

## Representation of Gender Stereotyping in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*: Endorsement of Traditional Gender Roles

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### ABSTRACT

This research discusses how the characters in the novel *Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott eventually submit themselves to the stereotypical role of women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when in reality American women were protesting the ideology of 'separate spheres' in accordance to the traditional gender stereotype that they faced. The research applies the sociological approach to uncover the connection between the literary work and the social condition of the era and to find out how the gender roles affect the characters of the March girls, supported by the theory of children literature. The primary data used in this research are the excerpts taken from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and some supporting data are taken from academic journals. The research focuses on the characters of the March Girls' actions and dialogues that show submissive behavior, in contrast to the efforts and movement of the women during that era who were protesting the ideology of 'separate spheres' that resulted in inequality. The result of the research concludes that *Little Women* seems to be written only as a reproduction of traditional gender values, this matter contradicts with what the American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century struggled for.

**Keywords:** *gender stereotype, gender roles, separate spheres, American women.*

### INTRODUCTION

The study of literature covers the major forms of poetry, drama, and novel, but there is more than one concept to define literature because its definition changes from time to time. Literature can be defined as a body of writing that aims to be creative. It includes forms of writing which deliberately and creatively experiment with language in order to suggest images and ideas which engage the reader's imagination. Literature describes and clarifies a reality, it functions as a mirror that reflects the culture, civilization, norms, and the perspectives of the people in a certain era,

which is why each literature work, written by different authors at different periods of time has its own characteristics according to the social condition and historical context. Literature is then classified into many genres, which according to M. H. Abrams (1999) in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, is a term of the French origin, derived from the Latin word *genus* which translated as 'type' or 'kind'. Genre denotes the types of classes of literature and the classification of literary works were based on many variables except by time or place. The novel studied in this research belongs to the genre of children's literature because it does not contain a heavy plot, no difficult conflicts, and the

diction chosen is easy to understand. Children's literature itself as defined by Peter Hunt (1999) in *Understanding Children's Literature* refers to literary works created especially for children in order to convey emotional and moral values.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, an American author, Louisa May Alcott, successfully presented a coming-of-age novel entitled *Little Women* that depicts the story of four young siblings as they face together the struggle of girlhood to womanhood, promoting the traditional gender roles of women during that time to their children audience. The book was initially published into two volumes. *Little Women* was published in 1868 and successfully won the hearts of the middle-class American girls during that time for its relatable characters and situations. A sequel, *Good Wives*, was published a year after. Nowadays, both *Little Women* and *Good Wives* are published under one title, *Little Women*, because it expresses how women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in America, was not considered as significant as men, hence 'little'.

As a product of children's literature, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* delivers the values of traditional gender roles of women in America during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the characters of the March girls (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy), roles of which men were cast as rational, strong, protective, and decisive. Women, on the other hand, were cast as the opposite (Tyson, 2015, p. 85).

Stephanie Foote (2005), a professor from University of Illinois wrote *Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott* discussing the events in the novel where anger and repression are generally ignored, telling the readers, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that women must not have and must act less on negative emotions. This matter made the readers lose the opportunity to inquire responses that include anger and resentment, in order to understand the construction of a particular kind of 'little women'.

This study aims at explaining the process of gender typing in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Seen through the characters' actions and dialogues, it is clear that the March sisters faced some challenges in trying to fit in into the society, especially for Jo who thinks that some femininity

expectations are a heavy burden to bear. Though it appears as if Jo's character initially opposed the traditional gender roles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, she eventually gave in to the values of a 'true woman' which means conforming to the traditional gender role. Factors, such as the March parents' guidance and how women at that time were not considered as significant as men, influence the process of gender typing of the March sisters in the novel and this matter is examined in order to find out how eventually the March girls submit into the gender stereotype during that era and how it affected their characters throughout the story, thus endorsing the traditional gender values to the readers.

However, the establishment for the characters of March sisters is effortless for Alcott, because it serves as the epitome of Louisa May Alcott's sisters in real life. The four siblings carry very different personalities despite coming from the same nuclear family. Louisa represented herself as Jo, the second daughter of the March family who was boyish and outspoken. Anna, the oldest in the Alcott family is portrayed as Meg. Lizzie is the quiet and perfect Beth, while the youngest of the Alcott sisterhood, May, is the dandy Amy. With a little amount of exaggeration and cleaning up of the rough edges, Alcott had finally settled the cast of the characters for her novel (Cheever, 2011, p. 480).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Astuti (2016) wrote *Theodore Laurence's Character Development as seen in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women*. Astuti's paper analyses the character development of Theodore Laurence using objective approach. The aim of this study is to understand the character development of Theodore Laurence, Josephine March's best friend, from time to time since the beginning to the end of the novel.

Johar (2012) wrote *Josephine March's Character Development from Immaturity to Maturity as Seen in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women* in which she uses objective approach. The approach is applied to the character of Josephine March. Johar's research aims to understand the character development of the main character in the novel, Josephine March, from time to time showing

how she has grown from an immature young woman to a mature woman.

Laire (2008) wrote *Little Women, a Feminist Study*. Her paper presents two main issues themes which are the tension between the true self and the patriarchal assumptions, and the marriage issues. Laire investigates Jo's literary career as she tried to find out whether Jo and Louisa both suffered from an anxiety of authorship, she then discussed the significance of marriage in the novel since Laire's research aims to study the female individuality in the novel.

Setiowati (2007) wrote *Failure in Gaining Equality as Depicted in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women and Good Wives*. The aim of Setiowati's study is to analyze the novel as the work of art that marks the fight for women's rights and the correlation with the society in the period. She applied the dynamic structuralism for her study, stating that the analysis explores the depth of the novel as a work of art through its inner structure, and at the same time also relates it to the historical background, Louisa's life and the social background of women in that era.

Widyaningtyas (2002) wrote *Josephine's Independence and Self-Sacrifice for the Family as the Reflection of Louisa May Alcott's Life in Little Women*. Widyaningtyas' aim in this study is to show the reflection of Louisa May Alcott's life and experiences in *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. It is intended in particular to show the depiction of Josephine's character which was written based on the author's own character.

Lastly, Wulandari (2000) wrote *Feminism Seen in Alcott's Little Women*, which analyses the feminism's reflection through the main characters. The result of this study shows that feminism appears through the four main characters – Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth – and their roles in society.

Most of the previous researches discussed the development of a certain character, or how much the character resembles the writer, and also the starts of feminism that appears as a result of patriarchal ideology. However, the present study focuses on the process of gender typing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research applies the sociological approach since it discusses the characters' progress in understanding their gender role and eventually submitting themselves to be an example of a gender stereotype with the consideration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century female role. The sociological approach explores the relationship between the literary piece and the society. It analyzes the social content of literary works, which made quite sense to call this approach a "connect-the-dots approach" as it connects the social, cultural, economic, and even the political situations to a work of literature (Rapaport, 2011, p. 5)

Since the genre of this book is considered to be children's literature, therefore the theory of children's literature is also taken into account in analyzing how in the midst of the start of the first wave of feminism, Louisa May Alcott endorsed traditional gender values through her novel which does not convey the message of women empowerment.

Besides, this study employs several theories about gender and sex. People are sometimes confused by the difference between sex and gender. According to Helgeson (2017), sex refers to the biological categories of female and male, categories which are distinguished by genes, chromosomes, and hormones. Culture has no influence on one's sex. Sex is a relatively stable category that is not easily changed, although recent technology has allowed people to change their biological sex. Gender, by contrast, is a much more fluid category. It refers to the social categories distinguished from one another by a set of psychological features and role attributes that society has assigned to the biological category of sex (p. 3).

Gender typing is the process by which children acquire not only a gender identity but also the motives, values, and behaviors considered appropriate in their culture for members of their biological sex (Shaffer, 2012, p. 240). The research on gender typing traditionally focused on three

separate but interrelated topics which are: (1) the development of gender identity, or the knowledge that one is either a boy or a girl and that gender is an unchanging attribute; (2) the development of gender-role stereotypes, or ideas about what males and females are supposed to be like; and lastly (3) the development of gender-typed patterns of behavior—that is, the child’s tendencies to select same-sex playmates and to favor same-sex activities over those normally associated with the other sex (Shaffer, 2012, p. 249).

## METHODS

The data for this research were taken from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. The actions and dialogues of the characters of the March girls serves as the focus as well as the primary data of the research, while other secondary data are taken from some academic papers and articles. The intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the novel are examined to determine which actions, thoughts, or dialogues best suit the situation of how the March girls acquire gender role through the gender typing process, and how eventually they became submissive to the traditional gender role, endorsing an idea that during the late 19th century was something that held American women back from claiming the rights they deserve.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In correspondence with the objectives of the study, the characterization of the March girls and the social condition of the late 19th century holds the most important aspect in analyzing what Louisa May Alcott tried to deliver through her novel. American women during the late 19th century faced a lot of challenges in trying to break the belief of domesticity so that they could put themselves in both the domestic and public spheres.

American women in the late 19th century were commonly married in their early to mid-20s to much older men because it reinforced what was considered ‘natural’ hierarchy between both sexes. Marriage is where the domesticity lies for women,

as George Burnap stated, it is the sphere for which women were originally intended and exactly fitter to adorn and bless, as they make a solace out of their homes (Burnap, as cited in Evans, 1997, p. 69). This being said, it could be concluded that during that era, women were assumed to not having anything better to do than attending their home. They were systematically discouraged from obtaining higher education, joining certain professions, and running businesses except as helpmates to their husbands (Kuersten, 2003, p. 17). These discouragements were due to the gender stereotype which was constructed by the society, where the image of ‘true woman’ means that females should remain in the domestic sphere, taking care of the needs of their husbands and children.

Actually, during the near end of the Civil War, American women were affected either directly or indirectly by the challenges and changes. Movements on women paving their way beyond the home realm were starting, but most were too caught up in being wives and mothers to participate actively (Massey, 1994, p. 3). Those who took part of the movement slowly gave light to women’s rights. Until the end of the war, an ever-increasing number of women becoming economically self-sufficient and better educated. These women, as quoted from Maria Weston Chapman, had “leaped from their spheres”. Some of these women were classified as strong-minded crusaders for woman’s rights and they were exceedingly noisy, while the others only showed signs of being restless but by no means rebellious, and the over-whelming majority were completely indifferent to the movement (Chapman, as cited in Massey, 1994, p. 3-4).

Those who embarked on the different sphere had obviously become more educated and changes were made in the history of America. Thousands of women in the North and the South joined volunteer brigades and signed up to work as nurses. Nearly twenty thousand women worked more directly for the Union war effort. Working class white women and free and enslaved African-American women worked as laundresses, cooks and matrons, and some three thousand middle-class white women worked as nurses. The activist Dorothea Dix, the superintendent of Army nurses, put out a call for responsible, maternal volunteers who would not distract the troops or behave in unseemly or

unfeminine ways, one of the most famous of these Union nurses was Louisa May Alcott.

Since the number of educated women increased, the number of women who took a leap out of the domestic sphere increased too. Such matter made the demand for women in several work fields elevated, including teachers. This case evoked the stereotype of profession, for example, the teaching profession were then seen more of a profession for women. Of course, challenges like unequal payment were faced by these women because after all women were still seen weaker than men. Not only those who worked as a teacher, women who worked as factory labors experienced the same treatment. These women were not allowed to use their own money, even when they earned it. They had to act as obedient daughters for their fathers, so they hesitated if they should use their hard-earned salaries for their own needs (Evans, 1997, p. 138).

More and more women entered the professional world in the Second American Industrial Revolution era after the Civil War. Meaning, more mothers act as working mothers, usually these mothers work as secretaries, writers, nurses, governesses, or, for women of the lower class, as maids. Even though they were finally allowed to be in the public sphere, they still have responsibilities inside the domestic sphere (Evans, 1997, p. 140).

However, *Little Women's* author, Louisa May Alcott, did not use her platform to promote the spirit of breaking boundaries for the purpose of providing a better life for women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, she endorsed the traditional gender roles instead, a traditional idea where women need to remain as being pious, pure, and submissive in order to be considered as a respected being.

### **Gender Typing Turns to Gender Stereotype: The Experience of March Girls**

As a product of the society, gender roles reflect the gender stereotype which the society categorize and respond to members of each gender. It has long been an issue because the generalized view or the preconception on the characteristics or attributes that males and females should possess or perform tend to limit the capacity of how an

individual could develop their personal abilities, pursue professional careers, or as simple as making their own choices in what to do with their lives. Sometimes gender stereotyping resulted in the violation of human rights and fundamental freedom, which is why American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century started to make a move and take a leap out of the domestic sphere to break the stereotype, the traditional idea that women were regarded as beings less than and weaker than men, that they were incapable of accomplishing many things that men could.

The causal process of gender typing until it developed into gender stereotype were portrayed by Louisa May Alcott through the characters of her novel, *Little Women*. However, the experiences that Louisa's characters went through does not exactly portray the social condition, especially the struggles that American women faced during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the process of gender typing, the March girls, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, were very much influenced by the teaching of their parents, especially Marmee (Mrs. March), who taught them the values that women should possess in order to be perceived as coming from a respectable family by the society.

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved, and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. (Alcott, 2008, p. 97)

Marmee's statement supports the argument that the biggest milestone in a women's life is getting married, as she described it to be a 'beautiful experience'. Her statement also implies that women were deemed to be weaker than men because the sweetest thing that could happen to a woman is being chosen by a man. By engraving the idea of "little woman" in the minds of their daughters, the March parents successfully raised four children that believed women's duty is centered in the home.

The girls then develop the understanding of the roles that were constructed for them by the

society. Jo, the second born of the March girls, was the only one among the girls who initially showed disinvestment of the gender role that she should conform along the development of the story. However, Louisa May Alcott does not intend for Jo to be the candidate among her characters that promotes a breakthrough from the traditional gender role. Once she had found Professor Bhaer on her journey in New York, they got married and not so long after, Jo March subscribed to the traditional roles that was taught to her since her childhood, fulfilling the expectation of the society that women are to be married and are responsible in making their home as comfortable as possible for the delight of their husbands.

The other members of the March girls did not experience a twist like Jo, they had no doubt in obeying the roles that were already constructed for them. Marmee's first born, Meg, was married to a lad named John Brooke, who formerly tutors Theodore Laurence privately in his home. Louisa May Alcott describes marriage life has made Meg grow womanly in character and wiser in housewifely arts (Alcott, 2008, p. 226), which fits the characteristics of a 'true woman'. Meg puts her ambitions and hopes of living in luxury because the man she married was not a wealthy man, and made herself busy only in the domestic sphere, determined to be a model housekeeper so that her husband could find their home a paradise, because it is what was expected of her. Beth's character however, did not have the chance to experience marriage like all of her sisters because she passed away due to complications from scarlet fever. But this event does not mean that she had an agenda against the stereotype. She contracted the disease when she was out nurturing for the poor Hummel family, an action too compassionate that her life was later sacrificed. When Beth was ill, the youngest sister, Amy, was immediately sent away to stay with their Aunt March due to health reasons. Amy then went along her Aunt March to Europe because during her stay she impressed her aunt by being a 'proper lady'. She spent her time in Europe studying arts to achieve her ambition in becoming an artist, however she stumbled upon Theodore Laurence and the two immediately fell in love and tie the

knot. She too, tragically wasted her opportunity on leaving the domestic sphere because after she and Laurie got married she no longer pursues her dream of being a professional artist. How all the March girls eventually lead such a traditional gender role that fits in what was expected from the society is no other than the result of their parents' teaching.

### **Endorsement of Traditional Gender Roles through the Characterization of the March Girls**

The creation of the novel *Little Women* was not entirely of Louisa May Alcott's will. She was pushed by Thomas Niles to make a story about young girls and did so after much stalling. The novel was published in 1868, almost the same time of the end of the Civil War, transitioning to the Second American Industrial Revolution. Women were starting to get a hold of their education rights, therefore increasing their intellectuality and are able to commence movements demanding their other rights to be fulfilled, breaking through the traditional values and roles of women. The rise of the Second American Industrial Revolution has made countless of women leap off the domestic sphere, left behind the ideology of 'true woman'.

*Little Women* seems to be written only as a reproduction of traditional gender values, which contradicts with what the American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century struggled for. Take example to Meg's marriage life. After she married John Brooke, her biggest concern in life was to be a model housewife. She would improve her lack of homemaking skills so that her husband should find their home a paradise. The rebellious and vocal Jo eventually subscribed to the idea of being submissive and nurturant after she met Professor Bhaer and altogether stopped pursuing her dream in order to be able to handle her new household. The sickly Beth showed no significant actions of portraying the endorsement of traditional gender roles because her character was not long around in the novel due to complications from the scarlet fever that she had contacted. Amy, the last daughter of the sisterhood, ended up marrying Laurie and she too gave up her dream on being a professional artist.

## Children's Literature as A Medium to Transfer the Society's Values on Gender in the Late 19th Century

Children's literature is created to convey lessons or knowledge which are deemed important to the foundation of the children's future (Grenby, 2008, p. 4). However, the kind of lesson that Louisa May Alcott delivered through her novel, *Little Women*, was not the one that could form a new generation with a different perspective on the roles of women. Through the characters of the March girls, Louisa May Alcott only reproduce the traditional values that was constructed in the society. Around twenty years before the publishing of *Little Women*, figures such as Susan B. Anthony, Rachel Foster Avery, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton has led the American women's suffrage movement which started from the women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The movement of course supported the cause of gaining equality for women, starting by fulfilling women's right to vote.

Through her work, Louisa May Alcott could have help deliver the message that these women struggled to fight for equality and how from a young age, girls should already understand that they were not to be treated unequally by anyone. It is a pity that Louisa did not use the platform that she was presented very well.

### CONCLUSION

This study finds that Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is a work of children's literature which serves to conserve the traditional gender roles by portraying them through the characters of the March girls. The March girls were depicted as girls who eventually conform to the traditional idea of gender stereotype, an idea which does not only limit an individual to freedom of choice but also their capability to improve themselves in many aspects. American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were anxious to leave their duties in the domestic sphere in order to get in to the public sphere because they faced judgments such as not being proper enough to work and provide for their family because women's capabilities were regarded less

than men, that they were not professional enough. This stereotype which was constructed by the society is then passed on to the children through the process called gender typing, where the parents' influence at home plays such a big role for them to gain the understanding of values, motives, and behaviors marked as appropriate for each respective gender. The roles that they understand and perform later reflect the stereotype of how males and females should act.

Women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century America then started to commence movements to try and break free from the occurring stereotype and this marks as the beginning of the first wave of feminism. While these women were demanding for equal rights and a bright future full of opportunities, which they did not only for them but also for the younger generation, Louisa May Alcott represents the characters of the march girls in *Little Women* to be the opposite of what some of the women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were fighting for. Even though throughout the story the characters of the march girls, especially Jo, showed a point in the development of their characters where they seem to question the role that was assigned to them by the society, the girls still took a step backwards and reproduce the traditional gender stereotype rather than present themselves as empowering characters.

This research is conducted to enrich the studies of American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and to prove that readers or academicians should always be critical in reading a text. In this case, *Little Women*, when read closely with a critical mind, does not voice the struggle for equality that the American women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had commenced.

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