“I want to be great, or nothing”: Amy March’s Subversion of Societal Expectations

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

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Since its publication in 1868, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has sparked favoritism and debate among readers about the characters and plotlines. The novel follows the March family—Marmee, Mr. March, and their four daughters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Originally published in two parts, with the first focusing on the girls' childhood as they learn lessons and the second on their marriages and careers, *Little Women* is intended for a young audience and teaches readers crucial life lessons alongside the March girls. Even though the novel's narration is third-person omniscient, many readers align themselves with Jo, the second-eldest March sister who aspires to be a writer. Most of the scholarship surrounding the text also focuses on Jo. Camille Cauti, Stephanie Foote, and Ann B. Murphy argue that readers identify with Jo because the novel is told from her perspective; therefore, readers view the events and other characters through Jo's eyes. Cauti writes, "Louisa May Alcott based Jo on herself. Consequently, Jo is the most fully realized, complex character and, not surprisingly, the one most beloved by Alcott's readers across generations" (23). Jo is a self-insert for Alcott, who knows herself best and can portray the character accurately (Foote 76). Murphy agrees with Cauti's argument, pointing out that readers can relate to Jo because the third-person novel is told from her perspective (Murphy 566). Despite the general belief that Jo is beloved by readers because of the novel's writing style, Clare Bender presents a counterargument about the heroine's inability to meet expectations. She writes, "Out of all the March sisters, Jo is the most interesting and the one to whom readers can easily relate because of her normal human struggles and failings" (Bender 148). Bender's claim raises questions about whether the other March sisters' struggles are relatable.

Although Jo is the novel's heroine, the other sisters are also concerned with meeting societal, feminine expectations. Beth and Amy are dedicated to their music and art careers, respectively, and, while Beth successfully makes sacrifices at the beginning of the novel, Amy

and Meg struggle with vanity, selfishness, and self-sacrifice. Greta Gaard outlines feminine expectations during the nineteenth century, specifically the Civil War. She writes, "The overt messages are the rules of true womanhood: be pure, pious, submissive, domestic, and perform your self-sacrifice cheerfully" (Gaard 4). The men, including Mr. March, risk their lives by joining the war effort, so the women at home must sacrifice their own wishes and suppress their emotions, specifically anger, to become proper young women. Gaard also argues that anger was associated with masculinity, and, since marriage was the de facto role for women during this time, they could not show their anger toward men or the patriarchal system because they had to join that system to succeed (13). Instead of expressing their natural emotions and financially supporting themselves with careers, women were taught to always appear happy and rely on men for financial stability. These expectations are both encouraged and subverted in *Little Women*, but Jo is not the only sister who faces them; the youngest sister, Amy, both adheres to and subverts feminine expectations and asserts agency.

Despite Amy's substantial role in the novel, she is often overlooked or outright hated by readers and scholars due to Alcott's narratological choices. Jo and Amy are foils even though they are both artists, so if Jo views Amy through a negative lens, the reader will too, since the novel is told from Jo's perspective. Many famous scenes inspire this hatred of Amy: burning Jo's manuscript, earning the trip to Europe, and marrying Laurie. Content creator Rachel Ann Thomas even posted a video to her Instagram on January 29, 2025, ranting about the decision to pair Amy and Laurie together. She says, "Amy's always gotten what she wants….She is the one that ends up going to Europe. She ends up taking Jo's spot. There are so many things that Amy gets over Jo" (Thomas). This sympathy for Jo and hatred of Amy is still prevalent more than 150 years after the novel's publication, and scholarship has continued to treat the youngest March

sister poorly. Cauti says she "found Amy particularly annoying" (29), and Murphy refers to her as "the least likeable and most narcissistic and ambitious of the four" (570). Associating narcissism and ambition with unlikability points to the novel's endorsement of feminine expectations. Amy is not supposed to be vain or selfish; she should make sacrifices like her sisters, such as when Jo cuts and sells her hair to financially support her mother's trip to visit their father at war. However, Amy is ambitious like Jo, since they both wish to be successful artists. Even though readers continually see Amy working to improve her artistic skills, these moments are overshadowed by Jo's own journey and Amy's mistakes.

Although Jo has received most of the attention from readers and scholars, Amy can also be read through a feminist and gender studies lens. Foote agrees with this claim, but Bender and Frances Armstrong fail to touch on the youngest March sister in their scholarship. Foote writes, "But there is another way to tell the story of *Little Women*, and that is as the story of Amy, who is, after all is said and done, triumphant in the areas of class and gender ambition" (74). Amy's ability to meet societal expectations and play the role of a proper young woman while also having her own self-satisfying artistic career contradicts Jo's status at the novel's conclusion; Jo had to sacrifice her authorial career for a marriage to Professor Bhaer, deciding to open a school for young boys instead. Amy and Jo's differing abilities to meet expectations connect to Bender's point that Jo's plotlines are more "relatable." While Amy grows as a character and pursues traditional goals, Jo struggles to play the part of a proper young woman, an issue that is universally relatable for readers from all time periods. By pairing this relatability with the narratological choices, Alcott creates a self-insert that readers can sympathize with while viewing the events of the novel through her eyes. However, this decision means the other March sisters, specifically Amy, are overlooked or even ridiculed.

When readers are first introduced to Amy, she is a selfish, vain twelve-year-old. However, her father's letter inspires her to change and focus on her self-improvement. She struggles with fitting in at school and does not want to make sacrifices, which connects to her goal of succeeding in society and climbing the social ranks. As she continues to grow as a character, Amy becomes aware of the patriarchal system she exists in and what she must do to succeed. She makes sacrifices, turns herself into an art object, and places the expectation on herself to marry well. During the second half of the novel, she succeeds by meeting expectations, but she still refuses to sacrifice her artistic career for marriage; she believes she can have both. When she rejects Fred Vaughn, who represented a financially supportive marriage, she is rewarded with Laurie, whom she has loved since childhood. Amy's character growth and her ability to both adhere to and subvert expectations prove that she deserves space in scholarly conversation. Unlike Jo, she is unwilling to sacrifice her artistic career or her traditional wish to marry, and by the end of the novel she has both. Her ability to play the part of a proper young woman by suppressing her emotions, pleasing others, and becoming an art object helps her survive and succeed.

"Marmee told us to do lots of things, but we can't possibly do them all": Amy's Inability to Make Sacrifices

Nineteenth century women were encouraged to make sacrifices, a condition that was exacerbated during wartime. While men could focus on themselves, their careers, and their families, women had to sacrifice their own goals and pleasures for others. The March sisters learn this lesson throughout their childhood—Marmee is their teacher and hopes her daughters will follow in her footsteps—but Amy, the youngest, struggles with this expectation.

The novel opens a few days before Christmas; the sisters are lounging around the house, complaining about the lack of presents and their missing father, who is working as a doctor for the Union Army. Because the novel is written in third person omniscient, readers only see the sisters' perspectives through their dialogue. Jo, the novel's heroine, complains that "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," placing a focus on material goods instead of shared company and time with family (Alcott 11). A few lines later, readers are introduced to Amy and her love of the finer things in life. She says, "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all" (Alcott 11). This first piece of dialogue clues readers into Amy's future character growth as she initially struggles with her family's financial situation. Foote writes, "For Amy it isn't just that there isn't enough money, it's that there isn't enough money to be like other girls" (69). She is jealous of others who have finer things and wishes to be like them, and readers see her try to improve her social standing as she grows up. This introduction to young Amy shows that she has a long way to go in terms of self-improvement and meeting feminine expectations.

After complaining about Christmas without presents and their father, the girls decide to use their money to buy their mother a nice gift. They are practicing their self-sacrifice skills by giving up their own happiness and pleasure. As each sister brainstorms a gift idea, Amy says, "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 something for me" (Alcott 14). She selects a gift that she knows her mother will like that is also cheaper, so she will have leftover change to spend on herself. Even from a young age, Amy balances her selfishness with self-sacrifice. Gaard points out that "only Amy attempts to moderate… but such moderation is not enough, and Amy feels the pressure" (5). Her sisters

force her to make sacrifices, acting as the societal voice that expects women to give up their goals for others.

Amy makes her first sacrifice when the family receives a letter from Mr. March. He calls his daughters "little women," naming them and their femininity. By focusing on their gender and societal expectations, Mr. March hopes his daughters will grow into proper young women. After reading the letter, Amy confesses, "I *am* a selfish pig! But I'll truly try to be better, so he mayn't be disappointed in me by and by" (Alcott 17). She promises to work on herself to appease her father, showing that Mr. March reinforces the patriarchal structure he expects his daughters to exist within. To succeed, they must meet feminine expectations, which include making sacrifices and suppressing emotions. In response, Amy decides to return the small bottle of cologne and use all her money to buy a larger one. She tells Jo, "I gave *all* my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any more" (Alcott 20). Amy is aware of her selfishness and inability to make sacrifices but will try her best to improve. After announcing her goal and showing off her new gift, her sisters praise her, highlighting that she did the right thing by sacrificing her own happiness. Alcott writes, "Amy showed the handsome flask which replaced the cheap one; and looked so earnest and humble in her little effort to forget herself, that Meg hugged her on the spot, and Jo pronounced her 'a trump'" (21). The word "effort" implies that self-improvement does not come naturally to Amy; she must work hard at overcoming her selfishness if she wishes to meet expectations. The phrase "to forget herself" emphasizes the idea that a "proper young woman" is a role the girls must play; they are not inherently "proper young women," and Amy must "forget" her old, selfish ways to thrive and succeed in society. However, Amy displays that she still struggles with this task when she says, "I ran around the corner and changed it the minute I was up; and I'm *so* glad, for mine is the handsomest now" (Alcott 21). Although she

made the sacrifice, she is still unable to overcome her selfishness and vanity; she is enchanted by the fine item instead of the act of gift-giving.

Unlike Amy, Jo is willing to sacrifice hers wants for others.This trait is displayed when Jo finds out her father is sick, and her mother needs money to visit him. Jo sacrifices her vanity, cutting off her hair and selling it for her family's benefit. She says, "I didn't beg, borrow, nor steal it. I earned it; and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own" (Alcott 132). She takes ownership of her hair; the only way for the sisters to make sacrifices is to either give up their body or their material goodsMarmee has encouraged self-sacrifice, she shows an uncharacteristic moment of confusion when Jo cuts off her hair. She says, "My dear, it was not necessary, and I'm afraid you will regret it, one of these days" (Alcott 132). Like Amy, Marmee balances the need to make sacrifices with her own selfish attitude; she hopes Jo will learn this moderation, so she does not harm herself for others. Amy's response to this situation emphasizes the difference between her and her sister regarding their willingness to make sacrifices. Amy asks, "What made you do it," and the narrator says that she "would as soon have thought of cutting off her head as her pretty hair," demonstrating that Amy refuses to put her physical appearance at risk (Alcott 132). While Jo does not view her physical appearance as important, due to her attempts at subverting expectations, Amy understands that looks are crucial to becoming a proper young woman.

When Beth is diagnosed with scarlet fever, Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March, who teaches her to stop focusing on material objects. Amy creates her own will, and the narrator refers to this document as "Amy's last and greatest sacrifice:" she willingly gives her prized possessions to her family (Alcott 157). When she returns home, readers see Amy's intentions to improve when she says "I'll try not to be vain… Beth isn't selfish, and that's the reason everyone

loves her, and feels so bad at the thought of losing her. People wouldn't feel half so bad about me if I was sick, and I don't deserve to have them" (Alcott 160). Selfishness was associated with masculinity, while self-sacrifice was associated with femininity. By promising to be less selfish and making sacrifices for others, Amy embraces her femininity and meets expectations. Amy's youth and naivety are on full display in this monologue; she believes "everyone loves" Beth because she "isn't selfish." Beth becomes an aspirational figure and receives praise for meeting expectations and playing the role of a proper young woman. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes, "A woman's goodness consists in giving and serving… a quite explicit realization of the freedom and power generated by what appears an existence of self-sacrifice" (36). Because Beth is already a "good woman," even though she is only a year older, Amy believes more people would love and mourn her if she died.

Amy openly embraces self-sacrifice when she decides to financially assist young, middle-class artists after marrying Laurie. These girls are in a position that Amy can relate to, as the Marches struggled with poverty and Amy was not able to focus on her art due to their lack of funds. She tells Laurie, "People have been very kind to me, and whenever I see girls struggling along, as we used to do, I want to put out my hand and help them, as I was helped" (Alcott 357). She also shows her gratitude for the wealthy people who helped her along the way, including Aunt March; without her and the trip to Europe, Amy would not have been able to improve her artistic skills or win Laurie's affections. Although she initially struggles with self-sacrifice as a child, Amy focuses on improving her character to impress her father and meet society's expectations. She becomes less selfish, and, in turn, less masculine, and makes more sacrifices as she grows up, successfully embracing her femininity. However, she does not sacrifice her artistic

career for marriage and motherhood, proving that women could have both in the nineteenth century.

"That's because I'm rich": Amy's Character Growth at the Hands of Aunt March

The comparison between Jo and Amy becomes apparent when Marmee helps the former suppress her emotions. During this time, women were taught that to succeed in society they had to hide their emotions, specifically their anger, while men could voice how they were feeling. This expectation was rooted in the patriarchal system to silence women and take away their understanding of their own feelings. Gaard writes, "anger control is a critical support for the hegemony of the ruling class… individuals experiencing anger are discouraged from examining too closely the social structures in which they live" (3). If women expressed their anger, they would start to understand the patriarchal system that controlled and silenced them. This suppression of emotions was connected to self-sacrifice, since society taught women to serve the men in power while giving up their own needs and goals.

Although suppressing one's emotions was a crucial way to meet societal, feminine expectations, the narrative only focuses on Jo's struggle, not Amy's. Alcott provides a detailed description of Jo's anger that hints at her rocky relationship with Amy, and her narrator pities the heroine, allowing the readers to sympathize with Jo. In one notable passage, the repetition of the word "try" shows that suppressing her emotions does not come naturally to Jo; she must attempt to play the role of a genteel woman to meet expectations. "Poor Jo" introduces a sympathetic tone. The narrator understands it is difficult for Jo to hide how she is feeling and hopes the readers will understand this trial. Describing her anger as a "bosom enemy… always ready to flame up and defeat her" adds a negative connotation to her anger, which is a natural emotion

that, if not expressed, may bottle up and burst (Alcott 63). The narrator dedicates an entire paragraph to Jo's anger and her struggle to suppress it, but Amy's perspective about her own anger is lacking.

Amy embraces her anger when she burns Jo's manuscript after being excluded from a trip to the theater, but the narrator favors Jo's perspective. Alcott writes, "It seemed a small loss to others, but to Jo it was a dreadful calamity, and she felt that it never could be made up to her…and Amy felt that no one would love her till she had asked pardon for the act which she now regretted more than any of them" (64). This line attempts to sympathize with Jo, allowing readers to understand the heroine's pain after losing her stories. Because readers only receive one line about Amy's regret compared to Jo's lengthy loss, they are more likely to sympathize with the latter than the former. Amy, therefore, becomes unsympathetic in the scene, even though the narrator belittles Jo and her work with lines such as "it seemed a small loss to others" (Alcott 64). Through this belittling, Foote believes the novel is focused on educating Jo on how to suppress her emotions. She writes, "Even though the novel believes that her work is valuable, and that Amy has done a terrible thing in destroying it, it is less interested in the objective justice of Jo's feelings than it is in the subjective way she handles her anger" (Foote 64). Even though Amy burns the manuscript, indicating that she also struggles with her anger, the novel favors and sympathizes with Jo. If readers are experiencing the novel through her eyes, they will understand her while also viewing Amy in a negative light.

Due to the narratological choice to focus on Jo's emotional suppression, readers receive little insight into whether Amy is taught to hide her emotions. Before the manuscript scene, the youngest March sister was criticized for her selfishness and vanity, not her anger. Armstrong writes, "By action—burning the book—not by words, Amy vented most of her anger, and if she

had not made the mistake of expressing its last vestiges in words by admitting to the act, there would have been no consequences for her" (469). Although Marmee and Meg verbally punish Amy for burning the manuscript, more focus is placed on the fact that Jo does not forgive her. The novel praises Amy for confessing and, although she is punished by falling through the ice, Jo receives the blame for not forgiving her sister. Gaard points out that if Jo had forgiven her, Amy may not have fallen through the ice. Similarly, Foote writes, "For their part, Jo's mother and sisters understand the significance of 'Amy's bonfire,' but they cannot understand the intensity of Jo's response" (63). Amy's actions are rooted in societal wishes; she feels left out by her older sisters and desires to grow up and join society, which is a traditionally feminine goal. Jo, however, hopes to financially support herself and her family with her writing, which is a traditionally masculine goal. By encouraging Jo to suppress her anger in response to the burned manuscript, Marmee hopes her daughter will prioritize traditional goals such as marriage and motherhood. One step toward achieving these goals is suppressing one's emotions, which Jo learns to do through effort.

While Jo's efforts at suppressing her emotions receive more attention than the other sisters' attempts at self-improvement, readers see Amy's character growth when she is sent to stay with Aunt March to protect herself from scarlet fever. Alcott writes, "Amy rebelled outright and passionately declared that she had rather have the fever than go to Aunt March" (144). Even at age twelve, Amy shows how outspoken and determined she is; these traits will continue as she pursues her art career. She does not want to stay with Aunt March, but she suppresses her emotions and goes anyway. Unlike Jo, Amy impresses Aunt March with her "docile" and "amiable" attitude (Alcott 152). Beth's illness provides Amy with an opportunity to leave the private, domestic sphere and explore society. She grows as a character and learns how to impress

Aunt March; a skill she was unable to learn at her own home, but one she will continue to use for her own benefit.

Amy is rewarded for suppressing her emotions and appeasing Aunt March when the older woman takes her niece under her wing. Alcott writes, “She took Amy in hand, and taught her as she herself had been taught sixty years ago” (152). By pointing out how traditional Aunt March’s attitudes are, Alcott distinguishes between Amy’s acceptance of a traditional education and Jo’s need to subvert societal expectations. Although Amy will also subvert expectations through her art career, she takes on more traditionally feminine traits, such as charm and vanity, and complies with most social expectations. Even though Aunt March’s lessons may appear outdated, this way of teaching helps Amy balance the marital side of her life with the artistic, leading her to “have it all” at the novel’s conclusion.

As Amy continues to impress Aunt March, she begins to understand the role she must play to succeed. Her ability to charm others for her own benefit helps her maintain a close relationship with her aunt. Alcott writes, “The old lady took such a fancy to Amy, that she bribed her with the offer of drawing lessons from one of the best teachers going… she gave her mornings to duty, her afternoons to pleasure, and prospered finely” (191). Amy must sacrifice her own identity to get what she wants; she plays the part of a polite young woman for her aunt and is rewarded with drawing lessons, which will support her traditionally masculine goal of having a successful art career. Foote writes, “Amy….after having sedulously tended her airs and affections, grows into a young woman who pleases effortlessly and who reaps all manner of material awards” (75). Amy gets what she wants by meeting societal and gendered expectations. The line, “she gave her mornings to duty, her afternoons to pleasure, and prospered finely,”

shows how Amy balances her work and her art—a characteristic that continues throughout the novel as she strives for a loving marriage and a self-satisfying art career.

"I have lovely small feet, the best in the family": Amy as an Art Object

Amy's ability to meet societal expectations is rooted in her vanity and artistic skills; she performs and plays the part of a proper young woman by treating herself like an art object. During the childhood portions of the novel, the narrator describes Amy's physical appearance and her self-perception: "Amy, though the youngest, was 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" (Alcott 14). Even though she is only twelve, Amy attempts to act older; she infuses her conversations with vocabulary words but says them wrong. The narrator's description of Amy paints the picture of a proper young woman, despite her selfishness and inability to make sacrifices. The word "like" implies performativity instead of embodying or becoming a proper young woman. This physical description, when contrasted with Amy's childish personality, highlights the balance in her character; she must look and play the role of a proper young woman since it does not come naturally.

Amy's focus on her physical appearance as essential for a proper young woman becomes clear when the narrator points out the issue of her nose. Alcott writes, "It was only rather flat, and all the pinching in the world could not give it an aristocratic point. No one minded it but herself, and it was doing its best to grow, but Amy felt deeply the want of a Grecian nose and drew the whole sheets of handsome ones to console herself" (39). The mention of her art supports the idea that not only is Amy an artist, but she treats herself like an art object because she understands the importance of physical appearances and meeting feminine expectations.

Keyser writes, “Amy’s greatest art, we begin to suspect, is not her painting or sculpture but rather the graceful way in which she…exploits her own little womanhood” (618). Bender also points out the importance of physical appearance and how young women are conditioned to look a certain way to meet societal expectations (142). Along with her clothes and accessories, Amy hopes she can edit her physical appearance. She even draws noses she wishes she could have, which connects her physical appearance to her art. Her only solution is putting a clothespin on her nose with the hopes of “uplift[ing] the offending feature” (Alcott 102). Pain is not mentioned, but it is implied that Amy will do anythingthe way she views as desirable. Alcott’s focus on twelve-year-old Amy’s vanity shows how important physical appearance was to play the role of a proper young woman. As a woman, she thinks she will be valued for her beauty before her skills or personality. Amy hopes to appeal to others with her appearance, which will help her meet societal expectations more effectively.

Despite Amy’s focus on her physical appearance, she still balances meeting and subverting expectations. She treats herself as an art object but refuses to give up her artistic career for more traditional, feminine goals. Even though her vanity is rooted in a patriarchal system, as Keyser argues, she chooses to treat herself as an art object; she has agency at a time when women lacked power over their own bodies. Keyser writes, “Amy molds herself, but she nonetheless conforms to a male model of femininity…Amy can now play the role to perfection, but in her conscious playing of it and in her inability to break out of it, she is both more than a conventional heroine and less than a true hero” (619). Amy embraces her femininity through her vanity and physical appearance because she knows how to survive in the patriarchal system. Compared to Jo, the tomboy, who subverts expectations, Amy knows that she must look like a proper young woman to appear as if she is playing the part successfully.

Throughout the second half of the novel, Amy meets expectations and plays the part of a "little woman" by treating herself like an art object and happily joining European society. While Jo's chapters focus on her authorial pursuits, each of Amy's chapters show her working on herself and attempting to fit into society. As Foote says, many of Amy's scenes are focused on social goals, not artistic ones (84). However, Alcott connects Amy's ability to play this role with her artistic career because appearances are a major aspect of being a proper young woman.

Amy succeeds in meeting expectations for her own personal gain. She picks societal lessons up quickly and succeeds. Keyser writes, "While Jo would flaunt her unconventionality, Amy conceals hers in order to preserve and foster her genuine independence and what would appear to be the rudiments of a feminist consciousness" (616). After sacrificing her own happiness so the Chesters' fair could succeed, Amy returns home and her dialogue provides readers with insight into her goals. She says, "You laugh at me when I say I want to be a lady, but I mean a true gentlewoman in mind and manners, and I try to do it as far as I know how. I can't explain exactly, but I want to be above the little meannesses and follies, and faults that spoil so many women. I'm far from it now, but I do my best, and hope in time to be what mother is" (Alcott 243). Even though she initially struggled with selfishness and vanity, Amy now accepts the role of a "true gentlewoman" because she knows it is the only way middle-class women can succeed. As a child, she wished to be a successful artist in Rome, and although she still cherishes this goal, she now prioritizes meeting expectations. Jo's main goal, however, is to become a writer and financially support herself and her family. Amy's monologue finalizes the core difference between the sisters: Amy is willing to sacrifice some of her goals to succeed, while Jo holds on to her goals and hopes to succeed anyway. While Amy may have been selfish in her youth, she is now focused on improving herself and others.

Amy's hard work in social situations pays off when Aunt March invites her — not Jo — to Europe. Aunt March and Aunt Carol select Amy because of her improved spirits and sensibilities. Despite Jo's behavior during the social call, she believes she will be invited because she worked for her aunt for many years. When she hears of the news, she says, "It's always so; Amy has all the fun, and I have all the work. It isn't fair, oh, it isn't fair!" (Alcott 244). Despite her prior lessons, Jo embraces her anger and frustration. She belittles Amy's commitment to being a proper young woman, believing her efforts to not be "work" like Jo's literary pursuits. She says, "Amy has all the fun," even though readers have seen Amy working hard to get what she wants. This response from Jo may be another narratological choice to create sympathy for the main character. Despite readers' opinions, many scholars view the trip to Europe as a reward for Amy. Foote writes, "When Amy repays her debts during her social calls, she is rewarded beyond her wildest dreams" (76). Judith Fetterley agrees, viewing the situation as an opportunity for readers to learn that playing the role of a "little woman" leads to many benefits (381). Keyser also points out that while the trip to Europe will help Amy grow as a character and find a wealthy husband, it will also "pay dividends for her art," providing her with an opportunity to enter the public sphere for her own gain (617). She has learned all she can from the domestic sphere and can only improve herself further by traveling, which was seen as a traditionally masculine activity. Despite her ability to meet feminine expectations, Amy also subverts them by leaving home and focusing on her artistic career.

Amy's ability to make herself an art object is certified when she returns home with her husband, Laurie. The March family observes her character growth, showing that she was only able to improve herself by traveling abroad. Alcott writes, "For they saw that their youngest had done well, not only in worldly things, but the better wealth of love, confidence, and happiness"

(349). While Amy met expectations by marrying a wealthy man, she also subverted them by rejecting Fred Vaughn and a marriage built on financial support and objectification. Instead, Amy chooses Laurie, whom she genuinely loves.He will also give her the opportunity to work on her art instead of expecting her to be "an ornament to society" (Alcott 317). Her ability to embrace this balance is evident at the novel's conclusion as she has "love, confidence, and happiness" thanks to her marriage and improved artistic skills. However, she continues to value physical appearances, as shown in a conversation with Laurie. She says, "I don't wish to make you vain, but I confess that I'm prouder of my handsome husband than of all his money. Don't laugh,—but your nose is *such* a comfort to me" (Alcott 356). While this line is comical, it also shows how Amy subverts feminine expectations. She values Laurie's physical appearance and personality over his money, even though she expected herself to marry a wealthy man. She objectifies Laurie—and "the dimple in [his] chin"—the way a man would objectify a woman or value her physical appearance instead of her personality (Alcott 356). Amy views herself and Laurie as art objects, placing his money and physical appearance above his personality or her love for him. Despite her character growth, Amy is still vain, but her focus on physical appearance is connected to playing the role of a proper young woman.

"Not when I've spent my entire life loving you": Amy's Art Career and Marriage to Laurie

Although Jo is typically labeled as the artist in the March family because of her authorial aspirations, Amy is also determined to become a successful artist. During the childhood portions of the novel, her sisters give her the nickname "Little Raphael," connecting her to the famous male artist. She hopes to buy herself some drawing pencils for Christmas, which shows her commitment to her art and her difficulty in making sacrifices for others. Even from a young age,

readers see Amy trying to improve her skills and become a proper and well-rounded young woman. The narrator introduces Amy's artistic activities, which include "copying flowers, designing fairies, or illustrating stories with queer specimens of art" (Alcott 39). Female artists at this time were praised for their attention to detail, which allowed them to create replicates of male artists' work; however, they were not creating their own pieces. Lauren Hehmeyer writes, "The critics tore into the *Salon des femmes* in 1893, arguing that women's works too closely mimicked their masters" (86). Amy subverts this notion by "designing fairies" and "illustrating stories," showing that she can master many different mediums (Alcott 39).

Amy shows through her dialogue that she will do whatever it takes to achieve her goals, displaying a type of determination and stubbornness readers associate with Jo. During a conversation with her sisters, she says, "I have lots of 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 118). The first phrase is achievable since readers see Amy working to improve her artistic skills. Traveling to Rome is a bit trickier, since leaving the domestic sphere and entering the public sphere was deemed masculine, and the Marches could not afford to travel. Her final wish—"to be the best artist in the whole world"—shows how determined Amy is; if she cannot be the best artist, she does not want to be an artist at all.

Amy later groups her and Jo together as the two artists in the family, which supports the idea that the sisters are more similar than most readers would believe. Chapters dedicated to Amy and Jo focus on their artistic careers; the former works to improve her artistic skills, while the latter writes her novel. Amy says, "Jo and I are going to make fortunes for you all; just wait ten years and see if we don't" (Alcott 129). While young women were expected to possess specific artistic skills to impress male suitors, Amy and Jo both hope to financially support themselves

with their art at a time when this goal was associated with masculinity. Instead of making the money themselves, they are expected to marry men who will financially support them. While Amy's declaration successfully subverts feminine expectations, the narrator's descriptor belittles her artwork, similar to how Jo's burned manuscript was treated. Alcott writes, "…said Amy, who sat in a corner making 'mud pies,' as Hannah called her little clay models of birds, fruit, and faces" (129). Amy experiments with a new medium, but the narrator overlooks her attempts by calling the statues "little." "Mud pies" are also associated with childhood, reducing Amy's art to a silly mess. Keyser agrees: "Amy's early 'artistic attempts' are treated mockingly, but even these suggest her artistic independence" (617). Jo's manuscript was also described as "little," so the narrator is belittling both of their artistic careers to force them to meet expectations.

Even though the narrator belittles Amy, the novel does emphasize how she is still devoted to her art and her role as the family artist. At the end of the first section of the novel, the March family are sitting outside after Meg's decision to marry John Brooke. John may not be wealthy, but Meg still meets expectations by devoting her life to marriage and motherhood while Amy focuses on her art. Alcott writes, "Amy was drawing the lovers, who sat apart in a beautiful world of their own, the light of which touched their faces with a grace the little artist could not copy" (185). The word "little" returns, but now it is used to describe Amy and her role as an artist, not the art itself. The descriptor was first utilized in Mr. March's letter, and the word continues to belittle the sisters and their artistic pursuits so that they will meet feminine expectations. While Amy is devoting time to working on her art, the line, "the light of which touched their faces with a grace the little artist could not copy," shows that she still struggles with some artistic skills (Alcott 185).

As the second half of the novel begins, readers see Amy's dedication to her art as she tries different mediums, subverting the expectations placed on female artists at the time. Alcott writes, "It takes people a long time to learn the difference between talent and genius, especially ambitious young men and women" (203). This narration implies that Amy lacks either talent or genius; she does not have both. She may be a talented artist willing to focus on her skills, but she is not the best artist, which is her aspiration. The narrator describes Amy as "ambitious," adding a masculine element to a character associated with selfishness and vanity. She may possess those traits, but she also hopes to have a successful career like Jo. Despite her determination, the narrator tries to humble her with phrases such as "mistaking enthusiasm for inspiration" (Alcott 203). Despite the narrator's description, Amy still tries different mediums; after the mud pies, she picks up pen-and-ink drawing, which the narrator says, "proved both pleasant and profitable" (Alcott 203). Instead of belittling her, the narrator praises Amy's work. However, Murphy argues that "Amy's artistic efforts are consistently described as comical or insignificant, their only permanent memorial being a suggestively oedipal gouged foot" (572). She agrees with Keyser's earlier claim that the narrator belittles Amy's artwork to convince her to prioritize traditional goals. However, the narrator sometimes imbues the text with praise to show that Amy, not Jo, is the artist of the family, and she does not have to sacrifice her artistic career to succeed.

Amy is rewarded for pleasing her aunts with the trip to Europe, which will give her an opportunity to improve her artistic skills. Amy tells her sisters, "It isn't a mere pleasure trip to me…It will decide my career; for if I have any genius, I shall find out in Rome and will do something to prove it" (Alcott 244). While Aunt March hopes Amy will find a wealthy man to marry, Amy plans to focus on her art. She subverts feminine expectations by referring to her art as a "career" and refusing to dedicate her trip to finding a husband. The narrator suggested that

she had talent but not genius, and now Amy shows that she is also aware of her potential lack of genius. She hopes to "prove" her artistic abilities when she enters the public sphere, showing her devotion to her art.

In another letter to her family, Amy mentions her reunion with Fred, one of Laurie's friends from childhood, and her ability to balance her romantic life with her artistic career. Fred appeals to both her and her family because of his high status and wealth—two traits that are ideal for Amy's marital partner. She expects herself to marry well since none of her sisters did or will. Amy writes, "I may be mercenary, but I hate poverty, and don't mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help. One of us *must* marry well; Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't, yet—so I shall, and make everything cosy all around" (Alcott 252). Describing herself as "mercenary" adds a masculine quality to her character. She then confesses that she "hates poverty," referencing her childhood jealousy of upper-class girls and her attempts to fit in at school. Amy realizes the only way for her to climb socially is through marriage. The emphasis placed on the word "must" shows how necessary Amy feels it is to marry a wealthy man to financially support herself and her family. She is the first one to mention this concern, showing that she is placing this expectation on herself. While Amy has been selfish, she starts to openly embrace self-sacrifice by giving up her happiness and chance at love to marry a wealthy man to financially support herself and her family. She details her goals: "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 252). Her description of Fred paints him as the perfect suitor, even though she does not love him. She also compares his family to the Laurences—her only frame of reference for wealth—foreshadowing her eventual marriage to Laurie, which is built on both financial security and love.

Amy and Laurie's reunion in Europe and their eventual relationship highlight their similarities, despite the former's ambition and the latter's laziness. Amy appeals herself to Laurie by mothering him and acting like a proper woman of society; her determination and ability to meet expectations inspires him to do the same (Alcott 314). Laurie is heartbroken after Jo's rejection, and Amy tells him, "stay as you are and go to sleep if you like. *I* intend to work hard" (Alcott 316). The emphasis on the word "I" shows Amy's awareness of the differences between her and Laurie. She criticizes him for lounging around and not working toward his goals while she improves her artistic skills. Amy's frustration is rooted in the pair's class and gender differences. As an upper-class man, Laurie does not have to work to financially support himself but is expected to pursue a career, specifically one not based in the arts. Amy, as a middle-class woman, would be expected to raise her class position through marriage, but she instead wants to financially support herself with an artistic career. Laurie's interest in music is like Amy's in art, but he lacks the drive due to his privilege. He could pursue his music if it was not for his family's expectations, while Amy places the expectation on herself to marry well and sets her own artistic goals. She also knows that she can only be a successful artist if she works hard.

Despite Amy's determination, she starts to realize that she lacks the genius a great artist needs. She turns to Laurie for advice, and their close relationship becomes apparent. Amy starts by delivering the famous line, "I want to be great, or nothing" (Alcott 317). By splitting up the "great" and "or nothing" phrases with a comma, Alcott shows the two paths Amy considers in her life. She associates greatness with being a successful artist. The phrase "or nothing" is her view of failure. If she cannot be the best and leave behind a legacy, she has failed. She follows up this line by saying, "I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more" (Alcott 317). Amy realizes she lacks artistic genius, and she refuses to "be a common-place

dauber" or "try any more" (Alcott 317). She is giving up in this speech, and readers can sense her frustration. This pragmatic understanding of the patriarchal system and feminine expectations differentiates Amy from Jo, who is willing to subvert expectations to succeed as a writer.

As Amy continues to show her understanding of feminine expectations and patriarchal society, the narrator highlights her close relationship with Laurie. After Amy says she will "polish up [her] other talents and be an ornament to society," the narrator admits that "it was a characteristic speech" (Alcott 317). Laurie's perspective bleeds into the narration, and he recognizes that this speech is reminiscent of the Amy he knows. Amy realizes that if she is not the best artist, the only thing she can do as a woman is "be an ornament to society." Marrying someone rich like Fred will allow her to "polish up [her] other talents," but she will be unable to strive for greatness like she stated earlier. The phrase "ornament to society" demonstrates that Amy understands how women are valued for their beauty and viewed as secondary compared to their husbands. She is not a woman; she is an object, especially if she gives up her art for marriage. Amy is aware of the patriarchal society she exists within, and her threat to sacrifice her art career shows her embracing her femininity to meet expectations.

Due to their lifelong friendship, Laurie sees the real Amy underneath her attempts at playing the role of a proper young woman, emphasizing that this part does not come naturally to her. When he says, "Your face will, if your tongue won't," he is referencing the narration two lines before: "Amy preserved a discreet silence, but there was a conscious look in her downcast face that made Laurie sit up" (Alcott 318). Through both the narration and Laurie's dialogue, the reader understands that, even when Amy is not talking, she shows how she is feeling on her face, despite her attempts to suppress her emotions and play the role of a proper young woman. Laurie then says, "You aren't woman of the world enough yet to hide your feelings, my dear" (Alcott

318). He implies that, with practice and exposure to society, Amy could learn to hide her emotions, which supports the idea that she is playing a role. By adding "my dear" to the end of his phrase, Laurie makes clear how much he cares about her. The reader also understands that Amy shows off her emotions with the line "her lips would smile, and there was a traitorous sparkle of the eye" (Alcott 318). The word "traitorous" shows that, no matter how hard Amy tries, she cannot keep her emotions intact, even after Laurie criticized her. The pair's ability to understand each other's true selves, even when they try to hide them, proves that they are a good match.

Laurie ends the conversation by asking about Fred, and Amy's response shows the expectations she places on herself to marry a wealthy man, even if she does not love him. She says, "I could be, if I tried," which highlights her uncertain feelings for Fred (Alcott 318). Amy knows she needs to marry well to support herself. "I could be, if I tried" shows that she does not have feelings for Fred now, but she "could." Instead of using the word "would," implying that Amy will love him with time, Alcott uses the word "could." Amy "could" ideally love Fred, as he is wealthy and will provide her with a strong support system. Amy admits that she must try, revealing her uncertainty to Laurie and the reader with one line. Laurie shows his understanding of Amy with two separate lines: "He's a good fellow, Amy, but not the man I fancied you'd like" and "but it sounds odd from the lips of one of your mother's girls" (Alcott 318). In the former, Laurie refers to Amy by her name instead of "my dear," which adds a level of severity to his words. The phrase, "not the man I fancied you'd like," shows that he knows what type of man Amy likes, and Fred is not that man—Laurie is. Laurie then references her mother, reminding Amy of her childhood and how her mother raised her; he believes Amy should know better. Amy replies, "True, nevertheless" (Alcott 318). Although she is adding a level of validity to Laurie's

critiques, she still believes she is in the right. Like the use of the comma in the "I want to be great, or nothing" line, separating the words "true" and "nevertheless" shows the two different opinions in the scene. Laurie believes he knows Amy best and encourages her not to marry Fred, while Amy believes marrying Fred will provide her with the best possible future and social support system.

As Amy and Laurie spend more time together, their similarities become apparent and highlight why they are drawn to one another. She fills Jo's role by mothering Laurie and hoping he will improve, but she proves to be a better partner because of their similar personalities and goals. One example of her mothering is when she voices her disappointment in a longer monologue:

> I said when we first met, that you had improved; now I take it all back, for I don't think you half so nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you like gossip, and waste time on frivolous things; you are contented to be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and beauty,—ah, you like that, old vanity! But it's the truth, so I can't help saying it,—with all these splendid things to use and enjoy, you can find nothing to do but dawdle, and instead of being the man you might and ought to be. (Alcott 320)

Other than laziness, many of the traits she criticizes Laurie for possessing are those she used to possess. Amy also points out that Laurie will most likely succeed in life without working hard because he has "money, talent, position, health, and beauty." She lacks the money to support herself, so Amy is forced to either marry a wealthy man or have a successful art career. Laurie, however, lacks that motivation due to his privilege. Amy knows he has the possibility to be "the man you might and ought to be" if only he committed himself to self-improvement. As Azelina

Flint points out, “The generative potential of the sculpture suggests that women can create a living work of genius unimpeded by domestic duty if they are assisted by an equal who shares their burden of domestic labor” (56). Amy and Laurie are both artists struggling with the expectations placed on them; Amy expects herself to marry well, while Laurie is unsure of what he wants to accomplish in life. Once they do marry, readers see they are equal in the relationship, which allows Amy to continue her artistic pursuits for her own improvement.

After their conversation, Laurie focuses on improving himself and finding a financially supportive career. Alcott writes, “Amy’s lecture did Laurie good” (328). Like Jo, Amy mothers Laurie and helps him grow as a character. She worked on herself and now uses her experience to help him improve. Foote writes, “He also, therefore, makes himself a suitable match for Amy, for what she has done in scolding him is to assert, as her own mother has before her, the sovereign power to legislate behavior through sentiment” (77). Amy successfully follows in Marmee’s footsteps by not only improving her own character but also Laurie’s. However, Laurie realizes that he cannot succeed as a musician and must work for his grandfather. This moment is like Amy’s monologue; Laurie says, “Music has taken the vanity out of me as Rome took it out of her” (Alcott 330). They both want to pursue artistic careers but realize they cannot succeed unless they are the absolute best. This realization causes Laurie to sacrifice his music for a more practical, financially supportive career. Flint provides a counterargument for this interpretation of Amy and Laurie’s relationship. She writes, “Himself a failed composer, Laurie is a fitting punishment for Amy’s excessive ambition” (48). While Amy does struggle with her role as a female artist, especially after realizing that her talents are lacking compared to the male-dominated, European art scene, she is not punished with her marriage to Laurie, and she does not have to sacrifice her artistic pursuits. Because Laurie is wealthy, Amy is still able to work on her

art without worrying about financially supporting herself, which provides her with a self-satisfying art career.

As Laurie grows as a character and commits himself to a career, Amy also improves her character by rejecting a marriage based on money. Alcott writes, "When the time came, her courage failed her, and she found that something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart" (332). Instead of detailing the scene or providing Amy with an opportunity to share her thoughts in dialogue, the narrator describes Amy's realization and her hope to not marry for money. She would have only married Fred for financial support, so by rejecting a transactional marriage, Amy is rewarded with a love match with Laurie. The narrator says she would feel unsatisfied with the marriage to Fred, and although she knows she needs to marry for money, she refuses to sacrifice love. With regard to her earlier intention to marry Fred for money, Amy "wished she could take it back, it sounded so unwomanly" (Alcott 332). She describes her goal of marrying for money as "unwomanly," even though marriage was one of the only ways women could find financial stability. The wish itself is not "unwomanly," but the fact that she voiced it is. According to society, Amy should not be aware of the system she exists within, but she subverts this expectation.

Laurie finds Amy after Beth's death and turns into her knight in shining armor. Amy is struggling with homesickness and grief and when Laurie arrives he observes her ability to play the part of a proper young woman by fashioning herself as an art object. Despite Beth's death, Amy is still polished and focused on her appearance. Alcott writes, "Everything about her mutely suggested love and sorrow…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" (333). The emphasis on the cross as "her only ornament" shows that, despite Amy's appreciation of the finer things in life, she

values the necklace for sentimental reasons. The letter, ribbon, and expression on Amy's face help paint her as a sympathetic, grieving woman that Laurie can rescue and support. She cries to him like a damsel in distress: "Oh, Laurie, Laurie! I knew you'd come to me!" (Alcott 333). Amy trusts him and their relationship but still looks up to him as a savior.

After many shared scenes in Europe, Laurie proposes to Amy, but it is not a dramatic scene like his proposal to Jo. Instead, their moment on the lake mirrors a piece of art, with the two riding in the same rowboat. Even when Laurie is in control because he is the one proposing, Amy is aware of how she appears. The narrator describes the scene by saying: "Then they both stopped rowing and unconsciously added a pretty little *tableau* of human love and happiness to the dissolving views reflected in the lake" (Alcott 336). She and Laurie stand out on the lake after Amy accepts the proposal. The dialogue in the scene also stands out, since Laurie does not specifically ask Amy to marry him. Instead, he says, "I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?" (Alcott 336). The boat metaphor puts them on an equal playing field, removing a potential power dynamic in their relationship. Keyser writes, "The proposal itself is prompted when Amy relieves him of an oar, and the two pull smoothly together through the water" (618). Even when they share a boat, Laurie and Amy are equals. Despite Laurie's wealth, their relationship is not built on financial support; they love each other, and Amy is rewarded with a loving and financially supportive marriage after rejecting Fred, who represented a transactional match. She lacks a voice when she rejects Fred, but here she says, "Yes, Laurie," showing the pair's equality (Alcott 336).

Although they may adhere to gender and societal expectations at first, Amy and Laurie are ultimately equal and improve one another. They prove their equality when they write a letter to the March family announcing the union. Alcott writes, "It was a sort of written duet, wherein

each glorified the other in lover-like fashion, very pleasant to read, and satisfactory to think of, for no one had any objection to make" (340). Amy and Laurie work on the letter together, providing each other with a voice to share their feelings and praise their new partner. Not only is Amy balancing adhering to and subverting expectations, but she also blends her voice with Laurie's in the letter and in their relationship. They do not talk over one another like Laurie and Jo, proving the equality of their match. Amy even tells Laurie later that she fell in love with him and saw their match as being based on love, not money. She says, "I forgot you were rich when I said 'Yes.' I'd have married you if you hadn't a penny, and I sometimes wish you *were* poor that I might show how much I love you" (Alcott 355). Although she placed the expectation on herself to marry a wealthy man, Amy subverted her own expectation and the societal belief that men are supposed to financially support women by marrying Laurie for love, not money. The two improve and understand each other, proving their similarities and how well they get along.

The March family's impression of Amy when she returns home points out her overall character growth and how her love for Laurie has improved her. Alcott writes, "No little affections marred it, and the cordial sweetness of her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for it stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she had hoped to become" (349). The mention of Amy as a gentlewoman references her goal to meet feminine expectations and follow in her mother's footsteps. Although she has also subverted expectations by focusing on her art, the narrator enforces the idea that Amy could only become a "true gentlewoman" by marrying a man for financial support and love, as is traditionally expected of women. Foote writes, "Indeed, she becomes a true gentlewoman by the end of the text, proved by her refusal of a merely mercenary marriage alliance (for which she is rewarded by becoming the fabulously wealthy Mrs. Theodore

Laurence)" (77). Unlike Flint, Foote describes the marriage as a "reward," since Amy refuses the idea of marriage as transactional and embraces a match based on love.

Despite the sacrifices that come along with her marriage to Laurie, Amy is still painted as the artist in the family, not Jo. Jo rejects her authorial career for a life with Professor Bhaer running a school for boys, while Amy is married with time to focus on her art. In the last scene of the novel, Alcott writes, "Amy, with a beautiful motherly expression in her face, sketched the various groups" (378). This scene draws to mind the ending of the first section of the novel in which Amy draws Meg and John. Now, she draws the happy couples around her. Keyser writes, "Amy continues working for her own pleasure; she does not need parental encouragement—or permission—to resume a prescribed activity" (Keyser 617). Amy subverts her family's expectations by being both a supportive wife and an artist. Keyser writes, "Amy is a figure somewhat apart, and it is she, not Jo, who is portrayed as the artist, engaging herself in portraying the family" (616). At the novel's conclusion, Amy has a marriage based on both love and financial support as well as a self-satisfying artistic career (Keyser 616). The pairing of her "motherly expression" with her art shows that she can have both. Thanks to Laurie's wealth and financial resources, Amy does not have to sacrifice her art for marriage and motherhood. She is rewarded for meeting expectations and achieving traditional goals with the opportunity to continue her artistic career.

The final scene sees Jo, Amy, and Meg reflecting on their lives, their childhood goals, and whether they achieved them. Readers hear Amy's view of her life in her own words: "I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes or configure myself to helping others fulfil their dreams of beauty. I've begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done" (Alcott 379). She compares herself to Jo, suggesting that they are both the artists in the family,

even though the narrator paints Amy as the artist. Fetterly also places Amy and Jo in the same position, viewing them as having artistic aspirations. However, Fetterly argues that Amy gives up her artistic ambition once she realizes that she cannot pursue a successful career. She is not the best artist, so she does not want to be an artist at all. Women at this time had to be the best at what they aspired to do, so Amy believes it would be impossible for her to succeed if she was not the best artist. She marries Laurie, showing that she can balance her art with marriage and motherhood. Fetterly writes, "No longer working for fame or fortune, she is inspired by love for her child. Her figure is not intended for public exhibition, for Amy works not to produce great art or to define herself as an artist, but to create a private memorial to her dying child" (373). With Laurie's money, Amy can financially support other young, female artists while also working on a figure of her young daughter. The last two lines show that she is shifting her art to focus on her family, specifically her ailing child. Amy's roles as a mother and as an artist are intertwined, showing that she can have both; she does not have to sacrifice one or the other. As Fetterley argues, women could only be successful artists once they became wives and mothers; so long as they met society's expectations of women, they could pursue their own artistic aspirations (374). However, the reference to Laurie thinking "it is the best thing" is reminiscent of Mr. March's expectations and patriarchal views (Alcott 379). Amy's focus has switched from impressing her father to impressing Laurie, since her original goal of improving herself was inspired by her father's letter. However, she and Laurie are on an equal playing field compared to Marmee and Mr. March. They continue to improve in relation to their daughter. Alcott writes, "Amy's nature was growing sweeter, deeper, and more tender; Laurie was growing more serious, strong and firm, and both were learning that beauty, youth, good fortune, even love itself, cannot keep care and pain, loss and sorrow, from the most blest" (380). At first, it seems as if their daughter's

illness is meant to challenge them and their vanity. However, Amy and Laurie prove that they can still improve as people to support each other and their daughter. After helping one another grow in Europe, they enter the next stage of their life—marriage and parenthood—together.

Conclusion

Amy March deserves a place in *Little Women* scholarship for her ability to both meet and subvert societal, feminine expectations. Her refusal to sacrifice her artistic career at a time when women were encouraged to make sacrifices not only shows her dedication to her craft but also her determination to financially support herself with a self-satisfying artistic career. When she marries Laurie, she is still dedicated to her art because their marriage is equal. If she had married Fred Vaughn, who represented financial stability, she would have been reduced to an "ornament to society" (Alcott 317). However, she and Laurie are on an equal playing field, and the power she wields over him subverts the expectation that women must serve their husbands.

Fortunately, the most recent film adaptation of the novel, written and directed by Greta Gerwig and released in 2019, dedicates time to Amy's character growth and highlights her feminist nature. Instead of telling the story linearly, the film switches between the childhood and adulthood portions. This back-and-forth storytelling method helps viewers see Amy as both a spoiled young girl and a society woman in Europe. According to Florence Pugh, who plays Amy, "Everybody's perception of Amy is that she's the sour one in the family who is spoiled and has everything and gets what she wants. What I loved about this is that you get to see her brilliance and her sensitive side, how complicated and human she is" (McIntyre 55). Amy's portrayal in the other film adaptations is not as detailed as the 2019 version. In the 1933 and 1949 films, she does not burn Jo's manuscript or fall through the ice; her relationship with Jo lacks conflict. Both

films also show Jo leaving for New York before Amy receives the invitation to Europe, and no screen time is dedicated to Amy's trip. The 1994 film stars two actresses playing Amy, which leads to a stilted portrayal. While the film dedicates some time to Amy's art and her trip to Europe, most of the screentime is focused on Jo. Jo is still the lead character in the 2019 film, but Gerwig splits the rest of the story equally between the other March sisters. Amy's first scene is in Europe when she reunites with Laurie, so viewers see her in the middle of her character development. The film then flashes back to childhood, so viewers can see who Amy once was and compare her to the girl she becomes.

The 2019 film is not only the most recent adaptation of the novel but has also helped improve public opinion about the youngest March sister. A simple Google search of "in defense of Amy March" sparks multiple articles and YouTube videos published after the film's release. Jessica MacLeish published an article for *The Ringer* with this exact title on December 31, 2019. She points out that if readers saw themselves as Jo, they were bound to view Amy in a negative light. MacLeish writes, "Gerwig's script and direction, drawing on the source material, bring forth Amy's ambition and practicality, and her Amy is given ample opportunity to voice both her desires and motivation." Some of Amy's more feminist moments in the film are not from the novel; her monologue in Paris is adjusted to include lines such as "I always knew I would marry rich. Why should I be ashamed of that?" and "So don't sit there and say that marriage is not an economic proposition because it is." However, the novel, too, makes it clear that Amy is aware of the patriarchal system she exists within and what she must do to survive. She even places the expectation on herself to marry a wealthy man to financially support herself and her family, even if she does not say it as directly as she does in the film. Gerwig pulls moments from the novel in which Amy displays some feminist ideals and adapts them for the screen and twenty-first century

audiences, which helps viewers relate to her. The film also lacks the novel's narratological choices; Jo may be the third person omniscient narrator, which helps readers understand her and her struggles, but the film does not adapt this quality. Instead, screentime is dedicated to each of the sisters, who are viewed objectively. Paired with Pugh's stellar, Oscar-nominated performance, Amy finally becomes a character viewers want to root for and defend.

Although the 2019 film cannot capture the entirety of Amy's character growth from the novel, its portrayal of the youngest March sister helped spark conversation about how she is treated by viewers and scholars. Amy's development from a bratty twelve-year-old to a pragmatic society woman highlights her understanding of the patriarchal system, which, as a woman, she was not supposed to question. She knows what she must do to meet feminine expectations, so she sacrifices her true personality to play the part of a proper young woman. Discussing the feminine expectations in the novel provides readers and scholars with an opportunity to not only understand the March girls' struggles, but the difficulties all women faced during the nineteenth century. Amy's feminist qualities, such as her agency and ability to meet and subvert societal expectations, should not be ignored when discussing *Little Women*.

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