



Blurring the Boundaries: The Sexuality of *Little Women*

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I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body...because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man (Showalter, xiii)

It is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength. It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack (Rich, "It is the Lesbian in Us", 201)

"It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy"(Alcott, 3) laments Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's seminal work *Little Women*. This disappointment of sexuality, being "made" of one sex, whilst desiring to "be" of another, is one of the most complex (and taboo) issues surrounding many a critical reading of *Little Women*. Facilitated by contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler who argue that gender is performative and therefore socially constructed, some perceptive critics have begun to interrogate the sexual ambiguity in *Little Women*. Nina Auerbach raises the issues of sisterhood and the female community in her chapter "Waiting Together: Alcott on Matriarchy" to which Roberta Seelinger Trites adds a lesbian reading, in her chapter "Queer Performances: Lesbian Politics in Little Women", whilst Jan Susina questions why there are no men in *Little Women* in "Men and Little Women: Notes of a Resisting (Male) Reader". This provocative reconsideration of *Little Women* renders both a homosexual or heterosexual reading equally valid and a number of commentators also emphasise the "love that exists between women" (Judith Fetterley, 37) and seek to demonstrate a female relationship within the novel "Amy and Jo are the real couple of the novel (Douglas, 60), "Jo and Beth are at the heart of the novel"(Auerbach, 16), and Trites suggests that the sisters collectively are engaged within a "romantic friendship" (Trites, 155). Therefore, to read *Little Women* in today's society would indeed be "to engage with the feminist imagination" (Alberghene & Clark, xvii).

This essay seeks to intersect and supplement these critical readings and suggest that *Little Women* is a novel that investigates the dyadic relationship between the bisexual world of “childhood” and the “grown up” world of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, 631). Reflecting on the sexual ambiguousness of the novel, my analysis of sexuality in *Little Women* will juxtapose an examination of the way in which female sexuality was interpreted during this juncture, with the writings of Adrienne Rich.¹ In this way, a case for “compulsory heterosexuality” may be supported by socio-historical information, whilst the clues that Alcott provides suggesting this “bisexuality” or blurring of sexual boundaries is confirmed through intertextual references, especially in relation to Laurie and Jo.

By arguing *Little Women* within this context, I wish to add my voice to the feminist critics that claim that “gender roles rarely exist independently of sexuality” (Trites, 139) *except* within this pre-sexual world of childhood. This androgynous world allows both Jo and Laurie to occupy each other’s sexual spheres, and it is through this cross-gender romantic friendship that the *real couple* of the novel is established (Douglas, 60; my emphasis).

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Little Women was written in 1868 at a time when the unified belief towards sexuality was “to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations...to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative” (Foucault, 37). Women were seen as virtuous, pure and asexual. Sexual activity amongst women was understood as something to be endured to gratify their husbands or to procreate, it was not something that was willingly embarked upon. Family remained the chief patriarchal institution and the social order within society determined that males ruled over females. Excluded from this public sphere of patriarchy, where male values were exercised, women were united within the matriarchal domestic sphere of housekeeping and childrearing. There was little that tied the two sexes together and whilst women may have depended on men financially, it was women that they turned to emotionally. Men had to be seen as repressing any emotions in favour of rationality and therefore women, through inhabiting the same sphere, were allowed the freedom to express their sentiments of the heart, their emotions and their passions unreservedly. As several critics have pointed out, the social acceptability and even fashionableness of homo-social or romantic friendships, which encouraged women to fall “passionately in love with each other” (Faderman, 74), whilst refusing to accept that these relationships were anything other than platonic, further appropriated women’s subjugation and non-sexuality. Women could unselfconsciously confess their love for another woman safe in the knowledge that “regardless of the feeling that might develop between them, they need not attribute it to the demon, sexuality, since women supposedly had none” (Faderman, 159). This dichotomy between covert female sexuality and overt female asexuality goes some way to explain the sexual ambiguousness of *Little Women*.

Critics such as Trites use this covert female sexuality evident within these romantic friendships to suggest that *Little Women* is a lesbian text, whilst others such as Auerbach insist, “allegiance is more important than sexuality” (Trites, 143). Whilst none of this information precludes either possibility and there is certainly evidence to suggest that Jo does have passionate lesbian feelings towards her sister and mother, I would

suggest that the lesbianism evident within *Little Women* is related to what Adrienne Rich terms the “lesbian continuum” of women identified experiences and the love of a female community. For Rich, the term “lesbian continuum” refers to “a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman...to embrace...primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life” (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, 649). In addition, when referring to the bonds of sisterhood Maya Angelou comments that “all the responsibility, all the courtesy, all the soft and sweet words, all the teaching words, are called for in those relationships as much as in a love affair” (Angelou, 135). Therefore, Jo’s transgressiveness and bi-sexuality allows her to explore this female community of matriarchal love and sisterhood. Consequently, her desire to “marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family”(Alcott, 203) is not because she has passionate desires for her sister, but because she fears losing this female sanctuary in favour of forced male identification. Similarly, her longing for them to all be boys is also due to the fact that her sister, as a result of an enforced compulsory heterosexuality, will lose her own identity to her husband and therefore Meg’s affection for her will be lessened: “For Jo loved a few persons very dearly, and dreaded to have their affection lost or lessened in any way”(Alcott, 233).

In addition to this realm of sisterhood, Rich argues, is a further deeper inner sanctuary of mother-daughter bonding. She comments “Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge...of mother and daughter-hood” (Rich, “Motherhood”, 225). With mothers being responsible for the physical nurture of their children as well as emotionally caring for them, it is natural for Jo to acknowledge, “Mothers are the *best* lovers in the world”(Alcott, 437). Rich expounds the importance of the mother-daughter relationship and comments that it is the intensity of these relationships, which have been “profoundly threatening to men” (Rich, “Motherhood”, 226). Rich claims that from ancient texts onwards, daughters have been barely written about whereas sons have shared centre stage with their fathers. She argues that daughters throughout history have been nullified through infanticide and silence, writing:

we [women, lesbians] have met with utter, suffocating silence and denial...this silence is part of the totality of silence about women’s lives. It has also been an effective way of obstructing the intense, powerful surge toward female community and woman-to-woman commitment, which threatens patriarchy far worse than the bonding of male homosexuals, does. (Rich, “The Meaning of our Love”, 224)

Rich suggests that the suppression of female sexuality is vital in our society if one is to continue with the existing hegemonic social order and claims that compulsory heterosexuality as a phenomenon has been forced on women as a way of producing sexual inequality and dominance. This indoctrination that “marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive” (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, 640), teaches girls at an early age, that they can only achieve sexual power through men. Once a girl is made aware of her sexual feelings towards a male, he is to be her primary concern, and her own self-identification subsequently becomes secondary to his. This suppression of female sexuality is exemplified in *Little Women* through the character of Meg. Meg embraces this patriarchal world when she agrees to marry John and her life quickly becomes his life.

However, Meg finds her domestic role difficult. To be subservient to John and therefore a “good wife” does not come naturally to Meg. Being his wife is hard work, and this in itself further highlights Alcott’s narrative interest in continuing to complicate the gender assumptions by undercutting the conventions she is attempting to document:

In the kitchen reigned confusion and despair; one edition of jelly was trickled from pot to pot, another lay upon the floor, and a third was burning gaily on the stove. Lotty, with Teutonic phlegm, was calmly eating bread and currant wine...while Mrs Brooke, with her apron over her head, sat sobbing dismally. (Alcott, 276)

You must get yourself out of the scrape as you can; I’m too used up to “exert” myself for any one. It’s like a man, to propose a bone and vulgar bread and cheese for company. I won’t have anything of the sort in my house. (Alcott, 277)

Even though men are noticeably absent within *Little Women* and the men that are present are feminised, foppish or old and therefore asexual, the inference that males rule females is still maintained. Alcott accurately distrusted that society would teach girls about selfhood and therefore it is my opinion that Jo’s “refusal to perform her prescribed gender role” (Trites, 139) is not bound up as an affirmative for lesbian politics, as set out by Trites, but rather illustrates a reluctance to grow up and leave behind her bi-sexual childhood and enter this womanhood of “compulsory heterosexuality”. Thus, her cry of pain when she realises she is losing Meg and this loss will “make a hole in the family... and everything will be abominably uncomfortable”(Alcott, 203), is not out of the grief of losing a “lover”, but her reluctance to relinquish her pre-sexual childhood and “become” a woman. This is further compounded when Laurie says, “you don’t give her up. You only go halves”(Alcott, 234), because for Jo this is not an option. She does not want to accept that her sisters are entering this “grown up” world and that she herself is becoming a young lady “I ain’t! and if turning up my hair makes me one, I’ll wear it in two tails till I’m twenty”(Alcott, 3). It is not until the death of Beth that she is forced to leave her bi-sexual world behind her and journey into womanhood and embrace the inevitability of compulsory heterosexuality. Jo is forced into this world, not because she has “lost her greatest love” (Trites, 150), but because she has lost her childhood. Ultimately Beth’s death metaphorically and symbolically signifies the death of her childhood. Once she has left that world behind, she can no longer return.

The Romantic Friendship of Jo and Laurie

While Alcott makes few direct references to romantic friendships in *Little Women* it is evident that she was aware of their existence. Her later novel *Work* (1872) and her unfinished novel *Diana & Persis* both explore female sexuality and romantic friendships to a varying degree, and her resistance to narrative conventions is more discernable. Forced by her publishers to include obligatory marriage plots, Alcott, refused to marry Jo and Laurie. This decision “remains the most talked-about part of the book from its day to our”(Auerbach, 14), and I would like to suggest that a possible explanation as to why Alcott refused to marry them is because she had already united them within a romantic friendship. Through Alcott’s experimentation with shifting gender stereotypes, and their habitation of an androgynous bi-sexual world, both Laurie and Jo are equally adept at

occupying each others sexual spheres and therefore within this world of bi-sexuality they can exist independently of gender and sexuality.

Jo is constantly referred to as boyish and much is made of the fact that she whistles. Other indicators of this androgyny include her dress having a “gentlemanly linen collar” (Alcott, 25). She sees herself as the “man of the family” (Alcott, 5), insists on buying Marmee’s slippers and later in the novel cuts off her hair to aid her father when he is ill. She is the breadwinner of the family, ultimately supporting them through her literary endeavours. She is unable to cook, or carry out any feminine tasks, as illustrated when she burns Meg’s hair, but she can row. She cannot keep any of her clothes clean, doesn’t mind “being a guy, if I’m comfortable” (Alcott, 123); all her chores are masculine, she is not sentimental and understands (the boy) Laurie “almost as well as if she been one herself”(Alcott, 54). She plays all the male leads in their plays with relish and doesn’t care much for “girls or girlish gossip” (Alcott, 26). Laurie by contrast is quite feminised. He prefers a girl’s name, is moody, artistic, plays the piano and is happy to “sew, read, cone, draw, or do all at once”(Alcott, 140). He is quick to “see and feel beauty of any kind” (Alcott, 141). He enjoys gossip and sharing secrets and displays what would be deemed as feminine qualities when secrets are kept as a means of getting back at Jo for not confiding in him the blossoming relationship between Meg and John. Interestingly, when they first meet, it is Jo who possesses the “gentlemanly demeanor” and Laurie who has “little hands and feet” (Alcott, 28-29), and on their second encounter he comments that “boys make such a row” (Alcott, 48) and admits to not knowing any girls, to which Jo replies “you know me”(Alcott, 48). What is implied in this second meeting is that whilst they are aware of their biological maleness and femaleness and are vaguely aware of their socially separate spheres, they do not need to find their place within one or the other and therefore the pre-sexual nature of their childhood world, allows them to occupy the same one simultaneously. When Laurie is not occupying the female sphere of sisterhood (“We should have asked you before, only we thought you wouldn’t care for such a girl’s game as this”, “I always like your games”(Alcott, 140)), Jo is comfortably occupying the male sphere (“I was taking a lesson in fencing”, “You can teach me; and then, when we play Hamlet, you can be Laertes, and we’ll make a fine thing of the fencing scene” (Alcott, 149)).

Their intimacy is as natural as is their unspoken love for each other. They are totally connected to one another as demonstrated when they write for the paper together, gang up on Fred during the picnic, and again when Laurie threatens to run away and Jo tells Mr Laurence to “advertise for two boys, and look among the ships bound for India” (Alcott, 215). The level of this intimate non-sexual friendship is fully realised when Beth is taken ill with scarlet fever and “Jo...stretched out her hand in a helpless sort of way, as if groping in the dark, and Laurie took it in his” (Alcott, 184). She becomes aware of the “unspoken sympathy” and learns of the “sweet solace which affection administers” (Alcott, 185). In her greatest hour of need, it is to her “lover” and not to her sisters that she turns to.

As they are forced to enter the divided spheres of adulthood, they are aware that their sexual equality cannot last and the conflation of their gender and sexuality becomes evident. Whilst the demise of the friendship is on both sides, its ultimate destruction has to lie in a proposal of marriage. This signifies not only the patriarchal control of one sex over another, but also emphasises the fact that as romantic friendships were seen as non-

sexual, there cannot therefore be any genital sexuality between them. If Jo accepts Laurie's offer of marriage, she has to agree to his sexual demands as well as accepting him as her "superior" and this is something that she is not capable of doing. She is unable physically/sexually to cross the boundary with her body that she has psychologically crossed in her mind, although Jo does eventually have to embrace her pre-ordained sphere. Laurie, upon realising the social order of masculine over feminine and accepting that Jo is no longer his sexual equal, is able to embrace his masculine sphere with ease. This begins from when he sends the telegram calling Marmee back home and continues through to when he enters the public sphere of college and eventually embraces the freedom that a patriarchal society affords him.

With the demise of this relationship, the sexual boundaries within *Little Women* are no longer blurred and the hegemonic social order is fully restored. Patriarchy may ultimately conquer in *Little Women*, but for how long? Whilst it may appear that *Little Women* remained within its conservative roots and ultimately reinforced gender norms and heterosexual relations, one needs to finally place the novel within its historical context. Its place within the nineteenth century domestic novel genre, whose sentimental message focused on slavery, Christianity or female piety and suffrage,² allows us to appreciate that *Little Women* was and remains a radical novel that flies just under the radar of censorship and succeeds in its attempt to question the sexual conventions and stereotypes of the later part of the nineteenth century. Millet acknowledges, "because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures" (31). However, through these provocative reconsiderations that render a feminist reading of *Little Women* and enhance our understanding of the novel in terms of both its sexual ambiguousness and the suppression of female sexuality through compulsory heterosexuality, one is able to appreciate that, to a certain extent, we no longer have to accept the viewpoint that men and women are of two different cultures. By engaging with contemporary theories and applying them not only to *Little Women*, but also to other classic or canonical texts, this idea of two cultures is able to be challenged. Through the widening of our understanding of "sexuality" in contemporary society, we are able to acknowledge that sexuality is no longer just about reproduction, but also about our own personal identity and individual happiness.

Endnotes:

¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of the writings of Adrienne Rich used for this paper see her papers: "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs* (Summer 1980): 631-660; "It is the Lesbian in Us":199-202; "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand". In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. USA: Norton, 1995. 223-230; "Motherhood and Daughterhood". In *Of Woman Born – Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago, 1981. 218-255

² For a cross selection, see the works of E.D.E.N. Southworth (1819-1899), especially *The Hidden Hand*, the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1899), especially *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as Susan Warner *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Charlotte Yonge *Heir of Redclyffe* (1853)

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