

LITTLE WOMEN IN LITTLE HOUSES: THE ROLE OF THE TOMBOY
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who encourages me to be my own Little Woman.

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CHAPTER I

Capitola Black, Jo March, and Laura Ingalls:

Constructing the Tomboy Phenomenon

In *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses how books have been recognized as a way to indoctrinate children “into socially sanctioned behaviors” as early as the eighteenth century. Consequently, depictions of gender in children's literature prior to the 1960s have largely been determined by the traditionally patriarchal eras in which they were written. This gender indoctrination has been complicated by such literary characters as Jo March and Laura Ingalls, “who share with their literary descendants characteristics of strength, articulateness, creativity, and certain amounts of social power” that accompany an aptitude for intellectual distinction, as well as getting into scrapes (Trites 4). Jo of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series and Laura of the *Little House* books, written by Laura Ingalls Wilder during the Great Depression with the unacknowledged collaboration of her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, foreshadow the rise of the girls' quest in American stories encouraged by the Feminist movement. The *Bildungsroman* of the All-American girl has since become an emblem of feminism and the tomboy an active, vocal medium for diversifying gender roles.

A comparison reading of Alcott's *Little Women* and Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* reveals Jo March and Laura Ingalls as examples of strong, vocal pre-feminist tomboy

protagonists. Both embody feminist ideals that pave the way for the evolution of future feminist tomboy protagonists who differentiate themselves from their tomboy predecessors, developing individual “voices” that overcome cultural repressions that restrict their sex, and define themselves through relationships forged with parents and the communities in which they live. Among the patriarchal systems that Jo and Laura face are Christianity and the institution of marriage. Comparing the plot and family structures constructed by Alcott and Wilder reveals a deviation from the traditionally didactic young girls’ novel meant to socialize women into conventional gender roles while subversively reinforcing these roles. Protagonists such as Jo and Laura face very similar circumstances and social restrictions in their respective times, but they each evolve differently as they struggle to garner strength, maintain their voices, and increase sense of self. In doing so, Jo and Laura break through the Victorian ideology of “Separate Spheres” that was prevalent in gender role discourse in early nineteenth-century America. Alexis de Tocqueville’s account of his visit to the United States titled *Democracy in America* includes commentary that reflects these spheres:

I do not hesitate to avow that although women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of the [American] people ought mainly be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women. (Tocqueville)

Tocqueville’s description of American women and “the circle of domestic life” recognized the separation of spheres that appeared underfoot, as Linda K. Kerber states in

her article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” (10). What was underfoot, according to Kerber, was the American woman’s over engagement with “nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands, and family dependents” and the gender-designated “sphere” in which these activities resided in. In her book *The Bonds of Womanhood*, Nancy F. Cott asserts that the “ideology of domesticity, which gave women a limited and sex-specific role to play, primarily in the home” surfaced in the nineteenth century as the women’s dominant relation to society (4). This social ethic became the trope on which novelists, as well as historians, “came to rely when they described women’s part in American culture” (Kerber 10). Yet, with time, this trope is challenged by an alternative set of ideals provided by tomboy protagonists who offer an alternative role for American women through depictions in literature.

Jo March in *Little Women* and Laura Ingalls in the *Little House* books rose to prominence in American culture, despite the dominating prevalence of Separate Sphere ideology. Literature becomes popular when, as Cott notes, “it does not have to persuade – it does not innovate – it addresses readers who are ready for it” (2). The tomboy protagonists provided in *Little Women* and *Little House*, written by women for women, perhaps embody the sentiment of “superiority” that Tocqueville describes in allowing another vision of “women’s relation to society to surface” (Cott 5). The tomboy’s alternative to the ideology of domesticity is the ideology of feminism, “which attempted to remove sex-specific limits on women’s opportunities and capacities” (5). In other words, to step out of the separate spheres, we must first broaden what falls within them. This chapter will discuss how Jo and Laura do this by differentiating themselves from their girl protagonist predecessors, exemplified here by Capitola Black in E.D.E.N.

Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*. The ways in which Jo and Laura distinguish themselves from Capitola help pave the way for the progression of feminist tomboys in the future.

Prior to Alcott's *Little Women* in 1868, the tomboy protagonist gained momentum with E. D. E. N. Southworth's 1859 novel *The Hidden Hand*. Michelle Ann Abate's book, *Tomboys*, discusses how "a constellation of social, economic and political forces precipitated a shift from True Womanhood to tomboyhood for adolescent girls and young women" in the 1840s and 1850s. *The Hidden Hand*'s role in this shift resided in its compelling heroine Capitola Black, a thirteen-year-old girl "who used slang, spurned patriarchal authority and even cross-dressed" (Abate 2). Coming from a tide of domestic, docile heroines of the "Angel in the House" variety, such a heroine might not find popularity; but Capitola did. Abate states that "from the first. . . . enthusiasm for it was immense," inspiring praise and adoration from both readers and critics alike, which led to two serial reprintings, the first in 1868-1869 and the second in 1883, and finally in book form in 1888 (2). Abate's claim that "the tomboyish antics" of Capitola Black "made *The Hidden Hand* a best-seller and tomboyism a national phenomenon" is legitimate considering that the narrative's first reprinting occurred at the same time as Alcott's first publication of *Little Women*, introducing yet another slang-speaking, tune-whistling heroine in Jo March, a character whose popularity was so renowned it solidified the tomboy protagonist as a cultural phenomenon in American literature. Yet it was Capitola who helped launch that phenomenon, as her popularity broke free of the "gender-specific phenomenon" and "transcended the nineteenth-century dictum of separate sphere" (3). Nineteenth-century America developed "a special affection for its tomboyish protagonist," delighting in Capitola's nerve and humor so much that "readers wanted to

emulate her” (3). The succeeding tomboy literary heroine Jo March arguably surpasses her, as “the appeal of this topsy-turvy tomboy propelled *Little Women* to instant success upon its release and has helped it remain a favorite among young girls today” (Abate x).

Capitola Black paved the way for gender-bending heroines such as Jo and Laura in bringing forth a tomboy protagonist so popular that the concept surfaced “an alternative childrearing practice or form of gender expression for adolescent girls in antebellum American society” (3). In *Capitola*, the public finds a juvenile heroine that does not initially reinforce the submissive domesticity equated with middle and upper-class white women in nineteenth-century England and America; such women (often referred to as the Cult of True Womanhood) considered “physical strength, emotional fortitude and constitutional vigor unwomanly” and “prided themselves on being frail and raised their daughters in accordance with these beliefs” (Abate 4). *Capitola*’s journey in *The Hidden Hand* begins with the familiar nineteenth-century literary trope of introducing to the reader a hero/heroine who is penniless and homeless: an orphan who by blood is really an aristocrat, and whose journey must therefore consist of ultimately being restored to society’s proper place. However, *Capitola* is the very contradiction of the genteel, frail, and fainting white women of the Cult of True Womanhood. In order to survive the slums of New York, *Capitola* is “schooled in the tomboyish qualities of street-smarts and savvy rather than the bourgeois Southern traits of sentimentality and submissiveness” (Abate 10). Not only does she adopt boyish traits (as well as clothes) to fend for herself, she innately possesses “the physical, emotional, and intellectual skills to survive” (10). Southworth’s *Capitola* is an illustration of an emerging “alternative and more physically active code of conduct” that Frances Cogan dubs the “Real

Womanhood” phenomenon in her book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*. The Real Womanhood phenomenon, Cogan states, “advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage” (4).

Thus the age of “Real Womanhood” shifts the paradigm of young girl behavior, allowing it to broaden and include “the vigorous, athletic and even muscular” (Abate viiii). *The Hidden Hand* illustrates this, as at one point Capitola runs out of food, money, and is homeless. In order to survive, Abate notes, she “uses her tomboyish physical strength, emotional fortitude and intellectual cunning” to make her way in the world (11). In order to obtain a better job in her low societal position she dons boys’ clothing and picks up street slang; she goes by the more androgynous name “Cap.” These behaviors are repeated in protagonists Jo March and later Laura Ingalls, but not without significant differences, thus establishing Capitola as a mid-way point between the domesticated heroines of the past and feminist heroines of the future.

For example, like Capitola, Jo prefers to go by a more androgynous name than her given name, Josephine. Like Capitola, Jo adopts slang and masculine behaviors, such as whistling (Alcott, *LW* 9). While Capitola adopts these behaviors as an independent forced to survive on the streets, Jo adopts them because she simply prefers to be more masculine. When her sister Amy reprimands her for whistling because “it’s so boyish,” Jo’s response simply is “that’s why I do it” (9). While Capitola looks forward to being restored to her proper place in society as a respectable southern woman, Jo resents that one day she must “grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster” (9). Jo clings to her tomboy appearance while Capitola “is pleased to be

able to abandon” hers, and, as Abate states, “unlike the tomboys of many future novels, Cap puts on a dress without complaint” (14). Jo takes pride in her tomboy antics and does not heed her sister Meg’s appeals to “*not* make a guy” of herself in public: “I just will, though!” (Alcott, *LW* 114). Capitola, on the other hand, “begs her new guardian to refrain from mentioning her cross-dressing escapade to longtime friend and love interest Herbert Grayson” (Abate 14). Once Capitola is restored to her proper place in society, she is actually ashamed of her tomboyish ways, particularly cross-dressing, and associates “wearing boy’s clothes” with her “past misery and destitution” (Southworth 53).

Capitola’s shame in cross-dressing stems from her desire to marry long-time friend Herbert Grayson, and she begs her guardian not to divulge her masculine escapade to her suitor (53). In *Jo March* we find a heroine whose sentiments about marriage deviates from her predecessor’s and reflects the attitude of many succeeding tomboy literary heroines, including *Little House*’s Laura Ingalls. Upon the marriage proposal of her childhood friend and suitor, Laurie, Jo declares, “I don’t believe I shall ever marry; I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up to any mortal man” (Alcott, *LW* 387). This difference between the two protagonists is a significant one amidst a plethora of similarities. In keeping with her desire for husband, home, and hearth, Capitola’s “bravery, daring and autonomy do not turn her against either men or marriage” (Abate 12). Her tomboyism (unlike Jo’s) does not go so far out of the Separate Spheres as to reflect feminism in her desire for freedom outside the patriarchal restrictions that marriage imposes; rather, Capitola’s tomboyism ultimately manages to remain “firmly grounded in a female identity” (13).

Like Capitola and Jo before her, Laura of Wilder's *Little House* books plays a significant role in the establishment of the "new American girl," as masculine, athletic, and often bookish literary heroines rose to prominence by the twentieth century. Developed in the 1930s, Laura was part of an age of tomboy literature that reflects "an era in which the health of middle- and upper-class young white women had become imperiled from equating femininity with frailty" (Abate xii). As part of an American pioneering family traveling west in the late nineteenth century, Laura's tomboyism illustrates a code of conduct "designed to improve the strength and stamina of the nation's future wives and mothers and, by extension, the offspring that they produced" (xii). In *Little House in the Big Woods*, one of the first portrayals of tomboyism we see in Laura is a display of courage and athleticism during a game called Mad Dog with her pa, where "with a wild leap and a scramble she went over the woodbox" dragging her sister, Mary, with her to safety (Wilder 35). Wilder makes it clear that though it is a game, the girls genuinely become afraid when Pa's eyes become "so fierce that it all seemed real." Laura's tomboy character is established in the contrast of her reaction to her fear with that of Mary, her sister. Mary is "so frightened that she could not move," whereas Laura is quick, mobile, and, though she is smaller of the two, strong enough to save both of them. Her display of strength is commended by Pa, who reinforces the positive tomboy image with his admiring declaration, "You're only a little half-pint of cider half drunk up, but by Jinks! you're as strong as a little French horse!" (*LHBW* 35).

Certainly, many of Laura's tomboy characteristics are inherited from Capitola and Jo. Like Capitola, whose skin is so dark that at one point she is actually sold into slavery (Southworth 25), and Jo, who's "very tall, thin and brown" (Alcott, *LW* 10), Laura is

described as being “brown as an Indian” (Wilder, *OBPC* 143). This specific characteristic is reiterated throughout the *Little House* series, often by Ma and her sister Mary. As Abate notes, what Southworth, Alcott, and Wilder portray are “ostensibly Caucasian tomboys with brown skin and dark physical features,” linking them to “various forms of nonwhiteness” in order to support a code of conduct that ultimately strengthens their gender (xii). Their dark skin differentiates them from their frail, feminine contemporaries who do not engage in “rambunctious outdoor play” (xii) and, like Mary, will most likely stand frozen in fear in the face of danger.

As with Capitola and Jo, Laura must work outside the home in order to help herself or her family. While Laura neither dons masculine apparel nor a boyish nickname, she does take a job “earning good wages” and finds satisfaction in the thought that such wages are “only the beginning” (Wilder, *LTOP* 48). All three protagonists hold jobs that bring in income in order to sustain themselves and/or their family, supporting Abate’s assertion that “working outside the home is often seen as the apogee of tomboyish independence” (xvi). Moreover, Laura’s tomboyish nature resonates strongly with that of Capitola and Jo in that “the traits most Americans are likely to name as constitutive of this code of conduct include a proclivity for outdoor play (especially athletics)” as well as a “feisty independent spirit” (Abate xvi). Yet Laura follows Jo’s example and departs from Capitola’s attitude toward marriage (Capitola did not have “the most distant notion of being an old maid”) by never intending to marry (Southworth 272). In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura and her cousin Lena discuss their friend Lizzie’s getting married at thirteen, approximately their own age. The girls look at one another with “scared” expressions before Lena declares marriage a “silly” course of action, announcing: “I’m

not ever going to get married” (Wilder 50). Laura does not share Lena’s views in disapproving of marriage entirely, admitting that she “wouldn’t mind the work” and would like her own house; what Laura does not approve of, perhaps, is the freedom abrogated when one is legally, contractually, and sacredly bound to another individual (50). Later, in *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura agrees to marry her longtime suitor, Almanzo Wilder, on the grounds that he does not make her “promise to obey” him (Wilder 269). While she does not mind the responsibility of constructing her own home and family (as she asserted in childhood), she refuses to obey a man in marriage because, she says, “I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment” (*THGY* 270). In *Little Women*, Jo’s tomboy sentiments regarding marriage move from disapproval of submitting to patriarchal authority to conventional approbation, as with Capitola; in *Little House*, Laura’s sentiments evolve once more from outright disapproval to careful hesitancy about what seems like a shared authority in what marriage ultimately is: a partnership. As such protagonists developed in American literature from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, the tomboy’s code of conduct maintained an inherent fluidity that allowed “tomboyism to have a rich and multivalent history” (Abate xvi). The characteristics that Capitola, Jo, and Laura share are central tropes of tomboyism as we know it today. However, it is where these protagonists differ that shows its progression from novelty to social movement.

Perhaps the most significant way Jo and Laura’s tomboyism deviates from Capitola’s is that while Capitola is “tomboyishly rebellious and often even impertinent. . . she is also pious, compassionate and forgiving” (Abate 15). Similar to Laura, who is constantly at odds with the antagonist Nellie Oleson, Capitola has an archenemy in her

captor, Black Donald. While Laura rarely (if ever) backs down from the temptation of a triumph over Nellie, Capitola, “akin to the patient and forgiving Victorian woman,” entreats her villain (who is in the process of attempting kidnap) to repent (15). Completely discarding the mannish practices she adopted earlier, Capitola instead assumes “a maternal approach, calling him by his first name in her plea to have him abandon his plan and leave her room” (15). This does not work, and Capitola is forced to secure her safety by trapping Black Donald in a pit, an act which leaves her “grief-stricken” that she may have killed him (15).

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura is presented with a similar situation where she has an opportunity to have the upper hand over her own “villain” Nellie, an eight-year-old girl living in town who treats “country girls” with disdain (Wilder 148). The appeal of revenge is so strong that “Laura didn’t care what Ma had taught her; she didn’t care if Pa punished her. She was going to get even with Nellie” (Wilder, *OBPC* 171). Laura does not waste her opportunity. While Capitola goes so far to redeem her enemy that she “engages in another stereotypical act for a Victorian lady; she asks Black Donald to utter a prayer before meeting his doom” (Abate 15), Laura does “not care” that Nellie is upset over the revenge Laura inflicts on her; in fact she is “satisfied” by it (Wilder, *OBPC* 176). To quote Laura’s schoolmate Christy, who witnessed the girls’ feud: “It just served Nellie right!” (176). As Abate notes, Capitola’s actions in trying to reform and spiritually save her captor are “more characteristic of Victorian heroine than a tomboyish hero” (15). Not only does she try to reform the man who attempts to harm her throughout most of her childhood, but she actually regrets her attempt to free herself permanently from his dangerous grasp because it “will result in another person’s imprisonment” (15).

Eventually, Capitola's actions divert from the rambunctious tomboyism of her childhood and are redirected by the pious Victorian ideals of the womanhood she will face. Laura's actions remain defiant, as she sets her will stubbornly and unapologetically against her Ma's. While Southworth's protagonist in *The Hidden Hand* is instrumental in the "gender bending code of conduct" that tomboyism brought about "as a different way for girls to be girls," it was still too close to the Victorian ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood to be as revolutionary as such similar tomboy icons as Jo and Laura (Abate 15). In Capitola, we see an "innovative and even radical" protagonist for girls and women to enjoy, but not necessarily model themselves on or relate to. It is in Jo and Laura that we find examples of tomboyism that not only introduce gender-bending codes of conduct but also question the patriarchal authority of certain institutions, such as marriage and the workforce.

The narratives of Jo March and Laura Ingalls are similar to that of Capitola Black, but in certain structures they resemble each other even more strongly, particularly since each is the only tomboy in a family of four daughters. In this detail of family structure, *Little Women* and *Little House* are parallel: Jo is the second oldest girl in her family, described as "brown" with "sharp grey eyes" that are by turns "fierce, funny, or thoughtful" (Alcott, *LW* 10); Meg, the oldest, is "fair" and "rather vain" of it, and takes to lecturing "in her elder sister fashion" (10); Beth, the third oldest, displays "a shy manner, a timid voice" and is prone to sickness, the curse of a body not quite as strong as her sisters' (10); finally, there is Amy, who "though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least" who is characterized by her "snow maiden" appearance and a somewhat spoiled temperament (10). A similar description follows in

the Ingalls family: Laura, the second oldest girl in her family, is described as brown and “stout as a little French horse,” with grey eyes and a quick temper (Wilder, *TLW* 9); Mary, the oldest, is “a good little girl” who always “minds her manners” and has “lovely golden curls” (Wilder, *LHBW* 174); Carrie, the third oldest, has a “peaked little face” (Wilder, *LTOP* 160) and is “thin and pale, small for her age and spindly” (144); finally, Grace, is “beautiful and so happy, blue and white and gold and alive and laughing” (Wilder, *BSSL* 194) but “because she was the baby, they had almost spoiled her” (Wilder, *LTOP* 68). In Meg, Mary, Beth, Carrie, Amy, and Grace, we find stereotypical gender roles distributed among the sisters that contrast strongly against the tomboy traits of Jo and Laura. In Meg and Mary we find the docile, dutiful, domestic femininity that the True Cult of Womanhood glorified. In Beth and Carrie we see the “ill and languishing” young woman whose frailty equals her femininity, also in accordance with the Cult of True Womanhood, which “considered physical strength, emotional fortitude and constitutional vigor unwomanly” (Abate 4). Finally, in Amy and Grace we find a sense of entitlement bestowed on characters that are often defined by their youth and beauty.

If all of these characters serve to reinforce the ideologies of the Cult of Womanhood and Separate Spheres, then the tomboy characteristics of Jo and Laura serve to subvert them through contrast and opposition. Their characterization and “accompanying behaviors” are subsequently “linked with such elements as social surprise, gender duplicity and unlimited possibility” (xiii). Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* books feature protagonists that are not defined by women’s traditional gender roles, but who are, rather, “able to define these elements themselves” (xix). From the Cult of True Womanhood was shaped Capitola

Black, the popular, deviant literary heroine that defied traditional gender roles in order to survive, but eagerly reformed once her survival was secure. From Capitola Black came Jo March and Laura Ingalls, similarly deviant literary heroines who defied traditional gender roles not as a matter of survival, but as a matter of constructing their own identities. Their rebelliousness demonstrates an independence of mind that helped shape the modern American girl.

CHAPTER II

The Struggle Between Self-Awareness and Self-Acceptance: Overcoming Cultural Repressions in Childhood

I feel it is legitimate to compare the nineteenth-century *The Hidden Hand* and *Little Women* with the twentieth-century *Little House* series because I agree with Ann Romines in her article “Nineteenth-Century Reading and Twentieth-Century Texts: The Example of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” that “the influence of nineteenth-century U.S. women writers was not largely ended by 1900” (23). Alcott, as a reader who wanted to produce melodrama herself, the popularity of *The Hidden Hand* may have very well proven influential in her choice of a tomboy characterization of Jo in *Little Women* as Alcott learned to negotiate in what Stephanie Foote calls an “increasingly market-driven world” (67). Using Capitola Black as a blueprint and banking on the characterization’s financial success, *Little Women* may have been an attempt to further stretch gender relations with a narrative that initially challenged, but ultimately submitted to, what were deemed “proper” gender roles in the nineteenth century. Laura in the *Little House* books takes the examples of Capitola and Jo even further, recognizing that at a much younger age that the gender role norms imposed upon young women by society are unfair because they may not be natural. While Jo ultimately complies with these gender norms, Laura continues to challenge gender ideologies well into adulthood.

Since the inevitable marriages of Jo and her sisters ultimately reinforce traditional gender roles, questions arise about whether or not Alcott’s work challenges the limited

social possibilities of women in a patriarchal society. In her article “Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott,” Stephanie Foote asks a series of questions that highlights the reevaluation of *Little Women* as a feminist work:

Does the novel index the invention of a genre of didactic literature for young girls? Does it demonstrate the thorough imbrications of children’s literature with contemporary conversations about romantic love, personal morality, familial duty, and civic participation? (67)

Foote concludes that Alcott’s innovation proves relevant to feminism by its exploration of nineteenth century women’s roles and social mobility.

Yet, if the characterization of Jo is based on Capitola Black in Southworth’s *Hidden Hand*, Alcott *does* broaden the options for female social flexibility by constructing Jo in a way that deviates from “the ways that sentimental or women’s novels from the mid nineteenth century elevate female characters’ positive emotional responses—sympathy, for example, or compassion—as antidotes to the harshness of the external social world” (Foote 65). While Capitola Black’s characterization reinforces gender-restrictive sentimental views through her insistence on praying for her nemesis to repent of his ways as a means of reforming his criminality, Jo’s reformation is far less drastic and does not so completely contradict her innate roughness. She reminds Professor Bhaer that she is “strong-minded” during their discussion of marriage; the proposal ultimately ends with the assertion that “Jo never, never would learn to be proper” (Alcott, *LW* 506). If a work is to be argued as having, in Foote’s terms, “textual counterings of the demands of the competitive public sphere” that instigates women’s fiction to “construct the home as a refuge” from the harsh, external world (65), *Little Women* has more to offer than its

predecessor *The Hidden Hand* in creating a heroine who ultimately is physically bound to her “proper sphere,” but who resists mentally.

As Ann Romines notes, these nineteenth-century women’s texts “have exerted a powerful and largely unacknowledged influence on the reading, writing, and thinking of twentieth-century women” (“Nineteenth-Century Reading” 23). If there is a possibility that Alcott’s Jo was an improvement on Southworth’s Capitola, there is also the possibility that Wilder’s Laura was likewise influenced by both of these texts. In the later volumes of the *Little House* series, a woman shares an accumulated pile of *New York Ledgers* she brought from Iowa with the Ingalls sisters, and “Laura is thrilled by these exciting, female-centered” stories that were “a staple of nineteenth-century female reading” (25). Romines forms a connection between the *Little House* series and *The Hidden Hand*:

It was estimated that each issue of the phenomenally successful *Ledger* was read by a million persons (Coultrap-McQuin 51), and the women fiction writers under contract to editor Robert Bonner included E. D. E. N. Southworth, whose brilliantly audacious novel *The Hidden Hand* was serialized three times in the *Ledger* and might well have been read by the fictional and actual Ingalls sisters. (25)

The *Little House* series was written well after the first publication of *Little Women* and around the time of the third serialization of *The Hidden Hand*. It makes sense, then, that both Alcott and Wilder produced tomboy figures in their literary works that imitate characteristics found in Southworth’s Capitola Black, yet their deviations from her strengthen the argument that the examples of Jo and Laura expand the image of the

tomboy protagonist in their struggle with self-awareness, and later self-acceptance, in the face of cultural gender repressions. Romines states:

Even more than Alcott's four books about the March family, Wilder's eight-volume Little House series created a desire for a reading experience that would never come to an end, a fluid state as intense as Jo March's vortex, where the doors between conscious and unconscious stand open and Laura—protagonist and author of the Little House story—appears in the child reader's dreams. ("Nineteenth-Century Reading" 24)

Jo and Laura open "the doors between the conscious and unconscious" in their shared childhood struggle with self-awareness and self-acceptance. As these struggles are explored by the protagonists, both Jo and Laura use their individual "voices" to overcome the gender restrictions impressed upon them and their families by societal standards. The ways in which Jo and Laura employ their voices to overcome these obstacles help to construct a form of new "didactic" literature for young girls that encourages autonomy in childhood. Emotional responses such as anger, resentment, and envy that do not echo positive and elevated feminine sentiment (such as submissiveness, gentleness, and forgiveness) are shared by Jo and Laura. As Foote notes, the fact that such emotions as these portrayed in favorable female protagonists "signal that the home, rather than being the refuge from the social, or the template for a better version of the societal, is a testing ground for the pressures of the outside world" (64). Jo and Laura are depicted as owning and exploring these emotions, possibly preparing them "for the pressures of an always-evolving regime of class and status distinctions" (Foote 64). One might argue that gender distinctions are included in this continuous evolution. Through finding and testing their

voices in childhood, Jo and Laura are free to establish their voices in society as young women in ways that Capitola Black failed to do. These fully-formed dissenting voices, tested in the protagonists' youth and resonating with childhood readers of any century, are what make it possible for, as Foote says, the "regime of class and status distinctions" to be "always-evolving." Just as the examples of Capitola Black and Jo March have offered much to nineteenth-century readers and scholars, the example of Laura Ingalls Wilder likewise "has much to offer the student of nineteenth-century women's culture" as "it shows that continuities in U. S. girls' and women's reading and writing are much more pervasive and complex" than our studies have yet to fully realize (Romines, "Nineteenth-Century Reading" 27).

The ways in which Jo and Laura discover and establish their individual "voices" are, in part, a reaction to the "the lessons the girls learn in their home as well as within the larger social world" (Foote 68). *Little Women* and the *Little House* series each contains an abundance of scenes indicating the tomboy protagonist's struggle with envy, desire, ambition, and other such "negative" emotions. These sentiments are often tied with the lessons the protagonists are meant to be learning at home. As Foote states, with the enforcement of these lessons, usually by the parents, it is hoped that "an appropriately classed and gendered little woman takes shape as she learns to read the world in a critically emotional vocabulary that will protect her from perceived slights as well as allow her to maintain a sense of social distinction that appears completely natural because it is based on an equally 'natural' affective reading of the world" (68). Jo and Laura often reject these lessons and the critically emotional vocabulary imposed upon them on the grounds that these learned behaviors are *unnatural*, at least to the tomboy protagonist.

Jo is most often at ease with herself when she is around her sisters because it is within their tight circle that she can be as masculine as she wants, without having to answer directly to an authority or try and reform herself. When Jo is with the March girls, she is free to employ her “gentlemanly manner” and use slang words, although her sisters may nag her for it. Amy reproves Jo for her masculine behavior and Jo’s response is to immediately put her hands into her pockets, whistle a tune, and explain that she does it *because* it’s boyish (Alcott, *LW* 9). If the sisters reproach her for unfeminine behavior (Meg admonishes, “You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine”) Jo defies them by expressing exactly what is about being “manly” that she finds so appealing:

I hate to think I’ve got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster. It’s bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys’ games, and work, and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman. (9)

Laurie is another person with whom Jo unabashedly revels in masculine behaviors, and he perceptively notes how Jo’s use of “prim” and proper feminine behavior in public seems “rather funny” (35), although he is set “at ease” whenever she returns to her more natural “gentlemanly demeanor” (37). When around her siblings (and it can be argued that Laurie is a sibling, as Jo very much views him as a brother), Jo feels the freedom to assert her individuality by whistling and making a great racket without retribution. Jo is

the most defiantly masculine when around her sisters and Laurie, and she does not usually indicate any remorse for being so.

Although she is only the second oldest, Jo asserts her “male” authority over her sisters by insisting “I’m the man of the family now papa is away” (11), bringing home “bonbons for the little girls” after an evening out (41), and using her cleverness to make household chores appear more stimulating, such as “dividing the long seams into four parts and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa and America” (18). When Marmee asks the girls to give up their bountiful Christmas breakfast to a poor family with no such feast, Jo is the first to support Marmee’s notion, exclaiming impetuously “I’m so glad you came before we began!” (22). Alcott even illustrates Jo’s unhindered (and often impulsive) ability to express herself freely, and with gusto, through her actual voice, describing Jo’s voice when singing as wandering “through the airs at her own sweet will, always coming out at the wrong place with a crook or a quaver that spoilt the most pensive tune” (19). This description accurately relates Jo’s manner of expressing herself: brash, awkward, ill-fitted for a young woman, and yet appealing to readers in its imperfection and suitability to her character. As a tomboy figure, Jo is both accessible and likeable.

The one sibling that Jo will *attempt* to mind when reproved for her boyish behavior is Meg, whose “sweet and pious nature” unconsciously influences her sisters, “especially Jo, who loved her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given” (20). This hesitant admission of authority is repeatedly tested throughout the novel, as Jo often undermines her own attempt to render what Meg deems as proper womanly behavior because “the idea amused Jo, who liked to do daring things” (55).

When Meg is self-conscious about lending Jo a glove for fear that Jo's large hands "will stretch [the] glove dreadfully," Jo's cheeky response that she'll "go without" because she doesn't care what people think mortifies Meg into lending her the glove (32). Jo agrees to accept invitations and venture out to a New Year's Eve party with Meg, but it takes "united exertions of the family" to put her in a maroon dress "with a stiff, gentlemanly linen collar," the choice of which surely is a liberty taken by Jo to retain an element of her natural self in a very unnatural setting for her (33). At the party, Jo's inclination is to join a group of good-humored boys talking about a favorite sport, skating, but she resolves against it at the sight of Meg's eyebrows raised "alarmingly" in disapproval (34). Yet Jo's intention to abide by her sister's social etiquette is eventually compromised by her own determination to enjoy the evening. After discovering Laurie's hiding place at the party, Jo joins him and the two have "a grand polka. . . full of swing and spring" (38) even though Jo promised Meg she would not dance so as not to reveal the burnt back of her dress (37). Jo does not so much directly disobey her sister as *get around* the request by dancing in an empty hall where, as Laurie puts it, "we can dance grandly, and no one will see us" (38).

Jo's comfort and ease with her masculine manners are expressed by the open, unabashed, happy, and at times unrepentant use of them with her sisters and with Laurie, indicating a strong sense of self-awareness. Jo's self-acceptance is expressed when she finds it in herself to defy what is expected of by others' standards and remain true to her own personality and desires. As the novel continues, Jo begins to openly resist Meg's attempts to transform her into a genteel young woman. When, at one point, Jo refers to her sisters and herself as a group of "ungrateful minxes," Meg demands that Jo refrain

from “such dreadful expressions” and Jo, without hesitation, defends her freedom to use whatever words she chooses, saying “I like good, strong words, that mean something” (44). At another time, Jo declares that she’s “going out for exercise. . . . with a mischievous twinkle in her eye,” and Meg tries yet again to enforce her authority, stating that “two long walks” in one morning were quite enough for any young woman (54). This time, Jo’s response is a candid acknowledgment of her defiance as she claims “Never take advice; can’t keep still all day, and not being a pussy-cat, I don’t like to doze by the fire. I like adventures, and I’m going to find some” (54). Here, Jo exerts her self-acceptance by demanding nothing short of her own authenticity. This small assertion of autonomy is an example of how Jo employs her individual voice to overcome the cultural repressions that restrict her sex; essentially, she chooses *not* to be restricted by it, starting with imposing her individuality on Meg.

However, Jo maintains a struggle with self-acceptance in her subdued behavior with Marmee, the most influential female in the family. In fact, Jo’s attempts at fulfilling Marmee’s expectation of the ideal “little woman” result in her genuine desire to be a different person. The strong desire to please Marmee prevents Jo from accepting her behavior, and leads her towards self-rejection as she strives to meet her mother’s standards of socially constructed gender behaviors. In the chapter “Castles in the Air,” the girls discuss their ideal futures: Jo dreams of getting “rich and famous” from authoring many books (154). Her actual future much more closely resembles the picture that Marmee and Meg hope for: she has “some splendid, wise, good husband, and some angelic little children” (154). Jo never fully reaches self-acceptance as she eventually rejects her own dream to become instead her parents’ ideal “little woman.”

The first indication of the power Jo's parents have over her, in terms of the reinforcement of culturally-constructed repressive gender roles, is actually revealed through her father, who is absent for most of the novel. In a letter to his daughters from the war front, the father writes:

A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.

(16-17)

The result of this letter is the extraction of an ambitious promise from Jo to try and be what he calls "'a little woman,' and not be rough and wild" but do her duty at home "instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (17). This is quite a rejection of self by a girl who, earlier, boasted to her sisters that she wished she had been born a boy and could fight in the war alongside the very man who informs her that her place is at home. Jo holds fast to her promise, exerting her efforts on Marmee's request that the girls play their old favorite game Pilgrim's Progress as a way of fulfilling their father's wishes of reform. On one particular morning when Jo "*would* whistle, and make a great racket," she reprimands *herself* for this improper behavior, and her sisters for theirs, in an apology to Marmee, stating "we are a set of rascals this morning, but we'll come home regular angels" (43). Another time, Marmee tells to the girls the story of a man who gave up all his sons to the war effort so that her daughters might feel blessed in spite of what little

they have, for they have given up only one man (their father). Rather than feeling embarrassed, chastised, angry, or sorrowful, Jo entreats Marmee to “tell another story. . . . one with a moral to it,” because she likes “to think about them afterwards, if they are real, and not too preachy” (52). Rather than owning to any feelings of subjugation, Jo asks to be told another “moral” so that she might behave “better” in the future, a desire she expresses to no one else in the family. In fact, Jo is the first of her sisters to proclaim that the lesson was necessary, even as she pokes fun at it:

We needed that lesson, and we won’t forget it. If we do, you just say to us as Old Chloe did in Uncle Tom,—‘Tink ob yer marcies, chillen, tink ob yer marcies,’ added Jo, who could not for the life of her help getting a morsel of fun out of the little sermon, though she took it to her heart as much as any of them. (53)

In making fun of Marmee’s serious sermon at the same moment she’s supporting it, Jo is perhaps searching for a way to insert a small act of insolence into a lecture that demands her compliance. At one point in the novel, Jo tosses her head and declares proudly to Laurie that she’s “not afraid of anything” (59). This statement is undermined by her laborious insistence on being the proper “little woman” for her mother and father, implying that she is afraid of failing to meet their approval. Jo shows no genuine desire to be one such little woman around her sisters or Laurie, yet to Marmee Jo pleads, “Oh, mother! help me, do help me!” as she struggles “to cure” herself of her so-called faults, claiming “I’m afraid I *shall* do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me” (89). Jo is afraid of the dissatisfaction that may ensue should she not conform to traditional gender roles and behaviors.

Perhaps the biggest test Jo faces in regards to self-acceptance and self-rejection is her response to Amy's burning of her manuscript: arguably the most dramatic and emotionally packed scene in the entire work. Amy burns Jo's only copy of her stories, the result of "the loving work of several years" (83) in theatrical retaliation to a sisters' quarrel. The book represents not just a hobby for Jo, but "the pride of her heart" and "a literary sprout of great promise. . . . something good enough to print" (83). For Jo, the destruction of the book is "a dreadful calamity" (*LW* 83); Foote maintains that it is "catastrophic" (64). Jo's response to her sister's action is equally intense, as she gives her a look "fierce enough to frighten a much braver child than Amy" and gives her "a slight shake" (Alcott, *LW* 82). This seems almost a subdued reaction for a girl who has declared a desire to go to war and has once lamented that she "can't thrash Aunt March" simply for calling her by the more feminine (and therefore disliked) "Josephine," rather than "Jo" (36). In the instance when Amy burns Jo's beloved manuscript, it seems almost expected that Jo will submit to her natural inclination and give her sister the thrashing she deserves; but she does not. Jo shakes Amy "till her teeth chattered in her head" and gives her a box on her ear, but that is the physical extent of her passion, anger, and grief (83). What is surprising about this scene is not only Jo's remarkably constrained aggression, but her mother's response to Amy's act. Marmee looks "grave and grieved" at the outcome of "Amy's bonfire," but it seems "a small loss" (83). She advises Jo and Amy to "forgive each other, help each other" (84). Jo subdues her emotions even further, but she staunchly refuses to forgive, saying "it was an abominable thing, and she doesn't deserve to be forgiven" (84). Jo's direct opposition to Marmee's "lesson" after this episode expresses Jo's insistence on her own individuality far more

strongly than thrashing Amy could, as Marmee is the chief instigator of cultural and social expectations in the household, and the only family member Jo always obeys. In her article “When Girls will be Boys: ‘Bad’ Endings and Subversive Middles in Nineteenth-Century Tomboy Narratives and Twentieth-Century Lesbian Pulp Novels” Mary Elliott notes how, in the tomboy narrative, it is usually under “the direct influence of women (and the indirect influence of the patriarchal systems that control women) that the tomboys are contained” (92). Jo’s restricted response to Amy’s violation reflects the influence of Marmee, and by extension the patriarchal Christian society in which they live, but her refusal to follow Marmee’s orders and forgive her sister for committing the crime reflects Jo’s self-awareness that her natural inclinations reject traditional gender roles and patriarchal authority. In initially rejecting Marmee’s request that she forgive Amy, Jo rejects the influence of the patriarchal systems and opts, instead, to guide her own maturity. This assertion of self is brief, as Jo not only forgives her sister, but asks her mother for guidance on how to behave more properly in the future. Jo has yet to reach self-acceptance as she continues to struggle to implement her “voice” within patriarchal and Christian constructs.

Like Jo, Laura in the *Little House* series struggles with socially constructed gender roles, and her struggle is mainly experienced through a difficulty in abiding by culturally repressive rules enforced by her parents. Unlike Jo, Laura’s attraction for breaking these rules cannot be mitigated by anyone in the family. The first “rule” Laura breaks is the small act of interrupting her sister as their Pa tells them a story. Laura doesn’t interrupt with the intention of being rude or disobeying, she interrupts because she knows the answer to Mary’s question before Mary finishes asking it (Wilder, *LHBW*

23). Pa chastises Laura, saying she should “never interrupt,” but promptly counteracts his reprimand by complimenting her on her “sense” (23). Laura’s first act of disobedience portrayed to the reader is one that exemplifies her quickness of mind and intelligence, and Pa’s compliment invites her self-awareness of it. Laura’s second act of disobedience takes place on a Sunday, when the girls are not allowed to “run or shout or be noisy in their play” (84). What the girls can do is sew, knit, or “look quietly at their paper dolls” (84). Like her predecessor Jo, Laura’s disposition is an active one, constantly in need of physical or mental exertion. Laura, fully aware that she will be punished, decides that she can’t “bear it any longer” and begins to run and shout; Pa tells her to be still and her response is a physical one, echoing the thrashing Jo wished to give Aunt March for calling her a name she disliked: “She began to cry and kick the chair with her heels” (86). Laura does this even though “she knew she deserved a spanking” (86), choosing defiance and its consequences rather than submission.

Another time Laura is reprimanded for being “greedy” after collecting so many pretty stones that the pocket in her best dress gives out. Laura cries not because the act *was* greedy, but because “she had torn her best dress” and fears punishment (174). Rather than be ashamed of her own behavior because it’s deemed improper by an important authority figure, as Jo does with Marmee, Laura is only ashamed if she is caught in the act. Laura shows no remorse about the instinct behind the act which is deemed “improper” because her instinct is a resourceful one: there “were no pebbles like that in the Big Woods,” so she takes as many as she can find (173). This instance is followed by musings that contrast the behavioral differences between Mary and Laura: “Nothing like that ever happened to Mary. Mary was a good little girl who always kept

her dress clean and neat and minded her manners. . . . Mary looked very good and sweet, unrumped and clean, sitting on the board beside Laura. Laura didn't think it was fair" (175). This passage implies that Laura's struggle with her inability to observe gender-imposed rules lies not in *her* failure to properly carry out these rules, but in the fact that such rules are extraneous for a girl who is not predisposed to follow them, such as Mary is. In other words, it's not *her* fault that she can't reside neatly in her gender-dictated sphere; it simply isn't fair that someone of her nature is expected to.

Like Jo, Laura is very self-aware, realizing that she does not fit into the societally-mold fashioned for proper younger ladies, but her level of self-acceptance is arguably stronger than Jo's as she repeatedly challenges traditional gender expectations as a means of exerting her freedom to resist that mold and be perfectly happy. In the earlier books in the series, four-year-old Laura often uses physical strength as her "voice" in standing up herself when she feels she's been wronged, such as when she kicked the chair. Another time, while grumpily carrying out the task of gathering chips for the fire, Mary meanly claims that their Aunt Lotty favors her because of her blonde hair, since "golden hair is lots prettier than brown" (*LHBW* 183). Laura is incensed by the comment, although she believes the statement herself (183). Culturally constructed ideals of the feminine are constantly reinforced in Laura's world by adults who compare her to her sister, who meets these standards. Laura can't find it in herself to say anything, but she *can* take physical action, "so she reached out quickly and slapped Mary's face" (183). After Pa punishes Laura for disobeying his order that they "must never strike each other," Laura does not feel ashamed of her actions or the need to reform herself; she feels, again, the unfairness of it all, and "the only thing in the whole world to be glad about was that Mary

had to fill the chip pan all by herself” (184). These instances of physical aggression show that Laura accepts her nontraditional looks, preferences, and behaviors, even if society does not, and she is willing to fight for them.

Laura’s “voice” develops significantly in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* from physical assertiveness to expressing herself verbally. When the family moves to Plum Creek and Pa begins the construction of their new home, Laura, now eight years old, declares, “Let me help, Pa! . . . I can carry some” (Wilder, *OBPC* 14). Rather than telling her to go back inside with her mother and sisters, Pa says, “Why, so you can. . . . There’s nothing like help when a man has a big job to do” (14). Pa’s statement places Laura outside the realm of home, with her mother and sisters, and inside the men’s realm of work. In another instance, the girls go swimming in the creek, and Laura disobeys Ma’s instructions “to stay close to the bank” (26). Laura “deserves a dunking” so Pa dunks her, but rather than be frightened into submissiveness, Laura tells Pa to “p-please do it again. . . . I w-was awful scared. . . . but p-please do it again.” Pa is at first shocked by her cheek, but “then his great laughter rang among the willows” and Laura’s verbal defiance goes unpunished (26). Another time, Laura tells Pa “I think I like wolves better than cattle,” even though Pa informs her that “cattle are more useful” (79). She thinks about Pa’s statement, and repeats that she likes wolves better “anyway.” Laura repeats her own opinion, in spite of Pa’s, because “she was not contradicting, she was only saying what she thought” (79). This scene indicates Laura’s awareness of the difference between using her voice to contradict and using her voice to say what she believes, and that what may appear to be a contradiction to her family (or society) is really just her assertion of self.

Perhaps the definitive illustration of how Laura's self-awareness and self-acceptance is fully formed is the moment when Laura instigates the transference of the entire woodpile into the house during a storm. In doing this, Laura defies both Ma and Mary, as Mary tells her "You can't. . . . Ma told us to stay in the house if it stormed" (Wilder, *OBPC* 287). But Laura jerks away from Mary, saying "We've got bring in the wood before the storm gets here" and is the first to go out and do so; Mary eventually follows suit. Laura disregards both Ma and Mary's instructions because she knew she was "wise to bring in wood, though perhaps not quite so much wood," and she looks forward to a time when she will "always decide what to do" and "not have to obey Pa and Ma anymore" (291). Laura articulates her self-acceptance by her candid defiance of authority and her loyalty to what she considers to be right, even if society disagrees. As a tomboy protagonist subjected to stereotypical gender roles, Laura is aware that there are "things stronger than anybody," but nobody can make you do anything (106). The creek is a motif that exemplifies this, as Laura has been frightened by the strength of its current and depth of its waters but has "not made her scream and it could not make her cry" (106). Most of Laura's challenges and triumphs at this age happen on the creek's banks, perhaps signifying the book's title. For example, Laura blatantly disobeys Pa by daring to wade further than was instructed, and again by going to the riverbank after she was explicitly told not to. When she remembers "that she must not go near the deep, shady, swimming-pool" she immediately decides to turn around and hurry towards it (30). After Nellie disrespects Ma, Laura gets even by tricking Nellie into wading into the muddy, leech-filled waters. All of these instances depict Laura acting in defiance to anyone attempting to exert dominance over her.

As they explore childhood and adolescence, Jo and Laura find ways to reject traditional gender roles imposed upon them by their families as they struggle with self-awareness and self-acceptance. They each employ their individual “voices” to overcome the cultural repressions that restrict their sex. Jo is very self-aware of her tomboyish ways but struggles with self-acceptance as she tries to reform herself for the sake of her parents and the patriarchal Christian society in which they live. Laura’s self-awareness and self-acceptance are equally strong as she defies the social world of her parents and the gender rules they impose to remain loyal to herself. The ways in which both of these tomboy protagonists face these obstacles and overcome them to help a new form of didactic literature for young girls by presenting them with accessible, loveable heroines that encourage autonomy in childhood. As Elliott notes, the appearance of tomboys in American post-Civil War fiction for women and children “challenged the limits of prevailing domestic conventions and principles (in particular, those that teach the necessity of obedience to male authority)” (92). The popularity of Capitola, Jo, and Laura show that such protagonists, as Elliott states, “often exuberant and always disruptive,” are welcome intrusions to “rigid taxonomies of gender identity and to prevailing notions of appropriate private and public conduct for women” (Elliott 92).

CHAPTER III

Tomboy Protagonists and Their Parents:

The Conflicting Influences of Marmee, Mr. March, Ma, and Pa

In her article “Waiting Together: Alcott on Matriarchy,” Nina Auerbach expresses that “the family is the first community we know, and it takes the shape of Mother” (Auerbach 7). It is through Marmee’s governing of the March girls that Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy learn their places in the Victorian social world, and it is through Ma’s governing of the Ingalls family that Mary, Laura, Carrie and Grace learn how to be proper little women even as they pioneer the Western Frontier. Both *Little Women* and the *Little House* series depict a similar process: “the passage of a bevy of sisters from the collective colony of a woman’s world presided over by their mother to the official authority of masculine protection” (Auerbach 8). In each piece, “the favored girl, the surrogate son who is allowed into the private sanctuary of the library” (or in Laura’s case, the masculine sphere of work) has a stressed relationship with her mother under a matriarchy that instructs “a school for wives. . . . the only school allowed” (8). Though published in different times, both stories are similar in that they “are belied by their familial setting” where “they are concerned less with girlhood joys than with the difficult adjustments of women to an adult society that supersedes the reality of their world” (9). In this chapter, I will first delve into how Marmee and Mr. March provide Jo with a relationship in which her voice is heard and one in which her voiced is silenced, and how these relationships shape the protagonist as she comes of age and is further socialized into the community. I will then discuss how Laura is similarly structured through her

relationships with Pa and Ma, but highlight how her deviations from her predecessor, Jo, indicates the evolution of the Tomboy protagonist from a product of childhood nostalgia to a feminist product of emerging new social roles.

From the beginning, Marmee's instruction in *Little Women* impresses upon the March girls that "it is better to renounce than receive" (Auerbach 10). The novel begins with a Christmas devoid of a feast, as Marmee entreats her daughters to give up their meal to a struggling young family. There is no mentioning that the March family itself is a struggling young family, and that the food particularly provided for this Christmas breakfast was likewise rare for the Marches. Yet at Marmee's instruction, these "funny angels in hoods and mittens" (Alcott, *LW* 23) begin their story "with full hands and empty stomachs" (Auerbach 10). This early example of renunciation is part of the training that Marmee lays out for her four daughters on their way to Victorian womanhood, and she compares it to the education Christian receives on his way to the Celestial City in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far you can get before father comes home. (Alcott, *LW* 18)

Alcott implies that the "pilgrimage" of the March girls "is merely a game, an imitation of men's, and it takes place within the confines of the home for the purpose of winning male approval" (Keyser, "The Most Beautiful Things" 86). Marmee is the force that shapes her daughters' lives, but it is a force influenced by Mr. March. Even though he is absent

from the majority of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy's childhood, his desire that they should "do their duty beautifully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves beautifully" (Alcott, *LW* 17) pervades Marmee's instruction with patriarchal authority. This authority ultimately silences Jo's inner voice, as it is under Mr. March's influence that Marmee dictates what personality traits and behaviors must be renounced so that, upon his return, Mr. March "may be fonder and prouder than ever" of his daughters (17).

Jo faces the most difficulty in renouncing her willful nature and temper, which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, she asks Marmee to help her "cure" (*LW* 89). While Marmee tries to guide her daughter in the "right" direction by urging Jo to "never get tired of trying" to "conquer" her fault, she does provide Jo with an outlet where her true nature is acknowledged and understood, if not accepted, when Marmee confesses that she's "angry nearly every day" of her life (89). In her attempt to help abolish Jo's "flaws," Marmee reaches out to her daughter by relating to her:

"I've been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so." (89)

Marmee's confession strengthens Jo's resolve to try, once again, to alter her nature because she feels "comforted at once by the sympathy and confidence given her," making her fault "easier to bear" because she is not alone in bearing it (89). When Jo asks how her mother manages "to keep still," Marmee responds that she learned it from *her* mother (90). As she further explains to Jo, the passage from "the collective colony of a woman's

world presided over by their mother to the official authority of masculine protection,” as previously stated by Aurbach, is completed for Marmee when her mother dies:

“I lost her when I was a little older than you are, and for years had to struggle on alone, for I was too proud to confess my weakness to any one else. I had a hard time, Jo, and shed a good many bitter tears over my failures; for, in spite of my efforts, I never seemed to get on. Then your father came, and I was so happy that I found it easy to be good. But by and by, then the old trouble came back again; for I am not patient by nature, and it tried me very much to see my children wanting anything.”

(*LW* 90)

Marmee admits that the behaviors forced upon her by societal expectations, such as maintaining patience and a sweet temper when distressed, went against her own nature, much as they do with Jo; however, it is implied that with a mother’s help, and later a husband’s, Jo will likewise master her own so-called deficiencies.

Throughout the novel, Marmee proves repeatedly to be an outlet where Jo’s voice is simultaneously heard and subdued, creating a relationship that causes internal stress in Jo, who is constantly at odds with who she is and who she “should” be. Marmee implores Jo to overcome a hotheaded nature, even though she admits to sharing that nature. Marmee also offers Jo “a great freedom. . . . the freedom to remain children, and for a woman, the more precious freedom *not* to fall in love” (Auerbach 15) when she instructs her girls that is “better to be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands” (Alcott, *LW* 110). Yet this “freedom” is contradicted by Marmee’s implication that a husband will help Jo master her

“improper” behavior, and this eradication of the behavior (and the feelings in Jo that rouse such behavior) is the goal. Marmee instructs each of her girls on how to become little women, and “what we find are cozy scenes and sweet sermons but also the self-inflicted wounds that are a woman’s price of membership in the patriarchal family” (Keyser, “The Most Beautiful Things” 86). When Jo’s writing is published for the first time in a newspaper, the narrator expresses that “to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved” are the “dearest wishes” of Jo’s heart, and that the publication “seemed to be the first step toward the happy end” (Alcott, *LW* 167). Yet these two desires “are conflicting, if not compatible,” since in order for her to obtain independence “she will have to assert herself in such a way as to incur blame; and to win the praise of those she loves best, she will have to curtail, or at least modify, her striving for independence” (Keyser, “The Most Beautiful Things” 88). In striving to satisfy Marmee, the parent who not only acknowledges Jo’s struggles but shares them herself, Jo alters her desires in order to gain the approval of both her parents.

Jo’s relationship with her father is possibly the least developed of all her relationships in *Little Women*, partially because of his absence and partially because his relationship with his daughter seems restricted to what he desires her to be, rather than who she is. The first communication the reader witnesses between Mr. March and his daughters is the letter where he reminds them to “do their duty faithfully” (Alcott, *LW* 14). The first publication of Jo’s story is immediately followed by a telegraph expressing Mr. March’s illness, and any interest in publishing is set aside except for one poem Jo sends to her father, stating that her “silly little things. . . . amuse him” (*LW* 182). The words “silly” and “amuse” in relation to her writing and Mr. March indicate that her

father does not take her talent seriously. This trivial tone regarding her writing is quite a deviation from the “celebrated American authoress” that was boasted of just chapters before (162), and it is not told whether the victory was recounted to Mr. March at all. The self-deprecation that Jo conveys resembles Alcott’s own self-conscious discounting of her own work: she once publicly dismissed *Little Women* as “moral pap for the young” (Douglas 43). After Mr. March returns, as Douglas notes, “Alcott pays little attention to Jo’s private literary work. . . . They are Jo’s alone, they have an existence outside the home, and therefore none within the text” (50). He discovers Jo’s behavior to be so altered that she “disgraced herself by nearly fainting away” (Alcott, *LW* 229). Mr. March then assesses his daughters and expresses his “fatherly satisfaction” (233), particularly when regarding Jo:

“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 takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way, which delights me.” (324)

This description presented to us by Mr. March is a far cry from the description of Jo as being “brown” with a “fly-away look” presented to us at the beginning of the novel. Rather than be offended by this weak and overtly feminine portrayal of herself, Jo blushes with pleasure as she receive his praise, “feeling that she did deserve a portion of it” (*LW* 234). The Jo who Mr. March acknowledges is not the Jo the readers have come

to know, and the comparison of his “wild girl” to a mother “suggests Jo’s withdrawal into the domestic and dependent sphere from which she sought to escape” (Keyser, “The Most Beautiful Things” 90).

While Marmee is the parent to hear Jo’s voice and Mr. March is the parent to silence it, in the *Little House* series the roles are switched: Pa is the parent to hear Laura’s voice, while Ma is the parent to silence it. When Laura, early on, expresses an interest in working alongside her father on the farm, Pa encourages her by commending the masculine desire: “There’s nothing like help when a man has a big job to do” (Wilder, *OBPC* 14). When Ma tells Laura she must give up working alongside Pa to go to school because “a great girl almost eight years old should be learning to read instead of running wild on the banks of Plum Creek” (133), Laura resents Mary for just *looking* like “a good little girl who wanted to go school” (134) and resorts to asking Pa to keep her on the farm, where she likes it better (138). In her article “Mothers and Daughters on the Western Frontier,” Lillian Schlissel states that “both the reality and the ideology of the woman’s sphere existed on the middle-frontier, and was sundered by the start of the westward migration” (30). The disconnect between Laura, who wants to work, and Ma, who tries valiantly to make sure that “despite their rambles” her girls are “both educated and ladylike,” can be seen as result of this split (Fellman, “Laura Ingalls Wilder” 541). Laura is the result of “the Trail experience” which demanded that women do more, such as “the job of hired hands” which Laura often finds enjoyment in (Schlissel 30). Similar to Marmee, who raises Jo in the only way she knows how, which is just as her mother raised her, Ma similarly tries to raise Laura with the Victorian ideologies she is accustomed to, but which are foreign to Laura. While this conversion is in many ways

successful with Jo, Laura's relationship with her mother remains stressed into adulthood because "her task as a primary enforcer of the feminization of a female child" (Fellman, "Laura Ingalls Wilder" 539) is rendered impractical and Pa, as the patriarchal authority figure and Laura's encourager, solidifies the evolution of what it means to be feminine on the Western frontier.

As Schlissel notes, "The question of how to handle oneself as a lady and as a woman on the frontier was an issue of no small complexity" (31), and is deeply relevant to Ma's relationship with Laura in the *Little House* books:

It was an issue charged with ambivalence and uncertainty, and one that often created friction between older and younger women. On the one hand were the expectations and habits of traditional female behavior, the ideals of propriety established by a Victorian society. . . . On the other hand, the daily conditions of frontier life generated new situations, and younger women were alive to the possibilities of the new dimensions to their lives, of the new relationships they might form, and the new roles they might play. (Schlissel 31)

As she grows older, Laura uses her voice to express a desire for independence and equality; this voice she usually employs in direct opposition to Ma. When Ma worries about not being able to serve a proper "company dinner" for an unexpected visitor, Laura stoutly replies "What's good enough for us is good enough for anybody!" (Wilder, *BSSL* 2-3). When Mary chastises Carrie in a very Ma-like fashion for fidgeting and potentially mussing her dress as they wait for a train, Laura is only just prevented from saying "You come over by me, Carrie, and fidget all you want to!" (*BSSL* 17) by Mary's taking her

grievance directly to Ma. Laura's response is then aimed at Ma, rather than Mary, as Ma approves Mary's behavior and further tries to dictate Laura's. In retaliation, Laura passes "in front of Ma without saying a word," and later, waiting for the whistle of the train, "her heart beat so fast she could hardly listen to Ma" (17). Laura's drowns out Ma's voice, just as Ma drowns out Laura's; as a result, Laura is able to continue developing into the woman she wants to be. Later on, Ma claims that it is better to be "a live dog than a dead lion," a statement which Laura openly contradicts with "Oh, no, Ma!" (*BSSL* 121). As she grows older, Laura's behavior continues to align with her own desires and values, which are greatly shared with Pa. One evening after supper, Laura echoes Pa by declaring to the family "Let's go West," even though Ma insists that the family stay put so the girls may go to school (126). One of the reasons Ma insists that the girls go to school is so that Laura may become a teacher and help put Mary through college, but in *Little Town on the Prairie* Laura shocks the whole family by declaring: "I don't want to teach school, *ever!*" (212). Ma responds by looking "as stern as it was possible for her to look," but Laura continues: "I want—I want something to happen. I want to go West" (*LTOP* 212). Ma's voice as an authority over the type of young woman Laura should be is drowned out by Laura's increasingly verbal insistence that *she* should decide her own fate.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Ma tries to subjugate Laura with her Victorian feminine ideologies is because as the mother, Ma has matriarchal authority over how her daughters are raised when she has no authority over *where* they are raised. Pa's decision to move the Ingalls family further and further west throughout the series reflects how "the determination to make the two-thousand-mile journey was not one made by women. . . .

the decision to leave was reached by husbands and by fathers, often over the protests of wives and daughters” (Schlissel 30). While Pa’s eyes light up at the idea of going further west, the narrator states that “Ma still did not want to go west” as “she looked around the kitchen, at Carrie and at Laura standing there with Grace in her arms” (Wilder, *BSSL* 4). However, Ma submits to Pa’s authority with “Well, Charles, you must do as you think best” (5). Ma is like many of the women who “gathered their possessions and their children because life offered them no alternative. They valiantly masked their dismay because they were determined, above all, to maintain the family” (Schlissel 30). Unlike Ma, Laura shares Pa’s enthusiasm for going west, wanting “so much to go that she could hardly keep from speaking” (Wilder, *BSSL* 5). Once the decision has been made, Laura is so excited that she can “hardly do her housework properly” (5). Laura clearly relates to Pa’s sphere, with working outdoors and a desire explore the frontier. For Ma, however, necessity has laid upon her “the double burden of femininity” where she must perform “the traditional women’s task and part of the men’s tasks too” (Schlissel 30). While Ma might see this form of femininity as a burden, for Laura it is a blessing in which she may go back and forth between the designated spheres without shame “in performing a man’s feat” (32).

The difficulties Ma faces as a woman “serving as the primary caretaker” in frontier societies that, as Fellman notes, “devalue them as individuals and deny them both resources to do their job properly and support for them apart from their mothering role” (“Laura Ingalls Wilder” 539) explains both her disapproval of moving west and the continuous friction that arises in her relationship with Laura, as neither woman can relate to the other. Laura, however, turns to her cousin Lena for sympathy, as Lena verbalizes

feelings similar to her own: “I’m not ever going to get married, or if I do, I’m going to marry a railroader and keep on moving west as long as I live” (Wilder, *BSSL* 50). In finding a female companion outside of the home to commiserate with, Laura indulges in disobeying Pa and Ma with a growing disregard for the consequences. “Pa had never let Laura drive his horses” because he says she is “not strong enough to hold them if they ran away,” but when Lena encourages her to try Laura takes the lines and drives the ponies “all the way back to camp across the prairie. . . . whooping and singing” (51). With Lena, Laura also rides bareback for the first time, an endeavor that forces an exclamation of disapproval from Ma for looking “wild like an Indian”:

Twice Laura fell off; once the pony’s head hit her nose and made it bleed, but she never let go of the mane. Her hair came unbraided and her throat grew hoarse from laughing and screeching, and her legs were scratched from running through the sharp grass and trying to leap onto her pony while running. She almost could, but not quite, and this made the pony mad. (54-55)

As “a mother in such a society, plagued by problems of autonomy and self-worth,” Ma “may have trouble asserting her own subjectivity” onto Laura. As Fellman states, “the needs or patterns established” by Laura’s relationship with Ma “extend outward, beyond family relationships, into the shaping of. . . environments that allow for the kind of mutual nurturing with which they feel most comfortable” (“Laura Ingalls Wilder” 540). In *Little Women*, Jo fails to make these bonds outside the household because she looks to the companionship and approval of the women in her family, forcing the eradication of her natural tomboy behavior. Laura is able to construct

mutually nurturing relationships outside the Ingalls household at an early age because she desires her own happiness more than the approval of her immediate family, but also because there are more young women that are willing to openly share their struggles with the same experiences. Pioneering families such as Laura's faced, as Schlissel notes, "a constellation of conditions and circumstances so unique" that many of them underwent similar "modifications of social and sex roles that were formed by the special demands of frontier life" (29). Certainly, the "bond between mothers and daughters was a powerful means of providing a sense of stability and continuity with the past" (Schlissel 32) as we see when Ma repeatedly urges Laura "to put on her sunbonnet to keep her complexion white, lace her corsets tighter, and modulate her voice and control her emotions" (Fellman, *Long Shadows* 23). As a product of the period between 1840 and 1870, Ma "probably felt she had no choice but to socialize her along conventional female lines despite Laura's inclinations toward tomboyishness" (*Long Shadows* 22). However, as a product of the "homesteading and frontier life" that many people experienced in the years following the 1870s, Laura was one of "numerous women" who were presented with "opportunities to break free of many constricting female roles" (22). And so, as Schlissel states, "history may have imposed silence upon women of the western frontier" through mothers raising their daughters with traditional patriarchal ideologies, but this new generation of girls "in their own time. . . . were a sharp-witted and sharper-tongued breed" (29).

The progression of time, once again, proves to be a significant component in the positive portrayal of a woman reconstructing gender boundaries in the late nineteenth century with the publication of the books being in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when the

advocation of such behaviors was much less risky. According to her daughter Rose Wilder Lane, Laura “had well thought-out ideas about child rearing that differed somewhat from those of her parents” (Fellman, *Long Shadows* 30). Lane also alluded to Wilder’s “efforts in the books to describing the pioneer ingenuity and self-sufficiency that had propelled America into the present day” (*Long Shadows* 65). In a speech Laura gave in 1937, she states: “I wanted the children now to understand more about the beginnings of things—to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it” (*Long Shadows* 65). This comment can be seen as reflecting the progression of American ideologies over time, including the widening of the female sphere within both the home and society. As Fellman states, the *Little House* books include “female perceptions of and contributions to the Ingalls family’s frontier experiences,” and “focusing also as it did on the formative role of home life” Laura’s account “gives a somewhat different twist to the frontier saga” (*Long Shadows* 75). Wilder’s portrayal of Laura’s close relationship with her father is a key component to this deviation:

Whether Wilder, in fact, had a special relationship with her father or had been the most adventuresome daughter, the books allowed her to tell her family history in such a way as to convey that impression. The number of conversations initiated by Mary in the books is a fraction of those allocated to Laura. This is part of a related pattern in the books, the downplaying of both Mary and her mother, turning them into “inside” women, wary of the world outside their home, barely involved with

anyone outside the family. This is in contrast to the depiction of Laura who claims both the inside and the outside for herself. (*Long Shadows* 80)

The first manifestation of *Little House in the Big Woods* was titled *When Grandma Was a Little Girl*, obviously reflecting how the original novel in the series, as Fellman states, “was undoubtedly premised on the notion of how different life was just sixty years before” (*Long Shadows* 82). Since Wilder and her daughter Lane chose to include “one particular story and not another” (82), it can be assumed that the women use Laura’s experiences with history and progress to promote the evolution of female societal roles from the strictly marked spheres experienced by Caroline Ingalls to an individual’s choice.

While Ma tries to repress Laura’s tendencies toward masculine behaviors, Pa often encourages it. Rather than stay indoors and do the housework with Ma, Laura is eager to explore the construction of the nearby railroad because she wants to know “how they made a railroad grade” (Wilder, *BSSL* 92). When Laura “asks too many questions” about it, Pa rewards her by taking her to see the construction for herself. Ma cannot tell Laura now to stay at home, so she reprimands Laura for getting “too excited” and burdens her with a series of ladylike instructions:

Ma talked seriously to Laura. She said that she wanted her girls to know how to behave, to speak nicely in low voices and have gentle manners and always be ladies. They had always lived in wild, rough places, except for a little while on Plum Creek, and now they were in a rough railroad camp, and it would be some time before this country was civilized. Until then, Ma thought it best that they keep themselves to themselves. She wanted

Laura to stay away from the camp, and not get acquainted with any of the rough men there. It would be all right for her to go quietly with Pa to see the work this once, but she must be well-behaved and ladylike, and remember that a lady did not do anything to attract attention. (BSSL 95-96)

But Laura is not quiet as she stands next to Pa, watching the men work on the railroad; she asks question after question, some of which Pa gently reproaches her for not knowing the answers to from her observations of the site, claiming “You ought to be able to see that, Laura, without being told” (101). This small reproach is a compliment to Laura’s character, as it reveals Pa’s esteem of his daughter’s sharp mind. When Laura returns home, Mary confronts Laura for preferring “to watch those rough men working in the dirt” than staying “in the nice clean shanty,” and accuses her of “idling” (107). In this reconstruction of her past, Wilder illustrates “a childhood in which she had played second fiddle to a smart, good, beautiful sister who was much like her mother” and explores her “father’s role at the expense of her mother’s role,” claiming his “admiration and approval” which celebrates “her childhood rebelliousness without ever denouncing—or acknowledging—the power of her mother’s gentle repressiveness” (Fellman, “Laura Ingalls Wilder” 550).

In both *Little Women* and the *Little House* books, Jo and Laura face the “collective colony of a woman’s world presided over by their mothers” and its submissiveness to the “official authority of masculine protection” that their fathers represent (“Laura Ingalls Wilder” 550). In *Little Women*, Jo struggles to adapt to her feminine sphere as dictated by Victorian ideologies at Marmee’s request. As a sympathizer of the struggles Jo faces in learning to be “good” in ridding herself of such

“faults,” Marmee is the parental voice that simultaneously reaches out to understand and acknowledge Jo’s true self, while working towards repressing it at the request of Mr. March, who desires all his daughters to be good “little women.” While Alcott provides Jo with a relationship in which her voice is heard through Marmee, she also provides a more powerful relationship in which Jo’s voice is silenced through Mr. March. Similarly, in the *Little House* books Laura’s relationship with her parents reflects one that supports and encourages her tomboy behaviors and one that does not. However, in having Laura’s behavior approved by Pa, the authority figure in the family, Wilder depicts a tomboy heroine whose voice will *not* be silenced, but rather encouraged and cultivated into a strong feminine identity that gains power from correlating with both spheres of gender in a time and place when such cultivation was deemed a necessity.

CHAPTER IV

Tomboy protagonists and their communities:

Socialization, Domestication, and Entering the Work Force

Chapter Three explored how Jo and Laura face the “collective colony of a woman’s world presided over by their mothers” and its submissiveness to the “official authority of masculine protection” that their fathers represent. This chapter will discuss how Jo and Laura face this female collective colony in the world *outside* their homes. The relationship between tomboy protagonists and the female community begins in the home but comes to fruition as the girls come-of-age and are socialized. The tomboy’s introduction into society leads to the beginning of self-effacement as Jo and Laura venture outside the home and pursue work, rather than husbands. Jo and Laura each reach their peak of self-awareness as they attempt to enter the masculine sphere in the public arena; however, this self-awareness is challenged as each tomboy approaches the patriarchal construct of marriage.

The first time Jo is exposed to society on her own is through the publication of her writing. Not surprisingly, Jo’s debut into the world outside of the March household consists of work and a paycheck, rather than flirtations at fashionable parties (such as we see with Meg in the chapter “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair”). Meg’s account of her debut to Marmee is filled with the shame and confusion that accompany her first encounter with being sexually objectified by society:

I told you they rigged me up, but I didn't tell you that they powdered, and squeezed, and frizzled, and made me look a fashion-plate. . . . I knew it was silly, but they flattered me, and said I was a beauty, and quantities of nonsense, so I let them make a fool of me. (Alcott, *LW* 108)

Jo's debut consists of no such objectification; rather, Jo views her entrance into society as a success:

A prouder young woman was seldom seen than she, when, having composed herself, she electrified the family by appearing before them with the letter in one hand, the check in the other, announcing that she had won the prize! Of course there was a great jubilee, and when the story came every one read and praised it; though after her father had told her that the language was good, the romance fresh and hearty, and the tragedy quite thrilling, he shook his head, and said in an unworldly way,—"You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money." (*LW* 286)

The only person within the home who does not view the endeavor as a complete success is Mr. March, who praises the writing itself but then admonishes Jo to "do better" by aiming "at the highest," which is to say "never mind the money." This advice goes directly against Jo's reason for writing for publication, which has as much to do with obtaining financial independence as it does with artistic satisfaction. It is possible that in his "unworldly way," Mr. March is hinting at his daughter to pursue another path in society, one that mirrors Marmee's own wishes that the girls be "poor men's wives" rather than viewing money as "the first or only prize to strive for" (110).

Marmee's and Mr. March's perspectives mean that Jo must go further outside the home to pursue the career she desires, for, as Ann Douglas asserts, "Jo needs to be saved from herself by the helpful presence of others," further wondering "how will she know what that self is if she is seldom alone, if her autobiography is always a biography, her individual self-expression part of a collage of family endeavor?" (50). Jo herself admits that she's been "fussing" over her work for "so long" that she "don't know whether it's good, bad, or indifferent. It will be a great help to have cool, impartial person take a look at it" (Alcott, *LW* 288). Her work and self-expression are one-and-the-same, and venturing out into society will test whether Jo's masculine ways and career interests will survive pressures outside the home. The prospect isn't promising, as Jo's next small social venture, paying "half a dozen calls" with Amy (306), proves difficult for the tomboy heroine. Amy makes the point that such calls are "a debt" women "owe society," and there's no one else to pay it (307). During the outing, Jo adopts the behavior of a "well-bred" woman by being in turn "calm, cool and quiet" and a gossiping, giggling "charming girl" (309). But her inability to pay Aunt March "the compliment of coming in style" loses Jo her only chance at traveling the world (outside of marrying a man who can afford to take her) when she defies Aunt March's conservative views on "reformers" by claiming: "I shall be one if I can. . . . We can't agree about that, for you belong to the old set, and I to the new; you will get on the best, but I shall have the liveliest time of it" (315). This declaration foreshadows the trials and triumphs Jo has yet to face: Jo loses the longed for European tour to her well-bred sister Amy (who ultimately does "get on the best," as by the end of the novel she lives to see her "castle in the air" realized by

becoming an artist, going to Rome, and marrying a wealthy man) but gains the start of a career by moving to New York City.

Jo's decision to "hop out of the nest" (341) can be seen as a result of the displacement she feels upon being forced into womanhood, and thus society. Foote states that "Jo's gender rebellion during her youth defined her personality," but "it makes her a most unhappy young woman, misunderstood and often lonely as her two surviving sisters make successful entrances into the social world" (74-75). While Meg explores a new home as a wife and Amy explores Europe as an artist and debutante, Jo decides to enter society working as a governess and writer in New York, but not before promising Marmee "never to hop very far" (Alcott, *LW* 341), an anticipation of Jo's marriage at the end of *Little Women*. Yet this is an odd promise to make, since Jo reasons that "teaching would render her independent; and such leisure as she got might be made profitable by writing, while the new scenes and society would be both useful and agreeable" (351).

Jo, who lives "something of an insular life" in the March's "rambling home," is then, as Foote states, "confronted and addressed by the dense social and economic world" of New York City society (65). One of Jo's first encounters with this society involves having dinner with a wide variety of people:

The long table was full, and every one intent on getting their dinner – the gentlemen especially, who seemed to be eating on time, for they *bolted* in every sense of the word, vanishing as soon as they were done. There was the usual assortment of young men, absorbed in themselves; young couples absorbed in each other; married ladies in their babies, and old gentlemen in politics. (Alcott, *LW* 336)

Jo's displacement at home extends as far as the dining table she shares with fellow boarders in New York City: neither being a young man absorbed in his thoughts, a young woman absorbed in her relationship, or married woman absorbed with her children, Jo's presence at the table is unsettling to the people she shares it with. One young man observes her, and asks his friend "What the deuce is she at our table for?" and follows the question with a debasing comment on her looks: "Handsome head, but no style" (359). Jo overhears this conversation, and her first real participation "with other people in more public spaces" leads to feelings of exclusion based on wealth, gender, and her apparent lack of fortune and femininity. Thus, Foote suggests, "contact with the greater world" emphasizes the March girls' "material poverty", and Jo finds herself "involved in scenes of social humiliation" that provoke her "to feel a sort of objectless resentment intimately related to. . . . gender" (65-66). This resentment could lay the foundation for the eventual embracing of society-driven gender behaviors that Jo adopts in the future, or it could work as a testament to her own individuality in the face of societal expectations. Jo admits to feeling "angry" at the superfluous comment on her looks, but soon rises above it, writing to Marmee: "I didn't care, for a governess is as good as a clerk, and I've got sense, if I haven't got style, which is more than some people have. . . . I hate ordinary people!" (Alcott, *LW* 359). Her rejecting *their* values and choosing her own shows that she is capable of maintaining autonomy not just at home, but in "the greater world." It is the men at the table who are restricted by social conventions, as their inability to recognize Jo's professional value as a governess causes them to reduce her value as a young, single woman to her looks alone. Far away from Marmee's familial instruction, Jo

must face “the figuration of women as private, emotional centers who keep the world of economic distinction at bay” on her own (Foote 66).

At home, Jo constantly struggles between what is to be her “social” self and what she designates as her “real” self. As Foote puts it: “A complex balance of social desire and naturalized belief in taste and personal values, class and status play themselves out locally through a series of difficult negotiations with one’s ‘real’ and one’s desired position next to others” (66). Jo attempts to stay true to her “real” self by pursuing financial independence in New York City, but her “desired position” in relation to her family and their approval comes into play once again with the introduction of Professor Bhaer. In her first letter home, Jo writes to Marmee: “I saw something I liked” (Alcott, *LW* 354). That “something” is Jo’s first sighting of Professor Bhaer as he relieves a young servant struggling with a heavy hod of coal. Jo writes: “Wasn’t it good of him? I like such things; for, as father says, trifles show character” (354). The information Marmee initially receives from Jo about her life in New York has little to do with her career and much to do with an older, fatherly man who apparently would have the approval of Mr. March, should they meet. As Jo continues to fill her letters to Marmee with information about Professor Bhaer, she says “it seems as if I was doomed to see a good deal of him” (361), as if his presence in the house is an excuse not only for him to preoccupy her letters, but her time as well. The use of the word “doomed” hints that Jo finds the meetings both unfortunate and inevitable, and in her next letter to Marmee Jo justifies the dominant presence of Professor Bhaer in her letters once again: “On reading over my letter, it strikes me as rather Bhaery; but I’m always interested in odd people, and I really had nothing else to write about” (361). Eventually, Jo confesses in a letter to

Beth that she and the Professor “are very good friends” (361), but the hesitancy at this admission can be seen as a reflection of her “irritation at the constraints of nineteenth-century gender roles” (Foote 74). Her objection to such constraints continues from childhood into young adulthood, beginning with her vexation that she “can’t fight in the Union army,” followed by “her annoyance that she will have to wear gowns and pin up her hair every day” (74), eventually leading to her apprehension at forming an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

At the peak of Jo’s self-awareness, she is living independently in society and pursuing a career as an author. The first manuscript Jo presents to an editor is filled with “more reflections,” since Marmee’s upbringing impresses upon Jo that “every story should have some sort of moral” (Alcott, *LW* 369). At this pivotal moment, Jo goes against Marmee’s influence and agrees to the modifications “with a satisfied air” (370) because of the “compensation” (369) she receives. Jo makes the choice to be a career woman, not an angel-in-the-house. Jo then takes “a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature,” and it pays off, “for her emaciated purse grew stout” (370). Jo is conscious of her independence from Marmee’s teachings because the only thing that “disturbed her satisfaction” is her “feeling that father and mother would not approve,” but she prefers “to have her own way first” (370). Jo’s determination to live her life *her* way, as opposed to the patriarchal way of Marmee and Mr. March, hints at the potential autonomy Jo can achieve should she continue her journey as a single, anonymous writer in New York City. This is easy for Jo to do as long as she keeps “her secret,” telling no one she is the author of sensational stories.

The sensational literature which Jo produces is part of the “mass audience periodical and pamphlet fiction” that was popular in antebellum America (Keyser, *Whispers* xii). The content of these fictions ranged from “improbable adventure to violent pornography,” and Keyser further notes that Alcott herself created such fictions abounding “in madhouse scenes, mistaken identities, illicit passions, and ruthless heroines” (*Whispers* xii). Alcott also “advocated suffrage and an active, independent life for women”; thus, her anonymous participation in nineteenth-century sensational literature could be an indication of the “constraints operating upon talented, ambitious women, especially women artists” (*Whispers* xii). Jo readily gives up the “moral” in her stories for financial gain, and does not show any remorse in the decision. Rather, Jo immerses herself in it, becoming “interested in her work,” proving that her interest in such writing is not strictly monetary.

As far as her career is concerned, Jo’s only restriction is that she should “write nothing of which she is ashamed” (Alcott, *LW* 371). This seems an odd assertion for a writer who publishes anonymously and refuses to tell her family of her success; however, this restriction reveals that it is not *Jo* who is ashamed of such a career, but the public and family communities she belongs to. Writing sensational stories acquaints Jo with “folly, sin, and misery,” but Jo finds she is “prospering finely,” even as it is stated that she is “beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character.” It is not mentioned what specific attributes of Jo’s character are being defiled, only that the research Jo undergoes to gather “glimpses of the tragic world” she writes about introduce her to the “folly, sin, and misery” of “living in bad society.” Alcott writes that “wrong-doing always brings its own punishment; and, when Jo most needed hers, she got it.”

The “wrong-doing” is Jo’s rejection of the “womanliest attributes of a woman’s character” by entering the male sphere as an economically independent writer exploring “the darker side of life,” rather than protecting her “innocent bloom” (371). For a young woman to explore “bad” society, even in her own imagination, is to step outside of the limited boundaries which society dictates for any nineteenth-century heroine: a respectable young woman either enters society as a debutante (as Amy has done), keeps a good home (as Meg has done), or both.

Jo’s “punishment” for breaking these boundaries and “desecrating” her femininity reveals itself in the father-figure of the patriarchal Professor Bhaer, who has “no patience” for the “bad trash” that is sensational stories. Professor Bhaer saves Jo as he would “save a baby from a puddle” (*LW* 376) with the advice that Jo give up writing stories that “good young girls” should not see (377). Jo defends her choice by stating that “many respectable people make an honest living out what are called sensation stories,” but Bhaer claims she has “no right to put poison in the sugar-plum” (377). The elements of the masculine sphere become “poison” when they touch the sweet, innocent bloom of the feminine sphere, and Jo determines that it’s better to “burn the house down. . . . than let other people blow themselves up with my gunpowder” (378). The community rejects Jo’s authentic self, preferring the angel-in-the-house who upholds traditional Victorian ideals. Jo’s authentic self is not so much the writer of sensation stories (the genre was recommended by her editor) as the working writer who maintains financial independence. Jo readily gives up writing stories with a “moral” to them in order to make more money, thus the community rejects Jo’s ability *to choose* how she makes a living by condemning options that do not promote the Victorian ideal of a “simple, true, and lovely” female

character (372). Jo's authenticity does not lie solely in that she *is* a writer, but also in what she writes, and why. Just as Marmee is influenced by Mr. March's patriarchal authority, Jo becomes the instrument of Professor Bhaer's: "He helped her in many ways. . . . and Jo was happy; for while her pen lay idle, she was learning other lessons beside German, and laying a foundation for the sensation story of her own life" (379).

In the *Little House* series, Laura's relationship with communities outside the home is mainly comprised of pursuing work and financial security—particularly through teaching. The kind of work that is socially acceptable for Laura at this time is that of schoolmistress, a far cry from the physical labor Laura performs while helping Pa. Just as Jo resents joining Amy in paying their "debt to society," Laura resents Ma's proposition that she teach Carrie and her playmates, Louizy and Annie, everyday without any kind of compensation at the age of twelve (Wilder, *BSSL* 255). Laura does "not want to do it at all," but she responds "obediently, 'Yes, Ma'" (*BSSL* 255). Ma does not like to see Laura working on the farm because she believes her daughters are "above doing men's work" (Wilder, *TLW* 4) and even Pa notes that "town's no place for a girl to be doing a boy's work" (*TLW* 65), indicating that once Laura is out in society her farming days will come to an end. While Laura does not like docile occupations, such as teaching school and sewing, she is "proud" of the work that makes "her face and her neck. . . . wet with sweat" and allows her sunbonnet to "hang by its strings" (*TLW* 6-7). Laura does not warm to the idea of teaching or sewing as an occupation until compensation is connected with it, and, like Jo, her desire for financial independence is established early in her teens. Laura daydreams about what it would be like to have money, and determines that "if ever she were rich" she'd buy a majestic pair of horses. As she daydreams about such riches,

Laura lets “her bonnet fly back in the wind,” (*BSSL* 263) as if in defiance of Ma and the limited but socially acceptable future laid out for her. Still, her desire for financial security for her family, her sister Mary’s schooling, and her own independence allows her to seize the occupation of school teaching as an opportunity to help establish freedom from conventional pressures.

Laura’s entrance into society is often accompanied by her own assertions about the feminine sphere as she comes into adulthood. Laura laments that “when girls pinned up their hair and wore skirts down to their shoe tops, they must wear corsets,” and when Ma reminds her how Pa could span her waist “with his two hands” at the beginning of their marriage, Laura responds: “He can’t now, and he seems to like you” (*LTOP* 94). That Laura must come-of-age, and have her braids pinned up and her waist cinched in does not mean that she must concede to the standards imposed upon her by the ideals of that time. Laura voices her concerns from her criticism of fashion to her interest in economics, as she worries with Pa over losing their crops. Pa remarks to Laura: “I didn’t realize you were old enough to be worrying” (*LTOP* 107). His surprise at Laura’s economic interest in the family is not based on gender but rather on age, conveying that her interest is not only acceptable but significant, as she is no longer a child.

While Jo ultimately embraces self-denial by giving up writing stories for pay in order to be the ideal little woman, Laura refuses Mary’s entreaty to “learn self-denial” with an absolute “I don’t want to” when Ma suggests they save reading their bundle of *Youth’s Companions* until Christmas (Wilder, *TLW* 175). Mary agrees to this form of “self-denial” for the good of the family at Ma’s suggestion, but Laura expresses her desire to continue reading in the face of Ma’s opposition. This is an early example of

how Mary conforms to the feminine sphere by putting family desires and conventionality before herself, yet Laura insists on being her authentic self by indulging her own desires and behaviors. Laura continues to demonstrate this when she later carries out Carrie's punishment in defiance of the teacher, Miss Wilder, for punishing Carrie unfairly. Laura does not even "try to resist" her fury, giving way to her feelings "completely" and allowing herself to behave as she sees fit, even in the face of punishment from Miss Wilder and her parents (*LTOP* 166). Laura could have denied her instincts for the sake of pride and her family, but to do so would be to deny her own sense right and wrong. She chooses to remain true to herself by standing up for Carrie and accepting the punishment for it. When Laura and Carrie are sent home from school ("a punishment worse than whipping with a whip") Laura declares: "It's my fault because I rocked that seat so hard. I'm glad of it! I'd do it again" (*LTOP* 164). Laura's resolve to remain true to her identity as she enters society is not shaken by the repercussions she faces. Her tenacity is illustrated in her response to a story Pa tells of an engineer who quit driving his locomotive in ten feet of snow: "He oughtn't to quit. He ought to figure out some other way to get through, if he thinks that way won't work" (*TLW* 219). Laura doesn't quit working on the farm even though she is becoming a young woman, and Pa admits to her: "If you hadn't helped me in the haying, little Half-Pint, I'd not have put up enough hay. We would have run short before this" (*TLW* 311). Similarly, she does not relinquish staying true to herself by straddling both masculine and feminine spheres after she enters adulthood. Her desire for autonomy is "warmth inside her. . . . steady, like a tiny light in the dark" (311).

It is outside the home and in the community that Laura feels “free and independent and comfortable” (*TLW* 19). When she attends school in town with Carrie, Laura disproves the assumption that “Girls don’t play ball!” when she makes a running leap and catches it, an act commended by her schoolmate Cap Garland who states: “She’s as good as any of us” (78). Laura continues to “join in the games” even though “it was tomboyish to run and play, at her age” (*TLW* 145); her behaviors are rewarded with the approval of another schoolmate, Charley, who says “She isn’t a sissy, even if she is a girl” (146). Even Laura’s female schoolmates do not judge that her face is “hot from running and jumping,” and that hairpins are “coming loose in her hair,” for “Ida sometimes played, too, and Mary Power and Minnie would look on, applauding” (146). As often as Laura plays like a boy she wants to fight like a boy, usually with Nellie Oleson. That behavior, too, is commended by her peers, for at the schoolhouse Laura nearly slaps Nellie for making impertinent remarks against Pa; instead she issues a sound rejoinder that makes Nellie retreat back “into her seat” (150). Ida give Laura’s “clenched fist a quick little squeeze that meant, ‘Good for you! You served her right’” (150). Laura’s relationship with the community in which she is socialized is positive early on, and her interactions with her schoolmates, male and female, reveal that her tomboy antics do not make her unwomanly, even as she approaches adulthood.

Jo’s decision in *Little Women* to give up writing and return to hearth and home is the result of her desire to be considered “good” in the eyes of her parents, society and eventually her husband, Professor Bhaer. As Laura approaches the work force by accepting her first job sewing shirts in town, she acknowledges to Mary: “I wish I could be like you. But I guess I never can be. I don’t know how you can be so good” (*LTOP*

11). When Pa approaches Laura with the job offer, Laura accepts the position in spite of her dislike of sewing, focusing instead on the money she will make:

Quickly Laura multiplied in her head. That was a dollar and a half a week, a little more than five dollars a month. If she worked hard and pleased Mrs. White, maybe she could work all summer. She might earn fifteen dollars, maybe even twenty. . . . She did not want to work in town, among strangers. But she couldn't refuse a chance to earn maybe fifteen dollars, or ten, or five. (37)

Like Jo, Laura finds it "wonderful to think that already she was earning good wages" (*LTOP* 48). Laura's satisfaction turns to ambition as she resolves to pay her parents back for the costs it took to raise her as the first step in her journey to financial independence:

All the week, she looked forward to the pleasure of bringing home her wages to Ma. Often she thought, too, that this was only the beginning. In two more years she would be sixteen, old enough to teach school. If she studied hard and faithfully, and got a teacher's certificate, and then got a school to teach, she would be a real help to Pa and Ma. Then she could begin to repay them for all that it had cost to provide for her since she was a baby. (48)

As with her dislike of sewing, Laura rises above her dislike of teaching because of the opportunity it offers in providing her with the financial security. If she can repay her parents for all the costs it took to provide for her, then she will not be indebted to them as an adult, leaving her free to establish herself in society as she sees fit with whatever

money that is rightfully hers. This sentiment is mirrored in Laura's thoughts on the Declaration of Independence when she accompanies Pa into town on the Fourth of July:

She thought: Americans won't obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone else who has a right to give me orders. (*LTOP* 76)

Like Jo, Laura moves away from home to begin a career when she accepts a teaching position that offers forty dollars for two months. Impressed that she can "earn so much money" (*LTOP* 302), Laura agrees to the arrangement even though she is only fifteen years old and does not want "to teach school twelve miles away from home, alone among strangers" in unsettled country (307). Ma presents an alternative to Laura when she reminisces of her own school teaching days, as she describes how she taught two terms before meeting and marrying Pa (*LTOP* 266). Only then does Laura consider marriage as a viable option: "Hopefully she thought that she might meet somebody. Maybe, after all, she would not have to be a schoolteacher always" (266). For Laura, marriage means financial security, independence from family, and partnership; it offers the same perks as teaching or sewing while allowing her to pursue endeavors she actually enjoys, such as farming. In an article she later wrote for McCall's magazine titled "Whom Will You Marry," Wilder states "there is a joy of spirit and a pride of power that come to a farm woman who is fully alive to her opportunities, meeting and solving problems, confronting and overcoming difficulties" (qtd. in Hill 115). In this article, Wilder passionately argues that "not only do farm women enjoy full and equal

partnership with their husbands but that the work they do is important and deeply fulfilling” (qtd. in Hill 115). Until then, Laura desires to “earn some more” once her teaching terms come to an end (*THGY* 100). Laura accepts another job as seamstress for the town’s dressmaker, Mrs. McKee, and the promise of “fifty cents and dinner” helps her look “forward to the day of sewing busily” (100). Laura’s eagerness to “go on earning something” (115) demonstrates that she is a more successful career woman than her predecessor, Jo, for although her work is limited to that which is available in her feminine sphere, Laura takes advantage of the opportunities to establish her independence by earning her own living with pride and confidence. Laura’s choice to earn money for herself and use it as she chooses is accentuated by a conversation she has with Mrs. McKee about the Women’s Rights movement, perhaps reflecting Wilder’s own political views, as “the middle-aged Laura Ingalls Wilder had long been active in local politics” (Fellman, *Long Shadows* 56) at her home in Mansfield, and maintained an “extreme vision of individualism” throughout her life (*Long Shadows* 68). In *These Happy Golden Years*, Mrs. McKee tells Laura:

Whoever makes these laws ought to know that a man that’s got enough money to farm, has got enough money to buy a farm. If he hasn’t got money, he’s got to earn it, so why do they make a law that he’s got to stay on a claim, when he can’t? All it means is his wife and family have to sit idle on it, seven months of the year. I could be earning something, dressmaking, to help buy tools and seeds, if somebody didn’t have to sit on this claim. I declare to goodness, I don’t know but sometimes I believe in woman’s rights. (Wilder 119)

Interestingly enough, Laura's position as a working woman in society mirrors Mrs. McKee's position as a working wife sitting on a claim. If Laura has "enough money to farm," then logically she should be able to buy her *own* farm. Just as a wife and family must sit "idle" on a claim so that the husband may pay for it, women are expected to sit "idle" once they enter marriage, just as Ma gave up working when she met Pa. However, Mrs. McKee's statement points out that her marriage differs from Ma's in that it is a partnership, since she "could be earning something" to "buy tools and seeds," making her just as much a farmer as her husband since she's "got enough money" for it. Thus, marriage is tied to women's rights as a freedom to earn money and spend money as an individual sees fit; marriage has the potential to be conducive to this freedom, just as it has the potential to threaten it. In *Little Women*, Jo's marriage with Professor Bhaer threatens this freedom, as it is under his influence that she gives up her means of earning through the writing of sensational stories; she earns money as *he* sees fit, not the other way around. In *Little House*, Laura's marriage with Almanzo proves conducive to her freedom, as she lets it be known that she will never "obey" him against her own "better judgment" (Wilder, *THGY* 269-270).

As long as Laura continues to earn on her own, she determines that she will not "marry anybody" (*THGY* 121). She knows that when the term begins she must teach school again, although she looks at the prospect with a grim outlook, for just as Pa "must stay in a settled country for the sake of them all. . . . she must teach school again, though she did so hate to be shut up in a schoolroom" (139). One would think Laura's being trapped in a marriage would be the equivalent to Pa's being trapped in settled country, unable to roam westward; in actuality, Laura's freedom is more infringed upon by

working in a schoolroom for the rest of her life. Just as Ma meets Pa and Jo meets Professor Bhaer, Laura *does* meet a man who offers a different alternative for her future: Almanzo Wilder. In Almanzo, Laura finds a partner rather than a patriarchal father-figure. Bringing back Laura's dream of riding behind a glorious pair of horses with her sunbonnet down, Almanzo offers Laura a buggy ride behind a pair of wild colts he's attempting to break. Laura accepts, and Almanzo comments "Do you know there isn't a man in town except Cap Garland who will ride behind these colts" (*THGY* 144). Thus their relationship is quickly established as an equal one as the two of them begin their courtship breaking in the pair of horses.

The relationships between Jo and Laura and their communities as they come-of-age and are socialized follow similar trajectories, but lead to very different outcomes. Jo's introduction to society leads to the beginning of self-effacement as she gives up her career of writing sensational stories in order to meet the approval of the society she faces: namely Professor Bhaer. Laura's introduction to society leads not only to the peak of her self-awareness, as she maintains her tomboyish tendencies even within society, but the encouragement of her straddling both masculine and feminine spheres as she establishes herself as a working woman capable of self-sufficient financial security. The entrance of Professor Bhaer into *Little Women* and Almanzo Wilder into the *Little House* books as prospective suitors does introduce the patriarchal-construct of marriage to the heroines; however, while this construct completes Jo's self-effacement, it provides Laura with a partnership that ultimately empowers her self-governance.

CHAPTER V

Taming the Tomboy: The Encouragement of Idealization and its Effects on Feminist American Children's Literature

The tomboy is idealized, and in some ways encouraged, in both *Little Women* and the *Little House* books until the protagonists turn eighteen, at which point both Jo and Laura are reestablished in the home as domestic wives. Denying both Jo and Laura promising futures with careers is an old, but not yet out-dated, method of feminine glorification, as it continues to lead to critical discourse on the authors of such works and the denied potential of their heroines. Keyser suggests that Alcott's domestic works "expressed their self-consciousness about, even critique of, bourgeois values," and by "creating such scenes in her domestic fiction, acknowledged *its* duplicity—that her seeming idealization of the domestic realm, with its constraining roles for women, overlay a profound skepticism about the organization of domestic life" (*Whispers* xviii). The discourse such works inspire leads the way to feminism, and feminism, in turn, ultimately changes how novels for young girls are written.

In *Little Women*, Jo defies the cultural norms of her time by pursuing a career writing sensational fiction outside the maternal boundaries of hearth and kindred. The object of her pursuit, outside of enjoyment, is strictly monetary: "I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money" (Alcott, *LW* 378). Jo only begins to question how her gender-defying motives and actions affect her family under the influence of Professor Bhaer, as she speculates what the discovery of her stories will

do “if they were seen at home, or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them” (378). Jo obediently gives up her quest, but not without a long, resentful meditation on how her knowledge of what is “right” and “wrong” is fashioned by socially-driven gender stereotypes: “I almost wish I hadn’t any conscience, it’s so inconvenient. If I didn’t care about doing right, and I didn’t feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I should get on a capitally. I can’t help wishing, sometimes, that father and mother hadn’t been so dreadfully particular about such things” (378).

As opposed to Capitola Black, who reformed her tomboyish behavior seamlessly with no inward or outward struggle, Jo calls out the unfairness and uselessness of such gender restrictions to the reader before pleasing the social order by complying with Professor Bhaer’s advice. Jo only gives up writing sensational stories when Professor Bhaer speaks of such literature, specifically Jo’s *Weekly Volcano*, “with great disgust” during a session where he is teaching Jo German; the professor states he would rather give his students “gunpowder to play with than this bad trash” (LW 376-377). Jo reacts by imagining “what a blaze her pile of papers. . . . would make” and “her hard-earned money lay rather heavily on her conscience.” At first she resolves that *her* sensational stories “are not like that,” that “they are only silly, never bad,” and she briefly disregards Professor Bhaer’s strong opinions. She attempts to change the subject by stating: “Shall we go on, sir? I’ll be very good and proper now,” referring to the mistakes she made during the lesson. Professor Bhaer responds gravely with “I shall hope so,” and Jo feels “he meant more than she imagined,” making her feel “as if the words ‘Weekly Volcano’ were printed in large type, on her forehead” (377). It is only after Jo feels pressured by Professor Bhaer to be “good and proper” that she carefully re-reads “every one of her

stories” (377), after which she concedes that “they *are* trash, and will soon be worse than trash if I go on” (388). She gives up writing her lucrative sensational stories, and Professor Bhaer is the patriarchal element that at last induces a successful reform in Jo.

The chapter ends with Jo’s return to the March’s home and the reflection that she’s “written no books—earned no fortune” but she has “made a friend worth having,” and she will “try to keep him” for the rest of her life (381). This clear “opposition between working and waiting defines the brutal truth about woman’s role” (Keyser, *A Family Romance* 33) in the nineteenth century, as it is only after Jo attempts to sustain herself and family through work that she gives up her masculine pursuits and properly waits for Professor Bhaer to transform from good friend to good husband. Jo’s resentment at her own transformation suggests that, as Keyser suggests, the covert message of *Little Women* is that “the acquisition of the little woman character is less a matter of virtue than of necessity. . . . women’s acceptance of the domestic sphere as the best and happiest place may be less a matter of wise choice than of harsh necessity” (*A Family Romance* 34).

As Abel et al state, Alcott’s plot in *Little Women* raises “crucial questions about fictions of female development” (4): How typical is Jo’s course toward marriage? What “psychological and social forces obstruct” Jo’s maturity, and what such forces promote it? How does Jo’s journey to maturity alter “prevailing patterns of women’s development in fiction” (4)? After Jo gives up writing sensational stories under the influence of Professor Bhaer, she is not so reformed of her old behaviors as to accept Laurie’s marriage proposal, claiming “I haven’t the least idea of loving [Professor Bhaer], or anyone else” (Alcott, *LW* 385). She even refuses Laurie’s proposal on the grounds that

he'd "hate" her "scribbling," and she "couldn't get on without it" (387). Her stance on marriage, at this point in the novel, still resonates with her earlier stance that she will not marry; when Jo tells Teddy: "I don't believe I shall ever marry; I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (387). The "psychological and social forces that obstruct" Jo's maturity into her own independence are the influences of patriarchy both at home and abroad. Jo first struggles with her unwomanly tendencies in order to become a better "little woman" for Mr. March and Marmee, an endeavor that causes her great mental anguish, as expressed throughout the first part of the novel. Jo then faces society in New York and meets Professor Bhaer, and the "social forces" such as the editors at the *Volcano*, the clerks at her boarding house, and Bhaer himself, bring about the greatest turn toward femininity we have seen in Jo since the novel began: she gives up writing sensational, lucrative stories (a job she enjoyed) because Professor Bhaer deemed it unsuitable. Jo's natural sense of self and purpose is altered, but her refusal of Laurie proves it is not yet completely reformed by the social forces that surround her.

Jo's alteration is acknowledged by family, as Meg notes how she is "glad to see a glimmer of Jo's old spirit" (Alcott, *LW* 460). The words "glimmer" and "old" imply that Jo's old ways are quickly disappearing, and the word "glimmer" particularly evokes a feeling of hope that the tomboy in Jo will not completely dissipate with coming-of-age. But as Jo changes and her sisters come-of-age, Jo's idea of growing old and becoming "a literary spinster with a pen for a spouse" takes a dismal tone: "A family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps; when, like poor Johnson, I'm old, and can't enjoy it—independent, and don't need it" (466). Keyser suggests that the

“lesson of the female artist” that Jo learns is not unlike the lesson Alcott “supposedly learned” in her own lifetime: “to subordinate their needs for artistic expression to the needs of their families and to use their artistic talents for the benefit not only of their own families but of the family as an institution” (*Whispers* 60). The glimmer of Jo’s former self is fading fast as her path to adulthood eventually conforms to the nineteenth-century’s “prevailing patterns of women’s development in fiction” (Abel et al 4). This resignation, however, is not made without the path itself being oppositional to its outcome, as Jo struggles against her conventional vocation even as she approaches her acceptance of domesticity as the eventual wife of Professor Bhaer.

Abel et al state that in a *Bildungsroman*, “only male development is marked by a determined exploration of a social milieu, so that when a critic identifies the ‘principle characteristics’ of a ‘typical *Bildungsroman* plot,’ he inevitably describes ‘human’ development in exclusively male terms” (7). Where male protagonists in such a plot are likely to encounter “forces hostile to imaginative growth,” female protagonists are more often shown to be developing “later in life, after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found succinct” (7). *Little Women* stands apart from this assertion in many ways, one of them being that Jo’s journey begins “with the heroine’s childhood,” effectively placing the start of her development, or “education,” entirely apart from marriage and motherhood. Jo’s journey to adulthood more closely resembles a male protagonist’s *Bildungsroman* just as her girlhood habits more closely resembles a boy’s: she embarks on a “determined exploration of social milieu” as part of the non-formal education that ultimately shapes her career (8). Jo diverges from the traditional nineteenth-century heroine in that “women in nineteenth-century fiction are

generally unable to leave home for an independent life in the city,” and “when they do, they are not free to explore; more frequently, they merely exchange one domestic sphere for another” (8). Jo does not leave her domestic sphere at home only to immediately enter the domestic sphere of Professor’s Bhaer’s home as his wife; rather, Jo supports herself and her family with the living she earns from writing stories, an artistic pursuit that more closely resembles that of Wilhelm Meister than, say, Jane Eyre, who goes directly from the domestic sphere of governess to the domestic sphere of Mr. Rochester’s wife.

Abel, Hirsch and Langland state that the young male hero “traditionally roams through the city” while “the young heroine strolls down the country lane,” as “her object is not to learn how to take care of herself, but to find a place where she can be protected, often in return for taking care of others” (8). Jo does return to the March’s home, where she can be protected from the work that began to desecrate “some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character,” and she does eventually take care of Professor Bhaer as his wife and, eventually, partner, but her time spent in New York *first* enable to take care of herself and her family (Alcott, *LW* 371). Once she returns home, she immediately acquires the role of caretaker first in nursing Beth during her illness, then in occasionally looking after Meg’s children Daisy and Demi, and finally in marrying Professor Bhaer and opening their school for boys. If “feminist theories of gender difference enable new readings of female fictions of development,” then Jo’s personality and experiences prior to her marriage cannot be discounted (Abel et al 9). Her distinctive masculine voice and personal pursuits present “a distinctive female ‘I’” that “implies a distinctive value system and unorthodox development goals” (10). Southworth’s Capitola Black dons

masculine garments and behaviors because she has to if she wants to survive; for Jo, it is a personal pursuit defined “in terms of autonomy” rather than “in terms of community and empathy” (10). In Wilder’s *Little House* books, Laura not only follows Jo’s example in her development of a distinctive female “I” but takes it a step further as she enters her marriage with Almanzo Wilder, a union founded and fulfilled on equality and partnership.

Jo ultimately succumbs to her traditional feminine sphere, and is “mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence” (Alcott, *LW* 494). Jo even *announces* her entry to the sphere, telling Professor Bhaer “I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I’m out of my sphere now,—for woman’s special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens” (506). At the novel’s conclusion, Jo remembers her “castle in the air” as a “selfish, lonely and cold” prospect, asserting that her dream of writing “a good book . . . can wait” (515). The novel ends before Jo realizes her dream, but Marmee approves of her choice, wishing her daughter “no greater happiness” than that which she has currently achieved. Jo is not perhaps Abel et al’s “fully realized and individuated self who caps the journey of the *Bildungsroman*,” but that does not mean she does not “represent the developmental goals of women, or of women characters” (10-11). Her journey paves the way for Laura’s as the fully developed autonomous voice that addresses “the tensions between the assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists” (Abel et al 11).

Like Jo, Laura maintains her tomboyish habits well into adulthood, even after she’s left home and entered society as a teacher at Brewster School. In her first week of

teaching, Laura puts these habits on display when she engages in a snowball fight with her pupils during their lunch hour. Laura is described as being “quickest of all, dodging and scooping and molding the snow” as she glows warm with laughter and obvious enjoyment (Wilder, *THGY* 27). The behavior stops only when the playing grows too rough and Laura’s eldest student, Clarence, throws a particularly rough snowball. Laura realizes “that she must not play anymore,” not because she is a young woman and the behavior is unbecoming for her sex, but because she is “too small and too young,” giving Clarence an unfair advantage as well as undermining her authority as his teacher. The “unladylike” aspect to the situation never enters Laura’s head, as she assesses the situation focusing on authority, rather than conventionality.

Just as Jo reiterates to Laurie her skepticism about marriage, Laura follows suit in a conversation with her sister Carrie when she’s home for the weekend from the Brewsters’. Laurie brings up the subject of marriage with Jo because he suspects a romance between her and Professor Bhaer; likewise, Carrie’s mention of the subject follows on the heels of the budding courtship between Almanzo and Laura. Carrie opens the dialogue with the statement that perhaps Laura will get married, which would prevent her from teaching long, since she “dreadfully” hated it (*THGY* 36). Like Jo, Laura simply states “I don’t want to” on the subject of marriage, implying that she’d rather maintain her independence as a single woman teaching than as lose it as a wife and homemaker (36).

Her courtship with Almanzo does not follow a particularly romantic or steady course, as she refuses to acknowledge him as her “beau” (52), even though Almanzo begins the courtship some time before by walking Laura home from church and town

meetings in *Little Town on the Prairie*. He continues the courtship after she relocates to the Brewsters' by offering her rides home every weekend, which Laura readily accepts. However, Laura quickly establishes boundaries in the relationship by telling Almanzo that she is "only going" with him because she wants "to get home," and that once her semester of teaching completed, she will not go with him anymore (*THGY* 62). Almanzo himself acknowledges that "there's nothing in it" for him, but he continues to make the drives, even in the most disastrous and dangerous weather, simply because he enjoys "good company" (83) and "God hates a coward" (77). Their relationship may develop less romantically than is traditional, but it is ideal in establishing a potential partnership based on equality. Almanzo's determination to give Laura a ride home in deadly weather resonates with Laura's own willful mind and tenacity to never shirk from a duty or challenge, or to give up her own independence. In all likelihood, Laura would respect Almanzo more for this reason than if he were strictly motivated by romantic possibility and patriarchal chivalry.

Their equality is further established when on one of the rides, Almanzo suggests Laura drive his horses. Laura brings up, once again, how Pa has forbidden this particular activity because she is "too little and would get hurt" (84). Eventually, Laura not only drives his prized horses Prince and Lady, she also helps him break in a pair of wild colts. Laura's *Bildungsroman* follows Jo's in that she leaves her feminine sphere at home to live independently in society, with the ability to explore her life as an individual without directly entering another feminine sphere, specifically that of wife and mother. Laura's venture into society as a teacher can be argued as leaving the domestic sphere at home for the domestic sphere abroad, echoing Jane Eyre's role of governess at Thornfield Hall.

However, her role as a teacher isn't established with any traditional feminine characteristics. In Laura's own education, she has been instructed by men and women alike, adding a sense of gender equality to the role. When she engages in a snowball fight with her students she ceases not because she is "a girl" and the behavior is unbecoming to her sex, but because it will undermine her power as an authority figure. It is in this way that *These Happy Golden Years* counteracts traditional assumptions of gender norms and female protagonists in general, by applying males to female norms and aligning female values with masculine ones.

After her time with the Brewsters, Laura returns to her sphere at home with the desire to "earn some more" (*THGY* 100). Unlike Jo, Laura does not immerse herself in the family community and feminine preoccupations; neither does she look on her future as an independent woman with a melancholic gaze. Rather, she regards a future of productivity as a "full" and "pleasant" time, and she soon accepts a job sewing clothes for the town's dressmaker (100). Just as Jo's emergence into working society brought about the emergence of her romantic relationship with Professor Bhaer, Laura's entrance into the social sphere of work is also the entrance into the social romantic sphere, as her new employer, Mrs. McKee, demonstrates by telling Laura, "You will marry [Almanzo] yet" (121). Laura insists "No, indeed I won't" (121), even though she forgets that she "didn't intend to go" with him anymore and continues to accept his attentions long after her return home (92). The amount of time Laura spends with Almanzo suggests that this determination to be established as a single woman is based on her desire to maintain independence, rather than from a lack of affection for him. When Almanzo *does* try to add an element of romance to the relationship by "laying his arm along the top of the

back” of the buggy as she leans against it during a ride, so that he is “not exactly hugging” her (but not exactly *not* hugging her), Laura leans forward and shakes the buggy whip so that the colts they are training break out into a sprint (166). Almanzo does not ask Laura why she did it; instead, he asks ““You’re independent, aren’t you?”” (168). Laura’s response is a simple ““Yes”” (168). Almanzo accepts this attribute of Laura’s, and continues to pick her up for buggy rides knowing full well that she expects their relationship to be on level ground, with each of them owning equal authority. Even as Laura approaches the sphere of wife and mother, she does not accept the terms under which it is traditionally offered. If she is to accept Almanzo as a “beau,” the courtship will proceed on her terms as well as his.

Abel et al state that “the primary assumption underlying the *Bildungsroman*—the evolution of a coherent self—has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction,” but it “remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs” (13). Wilder helped create this increasingly responsive world by constructing a heroine (based on her own experience) who *chooses* marriage based on the promise of an equal partnership, both in life and love. Laura has proven that she can work for a living and do so satisfactorily; she does not need a marriage. She *does* require independence and if a marriage can offer her that, along with partnership, then her needs will be met with satisfaction, not restriction. When Laura finally drives a pair of horses on her own (with Almanzo’s encouragement), Almanzo comments that the townspeople stared because “they never expected to see a woman driving that horse” (*THGY* 199). Whatever few restrictions Pa might have laid on Laura as a child because of her sex, Almanzo encourages Laura to follow her own inclinations

as an independent adult. Although Pa reacts “sharply” (208) to Laura’s driving Almanzo’s horses, he does not try to prohibit her from doing it again. With Almanzo’s help, though not necessarily because of Almanzo, Laura at last reaches the level of autonomy she has sought throughout her childhood and young adult life. She demonstrates this autonomy by entering an engagement with Almanzo on her own terms, and Almanzo expects no less. Laura tells Almanzo that her agreement to marrying anyone relies on two elements: “Who” offers her an engagement ring, and “the ring” itself (214). This is quite a progressive demand for a heroine of her time and place, and Almanzo does not shirk from the stipulations. Laura approves of both suitor and ring, and the two enter an engagement.

Laura does not abandon her priorities of pursuing work and financial security once she enters the engagement, rather she is ambitious. She tells Pa that she would not mind teaching again, if only she could have a larger school, “one with more pay” (233). Laura does not particularly like teaching school, but she does like maintaining steady work. Once she marries Almanzo, she can replace teaching with the farm work she found so satisfactory during her youth, only now she will be working alongside her husband, rather than helping her father. Almanzo promises Laura that when they are married, she ““will be through teaching school, for good!”” To which Laura replies: ““I suppose you mean, for better or worse. But it better be for good”” (238). Laura is aware that she will gain from this union a future filled with work that she enjoys, companionship, partnership, and economic stability; her comment hints that she is entering this marriage with the hope that it will improve her life.

And it doesn't work. As she approaches her new "sphere," Laura maintains her tomboyish tactics as much as ever. After witnessing a scene of hilarity during a church service, Laura is so overcome with suppressed laughter that Mary feels it necessary to whisper "behave yourself" to her unseemly sister. Mary, true to form, chastises Laura, asking if she "will ever learn to behave properly" (*THGY* 262). Laura owns that she will not, and suggests that Mary finally give her up "as a hopeless case" (262). Laura has reached her full maturity, and she has conformed to the traditional ideals of neither home nor society. True, Laura enters a marriage at eighteen, as young respectable women were expected to do, but she maintains stipulations for the marriage as well as the engagement. Before she agrees to marry Almanzo, she asks that the "promise to obey" be removed from the ceremony, telling her fiancé: "I am not going to say I will obey you. . . . I cannot make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment" (269). In requesting that the word "obey" be removed from their vows, Laura establishes a model for marriage based on equality, paving the way for the future of women by establishing her own needs in a society that formerly constrained them.

That Alcott denied Jo a successful and financially independent career as a sensationalist writer in favor of a more traditional marriage to Professor Bhaer does not mean that *Little Women* cannot be defended as a progressive work of pre-feminist literature. Elizabeth Langland's "Female Stories of Experience" demonstrates that Alcott's *Work* "can reveal *Little Women's* submerged plot, which uses the novel's multiple protagonists to challenge the overt emphasis on marriage as female destiny by lovingly depicting maternal and sororal relationships that foster adulthood" (qtd. in Abel

et al 16). Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer seems to emphasize more the descent from Jo's individuality and tomboyish joys of adolescence than her contented rise to conventional womanhood, leaving the reader wanting more, looking for more, and perhaps eventually writing more. J. K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, states in her interview "The Women of Harry Potter" with Warner Bros. that the courageous, bookish heroine, Hermione Granger, is an "exaggeration" of herself as a young girl, and that when she was a young girl, she related to Jo March, who was "a lifeline" in sea of "slim pickings" when it came to literature with non-traditional heroines (Rowling). She discusses the process of writing Hermione's transition from girlhood to womanhood, stating, "so much is expected of you as you become a woman, and often you are asked to sacrifice parts of you in becoming a girl. . . . Hermione doesn't. . . . In creating Hermione, I created a girl who was a heroine but she wasn't sexy. Nor was she the girl in glass who is entirely sexless. She's a real girl" (Rowling). In the character Mrs. Weasley, Rowling addresses the claim that women's autonomy and ability is diminished by marriage and children when discussing a battle scene in *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*:

I consider myself to be a feminist, but I always wanted to show that just because a woman has made a choice, a free choice, to say, 'Well, I'm going to raise my family, and that's going to be my choice. I may go back to a career, I may have a career part time, but that's my choice,' doesn't mean that *that's all* she can do. . . . Molly Weasley comes out and proves herself the equal of any warrior on that battle field. (Rowling)

Laura's journey in the Little House books offers what Jo's readers perhaps were lacking: a heroine following the same formula, the same journey, but establishing a future

for herself that does not compromise her individuality, her right to choose her individuality, and a right to choose her future based on that individuality, whether it conforms to traditional expectations, such as marriage, or not. As Abel, Hirsch and Langland state:

The range of women writers—mainstream and minority, British, American, European, and Latin American—who return to fictions of development testifies to the enduring power of the genre. Honoring this variety, our collection strives for an expansive rather than an exclusive picture of a female tradition. (18)

Alcott's Jo March in *Little Women* and Wilder's Laura Ingalls in *Little House* provide contemporary feminist writers and scholars with "the most salient form of literature" (13) for women about women, paving the way for such contemporary heroines as Cassie Logan, Harriet the Spy, Hermione Granger, and Katniss Everdeen. As the portrayal of the All-American girl continues to evolve through literary heroines, from Victorian angel-in-the-house, to athletic tomboy, to plain Jane intellectual, the definitions and restrictions of gender continue to diminish, thus promoting "the only way to be truly happy," which is to say "this is who I am, and I'm not going to pretend to be otherwise" (Rowling).

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