the inner growth of children" (Matteson 62). He was often found with his daughters simply observing, taking notes, and brainstorming ways to "fix" any behavioral issues he found. He often kept diaries of hundreds of pages on Anna and Louisa, documenting their behaviors and ways to nurture their spiritual development. (60-61) However, Bronson Alcott quickly discovered that the physical nature and disposition of a child is also a contributing factor for behavior, not simply the environment. He seemed to struggle with the raising of Louisa, since she seemed less interested in "meditative matters" and more on what was in front of her. She was also less passive than her older sister and was more prone to "a high and excessive flow of the animal nature." He found her to be dramatic, focused on real practice over theorizing, indulgent of impulses, and selfish. All of this derived from her lack of self-suppression and calm demeanor. Bronson thought this

[1] I discuss this experiment briefly and mainly utilize the research of John Matteson for context. However, "The Cosmopolitical Project of Louisa May Alcott" by Laura Dassow Walls goes more in detail about the experiment and could be more beneficial if looking for more information.

was dangerous for her development of the meditative spirit he was aiming to instill in her and her sisters and therefore considered her to be an imperfection. He even considered the fact that Louisa liked meat over vegetables a sign of her having a violent and temperamental nature (63-65). Louisa also had more of a tomboy nature growing up, similar to the way in which Jo is described. Nonetheless, Bronson Alcott continued with his experiment. In practice, he tried to teach his daughters constant and continual self-control of the physical body. This was so that the children could become more in touch with their spirit since, "'fortitude and self-denial' awakened 'a higher sense of spirituality'" (Flint 82). Using this idea of self-control, Bronson worked with Louisa to calm her temperament.

As a Transcendentalist philosopher during the 1800s, Bronson Alcott shared his child education, experiment, and rearing philosophy with other famous philosophers of that time. However, the Temple School closed on 22 June 1839, due to controversy surrounding one of Bronson's articles in *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*. In this, he "raised issues like conception and circumcision" that claimed that every childbirth is equivalent to the birth of Jesus. This claim and the general discussion of these topics were seen as "obscene," and corrupting of the minds of children. Multiple newspapers slandered Alcott, and because of this and the complicated dismissal and resignation of his assistant, Peabody, the school closed (Matteson 76-79). However, this is where Margaret Fuller begins to be more present in the lives of the Alcott family. She was known as being a "loyal defender" of Alcott, after very briefly taking over Peabody's position before the school closed. She advocated for him as a "noble man" and wrote to other writers who had or were going to slander Bronson Alcott. At this point, Fuller had not become the editor of *The Dial* or

written *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, but she was beginning to be respected amongst Transcendentalists (80-81).

The Alcott family then moved to Concord, Massachusetts. There, they became neighbors with Ralph Waldo Emerson. They also became good friends with Henry David Thoreau, George Ripley, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Bronson also continued to work with Margaret Fuller and often collaborated with Emerson. Finding community in Concord, Bronson quickly entrusted the education of his daughters to Thoreau and Emerson. Anna, the eldest, attended the Concord Academy, a school managed by Thoreau. Louisa and her sister Elizabeth then took lessons at Emerson's house with Miss Mary Russel. They also often found themselves on nature walks led by Thoreau with the other children in the town. Bronson continued to take seriously their lessons and to try to calm Louisa's tomboy and contemptuous spirit. However, he seemed to open up to the idea of a current and future state of society that "would fall on both genders, (and) he welcomed the chance to 'rear Women for the new order of things" (Matteson 95). This is after he decided to renounce his previous endeavor as a moral and spiritual teacher and take on the more natural and peaceful Transcendentalist philosophy of his new community. In other words, he no longer believed in fighting the soul for moral perfection and instead wanted to "simply be" and take on and learn from the transcendentalists he was surrounded with (86-95)[2].

Given the strong influence that other philosophers had on Bronson Alcott's philosophy, it is reasonable to draw the similarities between this teaching and the Transcendentalist feminist philosophy of Margaret Fuller. Since he continued to believe in the importance

[2] This citation is in reference to the rest of the paragraph, informed by the entire chapter "Orpheus at the Plough" from *Eden's Outcast* by John Matteson.

of parental guidance and wanted their education founded on Transcendentalist beliefs, it is no surprise that these ideas would have influenced Louisa May Alcott. It is then theorized that *Little Women* has strong, real-life influences and is autobiographical of Louisa May Alcott's life. Or, it has strong real-life influences. So, this provides further support that these Transcendentalist ideas that were apart of Louisa's everyday life and upbringing would have been brought into her writing of *Little Women.* Through examining Margaret Fuller's philosophy more in-depth, we then see a strong influence on Jo's character and relationships.

3. Louisa May Alcott and Margaret Fuller

So, based on evidence that Louisa May Alcott was heavily influenced by Transcendentalist thought and philosophy due to her father's teaching, and based the novel on many aspects of her life, I argue that Louisa May Alcott utilizes Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy in *Little Women*. Margaret Fuller was "known a prolific and influential Transcendentalist writer, drawing inspiration from other Transcendentalists and activists… to (build) her ideas on marriage and gender roles" (Levine 693). She is most famous for her work on *The Dial,* a Transcendentalist journal, and writing *A Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Suffragists such as "Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage even stated that Fuller, 'possessed more influence upon the thought of American Women than any woman previous to her time.'" So, since Louisa May Alcott was heavily influenced by Transcendentalist philosophy and Margaret Fuller had vast influence on the women the United States, there is little doubt that Alcott was well versed in Fuller's philosophy. We then see influence of this philosophy in *Little Women.* Especially through in Jo's character and relationships. We see this in multiple ways, including the incorporation of fluidity of gender roles and harmony between masculine and feminine. Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer can also be considered a cautionary tale of entering into an inegalitarian marriage due to solitude and loneliness. Before moving forward, we need to understand Fuller's philosophy on these topics in order to fully recognize the influence that it has had on the writing of *Little Women*.

The first major influence of Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist Feminism is her philosophy on the fluidity of gender roles, an uncommon and progressive thought during

the nineteenth century. During this time, men and women were seen as belonging to different "spheres" within society. Linda C. McClain wrote in the *Boston University Law Review* that "the husband was the legal and political representative of the household and extending women's rights- whether in the realm of marriage or of political life- would disrupt domestic and political order" (1861). It was believed that the man maintained not only the order of his house, but also the order of society by "speaking for" his wife and household, making sure they remain in the private sphere. Women's societal duty was then to her husband and raising her sons to be good citizens and public leaders and daughters to maintain a good household. However, prior to marriage, women maintained a degree of independence, and it was seen as more acceptable to engage in the sphere. However, as soon as a woman married, "the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes (her) within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties and forbids her to step beyond it." (Kerber 10) So, women only confined to these spheres once they were married. However, gender stereotypes also required men and women to act in a certain manner and reinforced the separation of these spheres. Women were to act refined, delicate, reserved, and kind. Men were then expected to be assertive, educated, rational. In other words, women were to maintain a demeanor that is reserved and ladylike, and men were expected to be educated and leading gentlemen. These societal expectations are then demonstrated in *Little Women*, which will be discussed in the analysis sections.

Margaret Fuller, on the other hand, pushed against these societal standards and stereotypes. Fuller believed that gender was fluid, or that the perceived understanding of femininity and masculinity is not strictly defined to a certain sex. She founded this belief on Descartes' concept of dualism, or the Mind-Body Problem. This concept stated that

humans consisted of physical and mental properties. The physical properties included the physical body of a person and the mental properties included "consciousness (including perceptual experience, emotional experience, and much else), intentionality (including beliefs, desires, and much else), and they are possessed by the subject or a self." Descartes then believed that the mental properties of a person were the most important aspects, calling it the essential properties, since this involved the ability for a person to utilize reason and understand the world around them (Dualism: The Mind-Body Problem). Fuller then states, "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another… There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" ("The Great Lawsuit" 728)." Fuller explains here that because the most important properties of a person are their mental properties, and both men and women are capable of a high level of cognition, then the physical qualities of a person are no longer determinative of traits and qualities. Along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, this level of cognition was described as Transcendentalist "genius". Phyllis Cole stated that Fuller wondered, "Could the female mind discover and act upon the god-like capacity of consciousness enabling the highest cognition and creativity?" (409). Since this is the basis of Transcendentalist thought and philosophy, determining that women were capable of such a high level of cognition, women were invited to participate in the conversation along with men.

Fuller then determines that because gender is fluid and there is no strict divide between masculine and feminine, then strict roles within society based on gender are no longer valid. Since men and women have the same mental capabilities, they are equal, and social roles, traits, and interests that are designated as only "masculine" and only "feminine"

become insignificant and inaccurate. History and nature even support this notion. In both, we see women go into war and "hold immense burdens." We also see men "who feel maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother." ("The Great Lawsuit" 728) This shows how the concept of a separate "private" sphere for women and a "public" sphere for men goes against our human nature. Dorri Beam explains that if masculine and feminine are not distinct roles, then we cannot base society on these roles either (Beam 53-54).

This concept of fluid gender then also inevitably has an effect on relationships between men and women. Both men and women are capable of being successful and serving in the private or public sphere. So, in order to have a healthy relationship, it must be one of equals in which the man and the woman can support one another within either sphere.[3] This includes both friendships and marriages between men and women. During the time period in which *Little Women* was written, friendships with women were considered to be volatile and "dangerous liaisons." (Wadsworth 1) However, Margaret Fuller disagreed and believed that the two genders can live in harmony with one another. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she discussed how Man is one body, and in order for it to grow and flourish, there cannot be injury to a part of it. The focus is on a person's soul, rather than the physical body they have. They must not work to oppose one another and instead, "correspond to and fulfill one another, like hemispheres, or the tenor and bass in music" (331). This is based off of the Emersonian idea of self-reliance that creates self-respect. Fuller then argues that this then creates mutual respect among the sexes, so long as both practice self-reliance and respect for oneself first and then recognize it in others. ("The

[3] The beginning of this paragraph is derived from my "Margaret Fuller and Marriage" essay from ERH-322WX: American Romanticism course.

Great Lawsuit" 706-707) Fuller argued that this would in turn create a healthy and balanced society that enriches and seeks to grow the people. In order for this to occur, men and women need to interact in a healthy way, giving way to new opportunities to women in the public sphere and men in the private sphere.

This level of male-female friendship and harmony then also becomes the basis for marriage, the most intimate companionship between men and women. They are able to view one another with respect and therefore "not only correspond to and appreciate one another, but prophesy to one another (707). Fuller states that men have "found in their wives companions and confidants in thought no less than feeling" (716). Instead of basing the relationship on mutual feelings of love, it is based off of the mutual respect that is found in friendship. She even describes this as a "marriage of friendship" that becomes mutually beneficial and is essential in a healthy marriage that allows the man and woman to flourish. Fuller also describes a healthy marriage to involve friendship outside the marriage, with friends and family. The woman is "the sister and friend of all beings, as the worthy man is their brother and helper" (720). The couple is not so inwardly focused that they solely invest in friendship and marriage with one another. This allows both to flourish as individuals and continue to invest in the surrounding society. However, outside of the fluidity of gender and within the context of marriage, Margaret Fuller did not comment specifically on male-female friendship apart from marriage. However, Louisa May Alcott seems to use these two points from Fuller as a basis for the friendship between Jo and Laurie in *Little Women* to show an example of a healthy relationship between men and women that does not end in marriage. This, however, will be outlined in later sections.

Fuller, however, did have a lot to say on the subject of marriage. Fuller specifically discusses in “The Great Lawsuit” different types of egalitarian marriages. Some of these are healthy, while others are unhealthy. First, she brings up the question of whether or not a marriage is one of emotional and soul connection, or of contract and convenience (715). Most men during this time enter into these marriages believing it to be the latter and not considering the friendship that can be developed between the two. This is a marriage that is not egalitarian and not encouraged by Fuller. Fuller then also goes on to discuss four different types of egalitarian marriages: the household partnership, intellectual companionship, mutual idolatry (716), and religious union (719). However, the household partnership and mutual idolatry were considered to have negative impacts on the individuals involved. Household partnership is one in which “The man furnishes the house, the woman regulates it” (716). The man is set to the public sphere while the woman is set to the private sphere. However, the belief is not that the man’s role is better than the woman’s, and there seems to be a mutual respect and kindness between the two. They are both content in helping one another and complement each other in their separate and defined roles. While this type of marriage is egalitarian in the sense that neither role is more valuable than the other, it is more a marriage of convenience, rather than the connection of souls. There is little dynamics of friendship or love between those involved. The next unhealthy, egalitarian relationship is mutual idolatry. This is a marriage in which they close themselves off to others around them and solely focus on each other. However, they do not enrich each other and instead “weaken and narrow one another; they lock the gate against all the glories of the universe that they may live in a cell together” (716). While there may

be friendship here, it is one of equal idolization, rather than healthy admiration. This marriage also often ends in discontentment, with intense emotion burning out quickly.

Intellectual companionship and religious union are then two types of healthy, egalitarian marriages, which were displayed earlier when discussing friendship. Margaret Fuller described the intellectual companionship as the friendship marriage. In this relationship, men enter the public, intellectual, and artistic spheres and consider their wives to be "companions and confidants in thought no less than in feeling" (716). This allows the woman to grow in intellectual thought just as the man does. This type of relationship elevates both, with both holding high esteem and admiration. In this type of relationship, both the man and woman attend to "matters of the home" and prepare public documents and reading for the public. One example given by Fuller was a husband who began letters, and his wife finished them. Fuller also alludes to the marriage of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft as an example. Wollstonecraft wrote "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" in which she argues women were to be intellectual partners to their husbands. In order to do this, women must be permitted to participate in public and intellectual life. Otherwise, how would they be able to properly support their husbands and raise their children for the public sphere. She states, "if she not be prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue… If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot" (3-4). So, men and women are both still generally within the traditional "spheres" of society, but women should be permitted to participate to a degree in public life in order to fully carry out their work in the private sphere. The next type of egalitarian marriage is the religious union. This type of marriage is described as a "pilgrimage towards a common

shrine" ("The Great Lawsuit" 719). Both equally work towards "home sympathies, household wisdom, and intellectual communion" (719). They aid one another and can confide in one another with their struggles. Then, in doing so, they support one another and communicate in striving for and completing their goals. While there is friendship, here is also mutual respect and love. They are truly in a relationship of equals who advance one another. Fuller then brings in the example of Count Zinzendorf, who described his wife as someone who was able to help him in "rejecting a dry morality" (719). Those who saw their marriage then did not view his wife as simply his wife, but as a strong individual who was able to think independently and was well-versed in all subjects. Fuller then discussed how another indicator of this type of relationship is a woman who writes, as Fuller herself did. She is someone who breaks into the public sphere and can compete intellectually with the men.

Amongst her discussion of relationships with others, Margaret Fuller also discusses the relationship to self. Building off of the Transcendentalist concept of self-reliance, Fuller fully encouraged the freedom of women within the intellectual and public sphere, regardless of whether a man was by her side. She stated, "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home" (705). The best way Fuller saw that a woman could do this is to remain unmarried. She stated that,

> A profound thinker has said 'no married woman can represent the female world, for she belongs to her husband'… But that is the very fault of marriage, and of the present relation between the sexes, that the woman does belong to the man,

> instead of forming a whole with him… Woman, self-centered, would never be absorbed by any relation… It is a vulgar error that love, *a* love to woman is her whole existence; she is also born for Truth and Love in their universal energy. (730-731)

Because a woman is naturally, socially, and legally dependent on her husband during this time period, Margaret Fuller argues that the single life allows women to fully connect with themselves and the "universal soul" that was championed by the Transcendentalists. They are able to do this because they are "thrown more upon themselves" and able to gain "a closer communion with the One" (722). This then allows that "all her thoughts may turn to the centre, and by steadfast contemplation enter into the secret of truth and love, use it for the use of men, instead of a chosen few, and interpret through it all the forms of life" (722). Not only will women enrich themselves and their soul, but also the society as a whole. As women writing is an indicator for a religious union marriage, Margaret Fuller also praises "female authorship" in the single life. The contributions of these women, who are not affected by dependency on men, are highly valuable since they have a strong sense of self and interaction with society, rather than a spouse. This individualism allows them to grow as intellects, despite being "old maids," as Fuller and others in society called women who remained unmarried. (720-721)

Louisa May Alcott also believed the same as Margaret Fuller regarding the life of the "old maid." In 1868, Alcott wrote "Happy Women," a short, fictionalized essay about four women who choose to remain single throughout their life. (Ward VI) In each, the women find true happiness and fulfillment in whatever trade they find themselves in. The purpose was to warn women against rushing into marriage for the purpose of securing a place within

society and providing for themselves financially, rather than love. Alcott writes, “young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness which astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Miss’” (“Happy Women” 40). Here, she compares the rushing into this kind of marriage as causing women to lose their basic rights, along with their individualism of “self-respect.” She also diminishes the significance of marriage to simply a title change. Instead, Alcott urges women, “don’t be afraid of the words, ‘old maid,’ for it is in your power to make this a term of honor… Do not be ashamed to own the truth- do not be daunted by the fear of ridicule and loneliness… Be true to yourselves…” (42) As Margaret Fuller also does, Alcott urges women to use singleness as an opportunity to contribute to society, while also growing as an individual and intellectually. Then also, to embrace the idea of living out life unmarried and becoming an “old maid,” despite fear of societal judgement and loneliness.

4. Jo's Character Analysis

Based on this understanding of Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy, we can fully analyze how it is incorporated into *Little Women*. In my research, the philosophy demonstrated is best seen in Jo's character and relationships. Jo herself represents the fluidity of gender roles, specifically the concept presented by Fuller that states that "there is no wholly masculine man and no purely feminine woman." Jo holds masculine physical traits. However, she matures to fit more into the societally feminine ideal, while also still maintaining more traditionally masculine attributes. Jo also seeks to engage in the public sphere, through education and writing. This demonstrates Fuller's promotion of female authorship and intellectual contribution to society. Jo also takes pride in the independence she gains from her writing and wishes to remain unmarried, as both Fuller and Alcott promoted, in order to maintain her liberty.

In the beginning of the novel, Alcott's intention was to describe the physical attributes of each March sister since readers "like to know 'how people look'" (6). One of the first things that can be noticed is that these physical descriptions also hint at each of their personalities, as if the physical aspect reflects the characteristics that each hold. You can see that Margaret, Beth, and Amy are described in similar ways, as being delicate with feminine features. However, Jo is described in a very different way. She has masculine characteristics and is considered to be awkward in the way she carries herself. One of the other key characters, Laurie Laurence, however, is not afforded a physical description. It is perhaps telling that the women are afforded a physical description while Laurie is not, suggesting that the physical attributes of the women are more important to their identity

than the physical attributes of Laurie, a male character. But he is given short descriptions regarding his attributes and character throughout the novel.

As previously stated, Margaret, Beth, and Amy are described with very feminine and delicate attributes. Margaret, being sixteen, is described as being “very pretty” with fair skin; large eyes; soft, brown hair. She is also plump with small hands. These characteristics make her “rather vain” (6). Since she is described as “pretty” in this description shows what society considers to be beautiful: someone who is fair, plump, and has small hands. As the eldest, takes on a motherly role, especially with her father, who has gone to fight in the war. Her description then portrays her as a housewife, someone who spends the majority of her time indoors and away from physical labor. Beth is then described in a similar way, as someone who is very pretty with a rosy complexion, smooth hair, and bright eyes. Also, she has a shy manner, timid voice, and peaceful expression. She is very introverted, her father even calls her “Little Tranquility” (7). Later, she is often described as being perfect, with no flaws. This shows how these qualities in women were highly favored and praised. Beth then represents the “perfect woman,” someone who is reserved and keeps to their quiet place within society. Amy is then detailed in similar ways as Margaret and Beth, as having fair skin and delicate features. She is also said to carry “herself like a young lady mindful of her manners” (7). Just like Beth’s description, this gives the impression that in order to be a proper young lady in society and highly regarded, you must follow the rules that are set for young women.

In comparison to her three sisters, Jo is described as awkward and having undesirable features since she has a more masculine appearance. This description is the first place in which you can see the stark contrast between Jo and the rest of her sisters. This masculinity

is even reflected in her nickname, Jo, which is commonly a male name. Of all the sisters, Jo has the longest description. She is tall, thin, brown, and has tangled and bundled hair, indicating that she spends a lot of time outside working or playing, like a young boy. She is then also compared to a colt, implying she is awkward and learning how to fit into the body in which she is given. She also has a "decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything" (6). This implies someone who is outspoken and curious but does not fit the beauty standard of that time. While her sisters are described as pretty, she is described as "a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it," as if her masculine qualities and tomboy nature are imperfections.

However, Jo's appearance and demeanor also does not fully fall under a masculine identity. For example, when Jo cuts her hair to sell in order to raise money for her father, she originally admires it, saying that it will grow to be "boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order. I'm satisfied…" (166). She enjoys the fact that the cut is more masculine. However, when her sisters are not around, she is found crying over the loss of her "one beauty" (168) and then continues to try to hide it under a hat. Meg later tries comforting her, repeating Jo's earlier statement, saying it was very "boyish and nice" (172). Jo responds by saying that is her only consolation. So, while Jo does prefer a more masculine appearance, she still regrets giving up her "beauty." Jo worries about her appearance as a young woman of society but does not conform to typical beauty standards of the time.

Over the course of the novel, Jo seems to evolve to maintain her "masculine spirit," while also growing into a woman of society. This also portrays the idea that gender expression is a spectrum and ever-changing. You see this confirmed when Jo's father

returns from the war and reflects on the change his daughters have made. Mr. March states, regarding Jo, that,

> In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the son 'Jo' whom I left a year ago… I see a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug as she used to do. Her face is rather thin and pale, just now, with watching and anxiety; but I like to look at it, for it has grown gentler, and her voice is lower; she doesn't bounce, but moves quietly, and take care of a certain little person in a motherly way which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl; but if I get a strong, helpful, tender-hearted woman in her place, I shall be quiet satisfied. (225-226)

While Jo has grown out of some of her "boyish" tendencies and appearance, Alcott does not portray this as a negative or tries to keep her on the same side of the gender spectrum as she was in the beginning. So, while Jo holds more masculine traits throughout the novel, she matures to have a more feminine nature. What is important to note is that this evolution was not caused by outside influence, but was a natural progression noted by her father after not seeing her since her young childhood. So, Alcott here embraces the model set forth by Fuller and displays her as ever-changing and not constrained by the expectations set on her but as evolving and maturing of her own free will.[4]

[4] While not utilized here, Angela Hubler, et al. in "Roundtable: Teaching *Little Women*" can be used as a source for more information on this concept. In this article, Hubler, et al. discusses how this novel shows how women exercise their liberty and do not need to be become more like men in order to establish their place in society, but rather can make their own decisions in terms of their appearance, relationships, occupations, and hobbies. As Fuller noted, they are not defined to either a masculine or feminine identity.

Jo also has habits and enjoys activities that are considered “masculine.” The first part of the novel is where you see this the most since this is where most of the character-building takes place, as opposed to plot progression. Jo continually makes comments about preferring hard labor and outdoor tasks, Meg saying that she “insists on doing all sorts of hard jobs” (173). These tasks were typically taken on by men and boys within the house, but since her father is not present and she does not have any brothers, Jo takes care of these responsibilities. After her father left, she exclaimed, “I’m the man of the family now Papa is away” (7). When Jo is young, she also enjoys filling male roles when she is playing with her sisters and Laurie. One example of this is her founding of the “Pickwick club.” Every Saturday, the March sisters would meet to write a newsletter of the week, with short stories, news, poems, and humorous advertisements. Jo led as the editor, with the name “Augustus Snodgrass.” As a secret writing society, the girls all took on male personas and addressed one another with “he/him” pronouns. (102-110) Another place where we see Jo happily filling male roles is when she and her sisters put together plays. The March sisters were putting together an operatic tragedy for Christmas, and since no boys were permitted to attend their showing, “Jo played male parts to her heart’s content” (19). She was more content with playing these parts and dressing in conventionally male clothes than she would have in female clothes. Also, given the fact that in order for her to do this, men could not be present, it shows how this was abnormal and not socially accepted for women to do, unless they were solely in the company of other women. So, Jo’s physical attributes, ability to mature of her own free will, and interests demonstrates Fuller’s philosophy

of the fluidity of gender expression, that “there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.”

Jo also had a strong passion for engaging in the public sphere through education, which was not easily accessible to women. During this time, women writers were becoming more common, but they were seen as strong liberators of the confines of their sex. You can see this when she asks Laurie when he is going off to college. She exclaims, “How I wish I was going to college!” (32). In the second part of the novel when she goes to New York to work for Mrs. Kirke at a school, she finds herself surrounded and enriched by scholars. She attended lectures, listened to conversations of philosophy, and took German lessons from Professor Bhaer. She enjoyed this educational community and reflected on New Year’s saying, “I’m cheerful all the time now, work with a will, and take more interest in other people than I used to, which is satisfactory” (353). While Jo previously found herself out of place at social parties where she was expected to dress up; make small, appropriate conversation; follow strict social rules; and view men as possible matches, she found the educational community to be a place where she felt accepted and enriched.

Along with Jo’s passion for education, she is most notably known for her passion for writing. During this time, women writers were becoming more popular, but they were considered the new, modern and liberated woman, since modern feminists, including Fuller, promoted female authorship. The first place we see this passion for writing is when she is young. After attending a play with Meg and Laurie, Amy burns a book that Jo had been working on for years because she was not permitted to attend. As soon as Jo learned about the book being burnt, she turned pale and was overcome

with “a passion of grief and anger” (77-78) over the burning of “the passion of her heart” (78). She then yells, “You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I’ll never forgive you as long as I live” (78). Because of this, Jo remained solemn and ignored Amy for days. This is one of the only times in the novel where you see an argument between the girls escalate to this severity. Here, Jo is overcome by a sort of “romantic passion” when it comes to her writing. We also see this in other instances throughout the novel. In chapter fourteen, Jo works busily in the garret, a spot in the attic that she has transformed with a couch and a writing desk so she can work in peace. Here, she becomes “absorbed” in her work and writes “earnestly” (150-151). She then secretly goes to town to have her story published in the local newspaper. After it is published and she receives approval from her family, “she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears; for to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end” (160). Not only does Jo display her love for writing, but she sees it as an avenue for supporting herself, as opposed to the common route of being supported by her parents and then one day a husband. Here, she aspires to become self-reliant. This romantic passion for writing then continues into her adulthood and the second part of the novel. “Chapter 27: Literary Lessons” is all about Jo’s writing and the beginning of her supporting herself. Every couple of weeks, Jo would “‘fall into a vortex’ as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace” (272). She even wore a black woolen pinafore and a cap when she was in these spells so that she could focus. Her family then knew when she was wearing this to keep their distance from her. She described being overcome by

creativity and fully investing herself into the stories that she wrote, ignoring any want or desire of the "outside world." (273) In this chapter, Jo began writing sensationalist stories, a genre filled with fantastical adventure and romance, but which was considered improper and immoral for women to write (Pykett). She also publishes these stories in the paper and learns that she can support herself and her family with the money she makes. She began to "take great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny" (277). Here, Jo grew even more as a writer and in independence.

Because of this independence, Jo resolved that she never wanted to get married. We first see her make a statement regarding this before Meg is married. Jo says, "Don't be alarmed; I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in the family" (254). Throughout the novel, this is the common consensus even among her family. When Amy discusses marrying rich, she says she must because Meg did not and Jo won't marry (327). So, this is not simply a resolve Jo has made in her younger years before she reaches courting age. After she returns from New York when she is in her twenties, Jo tells Laurie that "I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (374). For most of her life, even after meeting and getting to know Professor Bhaer, Jo intended on maintaining her independence and supporting herself. It seemed, for most of the novel, that Alcott was setting Jo up to be an "old maid," as Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott both promoted and praised.

Jo seems to reflect Margaret Fuller's philosophy regarding gender expression and the liberated woman. Jo has habits and preferences that were more commonly expected of men during the time in which this novel was written. She does not conform to societal standards of behavior and appearance and enjoys chores and filling male roles when she plays with her sisters and Laurie. However, later in her life, she begins taking on more characteristics and behaviors expected of women during this time, showing how gender expression is everchanging and should not be confining. She also strives to have a higher education, something that was only mainly reserved and accessible for men. This, however, never changes as she ages and is then enhanced by her investment in writing. Jo also admires her ability to support herself and her family with her writing. Given that Jo also claims that she will never marry, it seems as if Louisa May Alcott is writing Jo to happily become the single, "old maid" author that she and Fuller praised. Both Alcott and Fuller believed in the power of female authorship and in using it as an avenue of independence, connection with self, and intellectual inquiry. These are all things exhibited by Jo in most of the novel, and she seems to thrive and find happiness in herself and her work. This all shows a wish to engage in society, freely express gender identity, and engage in oneself that Margaret Fuller promoted in *A Woman in the Nineteenth Century.*

5. Jo and Laurie's Relationship

While Jo and Laurie do not get married, they share a very special, male-female friendship that was uncommon during the time this novel was written. His importance and inclusion in the March family, especially to Jo, is even signified in him being called a "little gentleman," (24) a direct reference to the March sisters being called "little women." Sarah Wadsworth, in her article, "New Friendship Flourished like Grass in Spring," explains that during the time in which *Little Women* was written the cultural expectations also had a negative effect on the freedom of men and women to form close friendships, since they were considered too volatile and "dangerous liaisons." Because of women's supposed greater disposition towards emotion, relationships between women were contentious and should remain within their sphere. Men were then encouraged not to engage in friendship with women. However, *Little Women* combatted this by creating a story that had innovative, prolific, and influential friendships, other than between the sisters. (Wadsworth). Because Jo tends to show more masculine traits and Laurie more feminine, they are drawn to one another. In this way and in many others, they balance each other and show how masculine and feminine can "live in harmony," with no hint of judgement or shame for how they choose to express themselves. Their friendship then evolves to model that of the religious union, in which they become "confidants" and support each other emotionally and in the public sphere. Alcott then builds on Fuller's philosophy and demonstrates that this kind of friendship can be mutually beneficial, without ending in marriage.

Both Jo and Laurie express their gender differently from how society would expect them to. As previously discussed, Jo holds conventionally masculine characteristics and

traits, especially in her youth. Laurie then tends to show more feminine characteristics and traits. This is also seen in how Laurie also prefers to go by a nickname that is uncommon of his gender, referencing his feminine nature. We first meet Laurie when he sends the March sisters an array of ice cream, cake, fruit, French bonbons, and fresh flowers after the girls put on a play for Christmas (23). Here, he is described as being bashful and "wistful" (24-25), commonly feminine descriptions. He is characterized in a way that is expected of women but frowned upon and seen as a flaw in men. In this chapter, the girls also talk about how Laurie is "locked up" in his home with his grandfather, taking lessons and intensely studying. Later on, we learn that these are all things that Laurie despises. His grandfather expects him to become a businessman, against Laurie's wishes. Laurie would much rather spend his time playing piano and one day become a musician, a pursuit that was considered feminine. Laurie shows how men, along with women, are also confined and affected by gender stereotypes.

At the beginning of Jo's friendship with Laurie, you see their expression of gender roles begin to complement one another. When Jo first meets Laurie, they are both trying to hide at a party. When Jo goes behind a curtain, she is shocked and says, "another bashful person has chosen the same refuge" (29). Jo's dislike for environments where she must act feminine, and Laurie's bashfulness cause them to find one another. Behind the curtain,

> Both peeped and criticised and chatted, till they felt like old acquaintances. Laurie's bashfulness soon wore off; for Jo's gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at ease, and Jo was her merry self again, because her dress was forgotten, and nobody lifted their eyebrows at her. (31)

Immediately their demeanors balance each other out. Because of Jo's outgoing nature, Laurie was able to be more himself. Then, because Laurie was more accepting of her "gentlemanly demeanor," she did not feel the need to impress him as a possible suitor or to act ladylike.

We continue to see Jo's more outgoing nature compliment Laurie's more bashful as their friendship is being founded. After the party, Jo wished to become friends with Laurie. She remembered Laurie's shyness and took note of it, stating "the 'Laurence boy' who looked as if he would like to be known, if only he knew how to begin" (49). She did not judge him for his shyness, but instead felt even more compelled to reach out herself. She states how she felt "more eager than ever and had planned many ways of making friends with him." Jo even noticed how Laurie was sometimes seen overlooking the garden where the girls were often playing and working. Laurie wished to be friends with them but did not know how to engage. When thinking about the prospect of reaching out to be friends, Jo saw it as "daring" and something that would "scandalize" Meg. The idea of going beyond society's expectations of friendship and mixing prescribed feminine and masculine spheres was seen as a fun adventure to Jo. Then, as she yelled up to Laurie as he was overlooking the garden, Laurie mentions how "Boys make such a row," and he does not enjoy male company (50). This is due to the fact that he has a cold and does not feel up to engaging with boys. But this also shows how much social energy it takes for Laurie to engage with other boys. However, after Jo mentions how girls are quieter, Laurie invites her to visit with him. He seems more inclined in this instance to feminine company, given that it takes him less social effort to engage in those friendships. Mr. Laurence even takes note of this, saying he liked Jo because "she seemed to understand the boy almost as well

as if she had been one herself" (57). As the novel progresses, we see Laurie come to enjoy Jo's company more than he enjoys the company of other boys his age. He spends most of his time with Jo and her sisters and is rarely ever seen engaging with other boys. So here, Jo and Laurie balance one another and show harmony between masculine and feminine.

Since Jo and Laurie's expression of unexpected gender roles complement each other so well, they build an egalitarian friendship, in which their gender roles do not determine a sort of hierarchy between the two. This concept of egalitarian friendship between Jo and Laurie is also discussed by Sarah Wadsworth in "'New Friendships Flourished like Grass in Spring': Cross-Gender Friendship in *Moods* and *Little Women*."[5] This egalitarian friendship is the type of friendship that Margaret Fuller promoted as the basis of marriage. They both support one another in their dreams and endeavors, Laurie with his passion for piano as a young man and Jo with her writing. We see Jo support Laurie when she visits his home for the first time, and he decides to play for her. When she sees the grand piano, she implores Laurie to play. When he does, "Her respect and regard for the 'Laurence Boy' increased very much, for he played remarkably well… (she) praised him till he was quite abashed" (58). However, as soon as Laurie's grandfather hears, he rushed in and made him stop. When Jo is confused, Laurie then tells her Mr. Laurence does not like him playing because "I am not a young lady" (58). However, despite the fact that playing piano is a traditionally feminine pursuit, Jo still supported him and had great respect for his ability, completely disregarding stereotypical norms. When she is mentioning the story later to her sisters, she proclaims, "Let him be a musician, if he wants to, and not plague his life out

[5] While this idea that Jo and Laurie share an egalitarian friendship is shared by scholars, I argue that their friendship is egalitarian because of the way in which Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy is incorporated.

sending him to college, when he hates to go" (59). Also, later as Laurie is telling the girls how he wishes he could escape his grandfather's wishes and go abroad instead of attending school, Jo exclaims, "I advise you to sail away in one of your ships, and never to come home again till you have tried your own way" (148). Jo fully supports Laurie following a nontraditional path for a young gentleman, inadvertently questioning the gender roles assigned to him.

Laurie then equally supports Jo's wish to become a writer. When Laurie catches Jo in town after she had dropped off two stories at a publisher, he exclaims, "Hurrah for Miss March, the celebrated American authoress!' cried Laurie, throwing up his hat and catching it again" (155). He continues, "It won't fail. Why, Jo, your stories are works of Shakespeare… Won't it be fun to see them in print; and sha'n't we feel proud of our authoress" (155). This seemed to brighten her spirits and inspire hope in Jo. Just as Jo had supported Laurie in his nontraditional route, he did the same for her. This not only supports Margaret Fuller's philosophy of gender roles being unconfining, but also an egalitarian relationship of equal support in how they participate in society. This seems to model Fuller's notion of the religious union in which they are one another's confidants and support one another's endeavors in the public sphere.

Jo and Laurie's friendship also formed a deep, emotionally supportive relationship that is also parallel with Fuller's model of the religious union. They share in one another's successes and hardships. One example in which Laurie supports Jo is when Beth becomes gravely ill for the first time. When Jo realizes that Beth's condition is much worse than they anticipated, she begins to cry to Laurie. Jo then, "stretched out her hand in a helpless sort of way, as if groping in the dark, and Laurie took it in his, whispering as well as he

could with a lump in his throat, 'I'm here. Hold on to me, Jo, dear!'" (187). Jo thinks, "the warm grasp of the friendly human hand comforted her sore heart, and seemed to lead her nearer to the Divine arm which alone could uphold her in her trouble" (187). Laurie made sure to be present during this time, when he knew the family would be struggling, in order to be there for Jo and her family. He was not only physically present, but also shared in the pain that Jo was feeling. However, even through his own pain, he recognized that Jo is more distraught, as Beth's sister, and offers her comfort. This comforts Jo, but also uplifts her spiritually. This is an example of the support of the religious union that Margaret Fuller models. Laurie here shares in her struggle and then emotionally and spiritually encourages her. Later in the chapter, we also see him try to help ease the situation by calling for Mrs. March before Jo is willing to. Laurie knew that the sisters would need Mrs. March and that Jo would wait to the last minute to call her, so he stepped in so that the girl's mother could get to the house in the event that Beth passes. This shows the intimacy of his relationship with Jo in how he knew her stubborn nature, but also the support she would need from her mother. In this way, Laurie was able to offer emotional, spiritual, and physical support to Jo without her needing to ask.

Jo also emotionally supports Laurie. One example of this is after she rejects Laurie's marriage proposal. After Laurie storms off, Jo resolves to go see Mr. Laurence in order to "prepare (him) to be very kind to my poor boy" (375). She then narrates,

> Being sure that no one could do it so well as herself, she went straight to Mr. Laurence, told the hard story bravely through, and then broke down, crying so dismally over her own insensibility that the kind old gentlemen… did not utter a reproach…so he shook his head sadly and resolved to carry his boy out of

> harm's way, for Young Impetuosity's parting words to Jo disturbed him more than he would confess. (375).

Despite the fact that Jo's refusal of his marriage proposal was the cause of Laurie's heartache, her first reaction was to care for his emotions. His emotions were her first priority, despite the ache she felt over losing her friend. Just as Laurie did when Beth was sick, Jo also shared in his heartache and was upset over the pain that Laurie was feeling. This instance also shows the intimacy of their relationship at this point since Jo was fully aware that she would not be able to physically be there to comfort Laurie, so she went to the only person who would be able to. Mr. Laurence then encourages Laurie to go abroad, as he had planned. This trip abroad revived Laurie and he consequently becomes closer with and marries Amy. While Jo did not directly influence Laurie to going abroad, without her going to Mr. Laurence first, Mr. Laurence would not have known the cause of Laurie's distraught and slightly erratic behavior. Then, he might not have suggested that Laurie go abroad to cure his broken heart. So, Jo knew how to make sure that Laurie was taken care of even when she could not be there. This concern and care for Laurie's emotions and well-being also reflect the emotional support of Fuller's religious union that was also shown through Laurie being there for Jo when Beth was sick.

So, we see Margaret Fuller's philosophy on the harmony between masculine and feminine in the friendship between Jo and Laurie. They also exhibit the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual support and growth that is seen in the religious union marriage. However, Alcott seems to build on Fuller's philosophy and show how egalitarian friendship can be equally beneficial, without ending in marriage. Jo and Laurie even reflect on how their relationship is better as friends when Laurie returns from Europe with

Amy. Laurie exclaims, “I have learned to see that it is better as it is… I think it was meant to be so, and would have come about naturally, if I had waited… I could honestly share my heart between sister Jo and wife Amy, and love them dearly” (454). Jo then later also says, “Amy and you never did quarrel as we used to. She is the sun and I the wind, in the fable, and the sun managed the man best” (457). Even though their friendship mirrors that of the friendship that founds the religious union, both Jo and Laurie are able to reflect and realize that they have a stronger relationship simply as friends. As stated previously, Alcott here builds on Margaret Fuller’s philosophy and shows how an egalitarian friendship can be as equally valuable and beneficial as an egalitarian marriage.

6. Jo's Marriage to Professor Bhaer

Given the strong influence of Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy we can see throughout *Little Women*, we then must question its influence on Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer. I argue that Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer is a cautionary tale of rushing into an unequal marriage due to solitude and loneliness. Jo consequently lost the independence she previously took great pride in. As stated previously in Jo's Character Analysis, one reason for this conclusion is because Jo had remained firm in her wish to remain unmarried throughout her life in order to focus on her writing and maintain her liberty. This was not a wish of hers that she held before courting age as a childhood declaration, but a wish she held until her mid-twenties. So, Jo's quick and drastic change of mindset is shocking and out of character.

When we first meet Professor Bhaer, Jo is still firm in her determination to become an old maid. Professor Bhaer first enters the picture when Jo goes to New York to work as a caretaker for some family friends' children at a school. She left with the intention of escaping a possible marriage proposal from Laurie after she discovers he likes her. She was also feeling, "restless, and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning" (337-338). So here, her intentions of remaining unmarried and pursuing her passion for education, even informally, remain evident. When Jo reaches New York, she quickly develops a friendship with Professor Bhaer. However, this is not an egalitarian friendship that is promoted by Margaret Fuller or paralleled to that with Laurie. Jo immediately holds Professor Bhaer in high regard because of his intellect, which she desperately wishes to acquire. So, Jo begins taking German lessons with and receiving input on her writing from Professor Bhaer. In this way, the dynamic between the two is more that of a student and a teacher. As Jo spends

more time with Professor Bhaer, she even begins to romanticize him because of the intellect that he holds. In chapter thirty-four, at the New Year's Eve party, Jo thinks,

> Jo valued goodness highly, but she possessed a most feminine respect for intellect, and a little discovery which she made about the Professor added much to her respect for him. He never spoke of himself, and no one ever knew that in his native city he had been a man much honored and esteemed for learning and integrity… She felt proud to know that he was an honored Professor in Berlin… and his homely, hard-working life was much beautified by the spice of romance which this discovery gave it. (360)

Here, you see Jo holding Professor Bhaer in high regard for his intellect because she discovered that he is a widely acclaimed scholar in Germany. This then added a sense of romance and adventure to him, when she had previously viewed him as a fairly ordinary man. This romantic view that Jo has of him is then seen when she listens in as Professor Bhaer is participating in a philosophical debate. She says, "he blazed up with honest indignation and defended religion with all the eloquence of truth – an eloquence made his broken English musical and his plain face beautiful…. Somehow, as he talked, the world got right again to Jo" (362). Again, you see features of Professor Bhaer that Jo used to view as ordinary become romantic. So, in these instances, you see an imbalance in power in how Jo almost idolizes Professor Bhaer for his knowledge, means of persuasion, and respect in higher education. Because Margaret Fuller promoted friendship as the basis of marriage, this inegalitarian friendship would lead to an inegalitarian marriage.

This imbalance in power and lack of an egalitarian friendship between Jo and Professor Bhaer then leads to Jo associating guilt and shame with her writing. After Jo listens in on Professor Bhaer's philosophical debate, Jo reflected that, "her friend Friedrich Bhaer was

not only good, but great… This belief strengthened daily. She valued his esteem, she coveted his respect, she wanted to be worthy of his friendship" (362). Unlike her egalitarian friendship with Laurie, Jo felt as if she must continually earn Bhaer's respect and friendship. Because she held his opinion in such high regard and she felt a need to "be worthy of his friendship," she burned her writing after Professor Bhaer shamed her Sensationalist writing, which was viewed as an improper and immoral genre for women to write at that time. He had found a copy of a Sensationalist story in a newspaper and Jo began to blush, giving herself away as a writer of the genre. While she never verbally admitted to writing these types of stories, Professor Bhaer knew she did. He then said, "I haf no patience with those who make this harm… Yes, you are right to out it from you. I do not think that good young girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash" (363-364). He then proceeded to burn the newspaper in the fireplace. This made Jo feel as if, "she came near to losing everything" (362), referencing her friendship with Professor Bhaer. After this, she then asked to continue on with the lesson, saying, "I'll be very good and proper now" (364). While she stated this to inquire about the lesson, she was subtly referencing the ending of her writing of Sensationalist stories. Professor Bhaer then responded, "I shall hope so," also in reference to the end of her writing of this genre. This statement then made Jo "feel as if the words Weekly Volcano were printed in large type on her forehead" (365). While Jo previously had been proud of the newfound freedom, independence, and adventure from the selling of these stories, Professor Bhaer's opinion in turn made her fill with guilt, shame, and dread about her writing.

Because Jo held Professor Bhaer in such high esteem, she then returned to her room and proceeded to destroy her writing. When she begins rereading through her stories, she "seemed to have got on the Professor's mental or moral spectacles also; for the faults of these poor stories glared at her dreadfully, and filled her with dismay" (365). By comparing her new view of her stories to wearing Bhaer's spectacles, it seems as if Jo is no longer seeing her writing through her own eyes and opinions, but now Bhaer's. Then, when she begins thinking about the prospect of Bhaer getting a hold of her writing, she "turned hot at the bare idea, and stuffed the whole bundle into her stove" (365). Because of her fear of Bhaer's judgement, she immediately burns her writing without any forethought, stating, "They *are* trash… that's the best place for such inflammable nonsense" (365). Same as her now viewing her writing through his eyes, she is now also using the same verbiage as Bhaer to discuss her writing. This can then be directly compared to when Amy burned Jo's writing early in the novel, in which she believed that she had suffered a "dreadful calamity" for losing "the pride of her heart" (78). Because of Bhaer's comments, Jo no longer felt the romantic passion she had previously felt towards her writing. The inegalitarian dynamic between Jo and Professor Bhaer therefore led to Jo losing her passion for her writing and destroying it.

After Jo does this, she is then overcome by a new sadness and sense of lack of belonging. The narrator states that "when nothing remained of all her three month's work except a heap of ashes… Jo looked sober" (365). The happiness that Jo previously felt was now replaced by a shallow melancholy, which was very out of character for her. She then wished that she did not feel this moral dilemma, caused by Professor Bhaer, anymore, saying, "If I didn't care about doing right… I should get on capitally" (366). Jo here admits

that she would be perfectly happy if she had carried on the way she did before. Jo then continues to try to find a new genre that she was passionate about writing. She tried to write stories that had a moral, but they became more like "an essay or a sermon" (366). However, Jo despised writing these and the narrator states,

> She had her doubts about it from the beginning, for her lively fancy and girlish romance felt as ill at ease in the new style as she would have done masquerading in the stiff and cumbrous costume of the last century. She sent this didactic gem to several markets, but found no purchaser, and she was inclined to agree with Mr. Dashwood that morals didn't sell. (366)

Here, you see Jo begin to feel the way about her writing as she did as a young girl when she was forced to attend formal events dressed up and act as a young lady. She no longer feels that "fancy and girlish romance" she previously did and now feels as out of place as a writer as she did as a young girl at social events. She also then loses her ability to independently support herself, something that she took great pride in. Because of all this, she would at times become, "serious or a little sad" (367). So, her new mindset surrounding her writing is not something that is simply temporary, but more permanent. When Professor Bhaer noticed her solemn demeanor, and how she no longer had ink on her hand and waited for the newspaper, he was "assured… that she was bent on occupying her mind with something useful, if not pleasant" (367). This then seems to be unparalleled with the religious union and egalitarian friendship that is modeled between Jo and Laurie, as previously demonstrated. Professor Bhaer is unsupportive of Jo's writing and endeavor into the public sphere.

After Jo returns home from New York, she still remains firm in her wish to remain unmarried and shows no inclination to liking Professor Bhaer as more than a friend. We see this when she decides to reject Laurie's marriage proposal. As shown in the section "Jo and Laurie's Relationship Analysis," when Laurie suggests the idea that she will be married, she proclaims, "I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (374). Even when Laurie suspects that Jo loves Professor Bhaer, she "wanted to laugh, but restrained herself" and said, "I haven't the least idea of marrying him or anybody else" (372). Not only did she still love her independence and did not want to marry, but she also believed that it was a ridiculous proposition for Laurie to even suggest that she would marry Professor Bhaer.

However, Jo eventually falls into a deeper solitude than the one that she fell into after New York when she loses Laurie and Beth passes away. Jo then takes over Beth's previous duties of caring for her parents and their home. The narrator states, "these were dark days for her, for something like despair came over her… she fell into the moody, miserable state of mind which often comes when strong wills have to yield to the inevitable" (442). This was caused by her grief of the loss of her sister and how she no longer had friends around her the way she did when Laurie was home or when she was in New York. But it was also caused by her dislike for the routine responsibilities she had within the home. Eventually though, her mother suggested that she begin writing again. She begins finding joy in writing for the local newspaper and hearing the praise from her family once again. However, she still remained discouraged from Professor Bhaer's shaming of her writing and never found that strong, romantic passion she once had for writing. So, Jo remains in a state of loneliness and sorrow, which has now become the fuel for her writing. However, her grief and

loneliness seem to show a very stark difference from her outgoing, passionate, confident personality that she displayed in the rest of the novel.

While in this deep solitude, Jo begins to shift her mindset from becoming an old maid to possibly marrying. After seeing how Meg was flourishing in her marriage, Jo says, "Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it?" (444). This is the first instance in which Jo even considers marriage. The narrator then seems to hint at how this consideration is caused by grief by saying, "Grief is the best opener of some hearts, and Jo's was nearly ready for the bag" (444). This seems to show that Jo did not come to the conclusion based on a true desire to be a wife, but by the effects that grief has had on her. The prospect of becoming an old maid even begins to sadden her as well. In chapter forty-three, as she is lying in Beth's room, Jo thinks, "An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame… Well, I needn't be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner, and I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it, but…" (449-450). Jo begins to trail off but stops herself. She is trying to remain firm in her previous resolution to hold onto her independence, but the loneliness that accompanies the lifestyle makes her begin to consider marriage. The narrator even further comments on this change of mindset after her first consideration of marriage by stating,

> Now, if she had been the heroine of a moral storybook, she ought at this period of her life to have become quite saintly, renounced the world, and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet… But you see, Jo wasn't a heroine, she was a struggling human girl like hundreds of others, and she just acted out of her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic, as the mood suggested… Jo had got so far, she was learning to do her

> duty, and to feel unhappy if she did not, but to do it cheerfully… She had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard, and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to them as they had to her? And if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others? (444-445)

By stating that she is not a heroine, the narrator implies that this is not an idealized story, but one that is realistic of young girls during this time. This seems to show the voice of Alcott, who encouraged girls in "Happy Women" not to enter a marriage due to loneliness and solitude. Here, Alcott as the narrator shows that this is not the idealized version of life that she would picture, but the realistic one in which girls choose to marry to escape their loneliness. By saying Jo "had gotten so far," also shows how far removed she now is from her character and personality. Before, she despised homely tasks, but because of how far removed she is from her normal self, she now finds some happiness in them. The ending of the paragraph also admits that at this point, Jo has given up her dreams and ambitions that she intended for her life. Instead, she has submitted to the home life and private role she had been wishing to get away from for her entire life.

Because of Jo's deep loneliness, change in personality, lack of romantic passion for her writing, and fear of becoming an old maid, she begins to miss Professor Bhaer and long for a lifetime companion. At the end of chapter forty-two, Jo begins to roam the garret that she used to use as her writing space. While there, "a restless spirit possessed her" (448). She then stumbles upon her hope chest that included a collection of childhood relics. "She smiled at first, then she looked thoughtful, next sad, and when she came to a little message written

in the Professor's hand… she sat looking at the friendly words, as they took a new meaning, and touched a tender spot" (448-449). She then says, "now how I should love to see him, for everyone seems going away from me, and I'm alone" (449). When Jo stumbles on this letter, she was already in a deeply emotional, lonely state. His kind words were something that she had been longing to hear from someone, but until now, she had not even thought of the Professor. She then wishes to see him because she is all alone, not because she misses his company, but because she misses companionship of any kind. The narrator even comments saying, "Was it all self-pity, loneliness, or low-spirits? Or was it the waking up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its inspirer? Who shall say?" (449). This can be interpreted either way. However, given the confusion between the longing to fill her loneliness and about her possible feelings for Professor Bhaer, there seems to be strong evidence that these feelings were brought on by her intense emotions and fear of living a life as an old maid, not because of true and genuine feelings for Bhaer. After this, while Jo is happy in her life and how it has turned out, she fills the domestic role that she has always despised and loses her romantic passion for writing and dream to maintain her liberty to support herself independently.

Because of Jo's inegalitarian relationship with Professor Bhaer and how she only develops feelings for him when she is in a place of deep solitude and loneliness, I argue that their marriage is a cautionary tale of rushing into a marriage that is not egalitarian. Since Jo holds Professor Bhaer in such high regard because of his intellect, there is a hierarchy in which he holds social power over Jo. Then, this is also a cautionary tale because, as Margaret Fuller cautioned against in *A Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and Louisa May Alcott in "Happy Women," Jo rushed into a marriage due to loneliness and fear of becoming an old

maid. This therefore provides a new understanding and reading of the ending of *Little Women* and how Jo still shows the importance of equality in marriage that allows one another to grow, rather than hinder us in our engagement in the public sphere.

7. Conclusion

As demonstrated, Louisa May Alcott was influenced by Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist Feminist Philosophy regarding gender roles, male-female friendships, and marriage. This is because Louisa May Alcott was raised by her father, Bronson Alcott, in an "experiment." He aimed to raise his daughters in his own ideals of Transcendentalist philosophy and shape their behavior accordingly from a young age. Then, when the family moved to Concord, Massachusetts, Louisa May Alcott was educated by and lived amongst other notable Transcendentalists, including Margaret Fuller. This creates a strong founding connection between Fuller and Louisa May Alcott that supports the notion that Louisa May Alcott adopted Fuller's principles laid out in *A Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

This is then reflected in *Little Women* through Jo's character and relationships. This is seen in how Jo holds traditionally masculine physical characteristics, temperament, and interests. However, she evolves through the novel to have more a more feminine appearance and conforms to traditionally feminine societal rules, growing out of her wild tomboy nature. She instead becomes a mature woman who holds more traditionally masculine traits and wishes to engage in the public sphere. However, this was not influenced by outside pressures, but by her maturing as she came into adulthood. This demonstrates Fuller's idea that no one is wholly masculine or feminine, and one can evolve and mature of one's own free will. Jo also demonstrates a strong wish to engage in the public sphere and engage in female authorship, as promoted by Fuller. She has a strong desire for education and romantic passion in regard to her writing. This then offered her a sense of independence that she took great pride in. Jo also never wished to marry, until the end of the novel, and instead wished to improve her writing and maintain her liberty. This

concept of becoming an “old maid” and using it as an opportunity to engage with oneself and the public sphere was an idea that was promoted by both Fuller and Louisa May Alcott.

Jo and Laurie’s friendship then reflects Margaret Fuller’s philosophy of harmony between masculine and feminine. This is because while Jo holds traditionally masculine traits and interests, Laurie holds traditionally feminine traits and interests. This change in personality then leads to their strong relationship in which they both complement one another because Laurie was comforted by Jo’s gentlemanly demeanor, and Jo was able to be more herself since she was not expected to act ladylike around him. Their friendship then evolved into an egalitarian friendship that seemed to reflect Margaret Fuller’s concept of the religious union. They were each other’s closest confidants and supported one another in their endeavors in the public sphere, despite them both being contradictory of their gender roles. Laurie was Jo’s biggest supporter in her writing and Jo in turn supported Laurie’s passion for piano. They then also both emotionally support one another by coming to one another with struggles and supporting one another through hardship. Alcott, however, seems to build on Fuller’s philosophy of friendship and show how egalitarian friendship can be equally beneficial when it does not end in marriage.

Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer is then a cautionary tale of rushing into an inegalitarian marriage due to fear of loneliness and becoming an old maid. This is because Jo had remained firm in her wish to remain unmarried throughout her life in order to focus on her writing and maintain her liberty. This continued even when Jo had become friends with Professor Bhaer. However, Jo holds Professor Bhaer in extremely high regard because of his intellect. Because of this, she values his opinion over her own and destroys her writing due to Bhaer’s shaming of Sensationalist stories. This then demonstrates the

hierarchy between Professor Bhaer and Jo in which Bhaer has social power over Jo. The power dynamic is therefore more of that between a student and a teacher, rather than equal friends. After Jo returns home, she still remains firm in her wish to never marry. However, she falls into a deep solitude, which causes her to lose her strong personality and dreams and begin fearing life as an old maid. It is not until Jo is at her lowest point of solitude when she admits to missing Professor Bhaer. However, she admits that this is because everyone in her life has left, and she is alone. This then supports the notion that Jo rushed into an inegalitarian marriage in order to escape her loneliness and solitude, as Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott cautioned against.

Given these points, we see how Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalist feminist philosophy influenced Louisa May Alcott in the writing of *Little Women*, particularly in Jo's character and relationships. This then demonstrates the connection between Fuller and Louisa May Alcott, which has not been researched extensively before. It also shows how Louisa May Alcott implemented Margaret Fuller's philosophy, but also built upon it by showing male and female friendship to be valuable outside of the context of marriage. This also provides an alternative view of the conclusion of the novel as a cautionary tale, rather than a romantic, happy ending. By demonstrating this, we are able to see how feminist philosophy was in conversation with literature during the first wave of feminism in the United States.

Moving forward, this research offers an avenue for us to further understand how Margaret Fuller's philosophy influenced other aspects of the novel. Within the context of this thesis, I was only able to closely analyze Jo and her relationships. But this philosophy could also contribute to the crafting of the other March sisters: Amy, Beth, and Meg.

Further research can also be done on Laurie, especially in regard to his marriage to Amy. This can then also take a broader scope, and we can further research how Fuller's philosophy is seen in other works by Louisa May Alcott, including *Jo's Boys*, *Little Men*, and *Hospital Sketches*.

This thesis then also holds significance to our lives today, especially for women. Just as Jo did for the majority of the novel, we are invited to embrace our own identities. We are able to toe the line between masculine and feminine. But then, as Jo did, evolve and mature as we go about our lives. Society also benefits from our independent liberty by allowing us to freely engage in it and share our ideas through conversation and authorship. This also demonstrates how the other people we engage with in our friendships and marriage should support us in these endeavors in the public sphere. But they should also emotionally complement and support us. As Louisa May Alcott said, we must, "Keep good company, read good books, love good things, and cultivate soul and body as faithfully as you can" (*Rose in Bloom*). By doing this and fully embracing our identities and surrounding ourselves with those that support us, we can then truly thrive.

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