

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B HL

Title:

The March Sisters represent various forms that autonomy can take, suggesting that a sense of independence may evolve differently among individuals despite their shared backgrounds and the constraints imposed by social norms.

How do the March sisters in *Little Women* navigate and reinterpret nineteenth-century social expectations individually, and what factors shape their differing paths toward independence?

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Introduction

Little Women is a coming-of-age novel that takes place in Massachusetts, America, in the nineteenth century, written by Louisa May Alcott. It displays the journey of maturation and self-development of each March sister; Amy, Meg, Beth, and Jo, as they fight against the difficulties that come along with the constraining and rigid societal expectations upon women. The sisters' journey of economic and emotional independence is shaped by artistic ambitions, self-awareness, and the era's social, economic, and political features. Through negotiating their desires with society's expectations, they form a personalized autonomy, within the parameters of being a little woman.

Alcott outlines each March sister's journey of independence through their experiences, as they face different aspects of life's realities, causing them to develop a uniquely shaped sense of autonomy. The American Civil War has a huge impact on their lives, as it disrupts the economy, social structure and particularly women's role in society. With the emergence of these changes, the March sisters are facing challenges in adapting, particularly to poverty. Collectively, these factors make their journey inextricable and constrain their process of self-discovery; however, through sisterhood and the guidance of their mother, Marmee, they overcome these challenges. The March sisters are inspired by Louisa May Alcott's life (*"Blending Fiction"*); therefore, the portrayal of the era's features is based on real-life experiences. In this way, it creates a clear and coherent image in the reader's mind. Each sister's distinct personality, ambitions, and strategies shape their evolution of exploring and reinterpreting what freedom means to them. Apart from their differences, they aim to live a pleasant and purposeful life by devising a path that aligns with their autonomy.

Through writing my extended essay, I will be examining the question: **“How do the March sisters in *Little Women* navigate and reinterpret nineteenth-century social expectations individually, and what factors shape their differing paths toward independence? ”**

For constructing this extended essay, I will be following these steps. The novel *Little Women* will be used as the primary source, including both parts, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, with quotes to support the essay's research question. On top of that, scholarly reviews and critical interpretations will be used to analyse the era's distinguishing traits and to add depth to the essay by including other perspectives, listed under the subtitle “Bibliography”. “English Common Law” and “American Civil War” will be researched through articles to gain an understanding of the era’s regulations and events, in addition to how these affect social structure and the journey of the sisters. Furthermore, ideologies such as “Cult of Domesticity” and “Existential feminism” will be explored to form a framework of womanhood, and related representatives and demonstrations will be provided. Scholarly perspectives will be used to contextualize autonomy as a complex, multi-process path; thus, a nuanced approach will be adopted to the determinants. Finally, the 2019 film adaptation of “*Little Women*” will be examined to further investigate the era’s social structure and the extent to which each sister is affected by it. Ultimately, all gathered evidence will be synthesized and critically analysed to construct a coherent and insightful argument in the Extended Essay.

The Sexist Structure of Nineteenth-Century Society

The social structure of the era has a vital impact on the March sisters' journey of independence. The novel *Little Women* is set in Concord, Massachusetts, approximately between the years 1861 and 1867 (*"Little Women: Context"*), during the post-Civil War period, followed by the early Reconstruction era. The idealized concept of womanhood was grounded in the nineteenth century's "Cult of Domesticity," (Nagel, 5) an ideological framework for upper and middle-class white women which scaled women's value through piety, purity, submissiveness, and domestic labour (*"Cult of Domesticity"*). In this era, women were obligated to follow a fixed path in their lives despite their will, principally due to societal pressure and ideologies such as the Cult of Domesticity. The novel's protagonist, Jo, stands out for her rebellious nature, especially against the constraints on women that limit their independence. She opposes the social norms that underestimate women's capacity and the stereotypes that suggest women are only responsible for getting married and having children.

"Women have minds and souls as well as just hearts, ambitions and talents as well as beauty, and I'm sick of being told that love is all a woman is fit for." (*Little Women*)

As a consequence of the Civil War, America's economy and society were changing. The traditional economy was disrupted, leading to the emergence of an industrial-based economy. These changes significantly affected women's roles in society, particularly in lower and middle-class communities, creating new job opportunities for them (*"Women and the Early Industrial Revolution"*). In *Little Women*, Richard, the father of the March family, had to serve in the military during the war; thereby leaving the responsibility of gaining money to support the family to Jo and Meg.

Women were victims of this patriarchal society; while their husbands were working, they were responsible for doing housework and taking care of their children, which made them essential components of homemaking. According to the English Common Law, the family was entirely under men's control; women lacked property, marriage, political, and educational rights (*“Coverture and Economic Gender Inequality”*). In the movie version of *Little Women*, Amy reveals that, in the patriarchal marriage system, women couldn't have a voice or a choice in relation to the bit of money that they earn, due to the economic dependence on their husbands:

“Well, I’m not a poet. I’m just a woman. And as a woman, there’s no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don’t, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married” (*Little Women*)

Through cinematic performance, the audience gains an understanding of the self-esteem erosion that Amy encounters due to the lack of access to financial independence for women. Additionally, in the movie, this scene demonstrates that women's autonomy is partially limited due to the societal structure and the laws that prevent them from supporting themselves financially.

Resistance to Patriarchal Norms through Sisterhood

The development of each sister's autonomy is largely influenced by their sisterly bond, as their conflicts, dialogues, and support for one another encourage them to express themselves freely and to become more aware of their desires. In addition, by uniting with one another, they resist the oppressive social norms, thereby allowing them to embrace individuality instead of conforming to stereotypes. Alcott's rebellion against the era's prescriptive norms, as mentioned in her novel *“An Old-Fashioned*

Girl” mirrors how the sisters support each other in maintaining a life lived for themselves, nurturing their paths towards their ambitions, rather than fitting into a stereotype:

“I believe that it is as much a right and duty for women to do something with their lives as for men, and we are not going to be satisfied with such frivolous parts as you give us” (*Alcott 214*)

This declaration by Alcott suggests that her knowledge framework is grounded in a free-spirited, rebellious stance against constraints. Jo is a semi-autobiographical character based on Alcott (*“Blending Fiction”*), suggesting that the foundation of Jo’s rebellious nature is directly inspired by Louis May Alcott.

Marmee as the Guidance for Building A Path Towards Independence

The March family became a part of the lower middle class after the Civil War. The father of the house, Richard, was absent due to serving in the army and later due to his illness. As a result, Marmee took in charge of the family financially and morally, which inspired the girls to be self-sufficient as women at an early age.

“I want my daughters (...) To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives. But I want them to be strong, independent women, and not selfish and thoughtless ones.” (Alcott,93)

This declaration of Marmee captures the moral foundation that guides their journey of self-exploration and maturing. Through an existential feminist framework, Marmee’s guidance, as argued

by Simone de Beauvoir, cultivates the idea that womanhood is shaped by experience and moral choice rather than by a fixed identity. (*Moi* 263)

Jo's Journey of Independence Through Authorship

Throughout the novel, Jo is portrayed as the eccentric sister for disobeying and rebelling against the normative patriarchal society of 19th-century America. Jo, as the heroine of the story (*"Little Women: A Feminist Study"* 26), opposes the norm that women are complementary figures to men, reflecting her strong desire for self-reliance and freedom.

"What could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others?" (*Alcott*, 409)

In Jo's maturation journey, self-exploration and expression is the keys for constructing a framework of her independence. In the beginning, she views authorship as a tool for supporting herself and her family financially.

"I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favourite dream"
(*Alcott*, 134)

Jo's pursuit of authorship is not merely a professional aspiration but also a vehicle for economic independence, especially after seeing herself as the provider in the absence of their father. Jo's commitment to writing forms a moral and intellectual autonomy, in which she finds freedom and self-

expression without external compulsion, echoing Emily Dickinson's words, "I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word. Sometimes I write one, and I look at it, until it begins to shine." (Dickinson, Letter 268). She resists the ideals of traditional gender roles and refuses to be confined to the women's sphere, feeling an affinity for being a "boy". Jo doesn't enjoy being called "Miss March" or "Josephine" (*Alcott*, 5), as they sound feminine to her. Additionally, her sisters mock her for being a "tomboy" and for using slang, since they oppose her ideals by having a longing for being ladylike and living an aristocratic lifestyle.

"It's bad enough being a girl when I like boys' games, work, and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse now, because I'm dying to go fight with Papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like an old woman!" (*Alcott*, 5)

Jo's words reveal her rebellion against being a woman, with her liberty constrained and forced to do domestic work instead of joining the army. This statement further reveals that, despite being surrounded by women who do domestic work, embrace femininity, and aspire to live an opulent life, this doesn't appeal to her; instead, she finds this lifestyle useless, comparing it to that of an "old woman". (*Sentana* 9)

She nourishes her free spirit by avoiding to be captivated by the society's stereotypes and making independent choices. One significant event is when she publishes her short stories without mentioning her family. The motivation to keep it a secret from everyone could be to succeed on her own terms without seeking anyone's approval, as well as society's prejudice. During that era, sensational fiction was considered an unsuitable genre, especially for women to write, due to women's lack of radicality, and she was aware that engaging in this genre might entail social pressure (*Maunder* 5). Jo March's definition of independence mirrors that of the real-life author Margaret Fuller, who wrote "Woman in

the Nineteenth Century". She was an author who rejected the constraining social norms of the nineteenth century and instead nourished her intellectual and financial capacity through authorship. Her statement in her book, "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely" (Fuller 76), mirrors Jo's nature, indicating that she is a real feminist figure.

Jo's journey of redefining her intention through writing and independence changes when she receives harsh criticism from Professor Bhaer; he criticizes Jo for the moral quality of her work, saying, "not true, not good, and not useful." (Alcott, 334)

"They are trash and will soon be worse trash if I go on, for each is more sensational than the last. (...) I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money. " (Alcott, 335)

After receiving a realistic feedback from Professor Bhaer, she understands the value of her work is diminished due to the absence of moral and ethical values. This leads Jo to shift her framework of autonomy, especially after realizing that financial aspirations were worthless compared to her moral values. Later on, Marmee further explicates that shifting her artificial tone into an authentic and heartfelt one would help her to express herself more clearly and gain a more realistic understanding of success based on moral values.

"Humour and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thoughts of fame and money, and put your heart into it, my daughter. " (Alcott, 410)

Marmee's words can be interpreted as success being a broad concept that can take different forms, and its scope can vary for each person; thus, it shouldn't be narrowed down to materialistic values. Finally, Jo gains emotional and intellectual independence after freeing herself from the social pressure that limited her artistic self-conception and inventive nature.

Amy March: The Refinement of Ambition and the Pursuit of Independency and Self-

Determination

Amy is the youngest sister who lives life authentically and purposefully by embracing society's expectations for women rather than rejecting them completely. Initially, she despises poverty due to attending to a school with many wealthy girls, thus leading her to have materialistic ideals at a young age. Amy's conception of independence undergoes several stages; initially, it is mediated by external validation of achievement, particularly through materialistic and superficial goals. Amy envies Meg, who attends The Vanity Fair organized by the wealthy Moffat family, as she earns the opportunity to experience luxury and high society.

"I wish I were going to have a fine time and wear all these nice things," (Alcott, 79)

Another key aspect of Amy's early immaturity is her tendency to seek approval and admiration from others to feel a sense of self-worth and independence. Initially, she wants to pursue art, however this desire is motivated by fame and recognition instead of pure passion.

"I have ever so many wishes; but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine picture, and be the best artist in the world." (Alcott, 135)

Amy's definition of independence transforms when she visits Europe with Aunt March and further explores her artistic talent. This experience leads her to realize that discipline and self-knowledge are important values for living a liberated and blissful life, whereas outward defiance and social admiration are insufficient.

"Talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a commonplace dauber, so I don't intend to try anymore," (Alcott, 381)

After criticizing herself, Amy realizes that she should not allow herself to be misled by society, where success is a simplified concept. She recognizes her shortcomings in art and chooses self-respect and honesty rather than fame or admiration. Realizing this leads her to develop an independence grounded in self-awareness and moral integrity, and in addition, she redefines success on her own terms. However, Amy doesn't completely give up on her ambitions; instead, she starts building up new ones such as constructing a family.

"I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes or confine myself to helping others fulfil their dreams of beauty. I've begun to model a figure of a baby..." (Alcott, 461)

Amy decides to marry Laurie without seeking wealth or success, suggesting that their companionship is established through genuine understanding and emotional authenticity. Their marriage is grounded on values such as love and happiness rather than an economic transaction; even so, Amy acknowledges social norms by marrying a wealthy man. Thus, indicating that she embraces the social norms rather than rejecting them. She admits:

“ If they love one another, it doesn’t matter a particle how old they are nor how poor. Women should never marry for money...” (*Alcott, 429*)

She defines independence through an existential feminist approach (*Rahmawati and Anjany, 101*), choosing to create meaning for herself through conscious freedom and responsibility. Amy’s autonomy resembles Simone de Beauvoir’s claim in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (*Beauvoir 283*):

“I’m not afraid of storms, for I’m learning how to sail my ship” (Alcott, 428)

This metaphor may signify that Amy has absolute control over her life; she can remain strong and resistant against life's harsh realities or society's rigid expectations, and that she does so by following her own path without relying on others. In this way, as in Beauvoir's existential feminism ideology, her independence is not innate; she constructs it through choices and self-expression, and this emphasizes her self-sufficiency (*Tuaderu 43*). At the end, Amy negotiates an independence model, in which she navigates social norms to her advantage and balances her artistic ambitions and aspiration for creating a family.

Negotiating Affection and Self-Sufficiency: Meg March’s Path to Independence

Meg is the eldest sister of the family who prioritizes living in comfort and luxury, with a family of her own and a rich husband, rather than pursuing an ambition or a goal.

“I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things- nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture...” (Alcott, 134)

Meg encounters the high society and their superficial ideas by attending the Vanity Fair organized by the Moffat family. In this event, the upper-class guests praise themselves by wearing expensive dresses, gossiping, and flirting. Therefore, it symbolizes wealth, elegance, and sophistication, which appeal to Meg. When she arrives at the Moffat residence, Meg admires their luxurious lifestyle, belongings, and the elegance of the occupants, particularly of Annie Moffat's possessions.

"The more she saw Annie Moffatt's pretty things, the more she envied her and sighed to be rich." (Alcott, 81)

In this event, the Moffat sisters treat Meg as a "novelty" by dressing her in finery, accessories, and involving her in gossip. In consequence, she feels humiliated and displeased, since these spoils are opposed to her moral values; thus shifting her perspective on admiration. She still enjoyed admiration, but in this case, the attention she got wasn't because of her nature or character; instead, it was purely because of her borrowed dress, shoes, and accessories. This led her to realize that she had suppressed her values and identity while seeking validation and approval from others by conforming to upper-class standards of beauty. When Meg returned home, she confessed her mistake with shame to her mother and sisters:

"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 out of me." (Alcott, 91)

Meg's own definition of independence was finally formed when she revealed her love for John and defended him to her aunt, who claimed that she shouldn't marry him because he was poor. At that moment, Meg became aware of her self-authorizing and courageous part, which made her feel independent:

“Meg hardly knew herself, she felt so independent and brave—so glad to defend John, and assert her right to love him.” (Alcott, 215)

Her confession implies that she chose love over money despite social norms about marriage; she also asserted that she felt independent when she stood up for her own will rather than conform to those norms. In the end, she constructed an understanding of independence in terms of self-expression and, self-adequacy as she doesn't rely on others approval to feel valued or strong.

The Unchosen Path of Beth: A Journey Without Independence

Beth March is the sister who stands out for her stability, shyness, and emotional sensitivity. Beth is portrayed as the ideal Victorian woman through the novel. As Shannon Hoff argues, during this era, women who were quiet and isolated were considered as the “Angel in the House” (Hoff 34) , making them the ideal Victorian women, similarly to Beth. This was because marriage and motherhood were fatal to Victorian women's lives, and selflessness and quiet service were ideal qualities in a wife.

Beth's journey to find her true self is not driven by ambitions or goals; she enjoys helping others and takes pleasure in doing so. In the novel, Beth's nature is defined as:

“There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices.” (Alcott, 38)

Even on her deathbed, Beth announces that her happiness and purpose are fulfilled, knowing that her presence has brought peace and love to her family.

“And now, when it’s too late to begin even to the better, it’s such a comfort to know that someone loves me so much and feels as if I’d helped them” (Alcott, 393)

This moment also captures the element that forms Beth’s identity: her relational dependence on her loved ones, rather than self-determination, which suggests that she limits her independence by spending all her time being a great sister and daughter, and still not feeling enough, as she wants to be “even better.” Beth decided to go over to Hummels to offer comfort and advice to the sick baby, even though she was feeling unwell. Consequently, she caught the illness, leading to an incapacity in her physical abilities; her “cheeks were very thin, and her hands seemed too feeble to hold.” (Alcott, 175) This event implies that she prioritizes helping others over shaping her own path, revealing that her independence isn’t taken away by someone but is suppressed by herself through selflessness.

Through her sickness, Beth was feeling miserable as she saw all her family members being “strong and full of happy plans” (Alcott, 393) while she didn’t have the opportunity to find her path in life. She kept this a secret so that she wouldn’t frighten anyone. Her action reveals that she internalized selflessness to the point of self-erasure, reinforcing that her independence isn’t limited only by her physical inability but also by minimizing her worth, constraining her from living a life dedicated to herself. Beth approaches happiness differently than her sisters, reconciling a fulfilling life with love instead of achievement, as stated in her last words to Jo:

“You will be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the World, for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go.” (Alcott, 393)

This moment may reveal that Beth's definition of independence is about giving love to others and maintaining emotional connection with them, reinforcing the idea that autonomy can take different forms and it can be achieved through unique ways.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the presentation of female independence and its dimensions through the journeys of the March sisters in *Little Women*. Alcott portrays independence as a concept that should not be reduced to a single form; it can be interpreted and applied differently and shaped by experiences and ideologies; therefore, it is multidimensional. Marmee plays an enormous role in the March sisters' lives by guiding them to be morally mature and grateful, as well as being independent, causing their journey to be interconnected. However, each sister responds to the limiting social norms and the repercussions of the Civil War differently, thus diverging their path of redefining independence. Additionally, the novel challenges the rigid portrayal of womanhood and persuades readers to recognize that autonomy is not a single destination but a process with multiple, individual paths. Overall, despite their differences, the March sisters' autonomy ultimately emerges through the cultivation of self-sufficiency.

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