

From Garret to Study: Dual Pathways of Female Empowerment through Writing in *Little Women*

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Abstract

In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, there exist dual pathways of female empowerment through writing reflected by the character Jo March. Jo moved from the margins of domesticity to the center of social influence through writing which serves as not only a tool for personal liberation but also a mechanism for societal transformation. Jo's evolution from writing in a garret to setting up a communal study reveals the dual pathways of female empowerment: Individual establishment and public impact. Based on feminist theory and historical contexts, this study discusses how 19th-century American women applied literature to challenge gender norms and reshape societal power structures.

Keywords

Female empowerment, Personal liberation, Societal transformation.

1. Introduction

The 19th-century American society underwent a comprehensive social transformation influenced by the surging tides of industrialization.[1] However, the persisting ideological framework of the Victorian era continued to constrain collective consciousness, thereby matrimony and domesticity remained to be the symbol of female value.[2] Jo March, rejecting to follow the traditional concept of female role, subverted conventional gender paradigms and deconstructed entrenched societal constructs of femininity.[3] Through writing, Jo developed two interconnected modes of empowerment: garret writing as private resistance and study-based education as public reformation. The two paths interconnected to

2. Literature Review

In recent years, many researchers have made deep research on *Little Women* from various angles, including feminism, history context and writing strategies. Xiao Yuhan's[4] comparative study highlights the connection between female characters' awakening and the author's writing style but fails to delve deeper into the empowering function of writing itself. While Zhu Wei[5] uncovers the gender politics within the text and Chu Yihan[6] emphasizes how social environments shape female characters, neither addresses how women break through structural constraints through writing. Most existing studies focus on static analyses of character traits or consciousness. This paper traces Jo's complete journey from Gothic fiction to realist writing and eventually to educational practice, revealing how literary creation evolves from private expression to public intervention. Writing plays an very important role in Jo's

3. The Garret: Writing as Private Empowerment

Economic Liberation: From Bodily Sacrifice to Intellectual Labor

There is an episode in Chapter 15 which tells that Jo sold her hair for money. Jo said, I hate to borrow as much as Mother does.[7] Her action symbolizes the commodification of female

bodies in a capitalist patriarchy. Later, she earns from writing, transitioning from passive objectification to active economic agency. Jo resented the multiple shackles imposed on women by society and strove to tear off the labels affixed to women by external forces. Contrary to traditional expectations for women, she preferred meaningful, strong vocabulary and boldly expressed her ideas with unrestrained freedom. She dared to challenge outdated notions that women existed solely for marriage and childbearing. Rejecting the constraints that marriage would impose on her life, she sought to control her own destiny and used writing as a means to transform her family's economic circumstances.[8]

Identity Construction: The Garret as a Subversive Sanctuary

In chapter 4, it tells that every few weeks she (Jo) would shut herself up in her room... put on her scribbling suit... writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul...[7] This attic space transforms into a "woman's kingdom," a physical and psychological refuge where Jo could freely explore her imagination through Gothic tales that gave voice to her suppressed ambitions and frustrations. The destruction of Jo's manuscript by her sister Amy serves as a powerful metaphor for patriarchal attempts to silence women's creative expression. Yet Jo's determination to stick to writing in spite of this violation demonstrates what contemporary feminist theory recognizes as textual resilience, where the act of writing itself becomes resistance. In this pattern of creation, destruction, and recreation, writing functions as both sanctuary and weapon for 19th-century women artists.

Emotional Support: Gothic Writing as Resistance

Jo writes many "blood-and-thunder tales"[7] to express her anger towards oppression of female. Through her sensational stories filled with Gothic elements of murder, vengeance and supernatural hauntings, Jo channels her repressed feminist anger and frustration into creative expression, constructing an alternative narrative of female agency that directly contradicts the passive role expected of women, that is the "angel in the house" idea. In contrast, Jo's sister, Beth embodies the traditional feminine virtues through her piano playing - a domestic art form meant to comfort and entertain the family. While Beth's music soothes, Jo's writing disturbs. Where Beth performs self-effacing service, Jo asserts bold individualism. The comparison between the two sisters highlights that Jo's writing becomes a radical assertion of selfhood.

4. The Study: Writing as Public Empowerment

Knowledge Production: From Sensationalism to practicality

Jo stopped writing sensation stories, and began to write something to record the lives of ordinary people. As she begins documenting the harsh realities of poverty and the systemic barriers preventing intelligent young women from accessing education[7], her work assumes a new social responsibility that Professor Bhaer recognizes as "true literature." [7]. This shift represents what modern feminist scholars would identify as Jo's move from private anger to public engagement. Her study becomes a "space of resistance," transformed from mere writing room to what the text metaphorically calls a "factory of knowledge." In this intellectual workshop, Jo's narratives challenge the patriarchal literary establishment by centering marginalized voices and experiences traditionally excluded from the canon. By elevating the stories of the impoverished tiers and educationally deprived girls to the status of literature, Jo expands the boundaries of what counts as valuable knowledge. Her pen becomes a tool for both artistic expression and social reform.

Educational Reform: The Study as a Site of Collective Liberation

After Aunt March's death, Jo receives the Plumfield. With Professor Bhaer as her partner, she transforms the property into a progressive co-educational institution, fundamentally redefining the purpose of her writing space. The field evolves into a dynamic center for social reform where writing serves as both curriculum and catalyst for change. This shift mirrors Jo's

own ideological development: her writing now directly empowers marginalized students, including impoverished boys and intellectually curious girls excluded from traditional education systems. The ink-stained desk that once bore her Gothic manuscripts now holds lesson plans and students' compositions. Here, the study's evolution from a solitary workspace to a collaborative classroom embodies the shift from individual to collective empowerment.

Reconfiguring Gender Dynamics

Alcott's characterization of Jo is based on the context of the rising status of women in modern American society and does not completely break away from the reality that traditional ideas still hold an important position in the mainstream discourse after the end of the American Civil War.[2] The action that Jo and Bhaer share intellectual labor—editing manuscripts and mentoring students demonstrates that their study becomes a microcosm of equal gender relations. The goal of liberal feminism is not to seek privileges for women but to eliminate gender discrimination and ensure equal treatment for both sexes. Its aim is to create a fair and compassionate society where individuals enjoy full freedom. The independent and self-reliant Jo strives to dismantle barriers and prejudices that hinder women's access to equal education. She learns to reconcile love with freedom, relying on her persistent efforts to challenge the exclusion of women from workplaces, academia, and public discourse. In doing so, she emerges as a pioneering leader of intellectual liberation in the new era, enabling women to realize their full potential.[8]

5. Discussion

Though Jo uses the pen name J. March, mirroring Alcott's own alias (A.M. Barnard), which reflects systemic barriers for female writers, she makes great efforts to narrow the gap. Her action, including her refusal of Laurie's marriage proposals and rejection of the era's idealized "woman's sphere" all demonstrates her resolution to apply writing as her empowerment tool. Moreover, the establishment of Jo's school parallels real-world initiative, linking literary activism to broader social change. There are doubts that Jo's marriage with Bhaer dilutes her feminist radicalism. However, it is undeniable that her union with Bhaer shares more similarities with a kind of partnership. And the founding of Plumfield represent pragmatic yet transformative steps toward systemic change. Jo's journey reflects the tension between individual ambition and collective responsibility, embodying the incremental strategies of 19th-century reformers.

6. Conclusion

Jo March's transformative journey from the solitary rebellions of her garret writings to the communal vision realized in her Plumfield study powerfully encapsulates the dual mechanisms of female empowerment through literary practice. In the garret's cloistered confines, Jo's early "blood and thunder tales" function as "madwoman" narrative that expresses feminist resistance against the era's "angel in the house" ideology. This phase represents writing as private catharsis, where the physical isolation of the attic space metaphorically mirrored women's exclusion from the public literary sphere. However, Jo's later establishment of Plumfield School with Professor Bhaer enacts the active conversion of domestic areas into sites of collective empowerment. Here, the study evolves from personal workspace to pedagogical hub, where writing instruction becomes democratized to empower marginalized students. Though constrained by 1860s gender norms, Jo's trajectory anticipates 20th-century feminist pedagogies that view literacy as liberation. Ultimately, Jo's writing transcends its domestic framework to propose literature as both mirror and lever, reflecting patriarchal constraints while providing tools to dismantle them. The novel's enduring relevance lies in this dual vision: writing as means for self-liberation and social transformation.

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