Alcott's *Little Women* and the Domestication of Female Desire

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ways in which classed and gendered ideologies in the novel *Little Women* repress Jo, Amy, and Meg March. Beth, because of her function as a domesticated type rather than as an individual woman, does not suffer from the defeat of her desires. Therefore, she is not considered extensively in this paper. Jo, Amy, and Meg are each convinced that meeting middle class social standards by becoming humble and altruistic wives is more vital to their roles as women than fulfilling individual goals and ambitions. Jo, who surrenders her long-cherished goal of becoming a famous and self-supporting author in order to write moralistic fiction that will please society, is often seen as the most prominent of the sisters. However, Amy and Meg also make sacrifices in the name of social acceptability. Amy, in order to succeed in the nineteenth century marriage market, lays aside both her artistic ambition and her intention to marry solely for money. Meg, whose main goal is the acquisition of wealth, is convinced to surrender her dream of financial security in order to meet middle class standards. All three women are, through the course of the novel, transformed from ambitious young girls to domestic women, angels in their respective homes.

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In a chapter in *Little Women* titled "On the Shelf," Alcott describes the state of the middle class American woman, "In America, as everyone knows, girls early sign the declaration of independence and enjoy their freedom with republican zest, but the young matrons usually abdicate with the first heir to the throne and go into a seclusion almost as close as a French nunnery" (468). The resignation of freedom that Alcott describes here is not an immediate change but a process in which young girls learn to substitute the values of womanhood for their own unique desires. They are taught to treasure modesty, altruism, and humility. In order to learn these lessons, much of who they are and what they value, any belief or ambition which is not essentially domestic, must be broken down and replaced with traditional female beliefs.

Three of the March sisters are subjected to this process of feminization and domestication. Jo, Amy, and Meg are each taught to surrender their most treasured desires in order to make themselves acceptable to men. Jo must part with her wish to become a famous, wealthy author. Amy must lay aside both her original desire to become a successful artist and her secondary goal of marrying for financial benefit. Meg is convinced that she must surrender her hope of a life filled with wealth and luxury. All of these sacrifices occur as the March sisters are transformed from individuals with ambitions, hopes, and dreams into women who fit the middle class ideal of the Angel in the House.

The ideal of the Angel in the House was the "intersection of class and gender ideologies" that defined the role of wife during the Victorian era. It is also the ideal that the March sisters are molded to fit (Langland 290). The Angel in the House was the Victorian wife whose moral strength protected her husband and children from the cares of the world. She provided a sound and domesticating influence in the home; she created, "a haven, a private domain opposed to the public sphere of commerce" (Langland 290). The middle class home was a separate arena from
the outside world, and it was the wife’s responsibility to manage that small world with humility and altruism.

Middle class status was a prime factor in the application of the role of the Angel in the House. At this period, the middle class was claiming moral authority over the other social classes, and this role of the Angel in the House allowed them to both justify and maintain their claim. The role of the Angel in the House served functions for the middle class other than simply suppressing women and molding them into humble beings. It allowed the middle class to remain the dominant influence on culture by exerting their moral energy (Langland 290). The humble, moral wife served a purpose beyond her own individual life; she perpetuated the predominance of the middle class in society.

The middle class March girls fit the description of the woman who will become an Angel in the House. Their social position makes marriage their most realistic life option, and they are expected to marry and perpetuate middle class social control. Understanding what is expected of her daughters, Marmee begins to expose them to this ideal at an early age, often trampling their ambitions and characters in the process. She tells them that, “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman...It is natural to think of it...right to hope and wait for it, and wise to prepare for it” (Alcott 118). Marmee believes that her daughters should be ready to assume the role of the Angel in the House, so she prepares them for it despite their original resentment of its requirements. Eventually, the girls come to accept their place in the home as the only option available to them and take up Marmee’s task, altering themselves in order to fit the role they once resented. Jo willingly surrenders her writing at the urging of her future husband Friedrich Bhaer. Amy displaces her desire for social status from the unacceptable avenue of art onto the marriage market. Meg lays aside her desire for luxury to
become a poor man's wife. Marmee's lessons have worked on her daughters, who have accepted them and altered their lives accordingly. As Langland notes, "middle class women were produced by these discourses [of the ideal of the Angel in the House] even as they reproduced them" (290). Marmee passes on the middle class morality she has been taught to value, and the March sisters adopt it and reproduce it in their own lives.

The only sister who is not taught the role of Angel in the House is Beth, for she already fills it. Beth is, in many ways, a type. She is the extreme example of the Angel in the House, going so far as to die "from a mysterious disease arising from terminal goodness--from her inability to distinguish between nurturing others and the radical self-denial expected of femininity" (Murphy 571). Unlike her sisters, Beth never attempts to negotiate the female world, to blend her own desires with the standards presented by the middle class world and the ideal of the Angel in the House. Rather, she completely embraces the ideal and becomes a model of feminine domesticity. On her deathbed she tells Jo, "You must take my place Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone. And if it's hard to work alone, remember...that you'll 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, and it makes the end so easy" (Alcott 504).

Beth's encouragement to Jo is an exhortation to live a life like she has lived, one full of domestic sacrifice. Willing to surrender any dream for the sake of her home, Beth is the quintessential Angel in the House. In fact, her entire life occurs within the boundaries of the home. Having quit school because of her shyness, Beth is completely enfolded in the domestic. At no point in the novel does she ever leave the home without the reassuring presence of her sisters and family. Though she does have some unique character traits independent of her role as a miniaturized Angel in the House, such as her enjoyment of music, Beth has no great aspirations, as those
would violate her role and defeat her femininity. Beth's complexity is limited by her entirely domestic role; therefore, she has not been considered in this paper.

With the exception of Beth, the March girls, throughout the course of Little Women, are domesticated and indoctrinated with ideas of middle class morality and femininity. Seeing the ideals that Marmee communicates to them as their only option, the sisters eventually lay aside their individual ambitions in order to conform to societal standards. More than anything else, Little Women is the detailing of this journey, a literary representation of the severe and permanent impact of cultural expectations of middle class women. The development of the March girls into silenced women is a representation of a society in which middle class women are, regardless of individual talent and ambition, forced into the mold of the domestic and moral housewife at the cost of their own desires, individuality, and ambitions. In creating this representation, Alcott both demonstrates the reality of the repression of female desire and protests that reality.

Jo March, perceived by most as the central sister in Little Women, is forced into the mold of traditional domesticity as she is exiled from the outward sphere of commercial writing and pushed into the home, the traditional and acceptable place for women. Her youthful aspirations of defying social standards by becoming a well-known writer are negated by society and its expectations as she is gradually forced into social insignificance; thus, Jo is exiled from public, profitable writing (Brodsky qtd. in Ingram 1).

Jo's literary ambition, her desire to become a publicly recognized writer, is defeated by the text's depiction of commercial writing as a male activity. In this text "the feminine voice is exiled from the public place...and seeks refuge in the private spaces of the home" (Radner 252). Jo's exile from public writing and to the home is evidence that within the text of Little Women
the power associated with writing in the public sphere is considered inappropriate for females, who are confined to confessional and moralistic writing, or to journals and children's stories. The audience for traditional female writing consists of women and children, two groups of people who have little influence or power. By confining women to these genres, society prevents their voices from being heard by the public, by men. Jo originally hopes to shatter these conventions in order to become a well-known author; however, society eventually forces her to surrender the pursuit of public, masculine writing and to limit herself to the less influential sphere of feminine writing.

From the beginning of Alcott's novel, it is clear that Jo wishes she had been born a boy. Her tension with her own sexual identity, revealed immediately, plays a large role in the definition of her ambitions and desires (Murphy 577). To expand upon this idea, Jo's dream of her ideal future, which she constructs around writing and professional success rather than around the traditional female desire of caring for a family, is an early indication of her desire to be male. She says that she will "write books and get rich and famous" (Alcott 173). Becoming independent and able to support herself and her family through her writing is Jo's greatest ambition. This ambition would typically be perceived as a male desire. Alcott also describes Jo as having the male traits of being "blunt" and "scorn[ing] romance, except in books" (172). Jo's male characteristics run parallel to her desire to produce the kind of noteworthy, profitable fiction that is generally associated with men.

Jo's ambition and her desire to write publicly, her masculine characteristics, are also expressed in her adaptation of her name. Jo is actually Josephine, a name that she rejects as it is "so sentimental" (Alcott 34). Jo's decision to change her name to one that is more compatible with her desire to be male indicates her understanding of the limitations created by her sex.
However, her attempt to counter these limitations by changing her name cannot, ultimately, be effective. Beth, the constant reminder of the value of true femininity, tells Jo that, “It [Jo’s sex] can’t be helped, so you must try to be contented with making your name boyish and playing brother to us girls” (Alcott 6). Beth’s words show that Jo will always be limited to impersonation of males. Jo must fabricate any masculinity that she possesses as society will not acknowledge any inherent traits which might be classified as masculine. Her remodeled name is simply one attempt to create masculinity out of her femininity. Throughout the novel, these attempts are eroded as Jo is slowly taught to deny all associations with masculinity.

Jo’s public writing does require her to maintain an association with masculinity, often causing her to be criticized. Her public writing is disparaged because, by requiring her to participate in the masculine sphere, it detracts from her femininity. In the novel, the traditional female sphere is portrayed as “a positive model of the civilizing and the necessary” (Foster and Simons 87). Jo’s public writing, at times, removes her from this “necessary” female sphere. Commercial writing is portrayed as a form of expression which is inappropriate for her due to her sex. Defying this social edict, which forbids women from producing public writing, has a price; in Jo’s case, the price is social awkwardness and separation from more traditional females (Keyser 74). This separation occurs because Jo’s goals for her future differ from those of other women. Meg, for example, derides her sister for having dreams full of “horses, inkstands, and novels” (Alcott 172). Amy rebukes Jo for her independent and strong nature, sarcastically telling her to “go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air and call it independence if you like” (Alcott 314-5). Meg and Amy have both identified Jo’s more masculine characteristics, specifically her writing, and have soundly reprimanded her for the ways in which she differs from other women and for the masculine characteristics that result
from her pursuit of public writing.

Jo’s desire to write is not the only aspect of her character that distinguishes her from the women around her. Jo is frequently, and impermissibly, angry (Murphy 572). Though Murphy’s argument recognizes Jo’s anger, it fails to consider fully the reasons for its impermissibility. Anger is a masculine emotion, an indication of power and desire. Therefore, it cannot be tolerated in a woman. Jo’s anger is a result of her desire to write well and to benefit financially from that writing, and it stems from the fact that her ambitions are in direct conflict with the expectations of society. However, this conflict does not dissolve Jo’s ambitions; it simply makes her more confused about her own identity. Jo’s existence as a female and her existence as a writer are mutually constitutive. She cannot eliminate either aspect of her identity, and the pressures of society, which urge her to eradicate her desire to write, only serve to confuse and anger her. Her ambition is a critical aspect of her identity; it defines both her present existence and her future goals. The fact that her writing conflicts with her gender irritates and frustrates her, but this conflict does not offer a way to eliminate the desire to write, resulting in Jo’s anger.

The narrative, however, continually minimizes this anger. One of the most blatant examples of this minimization occurs when Amy, attempting express her own frustration, destroys the book that Jo has written, her “precious little book” of fairy tales (Murphy 572; Alcott 94). Jo’s anger over Amy’s actions leads her to allow her sister to fall through the ice while they are skating on a pond. Amy is saved, but Jo suffers intense emotional pain because of her anger and its results.

After the incident at the pond, the narrative overlooks Amy’s burning of Jo’s stories, focusing completely on Jo’s anger and its horrible results and painting her outrage as immoral.
and regrettable (Murphy 572). Armstrong argues that the anger which prompted Amy to burn Jo’s book is dismissed as harmless because it is expressed through actions rather than words, while Jo’s anger at Amy is condemned as dangerous and unacceptable as her “weapons are words” (469). This argument can be expanded by recognizing that Amy’s anger is dismissed because it functioned to destroy Jo’s words, thus eradicating both her inward thoughts and the masculinity connected to her writing. Furthermore, Jo is more likely to eventually convey her anger through words, through her commercial writing. For this reason, Jo’s anger is destroyed. The “public voice” that she used to express this anger is also cruelly silenced (Murphy 581). In fact, after seeing the results of her anger, Jo subscribes to societal expectations and contributes to her own silencing. She feels, as Fetterley describes the emotion, “horror at herself which in turn results in contrition, repression, and a firm vow...never to let her anger get beyond a tightening of the lips” (380). The impact of this incident, however, extends beyond Jo’s immediate reaction. The accident at the pond, and its results, expose the vulnerability of Jo’s words and cause her to question her own identity and subjectivity. She begins to see her anger, and, by connection, her desire to create a public voice through writing, as masculine characteristics which must be eliminated if she wishes to become a member of the feminine sphere.

The strength of Jo’s public voice and words are diminished by the way in which her commercial writing is minimized. The publication of her first story, “The Rival Painters,” is immediately overshadowed by news that her father, who is away at war, is ill and could be dying. In order to raise money for her mother’s journey to see her father, Jo cuts off her hair and sells it. This action reduces her from a professional writer to a poor, desperate young girl with nothing to offer other than one of her female attributes. Keyser highlights the fact that selling her hair also feminizes Jo as her grief over the loss of her chestnut locks is revealed (57).
Additionally, the masculine elements of Jo’s first commercial success as a writer are overwhelmed by the feminine elements of her grief. Murphy asserts that in this process, Jo’s public voice is devalued (Murphy 581).

Jo’s public writing is also minimized by her parents. Marmee devalues Jo’s writing by consistently cautioning her against the anger her voice expresses rather than encouraging her in her attempts to become autonomous. Marmee’s censorship of Jo’s anger is particularly significant because anger is a problem that she struggles with as well. She tells Jo that she often relies on Mr. March to help her stifle that anger. Fetterley identifies Marmee as, “the model little woman” who has, in actuality, been silenced by patriarchy (371). Marmee is attempting to silence Jo as well because she believes that in order to become a “mature social” woman Jo must conform to patriarchal expectations (Columbia Literary History of the United States 303). One of these expectations is that Jo, as a woman, will learn to suppress her anger. In urging Jo to hide her emotions Marmee is marginalizing and silencing her and, indirectly, encouraging her to apply this lesson of silence to her writing as well. Marmee’s attempts to modify Jo’s writing teach her to conform to the prejudices and stereotypes of society. As Murphy claims, Marmee does perpetuate patriarchy by conveying to Jo the beauty of life as a traditional female and the necessity of fulfilling that role (Murphy 570, 574). This indoctrination certainly affects Jo, eventually leading her to believe that she must relinquish her public writing in order to become a traditional woman.

Though Marmee has great influence over Jo’s writing, it is Mr. March most blatantly censures her talent (Murphy 582). He is primarily responsible for the sense of conflict Jo feels between her sex and her literary ambition. He prevents her from writing thrillers, urging her to focus on confessional writing and on the production of moral tales. Murphy states that Mr.
March, “despite his physical absence from the text, is the primary agent of trivialization and objectification” (579). Murphy’s concept can also be applied to Jo’s fears concerning the morality and femininity of her writing. Jo feels her father’s authority constantly through the knowledge that he is watching and evaluating both her and her writing. Her constant awareness of his presence smothers her creativity and makes her incapable of leading a life in which patriarchal authority does not determine her actions. Jo spends much of her time attempting to please her father, eventually surrendering her commercial writing in order to meet his expectations.

Mr. March’s advice to Jo, in which he urges her to focus on moralistic writing instead of profitable thrillers, shows that he wishes to control Jo’s voice by controlling the genre in which she writes. Jo’s anger and confusion are far less threatening when they are contained in journals and children’s stories, which Murphy identifies as “private, domestic writing” (581). To expand on this concept, it is only when Jo’s words are heard by the general public that they become dangerous and are therefore portrayed as being inappropriate for a woman. In his advice to his daughter, Mr. March completely disregards the fact that Jo sees writing not as a vehicle for the transmission of morals but as a means to both fame and autonomy.

Later in the novel, Jo burns her sensational stories, her potential route to the fulfillment of her ambitions, in a fit of moral conviction. This event is sparked by the influence of her friend Professor Bhaer; however, her desire to avoid displeasing and disappointing her family plays a large role in her decision (Keyser 34). While destroying her stories, Jo asks herself, “what should I do if they were seen at home?”, and she “turned hot at the bare idea” (Alcott 430). Though Jo is concerned about the opinion of her family as a whole, the person she most fears to have see her stories is her father. At this point in the story, Jo is no longer living at home;
however, she remains intensely aware of her father’s presence, and this awareness causes her to
destroy her own independence and to surrender her ambition of becoming a well-known author.
In response to her fear of her father’s disapproval, Jo begins to write moralistic children’s stories,
which cannot provide her with the kind of financial support she needs to maintain her
independence. Mr. March’s influence deals a severe blow not only to Jo’s financial status but
also to her sense of identity, undermining her writing and causing her to doubt her own abilities
and to question her own ambition.

Despite Jo’s independent nature and ambition concerning her writing, she shows a
notable lack of respect for her own talent. She frequently criticizes her own writing, referring to
her writing process as “scribbling” (Alcott 441). In fact, “Jo did not think herself a genius by
any means” (Alcott 322). Her youthful creativity is stifled by the attitudes of those around her
and by social stereotypes and prejudices regarding women and commercial writing. However,
when Jo envisions her dream life she imagines a world where she is a famous writer. She
pictures herself writing “out of a magic inkstand so that my works should be… famous” (Alcott
173). Jo wishes for a magic inkstand. She doubts her own talent and potential. Her sex is an
obstacle on her path to greatness, and she is positive that she needs some type of outside, magical
power to succeed in the male world of writing and publishing. Jo’s confusion about her gender
role and the abilities that are supposed to accompany that role is evident (Murphy 577).
Murphy’s claim concerning Jo’s gender role confusion can be expanded by observing the
concessions that Jo makes to femininity in an attempt to counter the masculine nature of her
commercial literary pursuits.

At the same time that Jo is hoping for success in the masculine sphere of writing, she is
also trying to maintain values that she has learned in the home, such as being self-deprecating
and showing more concern for others than for herself. Even after the success of her stories, Jo remains humble, handing over the glory of her success to her family. She credits them as the inspiration and motivation for her writing, telling her father, “If there is anything good or true in what I write, it isn’t mine. I owe it all to you and Mother and to Beth” (Alcott 525). When Jo begins to write sensational stories her goal is to gain money and power “not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than self” (Alcott 417). Jo consistently denies that her literary motivation stems from her own desires. She claims that she is motivated by the needs of others. This claim ties her masculine, public writing to established feminine values. In presenting her writing as a product of her concern for others, Jo is endeavoring to blend the masculine sphere of her writing with the feminine sphere of her home. She tempers her masculine drive and desire for public success with feminine altruism and deference to others. She maintains what Fetterley defines as, “that negative self-image which is the real burden of the little woman” (380). Jo’s desire to somehow connect her public writing with traditional female characteristics stifles her self-knowledge and causes her to doubt her own literary talent. She is forced to confront the barrier between her personal ambitions and her desire to fulfill the expectations of her society.

Jo’s final exile to the home, the end of her careful balancing act between both worlds, comes through the influence of Professor Bhaer, who stifles Jo’s writing and removes her to the home, where her literary creativity is limited to the domestic. By transforming Jo from an independent writer to a dependent wife, Bhaer forces her into social insignificance, or exile, and silences her public voice (Brodsky qtd. in Ingram 1). The beginning of Bhaer’s influence becomes apparent when he delivers a moral lecture so severe that it prompts Jo to give up writing her sensational stores, which, Bhaer says, are poison to the minds of all who read them.
Murphy recognizes the link between the defeat of Jo’s public writing and the end of her ability to present women who are “erotic, assertive... who impose their private fictions on the public world,” women who speak out and demand to be heard (Murphy 580). Bhaer’s removal of Jo’s ability to present powerful women occurs because he wants Jo to become a traditional and quiet wife, focused on familial concerns and private writings. He also wants to serve as the patriarchal authority figure, who, by his observation, enforces the silencing of her public voice.

Professor Bhaer sees Jo’s writing not as a road to independence but as an unseemly corruption of a female, who, due to her sex, should be virtuous and morally sound. He views her sensational stories as violating female norms and believes that he can correct her error. Jo caves under Bhaer’s moral instruction, gradually making her final submission to patriarchal authority. In an effort to produce writing that society will be seen as appropriate to her sex, she stops writing thrillers and attempts to write moralistic children’s fiction, which she does not find intellectually or financially satisfying. By making this literary transition, Jo relinquishes her source of independence to a man who believes that it is his duty to exile her to the home, to return her to the proper sphere of morality and domesticity. Bhaer takes not only Jo’s financial independence, but her emotional independence as well.

Allowing Bhaer to destroy her independence, Jo rejects the proposal of her childhood friend, Laurie and accepts the proposal of the older German professor. In so doing, she makes a choice between “romantic love and rational affection,” ultimately choosing rational affection (Elbert 162). In the terms of Jo’s rejection of Laurie there exists a lack of solid reasoning (Murphy 578). Laurie and Jo have complementary temperaments and enrich each other’s characters. Jo’s masculine attributes, such as her need to write commercially, are balanced by Laurie’s feminine attributes, such as his affinity for music. Together, Jo and Laurie defy gender
stereotypes. In rejecting Laurie’s proposal, Jo also rejects the opportunity to finally move beyond the role of a traditional female. Laurie has always been a passionate supporter of Jo’s writing (Murphy 578). Her denial of his proposal takes from her the possibility of having a mate who respects her public voice. Jo could easily have continued her commercial writing had she married Laurie. Her subsequent marriage to Bhaer denies her this opportunity and is evidence that she has chosen the socially acceptable route and by deciding to sacrifice the male elements of her writing in order to secure a permanent place in the female sphere (Keyser 42-3).

Marriage to Bhaer is the final factor in Jo’s exile to the home and in her exile from public writing. Murphy states that, “[Jo’s] marriage to Professor Bhaer offers her a way to balance personal need and cultural expectations” (571). Expanding upon this idea, Jo marries Bhaer in an attempt to find a compromise between the masculine sphere to which her literary ambitions would have taken her and the feminine sphere of domesticity she has been taught is her proper place. Jo still plans to write after her marriage; however, it is clear that she will be producing domestic journals and tales of a contented home life. Her high-reaching, masculine literary ambitions are gone; she has been exiled from them. Jo’s need to meet the expectations of society finally outweighs her desire to succeed artistically. She tells Bhaer, “I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I am out of my sphere now, for woman’s special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens” (Alcott 578; emphasis mine). Murphy highlights this quote as indicative of Jo’s use of marriage as a way to balance her desires with society’s expectations; however, this statement is also indicative of the way in which Jo has used marriage to patriarchal Bhaer as a method to secure her place in the feminine sphere (571). In this marriage, she no longer has the option of producing public writing, so she must reconcile herself to playing traditional female roles. Jo’s awareness of the sacrifices that societal expectations have caused
her to make is obvious. She has surrendered to socialization, but she is still conscious of the ways in which she has been exiled to the home and forced to relinquish her literary ambition, to exchange her public voice for a domestic one.

Jo’s domesticity and marriage to Bhaer do not, as Murphy argues, “create new possibilities for [Jo] as...a professional in her own right” (569). Jo cannot be a professional because she has been exiled to her domestic position. Her familial role is limiting and predetermined. Her writing is no longer professional; it has been stripped of all commercial elements. Jo has, in marrying Bhaer, denied herself the opportunity of becoming an actual professional, free to embrace her creativity and focused on her aspiration of producing great public fiction. She has permanently rejected public, profitable writing as well as the masculinity attached to that writing. She has placed herself in physical and mental exile in the female realm, choosing to live life as a traditional wife and a confessional, moralistic writer.

Jo’s choice is significant not only because it finally determines her gender role, but, more importantly, because it ends her confusion about the limitations placed on female writing and literary ambition. The novel’s complex presentation of writing, of its associations and of its boundaries, is what causes Jo such anger and bewilderment. In the end of the novel, Jo resolves this anger and confusion by accepting the precept that, “[g]ood writing for women is not the product of ambition...nor does it seek worldly recognition...it is the product of a mind...that seeks only to please others and, more specifically, those few others who constitute the immediate family” (Fetterley 374). Jo’s submission to this precept signals the end of her dual participation in the masculine and feminine spheres. She has finally reconciled herself to her gender role; however, she has also determined the direction of her future writing. She has chosen confessional, feminine writing as her future genre. Jo is exiled not from writing as a whole, but
rather from professional, masculine writing.

Jo’s exile from her art, from profitable writing, permanently confines her to the domestic realm. Jo’s repression, the domestication of her desire to write for the public, is echoed in the repression of her sisters, Amy and Meg. Jo’s pain at her exile from public writing also resembles that felt by Amy, who prevented from pursuing her childhood dream of becoming a famous artist by societal expectations, experiences the domestication and defeat of her artistic ambition. Amy describes her castle in the air by saying, “I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (Alcott 173). Her desire to become a great artist is, while strong in her youth, eventually overridden by social influences. She learns that talent is not genius. Like Jo, she decides to remove her art to the domestic sphere in order to gain social sanction for it (Fetterley 373). However, Amy is also motivated by the realization that domesticating her art will give her an advantage in the marriage market. She displaces her search for status. Rather than looking for status through her own independent efforts as an artist, she seeks it through marriage to a wealthy man.

Though Amy’s artistic aspirations are defeated and domesticated in much the same way as Jo’s literary goals are, the source of Amy’s aspirations differs from that of Jo’s. Jo is motivated by money and independence. Amy’s attachment to the idea of becoming a great artist is more strongly linked to her wish for status than to a longing for financial independence. Amy wants to be the best at what she is doing, or she has no desire to do it at all; status defines her efforts. In her own words, “I want to be great or nothing” (Alcott 489). Although she wishes for beautiful things and rich opportunities, it is Amy’s desire for social recognition that provides the majority of her motivation. Her wish is not to produce art that will allow her to provide for herself and her family, it is to produce the best art in “the whole wide world” (Alcott 173). For
Amy, succeeding in the artistic world is primarily a way to acquire social status.

After being subjected to the expectations of middle class society, Amy displaces her need for status, transferring it from art, in which she was an active participant, to the marriage market, in which she is a voiceless object. Though Amy both understands and willingly enters the marriage market, the system is still brokered by men. Her eventual success in the search for a gentleman husband requires her to make many sacrifices. Eventually, she parts with much of her individual identity. In order to participate successfully in the marriage market, women must become, to some degree, objects. The fact that Amy encourages much of her own objectification makes her more successful but does not reduce the emotional toll of the process. Amy’s objectification does require significant sacrifice and, in the end, provides social status that is not quite what she once desired.

In the novel, Amy emerges immediately as the beautiful, social sister. Her pleasing appearance and social skills prompt the notice of others even as she uses them and the attention they bring her as tools in her attempt to acquire social status. Amy originally tries to attain this status through her art, but she eventually determines that finding a wealthy husband is the most plausible route to social status and displaces her desire for status onto the marriage market. Her innate social skills and beauty lead her to success in this market. However, her success comes after she has sacrificed much of who she is, after she has both been objectified and participated in that objectification.

The first words that Amy speaks in the novel are a wish for a higher social position and all of its desirable trappings, “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls to have none at all” (Alcott 3). The way that Amy is described as finishing this first line, with an “injured sniff,” also demonstrates her devotion to status and its markers. Amy
is immediately characterized as devoted to and longing for status. She is upset and injured by the fact that she and her family are poor, and she does feel that the Marchs’ poverty is underserved and unjustifiable.

The first description of Amy indicates that she is misplaced in the March household. Alcott describes Amy as, “though the youngest...a most important person--in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners” (7). As the most beautiful and feminine sister, Amy is immediately distinguished from Meg, Jo, and Beth. Unlike her sisters, she meets traditional standards of female beauty as she is fair, blonde, blue-eyed, slender, and ladylike. Amy’s physical appearance is defined as distinctive, as is her self-concept; Amy is quick to see her own importance.

Amy’s fascination with herself is firmly established in the scene in which all of the girls decide to use their Christmas dollar to buy a gift for Marmee. Each of the other three sisters quickly chimes in, identifying the gift she plans to buy for Marmee, all gifts that will cost an entire dollar. Amy, the last to speak, offers a compromise, “I’ll get a little bottle of cologne. She likes it, and it won’t cost much, so I’ll have some left to buy my pencils” (Alcott 8). Here, Amy’s negotiation skills are obvious. She has examined the situation and has decided upon the route that will best please both others and herself. Amy possesses an ability which none of her sisters do, the ability to successfully negotiate complex social situations without facing repercussions. No one reprimands Amy for keeping part of her dollar to herself or demands that she participate fully in the Christmas celebration. All of the sisters accept her skillfully wrought compromise.

Despite Amy’s compromise and its initial success, she is eventually convinced, by her
own conscience, that in order to be a properly giving female she must return the small bottle of cologne and her drawing pencils for a larger bottle of cologne that will cost her whole dollar. Amy must sacrifice the tools of her ambition for a bottle of cologne, an emblem of acceptable femininity. Her drawing pencils, centered on both the self and ambition, are not a suitable use of money. Cologne, an enhancer of femininity, is a far better use of her income.

Having returned her pencils and purchased a larger bottle of cologne, Amy tells Jo, “I am truly trying not to be selfish anymore” (Alcott 18). However, this statement is quickly followed by a more telling one, “You see, I felt ashamed of my present after reading and talking about being good this morning, so I ran round the corner and changed it the minute I was up, and I’m so glad, for mine is the handsomest now” (Alcott 19). Amy, though she was originally motivated by her conscience and her desire to present Marmee with an appropriately feminized gift, has been able to find some personal benefit in the situation. Her gift is now more beautiful than those the other girls have brought. Amy’s personal conviction that her gift is superior to those of her sisters is reinforced when Beth, “ran to the window and picked her finest rose to ornament the stately bottle” (Alcott 18-9). Amy’s desire for status and her insistence that it be conferred on her gift causes Beth to oblige her by placing her best rose on Amy’s bottle of cologne rather than on her own gift to Marmee. Amy’s tendency to claim the prominent position indicates that she is consistently ranking things and considering status. However, she also feels that she must make some concessions to the ideas of femininity, which encourage altruism rather than competition and ranking. The conflict that Amy feels during the selection of Christmas presents is one that she will experience throughout the novel. Her social success and her ability to manipulate others into the actions she desires as well as her need for status often cause both internal and external conflict. In a world in which working, middle class women are not
supposed to have any type of power, Amy’s social prowess is often perceived as both threatening and inappropriate.

Marmee is the first to begin to break down Amy’s attachment to status and appearances in a lecture on conceit and vanity. As a girl preoccupied with stature, Amy places a high premium on appearances and ensures that her accomplishments are always within view. While this attitude makes her much admired by her peers, it is a violation of the modesty that, as a young woman, she is expected to maintain. Amy carries a “burden of vanity” and “must learn that appearances can be deceiving” (Elbert 158). So, Marmee instructs her, “You are getting to be rather conceited, my dear, and it is quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit spoils the finest genius...the great charm of all power is modesty” (Alcott 86). Though Amy has always been vain, this is the first time that she has been reprimanded for her conceited behavior. From this point on, she struggles to balance the altruism and modesty deemed necessary for a woman of her social standing with her own ambition and desire for status.

Art is the first medium to which Amy applies her ambition in an attempt to gain recognition. Moving through a series of unsuccessful artistic experiments, she gradually eliminates creative outlets. Though this process does not yield any great artistic fruit, it both highlights Amy’s narcissism and teaches her the feminine virtue of humility. Humility is reinforced as ‘Amy’s artistic efforts are consistently either comical or insignificant. Her work is portrayed as trivial’ (Murphy 572). Though Murphy notes the trivialization of Amy’s artistic attempts, she fails to point out the fact that Amy’s work is trivial because of its complete domestication. Amy spends her time executing “Raphael’s face...on the underside of the moulding board and Bacchus on the head of a beer barrel” (Alcott 309). None of Amy’s artistic
attempts reflect her enthusiasm or talent as she is restrained by her domestication. The fact that Amy’s art is confined to the home minimizes it and prevents it from garnering the recognition and praise Amy desires. However, as a woman, Amy does not have access to outside exposure. The development of her domesticated art serves the same function as Marmee’s lecture, showing her the path to modesty as she faces a series of disappointments.

Art also teaches Amy humility through the classes that, due to the generosity of her aunt March, she attends with girls from much wealthier backgrounds than her own. Amy wants to gain the notice of these girls by impressing them with a party at the March home. She tells her mother, “They have been very kind to me in many ways, and I am grateful, for they are all rich and know I am poor, yet they never made any difference” (Alcott 312). Amy recognizes the gap between herself and the wealthier girls in her class and attempts to bridge it by throwing an impressive party at her home, at a high cost to herself and her family. Her attempt fails miserably when only one of the promised twelve girls appears, but Amy maintains control of the situation, coming in from her party of one “looking very tired but as composed as ever” (Alcott 319). Though she is able to keep her emotions in check, Amy is affected by this incident. Her pride is severely damaged by the loss of her money and time and by the fact that the wealthy girls from her art class snubbed and rejected her. To a young woman desiring to elevate herself socially, this event presents an important lesson. Amy learns that, for a woman of her class, modesty is more successful and becoming than ostentation. The incident of the fete is another way in which Marmee’s lesson of modesty and sincerity is impressed upon Amy.

The artistic experimentation and ambition that has characterized Amy’s youth is finally ended on her trip to Rome. During this trip, Amy is exposed to famous artistic works, and this experience quickly convinces her that, “talent isn’t genius and no amount of energy can make it
so” (Alcott 489). For Amy, talent is not a sufficient reason to pursue a career in art. She tells Laurie that, “Rome took all the vanity out of me, for after seeing the wonders there, I felt too insignificant to live and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair...I want to be great or nothing. I won’t be a commonplace dauber, so I don’t intend to try anymore” (Alcott 489). Amy realizes that attempting to become famous through her art without succeeding enormously would distinguish her from other women in an undesirable way. As a middle class woman, her attempt would be viewed as overly ambitious and proud were it not supported by an extraordinary gift. She behaves “as if possessing the genius of Michelangelo were a woman’s only excuse for pursuing artistic activity” (Murphy 572). With her usual social keenness, Amy recognizes the threat that pursuing her art further poses to her search for social elevation.

Amy’s decision to surrender her art in order to secure social status is another example of her desire to please others in order to be elevated in society. Her class and gender prevent her from making this shift in social status on her own, so she relies on the good opinion of others. This reliance is fairly easy for Amy as she is a person who can, “please without effort, make friends everywhere, and take life so gracefully and easily that less fortunate souls are tempted to believe that such are born under a lucky star.” Furthermore, “Everybody liked her, for among her good gifts was tact. She had an instinctive sense of what was pleasing and proper, always said the right thing to the right person, did just what suited the time and place, and was...self-possessed” (Alcott 311). Cultivating this natural dispensation, Amy seeks to please those in the higher social brackets, often sacrificing her individual characteristics and preferences in the process. She is always willing to build a façade of wealth and culture in order to avoid detection of her poverty. Amy’s desire to please the wealthy causes her to efface her own identity, at least in public situations. She believes that who she appears to be supersedes who she is, and she
works hard to maintain those appearances, even at the cost of her own artistic ambition.

Amy’s sacrifice of her art is not only an attempt to please people, it is also an attempt to secure a wealthy husband. Recognizing that her ambition of achieving status independently through art is threatening, Amy displaces her desire for status, transferring it onto the marriage market, the only acceptable avenue for female ambition. She decides that the only way in which she can reasonably acquire status is by making a good match. She writes her mother from Europe, “One of us must marry well. Meg didn’t, Jo won’t, Beth can’t yet, so I shall, and make everything cozy all round” (Alcott 385). One of the March sisters must marry well to secure the financial future of the family. As women, the girls cannot work their way to security, so they must marry with the future in mind. Amy is the only sister to come to this realization.

In the search for financial security, Amy considers accepting the proposal of Fred Vaughn, a wealthy gentleman who is traveling through Europe with Amy and her aunt March. She writes, “I’ve made up my mind, and, if Fred asks me, I shall accept him, though I’m not madly in love. I like him, and we get on comfortably together. He is handsome, young, clever enough, and very rich--ever so much richer than the Laurences” (Alcott 385). Realizing that Fred is wealthier than anyone she has ever come into contact with and that he desires her, Amy determines to accept his marriage proposal. She sees that his offer is far more impressive than any others she is likely to receive. Accordingly, she decides to capitalize on the opportunity.

In making the decision to accept Fred, Amy also accepts the fact that she will be a member of a loveless marriage based on convenience rather than on passion. As Elbert points out, two types of love exist in the novel, passionate love and rational affection (163). Marrying Fred would limit Amy to rational affection, an unacceptable option for her. Amy’s position within the narrative is distinct from that of Jo, for whom rational affection is the best available
solution to artistic repression. The fact that this solution is unacceptable in Amy's particular case reveals the extent and diversity of the repression of female desire as well as the lack of one solution, such as a marriage based on rational affection, which will resolve every case. As women are individuals, individual and complex solutions must be developed. In Amy's case, she realizes that surrendering her chance for a passionate, lively marriage would violate basic elements of her character as well as of her desires. However, she accepts this sacrifice because of the increase in social status that marriage to Fred would bring with it. Amy's mercenary tendencies, displayed in her interactions with Fred, have been developed by her use of marriage as a vehicle for social status. When she displaced her desire for social elevation from art onto marriage, Amy entered the marriage market and molded herself into a suitable product, sacrificing elements of her individual personality if they interfered with her self-objectification.

Despite Amy's intention of marrying for money, her home life and the middle class, feminine values she has been taught interfere with her success. Amy recognizes the competitive, financial nature of marriage, but she is also tied to the values her mother taught her, to the idea that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman." Marmee's words, "I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world--marry rich men merely because they are rich...Money is a needful and precious thing...but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect or peace," and her corresponding approach to parenting are manifested in Amy's behavior concerning Fred's marriage proposal. Amy sees the opportunity that his proposal presents and, having sacrificed her art in order to make herself a desirable woman, she wants to take her chance and secure wealth and prosperity. However, she feels the same conflict that she
felt as a child buying Marmee a bottle of cologne; she is torn between her own instinct for self-elevation and the values she has been taught. In this case, as in the case of the cologne, Amy caves under the pressure to be altruistic, modest, and sincere and refuses Fred Vaughn’s proposal, though doing so is also surrendering the social status she has desired since her childhood. Despite the sacrifice involved, Amy decides that, “she didn’t care to be a queen of society now half so much as she did to be a lovable woman” and that her declaration that she would marry for money, “sounded so unwomanly” (Alcott 512). Regretting her past mercenary actions and craving the type of womanhood Marmee encouraged, Amy rejects Fred’s suit. However, she does realize that she has sacrificed her financial opportunity, and she does still long for status; her instruction has simply, as in her childhood, overcome her personal desires.

Amy’s upbringing has taught her to value men who fit Marmee’s definitions of goodness and acceptability. Laurie Laurence, her eventual husband, is just such a man. Though their marriage may appear to be a fairytale ending in which Amy finally acquires both the social status she has been seeking and a respectful, loving partner, Laurie still requires that Amy be objectified. A prime example of this fact can be found in the scene in which the two meet in Vevay after Amy receives word of Beth’s death:

A pleasant old garden on the borders of the lovely lake, with chestnuts rustling overhead, ivy climbing everywhere, and the black shadow of the tower falling far across the sunny water. At one corner of the wide, low wall was a seat...[Amy] was sitting there that day, leaning her head on her hands, with a homesick heart and heavy eyes...Everything about her mutely suggested love and sorrow--the blotted letters in her lap, the black ribbon that tied up her hair, the womanly pain and patience in her face. Even the little ebony cross at her throat seemed pathetic to Laurie, for he had given it to her, and she wore it as her
only ornament. (514-5)

Amy is presented as a beautiful object among beautiful scenery. She has become, in this scene, "her own most triumphant art object" (Murphy 571). While Murphy explains the power of this scene in contributing to Amy's objectification, she does not consider the extent to which that objectification makes Amy an appealing art object on the marriage market or the ways in which Laurie responds to that objectification.

Having surrendered her artistic ambition and displaced that ambition onto the marriage market, Amy has prepared herself, rather than a canvas or sketch, to be viewed and purchased based upon that viewing. She has tempered her beauty with the love of home and humility that Marmee taught her were necessary for a woman, creating the "homesick heart and heavy eyes" and the "womanly pain and patience" that attract Laurie to her. Amy's appearance, her muted beauty and her obvious need for male comfort and help, communicate her objectification. Amy has molded herself into the perfect woman, beautiful and delicate but also humble and patient, anchored in her natural surroundings but also in need of male aid. The only ornament that she wears is the ebony cross Laurie gave her, a mark of her feminine forbearing and faith as well as of her need for Laurie, who takes great pleasure in the fact that she is wearing jewelry that he gave her. He sees the ways in which Amy has defined herself by him, and he is pleased with that observation. In this scene, Amy is blended with the natural beauty around her, becoming an object worthy of appreciation, but an object nonetheless, and Laurie responds to that objectification, deciding at that moment that, "Amy was the only woman in the world who could fill Jo's place and make him happy" (Alcott 515). Laurie does see Amy as an object; his acceptance of her occurs in a scene in which she functions as an art object rather than as an individual.
Laurie does believe that, as an object, Amy can fill the void that Jo’s rejection left in his heart. This belief is evident in the previous quote, but it also surfaces in his conversation with Jo, after he has married Amy. He tells Jo, “Amy and you changed places in my heart, that’s all” (Alcott 536). This statement, when considered in the light of his earlier thoughts of Amy, places both sisters in the roles of interchangeable objects. When one sister proved too spirited to be subdued, he simply exchanged her for the more objectified, womanly sister. Though Laurie may seem to be the perfect mate for Amy, he does see her as the object she has worked so diligently and sacrificed so regularly to become, preventing her from asserting herself as an individual woman.

Amy negotiates the marriage market successfully in that she marries a man who can give her the wealth and status she has always desired. However, in order to procure that status, she is forced to design herself as an object that meets both the standards of the marriage market and the standards of womanhood espoused by Marmee and society. Amy’s successful union comes at the cost of her own identity. Forced to displace her desire for status from her independent artistic attempts to the marriage market, Amy both objectifies herself and allows others to do the same in order to acquire a socially acceptable and financially secure husband.

Amy objectifies herself because she understands the marriage market in which she is operating. Though, in many ways, this market defeats her by destroying her individuality and ambition, she does use it to her best advantage, considering her social situation. Amy’s social skills and beauty allow her to craft a form of opportunity from her repression, a feat that her sister Meg is unable to accomplish. Meg, though seeking the same financial security as Amy, lacks the knowledge of the marriage market necessary to strong performance within it. She does not understand that, as a woman, she is an object to be viewed and purchased. Accordingly, she
does not, as Amy does, prepare for that process. The result of Meg’s lack of preparation is eventual entrapment in a poverty-stricken and unequal marriage in which her individual identity and her desire for wealth are obliterated.

As both a child and an adult, Meg is focused on luxury and wealth. Before her marriage, she dreams of, “a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things...and heaps of money” (Alcott 172). Though Meg is being truthful in her declaration of her wishes, her protests against her poverty are eventually silenced by the insistence that middle class women should be humbly contented with their place in life. Meg’s focus on money and luxury is seen as unbecoming and immodest. This lesson is reinforced when, after a brief debut as a coquette, Meg is taught that modesty and humility will serve her far better than her wealthy friend’s admonition that she ‘put herself forward’ in order to secure a rich gentleman who can give her all the money and beautiful objects that she desires (Alcott 119). Marmee tells Meg that modesty is superior to forwardness and that she would be happier as a poor man’s wife than as an immodest but wealthy married woman.

In giving Meg this advice, Marmee fails to acknowledge the fact that her daughter may see marriage as a route to financial stability rather than as a confirmation of her femininity. Socially, as a middle class woman, Meg is not permitted to view marriage as anything other than an opportunity for her to serve as a modest and humble wife, an Angel in the House. Meg feels pressure to choose a sphere that reflects her class status, for her repression is caused by both her class and her gender (Armstrong 465). In the end, Meg’s acceptance of her mother’s principles about marriage lead her to wed John Brooke, an impoverished clerk who will never be able to give her the wealth that she desires. Convinced that her personal ambitions are wrong, Meg surrenders them only to find herself trapped in a poverty-stricken marriage in which she is the
lesser component, the Angel in the House, the moral guide.

Meg’s original aspiration in life is to be a rich woman; however, her financial hopes are defeated by her role as a middle class woman, which supersedes her role as an individual. Through the gradual influence of society, Meg becomes convinced that it is proper for her to marry for love rather than to spend her life longing for money. Eventually, she marries John Brooke and bears his children in an attempt to fill the position that she has been taught she should occupy. In her effort to become the ideal woman, Meg relinquishes her dreams of a life filled with wealth and luxury.

As a young girl, Meg fantasizes about the ease that comes with wealth. The first words she speaks are, “It’s so dreadful to be poor” (Alcott 3). She also reflects upon “all the pretty things she want[s]” and her “longing to enjoy herself at home” (Alcott 4). In fact, Meg is immediately characterized by this Christmas wish (Delamar 85). All of the other sisters are able to identify specific items that they want for Christmas, but Meg desires a lifestyle. She wants to be a woman of leisure. She wants to enjoy her home rather than work in it. The position of a housewife is not what Meg desires; she imagines herself as a rich woman with a houseful of servants to command. When she puts her dream life in words, she says, “I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things--nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like” (Alcott 172). Meg is, at the beginning of the novel, attempting to disconnect from the socially respectable, but financially unfulfilling life she is leading.

Meg’s attempts to escape from her current financial situation via the establishment of a wealthy household are thwarted by the pressure that society places on her to marry within the lower social class that she belongs to and to serve her husband and children as an altruistic wife.
and mother. The conflict that Meg feels between her ambitions and the pressures of society can be seen in the conclusion of her discussion about how she hopes her life will develop. After discussing the wealth and servants she hopes to have, Meg adds, “so I never need work a bit. How I should enjoy it!” She then qualifies this statement with, “For I wouldn’t be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly” (Alcott 172). This construction of her future exposes both her desire to be the mistress of a wealthy home and, more importantly, her anxiety over being wealthy and idle. Meg rapidly reforms her selfish wish for wealth by modifying it with her wish to help others. She tells her sisters and Laurie, her listeners, that she would not be idle and that everyone would love her for her good work; yet, she has just wished for a home in which being idle is an enjoyable luxury. Clearly, Meg is torn between her vision of a wealthy, luxurious household and society’s expectations that she be a giving, altruistic female who works for the benefit of others.

The conflict Meg feels between her inner desires and the expectations of society plays out in her temporary adoption of the role of the high society coquette. However, this attempt at imitating the wealthy is ill-fated, and its failure eventually leads her to adopt the role of placid wife and mother. She allows her rich friends to dress her in their clothes and jewelry before she attends their party. Meg is not a success at this event; somehow, everyone seems to know that she is an impostor. In fact, one gentleman goes so far as to say to his wife, “They are making a fool of that little girl. I wanted you to see her, but they have spoilt her entirely. She’s nothing but a doll tonight” (Alcott 113). At seventeen, Meg is no longer a child. Furthermore, she is dressed in the same manner as all the other girls at the party, including her hosts the Moffats. However, even Sallie Moffat notes the incongruence of Meg’s appearance, “You don’t look a bit like yourself, but you are very nice” (Alcott 110). Sallie recognizes, in an indirect way, that Meg
has transgressed class boundaries in her appearance.

Meg’s appearance is remarkable only because it belies her social class. She should appear to be what she is, a middle class girl. Meg recognizes this expectation herself, realizing that she is outside of her sphere. She says, “I wish I’d been sensible and worn my own things. Then I should not have disgusted other people or felt so uncomfortable and ashamed of myself” (Alcott 113). Meg’s anxiety concerning her appearance stems from the fact that she is oppressed not only because of her sex but also because of her class. Her small game of dress up violates her gender boundaries in that it makes her sexual and appealing. However, these gender expectations cannot be separated from the requirements of social class. As West and Fensternaker assert, “no person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing...class” (13). What is expected of Meg, as a woman, is expected of her because of both her class and her gender. These two elements of Meg’s identity are inseparable and work together to determine what society demands of her, modest and sincere behavior appropriate to a middle class, working woman.

The reality of Meg’s dual oppression due to gender and class becomes clear when her position is contrasted with that of Sallie. Sallie routinely acts in the same way that Meg has at this single party. However, her activities are not seen as a poor reflection on her femininity. She is an upper class woman. As such, she is expected to behave frivolously and without consideration for the future. West and Fenstermaker’s principle that, “depending on how...gender, and class are accomplished, what looks to be the same activity may have different meanings for those engaged in it” certainly applies in the case of the Moffat’s dance. While Meg and Sallie are engaging in the same activity, Meg’s status as a member of the working class places her outside of her sphere. Sallie’s situation as a member of the upper class prevents her
from violating her femininity. It is not only Meg’s gender but her class that bars her from participation in the world of the wealth and luxury.

Despite the fact that Meg’s gender and social station prevent her from acquiring wealth, she is incredibly attracted to the lavish life the Moffats live. Looking at herself in the mirror before the party, she realizes that she is “a little beauty” (Alcott 110). Meg feels a conflict between her desire to look beautiful and wealthy and her desire to please those who think that her appearance and behavior should reflect her social and financial status. In the end, however, her desire to please her family defeats her desire to appear rich and beautiful. She returns home and confesses her selfish behavior to her mother, who encourages her to value modesty over beauty and wealth. Marmee’s advice finally convinces Meg that the role of the coquette is inappropriate for a girl of her social station.

Meg’s occupation of the role of the coquette is brief and ill-fated, and at its end, she is more convinced than ever that she should be waiting for a respectable man to make her his wife. This feeling stems from her negative experience at the Moffats’ but is cemented by her mother’s advice. Upon Meg’s return from the fortnight of celebration, Marmee encourages her to be modest and to prize the opinion of good men over wealth. Objectively, this advice is not damaging to Meg’s financial aspirations; however, Marmee’s guidance places Meg in a passive position from which she is incapable of actively pursuing her dream of being wealthy. Marmee tells Meg, “To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman” (Alcott 118). In this construction, Meg is the passive woman who waits for the active male to love and choose her. Marmee does not mention Meg’s choice or the way that her desire for financial security plays into the romantic equation. Marmee says, “I’d rather see you poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-
respect and peace” (Alcott 119). She does not consider the fact that Meg has a choice concerning the reasons that she wants to marry. Meg, however, accepts Marmee’s advice. She goes to bed on the day of her return claiming that she will be “the pride and comfort” of her parents’ life (Alcott 119). She will be the socially appropriate woman, concerned about marrying a man who can provide the average, domestic relationship that Marmee wishes her daughters will have. After hearing her mother’s advice, Meg is convinced that she needs to become a modest woman waiting for everyday, acceptable love rather than pursuing wealth.

In the process of her decision to become a modest, middle class woman rather than a coquette in search of wealth, Meg tells Marmee, “Poor girls don’t stand any chance, Belle [Meg’s wealthy friend] says, unless they put themselves forward” (Alcott 119). Meg’s statement is quickly eroded by both Marmee and Jo, who claim that it is better to be an old maid than to be, “unhappy wives or unmaidenly girls running about to find husbands” (Alcott 119). However, Belle’s statement does contain some truth. In the nineteenth century, women were objects on a marriage market. In some respect, they did need to know how to mold themselves into acceptable objects and how to negotiate the social situation in which they found themselves. Meg does not understand how to reconcile the demands of the market, that she be beautiful and socially adept, with the demands of her gender and class, that she be modest and altruistic. As a result of her inability to negotiate her social situation, Meg is forced into the role of the moral middle class woman, a role that damages her ability to procure the wealth she has always craved.

Meg’s desire for financial status is even further eroded by her romantic intrigue with John Brooke, who eventually spirits her away to the small, nearly impoverished domestic world that Marmee so adamantly recommends. Meg’s relationship with John begins with resistance. In him, she recognizes a threat to her financial aspirations and her independence. After a joke that
Laurie plays on Meg in order to sound out her feelings about John, Meg claims that, “I don’t want anything to do with lovers for a long while--perhaps never” (Alcott 252). However, in the process of the joke, Meg finds out that John does care for her. Originally hostile and afraid, Meg resists John’s advances. However, his aggressive pursuit confirms to her that he is the type of man she should marry. He fulfills her mother’s wishes. He has loved and chosen her, while she has passively waited for him to act as he chooses. In this relationship, Meg has become an object rather than a participant. Meg, as an adolescent, has reached the point in her life at which she must either acquiesce to society or choose to claim her own power (Spacks 128). Unlike Amy, Meg is unable to muster enough self-confidence to make this decision, so she retreats into marriage as “a public testimony of her value” (Spacks 117). The things that Meg once wanted for herself have lost importance and have been replaced by the goals that society and Marmee have set for her. A loving, but unimpressive husband who will choose her without making her work to achieve what she wants from the relationship, John matches Marmee’s romantic ideals perfectly.

Meg allows herself to become John’s wife and to surrender her hope of financial prosperity in an effort to fit in with normative conceptions of the role of women in society (West and Fenstermaker 34). Before her marriage, Meg had no choice but to work as a governess for a wealthy family. This job prevented her from serving as the ideal wife and mother. In John she sees an opportunity to cultivate the ideal female qualities of, “tenderness, piety and nurturance,” qualities that she believes she will have a much better chance of developing in her own home than in that of someone else (West and Fenstermaker 34). As a middle class, working woman, Meg is required by society to place herself in a position that will allow her the time to develop these qualities. While John cannot offer her the opulence she dreams of, he can offer enough
security to allow her to cultivate her femininity (West and Fenstermaker 34). This fact, combined with the allure of marriage as a marker of female maturity, makes Meg willing to sacrifice her financial aspirations for confirmation of her essential femininity.

Though Meg eventually accepts John’s attention, she still longs for the luxurious life of her friend Sallie Moffat. One particular incident during her marriage shows that, in many ways, she remains dissatisfied with her financial status. Meg, who has been pushing the limits of John's financial ability, eventually buys twenty-five yards of expensive violet silk. This episode is a painful example of Meg’s self-denial in pursuit of domestic bliss. She impulsively buys this violet silk so that she might have a fancy dress like those Sallie wears. This purchase ultimately causes Meg regret; in order compensate for her thoughtless purchase, she asks Sallie to buy the silk from her. Sallie complies, and Meg uses the money to buy John a new overcoat (Elbert 156). This incident sends the message that while as a female, Meg is not allowed to be extravagant, John, as a male, is allowed to enjoy luxury. As a woman, it is Meg’s duty to give until she can give no more, retaining nothing for herself. The incident of the violet silk also implies that it is absolutely unacceptable for Meg to displease her husband. However, Meg’s desires may be denied without consequence.

The violet silk episode also demonstrates, once again, the class difference between Meg and Sallie. Meg is forbidden any luxury while Sallie is allowed to buy both silk for herself and silk from Meg. Sallie is allowed a double luxury while Meg is not permitted even a single one. Furthermore, Sallie is permitted to keep the violet silk that she buys from Meg, while Meg must use the money from the silk to buy John a new overcoat. High social class permits Sallie to accumulate material objects. As a middle class woman, Meg must ultimately sacrifice any luxury she receives for the good of another. Meg’s status as a middle class woman requires her
to be continually self-sacrificing and domesticated in a way that is not required of Sallie. Meg’s social position ensures that she will remain humble and altruistic.

Meg, in the episode of the violet silk, is eventually glorified for her docility and altruism. However, this same docility becomes a problem in her attempt to raise her children. Tired and overwhelmed, Meg stops working to appear beautiful and becomes, “dowdy and dependant” (Elbert 156). As a result of Meg’s distraction and diminishment, John leaves the home more and more often, compounding the problem. However, John does not bear responsibility for this issue. Rather, Meg must dress up and attempt to talk about subjects that interest him. In return, John takes on a small amount of household duties. The burden of bridging this marital gap, however, lies largely with Meg. Not only has Meg been financially deprived, she has also been forced to augment that financial deprivation with great mental and emotional responsibilities, laboring to improve her marriage without being rewarded by her husband. In this case, Meg’s effort to become the ideal woman is thwarted, and she must expend even more energy in an attempt to fill that elusive role, all without experiencing the financial security she once thought she would possess as an adult.

Meg’s dream of a life of ease and luxury, her castle in the air, is defeated by society and the expectations that it places upon her due to her gender and social class. In the end, Meg’s life is not at all what she thought it would be. In her article, “Little Women: Alcott’s Civil War,” Judith Fetterley proposes that, by the end of the novel, Meg’s castle in the air is almost completely fulfilled as her dream was, from the start, domestic (372). However, the domesticity Meg envisioned as a child was that of the upper classes. She is eventually persuaded to accept not luxurious domesticity but difficult, middle class domesticity. The roles of middle class and upper class women are drastically different from each other, a fact demonstrated by Sallie’s
party, and Meg, inhabiting the role of the middle class woman, certainly does not receive the role that she once desired. Fetterley also argues that, "Meg must learn that love is better than luxury; she must learn to put a man in the center of her picture, and she must learn that without domestic chores to keep them busy, women will be idle, bored, and prone to folly. These are but minor adjustments, however, for Meg’s dream, centered on the home, is eminently acceptable" (373).

What this argument neglects to consider is that, in Meg’s dream, domesticity’s importance rests in its role as a backdrop for luxury, and luxury is not an acceptable desire for a woman of Meg’s class. Meg’s inability to negotiate social boundaries with personal ambition deprives her of her dream of wealth and luxury, living instead in a typical middle class domestic situation. Her desire has been completely defeated by society’s expectations and her capitulation to them.

By surrendering her castle in the air, her idea of a tranquil life filled with luxury and fortune, to the ideals of society, Meg becomes a domestic, middle class wife who behaves in a way that is consistent with society’s expectations. She marries a man who can keep her in moderate comfort and proceeds to raise his children while making sure that he remains perfectly satisfied with his home life. In an attempt to become the wife that society has taught her she should be, Meg sacrifices her aspiration of becoming a wealthy, influential woman.

Meg March, like her sisters, is eventually shuttled into a world over which she has no control. In marrying John, she resigns herself to a life of poverty and domesticity, leaving behind her dream of financial prosperity. Meg’s fate echoes that of Jo and Amy. Jo subjugates her literary talent to her home and her family life. Amy objectifies herself by surrendering her artistic talent and displacing her hopes onto the marriage market. All three sisters suffer when their childhood ambitions are stripped away so that they can become model middle class women, angels in their homes.
Alcott's novel portrays both the strength of female ambition and the defeat of that ambition by dominant social forces. Her narrative makes clear the social emphasis on the necessity of the middle class adoption of the role of the Angel in the House, of the giving and moral female personality. However, Alcott also depicts the March sisters' resistance to this adoption. This novel is, in fact, desperately conflicted. As Murphy points out, "The power of Little Women derives in large measure from the contradictions and tensions it exposes" (584). This conflict imbues the novel with the sense of apprehension concerning the fate of the March sisters that makes it such an attractive and powerful work. The conflict also raises the question of the motivation and purpose of Alcott's great work.

The conflict within Little Women arises from the chasm between Alcott's own life experience and her convictions about the experiences of the majority of middle-class women. Alcott herself was a successful author of both scandalous thrillers and children's fiction. Unlike many women of her time, she was able to find a balance between personal ambition and societal expectations. In Little Women, however, she examines life as it might have been for her and as it was for many other women. The novel is set in the 1860s, during which time Alcott felt that women still faced many closed doors. It was not until 1886 that Alcott declared, "the woman's hour has struck" (Alcott qtd. in Armstrong 454). Alcott felt that, at the time in which her novel was set, women were being restrained and held back by social forces as their individual ambitions were destroyed. Little Women is a literary expression of this belief.

The repression of the three March sisters demonstrates what Alcott felt was the reality for many girls growing up during the Civil War. Though she herself had escaped fulfilling the role of the Angel in the House, she recognized that other women had not been so fortunate, that other women had been forced to subjugate their personal desires to the necessity of a socially
condoned marriage. These women are exposed in *Little Women*.

Alcott’s own life also plays a role in the fates of her repressed female characters. In Jo’s life, Alcott’s alternative future is outlined. Had she not been strong enough to resist social pressure, Alcott too may have been both married and silenced. In fact, she faced her own version of silencing when she made the transition from writing sensation stories to writing children’s fiction. Her sensation stories appeared primarily between 1862 and 1867. *Little Women* was published in 1868. The novel’s enormous success and the demand for a sequel confined Alcott to writing children’s fiction for the rest of her literary career (Delamar 94). After the publication of *Little Women*, she decided to stop writing sensational stories, believing that “even their mild violence and emotions were not in keeping with the image her young readers had of their favorite author” (Delamar 95). In her own way, Alcott was restrained by the social opinion that a writer of children’s fiction should not also write sensual thrillers. In the character of Jo, Alcott envisions the extension of her own repression, an extension that, in 1860, would have been quite likely to occur.

Similarities to the financial plights of Amy and Meg can also be seen in Alcott’s own life. Having suffered from the popularized saying that the Alcotts cannot make money, Alcott herself could never accumulate enough of it (Delamar 97). Her preoccupation with finances was gratified by her profession and her ability to make money independently. Through Amy and Meg, Alcott examines women who, because of their class, gender, and position within the world and the family, are not able to soothe their worries by earning an independent income. Like Alcott, both girls come from a financially insecure family. Unlike her, they can only hope to remedy this situation through marriage. Amy succeeds in doing so at the cost of her individuality and artistic ambition. Meg, never understanding how to negotiate her social
position, fails and must resign herself to marriage to the poverty-stricken John Brooke. In portraying Amy and Meg as she did, Alcott not only echoed the lives of herself and her family, she examined alternative possibilities for her own life. Having experienced enough gender-based repression to understand its existence, Alcott exposed it in her novel.

In *Little Women*, Alcott makes clear both the abilities of girls and women and the social factors that prevent them from fulfilling their ambitions. As a strong feminist and a believer in women’s equality to men, Alcott presents a fiction that shows the dangerous consequences of female repression. She highlights the talents of Jo and Amy and the intense ambition of all three girls. She depicts their energy and their willingness to work toward their goals. She positions the March sisters in such a way that they become strong and admirable young women. Then, she introduces social pressure into the narrative. In doing so, she exposes the ways in which society cripples talented and ambitious young women. As Amy notes in the novel, “Ambitious girls have a hard time...and often have to see youth, health, and precious opportunities go by, just for want of a little help at the right moment” (Alcott 554). In fact, this is the fate of the three March sisters, a fate that Alcott both acknowledges as common and resents as a diminishment of female power.

*Little Women* is a deeply conflicted novel in which both the ambitions of young girls and the defeat of those ambitions by society are chronicled. As a female author, Alcott was herself operating outside of social boundaries, and this position did not come without its share of social censure. Required by traditional female standards to cease writing sensational fiction after the publication of her children’s stories, Alcott realized that, for many women, repression due to gender and class standards was much more extensive than that which she faced. Setting her novel in the time of its authorship, the 1860s, she employs *Little Women* as an exploration of
both the fate of many girls of the time and an extension of her own repression. Furthermore, she demonstrates the damaging effects of the minimization of women by highlighting their talent, ambition, and drive to succeed. In *Little Women*, Alcott both exposes the social repression of women and laments its impact.
Works Cited


