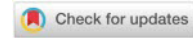


# LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S VISION OF MARRIAGE IN LITTLE WOMEN

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to demonstrate that beneath the apparently conventional plot of *Little Women* (1868) lurks a rather progressive concept of marriage. The initial hypothesis is that the role model for the March girls is their unconventional mother, whose ideas they eventually adopt and put into practice. Marmee is an ardent opponent of the marriage of convenience. In her view, the chief prerequisite for choosing a life companion is love. Mrs March's vision of marriage is seemingly contradictory – she concurrently considers marriage a sacred relation and adopts the position that it should not be the only and ultimate end of a woman's life. The coveted aim should be self-actualisation, whereas matrimony is an integral and significant, but not absolutely necessary stage of a girl's blossoming into womanhood. Each of the sisters, in her way and to a certain extent, fulfils her mother's high expectations. All the sisters but Beth (who dies prematurely) learn how to conquer their greatest flaws and choose husbands who match both their virtues and weaknesses. Contrary to the views of certain critics that the marriage of the March sisters testifies to their conformity and submission, both to society and their husbands, this paper argues that marriage is an important aspect of their maturation. During their development, the sisters realise that they ought to renounce their childish dreams, the so-called "castles in the air" to strike a balance between individualism and the family's (in particular, their mother's) expectations. Admittedly, the marriages of Meg, Jo, and Amy do imply a compromise, but compromise, mutual helpfulness, and self-sacrifice are prerequisites necessary for the creation of the proper marital union in the fictional world of Louisa May Alcott. Moreover, this paper argues that concessions are expected not only from the March girls but also from their husbands, who likewise compromise and mature in marriage.

**Keywords:** Little Women, marriage, Louisa May Alcott, "castle in the air", self-actualisation

**Field:** Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the view of certain critics (Karpen, 2022, p. 2; Balledelou, 2008, pp. 130–131) that marriage testifies to the submission and conformity to society's expectations in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), this paper aims to demonstrate that this novel is actually a vivid illustration of the author's progressive vision of marriage. The initial hypothesis is that the role model for the March sisters is their beloved Marmee, a woman whose apparent meekness hides advanced concepts, which her daughters eventually adopt and put into practice. Mrs March simultaneously perceives marriage as a sacred relation and endorses the view that it should not be the only and ultimate end of a girl's life. Instead, girls should focus on realising their potential to attain self-actualisation. Having internalised their mother's vision, all the March girls marry for love. Mrs March endeavours to raise the institution of marriage to a higher level, to transform it from an arrangement and convention into a union of equals based on the division of responsibilities and duties, as well as on principles and values. Each sister, to a certain extent and by her personality, adopts her mother's concept of marriage. Hence, in addition to common features, the marriages of Meg, Amy, and Jo also have certain peculiarities, which is why the paper will deal with each of them in detail. Their marriages are not without challenges and adversity, but they and their spouses are willing to work through problems and grow together.

## 2. MARMEE'S PROGRESSIVE VIEW OF MARRIAGE

To be sure, Mrs March would like her daughters to remain children as long as possible. This is partly the reason why Meg, Jo, and Amy are quite naive and ignorant when it comes to the vicissitudes of love, at least at the beginning of the novel. However, Meg's short stay at the Moffats symbolizes her entry into the world of adults, namely, the world of courtship. Meg is deeply hurt when she overhears comments on her mother's supposed plans to marry her well, that is, rich. Moreover, the situation gets more complicated when a suitor appears in Meg's life. As Daniel Shealy (2019) aptly remarks, the girls who are perplexed by the sweet pains of love "need the advice of a strong, resilient female guide" (p. 372), and that guide is precisely their mother.

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Mrs March, who functions as Alcott's ventriloquist, possesses a sophisticated approach to marriage, which she succeeds in passing on to her daughters. There are several important aspects of Marmee's vision of marriage. First of all, Marmee is an ardent opponent of marriage of convenience. Bearing in mind that women were economically dependent on their husbands in mid-nineteenth-century Victorian America, Mrs March's view that the motive for marriage should never be material well-being may come as a surprise. Although Marmee is aware that money is necessary, she advises her daughters to pay more attention to the character and virtues of their future husbands:

"Money is a needful and precious thing – and, when well used, a noble thing, but I never want you to think it is first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives if you were happy, beloved, contended than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace" (Alcott, 2008, p. 146).

Hence, whereas Victorian ideology conceptualised marriage as a "socio-economic arrangement granting women life insurance and men – social approval" (Rudin, 2019, p. 128), Alcott endeavours to "remove the institution of marriage from the economic domain and restores it to a domestic domain" (Ibid) where the emphasis is on love. Indeed, love is the first and chief prerequisite of matrimony in the view of Mrs March. Her attitude testifies to the shift of the focus from economic to romantic that occurred during the nineteenth century. Moreover, as stated by Lustra (1989), as the century progressed, the American youth was increasingly able to choose a life companion independently, that is, with the minimum of interference from their parents (p. 28). This trend is mirrored in *Little Women*, where the three sisters themselves decide whether and whom to marry, whereas the role of the parents is advisory.

However, even though Marmee's role is consultative, she exerts enormous influence on her daughters. The secret of that huge influence is in her omnipresence and the attention and patience she showers on her children. This unusually active Victorian mother builds an honest and open relationship with her daughters based on trust. Mrs March's upbringing is an outstanding example of what Broadhead (1993) calls "disciplinary intimacy" (p. 72). This method of raising children implies teaching through an intensified bond between parent and child. Children feel their mother's enveloping presence and commitment so much that they consider it their duty not to disappoint their mother's high expectations. While seemingly giving her daughters immense freedom, Marmee is actually thoughtfully leading them to follow her example and internalise her values. The enormous influence on the daughters is manifested, for example, in Meg and Amy's relinquishing their desire for wealth (in the form of a rich husband) and in giving up the marriage of convenience. Instead, all March sisters marry for love. Moreover, Jo and Amy, the two most ambitious sisters, gradually adopt their mother's view that the care of a family is the woman's priority, which results in moderating, if not altogether renouncing their artistic aspirations.

At first glance, Marmee's vision of matrimony seems a contradictory one. She simultaneously perceives marriage as a sacred union and adopts the position that marriage is not the only and ultimate goal of a woman's aspirations. Mrs March's advice is that marriage, if it is with the right man, is a lifetime blessing: "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (Alcott, 2008, p. 145).

However, even though the experience of being married to a worthy man is perceived as invaluable, the coveted aim of a woman should be self-actualisation. In other words, Marmee takes marriage extremely seriously but simultaneously contends that it should not be the only and ultimate goal of her daughters. Therefore, marriage is an integral and important, but not absolutely necessary stage of a girl's blossoming into womanhood:

"Leave these things to time; make this home happy, so that you may be fit for homes of your own, if they are offered you, and contended here if they are not. One thing remember, my girls, mother is always ready to be your confidant, father to be your friend, and both of us trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives" (Alcott, 2008, p. 146).

In Marmee's view, young women should not continue to think of marriage as their only option and career. The final goal of a girl's maturation should be the development of her inner capacities and talents, not running after a husband at all costs. Therefore, she encourages her daughters to focus on unfolding their inner strengths and not to stress too much about the events that are yet to come.

If we look at Marmee's advice in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Victorian America, it appears that their views are extremely progressive, in particular, if we consider the fact that "few viable alternatives to marriage developed before the 1870s and 1880s, even for the most adventurous" (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985, pp. 32–33). Alcott highlights the importance of self-reliance for women, against the prevailing view that a woman was made for man, that is, to please and serve her husband.

By insisting on self-actualisation as a prerequisite for marriage, Marmee attempts to transform marital

union from an arrangement and convention into “more transcendent, spiritual, and transformative forms of marriage” (Šesnić, 2022, p. 2). This kind of marital institution, the so-called companionate marriage, with its emphasis on the equality of partners and division of roles and functions, requires “strength, maturity, and above all a secure identity” (Elbert, 1984, p. 157) from a spouse. To develop the necessary qualities, the March sisters are expected to master the art of household management, lead serviceable lives, and at the same time overcome their greatest flaws (their “bosom enemies”) and develop their talents and interests. Each of the sisters, in her way and to a certain extent, fulfils her mother’s high expectations. Except for Beth, whose blossoming into womanhood is thwarted by an untimely death, by the end of the novel, the March sisters by the end of the novel overcome their biggest flaws, are “happily married and are laboring in the fields best suited to the strengths as well as the weaknesses of their characters” (Foote, 2005, p. 69).

The argument of certain critics that the marriages of the March sisters attest to their failure to reach maturity is founded on the fact that on the thorny path of development, Meg, Amy, and Jo reject their original dreams, their “castles in the air”. While Karpen (2022) interprets their renouncing of childish dreams as “suppression as a universal experience of womanhood” (p. 2), this paper argues that it is a matter of redefinition to which all characters in Alcott’s novel are subjected, regardless of gender. The path to maturity of both female and male characters (as evidenced by the example of Laurie) reflects the following pattern: “first hopes deferred, then the learning of self-discipline, then the articulation of wiser goals, which are finally achieved” (Douglass, 2013, p. 61). To reach maturity, both the March sisters and Laurie are expected to relinquish their childish dreams because these dreams suggest extreme individualism, materialistic desires, ambition, and craving for fame. Moreover, these castles in the air have to be renounced because they imply an urge to please oneself, and “pleasing oneself”, as Parille (2009) remarks, “must be abandoned by little men and women alike” (p. 67). Instead, the March girls and Laurie endeavour to strike a balance between their individualism and the family’s expectations.

Furthermore, the development of the sisters does not end with their respective matrimonies. Hence, the argument of this article is quite the opposite of Balldelou’s claim that marriage is a reflection of the March sisters’ subjugation, which takes on such proportions that they even “lose their own identity and status as a character in the novel” (2008, p. 131). Actually, conjugal life is represented as an important stage of maturation in the fictional world of Louisa May Alcott. Taking into consideration the fact that the March girls represent different personality types and that each of them is paired off with a different sort of partner, it follows that each of the marriages, apart from common features, also has some peculiarities. Hence, the ensuing sections of the article elaborate on both the redefinition of the original “castles in the air” and how marriage is linked to the maturation of both the March sisters and their husbands.

### 3. THE ROMANTIC UNION OF MEG AND JOHN BROOKE

As Keyser (1993) aptly remarks, Meg is arguably the most conventional March sister (p. 64). As a result, she internalises the stifling patriarchal values of Victorian America according to which the endpoint of a woman’s life is to become a wife and a mother. In addition, her chief flaw, or, in her father’s words, her “bosom enemy” is envy and desire for luxury. Accordingly, her castle in the air is “a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things; nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit” (Alcott, 2008, p. 159).

On the one hand, Meg’s blossoming into womanhood represents the growth into a typical life of a Victorian housewife. Unlike her sisters, who are focused on developing their artistic talents, Meg, although “the most accomplished actress” (Keyser, 1993, p. 64) among them, is too “busy” with being a proper and model young woman to work on personal development. Her actualisation is, as Elbert (1984) persuasively argues, thwarted by her lack of secure identity and extreme obedience to both her parents and her husband (p. 158). On the other hand, Meg still partially matures. Her maturation is testified by the fact that she chooses as her husband an impoverished man (who is not capable of fulfilling her childish dreams of wealth) she is in love with, despite her aunt’s threat that such a decision will cost her a share of her inheritance. The development of Meg’s character is attested by her overcoming her bosom enemy – vanity and craving for material things. As a result of her (partial) maturation, Meg renounces her original “castle in the air” and chooses romantic love instead of eventual marriage of convenience.

Through an insight into the conjugal life of Meg and John, the author criticises the Victorian concept of womanhood, according to which marriage is the focal event in a woman’s life. As evidenced by Meg’s example, women who view matrimony as the pinnacle and ultimate aim of their lives are put on the shelf (Alcott, 2008, p. 431) after they become wives. Moreover, John, at least at the beginning of their marriage,

adopts the view that he is the one who has to do all the work, ignoring the household chores that fall under Meg's purview. This conventional view of marriage is a consequence of the marital union being based only on romantic love, and not on values and principles. However, the spouses make certain improvements with the help of Mrs March. Marmee believes that John cannot take full responsibility for the deterioration of their relationship. She reproves Meg for reducing herself to "just" a mother and housewife and advises her on how to involve John in parenting. This advice turns out to be very useful as John succeeds in disciplining their son Demi. Moreover, Marmee encourages Meg to continue developing her relationship with her husband, to be interested in what is happening in the world and to work on herself. As Marmee is an unquestionable authority figure for her daughters, Meg puts her advice into practice, much to the delight of her husband. Therefore, the argument of this paper does not go in line with Keyser's (1993) claim that "Meg's initiation into womanhood coincides with a retreat into childhood" (p. 68). Although the marital union of Meg and John is the most conservative example of companionship in the novel, it also implies that for some women the greatest happiness is indeed to be good wives and mothers. The romantic marriage of John and Meg is by no means egalitarian but is based upon love, mutual helpfulness and sacrifice. While John has to work hard to provide for her family, Meg is expected to moderate her materialistic longings. Her self-regulation is rewarded as John shares parental responsibilities with her. Their marriage suggests that the progress of society and the improvement of the position of women is possible if an effort is made to reform the family. The first step towards reforming the family is the involvement of husbands in household chores and parental duties.

#### 4. AMY AND LAURIE

At the beginning of the novel, Amy is represented as the spoiled youngest daughter marked by selfishness and vanity. Unlike Jo, she makes a huge effort to please people and makes no secret of her intention to marry rich. Therefore, it may be argued that Amy is the daughter who is at the beginning of the novel marked as the least influenced by her mother. However, critics often overlook the fact that Amy wants to marry rich not only for personal gain but also to help her family. Still, this undertaking, although easy in theory, turns out to be unattainable in practice. Amy, the youngest and therefore the most childish daughter, naively believes that she is cold-blooded and calculating enough to accept the marriage proposal of the rich Fred Vaughn, a man for whom she has no feelings. As Sarah Wadsworth (2015) succinctly summarises, "Although Amy's thinking initially follows the traditional view that love can be willed, taught and learned, Alcott corrects her faulty conclusion by making it clear that Amy has subconsciously begun to love Laurie" (p. 185). Therefore, although initially reluctant to accept her mother's view of marriage, Amy, taught by experience, realises that love, not material well-being, is the first and most important prerequisite for marriage. Therefore, in renouncing her childish dream in the form of a marriage of convenience, Amy demonstrates that she is still "true to the mother's teaching" (Alcott, 2008, p. 491).

However, Amy adopts her mother's views not only on marriage but also on art. Her initial castle in the air is "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott, 2008, p. 160). Significantly, throughout the course of the novel, both Jo and Amy's assimilation of their mother's values is accompanied by their renouncing artistic careers. What is problematic about Amy and Joe's professional aspirations (at least from the mother's point of view and the values promoted by the March family) is not the development of creative potential itself, but the fame and reputation they desire. Marmee advocates the position that "there is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long; even if it is, the consciousness of possessing it and using it well should satisfy one" (Alcott, 2008, p. 82). Although Keyser (1993) notices that Amy is "the most eager to venture out into the world" (p. 75), it seems that life in an enclosed family space has not been the best preparation for such a bold endeavour. During Amy's much-anticipated travel to Europe, where she sets on to see art, she is so fascinated by the works of great artists that she relinquishes her castle in the air. Instead of continuing to pursue an artistic career, she is content to create for herself and the people close to her. Moreover, Laurie too renounces his artistic career. Instead, they are willing to patronise talented artists of modest means.

A lesson Marmee teaches Amy, which she passes on to Laurie, is about the vanity of ambition. Instead of marrying Jo, whom he first proposes, Laurie later marries her youngest sister. Amy is rewarded for helping Laurie overcome his "bosom enemy", his laziness. Apart from overcoming his greatest flaw, Laurie's life trajectory resembles that of the March sisters in that he too renounces his original dream – to be a famous musician. Similarly to Amy and her sisters, Laurie realises that men, just like women, cannot "have it all", and chooses a balance between his desires and his grandfather's expectations. He renounces his castle in the air and agrees to pursue a career as a businessman. However, the emphasis is not on his actions outside the house. What is highlighted is that Laurie still fulfils his desire for a



nurturing home and love, a desire that has been neglected for so long in a cold castle which he perceived as a sort of prison. Laurie, who has been under constant pressure to fit into the straight mould of the prevailing gender discourses, is finally "liberated into loving like a woman" (Dalke, 1985, p. 574). In the fictional world of Louisa May Alcott, as Sarah Elbert (1984) persuasively argues, "the ability to create a home and sustain a family supersedes fame and money as evidence of success and civilization" (pp. 154–155). Therefore, although the March girls are encouraged to work on actualising their potential, they assimilate their mother's view that the top priority for women is the care of home and family. Furthermore, as evidenced by Laurie's example, not only the March sisters perceive home and family care as chief priorities – all the male characters in *Little Women* "long for home" (Dalke, 1985, p. 575). Hence, the argument of this paper does not go in line with Auerbach's claim that Marmee and her daughters create a sort of matriarchal utopia (1978, p.73). Rather, even though there is a minimum of contact between the male and female characters at the beginning of the novel, the gap between them is gradually bridged.

## 5. JO AND FRIEDRICH BHAER

Critics who argue that Jo's marriage testifies to her submission to society's norms support their claim with the fact that "Jo – who never wants to marry, who values her writing above all else – does finally marry and abandon the writing she cherishes" (Estes & Kathleen Lant, 1989, p. 102). The situation, however, is anything but that simple. Apart from being a voracious reader, a bookworm so to speak, Jo has a gift for writing, a talent she is very dedicated to developing. To be sure, Jo is the daughter whom the family considers the most talented artist. As Hisham Muhamad Ismail (2023) remarks, "she receives genuine encouragement from her family to pursue her professional dreams and achieve her independence" (p. 869). Her original castle in the air is summarised in the following speech: "I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle – something heroic, or wonderful – that won't be forgotten after I'm dead.[. . .] I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that's my favorite dream" (Alcott, 2008, p. 160). Unlike Amy, whose artistic development occurs only within the confines of the home, Jo's development as a writer is more complex. Although at first, she writes only for the family, over time she dares in an attempt to publish her fiction. Initially, she writes sensational stories, which are profitable and thus satisfy Jo's desire for independence. However, the problem with this genre is, as Daly-Galeano (2015) remarks, twofold. Sensational stories are not expected to contain moral implications and are perceived as an inferior sort of fiction (Daly-Galeano, 2015, p. 120). Hence, Jo's desire to become a wealthy and recognised writer is inherently contradictory. As it turns out, the fiction that sells well on the literary market is not at the same time what brings recognition. Therefore, Jo must choose between writing for money and writing for fame. This choice is anything but easy if we consider the fact that she views writing as a tool that should ensure her independence, which will allow her to take care of her family. However, over time, she adopts the attitude of her parents and her future husband that her writing should come from her experience and have a positive effect on readers, and she stops writing sensational stories. Although at the end of the novel, Jo has a new castle in the air in the form of a school she establishes and runs along with her husband, the narrator does not explicitly state whether she will continue her career as a writer. It is up to the reader to make interpretative choices and conclude whether Jo will definitely give up writing.

When it comes to marriage, Jo's attitude undergoes a significant change over the course of the novel, a change that has often been interpreted as evidence of her submission to the pressures of the patriarchal culture of Victorian America. However, the decision to get married rather testifies to maturing and compromise, but not with the social environment, but with the family, specifically Marmee's ideology. Jo is initially opposed to marriage for two reasons. The first is that she dreads the restrictions she is sure will come with this institution. Whereas Jo enjoys freedom in the unconventional March household, she supposes that the transition from childhood to adulthood will significantly jeopardise that liberty. The second reason is the fear that marriage will necessarily lead to the disintegration of the family. As it turns out, Jo's fears that the sisters' marriages will disintegrate the family turn out to be unfounded. Quite the contrary, marriages actually bring about the expansion of the family with the inclusion of husbands and later children. The turning point in Jo's view of marriage and family life in general occurs when Beth dies. If Marmee teaches Jo to overcome her bosom enemy, her stormy temper, Beth's death finishes her transformation into a woman who prioritises harmonious family life over fame and ambition.

Still, many readers and critics have been disillusioned by Alcott's refusal to marry Jo to Laurie. The wedlock of these two characters is impossible for two reasons. The first is that Jo's marriage ought to be egalitarian, and Alcott believes that the so-called companionate marriage cannot be based upon romantic passion, but on values and principles. Therefore, by rejecting Laurie's marriage proposal, Jo rejects a

romance, which she rightly believes would be limiting and would thwart her professional assertion. Laurie, who is rich and considers her writing to be trite, would probably look down on her desire to work, which is crucial to Jo. Second, as she wants her marriage to be based on equal footing, it makes the acceptance of Laurie's proposal wrong again because Jo often acts like a mother to him. She does not want a young man she has to take care of as her life companion, but an equal partner who will encourage her further development. Therefore, Jo chooses Friedrich Bhaer, a mature and affectionate man with whom she has much more in common as her husband. Unlike Laurie, whom she thinks of as a boy, Professor Bhaer earns her respect for taking care of his relatives and sharing her love of literature. He is genuinely moved by the poem she dedicates to Beth and does not regard her writing as gimmicky, but takes it seriously and directs it. Also, Bhaer is willing to implement Jo's idea of founding a school for boys. By giving up (hopefully temporarily) writing and starting a school instead, Jo redefines her dream to strike a balance between her desires and her family's expectations. However, as Shealy (2019) convincingly argues, Bhaer "too compromises by giving up his teaching position in the West" (p. 377). Therefore, Jo is right when she concludes that she will be able to establish an equal partnership with this man.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Starting from the observation that Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has often been misinterpreted as a conventional novel, this paper offers evidence that this novel illustrates the author's progressive vision of marriage. Mrs March functions as Alcott's ventriloquist on this issue and the role model for her daughters. Through the intensive bond she establishes with her girls, Marmee succeeds in passing on her ideas to them, which Meg, Amy, and Jo, each to a certain extent and by her personality, adopt and put into practice. They all marry for love and renounce marriage of convenience. In contrast with the view of certain critics that the marriage of the March girls testifies to their submission, we argue that marriage is an important phase of their maturation. Meg is arguably the most conventional sister and her marriage is the most conservative. However, she still partially matures, which is evidenced by her moderating materialistic desires. Her husband John, though initially delineated as a typical Victorian male, proves willing to enter the nursery (which was at the time considered the exclusive domain of mothers) and become involved in the children's rearing. Hence, the novel implies that the first step towards reforming society is the transformation of the family into a union based on the equal division of roles and duties. Amy, who at the beginning of the novel is under the least influence of her mother, eventually accepts Marmee's view of marriage and art. Furthermore, both Amy and Laurie renounce their original castles in the air and redefine them. In doing so, they strike a balance between their desires and the family's expectations. Likewise, by the end of the novel, Jo also matures and has a new castle in the air in the form of a Plumfield school for boys. She temporarily abandons her artistic career, but this decision is not only the consequence of her desire to comply with her parents' wishes. Her original dream, to become a wealthy and famous writer, as it turns out, is contradictory in itself. Moreover, she changes her attitude toward marriage and chooses as her life companion Professor Bhaer. In conclusion, the marriages of Meg, Jo, and Amy do imply a compromise, but compromise, mutual helpfulness, and self-sacrifice are prerequisites necessary for the creation of the proper marital union in the fictional world of Louisa May Alcott. Moreover, this paper argues that concessions are expected not only from the March girls but also from their husbands, who likewise compromise and mature in marriage.

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