TRABAJO FIN DE MÁSTER

MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS Y CULTURALES INGLESES Y SU PROYECCIÓN SOCIAL

"I Can't Get Over My Disappointment in Not Being a Boy": An Analysis of Louisa May Alcott's Queerness Through the Character of Jo March in *Little Women*

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Curso académico: 2023-24- Convocatoria: Junio

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a reflection of the support and love I have received from my family and friends, who have encouraged me through these months of intense research and work. I am especially grateful to my own Marmee, my mother, who has nurtured my passion for literature and *Little Women*, has carelessly advised me when I needed guidance, had faith in me when it was difficult to proceed through the writing process, has supported my educational journey in spite of all difficulties, and has patiently taught me how to be a better and greater 'little' woman.

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Introduction

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), over 515 anti-LGBT bills are being processed in every state in 2024. Notwithstanding, most of them will never be accepted, but the LGBTQ+ community and thus human rights are continually under attack. We are witnessing the consequences of a growing tendency of far right policies in the world that intend to impose heteronormativity through the misuse of justice. From banning drag queen shows to the 'Don't Say Gay' bill, it seems that the land of the free is not so any longer. The intention behind these bills is to exclude the *queer* again, to target it as a potential danger for the integrity of society, and turn it into an even more vulnerable collective than it already is. For many, being queer is a modern trend. However, as history proves, this is a false statement. Lesbians, gays, bisexual men and women, non-binary and transgender people, and asexual individuals have always existed, and we have proof in literature. Books mirror society, even when their pages portray fictional stories. Queer authors write narratives in which they could depict their queerness through their characters. However, as it has been stated, this is not a trend or an exception in the past. Even some classics and their authors are queer. Many scholars have and still devote their research to the queer matter in previous centuries, and one intriguing period worth of studying in relation to this field of study is the nineteenth century. Some of the papers covering topics regarding this matter are Travis Foster's "Nineteenth-Century Queer Literature," (2015) Olivia Murphy's "Queering Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century," (2020) or Jennifer Doyle's "Jo March's Love Poems." (2005) These works rely on queer theory, a recent scholarship which is very tightly connected to feminist and gender studies. They give interesting perspectives and arguments on whether certain heroes and heroines are engaged with the heteronormative cannon of the time or not, and why their queerness resonates deeply in our current society. In this case, this dissertation will approach Louisa May Alcott's queerness and how it is reflected in her novel *Little Women* through the character of Jo March, who is regarded as her alter ego.

This coming-of-age novel, published 154 years ago, has never been out of print. For a long time, it was part of the American curriculum at schools. Therefore, it is intriguing how a novel that intended to teach young girls the proper way to become ladies has evolved into a classic, and Jo March into a rebel heroine that still inspires many individuals, including LGBTQ+ readers. How can this character and her author resonate with this collective

nowadays when society is radically different than then? Michelle Hyun Kim opens her review of *Little Women* (2019) with a striking heading: "The New Little Women Basically Proves Jo March is Queer." (2020) Researcher and author Peyton Thomas has written a couple of articles (""Little Women" author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man." and "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?") that argue that Louisa May Alcott did not identify herself as a woman, a statement that has created great controversy within feminism. In a world that is more polarized and less tolerant, it is paramount to recognize the existence of queer history, to research on it, and to reflect the true stories of those popular –and unknown– figures who were not cisgender and/or heterosexual, since what is not mentioned does not exist. Both Kim and Thomas are not the first nor the last to explore and expose Alcott's queerness, and both use the figure of Jo March to analyze it. Nevertheless, many research papers regarding this aspect of Alcott only focus on her possible lesbianism, such as Roberta Seelinger Trites' "Queer Performances." (1999) Even though these works have been incredibly useful in queer literature and have great value, they miss many queer perspectives. My intention, then, is to contribute to these arguments by providing a wider scope that illustrate the ample queer spectrum –or rainbow– and the broad variety of queer experiences that Alcott and her alter ego can hold.

In order to present my arguments, it is necessary to introduce some major concepts and definitions that will be useful to understand the many points made throughout the dissertation. That is done in chapter one. Chapter two, divided into two different parts, deals with the context of my research: the history of the United States during the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, as well as Alcott's life and work. This information is extracted from different historical sources and those related to Louisa May Alcott's history. Chapter three is focused on the thesis of this dissertation: was Alcott queer? Here I develop the arguments exposed in the previous chapter through the analysis of Jo March in the novel and in two adaptations of *Little Women*: George Cukor's (1933) and Greta Gerwig's (2019). Finally, in my conclusion, after the study carried out in the three previous chapters, I expose the results of my research and comment on possible future lines of investigation related to the topic covered in this dissertation.

Chapter 1. “We’re Here; We’re Queer”

a. The origins of the word *queer*

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, *queer* has been part of the English language since the sixteenth century. Back then, this term, used as an adjective, did not have any kind of relation to gender or sexual orientation. The word had the meaning of “strange, peculiar, odd, eccentric.” As time passed, it disappeared from common vocabulary. Around the eighteenth century, individuals used it as “appearing, feeling, or behaving otherwise than is usual or normal” and “open to suspicion, doubtful as to honesty.” It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the term *queer* was openly related to homosexual men in a pejorative manner. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), one of the most prominent figures in English literature, was put on trial because of his homosexuality after it was revealed that he was having an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. In Victorian England, sex acts between men were regarded as crimes. This law was never applied to women. The Marquess of Queensberry, who was Douglas’ father, referred to the playwright and other homosexual men as “Snob Queers” in the course of said trial (Clark). Since then, the term *queer* became an insult. According to Judith Butler, quoted in the paper by Ángela Sierra González, “the term queer [...] had the purpose of shaming the named subject or rather they produced a stigmatized subject through that humiliant interpellation.” However, as W. Jones explains, even though it was an insult, there were many individuals within the LGBTQ+ community who used the word in “neutral and affirming ways,” even “as a positive self-description” during the twentieth century. This difference is paramount. The adjective was now also employed as a noun. This means that *queer* was not only a word used to describe, but a reality, a tangible subject. The power behind the term resides, precisely, in the anger and pain that came from the hatred and pathologization (Sierra González).

An event that had a gigantic impact in queer history was the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969. This episode happened the night of June 28 in the Stonewall Inn (New York), a popular gay bar in the city. It was not odd that the police raided these places, for homosexuality was a crime. However, this time anger spread among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the area. They were weary of the police’s attitude towards the community, and began a protest that lasted six days. One year later, on June 28, 1970, a group of between three and

five thousand marchers initiated the first Pride in New York City (*Library of Congress*). Through these demonstrations, homosexual people began to 'reconquer' the term *queer* with the chant "we're here because we're queer" (Jones). Still, the turning point came during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. The members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) changed their name to Queer Nation, focusing their efforts in the fight for LGBT rights (Zeng). Nonetheless, the visibility of the LGBT community soon was shadowed by the appropriation and exposure of white, cisgender, gay men, whose physical aspect was closer to heteronormativity. This does not mean that there is a fixed way of looking heterosexual or homosexual. Many homosexual men were closer to the values defended by the system that oppressed them. In this environment, the term *queer* appears as a way of demanding a double inclusion within society and within the community. Since then, it has become part of the vocabulary and is generally regarded as an umbrella term to define every individual who does not identify themselves as cisgender or heterosexual and opposes heteronormativity.

Consequently, the scholarship dealing with the studies of gender and sexual identities from a homosexual, bisexual, asexual, or transgender perspective is known as *queer* theory or *queer* studies.

b. What is Queer Theory?

Some might believe that this scholarship is a modern trend. Nonetheless, as it has been exposed in the previous section, queer theory has existed for over forty years. Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Donna Haraway, and Teresa de Lauretis are four of the well-known scholars within this area of study, although Butler is probably the most prominent one. However, in this dissertation I will only delve into the main points defended by Butler, Sedgwick, and Paul B. Preciado, since each of their contributions to queer theory are relevant for this work.

This scholarship is a really broad, recent, and dynamic field. In other words, it encompasses more than one theory, it is modern, and it is in constant evolution. Theories that were valid in past decades have evolved and are no longer tenet. Even though it has a

transparent body of work, its principles are in constant change. This might seem problematic for the general audience, but it is in fact positive and natural to its core. First, a theory in incessant movement is a theory that is alive. This area is related to human beings not only in a sexual or gender perspective, but it is also connected to other fields and currents, such as poststructuralism; and to different philosophies and movements as well, such as feminism and capitalism. Second, as a social field related to humanities, it is linked to human conditions, and humans, as animals and other living beings, are in constant transformation. Thus, it is evident that queer theory will be in perpetual development. There are many different views and advances every single day. As Sharon Marcus explains in "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay" (2005), "[the] new theory that could account for all we now know has yet to be produced; the weight of new data has smashed earlier paradigms, and new ones have yet to emerge from the rubble." (20)

This body of theories questions the current system, the *heteronormativity*, which makes reference to a "deeply-embedded cultural presumption" (Oxford Reference) in which every individual is thought to be heterosexual. Following this idea, any person who does not identify as such or does not fulfill what is expected from them turns into the Other, the *queer*. At the same time, this label creates binaries that act as opposites, such as man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual, narrowing the complexity of gender and sexual identities to too simplified dichotomies. Heterosexuality, then, becomes a technology that will program the minds of humanity to think that there is no other choice but being heterosexual. Michel Foucault called this process *biopolitics*. The French philosopher claimed that modern governments control the behavior of the population by using specific knowledge and "practices of security" with the pretense of taking care of the governed individuals. (Means) By building freedom, the government establishes the ground to rule.

Judith Butler was the first queer scholar to address the difference between sex and gender. Heteronormativity dictates that both sex and gender are synonyms, but, as feminist scholars have proved, this notion could not be further from the truth. Sex is connected to biology, and thus it makes reference to biological features, such as genitals or chromosomes, among others. On the contrary, gender is the social construction of the behavior of individuals according to social and cultural aspects (Research Group Philosophy). Following this idea, Butler defends that identities are not fixed; they are part of a continuum in constant change. Genders are expressed through "gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds," and

individuals become actors, *performers* (Butler, 1988). After the continuous repetition of these "arbitrary" acts or *performances*, the person in question understands on a subconscious level that is the correct way to behave in society according to the gender assigned at birth, which is supposed to be fixed. Nonetheless, Butler argues that gender is not *natural*, but *constituted*, that is, built upon cultural beliefs by social institutions, and so it can be constituted once again in a different manner, for "any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact." (1988) In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick follows the idea of performativity by stating in the introduction that the mere act of being in the closet or "closetedness" is actually a performance, since the individual who is not 'coming out' is *performing* a role that masks their sexual orientation. It is a silent performance. No speech is uttered, but still the closet is part of the LGBTQ+ discourse. Sedgwick mentions several other ideas, but her intention with this work is never to provide answers; she intends to begin conversations, to act as a starter. One of the topics she discusses is the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Only through the existence of the label homosexual, heterosexual exists (Reschke).

Paul B. Preciado follows this statement. For him, sex and gender are technological categories, "somatic-political prosthesis" that are part of a "complex semiotic-technical system" (Domínguez-Benitez, 2011): heteronormativity. In other words, sex and gender are two material and political elements within an order that uses language to program its members, "a social apparatus that produces femininity and masculinity and which operates through division and fragmentation of the body." (Preciado, qtd. in Domínguez-Benitez) The results of this dismemberment become the elements that justify the sexual difference. This means that, following the norm, when an individual is born, individuals arrange different criteria to define the sex and gender of the child: do they have penis –a man– or vagina –a woman–? On some occasions, that mutilation is not symbolic, but real. When a baby is intersexual[1], doctors practice what is called Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM) as a way of assigning a specific gender to the individual. Although having non-typical genitals is not a risk for the health, these practices, based on cultural beliefs rather than on science, are still performed[2].

[1] An individual is intersexual or intersex when they present Variations of Sex Anatomy since they are born, "including atypical genitals, atypical sex hormone producing organs, atypical response to sex hormones, atypical genetic make-up, atypical secondary sex markers." (NGO Report, 2016)

[2] These mutilations are still practiced in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Ireland, France, and Chile (NGO Report, 2016).

c. Reading With Rainbow Lenses

As heteronormativity is built on social beliefs, and as we engage with it, it is unavoidable that this system also pervades culture. It is a vicious cycle. Humanity produces and consumes different types of media on different platforms and has access to a whole variety of novels, which at the same time shape their behavior and way of thinking. Fiction, even though it is not real, influences our minds and constructs our vision and perspective of the world. That way we fall in what Alexander Doty called the *heterocentrist trap*, which can be defined as the automatic belief "that all characters in a film [or other narrative] are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer." (qtd. in Wotherspoon) In this respect, the "gender-and sexually-diverse film and television representation" field of study has dealt with the creation and interpretation of television and cinematic texts which have been adopted as queer or have always been queer (Cover and Dau). This scholarship, which is wide, works at two levels. First, it considers what can be understood as a queer text, including which themes, characters, and narratives can fall under said label. This is paramount, for not every representation is representation –mockery would not be included, for instance–, and there is a need for accuracy in the cinematic industry. It was not so long ago when homosexual characters, just like black people, were the best friends of the female protagonist, and their role was to be the comic relief. Another example is the hypersexualization of lesbian characters, influenced by pornography. Sapphic women in movies and television series were created for the male audience, and thus did not represent the bisexual or lesbian experience realistically. Luckily, movies and shows have evolved, and now, in spite of absurd controversies –such as the kiss between two women in *Lightyear*–, the representation of LGBTQ+ narratives, themes, and characters has improved. Nonetheless, the amount of queer characters is poor for such a gigantic industry as cinema or television. According to GLAAD's "Where We Are on TV Report 2022-2023", only 10.6% of the regular characters of primetime scripted broadcast are LGTBQ (GLAAD Media Institute, 2024), while 89.7% are not.

As Cover and Dau indicate, it is important also to analyze the texts in regard to the audience that consumes the product the same way they are considered by the media when

creating a movie or a television series. Social media make an impact on this analysis. The consumption of, especially, television series has been changed by the use of platforms such as X –former Twitter–. As our technology has changed, our ways of consuming media have evolved too. People now engage with the content they watch and comment movies and episodes online, posting their opinion in the form of an X thread, an Instagram or Facebook post or reel, or even uploading a video on Tiktok. In Spain, for instance, there is a great example of this matter. For many years, the series *Amar Es Para Siempre* ("Love Is Forevermore") –formerly *Amar en Tiempos Revueltos* ("Love In Tough Times")– dealt with the story of the Gómez family during the dictatorship years until the 1980s. The show, which finished in 2024, was mostly watched by the elders. Until 2018, it had only shown one sapphic couple which did not have a great impact on the audience. However, in season seven they introduced a new one formed by Luisita –Paula Usero– and Amelia –Carol Rovira–: Luimelia. It quickly captured the attention of the young and adult bisexual and lesbian women from Spain and Latin America, turning them into a social media phenomena. The success was such that they had their own independent show set in the 2020s. They were a not-sexualized representation of two women in a relationship, and were treated the same way as heterosexual couples in the show. Many have tried to follow the Luimelia legacy, such as the Spanish show *4 Estrellas* –4 Stars–, which included from the very beginning a sapphic couple: Luz –Ana Jara– and Ainhoa –Belén Écija–, that is, Luznhoa. This show was nominated for a GLAAD award in 2024 in the "Outstanding Scripted Television Series" category for its LGBTQ+ themes, which were not only centered on Luznhoa, but on other queer characters and stories. Both of these couples have a great presence on social media, and deal with one aspect that Cover and Dau detail in their article:

> There are also audience studies found in broader research on queer slash/fan fiction, including slash fiction written about ostensibly 'straight' film and television characters as a form of resistant reading of heteronormative discourses (Willis 2006), and in studies that both examine and actively 'queer' interactive digital gameplay. (Shaw 2014) These are likely to have future influence on the field of gender and sexual diversity in film and television entertainment, though at the time of writing continue to form separate sub-fields, and are thus excluded from this study.

Still, it is very important to notice what a good representation can create. They claim that the influence of this type of texts "is yet to come," but, although the amount of LGBTQ+ stories that are published as fanfictions is smaller than that of heterosexual couples, its influence is beginning to grow. The aforementioned couples have been protagonists of numerous fanfictions online, especially through the Wattpad platform, some of them being

published by publishing houses specialized in sapphic novels and works –for instance, the Spanish Les Editorial. *Little Women* has also had many fanfictions that have turned into novels, such as *Jo & Laurie* (2020), by Margaret Stohl, which is a retelling of Jo and Laurie's relationship; and there are some others that exist only in fanfiction websites. This kind of narratives have held a bad reputation too, for they are of easy access –anyone with an account can create stories, which does not assure quality or a proper use of language–.

Furthermore, audiences are always considered cisgender and heterosexual until proven wrong. This is heterocentrism. The LGBTQ+ community is still referred to as a minority. According to Statista, "seven in 10 people identify as heterosexual. Around three percent of respondents declared to be homosexual, gay, or lesbian, while four percent identify as bisexual," and "three percent of respondents from 30 countries identified themselves as transgender, non-binary/non-conforming/gender-fluid, or in another way." (2023) Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that identifying oneself as queer is sometimes treacherous –since it is still punished with death in some countries in the worst case scenario or you can be expelled from your family in the slightest–. Then, basing the entire audience as heterosexual or cisgender can be seen as evident, but it is a mistake, for these labels do not include the rest of the population. As Cover and Dau states:

> Movies and television series are a great showcase for representation. Nonetheless, studies must be careful with the time of the year they analyze. As Cover and Due indicate, "there is a need for studies which critically engage with questions on the extent to which we can measure visibility, for example, beyond arguments that on a particular day in June [Pride month] there were x representations of queers of colour across all broadcast television programs, down from a year earlier.

Creating media with a heterosexual or cisgender audience in mind affects the quality of the representation. In the same way, it is important to count with LGBTQ+ writers, cameras, directors, and members in general in these projects, for their perspective can shift and completely change the quality of the story. Representing does not only reflect importance, but conferes it. It does not only help those who already acknowledge their queerness, but those who do not accept or do not know they are queer because they have no models. Furthermore, having a good representation in movies and television series can contribute to the global understanding of the community as well as to eradicating false statements that surround queer people, experiences, and narratives. They can make conservative individuals more open to diversity, or at least less judgemental. The media, just

like books, mirror the world and those inhabiting it. Excluding LGBTQ+ characters or talking about forced inclusion when these appear does not reflect reality, but an ideology that is not in consonance with our current world.

Literary criticism is also pervaded by this heterocentrism: any attempt of a queer reading is labeled as imposed or forced. A great example that proves the idea I am exposing is the interpretation and re-reading of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. Even though she is not a fictional character, the example will help to shed light over my arguments. This woman, born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, is one of the best-known American poets. Her complex verses have attracted many readers to her words, which have been interpreted multiple times in many different manners, and many legends have been built surrounding her figure. One of the most popular ones –probably due to Apple TV series *Dickinson*– is that Emily Dickinson was not heterosexual. When her poetry was edited and published posthumously by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson[3], many changes were made: they added titles, modified the choices of words, and even adjusted punctuation. Currently, the closest collection of Dickinson's poems as they were first conceived are *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Since the publication of these works, many scholars have theorized about the poet's sexual orientation[4] as well as the identity of the addressee of her poetry. Nonetheless, the most extended argument for decades was the assumption of a heterosexual Dickinson who desired a man / men. Martha Nell Smith, as Sylvia Henneberg writes in her paper, argues that "the only reason the reader is deluded into believing that [...] is that editors have disfigured the letters and poems and reproduced their own misleading versions of them." (2) In fact, her poetry might sometimes be obscure and hard to interpret, but not so her letters to her friend, sister-in-law, and lover Susan Gilbert:

> Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to?… I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you — that the expectation once more to see your face again makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast — I go to sleep at night, and the first thing I know, I am sitting there wide awake, and clasping my hands tightly, and thinking of next Saturday… Why, Susie, it seems to me as if my absent Lover was coming home so soon — and my heart must be so busy, making ready for him. (H L7, n.d.)

[3] In total, three different collections were published by Todd and Higginson: *Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1890), *Poems of Emily Dickinson, Second Series* (1891), and *Poems of Emily Dickinson, Third Series* (1896).

[4] As an example, see "A study in the sexuality of Emily Dickinson. The spider and the flower: manifest homosexuality and its significance to critical comprehension of the poetry and the poet," (1970) by Dorothy Lynn Lochridge.

This and many other fragments of letters and poems have helped scholars to defend that the poet's erotic verses were not entirely addressed to men, but also to women, and that her correspondence with Susan Gilbert was not one between two friends, but two lovers. Of course, this reading, as well as many others, has been possible thanks to queer theory. These kinds of readings are not only beneficial for this field, but also for others, such as adaptation studies. As Wotherspoon explains, "adaptations make up a significant portion of the mainstream texts that are widely consumed in the Western world," and "portraying an existing plotline and character as queer when their is the potential to read it as such" is a benefit for the representation of queer people (5), as well as necessary. This is the premise in which I will base my analysis of *Little Women*'s Jo March on chapter 3.

Then, which method is the most adequate to make a close, queer reading? Emily Wotherspoon proposes Heather Love's separation of *thin* and *thick* description. In her paper, Love explains the difference between both concepts, originally created by philosopher Gilbert Ryle. For him, thin description is focused on what can be observed, it is "unadorned, [...] one that could be recorded just as well by a camera as by a human agent." (3). On the contrary, thick description would add a more profound meaning, "including attributions of intention, emotion, cognition, and depth, as well as cultural context and display," (3) which would be added by the reader. Although the latter might seem more interesting to analyze, it is actually the first one that would open the field to more hypotheses and possible meanings, allowing the reader to examine the thought, dialogues, and behaviors of characters. As Wotherspoon claims, this way the researcher is "entirely reliant on the evidence provided by the characters themselves, and their relationships with others." (7) In other words, the character is the narrative element that talks to the researcher, and not the text itself. Then, with that information, the reader provides a thick description, which helps them to complete the information they are receiving. This is the methodology I will use for my analysis on chapter 3.

Chapter 2. "I Long To Be A Man." An Analysis of Louisa May Alcott's *Queerness*

Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women* (1868-69), lived and wrote her works in nineteenth-century America. As I consider that the environment in which an individual develops their persona is paramount in shaping their personality and character, I will devote this chapter to the context of this writer and also to the understanding and portrayal of her queerness through her letters and journals. An author always leaves traces of their personality or even of their ideology in their writings, but in the case of Alcott it is more crucial to take a closer look to those hints in *Little Women*, since this novel is considered semi-autobiographical and Jo March is regarded as her alter ego. However, I will not cover the history of the entire century in the United States. Instead, my intention is to provide the reader with information about the Civil War (1865-1877) and the Reconstruction era, the period after the Civil War in the country, for it is in the latter when *Little Women* was written.

a. The *Queer* in Nineteenth-Century America

i. The Civil War (1861-1865) and the Reconstruction Period (1865-1877)

In 1861, after Abraham Lincoln became the President of the United States, the country was already divided into two different factions: the North –or Union– and the South –or Confederacy–. Before Lincoln took office, seven southern states had already decided to reject their affiliation to the Union and formed the Confederacy. As the tensions kept growing, more southern states sided with the Confederates, as they were disappointed with the Union's decisions on matters such as slavery. Hostilities were soon translated into conflicts, the first one initiated by the South. The army attacked Fort Sumter, in South Carolina, after threatening the Union –it belonged to the central government, and thus to the North–. This clash ended with the surrender of the fort's commander, Major Robert Anderson. This way, Fort Sumter became a territory of the Confederates. Even though not all southern states seceded, this independent government eventually was formed by eleven states: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. President Lincoln never recognized these states, for he did

not consider that their constitution was that of an independent country. He claimed that they were rebel states who did not want to obey the central government (Weber and Hassler).

But where did this conflict come from originally? Was it only due to differences in the slavery question? The truth is that many elements and disagreements were the breeding ground of the secession, but slavery remained the most important difference between the Union and the Confederacy. The arguments between pro- and antislavery forces can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when the States debated on whether to allow the extension of slavery into Western territories. Black slaves had no rights and were considered a valuable property to work in plantations. But during the nineteenth century, industrialization reached the States. This modernization was especially relevant in the North, while in the South the economy still relied on agriculture and plantations. In these lands, black people were exploited, and multiple aggressions, such as rapes, were common and, as Dr. Crystal Feimster says, "not considered … crime[s]." ("Part 1 - Sexual Violence Against African American Slaves and Its Legacy Today"). Nonetheless, the desire to eradicate slavery did not always come from a desire of freeing black slaves. Weber and Hassler recall that "Northerners, driven by a sense of morality or an interest in protecting free labour," wanted to end with this institution, a decision that Southerners did not agree with. They "feared that limiting the expansion of slavery would consign the institution to certain death," (Weber and Hassler) since it was their main source of wealth. The differences between the North and the South continued to increase, and soon Americans witnessed the outbreak of the Civil War.

This conflict, which lasted four long years, is the bloodiest in all of American history. There is not an exact number of lost lives, but there is a general agreement to state that quantity in 620,000. Nonetheless, many historians, such as J. David Hacker, think that number must be higher, around 750,000 deaths (Binghamton University). The uncertainty comes from the fact that "[n]either the Union nor the Confederacy kept standardized personnel records," as Hacker claims. Furthermore, he defends that the amount of deaths on the Confederate side –258,000– "was based on incomplete battle reports and a crude guess of deaths from disease and other non-combat causes." (qtd. in Binghamton University) This idea is supported by the 1870 Census, whose superintendent Francis Amasa Walker considered that number to be "not less than 850,000." (Walker, qtd. in Hacker) This number also includes the number of civilian deaths, which James McPherson must be around 50,000. In

order to understand the tragedy these numbers imply, Drew Gilpin Faust writes in the National Park Service website:

> [This number] is approximately equal to the total of American fatalities in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, combined. The Civil War's rate of death, its incidence in comparison with the size of the American population, was six times that of World War II. A similar rate, about two percent, in the United States today would mean six million fatalities.

While men were fighting in the war, women remained at home, in charge of households. At least, that is the official version. Nineteenth-century America was also pervaded with Victorian values and gender roles. According to them, women's role was to stay in their household and take care of children, to accept their confinement to the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, were supposed to embark in more manly activities: politics, wars, literature… When the Civil War began, a great number of them were recruited and served their respective army for the cause they believed in. However, since women could not join the battle, many disguised themselves as men and made their names masculine in order to fight with the troops. There is a good amount of testimonies of soldiers who did not realize that their colleagues were not men. Nonetheless, official historical archives show that many of these women had to return home after their true gender was discovered. Still, not all women remained at home or joined a regiment. As New-York Historical Society asserts on Women & the American Story digital curriculum:

> White and free Black women produced desperately needed supplies and raised millions of dollars for troop relief efforts. Thousands of Black and white women traveled to the front lines to work as nurses. Confederate women took over the management of family farms and businesses as the war raged around them. A number of white women did not hesitate to undertake smuggling and spying, knowing their race and sex would help protect them from suspicion. Some of these women posed such a threat that the U.S. government changed the rules of war in 1863, setting a new precedent for how female noncombatants would be treated in future conflicts.

The Civil War ended in 1865, and the Reconstruction period, far from peaceful, was turbulent. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated as the war was over, and his successor, Johnson, was forced to abandon the presidency due to an impeachment in 1868 as he was trying to integrate the South back into the Union again without eliminating their federal government abruptly. He thought that this would anger the Confederacy, and the country had just gone through a painful and long conflict. Eventually, by 1870, every Southern state which had belonged to the Confederacy was part of the Union again. According to Onion,

"the states constitutions during the years of Radical Reconstruction were the most progressive in the region's history" due to an interracial democracy in which black individuals were part of the public life in the same level as white people. However, even though black citizens were free from slavery, racism was still a controversial matter. White supremacists did not agree with the changes made by the Republican government during this period, and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan marked Republican leaders as their enemies for allowing black suffrage and other rights that would grant race equality. As years went on, the government became more conservative, and the work for potential equality was no longer an objective for them. In 1874, after almost a decade of Republican control, the Democratic Party had major power in the House of Representatives. In this context, after the loss of their husbands or fathers in war, many women were left with nothing. These widows made a harder effort to be part of society again, sometimes challenging the notions of how a good woman had to behave in order to feed their children.

Nevertheless, more than 700 women had joined the war, and due to prejudices, many were regarded as "prostitutes, mentally ill, homosexual, [or] social misfits" (Blanton) by other women, because conflicts were no place for ladies, and thus, if they acted like men, the reason was their sexual orientation –being sexually attracted to females was proper of men–, their poverty, or their mental state. This does not mean that there were no sapphic, achillean –men who feel attraction towards the same gender, whether they identify themselves as gay or bisexual–, or transgender people in the army. Although there is no written record of their sexual orientation or the pronouns they preferred, there are testimonies of which roles these people played throughout the rest of their lives. Furthermore, as I have explained in the previous chapter, the term *queer* was not used, at least in a derogatory term, until the end of the nineteenth century. Labels such as 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual' did not exist during Civil War time. The only one that was used was 'sodomite', which, according to Dictionary.com, when acting like the noun 'sodomy', makes reference to "anal sex" and "any sexual contact that is stigmatized as unnatural or immoral". Due to the non-existence of a queer vocabulary, many historians nowadays are hesitant to label certain historical figures of the time as homosexual, bisexual or transgender. As Joshua Bader points out, "finding words that accurately capture the past meaning of male-male intimacy for a modern audience requires creating a new vocabulary of queerness." In other words, individuals who had sexual

relationships with others of the same gender were called "sodomites"[5] in a pejorative way. In fact, sodomy was condemned by the law in every U.S. state, although not based on penal codes (Weinmeyer). Nonetheless, there are registers of same-sex encounters between men in the midst of the conflict. Reverend Irene Monroe includes a fragment of a soldier's letter to his wife in her article, in which he tells her about a ball in Virginia in 1864:

> Some of the real women went, but the boy-girls were so much better looking that they left. …We had some little Drummer Boys dressed up and I'll bet you could not tell them from girls if you did not know them. …Some of [the Drummer Boys] looked good enough to lay with and I guess some of them did get laid with. …I know I slept with mine.

Thanks to the remains of letters and journal entries written by soldiers, nowadays we know about Alphons Richter, a volunteer in the 56th New York Infantry who had a suspiciously extremely close relationship with a man from his troop. He was not American, but a German immigrant. His words have been paramount "to restore masculinity to queer men in military spaces" (Bader). As it happens nowadays, same-sex attraction was regarded as a feminization of the man, and thus the individual was considered inferior to his male counterparts. Richter joined the army not only because of his need of money, but also due to his own ideology. His rejection of slavery was enforced by his relationship with Carl Becker, an intimate German friend in the battlefield who "radicalized Alphons against the slave system" (Bader) after an encounter with a slave in a plantation. According to Richter's diary, both men were really close, and during the service both lived and shared their "domestic duties" (Bader), taking care of each other when they fell ill. Their closeness was such that when Richter was promoted temporarily to command the army, he found the news negative, since his duty would be an impediment to spend more time with Becker. Their letters to their respective families demonstrate that they were like "brothers," as Richter's mother wrote to Becker's (Bader). This might not mean that they had a romantic relationship, but Joshua Bader, as well as other people, interpret his story as a queer narrative during the Civil War.

There is more clear and probable evidence of transgender individuals in the army: Albert D. Cashier –born Jennie Hodgers– and Lyons Wakeman –born Sarah Rosetta Wakeman–. Megan Willmes and Jacob M. Henry included Cashier's biography on the website of The National Museum of the United States Army. They assure that this soldier wanted to be treated with male pronouns even after the war. For this reason, I will refer to

[5] The word was also applied to those who had sex with children and animals

him as a man. When Cashier was a teenager, he left dresses behind to wear men's clothes to work in a shoe factory. Since then, he never acted as a woman. In 1862, he joined the 95th Illinois Infantry Regiment, which "took part in most of the important battles of the western field of operations." (Clausius 2) He was an excellent soldier and was held in high regard by his other counterparts. Only one commander knew about his secret, but never told anyone "out of respect for all that he accomplished during the war." (Willmes and Henry) However, in 1911, after a fracture of his leg, a physician discovered that he was born a woman. After that, Cashier moved to the Soldiers' and Sailors' Home, where he signed his application for admittance giving his deadname[6], Jennie Hodgers. About three years later, he was transferred to a mental asylum due to his dementia. There, he was forced to wear dresses in spite of his protests. Albert D. Cashier finally died on October 10, 1915 of an infection. He had a funeral "with full military honors" in Saunemin, and was buried wearing a soldier's uniform, "under a flag" he fought for (Willmes and Henry).

The case of Lyons Wakeman is trickier. Most articles and websites never refer to him/her as a man, even though he/she lived the rest of their life as one. Only Scott Angus labels Wakeman as "the first transgender American hero to be recognized by the United States government" (MCC of Greater Saint Louis, 11:04-11:09). Due to this reason, I will use they/them pronouns to write the most relevant aspects of their lives for this dissertation. Wakeman, born in 1843, began dressing as a man when they started working as a coal handler on a canal boat, a job that was better paid than those related to women. After meeting some New York State Volunteers from the 153rd regiment who told them that there was a generous offer for joining the army, they applied and enlisted in that same regiment as Lyons Wakeman in 1862. This was the same year that Cashier joined the 95th Illinois Infantry Regiment. During Wakeman's work at the army, they wrote letters back home in which they stated that "I can drill as good as any man in my regiment." (Wakeman, qtd. in "Sarah Rosetta Wakeman: Fighting in the Civil War"). They never saw the end of the war, for they died on June 19, 1864 of chronic diarrhea. The regiment never knew about their sex, and Wakeman was buried as a soldier. It was after the discovery of their letters in the attic of the family farmhouse, many years later, that it was known that Lyons Wakeman was born a woman.

[6] A deadname is the name assigned to a transgender person before transitioning. Normally, after the transition, they refuse the name given at birth and assign themselves one aligned with their real gender.

Regarding those women who remained at home during war, it immediately comes to my mind the Apple TV series *Dickinson*. Its third season covers the period of the civil war, and the character of Emily Dickinson –Hailee Steinfeld– begins writing about death and war, seeing how her male friends go to the battlefield to, possibly, die. During this time, in the fiction, she finally gets closer to her friend, sister-in-law, and lover Susan Gilbert –Ella Hunt–. Whether this plot is a product of creative freedom of its creator, Alena Smith, or true, it demonstrates a kind of relationship that was popular between upper and middle class women during the nineteenth century, before and after the war: romantic friendships. These bonds are defined as intense and passionate. These friends would send love letters, presents, even hair locks –which were love tokens in this century– to each other. They would also share bed, hug, and kiss as a way of manifesting their affection. Although this sounds romantic to the twenty-first century reader, historians warn against a contemporary reading of the past. Marylynne Diggs agrees on the argument that claims that "homosexuality is a historically specific category of sexual identity and … emotional and erotic intimacies with members of the same sex have held different meaning in different historical contexts." (319-20) However, I disagree with this view. Warning against 'contemporary reading' seems very similar to the variety of conservative discourses around queer history. There have been many cases in which historians and scholars prefer to understand history from a heterosexual perspective, because that "contemporary reading" also includes homophobia, as it has been the case with the discovery of many human remains –skeletons– in Europe and Asia[7]. It is always assumed that both bodies are male and female, and thus they are labeled as lovers, as it happened with the first discovery of two skeletons in Modena, Italy, in 2009 (Steinmark). However, when bones are examined and it is discovered that both had the same sex, then the media opens debates about the modernity of the terms homosexual and heterosexual and how in Ancient times these kinds of relationships were understood very differently as we now do, or even swift their theories and interpretations to the possibility of a father-and-son love (Steinmark) or even "sexual deviancy … adultery and incest", for instance (Bell). We are aware of the contemporariness of queer vocabulary. I have devoted an entire section of Chapter 1 to this notion. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that, first, the reason why these debates rise up is due to inherent homophobia, which leads to a "necessary" series of arguments that recognize the existence of queer couples without giving them too much naturality so that heteronormativity does not fall; and second, always bringing the topic of modernity erases

[7] See Kristina Killgrove's article "Is That Skeleton Gay? The Problem With Projecting Modern Ideas Onto The Past" (2017) for *Forbes*.

queer history, even when that is not the intention. That is why it is always important to include queer theory in history. As Bell concludes:

> Normalising the consideration of a Queer status should begin at skeletal analysis, where remains with both male and female sex characteristics are not disregarded, but validated through the application of Queer Theory. The strict categories of sex determination do not allow for biological sex fluidity, and as a result, a significant number of individuals from the past are not only ignored, but not included as a part of human history. Through the misinterpretation of same-sex double burials, an under researched and valuable part of LGBTQ+ history is forgotten.

Human beings evolve, and so do their ways of building societies, systems, and relationships. Just because in the past women depended on marrying a man –a marriage previously arranged by their parents– and now they do not anymore, does it mean that we cannot label this pair as a heterosexual couple because the term heterosexual is also modern? No one ever thinks about a question like that because it is always applied to the *queer*, the abnormal. It is a culturally inherent way of thinking, and homophobia is much more present than many might think.

It is acknowledged that romantic friendships between women were universally accepted and even considered dignifying. However, scholars like Martha Vicinus disagree with such an affirmation. Vicinus considers that there might be a possibility of an exaggeration about "the acceptability of romantic friendships" during this period (Diggs). She claims that, during the first half of the century, there were many doctors who pathologized many different ways of practicing sexuality –probably those which differ from heterosexual–. Although same-sex relationships existed in early nineteenth-century America, as the example of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, who lived together and were seen as a married couple where they lived since 1807 (Boomer), they had existed in Europe for many years. Of course, this does not mean that all of a sudden, in a previous and recent century, a queer individual discovered that two people of the same gender could be partners. Europe and Asia have a wide history of same-sex relationships, with historical figures such as Alexander the Great, openly bisexual[8], and paintings and written records, among other data, that prove that these kinds of bondings did exist. The best example of nineteenth-century European lesbian relationships is Anne Lister, who detailed her sexual life with other women in her diary (Diggs).

[8] For more information on Alexander the Great's bisexuality, see Moira Scully's "Secrets of the Sheets: An Exploration of Alexander the Great's Sexuality" (2021); or Jeanne Reames-Zimmerman's "An Atypical Affair? Alexander the Great, Hephaistion Amyntoros and the Nature of Their Relationship" (1999).

Nonetheless, according to The Marginalian, these types of relationships were not only related to women, but also to men, although it was not that common. During this period of time, some men had romantic friendships with other men. Logan Scherer writes that "it was common for men to forge romantic friendships –ferbid, life-defining connections– with other men," and that their way to show affection was through "light physical touching and gentle kissing, [...] gestures [that] weren't considered at odds with their marriages and domestic lives nor were they seen as challenges to masculinity." Scherer gives examples such as President Abraham Lincoln. The writer highlights that it is precisely the absence of terms such as homosexual or heterosexual that makes romantic friendships "so deeply queer." Even when men got married to their female partners, their relationships with their male friends kept existing through love letters. These bondings existed throughout the entire country, although sometimes it was only limited to young individuals. Nonetheless, there are written records of mature men who chose their life-long friend as one who chooses their romantic partner:

> After an acquaintance of nearly three years I have chosen [Wyck] as my friend, and he has reciprocated; May he live long and happy, and may the tie of pure friendship which has been formed between us, never be severed, but by the hand of death . . . ever keep us as we now are in oneness, one life, one interest, one heart, one love. [A letter by James Blake, included in *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*, by David Deitcher, qtd. in Scherer]

Whether these romantic friendships were friendships or covers for homosexual relationships, their existence is proof that heteronormativity is artificial, for homoerotic desire has always existed. It is in this historical context in which Louisa May Alcott will grow and die, and I will study how this environment and its queer atmosphere influenced her life and work.

b. "I Can Write, And I'll Prove It." Louisa, the Proud 'Son'

When anyone hears or reads the surname Alcott, they hardly ever think about Bronson Alcott, the transcendentalist philosopher, but about his second daughter, Louisa May, author of *Little Women*. Born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, she was acquainted from a young age with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. When they finally

established in Concord –they moved three times to this town–, the Alcotts were neighbors of these people as well as of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author, who bought the first house they acquired there, The Hillside, and renamed it The Wayside. His son, Julian Hawthorne, was Louisa's childhood friend. He once described her as

> a big, lovable, tender-hearted, generous girl, with black hair, thick and long, and flashing, humorous black eyes. Humor she had, and wit too, and dramatic talent, and in spite of what Henry James[9] once told her, she did have genius.

Dr. John Matteson, her biographer, adds to this description in the annotated edition of *Little Women*, saying that Alcott was an "athletic young lady with an astonishing vitality," [my own translation] and collects other descriptions made by close friends and acquainted people. F. L. H. Willis, her cousin, who lived for several years with the Alcotts (University of Massachusetts Amherst), pictures her as a woman very similar to her alter ego Jo March: "[Louisa] had a clear olive brown-complexion with brown hair and eyes [...] she was full of spirit and life; impulsive and moody, and at times irritable and nervous." (Willis 35) That same spirit "was high and courageous," (Hawthorne) her mind was wide open, and had a tender heart, which makes sense due to the way her parents, especially her mother, Abba May Alcott, raised and educated his children. At the same time, the people who knew her say that she was a funny person to be around, always making everyone laugh, in spite of the suffering and poverty that surrounded her family. But almost everyone who read her work, especially *Little Women* agreed on her talent and genius when it came to writing.

As I have mentioned, the Alcotts were acquainted with some of the most prominent individuals within the areas of philosophy and literature. That is why they were quite ahead of her time. While society encouraged girls to become ladies and perfect wives and mothers, Bronson and Abba Alcott encouraged their children to pursue their desires. When May, the youngest, demonstrated talent for the arts, they allowed her to paint the walls within the house. Bronson also built a desk for Louisa to write her stories. All these elements are preserved in the original Orchard House, which is a museum nowadays. The family was also known for being social activists, with special emphasis on the abolition cause. Bronson Alcott established Temple School in Boston with a peculiar teaching methodology, in which

[9] Henry James (1843-1916), after hearing numerous praises to Louisa May Alcott during a dinner in which she was also present and sitting next to him, he immediately told her that she "musn't believe them", since "[they weren't] true!" (Hawthorne, 1925) He never changed his mind about her or regretted his comment.

students received more questions than answers. This school was closed after a scandal involving the enrolment of a black child, which led families to take their sons out of the institution (Matteson xxxix). As Shelden indicates, both Louisa and her mother "had already worked diligently for the cause of abolition." (71) Furthermore, the Hillside was a stop of the Underground Railroad (National Park Service). In a letter to her brother, Abba Alcott, Louisa's mother, wrote about the arrival of a black man who was trying to reach Canada:

> We have had an interesting fugitive here for 2 weeks--right from Maryland. He was anxious to get to Canada and we have forwarded him the best way we could. His sufferings have been great, his intrepidity unparalleled. He agrees with us about [boycotting] slave produce. He says it is the only way the abolition of the slave can ever be effected. He says it will never be done by insurrection… (qtd. in National Park Service)

Bronson Alcott also described this "fugitive" as:

> [a] scarce thirty years old [man], athletic, dexterous, sagacious, and self-relying. He has many of the elements of a hero. His stay with us has given image and a name to the dire entity of slavery, and was an impressive lesson to my children, bringing before them the wrongs of the black man and his tales of woe. (qtd. in National Park Service)

And even though she is part of the history of the United States not only due to her contribution to literature, but her family's efforts to be on the right side of history, Louisa May Alcott did not like her name. According to Thomas, similarly to Jo March, who preferred her short name instead of Josephine, the Alcotts called the author Lu or Louy, and she herself signed her letters as Lou or L. M. Alcott ("'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man"). After reading some of her journal entries and letters, there is one clear aspect of her personality and identity: she did not identify herself with girlhood, at least with the values, games, and personal traits that were assigned to women in her time. Before the publication of her life-changing novel, she wrote to a close friend, "I was born with a boys nature & always had more sympathy for & interest in them than in girls." (qtd. in Thomas, "'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man") A couple of decades later, when she was interviewed by Chandler Moulton, she affirmed: "I am more than half-persuaded that I am, by some freak of nature, a man's soul put into a woman's body." (Louisa May Alcott, qtd. in Thomas, "'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man") When asked about the reason of such an affirmation, she answered that "[she had] been in love in [her] life with ever so many pretty girls, and never once the least

little bit with any man." (qtd. in Thomas, "'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man")

Then, the evident question a reader could have is: was Louisa May Alcott, the mother of girls' literature, a lesbian woman? Her declarations in Moulton's interview as well as the fact that she never married might support this idea, but not every scholar or Alcott fan agrees. Harriet Reisen, producer-writer of *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (2009), claims that "her charm had an androgynous quality," but she does not believe that she can be read as a lesbian. However, Reisen recognizes that "others read the [surviving] evidence differently." It is known that Louisa had many suitors, but she rejected all of them for the same reason: she did not want to get married. There is no evidence of female lovers, either. In *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, editor Ednah D. Cheney writes that when Alcott went once to a meeting of the Women's Congress at Syracuse, "she was … kissed by gushing young maidens," (244) and it does not seem that she did not like that level of affection, since Cheney adds that Alcott "enjoyed the fun. No amount of adulation ever affected the natural simplicity of her manners," but it can hardly be considered a demonstration of lesbianism. Then, it was not a matter of love or attraction. In her journal, she wrote that "[she'd] rather be a free spinster and paddle [her] own canoe." (107) She saw marriage as a prison in which one's liberties were imprisoned for the sake of building a family and not ending your days as a single woman, which was not well seen socially. However, she thought the opposite way. In 1868, Alcott wrote "Happy Women". This article was requested by "Mr. B." as a means of advising young ladies. Instead of focusing on the virtues of marriage, she wrote about women who had not gotten married: "...I put in my list all the busy, useful, independent spinsters I know, for liberty is a better husband than love to many of us." (Alcott, *Life, Letter and Journals* 171) In the text she addresses directly young ladies:

> …[love] can never satisfy a hungry heart. Do not be ashamed to own the truth – do not be daunted by the fear of ridicule and loneliness, nor saddened by the loss of a woman tenderest ties. Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success.

Even though she rejected marriage, there is evidence of some romantic affairs or attractions. It is known that during her youth, she was enchanted by Emerson. After her sister Anna got married to John Pratt, Louisa wrote in her journal: "Mr. Emerson kissed [Anna];

and I thought that he is the god of my idolatry, and has been for years." (107) This attraction was inspired by "Goethe's Correspondence with a Child" (1835), by Bettina von Armin, a book Alcott found in Emerson's library. She wrote letters to him, but never sent them, although years later she confessed this young love to him. "Emerson remained my "Master" while he lived," she wrote (*Life, Letters, and Journals* 50-51). It is also rumored that Alcott might have felt attracted to Thoreau as well. The rumors and arguments are based on the portrayal of the philosopher as Adam Warwick in her novel *Moods* (1865), a story that begins with a direct quote from Thoreau's essay "Experience": "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored lenses, which paint the world their own hue, and each shows us only what lies in its own focus." (qtd. in Whitford 1) There was also Ladislas Wisnieweski, a Polish young man thirteen years younger than her, whom she met in her first trip to Europe. She fondly called him "Laddie", and after he died, "she kept a dried rose from Vevey, where she'd met Laddie." (Thomas, "'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man"). "I drew down his tall head and kissed him tenderly," she wrote in her journal, "feeling that in this world there were no more meetings for us." Matteson believes that this could have been "her last significant romance." (qtd. in Thomas, "'Little Women' author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man")

Nonetheless, if Alcott had a lover, it must have been literature. Ever since she was a child, she found writing was a great source of creativity. Her imagination had no limits, and her devotion to books was encouraged by her mother, who advised her daughter to keep a diary as a way of controlling her temper (Matteson xlvii). At eight, she began her literary journey with poetry. Later, her verses evolved into short stories, which were published in popular magazines of the time. When she was fifteen years old, she made a promise to herself, which later became a prophecy: "...I'll be rich and famous and happy before I die, see if I won't!" (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House). Her first published novel was *Flower Fables* (1854), when she was twenty two years old. Later came *Hospital Sketches* (1863), an account of her time working as a nurse during the Civil War —a time I will explain in further paragraphs—; and her great success, *Little Women*, which was originally published in two parts in 1868 and 1869. All of these works were signed by Louisa May Alcott, but scholars have found that the author also published stories for an adult audience under pseudonyms. The most popular one of them is A. M. Barnard. This pen name was discovered by Madeleine Stern and Leona Rostenberg in the 1970s thanks to a series of letters from the 1860s exchanged between publisher John Elliot and Louisa, in which "A. M. Barnard" was clearly

referred to as herself (Sullivan). Although it is not known exactly how many stories she wrote under this name, the number might be closer to thirty. The most popular one is *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman's Power*, published in 1866. As A. M. Barnard, Louisa wrote "sensational thrillers, highlighting murder, manipulation, and revenge." (Sullivan) In our current times, we could regard this choice as an extravagant move, but the truth is that during the nineteenth century, if women wrote, the topics had to stick to children's literature, female related interests, and letters. As Sullivan writes, these sensational novels delve into topics that were considered scandalous for the Victorian morals, such as adultery, murder, bigamy, addictions, or violence. Signing them with her real name would have been dangerous for both her literary career and her incipient fame, and thus for her family as well, since Louisa wrote to earn money as a means of taking care of those she loved. Recently, scholar Max Chapnick discovered another possible pseudonym: E. H. Gould. It seems that Alcott made reference to a story called "The Phantom" in her journals, which was published in a newspaper called The Olive Branch under that same name. However, there are more stories and poems which were published and written by E. H. Gould. Chapnick, who is almost certain of Alcott's identity behind this pseudonym, bases his arguments in "[the use of] the Alcott for some of the characters. The name of her house, which was called The Wayside, was written about it in one of those stories." (qtd. in Mello-Klein)

Even though pseudonyms or anonymous tales were popular for women to write at the time to avoid facing discrimination due to their gender, what if that was not the *only* reason why Alcott published under A. M. Barnard and E. H. Gould? Why would she choose such androgynous names rather than masculine ones, as Mary Ann Evans did with George Eliot? What if the mother of girls' literature was not a mother, but a father? This idea is getting more acknowledgement, and is based essentially in author Peyton Thomas' articles. Basing his arguments on several extracts from Alcott's journals and letters, the researcher claims that there is enough evidence that proves that Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man. He recognizes the points brought by other scholars who defend that the author felt a great affinity to manhood:

> She wrote of herself as the "papa" or "father" of her young nephews. Her father, Bronson, once called Alcott his "only son." In letters to her close friend Alfie Whitman, Alcott called herself "a man of all work" and "a gentleman at large." (Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?")

In her journal, after the death of her sister Anna's husband, John Pratt, she wrote about her decision of becoming not a mother, but *a father* to her nephews, Freddie and Johnny Pratt (*Life, Letters, and Journals* 227). Of course, Anna was alive during this time, so probably Louisa's desire to act as their father means that she wanted to financially support and help the children, and that was the role of a father. With all this evidence, there are others who believe that maybe nowadays Alcott would have experienced gender dysphoria. As Matteson wrote in *Eden's Outcasts*, Louisa believed that "she should have been born a boy," (qtd. in Thomas ""Little Women" author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man.") and in the annotated edition of *Little Women* he writes that other people saw her as a woman with a constant anger at the fact that she was born a lady, not a boy (xxxvii).

Even though it is common knowledge that there is something *queer* in Louisa May Alcott beyond her sexual identity, not everyone agrees on the transgender point. Many women see this reading as misogynistic. Matthew, for instance, disagrees with Thomas. In her article for *The Hill* she claims that Alcott "was a woman far ahead of her time," and probably "ahead of our time as well." Her arguments are based on the problems with anachronistic reading, and says that calling the author transgender

> …misses entirely the far more radical and empowering point of "Little Women," and of Alcott's broader corpus: that growing past the indulgence of feelings to self-sacrificingly shoulder responsibilities is the path to both godliness and happiness for women no less than for men.

Likewise, Matteson also points out that "Alcott's description of the divide between her female body and her male nature was certainly trans, … but transcendentalist rather than transgender." (qtd. in Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?") He adds that

> Emerson, Thoreau and Louisa's father, Bronson, all believed that human beings were fundamentally spirits who happened to be in a particular physical form, but that the spirit should not be limited, that the spirit has an obligation to develop itself according to its own unique genius.

This attitude is criticized by those who support Thomas' idea. Author James Frankie Thomas complains about the use of euphemisms such as "ambiguous gender identification," as happens when once in *Little Women* Jo examines her boots "in a gentlemanly manner," an attitude that Matteson describes as "the first firm indicator of Jo's ambiguous gender identification." (9) "The word gentlemanly", James Frankie says, "is not ambiguous." (qtd. in

Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?") Matteson answered his criticism and humbly accepted his mistake, acknowledging that "there is, among many scholars, a kind of inherent conservatism, an unwillingness to go out on too much of a limb." (qtd. in Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?")

Reading Alcott as a transgender man or a non-binary person would not miss the point of her writing. She did not write children stories because she liked them, but because she earned money from them[10]. In fact, Alcott was so bored of the *Little Women* trilogy that she finished *Jo's Boys* calling the attention of the reader, asking them to: "[...] let the music stop, the lights die out, and the curtain fall for ever on the March family." (The Project Gutenberg EBook) In spite of her tiredness and her own desires, she is better known nowadays for a coming-of-age novel dealing with her childhood experiences. Jo, a character clearly ahead of her time, struggling to become an independent authoress with 'masculine' manners, has been read many times not only as a lesbian, just like Louisa, but as a feminist who combined the ideology behind the social movement with her masculinity[11]. As I have explained in the first chapter, queer theory departs from feminism. It is quite linked to it, so a queer reading of Alcott's works enriches the feminist perspective of *Little Women*, in this case. Scholar Dr. Stryker agrees with the idea, and claims that Alcott's identification with manhood can be acknowledged "without minimizing the impact of "Little Women" on women's lives and literature [...] We don't have to turn it into a pissing contest or a turf war." (qtd. in Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?")

There are other scholars who share Thomas' view, but maintain another perspective. It is the case of Gregory Eiselein, president of the Louisa May Alcott Society. He defends the possibility of Alcott being non-binary rather than a transgender man, always bearing in mind that she would not apply these terms, claiming that "Alcott never fit a binary sex-gender model." (qtd. in Thomas, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?") Moreover, he states that in the nineteenth-century people did not use the modern terminology we have nowadays related to "gender, sex, sexual identity, [and] sexuality," so even though we can interpret *Little Women*'s author's life experiences as those of a transgender/non-binary person, we should be cautious with the labels we impose on her, for we will never have an

[10] To see more of Alcott's opinion surrounding her writing, read Emily Temple's "Louisa May Alcott's Letter of Advice to a Young Writer" (Lithub, 2019)
[11] See Mijia Zhang's article "A Feminist Interpretation of Jo March's Rebellion" (2023) for further information.

answer coming from the afterlife. Many scholars defend that there were many women who wished to be men, but this desire came from the freedom the gender guaranteed (Severi 2022).

That Louisa was discontent with 'being' a woman is not a secret. "I was born with a boy's spirit under my bib and tucker," she wrote in her journal back in 1856 (74). When the North declared war to the Southern States in 1861, she wrote: "I've often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man." (112) Alcott wanted to go to war, and found a way to fulfill her desires: working as a nurse in the Union Hotel Hospital, Georgetown. When leaving her home she illustrated her feelings in her journal: "So I set forth in the December twilight, with May and Julian Hawthorne as escort, feeling as if I was the son of the house going to war." (124) She spent five weeks there, until she fell ill with typhoid fever, worsened with pneumonia. Her illness was treated with a poisonous medicine called calomel, which derives from mercurium. Due to this treatment, she spent the rest of her life accompanied by periodic frailty and pain (Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women). There are no written records of any knowledge about transgender men or cross-dressed women during her time in Georgetown. Alcott used to write every detail in her journal, from the few dollars she earned working to her thoughts, ideas, and reflections. Most of the entries belonging to this period devote some lines to the soldiers she had to attend (124-27), but none of them mentions any reference to cross-dressing or transgender soldiers. Then, I presume that Louisa May Alcott died with no knowledge of these cases.

The war changed her, not only because of her illness, which marked her for the rest of her life, but the severity of such an experience had a profound effect on her. According to Julian Hawthorne, "there were occasional tones in her voice and expressions of eyes and mouth that indicated depths of which she could not speak." Nonetheless, cross-dressing was familiar to her. Although she never used it as a means to fight in the Civil War, there are letters and journal entries in which she recalls dressing as a man for parties and flirting with girls (Thomas, ""Little Women" author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man."). On another occasion, in a costume party, she successfully passed as a man. She wrote to her friend Alfie Whitman: "[No] one knew me even after we unmasked… The boys called me 'sir' and pushed me round in the dressing room, & asked me to tie & pin them up supposing I was a man." (qtd. in ""Little Women" author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man.") She felt most comfortable in the exploration and performativity of gender with her friend

Alfie Whitman. In letters addressed to him, she described herself as "a gentleman at large", and "a man of all work." (qtd. in ""Little Women" author Louisa May Alcott was a transgender man.") In this friendship she explored not only her identity, but also some form of male homoeroticism, as Thomas indicates in his article for LGBTQ Nation. "Alcott was curious about male homosexuality, exploring the theme in her short story "My Mysterious Mademoiselle"."

These articles haven't been well received by the public. Many people believe that her rejection of girlhood does not come from gender nonconformity, but from her desire to be a free woman. As I have explored in this chapter, Louisa May Alcott was an advocate for women's rights. Her mother, Abba May, was a feminist, and probably taught these values to her children. In fact, Louisa was so determined in defending the rights of women that she was the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts (Matteson lxx). For these people, then, thinking about Louisa May Alcott as a transgender man looks like the theft of a feminist referent by the LGBTQ+ community.

After the research, I firmly believe that there is enough evidence that can support that Alcott did not identify as either a man or a woman. I share Eiselein's opinion on the matter. *Little Women*'s author did not follow nor fit a binary model. However, as the conception of sex and gender back in the nineteenth century was centered on the binary man/women, she did not contemplate this option, because it did not exist. When reading her bestseller, the androgyny and ambiguity is clearly present, which is a firm argument that supports my idea. Even though I strongly agree with the president of the Louisa May Alcott Society, it is true that the author never made the choice by herself, and spent the rest of her days living and acting as a woman with a male soul. For this reason, I still use the she/her pronouns instead of they/them.

Chapter 3. "I Went Where Glory Waited Me." An Analysis of *Little Women*'s Jo March and The Portrayal of Her Queerness

> But every memoir now is a kind of manifesto, as we piece together the tale of the tribe. Our stories have died with us long enough. We mean to leave behind some map, some key, for the gay and lesbian people who follow – that they may not drown in the lies, in the hate that pools and foams like pus on the carcass of America.
>
> – Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man*

The success of *Little Women* (1868) was such that a second part came right after it. Even though Alcott's name was beginning to sound popular after *Hospital Sketches* (1863), it was this coming-of-age novel that catapulted Louisa to fame. However, the author did not want to write it in the first place. It was Thomas Niles, the publisher, who, after insisting for months, convinced her to write a novel for girls. He had a strategy in mind: publishing both Louisa's work and her father's. This way, she agreed on writing the so-longing novel. However, she was not satisfied with this decision. In an entry of her journal dating May 1868 she wrote: "...I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it." (Alcott 1898, 172) Julian Hawthorne remembered that when she began writing *Little Women*, based purely on her childhood with her three sisters, she used to say that "she was "scribbling some rubbish." (Hawthorne 1922) Clearly, Alcott lacked motivation to fulfill the task. Thus, she wrote twelve boring chapters hoping to prove that she was not the right person for the assignment. When Niles read the pages, he agreed with her, but later he then showed the manuscript to his niece, "who laughed so much that ended up in tears." (Matteson) After realizing the potential bestseller he had, he urged Alcott to finish the novel. Once it was published, it has never been out of print.

> It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it. Mr. N. likes it better now, and says some girls who have read the manuscript say it is "splendid!" As it is for them, they are the best critics, so I should be satisfied. (Alcott's journal entry. August 26th, 1868)

And she was. By the end of 1869, almost twenty thousand copies of her "silly stuff," as she called it (Hawthorne), had been sold. By 1870, Alcott had earned $2500 for the copyright of *Little Women*, an astonishing number (Matteson). After seeing the figures, it is evident that, in spite of Alcott's reticence about writing a story for young ladies, this novel

was the work that reached the success she had prophesied. Nowadays, it is estimated that the number of copies sold amounts to ten million, according to Joan Acocella (2018), who summarizes the main content of Rioux's book *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of 'Little Women' and Why It Still Matters*. The novel has been translated into more than fifty languages, and this type of fervor for a book was never seen until J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga (PBS). The success was such that its first adaptation, a play, was a hit. However, Louisa was not alive to see the lasting effects of her writing –and I do not think she would have liked to witness them. After the play came two silent movies, which are now lost. Hawthorne watched the last of them. In his article (1922) he wrote the following about it, not knowing how truthful his words would be:

> [...] the picture was not so good as the book, but drew big audiences all over the country, and paid more money to the producers, no doubt, than Louisa herself ever made out of the book.
>
> These audiences, which laughed and were tearful by turns, were composed mainly of persons who either in their childhood or in maturity had read the book; and of the residue who had not read it, few, I imagine, failed to get it out of the local lending library immediately afterward.
>
> There is a popularity of more than fifty years, a Victorian success lasting over to our revolutionary and sophisticated twentieth century, and still vigorous and unafraid. A book written just after our Civil War, and seeping sweet and good all through the World War, and likely to survive the next cataclysm, whatever that may be.

Eleven years after the publication of this article, the world watched the first voiced version of *Little Women*, directed by George Cukor, with Katharine Hepburn playing the unforgettable role of Jo March. Forty-eight radio dramatizations appeared in the period between 1935 and 1950, and one year earlier Mervyn LeRoy released his new movie, *Little Women*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, who played Amy March, among other actresses. The world and the cinema had to wait forty decades before witnessing a new adaptation, this time directed by Gillian Armstrong starring Winona Ryder as Jo and Susan Sarandon as Marmee. Even a Japanese cartoon series of forty eight episodes was released before that, in 1987. The last adaptation in the big screen was directed by Greta Gerwig starring four-times-Oscar-nominee Saoirse Ronan as Jo. Apart from these, there have been "twelve adaptations for American television, and plenty more elsewhere." (Acocella 2018)

Many authors have recognized the influence this novel has had in their lives and professions, and others, such as Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and A. S. Byatt have paid tribute to it (2018). Simone de Beauvoir said once that she used to play Jo as a child, since

that way "[she] was able to tell [herself] that [she] too was like her, [she] too would be superior and find [her] place," (qtd. in Acocella) Ursula K. Le Guin also claimed that Jo March was "as close as a sister and as common as grass." (qtd. in Acocella) Other authors inspired by the main character of this story are Gloria Steinem, Helen Keller, Gertrude Stein, Danielle Steel, J. K. Rowling, and Tracy K. Smith (George 2018). The importance of *Little Women* in the movie industry is such that it is even reflected in literature, not only in authors. In Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017), it is an adaptation of *Little Women* that catapults Hugo to fame –and allows her to meet another important character for the plot. Even in fiction, Alcott's novel is involved in the queer atmosphere, for it is known that Hugo's secret resides in her sexuality. Even in music and popular culture, *Little Women* and Louisa May Alcott hold a special place. Both are related to one of the most prominent American figures of these last years: Taylor Swift. Apart from a possible family connection between both –a connection that appears to be true between Swift and Dickinson, as well as between Dickinson and Alcott, who seems to be 6th cousins 1 time removed, according to data in FamousKin.com–, fans of the singer and songwriter, called swifties, have interpreted her albums *folklore* and *evermore* as adaptations of the story created by Louisa two centuries ago, more specifically, the impossible love story between Jo and Laurie (Harmon). Not only that. The process of the mastering of her songs after her first record label was sold as well as the rights to her albums before 2019 resonated with the director and cast of the last movie adaptation of *Little Women*. For Gerwig, this situation is similar to the fight carried out by Jo March and Louisa May Alcott in fiction and in reality to keep the copyright of their work ("Little Women Stars Compare Taylor Swift to Louisa May Alcott"). This, joined to the amount of articles that expose curious facts about the original novel and analyze Alcott's words, demonstrates that Alcott and *Little Women* are mainstream again.

In this chapter, I will analyze the queer portrayal of Jo March in the first and last movie adaptations –that is, 1933 and 2019– and compare them to the original writing of the novel by Louisa May Alcott. I will cover not only aspects related to the matter of her sexual orientation, but also to her gender identity, since according to queer theory "identity is something that is dynamic and not static." (Sierra González) Through the analysis of the adaptations of Alcott's work, the reader will see the difference in the representation of the character depending on the social and cultural context in which the movies were released, and also how queer theory helps to support the argument behind the author's sexual and gender identity.

a. "I Am Not Miss March, I'm Only Jo." Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

In order to understand the different portrayals of Jo March, it is important to read thoroughly the original source: *Little Women*. In the very first chapter, Alcott describes the aspects of the four sisters, beginning with the older, Meg. Jo is described as follows:

> Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulder had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it. (Alcott 10; ch. 1)

According to these words, our main character is almost a lady who refuses to grow up because that would mean being forced to leave behind the liberty to act as she pleases. Her physical attributes are quite androgynous. Whereas women are always described with adjectives that indicate tendency to emotion, softness and delicacy, men are written as individuals with sharp attributes, and their body parts are bigger and longer than those of women, giving unconsciously the image of someone who needs protection on the one hand and a male protector on the other. Alcott mixes both descriptions to create Jo. She prefers her short, masculine name rather than her full, feminine one, Josephine, for she considers it "so sentimental." (34) Jo has round shoulders, her hair is "her one beauty," and she is thoughtful, an emotional attribute. Nonetheless, at the same time, she is compared to a colt, which is a young male horse, has long limbs, a sharp nose, eyes that see everything and demonstrate fierceness –a rather masculine attribute, since it is more related to violence–, and her hair is described as long and thick. This description isolated may not give much evidence of androgyny, but when it is compared to the other sisters it becomes more evident. Margaret, or Meg, is "very pretty, … plump and fair," has "large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands," Beth is a "rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl … with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression," and finally, Amy is "a regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and her yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners." Meg's hands are "white," delicate, as commonly the hands of the aristocracy were since they did not have to work the land; Jo's are big and clumsy. Amy desires to become a young lady; Jo despises her destiny. Amy's eyes are blue, a beautiful color; Jo's are gray and do not attract attention. Beth's hair is

smooth; Jo's is thick and "bundled into a net." It is evident that Jo is the black sheep of the family, as her Father calls her (228; ch. 22). Girls in children's fiction were projected as the stereotype of feminine perfection. Jo March does not fulfill that stereotype, since she is "a free-thinking, flawed person" that is closer to a heroine rather than to a flat character from one of those books (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House).

Jo is compared to a colt again in chapter 3, when she assists Mrs. Gardiner's party with her sister Meg. There she meets her new friend, Laurie. Again, Alcott remarks how unladylike her alter ego is, for she "didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood about, with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a colt in a flower garden." (32) On the contrary, she feels more aligned with boys' interests. In the ball she sees "half a dozen jovial lads [...] talking about skates in another part of the room, and she [longs] to go and join them, for skating was one of the joys of her life." In fact, the narrator says that in one of the last meetings of Jo and Laurie, both had been talking about cricket (33), a male sport. Furthermore, Beth is once "glad that she had read one of the boys' books in which Jo delighted." (142; ch. 11) Thus, Jo's interests are intellectual rather than emotional. When in chapter 11 the group is playing Truth, she proposes to "have a sensible game of Authors to refresh our minds,"(138) a game that was about creating fictional stories. Her dream of becoming a writer is just a castle in the air, since she wants it so badly, but is aware of the difficulty she will have to face only due to her gender. However, she does not give up: "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous: that would suit me, so that is *my* favorite dream." (149; ch. 13) Writing was considered such a male career that even Beth compares her sister's talent to that of Shakespeare (12; ch. 1). In spite of Alcott's rich knowledge on literature and authors and her admiration for women like the Brontës, she uses Shakespeare to make the comparison. One might think that maybe there were not popular female playwrights at the time, but that is not true. Estelle Anna Lewis, for instance, wrote *Helémah, or the Fall of Montezuma* in the same period Alcott wrote *Little Women*, although her most popular play was *Sappho of Lesbos*, published in 1868. As the Library Company mentions, she was once compared to Shakespeare, "the highest position accorded to a woman since the Greeks seated Sappho by the side of Homer on the pinnacle of fame." Even though it would be evident to think about the choice as a way of elevating Jo's writing skills, it makes sense that this comparison aligns with her masculinity.

Although she is proud of her androgynous attributes and attitude and demonstrates it every time she is able to, her sisters, especially Meg and Amy, disapprove of it. The only sister who seems to embrace Jo's masculinity is Beth, who calls her "brother" (9; ch. 1) and "[hopes] she won't [change]" her manners, since she thinks that "she is so funny and dear as she is." (160; ch. 14) Her father embraces her androgynity as well, for he calls her "the son Jo" (228; ch. 22) But, in the first chapter, Meg and Amy scold Jo's "gentlemanly manner," claiming that she is "old enough" to stop acting like a rude boy –which consisted of using "slang words" or whistling– and remembering her that she is now "a young lady." In chapter 11, Meg wants to stop her sister from wearing the "awful hat" Laurie gave her as a joke. "You shall not make a guy of yourself," she says. "I just will," claims Jo, "I don't mind being a guy if I'm comfortable." (129) Every time she is told that she is a lady, Jo gets angry. "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," (9) she grumbles in chapter 1. This famous quote has been included in various essays defending Jo's feminist spirit, but now, read through the lenses of queer theory, it acquires a new meaning. Alcott's alter ego adds in the text that her disappointment"is worse than ever now, for [she's] dying to go and fight with [her father], and [she] can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman." (9) Women could not join the army, as it has been explained in the previous chapter, and Jo's desire might be tied to the inequality of sexes. However, when this quote is read together with others that are disseminated through the novel, Jo's gender dysphoria –and thus, queer self– stands out. When the sisters are invited to Mrs. Gardiner's ball, both Meg and her and dressed in opposite ways. Whereas the older girl was dressed "in silverly drab, with a blue velvet snood, lace frills, and the pearl pin," the younger one dressed "in maroon, with a stiff, gentlemanly linen collar, and a white chrysanthemum or two for her only ornament." (31; ch. 3) Throughout the whole novel, Alcott mentions different flowers. For those readers who are not acquainted with the Victorian meaning of flowers, the different choices might seem arbitrary, but they are not. As Matteson recalls in the annotated edition of the novel, "white chrysanthemums symbolize the truth, so they constitute a proper ornament in this case for the honest and non-pretentious Jo." (41, 2n) The flowers, then, are a declaration of Jo's true soul and spirit, which cannot be encapsulated into one gender.

Jo's performativity goes from one gender to another constantly, identifying herself multiple times as a man. In chapter 23, talking with Meg, she says: "...I don't mean to plague you and will bear it like a man…" (231) Nonetheless, at the same time she is conscious about her physical appearance, and identifies herself as a woman in other scenes, even though she

does not enjoy it most of the time. “If I was a boy,” Jo tells Laurie once, “we’d run away together, and have a capital time; but as I’m a miserable girl, I must be proper and stop at home.” (218; ch. 21) Nonetheless, there are several times in the novel in which it is reflected how Jo tries to change her manly attitude so she can fit in. The first time the readers observe this is in the famous scene in which Marmee reads Mr. March’s letter. She is so moved by his words that she declares the following: “I’ll *try* and be what he loves to call me, ‘a little woman,’ and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else.” (15; ch. 1) Her duty, of course, is acting like society commands according to her body: as a lady. But as the narrator says, “keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South.” (15) Two chapters later, while Laurie and Jo are talking, it is said that “[his] bashfulness soon wore off, for Jo’s gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at his ease.” (34; ch. 3) Her androgynous attitude is queer, in the sense of odd, but also queer in the contemporary sense. There is a gender duality within her that demonstrates that she is a girl and a boy at the same time, or maybe she is not either of them. People were not able to understand her, and probably preferred not to. Laurie’s friend Kate is one of them:

> Kate looked rather amazed at Jo’s proceedings, especially as she exclaimed “Christopher Columbus!” when she lost her oar; and Laurie said, “My dear fellow, did I hurt you?” when he tripped over her feet in taking his place. But after putting up her glass to examine the queer girl several times, Miss Kate decided that she was “odd, but rather clever,” and smiled upon her from afar. (129-30; ch. 11)

She finds Jo “clever,” maybe because Kate understands quite well what being a lady meant in those times: losing one’s freedom to chain oneself to a marriage in which the woman is secondary in everything. She values her independence and strong personality, and is amazed at how Laurie sees her behavior normal, as he calls Jo “my dear fellow.” Kate might wish she could be like her. Even though she observes the scene, she does not share her thoughts with anyone present. Kate is astonished by the girl’s unusual expressions, which appear constantly throughout *Little Women*. “Christopher Columbus” or “that’s capital” are the most popular ones, and both are reflected in the movies that are analyzed in this work. Even though they are not ladylike, she declares that she will still use them, for “[she likes] strong words that mean something.” (42; ch. 4)

There are moments in the novel in which Jo conceals her androgynous attitude to please others. In chapter 29, as she promised to go with Amy to visit important people, she makes the attempt of acting as a proper lady, but it is clearly seen that she is uncomfortable:

> While Amy dressed, she issued her orders, and Jo obeyed them, not without entering her protest, however, for she sighed as she rustled into her new organdie, frowned darkly at herself as she tied her bonnet strings in an irreproachable bow, wrestled viciously with pins as she put on her collar, wrinkled up her features generally as she shook out the handkerchief, whose embroidery was as irritating to her nose as the present mission was to her feelings; and when she had squeezed her hands into tight gloves with three buttons and a tassel, as the last touch of elegance, she turned to Amy with an imbecile expression of countenance, saying meekly –
>
> "I'm perfectly miserable; but if you consider me presentable, I die happy."

Even though she does not enjoy behaving like a lady, she does it to please her younger sister, who is very much worried about social conventions. From the very beginning of the novel, Jo states that "[she doesn't] care what people say." (30; ch. 3) As she grows up, her acquaintances might have thought that she would change her attitude as she reaches her maturity, but it is seen that she does not. When she is nineteen –a proper lady at that time–, it is said that Jo's interest in manly sports still persist (250; ch. 24). At twenty-five years old, whenever she cries she "[draws] her hand over her eyes – for one of her boyish habits was never to know where her handkerchief was." (458; ch. 43) After visiting some relatives, the narrator explains that "[Jo] shook hands in a gentlemanly manner" as a way of saying goodbye (307; ch. 29).

Her gender dysphoria is evident, but as well as she could represent the experiences of a transgender man or a non-binary person, the character could also portray those of a sapphic woman or an asexual individual. When her life-long friend proposes and she rejects him, in the midst of the melodrama, Laurie says: "...there'll come a time when you *will* care for somebody, and you'll love him tremendously, and live and die for him." (373; ch. 35). However, that was not what was written in the original manuscript. Originally, Louisa May Alcott wrote the following: "...there'll come a time when you will ~~love~~ care for somebody and you'll love ~~them~~ him tremendously," (qtd. in Thomas, "The Radical Acceptance Behind *Little Women*") Clearly, Alcott had to make some slight changes in order to be published, so the gender-neutral "them" was erased.

Closing to the end of the first part, it is demonstrated that Jo does not feel love the same way the rest of the people she knows do. In chapter 20, she tells her mother that "[she doesn't] know anything about love and such nonsense!" (207) and her confession is followed by a mechanical description of how women are supposed to act when they fall in love. That

is, she is trying to rationalize emotions by relying on literature because she cannot understand love in any other way. In the second part of the novel, which develops the love story of this "funny match," when Laurie proposes, she states that she has "tried [to love him] and failed," and that "[she can't] say 'Yes' truly." (372; ch. 35) The narrator says the following about this moment:

> Not until months afterward did Jo understand how she had the strength of mind to hold fast to the resolution she had made when she decided that she did not love her boy, and never could. It was very hard to do, but she did it, knowing that delay was both useless and cruel. (372; ch. 35)

Further into the story, the reader comes to know that Jo regrets not accepting his proposal, but not because her feelings changed. Her regret came from a profound feeling of loneliness. The intention of Alcott was to end the novel with Jo as a spinster for two reasons: her ideals and her own life, for she refused to marry. In an entry of her journal dating November 1st, 1868 –period in which she was beginning the second part of *Little Women*–, she wrote: "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one." (175) However, her plans were forced to change because her editor, Thomas Niles, insisted that her heroine had to be married by the end of the novel. Still, Laurie would not be her husband. Thus, she created Professor Bhaer. In a letter, she defines him as a "funny match" for Jo. When the narrator describes Bhaer and Jo's sensations about him, it is written as follows:

> Why everybody liked him was what puzzled Jo, at first. He was neither rich nor great, young nor handsome; in no respect what is called fascinating, imposing, or brilliant; and yet he was as attractive as a genial fire [Jo's attraction for fire is reflected at the beginning of the novel], and people seemed to gather about him as naturally as about a warm hearth. [...] Jo often watched him, trying to discover the charm, and at last decided that it was benevolence which worked the miracle. (358; ch. 34)

The reader will understand the shock once they are reminded of Laurie's description made by Jo herself: "Curly black hair, brown skin, big black eyes, handsome nose, fine teeth, small hands and feet, taller than I am, very polite, for a boy, and altogether jolly." (35; ch. 3) He is also half-Italian, a detail that makes him even more interesting and attractive. Thus, Jo rejects the perfect match and ends the novel with the 'worst' choice of a marriage. Nonetheless, although Alcott's intention was to irritate her readers and not giving them what they desired –as a way of rebelling against the industry as well–, this character added another queer layer to Jo: asexuality. Although people often choose their partners because of their

physical appearance, it is not the case of Jo. What captivates her is his kindness, and above all, his intellect:

> She felt proud to know that he was an honored professor in Berlin, though only a poor language-master in America; and his homely, hard-working life was much beautified by the spice of romance which this discovery gave it. (359; ch. 34)

The asexual spectrum is wide, and within there is one specific orientation called sapiosexuality, which could define Jo's (a)sexuality. According to Cambridge Dictionary, sapiosexual makes reference to "a person who is sexually or romantically attracted to intelligent people." Nonetheless, she could also be identified by demisexuality, which is "[experiencing] sexual attraction only when they experience a deep connection." (Ferguson) Both characters are intellectuals, as Alcott was. There are numerous references to popular novels of the time. For instance, the Pickwick Club comes from Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), Jo mentions the possibility of buying *Undine and Sintram*, by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, for Christmas (Alcott, 7; ch. 1), reads *The Heir of Redclyffe*, by Charlotte M. Yongue (29; ch. 3), and *Essays, Philosophical, Historical, and Literary*, by William Belsham, to Aunt March (44, ch. 4), all the sisters read and take *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a guide, and the author includes literary allusions in the narration in almost every chapter. Thus, it is not odd that our heroine is as cultivated as she is, for Jo is a reflection of Alcott, and as the character does not pay attention to aesthetics in general or romantically, it makes sense that she could portray the asexual experience, so the match with Bhaer makes more sense. Still in this point of the novel she does not feel love towards this man. It is only after numerous visits of Bhaer to the Marches house that Jo finally discovers and puts a name to what she is feeling:

> Jo couldn't even lose her heart in a decorous manner, but sternly tried to quench her feelings; and, failing to do so, led a somewhat agitated life. She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence. (475-76, ch. 46)

Then, in a romantic manner, she runs under the rain to find Bhaer before he leaves town. The narrator says that "Jo's cheeks were as red as her ribbon, and she wondered what he thought of her, but she didn't care, for in a minute she found herself walking away arm in arm with her Professor." (478; ch. 46) Suddenly, *Little Women*'s heroine, the same who told Laurie that "[she] didn't believe [she] would ever marry, " since "she [loved] her liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man," (373; ch. 35) the same who was

afraid of telling her life-long friend the truth about her feelings because he would have laughed at her (476; ch. 46), accepts Bhaer's proposal because she loves him, and thus is involved in one of the most popular romantic tropes in novels: she "kissed Friedrich under the umbrella" after pronouncing "[your hands are] not empty now," the moving words that have been appear in every adaptation ever since its release (488).

b. "We're Man and Woman Now, We Can't Be Playmates." George Cukor's *Little Women* (1933)

It is important to remark on the period in which the movie was released: it was the 1930s, and the United States was going through the Great Depression. In this *Little Women*, the story leaves aside those individual talents each sister has and focuses on the different love stories. The country was suffering from poverty and families were starving. Thus, they needed distractions from their reality, and Alcott's work became a refuge in the dark, a lonely cabin in the forest that comforted those who were trying to survive. As Katherine Kellets recalls,

> In his Inaugural Address to the nation on March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: "We face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of the national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by old and young alike. We aim at the assurance of a rounded and permanent national life."

In this context, *Little Women* became an allegory of the solution to this crisis: a profound bonding between family and community (Kellets 4). Cukor uses Alcott's work to give the audience a sense of relief and hope. Money is emphasized, as well as sacrifice and service to the country. In the 1930s, there was no prominent feminist movement. American society was more conservative, and their preoccupations were closer to health and well-being rather than to social activism. In this sense, the 1860s –period in which *Little Women* was written– and the 1930s are peculiarly similar. In spite of this, Jo March still was the most remarkable character. Thanks to this role, Katharine Hepburn won an award for her performance in the Venice Film Festival, and was very proud of her work (Berg).

When the movie begins, the audience is presented to the March sisters. In the case of Jo –played by Katharine Hepburn–, she is reading a book to her aunt. That is her job:

cleaning and accompanying the old lady. Soon it is clear that Jo does the job not because she likes it. Opposite to her sister Meg, who teaches children and behaves with them in a motherly manner, promising to be there the following day, Jo takes advantage of the moment in which Aunt March falls asleep to escape. However, the lady's parrot announces her escape, waking the woman up, and consequently Jo has to stay a little longer cleaning. In the movie, Katharine Hepburn does not quite fit into the description written by Alcott. She does have brown hair and long limbs, although this latter aspect is related to the fact that Hepburn was already a twenty-six-year-old woman. She had beautiful features and followed the beauty cannon of the period. Nonetheless, she was definitely similar to Jo in spirit. According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

> Hepburn was an unlikely Hollywood star. Possessing a distinctive speech pattern and an abundance of quirky mannerisms, she earned unqualified praise from her admirers and unmerciful criticism from her detractors. Unabashedly outspoken and iconoclastic, she did as she pleased, refusing to grant interviews, wearing casual clothes at a time when actresses were expected to exude glamour 24 hours a day, and openly clashing with her more experienced coworkers whenever they failed to meet her standards.

In the movie, that spirit is shown especially through loose movements and comical facial expressions. She runs, exits the house climbing down the wall, jumps, is clumsy, falls, throws a snowball, dances comically out of sight with Laurie, slides down the banister at Aunt March's house, does fencing, and uses masculine manners of speaking, such as "Christopher Columbus!" (00:30:37) Any of these details is not proper for ladies and can be excused in children, but Jo goes one step beyond by rejecting her own name. The only person who calls her Josephine is her aunt, who is clearly very conservative, and those who meet her when she is already living in New York. This is so because it is expected that, once she becomes an adult woman, she will understand and assume her identity and act according to it. However, as I will explain, this does not happen. When Jo is a teenager, she shows a great temper, difficult to control, as it is demonstrated in the novel as well, a feature that is respected in every adaptation. She does not keep quiet when she witnesses injustice, as it happens in her Aunt March's house, when the old lady compares the girls to her Father, who preferred going to war rather than taking care of his family. Nonetheless, she quickly rectifies as soon as the old lady scolds her, what is considered proper behavior from a lady (00:05:25-00:05:42):

JO. There's no one looking out for us! And we don't ask favors from anybody! And I'm very proud of Father, and you should be too!
AUNT MARCH. Don't you be impertinent, miss!
JO. I'm sorry, aunty.

As it is shown in the first scene where all the March sisters are together (00:12:23-00:12:35), Jo is very proud of her personality and behavior, in spite of what Amy, an accurate representation of the society of the time, thinks:

AMY. It's proper to use good words and improve your "vocabiliry."
JO. [*whistles*] Aren't we elegant?
AMY. None would think so with your slang and manners.
JO. I hope not. I don't want to be elegant.
AMY. You whistle like a boy.
JO. That's why I do it [*whistles again*]

However, when Marmee reads the letter from their father, in which he calls them "[his] little women," and asks them to be "loving children to [their mother], [do] their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves," (Cukor 00:15:50-00:15:…) Jo resolves that she will "try and be … a little woman, and not be rough and wild." (00:16:33-00:16:47) Alcott adds that for this character changing her behavior is harder than fighting in the war. In the movie, this description is added visually, with a close shot of Jo's face in which the audience can see tears running down her cheeks, as Jo is moved by her father's words and is willing to change her personality in order to not disappoint him.

But little did the novel's heroine know about altering one's temper and personality. When they represent *The Witch's Curse*, Jo plays the two only male characters: Black Hugo and Roderigo. In the novel, it is said that Jo "had been considered a "Sancho"[12] ever since she was born," (Alcott 21; ch. 2) and also that she "played male parts to her heart's content." (22; ch. 2). Matteson explains in a note (29, 8n) how this resonates with Alcott's childhood. Both her and her older sister, Anna, played five or six characters each for their plays, and Louisa often took the male roles, such as pages or couriers. Her spirit is such that everyone surrounding her is sometimes confused due to the difference between her female aspect and her male spirit, as happens when Laurie and her are fencing. Jo, as a knight who rescues the princess from captivity –Laurie is captive due to his cold in his mansion–, visits her friend, and after they drink some tea, they both take two objects that could pass for swords and begin

[12] As Matteson explains in a note (27, 4n), "Sancho" was a term used in New England to scold children when they were not behaving properly. However, it is also a direct reference to Sancho Panza, Quixote's squire.

to fight. Suddenly, the girl falls to the floor, to which Laurie apologizes saying that he had forgotten that she was a woman, but she denies that gender difference claiming that she would have won if she hadn't tripped with the carpet (00:33:41-00:33:49). This attitude can be read from a feminist perspective: the heroine is rebelling against the patriarchal system that dictates that a woman cannot play with boys, for she will get hurt. Nonetheless, from a queer perspective, this scene has another meaning: the wild-spirited Jo refuses to follow the rules imposed on her gender and refuses to perform this false role. She has a tendency for more gentlemanly manners.

However, she also shows an appreciation for feminine traits. After she gets her hair cut, she defends it by stating that even though "it's boyish," it is also "becoming and easy to keep in order." (00:53:15-00:53:18) Opposite to the 2019 adaptation, every one, including Laurie, is shocked by her hairstyle. In the following scene, Jo is crying while Meg is asleep, until her sister wakes up. Then, Jo denies that she is actually in tears –tears are emotional and, thus, feminine–, but she is finally honest and confesses that it is because of her hair (00:54:45-00:55:11). This female attitude will eventually be established in her persona, once she moves to New York after she rejects Laurie. This rejection comes after Meg's wedding. Jo is sitting outside the house, sad, and her friend approaches her. He confesses his feelings, but she apologizes, since she does not feel the same way towards him: "I'm so grateful to you, so proud and fond of you. I don't know why I can't love you the way you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say 'I do' if I don't." (01:14:38-01:14:55) She mentions her incapacity to understand the nonreciprocity between both. This can have two different interpretations: first, she does not understand love, as it happened in the novel, and hates that one cannot choose whom they love, for marrying Laurie would be utopian; and second, she does not understand why she has never been able to see men as potential lovers. In the ball, she also escaped from dancing with another boy. She avoids them and is more comfortable in the presence of girls except when it comes to playing. Jo is confused in every aspect.

But in New York everything is suddenly clear. Her movements are more controlled now, she is motherly to the children she teaches, and presents herself as Josephine March. In her private time, she is shown knitting and wearing more refined, ladylike clothes (01:52:00). Her male attitude has been left behind, not only in Concord, but also in her childhood. She is a grown up woman. It is here where she begins her relationship with Professor Bhaer. He

soon becomes her friend, and gives her criticism for her stories. Opposite to the scene in the 2019 version that I will explain in the following part, Jo does not burst into anger, but into tears (01:29:21-01:29:54), and he tries to comfort her. The reason for his sadness is not that Bhaer did not like her writing, but that Laurie was in New York and did not visit her. In fact, she confesses to him that she does not think that the stories she showed him were very good (01:31:10), although she earned money for them. In this movie, the writing is not seen as a talent, but as a source of income –since the release was during the Great Depression, this emphasis makes more sense–. There are no quarrels between Bhaer and Jo, but admiration and affection for each other. This scene marks an important moment between both, since their relationship begins to grow. Once Beth dies, she stays in Concord. Her departure from New York did not suppose a dramatic climax between both lovers.

The ending of the movie is what the publisher –and the audience– looked for: a romantic final shot of the couple hugging, accepting the feelings they have for each other. Jo grows, leaves her boyish attitude behind, and embraces her future as a woman: a marriage with a man she loves. Josephine March is finally a lady.

c. "No One Will Forget Jo March." Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019)

This adaptation of *Little Women* is probably one of the most beloved by the audience and probably a future cinematic classic. The reason behind this affirmation is that its director, Greta Gerwig, did a deep and thorough study not only of the novel, but, knowing about the semi-autobiographical character of the story, she also read Alcott's journals and letters (Sandberg), and this is noticeable. The movie, then, wants to pay homage to Louisa May Alcott and her work. With this intention in mind, Gerwig altered some scenes and details that appeared in previous adaptations. The movie does not follow a linear structure. This was done intentionally, for *Little Women* is part of our cultural memory, and most of its audience is familiar with the story. Then, it should not be hard for them to understand the continuous alternations between past and present. In those scenes that reproduced the sisters' childhood, the director "wanted [them] to be "swirly", as if the camera were a fifth sister dancing along with them during their youthful romps." (Sandberg) Those representing their adulthood are recorded from a distance, so the camera is no longer another actor in the scene.

The beginning of the movie is intriguing, for it begins with a mixture between real life and fiction. The first shot shows Jo March –played by Saoirse Ronan– in front of a closed door. Due to her body language, the audience can see that she is anxious and nervous. This moment presents not only Jo, but also Alcott, and this for me is evident because of the way the scene takes place. The girl opens the door and enters with decided pace into a room filled with men who "hardly [notice] that she has walked in." (Gerwig 1) She sits down in front of Mr. Dashwood, a man who, after inviting her to sit down, makes multiple changes to the story she wants to publish. These changes are hurtful for her as an author, but also as a mother, since her relationship with her works is a motherly one: she cares for them, dedicates a great amount of time to their growth and quality, and gets worried if one of them goes missing. As we read in the screenplay, "[e]very time his pen scratches, Jo feels her heart breaking." (Gerwig 5) This, joined to her strong personality and temper, is probably the reason why she probably takes Professor Bhaer's criticism further in the movie too personally (00:22:30-00:24:30) and is so annoyed by Amy's terrible decision of burning her book of short stories (00:47:40-00:48:23) –in the novel, the pain is more acute, for it is said that she had been working on it "several years" and was "a literary sprout of great promise" that she was planning to give it to her Father as a gift when he returned home from war (Alcott, 81; ch. 8). Mr. Dashwood finally accepts the story, and asks her which name should the tale be signed by, to which she answers "none at all if you please." (00:04:04) In the novel there is a scene in which Jo publishes a story, but it is signed as "Miss Josephine March," (161; ch. 14) and, in real life, Alcott published her works under her name, except those stories that dealt with sensational matters, as I have explained in the previous chapter –this is also referenced in a conversation between Jo and Professor Bhaer, when Jo states that she does not sign with her real name because her mother would not like it, since "it's too gory for her" and Jo "[wants] to help with the money [she] makes and not worry her" (00:22:05-00:22:17). Then, why would Jo in this movie choose anonymity instead of a pen name? It has a very good reason: the absence of a name means that the author could be anybody. In other words, Gerwig wants the audience to see that this girl that is about to tell them a story could be either Jo or Louisa May Alcott. The movie closes following the same line, creating a circular structure. When Beth dies, Jo begins writing *Little Women*. The audience sees that she writes day and night, not even going down to have lunch –it is Marmee the one who goes up to the attic to bring her food–. This is a direct reference to Alcott, who used to fall under cathartic creative periods during which she would write all time, not leaving her work to eat. That is how she wrote *Little Women* in less than two months. In the movie, Jo even shifts hands to

write when her right one is tired –Alcott was ambidextrous–. Once she has finished the first chapters, she sends them to Mr. Dashwood, saying that she thinks "that it is probably quite boring," the same thought Alcott had about her work when she sent the first twelve chapters to Thomas Niles, who agreed with her the same way Mr. Dashwood does with Jo in the movie. Nonetheless, there is a scene that does not appear in the book, for it makes reference to real life. The publisher, sitting down with his wife, sees how his daughters, all young, come running to him with Jo's manuscript in their hands, asking him for the rest of the book (02:01:53-02:02:02). In that moment he realizes what a bestseller those *little women* could be. In the office, talking with Jo, the audience see an interesting conversation on screen that wanted to replicate the one that could have happened between Alcott and Thomas Niles (02:02:33-02:03:35):

> MR. DASHWOOD. Frankly, I don't see why she didn't marry the neighbor.
> JO. Because the neighbor marries her sister.
> MR. DASHWOOD. Right, right, of course. So, who does she marry?
> JO. No one. She doesn't marry either of them.
> MR. DASHWOOD. No. No, no, no, that won't work at all.
> JO. Well, she says the whole book that she doesn't want to marry.
> MR. DASHWOOD. Who cares! Girls want to see women married. Not CONSISTENT.
> JO. No, it isn't the right ending.
> MR. DASHWOOD. The right ending is the one that sells. Trust me. If you end your delightful book with your heroine a spinster, no one will buy it. It won't be worth printing.
> JO. I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition. Even in fiction.
> MR. DASHWOOD. It's romance.
> JO. It's mercenary.
> MR. DASHWOOD. Just end it that way, will you?
> JO. Fine.

Once Jo finishes chapter 46, she returns to her publisher's office. There they comment on the final result. Mr. Dashwood, now satisfied, discusses the contract. Jo fights for her copyright, a detail that annoys the man, but finally agrees on giving it to her and six point six percent of royalties. The publishing process, observed by a delightful Jo, is intertwined with scenes that correspond to the last chapter of the book, as well as with childhood memories of the sisters, which Gerwig states as "FICTION (?)" and "THE PAST, OR MAYBE FICTION, OR MAYBE BOTH." (121-22) Once one of the copies of the book is finished, they hand it to Jo, and on the cover it can be read "Little Women - Jo March." (02:08:58) The whole movie is metafiction.

In opposition to the 1933 adaptation, this movie is not focused so much on the love stories, but on each sister and their talents, as well as on their sisterhood. In the first we see that the connection between Jo and Professor Bhaer is almost immediate. Here, however, the first moment shared by both characters shows a very-much-focused-on-her-work woman writing next to the fire and a man who is always mesmerized by her presence (00:05:10-00:05:20). It is a unidirectional attraction. This happens again in the following scene together, in the theater (00:10:17-00:10:30). Bhaer looks up to look for Jo, but she is enchanted by the play that is being represented. Jo "is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain" (Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience*) so much that she does not *see* Bhaer, until she comes out of the theater and "spots Friedrich. She freezes, not moving, not wanting to be seen." (Gerwig 11) Jo is not interested in romance, but rather in Shakespeare and literature. But suddenly, after she receives her rejection for *Little Women*, Professor Bhaer appears in her house in Concord –she had left New York after she had heard about Beth's health and had not spoken to him after Bhaer's criticism–, and Jo seems rejoiced by his presence. The movie then shows their first encounter, in which both react infatuated by each other. Here, Jo presents herself as Josephine, leaving her male short name aside, but then corrects herself and says that "[she's] Jo." She might be refusing to act like a lady and just presenting herself as she is: an androgynous person proud of her 'two spirits' –male and female–. Then, the movie goes back to the present, where they both share a meal with the March family. Bhaer announces that he has intentions to go West, for "[he has] nothing keeping him [in New York]." (01:58:30) "Jo has an unconscious sharp intake of breath" when she hears the news, but only Amy notices (Gerwig 112). Once he has left the house, the entire family tells Jo that she clearly loves him, and Meg and Amy help her get ready to stop him before he goes on the train. When they arrive at the train station, Jo runs to find him, but she does not. It is him who finds her. In a romantic moment under the umbrella, she confesses to him that she wants him to stay, and both kiss (02:03:36-02:04:35). Jo was in love.

Jo's manly attitudes are seen throughout the entire movie, but especially during her childhood. For instance, when they come back from the ball due to Meg's injured ankle, she carries her sister inside the house in a way that seems masculine rather than feminine: "Here, make room, /Meg is a wounded soldier!" (17) In this same scene, in which Marmee 'adopts' Laurie in the family, she invites the boy to act in one of Jo's plays, "although you'll have to fight Jo for the male roles or play a girl." (18) For Meg, Beth, and Amy, Jo is more a brother than a sister. Not so for Laurie, who proposes further in the movie telling her that he has

"loved [her] ever since [he's] known [her]." (96) Nonetheless, it is evident that Jo has never looked at her friend with the same eyes he looks at her. When in the past they go to see a play with Meg and John Brooke, the camera points to both couples. First, the audience sees how Laurie looks at Jo completely infatuated by her presence, but she is so mesmerized by the play that she does not notice his gaze, so he looks back to the stage. Then, the camera shows Mr. Brooke timidly looking at Meg the same way Laurie looked at Jo. However, in this case, Meg does notice him and imitates the gesture, but the man takes his look back to the stage, too nervous due to his love for her (00:45:55-00:46:00). Once the play is over, they come out of the theater. Brooke offers Meg his arm and she takes it. When Laurie imitates him, Jo "punches him in the shoulder" (51) in a masculine way and runs to take her sister's arm. Later in the movie, when the March sisters, Laurie, and his friends are on the beach, there is a similar scene (01:08:21-01:08:40):

LAURIE. I know something you don't know.
JO. Tell me this second!
LAURIE. Has Meg perhaps mislaid a glove?
JO. (punches him) Mr. Brooke has it!
LAURIE. Yes.
JO. How do you know?
LAURIE. I saw it.
JO. Where?
LAURIE. In his pocket.
JO. All this time?
LAURIE. Yes. Isn't it romantic?
JO. No, it's horrid.

Instead of being happy for her older sister, she is annoyed "at the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away." (Gerwig 71) There are two reasons for that. First, Jo is terrified of being alone. It is seen in her rejection of growing up, when she says to Meg that she "can't believe that childhood is over" on her wedding day (01:33:00), and when she delivers a monologue stating how she defends being a spinster but how she hates being so lonely (01:41:32-01:43:00). Second, she does not think that any man is worthy of Meg's love. She protects her as a brother would –in the novel she goes as far as saying that she wishes "[she] could marry Meg [herself]" (Alcott 208; ch. 20)–.

Nonetheless, at the same time she demonstrates some appreciation of her female attributes, more specifically of her hair. When Marmee receives a telegram from Washington, where her husband is fighting, she begins packing with the help of her daughters, except for

Jo, who has gone to ask Aunt March for money (01:11:23). When she returns, she announces that she decided not to go to her house and "sold what was [her] own," taking her hat off and letting the rest of the family and friends see that she got her hair cut. Mr. Laurence, Laurie, and Mr. Brooke, who are present, begin to laugh, but Jo's sisters, Hannah –the servant–, and Marmee look shocked. "You look like a boy," says Hannah (Gerwig 76). Now, Jo and Laurie "look like twin boys." (76) The girl is proud of her action and does not seem affected by her new hairstyle, but in the following scene she is shown crying on the staircase, comforted by Amy (00:13:08-00:13:31). "What is it? Is it Father?" asks Amy. "No. It's my hair," answers Jo. Masking her real feelings and not crying in front of the rest is a masculine attribute, since tears are related to weakness and emotions, and men are not supposed to be emotional. There is just one scene in which Jo defends her right to cry, when Marmee reads them their father's letter. "Jo sits in the back so we can't see her cry," states Amy, receiving a punch on the shoulder by her older sister. "What if I do?" rebukes Jo (00:32:12-00:32:15). Mr. March's words have an effect on the sisters both in the book and in the 1933 adaptation. However, Gerwig suppresses Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth's commitments to become proper ladies. Instead, the final words of the letter are voiced off –"I know that they will be loving children to you, do their duty faithfully, fight their enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder of my little women." (00:32:48–00:33:18)–, and on the screen the audience can see the four sisters acting in a play written by Jo, behaving as the children they are. There are no moral obligations of changing her attitudes so they can become better women. Their childhood in the book is ruled by *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but its moral teaching is how to become better people –and Christians–. Thus, Gerwig's movie does not include that teaching, which was contemporary to nineteenth-century girls, but out of date currently. Then, Jo's manly personality does not change even when she grows up. She still runs, jumps over fences, and uses slang expressions such as "Christopher Columbus!" or "that's capital!", and both Meg and Amy still disapprove of this behavior. But Gerwig, as I stated at the beginning, did want to respect Alcott's original intentions, so if she wrote *Little Women* nowadays, she would probably suppress that moment too.

From the very beginning, Jo's personality and true spirit are respected, and Alcott is present in each movement and sentence delivered by Saoirse Ronan, the actress. After this beautiful homage, I think Alcott would use the sentence she wrote to end her novel to address

her audience: “however you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!” (Alcott 499; ch. 47)

Conclusion

This dissertation has provided a queer approach to the author Louisa May Alcott. With this intention, her journals and letters have been analyzed. On top of these sources, *Little Women*, her novel, has also been considered, studying thoroughly the character of Jo March, for she is considered as the author's alter ego. In order to accomplish it successfully, I have drawn on queer theory, especially on the works by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Paul B. Preciado, and Alexander Doty. Through my research, I have given enough evidence that demonstrates that, regarding gender identity, Louisa "Lou" May Alcott could have been a transgender man or a non-binary individual. Reading Peyton Thomas, Gregory Eiselein, and also Alcott's contemporaries who talk about her; bearing in mind the transcendentalist belief that spirits had no gender and its connection with gender performativity, and also that as twenty-first century researchers we have to be careful applying modern terms to people from past eras, I believe that Alcott was non-binary. It is even harder then to evaluate her sexual orientation, for she did not leave much clues, but according to the few excerpts from her letters to Alf Whitman –in which she stated the enjoyment she found in cross-dressing and in flirting with girls–, her attraction towards Emerson and Thoreau, and her relationship with Ladislas "Laddie" Wisnieweski, it is probable that she was bisexual.

In chapter one, I introduce queer theory through the words of some of its most important voices, especially Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Paul B. Preciado. Then, I cover how this field of study is important to understand literature in any period. Beforehand, I explain paramount concepts within this scholarship. Heteronormativity, a technological apparatus according to Preciado, is one of the most important terms, for it constitutes the basis in which queer theory works. This norm, imposed through institutions on society, dictates that both gender and sex are equal terms to designate whether an individual is a man or a woman. Nonetheless, as Butler states, gender is built on cultural beliefs, and as it is not fixed it is in constant evolution. Thus, she illustrates how humans are actors who perform a specific gender through movements and other enactments in a practice called performativity. Sedgwick provides arguments supporting this theory by stating the existence of silence performativity, which consists in the acting process executed by a 'closeted' individual, that is, a queer person who has not revealed their queerness for any reason. Then, this chapter is followed by the practical appliance of this scholarship and the various cultural

areas that are benefited from it. I use the concept heterocentrist trap, coined by Alexander Doty, to explain the presumption of heterosexuality by the audience in a cultural product. Then, I rely on Cover and Dau's article to explain the importance of representation in the media for both queer, and cisgender and heterosexual individuals. Thus, two examples from Spanish television series are provided to support their arguments.

Chapter two deals with the queer history of nineteenth-century America, more specifically the history of the country during the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, and introduces the reader to the figure of Louisa May Alcott. In the first part, I summarize the events that caused the outbreak of the war, as well as its ending and the period that followed. In this context, I include short biographies of queer people –especially transgender men– who fought in the Civil War and spent their lives acting according to their true gender. These individuals were not acquainted with Alcott or vice versa, but their narratives are a valuable testimony that demonstrates the importance of historical memory. Then, in the second part, in order to explore the life of this author, I rely mostly on *The Annotated Little Women*, by Dr. John Matteson, extracts of Alcott's journals and letters (*Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Journals, and Letters*), and testimonies of friends and acquaintances that knew and wrote about her. Some of these people were Julian Hawthorne and F. L. H. Willis. As knowing her surroundings is paramount to fathom her persona, I expose the history of the Alcott family, their social activism, and their relationship with some of the most prominent figures of the transcendentalist movement: Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thereafter, I address and analyze the different theories surrounding her gender identity and sexual orientations, providing arguments that support them. As I did later with Jo, I explore her manliness and her androgyny through the reading of her journal entries and letters. After the research, it is visible that her attitude was not so aligned with the expression of the female gender, although she fought for equal rights. Alcott, who was an author ahead of her time, lived her life respecting her androgynous spirit.

Finally, chapter three contains the analysis of Jo March's queerness and how hers reflects Alcott's. It provides the reader with an explanation regarding *Little Women*'s publication and success in the past as well as in our current times. Then, my analysis is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a different *Little Women*: the novel, the 1933 adaptation directed by George Cukor, and the 2019 adaptation written and directed by Greta Gerwig. I reflect on several extracts from the novel and from both adaptations that exemplify

what I intend to explore in this dissertation. I discuss Jo's manly attitudes and appreciation of her femininity, her brotherly behavior towards her sisters and Laurie, the rejection of her androgynous spirit by Meg and Amy, Jo's desire to belong to society, and how her relationship with Professor Friedrich Bhaer can be seen as a demonstration of the asexual experience.

Although I covered the topics I was willing to develop, during my study I came across some others that I consider very interesting for future works of research. One of them is the analysis of Louisa May Alcott –and Jo March– as a pioneer writer of novels addressed to young children and young adults in which there is a female character that defies heteronormativity, as it happens for instance with *The Famous Five*, by Enid Blyton, in which Georgina "George" Kirrin appears. Another one would be how other nineteenth-century authors that lived before Alcott introduced queerness in their works in subtle ways, as it happens with *Emma*, by Jane Austen, whose main character has a curious and *queer* fixation for her friend, Harriet Smith.

As I hope it will happen to the reader, this dissertation has widened my knowledge on queer theory as well as on Louisa May Alcott, a figure I have always admired and followed. As a queer woman myself I know how important representation is. What is not mentioned, does not exist, and the LGBTQ+ community has been silenced for so long. It is time to acknowledge those who came before us, whose work has been a paramount key to comprehend what was *queer* within us, to embrace our identities, and to lead and help others to understand themselves without the suffering that many had to assume as part of the journey.

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