Jo March

—The Unconventional Woman of *Little Women & Good Wives*
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Introduction

*Little Women and Good Wives* is a classic children’s novel published in the late nineteenth century by American writer Louise May Alcott. The book concerns the lives, loves and marriages of four sisters growing up during the American Civil War. Alcott portrays four sisters in the book. They are Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. The character Jo is thought to be based on Louisa May Alcott herself. Jo is a tomboy who rejects female values and convention. She has a strong passion for writing and aims at entering the man’s world by choosing a writing career at a time when this was not socially acceptable for woman. By focusing on the non-feminine qualities of Jo, this essay argues that Jo’s non-feminine characteristics and her desire to enter the man’s world have a strong influence on her desire to be a writer and even her chances of being accepted as a writer.

In this essay, Jo’s characteristics will be compared and contrasted with those of her three sisters. The purpose of this comparison is to demonstrate how Jo shows her non-femininity and to what extent she diverges from the contemporary expectations of women. Furthermore, based on the close reading of the novel and historical research, this essay will discuss whether Jo’s choice of writing, her main meanings of entering the man’s world is realistic.

Jo’s male characteristics and the conventional woman
The middle-class ideology of the proper “sphere of womanhood” which developed in the post-industrial England and America prescribed that a woman should be “a perfect lady, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home.” (Elaine Showalter, p.14) This definition of the ideal woman coincides with the image of the woman presented in The Angel in the House by Coventry Patmore, which has been universally accepted as “the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who were selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband.” (Wikipedia: The Angel in the House) The ideal woman is also “passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious and above all---pure” (Academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu: The Angel in the House). In Little Women and Good Wives, Jo March the protagonist, the second oldest sister among the Match sisters, has been regarded by critics as an exceptional rather than a typical nineteenth-century woman. Her unconventional image is the consequence of her male-like characteristics.

Jo’s rejection of conventional female identity

Jo’s man-like characteristics are greatly reflected in her rejection of conventional female attitudes and behaviors. At the beginning of the novel, Jo exclaims: “It’s bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy…go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!” (Louisa May Alcott p.9) Jo clearly demonstrates that she wants to be the man of the family, not the little woman; she wants to be a soldier in the army, and not a seamstress. The use of “can” indicates an ability; “can’t” demonstrates Jo’s recognition that fighting belongs to the man’s world, while “knitting” belongs to the woman’s world. The implication is that fighting is a worldly occupation, while knitting belongs to the female realm. Jo desires to be different and tries to enter the man’s world, but discovers that will-power alone is not sufficient. But this does not
prevent her from insisting upon becoming the head of the family when her father goes to war.

Her refusal to adopt a convention is also displayed in her dislike of her name. This becomes clear in chapter 3 when Jo encounters Laurie at the Gardiners’ New Year’s Eve ball. As Laurie calls Jo “Miss March”, Jo replies “I’m not Miss March, I’m only Jo… I hate my name, too—so sentimental! I wish everyone would say Jo, instead of Josephine” (Louisa May Alcott p.32). In Jo’s mind, a woman is equated with sentimentality, a quality she detests. Since she regards herself as a man and “longs for masculine freedom and independence” (Anne K. Phillips, p.608), she holds that “Josephine”, a typical woman’s name is too sentimental for her, while “Jo” is much more boyish and more attractive to her.

**Jo’s adoption of male identities**

The narrator portrays Jo as a character who regards herself as more masculine than feminine. As she sees herself as the only man in her family, she consciously often “plays a masculinized role” (Anne K. Phillips, p.558). This can be seen in her strong desire to protect her family and keep it together at all costs. On learning about Mr. Brooke’s affection for Meg, she grows increasingly anxious, because she does not want “anyone coming to take Meg away” (Louisa May Alcott p.193). She worries that some day “Brooke will scratch up a fortune somehow, carry her off, and make a hole in the family”. Jo’s anxiety is expressed in terms of creating a “hole”. Jo tells her mother “I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family”. Only by becoming a man in Jo’s world can she realize her dream. Jo thinks this is unavoidable but it is significant that the idea even occurs to her.

As her sisters are drawn closer and closer to marriage and departure, Jo claims that “I think it’s dreadful to break up families so.”(Louisa May Alcott p.192) On realizing the unavoidable change in her family, she feels very depressed. However, in
acknowledging the changes that have taken place, Jo defines herself as an independent adult and a strong supporter of her mother. Obviously, Jo cannot control the course of her sisters’ lives, but she can demonstrate for her mother how unique she is. Jo assures her mother that “if anything is amiss at home, I’m your man,” and promises, as all the birds leave their nests, “never to hop very far” (Louisa May Alcott p.305). In Jo’s mind, only a man can preserve the all-important unity of the family.

Jo’s mother sees her daughter as a strong supporter who always stands beside her. She tells Jo “it’s a great comfort, Jo. I always feel strong when you are at home, now Meg is gone. Beth is too feeble and Amy too young to depend upon, but when the tug comes, you are always ready.” (Louisa May Alcott p.305) Here, “too” appears twice in the mother’s speech reinforcing her great trust in Jo. Moreover, her using of “always” emphasizes her acknowledgment of Jo’s strong and unique role in the family.

On the other hand, Jo’s “masculinized role” (Anne K. Phillips, p. 558) is also displayed by her desire for independence and power. Jo is the most powerful and independent “little woman” in the March family. This independence and power are mainly shown in terms of Jo’s dream to become a writer. However, historically speaking, writing was a man-dominated domain during the nineteenth century, and people at that time even hold that “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be.” (Elaine Showalter, p.55). Jo’s dream is just that, a dream. It does not correspond to the “real” world.

The narrator tells us that Jo’s goal, her “favorite dream,” is to do something “splendid” and “heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead”. (Louisa May Alcott p. 41) Her chief desire, in short, is to write: “I think I shall write books and get rich and famous: that would suit for me, so that is my favorite dream”. (Louisa May Alcott p.138) In Jo’s speech, “rich” comes first followed by “famous”, which implies that Jo puts her duty to help support her family above the demands of becoming famous. She shares the same purpose with many female writers in that time, since in the nineteenth century “unmarried women were increasingly drawn to writing as a means of support”. (Elaine Showalter, p.47) But still, For Jo, writing is the key to be independent
and successful, also, it is crucial to be the man of the family, because Louisa May Alcott tells us: “to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wished if her heart and this seemed to be the first step toward the happy end” (Louisa May Alcott p.151). When Jo publishes her first story and receives the praise of her family and the promise of payment for her future stories, she is ecstatically happy: “I shall write more ... and I am so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girls”. (Louisa May Alcott p.151) As Jo realizes that she could write and sell sensation stories, she “began to feel herself a power in the house.” (Louisa May Alcott p.256) We can see that she has the potential to become a breadwinner for her family. Once Jo’s first story is published, she looks forward to being able to support her family. When she wins a hundred dollars for writing a sensation story, her prize money buys Beth and her mother a vacation at the seaside, and her other writing also buy the family basic items, such as groceries, clothes, and a new carpet. Moreover, the stories she sells in New York make it possible to take Beth to the mountains. Jo thus demonstrates her power as a writer as well as her ability to serve as the man of the family.

**Jo’s attitude toward beauty**

Compared to Jo, Meg the oldest of the March sisters is much more lady-like, and has many feminine qualities. She represents the conventional and good lady of the time. Soft and mild as she is, she tries to mother her younger sisters. She loves beautiful, luxurious things and is concerned about the way she dresses. She longs at heart to be a real lady. In contrast, Jo as a typical tomboy, unlike Meg and most girls of her age, she “never troubles herself much about dress” (Louisa May Alcott p. 30).

   The party at the Gardiner’s New Year’s Eve ball demonstrates the difference between Meg and Jo, when it comes to being a lady. Knowing that the Gardiner’s are elegant and wear expensive and showy clothes, the very question that pops into Meg’s mind is “What shall we wear?” She complains “If I only had a silk! ... Mother says I
may when I’m eighteen, perhaps; when two years is an everlasting time to wait.” (Louisa May Alcott p.27) “Everlasting time” shows that she earnestly desires to have a silk rather than poplin. On being told that Jo’s party dress is scorched in back from standing too close to the fire, Meg warns her to “sits still all you can, and keep your back out of sight”, however, it turns out that at last Jo “was merry herself again” and “her dress was forgotten” (Louisa May Alcott p.32). Jo obviously does not want to be constrained by her burned dress. What’s more, Jo has soiled her gloves and she declares “I’ll go without”, since she doesn’t “care what people say!” to which Meg cries “you may have it, you may” “or I won’t go” (Louisa May Alcott p.28). According to Meg, “a real lady is always known by neat boots, gloves, and handkerchief”. (Louisa May Alcott p.30) Such views are not a part of Jo’s world.

Jo constantly demonstrates her lack of interest in beauty and elegance. She defiantly declares that: “I don’t believe that fine young ladies enjoy themselves a bit more than we do, in spite of our burnt hair, old gowns, one glove apiece, and tight slippers.”(Louisa May Alcott p.36) The indication of her declaration is that “burnt hair, old gowns, one glove apiece, and tight slippers”, such unbeautiful things do not affect her enjoyment of the ball. “I’m neat and cool and comfortable … If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don’t wish to see them.” (Louisa May Alcott p.273) Jo looks down on those who pay much attention to external appearance. The implication is that she is more concerned with internal qualities.

**Jo’s unconventional language**

At its most basic level, Jo’s language functions as a significant marker of her unconventionality and non-femininity. Unlike her sisters Jo uses slang. She delights in slang, even though she is frequently blamed and corrected by her sisters. This can be seen at the very beginning of the novel. “Jo does use such slang words! … I detest rude, unlady-like girls” protests Amy, the youngest March sister. In her eyes, “slang” is the
same as being “unlady-like”. However, Jo insists: “that’s why I do it” (Louisa May Alcott p.9). On the other hand, another factor that distinguish Jo’s language from other March sisters is her use of “strong words”. She likes “good strong words that mean something” even though Meg detests more than once that they are “dreadful expressions” (Louisa May Alcott p.39). “Strong words” in this case are those informal expressions that are inappropriate for women, such as “wretches”. (Louisa May Alcott p.169) These words are used instead of bad words like swear words. “Elegance” was one of the standards for a good lady in that time, thus the lady-like girls in that period should adopt standard language rather than slang or “strong words”. To some extent, this is a kind of unwritten rule for a lady at the time. Judging from Jo’s saying: “that’s why I do it”, we can see that she realize and even understands that slang and “strong words” are not appropriate language for a lady. She also admires such expressions showing her desire to be a tomboy.

Furthermore, Jo detests “affected, niminy-piminy chits,” (Louisa May Alcott p. 9) and prefers and employs a kind of free, casual and straightforward conversation, even with men. She meets Laurie at the Gardiner’s New Year’s Eve ball, where she feels strangely about of release as she thinks she does not confirm to people’s expectation of a lady.

“No one came to talk to her, and one by one the group neat her dwindled away, till she was left alone. She could not roam about and amuse herself, for the burnt breadth would show, so she stared at people rather forlornly till the dancing began…Jo saw a big red-headed youth approaching her corner and fearing he meant to engage her, she slipped into a curtained recess, intending to peep and enjoy herself in peace.” (Louisa May Alcott p.31)

That Jo “could not roam about and amuse herself” indicates that she cannot enjoy the occasion there and even feels like a stranger. She “slipped into a curtained recess” because she is longing for escape.
What follows is Jo’s encounter with Laurie behind the certain, and an impromptu and spontaneous conversational exchange between them. They adopt a quite casual and open conversation. They talk about travel, books, and foreign languages. Jo frequently uses her favorite slang words as they talk, and both parities are quite pleased by the conversation. The conversation at the time described that men and women should abide the “formalities of social conversation between the sexes such as the use of proper titles and polished discretionary exchange with self-awareness of gender divisions” (David H. Watters, p.185). Apparently, the two dismiss such formalities as they are not essential for enjoyment. Jo and Laurie talk an equal return. There are no linguistic barriers between their two worlds.

Jo’s unconventional language has less attraction for ladies. As the narrator says early in the novel, “A quick temper, sharp tongue and restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series of ups and downs, which were both comic and pathetic” (Louisa May Alcott p. 67). This can be found in the scene in which Jo and Amy meet Aunt Carrol and Aunt March. Aunt March and Aunt Carrol want to test the two and decide which of the two girls should be offered the chance to accompany Aunt Carrol to Europe. In being asked questions by Aunt Carrol, Amy devotes herself to being nice and agreeable by answering like: “yes, aunt …”, “I’m willing to”… while Jo gives her vent to irritation in a serious of decided remarks on the topic of patronage by saying “I’m not, I hate to be patronized… I don’t like favors … I’d rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent.”(Louisa May Alcott p.283) Based on their different responses, Aunt Carrol views Amy’s answer and manner as “quite right and proper”, while she simply coughs softly and does not make any comments about Jo’s answer, since she obviously quite unsatisfied Jo’s abrupt language, “blunt manners and too independent spirit”(Louisa May Alcott p.293). The consequence of this test is that Amy receives her reward---going abroad with Aunt Carrol, while Jo loses her chance to go abroad even though she longs to go. Obviously, Jo’s language is liked by Laurie but not for Aunt Carrol. Aunt Carrol’s rejection of Jo reveals that sometimes Jo would be more acceptable in the man’s world rather than in the women’s world.
Jo never tries to be the “angel in the house”. Her unfeminine qualities, such as her boyish behavior, abrupt language and restless spirit are all positive qualities for a writer at the time. In the nineteenth century when people had a strong sense of gender roles, it was hard for women to overcome the obstacles and enter the male’s world Jo is not an exception. In the following section, Jo’s dream of becoming a writer will be discussed from the perspective of whether it was a realistic choice as portrayed in the novel or in terms of its social context.

Is Jo’s dream of being a female writer realistic?

Jo’s dream of being a writer goes through three stages. The first stage is characterized by her uncertainty at about what it means to be a writer. “Castle in the air” (Louisa May Alcott p. 138) is Jo’s description of her writing dream, and she hopes that some day the dream will come true even though she recognizes that it is floating in the air. In other words, she does not see her dream as feasible at the very beginning. In the novel, when Jo describes her castle, she says “I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my books should be as famous as Laurie’s music”, (Louisa May Alcott p.138) which suggests that she believes that she can only become a writer by the use of “magic”. The implication of Jo’s longing of “magic” power is that she realizes how tough her dream is.

As time goes by, Jo’s writings are increasingly praised by those around her, especially Laurie. And it is Laurie who suggests to Jo that she can publish her works. This forces Jo desire to test whether her “castle in the air” can become realistic. She accepts Laurie’s suggestion and begins to write diligently. In the process of writing, she exclaims: “I have done my best! If this won’t suit, I shall have to wait till I can do better.” (Louisa May Alcott p.142) The expression “I have done my best” reveals her strong determination to write, “I can do better” suggests an awareness of the enormity of the task. She is so anxious to succeed that she does not tell her family about her contract with a publisher. To her surprise, she publishes her first story and even gets the
promise of payment for her future stories. This is her first and successful attempt at writing. To some extent, her initial success eliminates some anxiety and encourages her to pursue a writing career. The second stage is that Jo finally begins to view her choice of writing career as realistic. This is her view on her writing career. The narrator tells us that “this seemed to be the first step towards that happy end”, (Louisa May Alcott p.151) which implies that Jo will ultimately become a successful writer.

After her first story is published, Jo’s passion for writing grows stronger and stronger. As the narrator tells us: “when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather” (Louisa May Alcott p.252). Jo devotes herself wholly to writing. When she escorts Miss Croker to a lecture and is told that Mrs S. L. A. N. G. Northbury supports her family by writing sensation stories, she begins to form a new idea--- to make a good living out of sensation stories. Her new idea is carried out secretly which make her success in winning a hundred dollars for writing a sensation story an even greater surprise to her family and even herself. When Jo gets the letter from the publisher, she “read her letter and began to cry”, since she ever “give up all hope of ever seeing her manuscript again” (Louisa May Alcott p.255). Her initial success encourages Jo to continue writing sensation stories.

The same year, she publishes many stories in the newspaper and gets quite a lot of money, likewise plenty of critics form her readers. The reviews put her with “pride and joy one minute,” but “wrath and dismay the next”, since some critics view her writing as “an exquisite book, full of truth,” but others proclaim that her work is “full of morbid fancies, spiritualistic ideas, and unnatural characters.” (Louisa May Alcott p. 258) On the one hand, the positive critics received of Jo reflect that Jo’s writing ability is accepted and admitted by some part of the public, while the negative critics indicates that Jo still have a long way to go, if she wants to be a worldly accepted female writer. Overall, the reviewers bring Jo to public attention and strengthen her as a writer. The reviewers also establish Jo’s validity as a writer and make realize that her dream was indeed realistic.
Is her choice a practical one from a historical perspective?

During the nineteenth century, women were entering literary professions in unprecedented numbers. But compared to male writers, they were still quite a minority, since fiction writing at the time was still primarily viewed as a “viable male profession” (Elaine Showalter, p.39) as opposed to a female profession. The most extensive study of the sociology of authorship shows that the proportion of women writers to men remained steady at “about 20 percent from 1800 to 1935, because of the inadequate educational provisions and the prejudice against careers for females.” (Elaine Showalter, p.39) Inadequate education and the prejudice were two major obstacles preventing females entering the writing domain. Jo confronts the same obstacles as female writers in the real world.

The education difference was problematic for female writers, who were clearly disadvantaged in comparison to their male contemporaries. During the nineteenth century, male writers enjoyed the privilege of a good education. “The percentage of literary men who had attended a university or other post-secondary school rose from 52.5 percent in 1800—1835, to 70.9 percent in 1870—1900”, while the situation for women writers was quite different: “about 20 percent of the women writers had been given some formal schooling, as opposed to being taught at home.” (Elaine Showalter, p.42) Women writers rarely had a chance to receive university education, and they “were deprived of education because of their sex, not because of their class”. Florence Marryat, one of the most famous female writers in the nineteenth century is a typical example. She told an interviewer that she had “read everything I could find… I may be said to have educated myself” (Elaine Showalter, p.44). Auto-didacticism was thus women’s chief option to become educated. The auto-didacticism somehow “open the world of male power and wisdom to them” (Elaine Showalter, p.42) and eases their inferior situation to enter the writing career. In the case of Jo, we see that she cannot go
to university as Laurie does. Knowing that Laurie will go to college, Jo says: “how I wish I was going to college!” (Louisa May Alcott p.33) Jo’s statement not only conveys her earnest longing to go to the college, but also demonstrates her disappointment as well as resentment that she cannot go to the college. Like other women at that time, Jo also tries to teach herself so as to prepare herself to be a writer. The author tells us that she “loved to retire with half a dozen russets and a nice book”, which shows that Jo has a great enthusiasm in book reading. And when Jo begins to write, she finds that her reading finally “turns out of service”, for it “gave her some idea of dramatic effect, and supplied plot, language and costumes”. (Louisa May Alcott p.254)

Prejudice was an almost insurmountable obstacle in the nineteenth century. People at large then held that “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be.” (Elaine Showalter, p.55) Women at the time encountered great prejudice from their families, publishers, readers and male writers. At that time, many female writers encounter prejudice and opposition from their male family members who view woman as subordinate “angle” rather than independent wage-earner. They sometimes “felt threatened by the prospects of female competition within the home,” thus, in family “father often unconsciously fought their daughters’ efforts to become independent.” (Elaine Showalter, p. 63) In this case, Jo apparently does not encounter the same problem as many women did at her time. She receives much encouragement from both her parents and her sisters that acts as an indispensable spiritual support of Jo and her writing. Jo’s father often minds her that “you can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest”, which reveals his high expectation Jo’s writing and her choice to be independent. Jo enjoys a better situation than women in the real world at the time.

As for the prejudice from the publisher and reader, Elaine Showalter tells us that a great amount woman’s literature works were rejected by the publisher. According to her investigation, during the nineteenth century, “a consistently high percentage of rejected manuscripts came from women”, (Elaine Showalter, p.38) which shows that prejudice was a major factor in the rejection. The preference was for male writers.
“A man’s novel is generally a more finished production than woman’s his education and experience give him a wide range of thought and a larger choice of character, and he usually groups his personages and incidents more artistically, and writes better English than his rivals.” (Elaine Showalter, p.79)

On facing such inferior situation, many female writers did not want to reveal their name and tended to use a male pseudonym. To some extent, this works, since many female writers felt that “they got better treatment from the public when they published anonymously and assumed male personae.” (Elaine Showalter, p.60) In Jo’s case, when she meets the editor of *Weekly Volcano*, she tells the editor that “a friend of mine desired me to offer–a story– just as an experiment”(Lousia May Alcott, p.329) and she also informs the editor that she does not want to reveal her name. This is because she does not want her works to be misjudged because of her gender.

Social prejudice did affect women’s writing career but it did not stop women that time entering the literary realm. Still, there were a great many women entering the literary domain successfully and that most of them were aspiring novelists. Some of them were writers such as Millicent Grogan, Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen who really made their name from their writings. Their successes served as an impetus for those women who longed for a writing career. As more and more female writers publish their work, many magazines and newspapers in that time marveled at that “the great increase in quantity, and general improvement in the quality of novels written by women. … In that time we have had at least three or four able novels per annum, not to mention others of respectable promise.” (Elaine Showalter, p.39) The increasing number of women writers had been noticed and their successes were acknowledged. Thus, we can conclude that from a historical perspective, despite prejudice, despite inadequate school education, Jo’s dream of a writing career is indeed practical.
Conclusion

*Little Women & Good Wives* describes a whole family of girls, while it is widely conforms that most readers love this novel because they love Jo March, the tomboy heroine. The unconventionality of Jo makes her “become one of the most enduring popular girlhood characteristics in Anglo-American literature” (Karin Quimby p. 1)

In the all-feminine family which she belongs to, she tries hard to play a man’s role. In order to gain acceptance of the man’s world, she rejects the conventional female identities and tries to adopt male characteristics and tactics as she is fighting to enter man's world where male rules apply. In the early part of the book, Jo chooses to become a writer; It is her dream. It is Jo’s unfeminine characteristics and her dream of entering the man's world which prove to be her strength and which are the ultimate reason why she is able to realize her dream of becoming a writer, a profession which was male-dominated throughout the nineteenth century.

This essay demonstrates that Jo’s choice of becoming a writer goes through three stages, and within these stages she forms an increasing clear understanding what it means to be a writer. Form the historical perspective, in the nineteenth century when the idea: “womanhood was a vocation in itself” (Elaine Showalter, p.21) was still quite prevalent, Jo’s choice of a writing career is quite distant from the social mainstream, which creates many obstacles on her way to success. However, Jo’s dream of becoming a writer is indeed realistic. It is, at the same time, fraught with difficulties. With her strong will to write, her auto-didacticism and also the help of her family, she eventually becomes a writer and fulfills her dream of entering the man’s world.
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