Little Women

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Born in 1832, Louisa May Alcott was the child of parents who were prominent in the Transcendentalist movement. Her father, Bronson Alcott, is often referred to as the father of modern education in the United States. In spite of his brilliance, he was terrible with money, and the Alcotts were plagued with a poverty that was far less pleasant than the pious poverty enjoyed by the March family. Louisa was forced to begin working at an early age in order to keep her family from the brink of starvation. Like Jo, Alcott harbored literary ambitions and took to writing pulp fiction in order to support her family. She went on to become a writer for the Atlantic Monthly and saw her first real success with the publication of a collection of her articles, 1863's *Hospital Sketches*. Alcott secured her literary fame with the publication of the first installment of *Little Women* in 1868. Alcott was a staunch abolitionist, feminist, and spinster up until her death in 1888.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Little Women opens in the latter days of the American Civil War, a conflict between the northern and southern United States that began in 1861 and ended in 1865. Mr. March's involvement in the war would have been a common touchstone for many readers at the time – during the Civil War, there were very few families that didn't have male family members who were involved in the conflict in some way. It's also worth noting that *Little Women* takes place in the midst of the Gilded Age, a time in American history that saw booms in scientific innovation, industrialization, and social justice. The American feminist movement gained strength during this time, and seeds of feminist thought can be found in *Little Women*'s pages.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the wake of the resounding success of *Little Women*, Alcott went on to pen two sequels, both chronicling the further adventures of Jo and the Plumfield School for boys: *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). One might also look to *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), another popular children's novel that deals with themes of femininity, domesticity, and true love.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Little Women*
- **When Written:** 1868-1869. Alcott commented that she wrote the book "in record time, for the money."
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** The novel was initially published in two volumes. The first installment (now Part 1 of the book), *Little Women: or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, was published in 1868. The second volume (Part 2 of the book) was published in 1869 under the title *Good Wives*. In 1880, the two volumes were thereafter published in one volume under the title *Little Women*.
- **Literary Period:** Romantic/Transcendentalist
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Autobiographical Novel
- **Setting:** Concord, Massachusetts; New York, New York; Various European towns and cities.
- **Climax:** In Part 1, the climax comes when Mr. March returns home after serving in the Civil War. In Part 2, the climax comes when Jo and Professor Bhaer are engaged.
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

What a Way to Go: Alcott was plagued with health problems throughout her short life, and it's speculated that she may have suffered from lupus. After suffering the stroke that ended her life, Alcott's unfortunate last words were, "Is it not meningitis?"

Hanging with Uncle Hank: As the daughter of a prominent Transcendentalist, Alcott was surrounded by many famous thinkers of her day. Henry David Thoreau crashed with her family from time to time, and often served as her babysitter. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a close friend of the Alcotts and loaned money to them in times of need. (Given this, one could speculate that Mr. Laurence from *Little Women* is modeled after Emerson.)

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens in Concord, Massachusetts, just a few days before Christmas in the year 1860. The four March girls – motherly Meg (age 16), boyish Jo (age 15), frail yet pious Beth (age 13), and elegant Amy (age 12) – live alone with their mother, Mrs. March. Their father, Mr. March, has volunteered to serve in the Union army as a chaplain, leaving his wife and daughters to fend for themselves in his absence. Though impoverished, the March family is rich in spirit; they are bolstered by their familial love and steered by strong Christian morals. On Christmas morning, the girls wake to discover that they've each received a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegorical novel about Christian morals. Together, they resolve to read a little from their books each day, and to put the morals they learn into practice. While attending a dance thrown by a local

rich family, Meg and Jo meet Laurie, the grandson of the March family's rich neighbor, Mr. Laurence. Laurie becomes a fixture at the March household, and old Mr. Laurence befriends the girls and becomes a surrogate grandfather to them. Laurie's tutor, Mr. Brooke, also becomes a fixture in the March household, and he takes a special liking to Meg.

Over the course of the following year, the girls encounter a number of trials that put their readings of *Pilgrim's Progress* to the test. Vain Meg, for instance, burns off a lock of her hair, conceited Amy is beaten in front of her classmates at school when she's discovered hoarding pickled limes in her desk, and Jo (blinded by anger) carelessly allows Amy to fall into an icy river. Toward the end of the year, they learn their father has fallen ill, and Mrs. March travels to Washington, D.C. (accompanied by Mr. Brooke) in order to tend to him. While Mrs. March is away, Beth contracts scarlet fever, and she grows so sick that the March girls and their servant Hannah fear that she won't survive. Beth's sickness finally abates the morning Mrs. March returns from Washington, much to everyone's relief. On Christmas, Laurie surprises Mrs. March and her daughters with the news that Mr. March has come home early. Mr. March surveys his daughters and is pleased with their moral growth in his absence. Soon after, Mr. Brooke confronts Meg and asks for her hand in marriage. She accepts, with the stipulation that they should wait three years before marrying, and the March family (with the exception of Jo, who wishes for her sister to remain at home) is awash in celebration.

Part II opens with Meg's wedding to Mr. Brooke. The ceremony is a simple affair held at the March family's home. She and Mr. Brooke then begin their new life at their modest home, the Dovecote. Meg gives birth to twins, Daisy and Demi, not long afterward. Jo, meanwhile, is pursuing her writing in earnest; she soon sells several of her stories and poems to a local newspaper; she uses the proceeds from her publications to send Beth and Mrs. March on holiday. Amy, given her elegant manners, has become rich Aunt March's confidante. Amy also impresses a distant yet wealthy relative, Aunt Carrol, who decides to take Amy with her on a trip to Europe. Soon after, Jo decides to move to New York for the winter in order to evade Laurie, who is infatuated with Jo. While working as a governess in a boarding house, Jo meets a kindhearted German professor named Friedrich Bhaer.

When Jo returns home after her stint in New York, Laurie confronts her and asks for her hand in marriage. Jo turns him down, and Laurie is devastated. Mr. Laurence then takes him on a trip to Europe, where Laurie soon runs into Amy. Meanwhile, back at home, Beth's health is waning. Jo takes her on one last holiday to the seashore, and Beth dies not long after. Word of Beth's death reaches Amy, who finds solace in her friendship with Laurie. Laurie realizes Amy was his true love all along; the two fall in love and elope. They return home the night before Jo's 25th birthday. That same night, Professor Bhaer makes a surprise visit. He proposes to Jo toward the end of his visit, and Jo accepts.

Five years pass. Jo and Bhaer are married, they have two boys, and they inherit Aunt March's house when she dies. Jo and Bhaer turn it into a school called Plumfield. The book ends with the celebration of Mrs. March's 60th birthday. The entire March family gathers in the apple orchard and reflects on how blessed they are to have each other. Mrs. March reflects that there is no greater happiness than to experience the love she has for her family.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Josephine "Jo" March – Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. March, sister of Meg, Beth, and Amy, and (eventually) Professor Bhaer's wife. She is also the first love of handsome, impetuous Laurie. Jo is the unlikely heroine of *Little Women*. Tomboyish, fiery, and outspoken, Jo has trouble fitting into the patriarchal gender roles prescribed by Victorian society. She is, however, a deeply sympathetic character. She harbors literary ambitions and manages to realize them as she grows older. Jo is fifteen when the story begins.

Margaret "Meg" March – Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. March, sister of Jo, Beth, and Amy, and (eventually) Mr. Brooke's wife. Meg is considered the beauty of the March clan – she is gentle, plump, delicate, and rosy. Fond of finery, Meg's greatest challenge is to humble herself to a life that isn't as grand as she might wish. Meg is sixteen when the story begins.

Elizabeth "Beth" March – Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. March, and sister of Jo, Meg, and Amy. Beth is sickly, shy, and utterly pious. Too anxious to attend school and too humble to attempt work outside of the home, Beth spends her days making herself useful around the March household. Beth seems to intuitively understand what is right and wrong (something Jo admires in her). Beth harbors musical ambitions, something that kindles a friendship between her and Mr. Laurence. Beth nearly dies of scarlet fever in Part I. Her health is weakened as a result, and she dies toward the end of Part II. Beth is thirteen when the story begins.

Amy Curtis March – Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. March, sister of Jo, Meg, and Beth, and (eventually) Laurie's wife. Amy is a "snow maiden" – pale, blonde, and blue-eyed – and she seems to instinctively understand social graces in a way that sets her apart from her sisters. She harbors artistic ambitions, which she eventually drops in lieu of getting married and becoming a society lady. Amy is twelve when the story begins.

Theodore "Laurie" Laurence – Grandson of Mr. Laurence and (eventually) Amy's husband. Laurie is the rich and handsome neighbor boy who befriends the March girls early on in the

book. Orphaned at a young age, Laurie has been primarily raised by Mr. Laurence. Laurie is half Italian, which is often cited as the source of his passionate nature. Jo is his first love, but after she refuses to marry him he eventually falls in love with Amy, who suits him far better than Jo would have.

Margaret "Marmee" March – Mother of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, and wife of Mr. March. Mrs. March runs the household in the first half of the book, when Mr. March is away at war. She is calm and collected, deeply moral, and teaches her girls to see the proper way to behave and the value of their poverty.

Robert March – Father of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, and husband of Mrs. March. Mr. March is a minister. In Part I, Mr. March has volunteered to serve in the Civil War as a chaplain, leaving his wife and daughters to fend for themselves, and plunging them into a degree of poverty. After he returns he partners with Mrs. March to provide support and a moral example to his daughters.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hannah Mullet – The Marches' black servant. The family feels that Hannah is a member of the family.

Aunt Josephine March – Mr. March's aunt. Aunt March is crabby old woman who serves as a constant source of consternation for the March girls. She has a good deal of money, presumably left to her after her husband's death.

James Laurence – Laurie's grandfather. Mr. Laurence is an educated, benevolent old man with a peppery disposition. He acts as the de facto guardian of the women of the March family while Mr. March is away. He never liked Laurie's mother.

John Brooke – Laurie's tutor, Mr. Laurence's employee, and (eventually) Meg's husband.

Margaret "Daisy" Brooke – Daughter of Meg and Mr. Brooke, and Demi's sister.

John "Demijohn" "Demi" Brooke – Son of Meg and Mr. Brooke, and Daisy's brother.

Professor Friedrich "Fritz" Bhaer – Jo's friend and, eventually, husband. A German professor whom Jo meets while she temporarily works as a governess for Mrs. Kirke in New York City.

Rob Bhaer – Son of Jo and Professor Bhaer.

Teddy Bhaer – Son of Jo and Professor Bhaer.

Fred Vaughn – Brother to Kate, Grace, and Frank. A rich young Englishman who courts Amy.

The Hummels – An impoverished German family.

Sallie Gardiner (Moffat) – Meg's friend and (eventually) Ned's wife.

Ned Moffat – Annie's brother, Sallie's husband, and Meg's sometime suitor.

Annie Moffat – Ned's sister and Meg's friend.

The Kings – The family that employs Meg as a governess.

Mrs. Kirke – A friend of the March family who employs Jo as a governess in New York City.

Mr. Davis – Amy's teacher.

Mrs. Crocker – A gossip acquainted with the March family.

Grace Vaughn – Sister of Kate, Fred, and Frank. An English girl.

Kate Vaughn – Sister of Grace, Fred, and Frank. An English girl.

Frank Vaughn – Brother of Kate, Fred, and Grace. An English boy.

Esther – Aunt March's French maid.

May Chester – Mrs. Chester's daughter, and Amy's friend. The Chesters are a well-to-do family.

Mrs. Chester – May's mother. The Chesters are a well-to-do family.

Aunt Carrol – Flo's mother. A distant relative of the March family who takes Amy abroad on a trip to Europe.

Flo Carrol – Aunt Carrol's daughter and Amy's friend.

Kittie and Minnie – Mrs. Kirke's daughters, and Jo's charges during her time as a governess.

Mr. Tudor An aristocratic man whom Amy talks with at a party at the Lambs' house.

Major Lincoln – A friend of the Moffats who compliments Meg for being "the fresh little girl with the beautiful eyes."

Jenny Snow – A girl who is Amy's "enemy" at school.

Mr. Davis – Amy's teacher, who beats the back of her hand as punishment for breaking one of his rules in school.

Mrs. Crocker – An old, gossipy neighbor of the Marches.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

In *Searchlights on Health: Light on Dark Corners* (1895), a popular Gilded Age guide to health and sexuality, the authors caution male suitors to consider what they love in their brides-to-be: "Do you love her because she is a thoroughly womanly woman; for her tender sympathetic nature; for the jewels of her life, which are absolute purity of mind and heart; for the sweet sincerity of her disposition; for her loving, charitable thought; for her strength

of character? because she is pitiful to the sinful, tender to the sorrowful, capable, self-reliant, modest, true-hearted? in brief, because she is the embodiment of all womanly virtues?" In describing what men should look for in a bride, the authors of *Searchlights* tidily sum up the ideals of femininity that were prevalent when *Little Women* was published. On top of this assumption that women were to embody these feminine virtues was the notion that women were naturally meant to belong in the home (this was often referred to as the "Cult of Domesticity"). Women in the late nineteenth century, and in particular feminists like Louisa May Alcott, questioned these popular notions regarding how women were supposed to behave and what role they were meant to occupy in society.

The notion of what truly constitutes feminine behavior (and, by extension, feminine virtue) is addressed in *Little Women* primarily through the defiant and tomboyish antics of Jo. Not content to be strapped into a corset and full of writerly ambitions, Jo parades around the March household in a pair of dashing leather boots, penning romances and poems by the dozen. The fact that Jo is ultimately a sympathetic and triumphant character (and not, say, a cautionary tale of what might go wrong if young ladies don't act in feminine ways) underscores *Little Women*'s quietly revolutionary idea that there are many ways to be female, and that no one way of being female is more valuable than any other.

There's also the question of how important men are in the lives of women. Part 1 of *Little Women* finds the March family fatherless and left to their own devices while Mr. March is off at war. Although the March girls find a kind of surrogate father in the form of their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence, the book seems to point out that women are able to get along with a greater degree of independence than the gender norms of the time might have people believe. The question of whether women belong solely in the home is also called into question, particularly through the many moneymaking exploits of the March girls.

This isn't to say that the Marches are outright gender revolutionaries – Mrs. March is eager to see each of her daughters married well (though she does mention that it would be equally acceptable if they remained single), and the March sisters (perhaps with the exception of gender-bending Jo) nonetheless strive to embody feminine ideals of beauty and virtue. This is just to say that the book toys with gender norms of the 19th century, and strives to emphasize that women are human beings complete with thoughts, desires, creative genius, vices, and virtues, and that they are capable of accomplishing and embodying more than the patriarchal gender roles of the 19th century allow.

CHRISTIANITY, MORALITY, AND GOODNESS

In the opening pages of *Little Women*, Mrs. March urges her daughters to take their cue from Christian, the main character in the allegorical tale *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. "Our burdens are here," she says, "our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City." And in many ways, the story arc of *Little Women* can be seen as a shadow of *The Pilgrim's Progress* – through their mishaps and misdeeds, and through their constant struggle to do what is good and right, the March sisters' progression from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood can be seen as a story of moral growth. How does one become a virtuous person? What constitutes virtuous behavior?

WORK AND SOCIAL CLASS

Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, was preoccupied with what constituted women's work, and how the Industrial Revolution spurred changes in a woman's power to earn a living – so much so that, following the success of *Little Women*, she would go on to publish a semi-autobiographical novel called *Work: A Story of Experience*.

Work is central to the lives of the members of the March family, and it's part of the social experiment at the heart of *Little Women*. Are women happiest when they work where they've always traditionally worked, in the home? Are women who are forced (or who select) to find work outside of the home less happy than women whose husbands serve as the breadwinners? These questions and more are addressed through the various work experiences of the March sisters (Meg is a governess, Jo tends to crotchety Aunt March, etc.). The book pushes forward the idea that a woman's usefulness extends beyond the realm of hearth and home – and this is most evident when Jo goes on to create a name for herself as an author.

Social class is also at stake in *Little Women*. Prior to Mr. March's departure, the March family is plunged into poverty due to shadowy circumstances. Throughout *Little Women*, the notion that poverty is valuable (and that material wealth, on the other hand, often leads to moral decay) is returned to again and again. "Wealth is certainly a most desirable thing," Alcott writes, "but poverty has its sunny side, and one of the sweet uses of adversity is the genuine satisfaction which comes from the hearty work of head or hand…" The notion (right or wrong) that the lower classes possess a kind of nobility and virtue that the upper classes lack is levied again and again in *Little Women*.

GENUINENESS, SIMPLICITY, AND NATURAL BEAUTY

"I don't like fuss and feathers," Laurie remarks when he sees Meg dolled up in borrowed finery at a dance thrown by one of her wealthy friends. Simplicity and genuineness are touted as values of the highest order in *Little Women*, and they're often seen as an antidote to the difficulties of poverty. Similar to a number of other late 19th century thinkers (the doctor and cereal tycoon John Harvey Kellogg, for instance), Alcott is a proponent of natural beauty. The March girls discover that corsets and dainty slippers often cause fainting and sprained ankles, and they receive far more praise, pleasure, and moral good from wearing their simple hand-me-down dresses and adorning themselves with a few hot house flowers from Mr. Laurence's conservatory.

LOVE

In *Little Women*, the March girls learn about the importance of love, both familial and romantic. The book can be seen as a record of the March girls' progression from an innocent, idealized vision of love to a more complex, worldly understanding of it by the end of the novel. The girls' idealized notions of romantic love are embodied in Jo's picaresque plays, in which swooning damsels find true love in spite of their hardships. (These plays can be seen as a reflection of the way romantic love was viewed in the 19th century – they represent an ideal that even Jo aspires to, even if she chafes against conventional femininity.) Laurie, the rich boy next door, offers Jo her first lessons in love, and helps her come to better understand what she's looking for in a successful marriage. By the end of Part 2, all of the March girls (with the exception of Beth) have found their way to true love. Working in tandem with this notion of romantic love is the notion of familial love – motherly love in particular. Mrs. March's love for her daughters is consistently upheld as an ideal that the March girls long to achieve both in their romantic lives and in themselves when they go on to become mothers.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FLOWERS

"Having no ornaments fine enough for this important occasion," Alcott writes, "Amy looped her fleecy skirts with rosy clusters of **azalea**, and framed the white shoulders in delicate green vines." Because the March girls can't afford jewels and silks on their working class budget, they often adorn themselves with flowers. It seems that, in the world of *Little Women* at any rate, ideal beauty is natural, simple, and wholesome. The blooms that the March girls adorn themselves with therefore become symbolic of ideal beauty, as well as a commentary on the less ideal beauty valued by those with wealth.

BIRDS

"**Birds** in their little nests agree," sings Beth in the opening chapter of *Little Women*. Although birds are sometimes used to refer to her sisters (Meg lives in the Dovecote; Jo is referred to as a wild gull), birds in *Little Women* are most often associated with Beth. Similar to Little Women's use of flowers to symbolize natural beauty, birds not only symbolize Beth's natural beauty, but also her timid, gentle, musical nature.

THE TURQUOISE RING

When Amy goes to live with Aunt March during Beth's bout of scarlet fever, it is revealed that Aunt March plans to give her a **turquoise ring** as a reward for her "good behavior and charming manners." It's during her time at Aunt March's house that Amy becomes a more religious and pious person. This ring can be seen as symbolizing the reward of Heaven after a life of earthly toil. It can also be seen as symbolizing the worldly riches that Amy will inherit as her life unfolds, given that she is able to cross class boundaries and enter the upper class.

UMBRELLAS

When Jo and Professor Bhaer become engaged in a rainstorm, it's revealed that Jo is overjoyed "to walk through life beside him, even though she had no better shelter than the old **umbrella**, if he carried it." Umbrellas in *Little Women* tend to play key roles in romantic scenes, such as the one quoted here. They can be seen as symbolizing male protectiveness.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *Little Women* published in 2012.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

"Our burdens are here, our road is before us...Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home."

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March (speaker), Robert March, Josephine "Jo" March, Margaret "Meg" March, Elizabeth "Beth" March, Amy Curtis March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sets the moral tone of the book in that it establishes that the primary conflicts of the novel will be internal: the girls battling their own worst instincts to try to live good and righteous lives. Here, Mrs. March references *The Pilgrim's Progress,* an allegorical novel about Christian life that the girls read and act out as children. Mrs. March suggests that this novel could represent not just a theatrical opportunity, but a road map for their spiritual lives. Indeed, *Little Women* itself is mapped onto *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with its plot arc and moral center heavily invested in constant self improvement, overcoming personal obstacles, and Christian values.

This quote comes directly after the opening struggle of the book, in which the March girls must decide whether to buy themselves Christmas presents, since they have chosen to forego family presents this year. The March girls first fantasize about buying things they really want, but with each other's help, they conclude that the best way to spend the money would be to buy their mother presents. In a sense, *Little Women* is an accumulation of choices like this one.This quote of Mrs. March's indicates that this struggle is emblematic of the struggles of the entire book.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

"I don't believe fine young ladies enjoy themselves a bit more than we do, in spite of our burned hair, old gowns, one glove apiece and tight slippers that sprain our ankles when we are silly enough to wear them."

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the March girls attend a party held by a wealthy neighbor. While the Marches are well-respected in town, they are not wealthy and the party invitation induces status anxiety in the girls, as they do not have clothes that will be as fashionable as others at the party. This quote encapsulates the lesson of the chapter; the girls spend lots of time fussing about their appearances and worrying what others will think of them, but these concerns only bring unhappiness and misfortune (sprained ankles, damaged clothes). What they ultimately find joy in is a true human connection they establish with Laurie, whose kindness is unrelated to shallow concerns like social status. From the anxieties and misfortunes of the party, the girls learn that their vanity comes at a cost, and from Laurie's new friendship they learn that joy comes from unexpected sources. This quote is Jo conceding that all their fuss was unnecessary--their own humble lives can be just as pleasurable as (or even better than) the lives of richer women.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

"I burned it up."
"What! My little book I was so fond of, and worked over, and meant to finish before Father got home? Have you really burned it?" said Jo, turning very pale, while her eyes kindled and her hands clutched Amy nervously.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March, Amy Curtis March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Each of the March girls have one particular character flaw with which they struggle throughout the book. For Jo, this flaw is her temper, which can be immoderate and destructive. In this quote, Jo realizes that Amy, in an act of revenge for an earlier unkindness of Jo's,has burned a book that Jo has been writing. This chapter shows the ways in which unkindnesses escalate if we don't check our impulses and tempers. Jo and Amy are caught in a cyclical spat, and each sister's next act of revenge is worse than the last until it leads to Amy being put in mortal danger. This chapter is particularly important because it is such a difficult challenge for Jo to choose love and forgiveness in the face of her strong temper (and love for her own creative work). Her failure to control her temper results in near-catastrophe, and it is a difficult and lasting lesson for Jo to learn.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

"I don't like fuss and feathers."

Related Characters: Theodore "Laurie" Laurence (speaker), Margaret "Meg" March

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

This quote of Laurie's is a rebuttal to Meg's central character flaw, her vanity. Meg is always envious of the nice things that others have, and she is protective of her own appearance to a fault. In this scene, she has fallen prey to this impulse, allowing her wealthy friends to dress her in a way that strokes her vanity but is contrary to her values. When Laurie sees her, he recognizes this and tells her so. What Laurie loves about the March girls is their character: their kindness, generosity, and intelligence. Furthermore, Laurie (who comes from a wealthy family) appreciates that the girls are not preoccupied with the shallow concerns of the wealthy (like fashion), but are instead deeply interested in spiritual progress and friendship. Laurie loves that they are down-to-earth, and to see Meg dressed up like a rich woman disappoints him. This quote is not intended to be condescending or judgmental on Laurie's part, but rather it is a well-intentioned criticism from a good friend, and Meg takes it as such. (Although as readers we should note that Laurie, as a man, feels entitled to offer his opinion on how he "likes" women to be.) Because of Laurie, Meg realizes that she has betrayed her values and she is embarrassed.

Part 1, Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone. It keeps us from ennui and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion."

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the March girls do an experiment to see if they enjoy putting aside all work for a week. While they begin the week optimistic that without work and chores they will enjoy themselves more, their contentment quickly unravels and becomes boredom, laziness, and petty fighting.

It's important to note here that the book is set in 1860, and the March girls work hard--they have much more responsibility than a typical American teenager today. Even so, the conclusion they come to (summed up in this quote by Mrs. March) is that hard and consistent work is essential to happiness and virtue. This revelation is an important one to these girls, who are each occasionally prone to status anxiety and envy of the rich and idle. By not working for a week, the girls begin to see a virtue in their humble background. Not only does work keep them wholesomely occupied, but working is actually a source of power for them. Alcott frames work and responsibility not just as burdens imposed on the poor, but also as potential privileges that reap personal and spiritual rewards.

Part 1, Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Jo's breath gave out here, and wrapping her head in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears, for to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Jo is the character in *Little Women* who most boldly defies gender norms. Jo dresses like a tomboy, brushes aside romantic love, and harbors ambitions of becoming a writer. In this chapter, Jo is taking important steps to making this dream a reality. Alcott is, in some senses, very traditional; her values are explicitly Christian, and she frames her novel around *The Pilgrim's Progress*. However, in this chapter, Alcott demonstrates that her conception of Christian values is not at odds with feminism. Jo's family supports her ambitions and encourages them instead of trying to sway her towards more traditionally feminine pursuits. This trust and encouragement is rewarded, since Jo's success does not distort her values. Jo is pleased by her success in a way that is not egotistical; her family's opinion still means the most to her, and she feels empowered that her writing can help her gain financial independence, not fame. This quote shows the benefits of women stepping outside of their traditional spheres and pursuing the work that is personally meaningful to them.

Part 1, Chapter 15 Quotes

"My dear, where did you get it? Twenty-five dollars! Jo, I hope you haven't done anything rash?"
"No, it's mine honestly. I didn't beg, borrow, or steal it. I earned it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own."
As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general outcry arose, for all her abundant hair was cut short.

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March, Josephine "Jo" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the Marches have received a telegram that Mr. March is gravely ill. As everyone anxiously contemplates how they can help, Jo slips out without telling anyone and sells her hair, which is described as being her greatest beauty. This is one of Jo's most complex moments. Her willingness to make this sacrifice for her father shows the abundance of her love and her relative comfort with defying gender norms. For Jo to cut off her hair in 1860 would make her almost completely alone among women; the gesture is brave and defiant, and its severity cannot be understated. However, she also weeps after cutting her hair, which shows that even for Jo, whose commitment to defying gender norms is fundamental to her character, losing her hair leaves her vulnerable and uncertain. Alcott is here subtly showing the extent to which women were and are valued based on their appearances rather than their character. This is a moment of great triumph for Jo, though, since she has made a meaningful sacrifice for her family and is standing up for her values in the face of hardship.

Part 1, Chapter 18 Quotes

"...she can't love Bethy as I do, and she won't miss her as I shall. Beth is my conscience, and I can't give her up. I can't! I can't!"

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March (speaker), Elizabeth "Beth" March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Jo and Beth share a special closeness that transcends the depth of normal sisterhood. The intensity of this bond seems to be because the two are so opposite, and yet they love and respect one another so much. Beth is meek and sweet, while Jo is bold and often brash. When Jo says that Beth is her conscience, she means that almost literally. To Jo, Beth is the embodiment of goodness and virtue. Beth inspires Jo, checks Jo's excesses, and her love provides redemption when Jo errs. So this quote reveals Jo's panic when she believes that Beth is going to die. The sentiment expressed here is a mixed one, because, while it is clearly rooted in a deep love for Beth, it also seems quite selfish and immature. Jo is only considering what this loss would mean to her. For instance, Jo here diminishes Meg's potential grief, saying that she loves Beth more than Meg does.

Part 1, Chapter 20 Quotes

"I knew there was mischief brewing. I felt it, and now it's worse than I imagined. I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the famiy."

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March (speaker), Margaret "Meg" March, John Brooke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jo has just learned that Meg is to marry Mr. Brooke, which marks the first engagement among the March girls. Jo alone is not happy for Meg, because she sees this as a threat to the closeness and love of their immediate family. Jo's reasons for this sentiment are complex, but it seems that, in general, Jo finds familial love to be superior to romantic love. Jo does not have a particularly nuanced understanding of romantic love (as shown in her plays), and her personal distaste for it seems to come from her perception that married women are beholden to their husbands, and, thus, romantic love contradicts Jo's values. Part of Jo's development as a person throughout the course of the book is learning that she can maintain her values and independence without rejecting romantic love outright. Jo must also learn that romantic love and familial love are tightly linked; the March family was founded on the romantic love between Marmee and Mr. March, for example. This quote, then, marks Jo's naive but well-meaning attitude about her family and about love.

"I'm not ambitious for a splendid fortune, or fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures."

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

When Jo asks Marmee whether she would rather her daughters marry rich men than humble men like Mr. Brooke, Marmee gives an answer that reflects the values and morals of the book overall. Marmee extolls the virtues of simple and genuine pleasures, reminding Jo that joy is not meted out along class lines, but rather it comes to those who are virtuous and who seek and give genuine love. Marmee says nothing sweeping and dogmatic about the rich; she is careful not to suggest that a life of modest means implies virtue in itself, reminding Jo that she would be happy for any of her daughters if they married rich, as long as it were for the right reasons. Marmee does suggest, however, that any considerations of money should be off the table when planning for the future because love and virtue are the most important things in life and they cannot be bought.

Part 1, Chapter 22 Quotes

"I remember a time when this hand was white and smooth, and your first care was to keep it so. It was very pretty then, but to me it is much prettier now, for in these seeming blemishes I read a little history. A burnt offering has been made to vanity, this hardened palm has earned something better than blisters, and I'm sure the sewing done by these pricked fingers will last a long time, so much good will went into the stitches."

Related Characters: Robert March (speaker), Margaret "Meg" March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

As many incidents in this book have illuminated, Meg's greatest vice is her vanity, and she has struggled against it frequently in her attempts to live a virtuous life. Meg is particularly vain about her pretty white hands, but the hardships she has faced since Mr. March went off to war have left her hands scarred. In this passage, Mr. March has just returned home and he praises Meg's hands, for their blemishes reveal the sacrifices she has made for her family and her progress in overcoming vanity in favor of more important concerns. This passage is another nod to the importance of work in the novel. Alcott sees work as the path to a good life, and idleness as courting vice. This quote is also important in that Mr. March, instead of encouraging Meg to protect her appearance (which some would have said was a woman's greatest asset), encourages Meg to work hard and help others, implicitly prioritizing her character over her appearance. This is another potentially feminist moment in the book.

"Meg and John begin humbly, but I have a feeling that there will be quite as much happiness in the little house as in the big one. It's a great mistake for young girls like Meg to leave themselves nothing to do but dress, give orders, and gossip."

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March (speaker), Margaret "Meg" March, John Brooke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Marmee is once again describing the virtue to be found in humility and simplicity. Mr. Brooke has bought a small house for him and Meg to live in once they are married, and, while Meg wonders about the more glamorous married lives of her wealthy friends, Marmee insists that there will be as much happiness for Meg living simply as for her more extravagant friends. While the notion that happiness is not distributed based on social class has been thoroughly explored in the novel, Marmee goes even further here to suggest that there could be something actually morally superior to living humbly, because the imperative to work keeps one from falling into vice and idleness. As the March girls learned during their week of not working, sometimes it is lack of work in itself that sows the most unhappiness and infects relationships (in that case, sisterly ones, but it's applicable to marriage, too) with pettiness. So, Marmee is implying that Meg's marriage might be happier than her friends' marriages not in spite of their modest means, but, perhaps, because of it.

Part 2, Chapter 25 Quotes

Meg looked very like a rose herself, for all that was best and sweetest in heart and soul seemed to bloom into her face that day, making it fair and tender, with a charm more beautiful than beauty.

Related Characters: Margaret "Meg" March

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

At Meg's wedding, she is dressed simply and adorned with flowers. In this passage, Alcott compares Meg's beauty to a rose in that it is simple and natural, and Alcott suggests that this beauty is rooted less in her appearance than in the pure happiness and virtuous intentions with which Meg is entering her marriage. To be this happy with her marriage is a triumph for Meg, who has previously been tempted by wealth and vanity. Her lovely and simple appearance contrasts with, for instance, the night that her rich friends dressed her garishly for the dance, and the comparison shows the tremendous progress Meg has made in overcoming her vanity. In fact, Alcott seems to suggest that it is only in overcoming vanity and finding things more precious and important to value that Meg has become this beautiful. This is an auspicious beginning to Meg's married life, and the whole scene of their wedding suggests the virtues of simplicity, nature, and genuine emotion.

Neither silk, lace, nor orange flowers would she have. "I don't want a fashionable wedding, but only those about me whom I love, and to them I wish to look and be my familiar self."

Related Characters: Margaret "Meg" March (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

As a further credit to Meg and her simple wedding, Alcott makes it clear that the simplicity of the wedding was Meg's choice, and not just a reflection of the means available to her and John. Meg (who was once taken in by vanity and envy of her wealthy friends' beautiful clothes) understands now that for her wedding day she should just be herself. After all, the only people whom she wants to impress are those who know her and love her best, and those are the very people who would be least taken in by fancy things, as Meg's family only cares about her character. This passage is an indication that Meg has made meaningful progress in her quest for a more virtuous life, and it shows the confidence that she has in herself and her marriage, since she is willing to rely on genuine sentiment to make the wedding beautiful, rather than striving to make it fashionable.

It wasn't at all the thing, I'm afraid, but the minute she was fairly married, Meg cried," The first kiss for Marmee!" and turning, gave it with her heart on her lips.

Related Characters: Margaret "Meg" March (speaker), Margaret "Marmee" March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

In a last testament to Meg's willingness to prioritize genuine sentiment over fashion and tradition, Meg kisses her mother at the wedding before she even kisses her new husband. This shows the depth of Meg's love for her family, and the extent to which Meg is acting on genuine impulse throughout the chapter. It is Jo, in particular, who has fretted over a perceived conflict between familial and romantic love, but something that each of the girls must learn throughout the book is that the two are not at odds, and the sentiments, complexities, and rewards of familial and romantic love are quite similar. This moment shows clearly that romantic and familial love are not in conflict, since Meg is perfectly comfortable breaking with tradition and expressing her love for her mother first. This moment also alludes to the importance of the bonds between women. Meg's marriage is virtuous and based on real love, but it can never replace or diminish the importance of Meg's mother and sisters to her life.

Part 2, Chapter 26 Quotes

"My lady," as [Amy's] friends called her, sincerely desired to be a genuine lady, and was so at heart, but had yet to learn that money cannot buy refinement of nature, that rank does not always confer nobility, and that true breeding makes itself felt in spite of external drawbacks.

Related Characters: Amy Curtis March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Amy's main vices are conceitedness and pretension. Amy always wants to be seen as wealthier and more cultured and worldly than she actually is. This manifests from the purely shallow (Amy using a clothespin to make her nose look more "Grecian") to the more earnest (Amy trying to cultivate friendships with aristocratic women, the primary conflict of this chapter). In this passage, Amy is hoping to throw a lunch party for her well-bred new friends, and she wants to serve delicacies that are beyond her means. The narrator tells us that Amy does not yet understand that appearing refined is different from having truly good breeding, which, we can presume, has to do more with kindness, humility, and self-esteem than with knowing the right references or having the right clothes (although it does put an uncomfortable emphasis on the "nobility" of one's heritage). This quote suggests that Amy already has all the qualities of true refinement, but she is too caught up on the external markers of refinement to be content with herself.

Part 2, Chapter 27 Quotes

Wealth is certainly a most desirable thing, but poverty has its sunny side, and one of the sweet uses of adversity is the genuine satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand, and to the inspiration of necessity, we owe half the wise, beautiful, and useful blessings of the world. Jo enjoyed a taste of this satisfaction, and ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jo has just won a handsome sum of money as a prize for one of her stories. She is ambivalent, though, about her success--while she likes feeling validated as a writer, the winning story was more pulp than literary and her father tells her not to be seduced by the money at the expense of aiming for writing better (but less marketable) stories. After using her money to send Beth and Marmee on a vacation, the narrator reflects on the role of money in Jo's life. For Jo, it is the act of writing itself that brings the biggest reward. Beyond that, Jo appreciates that writing for money can bring her some measure of independence, but she realizes that these two blessings are worth more than the advantages of having wealth. This is a radical statement coming from a young woman. Jo is satisfied with her writing career as an end in itself, and she likes the independence that money brings her, but she does not strive for anything more extravagant. Essentially, this passage is Alcott's thesis regarding poverty--one is that is inspirational, if not always realistic.

Part 2, Chapter 28 Quotes

...Meg learned to love her husband better for his poverty, because it seemed to have made a man of him, given him the strength and courage to fight his own way, and taught him a tender patience with which to bear and comfort the natural longings and failures of those he loved.

Related Characters: Margaret "Meg" March, John Brooke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes near the end of a chapter about the struggles of Meg's married life, one of which was the resurgence of Meg's vanity and her extravagant purchase of a fancy dress. While Meg has always been vulnerable to envying the rich, she has become better and better at overcoming this inclination, and in this situation, the love of her husband helps her understand that she was wrong. Meg realizes here that her husband's poverty has actually made him a better, more empathetic person because it made him tougher and taught him to be patient and kind with the struggles of others. (Of course, this is not always the case in the real world.) Meg links John's ability to forgive her to the virtues he has cultivated through a modest and humble life, and this helps her understand that she strives to be more

like him. This is another testament to what Alcott sees as the benefits of working, as it is through work that people learn strength and empathy.

Part 2, Chapter 29 Quotes

"Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive. If you'd remember that, and practice it, you'd be better liked than I am, because there is more of you."

Related Characters: Amy Curtis March (speaker), Josephine "Jo" March

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Jo and Amy pay a series of calls to acquaintances, and Jo embarrasses Amy by, among other behaviors, snubbing a man she finds distasteful. Jo argues that by snubbing him she might cause him to examine his behavior, but Amy, who is much more enamored with social graces, disagrees.

The quote here is Amy explaining to Jo that women, particularly poor ones, must be agreeable because it's the only way to repay kindness. This passage shows how deeply patriarchal Victorian society was, as Amy sees herself as having little value to acquaintances besides her ability to charm them. Jo, on the other hand, who refuses to be deferential and who is financially supporting herself, has a much more radical attitude. While Amy does not believe that it is her place as a poor woman to tell men that she disapproves of them, Jo thinks of letting her opinion be known as a way to influence people towards better behavior, and she thinks it inauthentic to be agreeable to someone just because he is a man and has higher social status. While Jo clearly comes out of this seeming more moral, the seriousness with which she takes Amy's argument shows how deeply ingrained these values were.

Part 2, Chapter 34 Quotes

[Jo] began to see that character is a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty, and to feel that if greatness is what a wise man has defined it to be, "truth, reverence, and goodwill," then her friend Friedrich Bhaer was not only good, but great.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March, Professor Friedrich "Fritz" Bhaer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 361

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the book, Jo is pursuing her writing career in New York and is starting to become slightly "corrupted" by the types of stories she is writing and the people she's around. She sees Professor Bhaer as unique because of his kindness and goodwill and his imperviousness to bad morals in their circles, and she's drawn to this in him. This quote comes after Professor Bhaer defends the existence of God to intellectuals who are doubtful. Jo is deeply moved by this, because Jo's own faith is something that she has felt has not been shared by others in New York. This is another instance of Alcott showing that money and status do not correlate with being a good person, and that it is often those of humble background who are most noble of character. (Of course, Alcott also sees goodness as inextricably tied to Christian belief.) Jo isn't impressed by literary luminaries or society people, but by Professor Bhaer, who is unassuming but also fiercely good and willing to stand up for his beliefs.

Part 2, Chapter 35 Quotes

"I can't love anyone else, and I'll never forget you, Jo, never! Never!" with a stamp to emphasize his passionate words.
"What shall I do with him?" sighed Jo, finding that emotions were more unmanageable than she expected. "You haven't heard what I wanted to tell you. Sit down and listen, for indeed I want to do right and make you happy," she said, hoping to soothe him with a little reason, which proved that she knew nothing about love.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March, Theodore "Laurie" Laurence (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 371

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Laurie has finally proposed to Jo, and she says no. It's difficult for Jo to break Laurie's heart because she loves him as a friend, but she knows she is not in love with him and wants to do the right thing by not giving him hope. While Laurie and Jo are both good people who genuinely

love one another, Alcott suggests that they would not complement each other as husband and wife because of their similarities, particularly their brash temperaments. Jo needs to surround herself with moderate people like Beth who check her worst impulses, and she seems to realize this while she is turning Laurie down. Jo has always spoken scathingly of romantic love, but in this chapter we get the sense that her attitude might be slowly changing. She doesn't protest much when Laurie accuses her of loving Professor Bhaer, which, for Jo, seems suspicious. However, we do know that she can't be in love with him yet because her handling of Laurie's emotions, as this quote states, proves that she doesn't quite know how to empathize with someone in love. This is something Jo needs to learn, but we get the sense that maybe she is about to.

Part 2, Chapter 46 Quotes

"Oh yes!" said Jo, and he was quite satisfied, for she folded both hands over his arm, and looked up at him with an expression that plainly showed how happy she would be to walk through life beside him, even though she had no better shelter than the old umbrella, if he carried it.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March, Professor Friedrich "Fritz" Bhaer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 482

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Jo has finally allowed herself to be open to romantic love. She realizes that Professor Bhaer is someone she genuinely loves and with whom she is compatible, and she wants someone to go through life with just as her mother has with Mr. March. After hunting down the professor and confessing that she is heartbroken that he is planning to take a job far away, Jo makes Professor Bhaer realize that his feelings for her are requited and he proposes. This is another example of the March girls striving to find husbands who are kind and virtuous and who complement their personalities, rather than trying to marry for status or wealth. Professor Bhaer has only a shabby umbrella with him, but Jo recognizes that the care with which he holds that umbrella over her head is all she needs in a marriage. It's also significant that the March girls have had so much agency in choosing their husbands. Jo and Amy both turn down proposals from wealthy men in order to be with better and poorer men, which is not a freedom that every Victorian family would have permitted their daughters.

"Ah! Thou gifest me such hope and courage, and I haf nothing to gif back but a full heart and these empty hands," cried the Professor, quite overcome.
Jo never, never would learn to be proper, for when he said that as they stood upon the steps, she just put both hands into his, whispering tenderly, "Not empty now," and stooping down, kissed her Friedrich under the umbrella.

Related Characters: Josephine "Jo" March, Professor Friedrich "Fritz" Bhaer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 488

Explanation and Analysis

Once Jo lets Professor Bhaer know that she loves him, the professor is overcome with joy. He had worried that he did not have enough to offer her because he didn't have much money, but Jo has never been someone particularly impressed with status. This exchange, in a sense, turns Victorian expectations for women on its head; Bhaer laments that all he has to give are "these empty hands" and Jo responds by putting her hands in his and telling him they are "not empty now." Instead of the man needing to offer material security to his bride-to-be, Jo is confident in her own ability to support herself and her ability to give love equal to his. Putting her hands in his symbolizes her assertion that she can equally contribute to the relationship and, while she appreciates the love and protection that Bhaer provides (as symbolized by the umbrella), she is choosing this marriage because it enriches her life, not because she needs it.

Part 2, Chapter 47 Quotes

Touched to the heart, Mrs. March could only stretch out her arms, as if to gather children and grandchildren to herself, and say, with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility…
"Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!"

Related Characters: Margaret "Marmee" March (speaker), Josephine "Jo" March, Margaret "Meg" March, Amy Curtis March

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 499

Explanation and Analysis

In this closing passage to the novel, the March women have successfully devoted themselves to Christian values and hard work, and have thus established the full and happy lives that Mrs. March always imagined for them. Throughout the book, each of the women has struggled to overcome their personal flaws, maintain moral values, and support one another as they grew up. Now, this has all come to fruition with each of the girls having made happy and thriving families of their own. It's significant that each of the women has learned, with much difficulty, to never prioritize money in their lives. While none of them but Amy has much money, their joy is something that can't be bought, and Mrs. March couldn't "wish [them] a greater happiness than this." Alcott is driving home the point here that love is the greatest gift of all, and we should never let superficial concerns cloud our ability to give and receive genuine love, whether that is familial or romantic. This passage also emphasizes the importance of family. Despite everything that has happened to the Marches, their family is still the central force in their lives and it brings them great joy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: PLAYING PILGRIMS

Concord, Massachusetts, just a few days before Christmas in the year 1860. The four March girls – Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy - are sitting in their sparsely furnished living room. The March family is poor, and Mrs. March (their mother) has suggested that the family go without presents, given that it would be wrong to "spend money for pleasure" when men (including their father, who volunteered to serve as a chaplain) are fighting in the Civil War. However the girls each have a dollar, and they discuss what they would like to do with their money.

Louisa May Alcott modeled the March family after her own life. The Marches' lack of money closely resembles the poverty the Alcott family endured when Louisa herself was a child. Mrs. March's suggestion that the family go without presents suggests that the family should embrace simplicity in lieu of material wealth. This renunciation of material wealth can be seen as a Christian act.

At first, the girls decide to buy presents for themselves, given how tirelessly they've been working. Sixteen-year-old Meg has been working hard as a governess for the King family, fifteen-year-old Jo serves as sour Aunt March's companion, thirteen-year-old Beth does a good deal of housework, and twelve-year-old Amy goes to school with tiresome girls who tease her for being poor.

The first of many moral struggles is presented here in this scene. The girls have worked hard, yes, but does that mean they're allowed to indulge themselves? The girls each have to come to grips with their own (very human) feelings of selfishness.

While they talk, Amy scolds Jo for using slang, citing that it's boyish behavior. Jo scoffs at Amy, putting her hands in her pockets and whistling a tune. Meg scolds them both for quarreling. She tells Jo that she should "remember that [she's] a young lady." Jo rebels. "I'm not!" she replies. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! ...I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy."

Amy will establish herself as one who wishes to rub shoulders with the upper classes – hence her worry about Jo's socially casual behavior. Jo's behavior also flouts the accepted gender norms of the late 19th century. Jo's wish to be a boy is an expression of her desire to enjoy all the freedoms men in the 19th century enjoyed. In her view, growing up means that she will have to relinquish this dream.

The March girls are described. Meg is beautiful in the Victorian fashion: plump, pale, and blessed with lovely hair and hands. Jo is tall, thin, and tan, with her only beauty being her thick mane of brown hair. Beth is small, delicate, shy, and rosy – her serene nature has earned her the nickname "Little Miss Tranquility." Amy is "a regular snow maiden," given her curly blonde hair, pale skin, and blue eyes.

Gilded Age beauty ideals are on full display in this passage. Ideal feminine beauty was seen as simple, unfussy, yet decidedly "feminine" – which is to say, plumpness, softness, and paleness. Plain according to 19th century standards, Jo would probably be considered attractive nowadays, given that she is tall, slim, and tan.

The girls prepare for their mother's return after a long day of work. Beth puts Mrs. March's slippers by the fire to warm up, and the girls note how worn they are. The girls decide to buy their mother a new pair for Christmas, and squabble over who will have the right to do it. They then agree to each use their money to buy Mrs. March Christmas presents.

The girls' love for their mother steers them back on course, morally speaking. Their selfishness is forgotten in their desire to please their mother, and they remember the Christian ideas of selflessness and generosity .

Mrs. March – "a tall, motherly lady with a 'can I help you' look about her" - comes home as the March girls are practicing their Christmas play, which Jo has written herself. Mrs. March reveals that she's received a letter from Mr. March, and she reads it to the girls after supper. In the letter, Mr. March bids the girls to be good and to "conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

Mrs. March embodies the 19th century's feminine ideal of motherhood, exemplified by her extreme selflessness and helpfulness (which nowadays might be described as codependence). Jo's decidedly unfeminine literary talents are introduced here. Mr. March, acting as the family's moral compass, reminds the girls to live by Christian values.

Mrs. March reminds her daughters of the times they used to act out scenes from *Pilgrim's Progress* when they were children. She then tells them that what they learned from that game is applicable to their own life journeys: "We are never too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time…" She then tells them that they should look under their pillows on Christmas morning in order to find their guidebooks for this journey. Just before going to bed, the whole family gathers together by the tuneless old piano to sing together.

Pilgrim's Progress is introduced in this scene, and the notion that the girls are on a spiritual quest to perfect themselves in the face of worldly difficulties will reverberate throughout the remainder of Part 1. The March family's idyllic familial love is exemplified here. The piano is falling apart, but the Marches don't need a fancy piano to enjoy their time together.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2: A MERRY CHRISTMAS

On Christmas morning, the March girls awake to find copies of *Pilgrim's Progress* tucked under their pillows. Meg suggests that they honor their mother's gift of the books by studying them every morning, and they spend the next half hour reading. Inspired by what she read, Amy sneaks out and exchanges the small, cheap bottle of cologne she bought for Mrs. March for a large one.

The nineteenth century feminine ideals of meekness and piety are on full display in this scene. Materialistic Amy shows uncharacteristic selflessness in buying her mother a larger bottle of perfume.

Mrs. March comes home from some early morning errands, and tells the girls that the Hummels – a deeply impoverished local German family - are starving. The girls agree to give away their Christmas breakfast, and together they bring it to the Hummels, who are very grateful for the gift.

Impoverished European immigrant families were commonplace in nineteenth century America. In spite of their own poverty, the Marches decide to do the Christian thing and go without their comparatively fancy meal.

The Marches return home and breakfast on bread and milk. After Mrs. March receives her gifts, the girls spend the rest of the day making preparations for their Christmas play. They put on the play in the evening for an audience of neighborhood girls – a love story featuring a witch, a dashing male lead (played by Jo), and a longhaired maiden. After the play, the March sisters and their audience come down to the dining room where they discover a feast of ice cream, cake, fruit, and other dainties furnished by their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence, who had been impressed by their generosity toward the Hummels that morning. The girls speculate that Mr. Laurence's grandson (whom they've only seen from afar) put the idea in his head.

Jo's play mirrors the romantic ideals set forth in the Gilded Age: the notion that women should be passive recipients of male attention, the notion that it's a man's job to pursue a woman, etc. Mr. Laurence is, in a way, acting like the Heavenly Father in this scene. A benign, distant male figure, he steps in to reward the March family for their good Christian deeds. His role in relation to the March family is not unlike that of the essayist and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson to Alcott's family. (Emerson would often step in to financially assist the Alcotts when Louisa's own father was unable to.)

PART 1, CHAPTER 3: THE LAURENCE BOY

Meg and Jo are invited to a New Year's Eve party thrown by the Gardiners, a well-to-do local family. The night of the party, Meg and Jo busy themselves with primping. Jo is a klutz, and many of her fine things have been ruined – her nicest dress has a burn in the back, and she spilled lemonade on her gloves. Meg's gloves are spotless, and the sisters agree to each wear one of Meg's good gloves and to carry one of Jo's spoiled gloves. Meg burns off a few locks of hair about her face in an attempt at curls. Mishaps aside, the girls finally arrange themselves in simple, tasteful (albeit imperfect) clothes and leave for the party.

Nineteenth century ideals of feminine beauty are exemplified here in the juxtaposition of boyish Jo with immaculate Meg. Meg's Christian goodness shines through when she agrees to share her gloves with Jo. There's a moral lesson in the loss of Meg's curls to the hot iron: if Meg had relied on her own simple, natural beauty instead of succumbing to vanity, her hair would have remained intact.

Meg warns Jo to refrain from dancing and keep her back to the wall during the party, so she might hide the burn. Meg agrees to signal to Jo if she sees her tomboyish sister engaging in awkward or unseemly behavior. Meg is at ease, and is swept up in conversation with the Gardiner sisters. Jo sees a group of boys talking about skating and longs to join them, but Meg raises a stern eyebrow as a warning signal and Jo's wishes are quashed. Hindered by her burned dress and feeling utterly out of place, Jo makes a dash to hide in a curtained recess, only to run smack into Mr. Laurence's grandson, Laurie.

Meg's preoccupation with keeping up appearances is exemplified in this chapter, particularly when it comes to her attempts to keep the unkempt, unruly Jo in check. Meg, unlike Jo, is at ease inhabiting her gender role. Jo, on the other hand, finds herself crammed into an uncomfortable dress, unable to move or speak without upsetting Meg. Teenage girls in nineteenth century society were not generally allowed to associate freely with boys – at least, not in the manner Jo wishes to engage with them.

Jo is somewhat nervous to run into Laurie, given that she's only ever talked to him once before. (Sometime in the recent past, Laurie had returned the March's pet cat, and Jo had chatted with Laurie about the sport cricket.) Laurie quickly puts her at ease, however, and Jo falls easily into tomboyish chatter with Laurie. Laurie asks Jo to dance, and Jo turns him down, citing her burned dress. Laurie is momentarily downcast, but then suggests that they dance in a nearby hallway. They do so, and they have a grand time.

Ironically, Jo is at her most genuine and attractive when she's flouting gender norms. (In this case, when she's chattering freely with a boy.) The fact that Jo dons a burned dress is due to the March family's poverty. This is in stark contrast to many of the attendees at the dance, who can afford to buy new things Laurie's love affair with Jo begins here, with their first meeting.

Meg comes in search of Jo and reveals that she's sprained her ankle thanks to her very pretty (but slightly too small) slippers. Meg begs Jo to help her hide her mortifying injury from others. In an attempt to help her sister, Jo runs to get Meg a cup of coffee. Jo manages to spill it down the front of her dress, and ruins Meg's glove in an attempt to clean it up. Laurie appears and, against Meg's wishes, puts things to rights. He brings Meg coffee and bonbons, and gives the girls a ride home in his grandfather's carriage.

The dangers of vanity are again explored in this scene. If Meg had dressed in a simple, genuine fashion, she never would have sprained her ankle. That said, Meg only wore the slippers in an attempt to embody femininity. Jo, meanwhile, expresses her irrepressible boyishness in ruining her fine things. Laurie sets things right, showing that the girls, regardless of their strengths, need a man's influence.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4: BURDENS

The holiday is over, and the March girls have to return to their work. "Oh dear, how hard it does seem to take up our packs and go on," Meg sighs. Jo and Meg trudge off to work. It's revealed that the March family was once comfortably well off until Mr. March "lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend." After this happened, Jo and Meg resolved to do their best to support themselves. Meg works as a governess for the Kings, and while she's happy with her position she often finds herself coveting the wealth and ease enjoyed by the family she works for. Jo, on the other hand, works for crabby (and wealthy) Aunt March.

The virtue of work is emphasized throughout Little Women, and it is indeed the focus of this chapter. Even though the March girls long for the comfort of their former lives, work will prove to have a virtuous effect on their characters. It will teach them the Transcendentalist ideals of self-reliance and individualism, as well as the Christian virtues of humility, modesty, and industriousness.

Beth, meanwhile, is too shy to attend school, so she stays at home and helps the March's lone servant, Hannah, with the housework. She also cares for a cadre of dolls. Beth secretly longs to take proper music lessons, and wishes her family could afford a better (and fully functional) piano.

Beth is, in many ways, the most traditionally feminine of the March girls, given that her realm is the home. Her seemingly effortless virtue will be revisited throughout the book. Here, even when she's selfish, she longs for something wholesome that would benefit her whole family.

Amy, on the other hand, feels her greatest burden is her nose, which she believes does not look classically Grecian and is therefore unattractive. She harbors artistic ambitions, and spends many an hour sketching. Amy is vain and puts on airs – however, her attempts at using large words are viewed as "elegant" by her schoolmates, as are her tales of her family's former wealth (which she is too young to actually remember).

Amy, meanwhile, is preoccupied with her looks – one of her moral failings in the scope of the book. Her desire to be accepted by her schoolmates will prove to be a lifelong pursuit, as she eventually goes on to attempt to be accepted by the upper classes in spite of her modest means.

Jo and Meg return home from work and rehash the day's events. Jo tells of how she tricked Aunt March into reading a romance novel instead of a book of boring essays. Jo remarks that she's puzzled by how dour and unhappy Aunt March seems. "What a pleasant life she might have if she only chose!" she says. This reminds Meg of her day at the Kings' – evidently, the Kings' oldest son had been disgraced at school, which threw his family into an uproar. Beth quietly chimes in with a pleasant story – earlier that day, she witnessed old Mr. Laurence buying a huge fish for a poor woman who was begging at the fish market.

Wealthy Aunt March operates as a cautionary tale about the moral depravity of a life lived without industriousness or gratitude. Jo is able to identify her aunt's moral failings given that she has the advantage (in Alcott's thinking) of being impoverished and employed The question of whether the middle and upper classes can embody virtue is at stake in this passage. The Kings seem as fallible as any, in spite of their wealth. Beth's story reminds the girls that the wealthy can embody virtue if they are industrious and generous.

Mrs. March, who has been quietly listening the whole time, gathers the girls around her and tells them a fairy tale about four young girls who learn to count their blessings. The March girls realize that their mother has turned their stories into a sermon about gratitude in the face of adversity, and they take to heart their mother's lesson.

Mrs. March acts as a surrogate for Mr. March (who is a pastor). She again acts as a moral compass for the girls, guiding them to follow Christian principles. The girls learn that their poverty helps them to be more virtuous.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5: BEING NEIGHBORLY

It's a snowy day, and Jo decides to go out and dig paths in the snow. The Marches' house – a small, brown, shabby dwelling bare of its summer greenery – is separated by a low hedge from Mr. Laurence's large stone mansion.. She spies Laurie sitting near one of the windows on the second floor. "Poor boy! All alone and sick on this dismal day," Jo thinks. She throws a snowball at the window, grabbing Laurie's attention. Laurie admits that he's been sick with a cold, and he invites Jo to come over.

The March family's poverty is embodied in their house, and is juxtaposed with Mr. Laurence's comparatively grand and stately mansion (an embodiment of his wealth and stability). The giant house, however, acts as a kind of luxurious prison for the sickly Laurie, who is trapped in a world where he cannot experience familial love.

Jo arrives soon after with an armful of offerings for Laurie: a plate of blanc mange (a kind of custard) from Meg and kittens from Beth. Jo straightens up Laurie's quarters, and offers to read out loud to Laurie. Laurie begs her to talk to him, and Jo tells him about her family. Laurie reveals that he sometimes spies on the March family, but Jo sees that he only does this because he is orphaned (his parents died when he was young, which is why he now lives with his grandfather) and feels lonesome.

Jo's generosity is both Christian and womanly. It turns out that Laurie's quarters need "a woman's touch," given that she feels it necessary to tidy things up a bit. Laurie reveals that he longs for the familial love present in the March household.

Laurie steps out momentarily to see his doctor, and while he's gone Mr. Laurence slips in and surprises Jo. Jo pluckily tells him that she feels Laurie needs to spend more time around kids his own age. Mr. Laurence invites Jo to tea. As he watches Jo and Laurie chatter, Mr. Laurence realizes that there may be some truth to what Jo has told him.

The necessity of familial love – and possibly that of motherly or womanly love as well – is emphasized here. Mr. Laurence might be rich, but riches cannot replace the love of a family. Being a good Christian man, Mr. Laurence sees the merit in Jo's words.

Jo reveals that Laurie said he'd been grateful for the "medicine" Mrs. March had sent over, and Meg remarks that Laurie was paying Jo a compliment. Jo is flustered, and chides Meg for being sentimental when all she wants to do is befriend Laurie. Mrs. March gives Jo permission to invite Laurie over to their house, and she reminds Meg "that children should be children as long as they can." Beth reflects on *Pilgrim's Progress*, and how they may reach the Palace Beautiful if they are all very good.

Meg is far more savvy to affairs of the heart than Jo is, and is keen on the thought that Laurie might have been flirting with Jo. Jo is still innocent in the realm of romantic love, hence her bashfulness. Mrs. March's comment on childhood is very much of her time; the modern notion of childhood was essentially invented in the nineteenth century. Beth continues to be the voice of virtue among the March girls.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6: BETH FINDS THE PALACE BEAUTIFUL

Meg and Amy soon join Jo in feeling welcome at Mr. Laurence's house. The girls are initially worried that they can never return his favors, given that he's rich and they're poor, but they soon realize that Mr. Laurence feels that they're doing him a favor by visiting with Laurie.

Laurie clearly benefits from the familial love offered by the Marches. The Marches, in return, benefit from Mr. Laurence's wealth and – to a certain extent – his fatherly influence.

Beth, however, is terrified of Mr. Laurence, and doesn't have the courage to go next door to try out Mr. Laurence's grand piano. Realizing this, Mr. Laurence visits Mrs. March and, within earshot of Beth, tactfully mentions that he wishes someone would drop by and try out the piano in the middle of the day, while everyone in the mansion is away, in order to keep it in tune. Encouraged by this, Beth tells him that she'd like to try the piano out. Mr. Laurence gently reveals that he once had a granddaughter, now deceased, who was much like Beth.

Beth's timidity is an extension of her simple, pious nature. Because her nature is timid, she tends to be far more humble and modest than the other March girls. She also tends to spend far more time in pious reflection, given that she's generally housebound. Here, she isn't just afraid of Mr. Laurence. She's afraid of his wealth, of the grand nature of his house. These traits can also be read as nineteenth century feminine virtues.

Beth thus begins to practice the piano at Mr. Laurence's house. She's so overcome with Mr. Laurence's generosity that she resolves to make him a pair of slippers, embroidered with **pansies**, as a token of her appreciation. After giving him the slippers, though, Mr. Laurence's reply is delayed, and Beth worries she has offended him.

Flowers appear time and time again throughout Little Women, and they often represent beauty in its simplest and most ideal form. The slippers are a humble gift, one that reflects the class disparity between the two families.

Beth returns home one day to find that Mr. Laurence has replaced the March family's old, broken piano with a luxurious cabinet piano that had once belonged to his deceased granddaughter. Much to everyone's surprise, Beth marches right over to Mr. Laurence's house and embraces the old man in thanks.

Once again, Mr. Laurence acts in a God-like fashion, rewarding Beth's pious and thoughtful behavior with a lavish (but not overly lavish) gift. Beth repays him with an act of familial love.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7: AMY'S VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

Amy borrows money from Meg in order to buy some pickled limes. Amy explains that limes are "the fashion" at her school, and that the girls trade them amongst themselves. Amy, as it turns out, is in debt for a lot of limes. Amy buys a whole bag of limes with the quarter Meg gives her, and her schoolmates regard her with sudden respect, with the hope that she'll give them limes at lunchtime. Amy snubs one of her enemies – Jenny Snow, a girl who'd insulted Amy's nose.

Amy's status anxiety – her concern with her social standing and her own family's social class – is front and center in this chapter. The limes serve as a silly but palpable metaphor for social currency. Amy is able to curry favors and gain social standing through the possession of these treasures. Amy indulges in some very unchristian behavior in snubbing Jenny – an act she will pay for dearly.

Amy is having a delightful day until Jenny raises her hand and tells their teacher, Mr. Davis, that Amy has pickled limes in her desk. Mr. Davis has outlawed pickled limes, and he's furious to discover that Amy has disobeyed his rule. He forces Amy to throw the limes out the window into the snow, where they're snatched up by a group of Irish children. He then beats the back of her hand with a ruler, and forces her to stand in front of the class until recess. Amy has never been struck in her life, and is utterly disgraced.

Poor Irish immigrants were commonplace in nineteenth century New England, and often their children didn't enjoy the benefit of schooling – hence the convenient Irish children in the snow! Amy gets her just desserts for her sin of snubbing Jenny, and the loss of her limes means she's back to being in the "lower class" of her school.

At recess, Amy runs home and tells her family what happened. Her family is incensed. Mrs. March agrees that Amy can take a vacation from school, given that she disagrees with corporal punishment and "Mr. Davis's manner of teaching." She also feels that Amy's schoolmates are a bad influence. Mrs. March then says that Amy deserved to be punished for breaking the rules, and warns Amy that she is becoming conceited. Amy then realizes that although Laurie is quite accomplished and talented, he isn't conceited, and that his modesty is part of his charm.

Taking a stand against corporal punishment was at the time a radical stance, one that reflected the real life influence of Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott. Mrs. March is also concerned with Amy becoming less Christian as a result of her time at school, and of indulging in fussy fashionable behaviors as a result. In spite of being rich, Laurie has managed to cultivate a moral character.

PART 1, CHAPTER 8: JO MEETS APOLLYON

Amy spies Jo and Meg getting ready to leave the house one Saturday afternoon, and demands to know where they're going. Jo snappishly bids her to mind her own business, and Amy quickly guesses that they're going to the theater with Laurie. Meg explains that Mrs. March wants Amy to go another time, given that Amy's recovering from a cold. Jo snorts that she won't go to the play if Amy comes along, given that she'll only be a nuisance. Amy weeps as Jo and Meg depart, and she vows to avenge herself.

Apollyon is the demonic antagonist of the novel Pilgrim's Progress, whom Pilgrim must defeat in his journey. In this case, Jo's moral demon is her fiery (and some might say unwomanly) temper. The sisters forget their familial love and each indulge in the moral failings of pettiness and vengeful behavior.

The play is delightful, but Jo can't banish her guilt at losing her temper with Amy. Jo and Meg return home and everything seems normal. The next day, however, Jo discovers that her "book" – a diary containing a number of stories she's been painstakingly working on – has gone missing. Amy reveals that she threw Jo's book in the fire. Jo is furious, and she vows to never forgive Amy.

Amy has given in to her sinful vengeance and the damage can never be undone. Jo realizes that her battle with Apollyon has only just begun – her refusal to forgive goes against her family's Christian beliefs. In indulging their vices, the girls go against their father's advice to "conquer" themselves in an effort to become more womanly.

Amy at first begs for Jo's forgiveness, but soon grows to resent Jo's anger. The following day, Amy spies Jo and Laurie departing to go ice-skating. Meg encourages Amy to join them, with the hope that Jo will be in an amenable mood thanks to Laurie. Amy runs after them, and only manages to catch up with them after Laurie has skated away around the river bend. As Amy struggles to put on her skates, Jo hears Laurie warn that the ice near the middle of the river is thin. Amy doesn't hear this, and Jo is too full of lingering resentment to utter a word to Amy.

Jo continues to indulge in boyish pursuits, this time by going skating with Laurie. Her refusal to forgive Amy leads her to behave in increasingly immoral ways. This notion of small sin leading to larger sin will be revisited later on in the book.

Jo skates away from Amy. Amy skates out over the middle of the river and falls through the thin ice. Jo hears her cry out and is paralyzed with fear. Laurie rushes by her and hauls Amy out of the river. They rush Amy home, where she's bundled in blankets and parked in front of the fire. Mrs. March assures Jo that Amy will be perfectly fine. Jo, however, is shaken, and is ashamed that her temper led her to act so spitefully. Mrs. March reveals that she, too, grapples with her temper. Mrs. March urges Jo to turn to God for help controlling her temper. Amy wakes, and Jo embraces her. All is forgiven.

In spite of her bravado and gender-bending antics, Jo and Amy are depicted as damsels in distress in this scene. Jo is only able to mutely stand by as Laurie performs a manly rescue. Alcott seems to imply here that women are necessarily not creatures of action – a view that conforms with the gender norms of her time. Once the sisters return home, Mrs. March again acts as a loving moral compass and guides her daughters back to God.

PART 1, CHAPTER 9: MEG GOES TO VANITY FAIR

The King children are sick with the measles, leaving Meg free to spend two weeks with her new friend Annie Moffat, whom she met at the New Year's Eve dance. Mrs. March has given Meg a few dainty accessories to wear from the "treasure chest" (a trunk full of nice things from the family's former well-to-do days), but Meg still worries that she will look shabby compared to the wealthy Moffats. Beth observes that Meg had previously said she would simply be happy to accompany the Moffats, and Meg agrees that she shouldn't fret over clothing.

The chapter opens with a scenario that sets the odds against Meg being able to stay on the straight and narrow Christian path of morality: her idleness will be a breeding ground for sinful thoughts, and the wealth of the Moffat family is already tempting her away from simplicity and natural beauty. Meg's worry about clothing is an expression of insecurity about her own femininity and attractiveness.

The Moffats are quite fashionable, and "simple Meg" has trouble fitting in. Meg observes that the Moffats aren't very intelligent or cultivated, but still she envies their splendid things. The Moffats treat Meg like a pet and take to calling her **Daisy**.

Alcott again underscores Meg's simplicity in this scene, juxtaposing it with the frivolous glitz and glamour of the Moffats. The notion that flowers embody simple, natural beauty is embodied in Meg's floral nickname.

On the evening of the first party (a small affair), Meg realizes that she will have to wear the dress she'd been saving for the big party at the end of her visit: a much-mended tarlatan that looks shabby compared to Annie's. As she prepares for the party, **a box of roses** is delivered. They're from Laurie, accompanied by a note from Mrs. March. Meg uses the flowers to decorate her dress and hair, offers bouquets to the Moffats, and tucks the note from Mrs. March in her pocket as a "talisman" against "envy, vanity, and false pride."

Meg's desire to both embody a fashionable image of femininity and fit into a higher social class lead her to give into the sins of vanity, greed, and envy. Her mother's loving gift of flowers symbolizes a more virtuous path: natural, simple beauty. Flowers are often worn in Little Women as a means of transcending social class (inexpensive adornments). They are the ideal accessories for those who strive to be natural and simple.

Meg enjoys herself at the party. She receives three compliments, including one from the Moffats' friend Major Lincoln, who calls Meg "the fresh little girl with the beautiful eyes." While at the party, Meg overhears two unknown women (presumably two of the Moffat women) gossiping about her. The women speculate that Mrs. March is planning on marrying Meg off to Laurie, given that he's rich. They also pity Meg her shabby clothing, and wonder if they'll get the chance to dress Meg up in "style." Meg's faith in her mother and her innocent friendship with Laurie are shaken by this speech, and she sheds a few tears on her pillow that night.

Meg's simple, genuine appearance is rewarded with the patriarchal blessing of Major Lincoln; in the traditional patriarchal world of 19th century America, male approval of a woman's appearance was a reflection of her value. Meg's simple beauty thus becomes a form of social currency. This may explain the catty behavior of the Moffats, who possibly feel threatened by Meg's power. Their gossip about Meg's sisterly love of Laurie is used to undermine Meg's feelings of worth.

The next day, Meg learns that the Moffats are inviting Laurie to the big party that week. Meg rebuffs their attempts to insinuate that she's romantically interested in Laurie, and the Moffats snootily tease Meg for her innocence. When Thursday arrives, the Moffats insist on dolling Meg up – they put her in a tight, low-cut dress, paint her face, and tie earrings to her ears with pink silk.

The Moffats' ideals regarding love, beauty, and feminine ideals stand in stark contrast to the March family's Christian morality. They attempt to initiate Meg into the world of vanity and flirtation by making her appear fashionable and flirtatious. Ironically, their attempt to make Meg look richer simultaneously works to "cheapen" Meg, at least in terms of her value as a woman.

Meg makes quite a sensation at the party. Young men flock to her, and wealthy old folks gossip about her. Meg is shocked to see Laurie – she didn't think he'd come to the party – and Laurie tells Meg that he doesn't like the way she's dressed. "I don't like fuss and feathers," he says. Meg scoffs at his comment, but can't shake it off. Meg overhears Major Lincoln commenting that the Moffats "have made a fool" of her. "She's nothing but a doll tonight," he says. Meg steadfastly assumes the droll airs of a fashionable young lady, but secretly regrets her decision to give in to the Moffats.

The second party scene offers a counterpoint to the first. Meg receives a good deal of positive attention in this scene, but it's the wrong kind of approval. The approval she receives in this scene is sexualized and frivolous; compare this to the fatherly (or perhaps Godly) approval of Major Lincoln earlier in the chapter. The novel depicts Meg here as dabbling in the wrong kind of love, the wrong kind of beauty, and the wrong kind of femininity.

Meg returns home and is relieved that she can just be herself again. She confesses to Mrs. March that she allowed herself to give in to her vanity at the Moffats' party, and that she overheard gossip that Mrs. March wanted Meg to marry Laurie. Mrs. March admits that she does have "plans" for her daughters, but that her plans involve making sure her daughters are "beautiful, accomplished, and good-" not married to rich men. "Better to be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands," Mrs. March says.

Mrs. March's speech at the end of this chapter offers a (mildly) feminist counterargument to the patriarchal idea that a woman's worth is directly tied to her ability to "marry well." Her indication that being an old maid (that is, an unmarried woman) might be more valuable than being married stands in stark contrast to the patriarchal ideals of the 19th century.

PART 1, CHAPTER 10: THE P.C. AND P.O.

Spring arrives. The March girls decide to vote Laurie into the P.C. (The Pickwick Club), their secret society and newsletter-writing club that features articles, stories, and poetry by the girls (all written under the guise of characters from Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*). Laurie institutes a P.O. (Post Office) between the March and Laurence houses – he converts an old birdhouse in the hedge between their yards into a mailbox.

The Pickwick Club offers a feminist revision of what girls (and women in general) are capable of. It also offers a microcosmic vision of a world run by women, governed by fairness and familial love.

PART 1, CHAPTER 11: EXPERIMENTS

The first of June, and both the Kings and Aunt March are away on holiday for the next three months. To celebrate Jo and Meg's newfound freedom, the March girls all decide to try doing absolutely no work for one week. (Mrs. March limited them to but one week.)

This chapter is essentially a twist on Chapter 9, insofar as it presents a moral test for the March girls. This time, the test involves the practical and moral value of work.

The first day of no work is "delightful, though unusually long." As the week drags by, however, the girls find that all idleness and no work leaves them feeling irritable and fidgety. Jo tires of reading books, Meg ruins some of her clothes in an attempt to fix them up like the Moffats' clothing, Beth keeps forgetting not to work (and fights with her beloved dolls when she doesn't), and Amy is overcome with ennui. The girls are secretly glad when the week is almost over.

Sloth and idleness – sins of the leisure class – take their toll on the girls' Christian virtues. Their ability to be kind and loving toward one another is also hampered by their idleness. This can be seen as being tied to ideal womanhood, given that their virtue (a key trait of ideal womanhood) is deteriorating as a result of their idleness.

Mrs. March decides to hammer home the lesson by giving Hannah and herself a day off from housework on Saturday. Jo is alarmed to come down to breakfast on Saturday morning to discover that there's no breakfast and, indeed, no fire. The girls, however, take matters into their own hands and pitch in to make a sub-par breakfast, which they proudly serve to Marmee. Jo invites Laurie over for dinner, and gets in well over her head when she attempts to cook a fancy meal for him. Meanwhile, Beth discovers her canary has died due to her negligence. Laurie and surprise guest Mrs. Crocker (an old, gossipy neighbor) attempt to eat Jo's inedible lunch.

Depending how you view it, the tie between idleness and the deterioration of virtue can be seen as either feminist or patriarchal. On the one hand, one could argue that Alcott's assertion that women should have practical work experience flies in the face of traditional ideals of femininity. On the other hand (as illustrated in this scene), it seems that idleness leads to the deterioration of the March girls' ability to perform homemaking tasks, ones typically assigned as "women's work" in a patriarchal society.

At day's end, Mrs. March asks the girls what they've learned this week. She reveals that she wanted the girls to learn what happens when people are idle and only think of themselves. "Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone," she says. The girls agree to balance work with play, and Mrs. March is satisfied that their experiment was a success.

Alcott's ideas regarding work are channeled through Mrs. March in this scene. The notion that work is virtuous flies in the face of the notion that the leisure class is somehow better or more valuable than the working class. It's also somewhat feminist, insofar as it makes the argument that women require meaningful work just as men do.

PART 1, CHAPTER 12: CAMP LAURENCE

Meg notices that she's missing a glove. Beth brings in the mail from the P.O. Laurie has sent Meg a translation of a German song done by his tutor, Mr. Brooke. In a letter to Jo, Laurie invites the March girls to go for a gypsy camp-style lunch in Longmeadow with Laurie's English friends the Vaughns. The girls agree to go.

The missing glove and the translation of the German song will come into play later on. It's implied that Laurie's friends, the Vaughns, are from the upper crust of English society; they will stand in contrast to the poor (but virtuous) March girls in this chapter.

The March girls set out to Laurie's house, where they meet up with Mr. Brooke, Sallie Gardiner and Ned Moffat (who came out to see Meg), and the Vaughns: twenty-year-old Kate (who acts as chaperone), twins Fred and Ned, and Grace. They all get into boats and row down the river to Longmeadow, where tents, lunch, and croquet await them. "Welcome to Camp Laurence!" Laurie declares when they land.

The inclusion of a chapter such as this – one in which the March girls are allowed to indulge in the pleasures of the leisure class – works both as a means of providing her readers with a vicarious thrill (many readers would be charmed by the novelty of the Vaughns) and as a means of providing a lesson in morality.

A croquet game commences. Fred cheats during the match, testing Jo's patience and temper. Jo takes the high ground, and manages to beat Fred anyway in spite of his cheating ways. After lunch, the group makes up a story together and plays a truth-telling game. After this is over, Meg watches Kate draw on her sketchpad. They start talking, and Meg reveals to Kate that she works as a governess. Kate is appalled. Mr. Brooke comes to Meg's rescue, citing that American girls, unlike the English, are "admired and respected for supporting themselves."

It's implied here that Jo's virtue is in part due to her working class status. Fred's willingness to lie echoes the notion from the previous chapter that idleness breeds sin. Mr. Brooke's assertion that women are admired for being able to earn a living is clearly feminist. It was a controversial idea at the time of this book's publication; Kate's reaction illustrates this.

Mr. Brooke asks Meg if she liked the song translation Laurie sent her earlier that day. Kate asks Meg if she reads German. "Not very well," Meg shyly replies. Mr. Brooke asks Meg to read a passage from Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, with the promise of tutoring her. Kate shows off by reading a passage from the book in a flawless accent. Meg then tries it – her reading is flawed, but Mr. Brooke clearly enjoys her reading of the passage much, much more. Kate leaves in a huff. Meg comments on Kate's condescending attitude toward governesses. Mr. Brooke replies, "There's no place like America for us workers…"

Mr. Brooke's romantic interest in Meg is indicated in this passage. The contrast between Meg and Kate is indicative of Alcott's notion of ideal femininity. Mr. Brooke's approval of Meg's working class status (similar to Major Lincoln's approval of Meg in Chapter 9) is the "right" kind of male attention, given that Mr. Brooke is honorable and educated. This is feminist insofar as it rewards Meg for being capable of supporting herself, and patriarchal insofar as she's being awarded with male attention and approval!

At the end of the day, when the rest of the group is singing songs, Ned sings a sentimental serenade to Meg, which she finds hysterical. He scolds her for snubbing him. "How can you be so cruel to me?" he whispers. Ned observes to Sallie that Meg isn't a flirt.

Meg's simplicity and virtue makes her immune to Ned's flirty behavior. It's implied here that flirtation (or a certain kind of flirtation, at any rate) is disingenuous; Meg's genuine nature is clearly preferable to Ned's flirtatious ways.

PART 1, CHAPTER 13: CASTLES IN THE AIR

Laurie has lazed about most of the day. Lying in his hammock, he spies the March girls trooping through the garden. He follows them at a distance, and spies them sitting in a forest glade. Meg is sewing, Jo is knitting, Beth is sorting pinecones, and Amy is sketching ferns. Laurie asks if he can join them, and Meg agrees on the condition that he keeps busy. "It's against the rules to be idle here," she says. It turns out he's stumbled upon the girls' "Busy Bee Society."

Feminine virtue, hard work, and the simplicity of the natural world offer an antidote to Laurie's sinful idleness. It's worth noting here that the girls are engaged, for the most part, in traditionally feminine tasks (sewing, knitting). Similar to Chapter 10, Laurie once again finds he has to prove himself worthy of joining feminine society.

Jo explains to Laurie that the society is part of the girls' game of acting out *Pilgrim's Progress*. "We call this hill the Delectable Mountain, for we can look far away and see the country where we hope to live some time."

The pious daydreaming that the girls are engaging in here offers a contrast to Laurie's slothful daydreaming at the beginning of the chapter.

The girls and Laurie then go on to imagine what it would be like if their "castles in the air" were to come true. Laurie mentions that he wishes to go to Europe and become a famous musician. He then sighs that he's "got the key" to his castle in the air, but he won't be able to do it because his grandfather wants him to go to college. The girls advise Laurie to obey his grandfather. That night, as Laurie listens to Beth playing piano for his grandfather, he resolves to do the right thing. "I'll let my castle go," he says to himself, "and stay with the dear old gentleman while he needs me, for I am all he has."

The girls (and particularly Beth) fulfill the traditional patriarchal notion of femininity in this chapter insofar as they exemplify simple, natural virtue. Their feminine virtue (not to mention their sisterly love) serves to encourage Laurie to be more virtuous. The girls' influence has taught Laurie about the value of familial love, as well as the virtue of hard work and sacrifice.

PART 1, CHAPTER 14: SECRETS

Jo sneaks out of the house in the middle of the day, having slipped a manuscript into her pocket. She goes into town and enters an office building. Laurie, having just stepped out of the gymnasium across the street, spies Jo going into the building and (assuming she went to see a dentist in the same building) decides to wait for her to come out, in case she needs an escort home.

One of the book's most feminist moments springs from Jo's actions in this chapter. Laurie assumes that Jo has had some teeth removed and thus needs help getting home. It is also implied that Jo, being a woman, needs a man to "save" her.

Laurie tells Jo that he has a secret, and that he'll tell her his secret if she tells him his. After some coaxing, Jo reveals that she's submitted two stories to the local newspaper. Laurie, in turn, reveals that he knows the whereabouts of Meg's missing glove. Jo is quite displeased when he tells her where it is.

Jo is keeping her writing a secret because it's not traditionally acceptable for women to write. The identity of the person who has Meg's glove isn't revealed just yet. Based on Jo's reaction, however, we're to assume that it's a suitor.

A fortnight passes, and the Marches think Jo is acting odd. She's rude to Mr. Brooke, and she and Laurie seem to be plotting something (in actuality, they're secretly chattering about Jo's newspaper venture). Finally she finds out that the local paper has taken one of her stories. Her family is delighted when they learn of her success. Jo reveals that the newspaper will pay her starting with her next story, and she's delighted that she will have a way to earn money.

At this point, we're to assume that the suitor is Mr. Brooke, given that Jo is being rude to him. Jo's success in this chapter is strikingly feminist, insofar as she's being championed for striking out on her own in order to do meaningful work – work that, in 19th century America, is typically performed by men.

PART 1, CHAPTER 15: A TELEGRAM

November. Meg is complaining about how dull and full of drudgery her life is. Amy posits that she and Jo will someday make a fortune for the Marches through their art, but Meg remains skeptical. Meanwhile, Mrs. March and Laurie come home. All is normal until Hannah bursts in with news of a telegram. Mrs. March snatches the paper from Hannah's hand. She learns that Mr. March is in a hospital in Washington, D.C. and is very ill.

The importance of work is strongly emphasized in this chapter. Meg's complaints about her drudgery will soon seem sinful when it becomes clear that her father's life is in danger; she will soon be thankful for her hard-working nature. It's worth noting that disease ran rampant through Civil War camps.

The March family, although overcome with grief, quickly springs to action. Hannah (for whom "work was panacea for most afflictions") encourages Mrs. March to get ready to leave for Washington right away. Laurie rushes off to send a telegram to Washington, and Mrs. March makes plans to leave on the early morning train.

The healing power of work is showcased in this scene, where the family's initial grief is staved off by the virtuous power of hard work.

Mr. Laurence returns to the Marches' house with Beth, who had gone to him for a couple bottles of wine for Mr. March. Mr. Laurence offers Mrs. March everything he has at his disposal, and promises to keep an eye on the girls while Mrs. March goes away. Meanwhile, Meg almost runs into Mr. Brooke as she's rushing about the house. Mr. Brooke informs her that he will offer himself as an escort to Mrs. March, as Mr. Laurence has business in Washington that Mr. Brooke needs to look into.

Although the power of women is often showcased in Little Women, there is also a consistent reminder that men are the ones who, ultimately, have the control. The women are able to take care of themselves to a point, but Mr. Laurence is able to provide the actual means (money, social position) to get things done.

The afternoon quickly passes as preparations are made for Mrs. March's departure. Jo is gone all afternoon, and the Marches begin to worry about her. She returns, finally, and places twenty-five dollars cash before her mother. Mrs. March is taken aback – where did Jo get the money? Jo swears she came by the money honestly, and then removes her bonnet to reveal that she's cropped and sold her "one beauty": her hair.

Case in point: The only way Jo is able to contribute money to her father's cause is by literally selling part of her body. In the patriarchal world of the Gilded Age, a woman's chief financial asset was her body. Jo has sacrificed her one source of natural beauty in order to fulfill what she sees as her daughterly duty.

Addressing her stunned family, Jo tells the story of how she sold her hair. Mrs. March isn't upset, but does worry that Jo will regret her decision. Later that night, Jo cries into her pillow about her lost hair. Meg overhears her and comforts her. Jo swears she doesn't regret her decision. The girls anxiously lie awake, worrying about their father.

In a traditional patriarchal society, a woman's value is tied to her beauty. In worrying about Jo's hair, Mrs. March is ultimately concerned that Jo has lowered her value. Even though Jo often thwarts patriarchal gender norms, she finds it hard not to feel remorse.

PART 1, CHAPTER 16: LETTERS

The girls awake at dawn to see their mother off. As Mrs. March leaves the house, she bids her daughters to be brave, to refrain from grieving, to "[h]ope and keep busy." She reminds them to go on "with your work as usual, for work is a blessed solace." Mrs. March climbs into the carriage with Mr. Brooke, and they depart for the train.

The virtuousness of work and the perils of idleness will be strongly at play over the course of the next few chapters. Mrs. March's words can be seen as a kind of foreshadowing of the lessons the girls will learn in her absence.

The house feels "half empty" to the girls after their mother leaves, but they resolve to console themselves with their work. Hannah gives the girls coffee as a treat, and Jo and Meg take their breakfast turnovers and head out to see to Aunt March and the Kings.

For once, the burden of dealing with Aunt March and the fractious King children comes as a relief to Jo and Meg. Work serves as a distraction and a means of cultivating virtue.

The girls, Hannah, Laurie, and Mr. Laurence all write letters to Mrs. March. In their letters, the March girls tell Mrs. March about how they haven't forgotten her lessons. (Jo, for instance, tells Marmee that she recently battled with her temper in a quarrel with Laurie.) Hannah, Laurie, and Mr. Laurence reassure Mrs. March that her daughters are safe and doing well.

The bulk of the chapter is given over to letters from each of the characters who have stayed behind. Mr. Laurence's letter underscores his patriarchal role – he serves as a distant (yet loving), moneyed power figure.

PART 1, CHAPTER 17: LITTLE FAITHFUL

For the first week after their mother leaves, the March girls are exceedingly virtuous and industrious. After that, however, they become more lax in their efforts. Jo catches a cold and thereby gets a holiday from Aunt March, Amy drops her housework in order to play with clay, and Meg forgets her sewing in lieu of writing letters to Marmee. Beth, however, continues to be industrious (although she does grieve).

Mrs. March provides a moral compass for her daughters. With Mrs. March gone, the girls—all except Beth—quickly go astray from the path of virtue. Beth's industriousness and piousness can be seen as ideal feminine traits; in many ways, she encapsulates the ideals 19th century femininity (she is pious, chaste, hard working, physically weak, etc.).

Beth goes to Meg and asks her to see the Hummels, as their baby is sick. Meg feigns fatigue and continues sewing. Beth then asks Jo if she'll go, but Jo uses her cold as an excuse not to go (even though she'd been well enough to see Laurie earlier). Beth implores them to go – she would do it herself, but her head aches and she feels tired. Jo and Meg suggest that Beth send Amy to do it. Amy is away, and Beth waits an hour for her with no luck. Beth decides to take it upon herself to go to the Hummels.

Mirroring the lesson of Chapter 11, the girls once again find themselves cultivating sinful thoughts and actions once they give in to idleness. The stakes, however, are much higher this time. It's implied that something bad is going to happen as a result of the March girls' slothful ways.

Beth arrives quite late, and no one notices her hide away in her mother's room after she comes home. When Jo finds her, it's apparent that Beth is ill. Beth informs Jo that the Hummels' baby has died of scarlet fever, and Beth fears that she's caught it. Jo chastises herself for letting Beth go to the Hummels' every day that week. Hannah is alerted to Beth's illness, Jo resolves to be Beth's primary nurse, and Amy (after some coaxing from Laurie, who promises to visit her every day) is made to stay with Aunt March in order to avoid getting sick.

Beth has always been sickly, but now that she has scarlet fever she truly fulfills the stereotypical 19th century role of the pious invalid (that is, a meek, pale, large-eyed creature whose purity and goodness have slated her for an early death, given that she's too good for this world). The March girls are thrust into a series of moral tests thanks to Beth's illness.

Laurie and Meg wonder if Mrs. March should be told of Beth's illness. Hannah (who has experience with scarlet fever) has told the children that she thinks Beth won't be too sick, and that it would be more harm than good to tell Mrs. March about Beth's sickness. They decide to wait and ask Mr. Laurence for his opinion. Jo and Laurie take a reluctant Amy to Aunt March's house.

Once again, Mr. Laurence is established as the surrogate patriarch of the March household; even though Hannah has just as much life experience (if not more), she defers to Mr. Laurence's judgment given his maleness, social stature, and wealth.

PART 1, CHAPTER 18: DARK DAYS

Beth has become quite ill, and is under the constant care of Jo, Hannah, and the doctor. Meanwhile, Mrs. March has written to tell the girls that their father has relapsed. In nursing Beth, Jo grows to appreciate her sister's sweet, simple, and pious nature. Beth grows more and more ill, and eventually lapses into a semi-conscious state.

The pious invalid often serves as a model to those around him/her. As such, Jo recognizes in Beth the characteristics (faith, piety, humility, simplicity, industriousness) she herself wishes to embody.

On the first of December, the doctor looks in on Beth and tells Hannah that Mrs. March must be sent for. Jo runs out the door to send a telegram. She bumps into Laurie when she returns, and she tells him that she's sent for Marmee, and about Beth's worsening condition. Tears stream down her face as she talks, and Laurie bids Jo to hold on to him for comfort. They embrace.

Overwhelmed by grief and panic, Jo forgets herself for a moment and allows herself to seek physical comfort in the arms of Laurie (something that a good Christian girl wouldn't normally do). This offers some foreshadowing of how their relationship will unfold in the future.

He then reveals that he's already contacted Mrs. March, and that she's scheduled to arrive that very night. Jo throws herself into Laurie's arms in relief and joy. Laurie, unsure of what to do, kisses her bashfully as she holds him. Jo snaps to attention after she's been kissed.

Male decision-making once again overrides female decisions as Laurie reveals that he's sent for Mrs. March. Jo is so simple and innocent, she has a hard time understanding why Laurie would kiss her.

News of Mrs. March's imminent arrival spreads throughout the house, and hope is renewed. Beth's **pet bird** begins chirping again, and **a half-blown rose** is discovered outside, which are seen as good omens. Beth, meanwhile, is unconscious. The doctor believes that Beth will undergo "some change, for better or worse" around midnight.

A half-opened rose seems to symbolize burgeoning hope; it could also symbolize Beth's beauty and simplicity. Birds are often associated with Beth throughout the text; the bird in this instance seems to indicate the possibility of Beth's recovery.

The whole household stays up to keep watch over Beth that night. When midnight strikes, Jo sees Meg kneeling with her face hidden. Jo suddenly fears that Beth has died and Meg cannot bring herself to tell Jo. Jo rushes to Beth's side and sees that all traces of Beth's illness are gone – Beth once again looks rosy and peaceful. Jo assumes Beth is dead, and kisses her forehead while whispering her goodbye. Hannah awakes at that moment, sees Beth's change, and joyously declares that her "fever's turned."

In 19th century America, death was (unfortunately) a large part of everyday life. Readers at that time would have read scenes such as this –with loving family members praying by an ailing family member's bedside – as commonplace. Beth's "false death" in this scene can be seen as the death of the old, healthy Beth. Shadows of her illness will follow her for the remainder of her life.

Dawn is breaking. Meg brings Jo **the rose** that they'd found in the garden. "I thought this would hardly be ready to lay in Beth's hand tomorrow if she – went away from us. But it has blossomed in the night," she says. She places it in a vase, so Beth can see it when she wakes. Outside, the girls hear sleigh bells, and Laurie calls from outside to announce Mrs. March's arrival.

The rose, symbolizing Beth's simplicity, genuineness, and natural beauty (both physical and spiritual), has fully bloomed, indicating that Beth is on the mend. This test of familial love will shape the March girls' futures.

PART 1, CHAPTER 19: AMY'S WILL

Meanwhile, Amy is holed up at Aunt March's and having a rough time. Amy has taken Jo's place in caring for Aunt March, and these chores, coupled with her schoolwork, leave her with little free time. Thankfully, Amy has allies. Laurie comes by every day to take her out, and the French maid Esther has taken a fancy to the girl.

Laurie's attention to Amy foreshadows later developments in Part II of the book. It's worth noting that Amy's workload has increased; as such, it seems like she's poised for an increase in virtue.

While Aunt March takes her nap, Esther allows Amy to look through the old woman's troves of jewelry. As Amy looks through a jewelry box, Esther asks the girl which of the things within she would most want to have. Amy picks out a strand of gold and ebony beads. Esther says she would like that necklace, too, but (given that she's Catholic) she would like to use it as a rosary.

Initially spurred by her greed for finery (a stereotypically feminine desire), Amy inadvertently chooses a necklace that holds some religious significance. Is this due to her innate goodness and simplicity? Or just luck?

Esther goes on to tell Amy that she would find great comfort in taking up the Catholic practice of spending a little time each day in prayer and meditation, ideally in a chapel. Amy has been neglecting her daily readings of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and she asks Esther if it would be right for her to mediate and pray. Esther assures her that it is all right, and offers to set up a small chapel in one of the house's unused closets.

Amy's interest in Catholicism has perhaps as much to do with her interest in aesthetic beauty as it does with her desire to live a moral life. It's worth noting that Amy's newfound piety is spurred by visions of finery.

As they put away the jewelry, Esther reveals that Aunt March plans to give her jewelry to the March girls after she dies. Amy is delighted to learn that Aunt March also has plans to give her **a turquoise ring** when she leaves for home, given that she's been well behaved. She resolves to be more obedient than ever, in order to be worthy of such a present.

Again, Amy's desire to live a moral life is spurred by her feminine desire to adorn herself. The turquoise ring seems to symbolize the gift of the kingdom of heaven – one that she might earn if she's very, very good.

Amy works to be more pious and well behaved, and Aunt March is pleased. Amy prays and meditates in her small chapel every day. Inspired by Aunt March, and in an effort to be even more well behaved, she decides to make her will.

Aunt March recognizes that Amy, in becoming more virtuous, is becoming more womanly – that is, she is learning to embody the traits of an ideal Gilded Age woman.

Amy asks Esther and Laurie to sign the will as witnesses. Laurie reads the document and asks Amy if she got the idea from Beth. Amy is confused, and Laurie goes on to explain that one day, when she felt particularly ill, Beth dictated her own meager last will and testament to Meg, in which Beth (lacking wealth) asked for locks of her hair to be given to her friends and family. Moved to tears, Amy asks to for a clause to be added to her will, stipulating for her own hair to be cut off and distributed. After Laurie departs, Amy goes to her chapel and prays for Beth.

Beth's role as the pious invalid exerts its influence here, as Amy is reminded that she's been committing the sins of selfishness and vanity. Amy also realizes that the loss of her sister would be greater than the loss of any of her worldly possessions. Faced with the imminent loss of Beth, her decision to give away her hair (her natural beauty) is a sign of her commitment to be more Beth-like.

PART 1, CHAPTER 20: CONFIDENTIAL

Mrs. March returns, and the girls are ecstatic. The girls sleep most of the day, and a "Sabbath stillness" falls over the house.

The return of the matriarch of the March home signifies the return of their moral compass – the "Sabbath stillness" is therefore fitting.

Laurie goes to Aunt March's house to tell Amy the good news. Mrs. March bursts in and Amy is so overjoyed that her cries awake an exhausted Laurie, who had been napping on the couch. Amy shows Marmee the chapel Esther made for her, and Mrs. March approves of it.

Mrs. March's approval of Amy's Catholicism reflects Alcott's own liberal, Transcendentalist notions of religion; Amy isn't punished given that Mrs. March (and Alcott) believes that there are many paths to God.

Mrs. March notices that Amy is wearing **a turquoise ring**, and Amy explains that Aunt March gave it to her. Amy asks her mother if she can wear it as a reminder to be good (and to not be selfish, in particular). Mrs. March approves, but cautions Amy that she should trust more in her ring.

Mrs. March seems worried (perhaps rightly so) that Amy's ring is too much a thing of vanity. Any adornments that aren't simple and/or natural (flowers, for instance) are regarded with suspicion in Little Women; there's a fear that they'll lead to sin.

That evening, Jo goes to Mrs. March and tells her what Laurie told her: that Mr. Brooke took one of Meg's gloves, and that he likes Meg but worries that the match won't be approved given that Meg is young and he (Mr. Brooke) is poor. Referring to Mr. Brooke by his first name (John), Mrs. March asks Jo if Meg isn't interested in him. Jo is flabbergasted that her mother would refer to Mr. Brooke in such informal terms, and Mrs. March explains that she and Mr. March grew quite close to Mr. Brooke during their time in Washington.

Although Little Women is often gently radical in terms of how it treats is female characters, this is a moment where it clearly ascribes to the standard patriarchal views of its time; it is clearly in favor of Meg becoming a housewife. Mrs. March's behavior shows that she approves of the match, given Mr. Brooke's hardworking, genuine, and pious nature.

Jo is upset that her mother has taken Mr. Brooke's side, and fears that Meg will be married off and taken away from the family. Jo expresses a wish that she could marry Meg, so Meg would never go away. "Why weren't we all boys, then there wouldn't be any bother," she sighs. Mrs. March, on the other hand, thinks Mr. Brooke is an excellent man, and that she would be happy to see Meg wed to him in three years time.

To modern day readers, the betrothal of a 28-year-old tutor to a 17-year-old girl would be scandalous. In the Gilded Age, however, matches such as this were commonplace. Jo's horror (shared as it may be with modern readers) would have been comical to readers in the 19th century. Mrs. March's approval is seen as reasonable, given that she adds the stipulation that Meg wait until she turns 20.

Jo asks her mother if she wouldn't rather see Meg married to a rich man. Mrs. March replies that she'd rather see her daughters happily, if humbly, married rather than have them marry into money out of a sense of duty. Jo asks why Meg can't just marry Laurie, and her mother replies that Laurie is far too young and undependable.

Laurie is younger than Meg, and in Gilded Age society it was considered unusual for younger men to marry older women. This match, oddly enough, would be seen as more unorthodox than the betrothal of a teenager to a man in his late twenties.

Meg walks in at that moment with a letter for Mrs. March to proofread. Mrs. March tells Meg to add a note to "John," sending him Mrs. March's love. Meg is surprised that her mother refers to Mr. Brooke so informally, and Mrs. March tells Meg that she and Mr. March now regard him as a son. After Meg and Jo leave the room, Mrs. March says to herself, "She does not love John yet, but will soon learn to."

Given that Mrs. March is the moral compass of the March household in the absence of her husband, it's assumed that her judgment of Mr. Brooke is moral and right. The notion that a woman might have to "learn" how to romantically love is in line with the patriarchal notion that women are more sexually innocent than men.

PART 1, CHAPTER 21: LAURIE MAKES MISCHIEF, AND JO MAKES PEACE

Jo is sure she sees the signs of love in Meg. "She's got most of the symptoms," Jo notes, "is twittery and cross, doesn't eat, lies awake, and mopes in corners." Meanwhile, after much teasing, Laurie soon learns Jo's secret about Meg and Mr. Brooke. He feels slighted that he wasn't taken into his tutor's confidence, and resolves to "devise some proper retaliation."

Jo becomes preoccupied with spotting lovesickness in those around her, largely because she recognizes it as a threat to the stability of her family. Women in 19th century America tended to live with their parents until they married. If Meg marries, she'll move out; Jo doesn't want this.

The next day, Jo brings a sealed letter for Meg from the P.O. Meg cries out in embarrassment when she reads the letter, and she accuses Jo of playing a trick. She hands Jo a different note from her pocket – it's a fake love letter from Mr. Brooke to Meg, in which he declares his undying love. Jo knows instantly that this is Laurie's work, and she vows to make him pay. Meg reveals that she had secretly responded to the note. In her response, she had told "Mr. Brooke" that she was too young to marry, and that he must speak to Mr. March. Mrs. March is proud of Meg's response. Meg then reveals that the letter she received today is from the real Mr. Brooke; in it, he speculates that Jo has played a trick. Mrs. March deems this second letter to also be the work of Laurie.

Laurie has a number of moral demons to wrangle with; one of them is his tendency to cause mischief when he feels slighted. His hijinks serve one good purpose, however, in that they give Mrs. March some insight into how Meg might behave should she actually receive a love letter. Meg's chaste response to Laurie's fake love note signifies that she harbors qualities of the ideal Gilded Age woman, in this case chastity, innocence, and deference to men (Mr. March).

Jo runs to fetch Laurie. While she's gone, Mrs. March asks Meg if she loves Mr. Brooke. Meg responds that she wants nothing to do with love at the moment, given the recent trauma of Beth's illness. Laurie arrives, and he apologizes profusely. Meg and Mrs. March forgive him, but Jo gives him the silent treatment. Mrs. March makes Laurie swear to keep Mr. Brooke's infatuation with Meg a secret.

Mrs. March is proud that Meg places her family before romance. Meg isn't a flirt, and it's a result of her simple, wholesome, religious upbringing.

After Laurie has gone home, Jo feels ashamed that she wasn't more forgiving. She goes to his house under the pretense of returning a book, only to find that Laurie is shut up in his room. Jo goes to him and finds that he's furious with his grandfather. Earlier, Mr. Laurence had asked Laurie to tell him why he'd been in trouble with the Marches, but Laurie didn't tell him the whole story given that he'd given Mrs. March his word to keep quiet. When Laurie refused to tell the whole story, Mr. Laurence grabbed Laurie by the collar and shook him. Laurie then ran to his room, fearing that he'd strike the old man.

Laurie's impulsive, explosive nature is supposedly tied to his "hot" Italian blood. This is the same thing that, in the past, drew him to the thought of running away to become a musician. Jo shares his fiery spirit (though she has no Italian blood to explain her peppery nature). It is implied that the male aggression in this scene requires the soothing mediation of a woman.

Jo tries to reason with Laurie, but he refuses to leave his room until his grandfather apologizes. Laurie briefly fantasizes about running away, and Jo momentarily commiserates with him before remembering that she must be rational. She resolves to go hash things out with Mr. Laurence.

Jo can't help but sympathize with Laurie, given the number of novels and plays she's read about adventurers. Her moral upbringing prevents her from giving in to this fantasy, however.

Jo enters the library, where Mr. Laurence is fuming. She innocently tells him she's there to return a book. While she browses the shelves, looking for a new volume, Mr. Laurence turns to her and demands to know what Laurie did wrong. The two engage in a verbal tug-of-war. Jo convinces Mr. Laurence that he's been too harsh. Mr. Laurence sees the error in his ways and writes a written apology to Laurie. Jo delivers the letter to Laurie, and Laurie is satisfied.

In a traditional patriarchal society, women are seen as virtuous creatures who offer themselves as role models of purity and piety to the men around them. It is up to Jo, then – who in spite of her boyishness is, after all, female – to teach the men in her life the value of forgiveness and familial love.

After all is said and done, Meg begins to think about Mr. Brooke more than ever. Jo worries that "Laurie's prank had hastened the evil day for her."

If Meg falls in love with Mr. Brooke, Jo sees that it's inevitable that she'll marry him.

PART 1, CHAPTER 22: PLEASANT MEADOWS

Peace reigns at the March household as Beth's health improves. Christmas Day arrives, and news of Mr. March's return after the New Year fills the March girls with hope. Jo and Laurie surprise Beth with a snow maiden decorated with modest Christmas gifts, accompanied by a poem by Jo.

The snow maiden, similar to Beth, is pure, simple, and beautiful because it's natural. The girls once again give modest gifts that are within their means, given that they're of the working class.

The March girls think they've gotten everything they could want on Christmas (Mr. Laurence gives Meg her first silk dress; Jo receives a long-desired book) until, that evening, Laurie brings Mr. March into the parlor. Mrs. March and her daughters are ecstatic. Later that night, they all sit down for a triumphant Christmas dinner, joined by Mr. Laurence, Laurie, and Mr. Brooke.

Since the Christmas of one year ago, the girls have learned a great deal about morality and virtue. Thus the gifts are a tad more extravagant than they were the year prior, as they have earned a reward. Meg's first silk dress is a sign of her growing womanhood.

After supper, Mr. March observes how much his daughters have grown since he last saw them. He's pleased that Meg's hands, once spotless, are calloused from work. He's also pleased to see that Jo is less tomboyish, that Amy is less selfish, and that Beth's health is much improved. Jo asks Beth what she's thinking, and Beth replies that she feels as if they've reached the "pleasant green meadow" from *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Mr. March's praise of Meg's calloused hand once again bolsters the book's argument that everyone, even women, needs work in order to live good lives. He is also pleased to see that Jo better fits a female gender role (one of the book's less radical moments). Mr. March sees little that needs improving in Beth, the pious invalid.

PART 1, CHAPTER 23: AUNT MARCH SETTLES THE QUESTION

The family seems complete now that Mr. March is home – still, they feel like something is missing. Meg (who seems love-struck) is an object of scrutiny, and Jo shakes her fist at the **umbrella** Mr. Brooke happened to leave at their house.

The umbrella, which will return again at the end of Part 2, symbolizes male protectiveness. The subtext here is that one thing needs to be solved: the question of whether Meg will be married off to Mr. Brooke.

Jo mentions to Meg that she doesn't seem like her old self, and asks her how she'd respond to a proposal of marriage from Mr. Brooke. Meg coolly replies that she would calmly inform Mr. Brooke that she is too young "at present, so please say no more, but let us be friends as we were."

Although Jo can see that Meg is in the throes of lovesickness, she has hope that Meg will reject an offer of marriage (as Jo still sees marriage as a threat to her togetherness with her sisters). Meg's cool response reflects her desire to be virtuous.

Mr. Brooke arrives to collect his **umbrella** just as Meg finishes her speech. Jo, flustered, tells Mr. Brook that she'll fetch it and jumbles her words, mixing up her father and the umbrella: "It's very well, he's in the rack. I'll get him, and tell it you are here."

Given that the umbrella can be seen as symbolizing male protection, it's unsurprising that she's confused it (in speaking, anyway) with Mr. Brooke, a protective father figure.

Meg and Mr. Brooke are left alone. Mr. Brooke confesses his love to Meg, and asks her if she feels the same. Meg's mind goes blank, and she replies that she doesn't know. "Will you try and find out?" Mr. Brooke asks. "I want to know so much, for I can't go to work with any heart until I learn whether I am to have my reward in the end…" He begs her, and Meg suddenly becomes aware of her power to snub Mr. Brooke. She recalls Annie Moffat's "lessons in coquetry," and petulantly dismisses him. Mr. Brooke is shattered.

Interestingly, in referring to Meg's love as a "reward," Mr. Brooke sounds awfully similar to Amy with regards to her turquoise ring. Talk like this wasn't uncommon in the 19th century, when the role of women dictated that, especially when married, they were by and large a man's property. Meg's relapse into bad Moffat behavior offers a lesson in the "wrong kind" of flirtation: one that's teasing and insincere.

Aunt March suddenly enters the room, and Mr. Brooke slips away. Aunt March realizes that Mr. Brooke is Meg's suitor, and decides to give Meg a piece of her mind. She informs Meg that it is her duty "to make a rich match," and that if Meg marries Mr. Brooke she'll never see a penny of her inheritance. Aunt March then goes on to insinuate that Mr. Brooke wants to marry Meg because she has rich relations. Meg is incensed, and she retorts that Mr. Brooke isn't marrying her for money, and that she wishes to be with him because he loves her.

Alcott often trots Aunt March into a scene when some moral lesson needs to be imparted to the March girls – hence her abrupt (and somewhat unbelievable) appearance in this scene. Given that Meg isn't afraid to be poor, and given that she isn't afraid to work for a living, she is thus able to make what Alcott would consider to be the virtuous choice in this scene.

Aunt March storms out. Mr. Brooke rushes in and confesses that he overheard the whole conversation. Meg forgets her coquetry and tells Mr. Brooke that he should stay with her. Jo enters and is dismayed to find Meg sitting in Mr. Brooke's lap. Jo rushes upstairs and tells her parents that Mr. Brooke is "behaving dreadfully, and Meg likes it!"

During this time, a declaration of love was as good as saying you were engaged to be married. Jo's horror at Meg's betrothal is supposed to be read as comic. Readers in the 19th century were of the belief that getting betrothed was the best thing a woman could do, and so Jo's alarm would be seen as an overreaction.

The Marches (with the exception of Jo), Mr. Laurence, and Laurie are overjoyed by the news that Mr. Brooke and Meg are in love. Jo confides in Laurie that she feels like she's lost her dearest friend. Laurie tells her to cheer up and see how happy her family is. Indeed, they are all in a state of bliss. The entire family has gathered in the parlor, and it is a pretty picture. Mr. and Mrs. March are "quietly reliving" the early days of their love through Meg, Amy draws the new couple, and Beth sits chatting with Mr. Laurence. Meanwhile, Jo and Laurie sit on the couch together, and they consider their image in the "long glass which reflected them both."

The marriage of a daughter was a big event in 19th century families – it signaled the shift from the daughter's girlhood into wifedom and motherhood. Even though gender-bending Jo is championed in Little Women, it's telling that the climax of Part I (the original end of the book) comes when Meg is engaged to be married. The finest thing Meg can accomplish – that any of the March girls can accomplish, it seems – is to become engaged. In looking in the mirror, Jo and Laurie reflect on who they might become; this scene foreshadows their dynamic in Part II.

PART 2, CHAPTER 24: GOSSIP

Three years have passed. The war has ended, and Mr. March has returned to his work as a local minister. Although to outsiders the house seems to be ruled by women, Mr. March is still "head of the family, the household conscience, anchor, and comforter, for to him the…women always turned in troubled times, finding him…husband and father."

Part II was originally released as a separate book, titled "Good Wives." In spite of how capable and independent the March women can be, it's made clear here that they still need to defer to the man of the house, Mr. March. In this way, Little Women adheres to the patriarchal gender norms of its day.

We're informed that Mr. Brooke served in the Civil War for one year, and was discharged after being wounded. Meg has grown more beautiful and more "wise in housewifely arts." Ned Moffat and Sallie Gardiner have wed, and Meg can't help but compare her own life with the wealthy one Sallie now leads. Amy has become Aunt March's confidante, leaving Jo free to write for the newspaper and to tend to Beth (who is still delicate). Laurie, meanwhile, is in college, and has become a bit of a dandy.

Meg, in spite of embodying a number of womanly virtues, still feels occasional pangs of discomfort with her working class status. Her continued envy of Sallie's circumstances is foreshadowed here. Amy, drawn as she is to wealth and refinement, is quite happy spending time with Aunt March.

We're then told about the "Dovecote" – the house that "Mr. Brooke had prepared for Meg's first home." It is a small and simple house, but the entire family's contributions to its décor and upkeep give it a charm that, Meg decides, money could never buy. Mrs. March estimates that there will be quite as much happiness in Meg's small house as there will be in the Moffats' big one.

The notion that money cannot buy happiness – and that it might actually encourage sin – is explored in this scene. Once again, Mrs. March asserts that a lack of money is actually preferable in many ways to wealth. Alcott describes the simplicity of the house's décor in an approving tone.

The wedding is scheduled to happen tomorrow, and Laurie – who has been giving Meg gag housewarming gifts for a while now - arrives at the Dovecote with another silly present: a watchman's rattle for Meg's protection. Jo takes Laurie aside and warns him not to play any pranks at the wedding. Laurie reveals that he needs to ask his grandfather for some money, and Jo chastises him for being a dandy and a spendthrift.

Laurie has been living it up at college: buying fashionable clothes, partying with his friends, and flirting with girls. Jo worries that Laurie's vices are being cultivated by his wealth and idleness. Jo, informed by her years of working for a living, views his gag gifts as wasteful.

Laurie mentions that a friend from his at college is quite stricken with Amy, and Jo replies that she hopes there won't be any more weddings in the family for years to come. Laurie ribs her for still being single, and Jo declares that she hopes she'll be an old maid. Laurie replies, "You won't give anyone a chance," giving Jo a "sidelong glance," his face suddenly "showing a little more color." Laurie predicts that Jo will be married off next.

Nineteenth century literature is full of references to blushing, and Little Women is no exception. In this instance, Laurie's flushed cheeks are indicative of his infatuation with Jo. And to be fair, Jo's rejection of marriage makes a lot of sense. Marriage, for many women, meant giving up their life's work in order to serve a husband and children. Jo's dreams are larger than that.

PART 2, CHAPTER 25: THE FIRST WEDDING

It's Meg's wedding day, and **the roses** are out in full bloom at the March residence. Meg is attired in a simple dress that she's made herself, her hair has been braided, and her only adornments are a few sprigs of **lily of the valley**. Her sisters wear suits of silver-gray with **roses** in their hair.

Flowers are Alcott's preferred bit of decoration. Their presence here – both in the ground and in the hair of the March girls – represents an idealized notion of working class beauty: one that is simple, unfettered, and available to all.

The wedding has no grand ceremonies, with the idea that "everything was to be as natural and homelike as possible." Aunt March is upset by how simple the proceedings are. Mr. March marries the couple, and after she's married Meg declares that the first kiss shall go to Marmee.

Familial love – as opposed to romantic love – is championed throughout Little Women, and this is clearly illustrated in Meg's assertion that she should kiss her mother before kissing Mr. Brooke.

No wine is served at the simple reception, prompting Laurie and Meg to have a conversation about alcohol. Laurie is pleased that the Marches aren't serving alcohol, given that he's "seen enough harm done to wish other women would think" as the Marches do. Meg asks him to promise to resist drinking alcohol when he goes back to college, and Laurie agrees.

Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott, was a champion for temperance (that is, for abstaining from alcohol), and the March family is no exception. According to their thinking, in order to lead a virtuous, natural life, one must avoid alcohol.

The reception ends in a group dance, with the married couples joining hands and dancing in a circle around the newlyweds, and the single folk pairing off to dance around them. Sallie Moffat and Mr. Laurence each observe that it was a fine wedding, in spite of its simplicity. The Marches then gather at the Dovecote to say farewell to Meg.

The dance seems to embody Meg and Mr. Brooke's initiation into the world of marriage and parenthood. Again, simplicity is touted as an ideal, with even fashionable Sallie acknowledging the beauty of the simple, homespun wedding.

PART 2, CHAPTER 26: ARTISTIC ATTEMPTS

Amy is becoming more serious in her undertaking to become a real artist. Aunt March has enrolled her in a drawing class, and as a result she experiments with pen-and-ink drawing, poker sketching, oil painting, charcoals, and nature sketching, all with varying levels of success.

Amy is a social climber, and latches onto opportunities to better her position. By growing close to Aunt March, Amy has access to some of the things rich girls enjoy: namely, art classes. Her attempt to become an artist pushes against the gender norms of her society.

Meanwhile, Amy also longs to become "an attractive and accomplished woman" who will one day be able to mingle with "best society," and she succeeds quite well in doing this. "Never forgetting that by birth she was a gentlewoman," Amy grooms her manners for the day when she might move in aristocratic circles.

But even as she pushes against the gender norms for women in her ambition to become an artist, Amy simultaneously desires to fit in. She wants to be an ideal aristocratic woman: beautiful, desirable, and intelligent.

With this in mind, Amy asks Mrs. March if she might have the girls from her drawing class over for lunch and a drawing session by the river. Amy wishes to express her gratitude for their kindness toward her, given that they're rich and she's poor. Mrs. March feels they should treat her kindly no matter what, but agrees to help Amy give a luncheon.

Amy's desire to move in aristocratic circles proves to be another hurdle in her moral development. Amy's mistake, in Mrs. March's estimation, is that she's trying to appeal to immoral people: those who value wealth rather than good character.

Mrs. March suggests a simple lunch, but Amy insists on delicacies: cold chicken and tongue, French chocolate, and ice cream. With the help of Meg and Jo (who wonders why Amy should go through such trouble for "a parcel of girls who don't care a sixpence for you"), and spending quite a bit of her own money (she hires a coach to drive the girls down to the river), Amy prepares for the party. Hannah has trouble cooking the delicacies Amy has ordered, but Amy perseveres.

Amy secretly (or perhaps not so secretly) desires to impress the girls she's in class with, and assumes that they won't appreciate the simplicity that her family values. In organizing a complicated, fussy lunch, Amy is indulging in the kind of frivolous thinking that (in Alcott's opinion) will only lead to trouble.

It's drizzling on Monday morning, the day appointed for the lunch. Amy has set a rain date for the following day, and by noon it's clear no one's showing up. The Marches sit down and eat the ices and other trifles that won't keep till the following day.

This chapter essentially reconfigures and replays the moral lessons doled out in Chapters 7 and 11. Amy's plans are spoiled, given that she didn't keep things simple and aspired for the wrong things.

Amy prepares for the luncheon once again the following day. It's sunny out, so she's sure the girls will come. The kittens get into the cold chicken, leaving Amy tasked with getting a lobster from town. Amy orders the coach and drives off to collect her guests. She returns home with just one girl – Jo spies them as they approach the house and bids Hannah to clear the table of most of the food, given that they've planned for a dozen guests.

It seems that the universe is conspiring against Amy's desire for a complicated, fussy lunch. Amy, however, continues to commit the sin of vanity and insists on following through with her plans.

She has a pleasant time with her sole guest. After the girl leaves, Amy and the rest of the Marches sit down to their second night of salad and ices for supper. Jo makes a joke about it, and Amy bursts out laughing. She bids that they take the party leftovers to the Hummels. Mrs. March expresses her sympathy that the party was a disappointment, but Amy reflects that she is satisfied. "I've done what I undertook, and it's not my fault it failed," she says.

Similar to the lessons learned at the end of Chapters 9 and 11, Amy is cautioned to avoid vanity, pride, frivolity, and anything unnatural.

PART 2, CHAPTER 27: LITERARY LESSONS

Meanwhile, Jo continues her literary aspirations. "Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex....'"

It becomes very clear in this chapter that Jo is essentially Louisa May Alcott herself. Meanwhile, Jo's writing work is making her independent, a somewhat novel role for a woman.

One day, shortly after one of her writing jags, she escorts her gossipy neighbor Mrs. Crocker to a lecture on the pyramids. A man there is reading a newspaper, and Jo's eye is drawn to a scandalous illustration accompanying one of the stories. The man offers her the paper – after Jo reads the story (a work of sensationalist fiction), he mentions that the woman who wrote it makes a good living from her writing.

Before writing literary fiction and nonfiction, Alcott paid the bills by writing pulp fiction very similar to the sensational titles Jo is discovering in this scene. Jo is lured by the promise of money, with the desire to contribute to her family's welfare.

Jo resolves to try her hand at a sensational story – in particular, she wishes to win the $100 prize advertised in the paper the man gave her at the lecture. She pens a sensational story and furtively sends off the manuscript.

Jo is being secretive because she knows that her family won't approve of what she's writing. She realizes that they'll consider her stories immoral.

Six weeks later, Jo learns that she's won the prize. Her family is "electrified," but Mr. March feels that Jo is capable of better. "Aim at the highest, and never mind the money," he cautions. Jo resolves to use her earnings to send Beth and Mrs. March on a seaside holiday.

Mr. March acts as the moral compass in this scene – he worries that Jo's vulgar stories will corrupt her. Jo, however, has achieved a level of power and independence that few Gilded Age women can enjoy.

Jo continues to sell her stories, and she feels "genuine satisfaction" with her ability to support herself through her writing.

Jo's success as a writer is never painted in disparaging terms; in this way, the book can be seen as feminist.

Spurred by her successes, Jo sends out her novel manuscript. It's accepted, but under the condition that Jo trims it down by a third. Jo goes to her friends and family for advice, and they all give her differing opinions on how she should edit it and whether she should edit it at all. Confused by the conflicting advice, Jo decides to edit the book using a few of everyone's suggestions.

In consulting with other people about her book, Jo isn't being true to herself. This is an example of the trouble she encounters when she deviates from the path of simplicity and genuineness. This desire to please others is driven by her desire to contribute financially to her family.

The book is published and Jo receives $300. She is disappointed and confused, however, when her book receives wildly mixed reviews (the product of her attempt to try to please everyone); ultimately, though, she reflects that she has become a stronger person as a result of the experience.

If Jo had been true to herself she probably still wouldn't have pleased everyone, but she would have had the approval of her father. The ability to take risks and make a living from her wits is bolstering Jo's self-esteem – an experience many women weren't able to have at that time.

PART 2, CHAPTER 28: DOMESTIC EXPERIENCES

Meg begins married life determined to be a model housekeeper. Her initial efforts are overzealous – in one phase, she goes through a cooking mania that leaves Mr. Brooke with indigestion, and in another she becomes overly frugal, leaving her husband to eat very scanty meals.

Women in the 19th century were expected to stay at home and master the wifely arts of cooking and housekeeping. The following chapter will offer an object lesson in the merits of simplicity in keeping house.

Meg then takes a notion to fill her pantry with homemade currant preserves. She has her husband order canning supplies, currents, and sugar, and once they arrive she sets out to make the jam. Meg quickly discovers that, while she'd witnessed Hannah making jam numerous times, she didn't realize it was quite so tricky. Her kitchen quickly becomes a mess, and Meg is frustrated when the preserves won't set.

Meg and Mr. Brooke aren't wealthy enough to hire a servant to do the cooking, so Meg's duty as a woman is to take care of the household chores herself. Meg wishes to be the ideal 19th century wife: a beautiful, cheerful woman who nonetheless is also capable of culinary magic.

Mr. Brooke, meanwhile, decides to bring a friend home for supper – something Meg had always encouraged him to do. Upon returning home with his friend, he's shocked to discover the kitchen in disarray, supper unmade, and his wife in a foul mood. He comforts Meg and inadvertently insults her with a joke about the failed jam. Meg huffily sends him and his friend out of the house.

Because she didn't keep things simple, Meg has failed on all fronts to be the cheerful, ideal woman she hoped she would be. Mr. Brooke, although he feels sorry for her, nonetheless expects her to fulfill her wifely duties: to provide delicious meals, to keep a clean house, and to be a cheerful hostess.

That night, when Mr. Brooke returns home, Meg gives Mr. Brooke the cold shoulder until she recalls some advice Mrs. March had given her regarding Mr. Brooke: "Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err…" She goes to her husband and begs his pardon, and the two are able to laugh about the whole incident.

Meg thus learns a lesson about being a good wife: you mustn't let your silly feminine moods and foibles (i.e. the jam experiment) get in the way of making your husband happy.

A few months later, in the autumn, Meg renews her friendship with Sallie Moffat. Meg quickly grows envious of Sallie's ability to buy clothing and trifles on a whim. While shopping with Sallie one day, Meg splurges on a fifty-dollar silk dress. When she brings it home, she realizes that the dress isn't as lovely as she hoped, and that she's made a mistake.

The Marches inhabit a borderline space between classes: they have the wealth of a working class family, but the breeding and connections of a wealthy family. Because she's able to move in wealthier circles, Meg is able to feel more keenly her desire for the material wealth of the upper classes - hence her continued battle with the desire for fancy clothing.

At the end of the week, when she and Mr. Brooke are going over their budget, Meg confesses to buying the dress. Mr. Brooke is bewildered and disappointed. Meg apologizes, but also bitterly admits that she is tired of being poor. Mr. Brooke forgives Meg, but it's clear that she has hurt him.

Because Meg is a housewife, she is essentially powerless to change her monetary circumstances except through appealing to her husband. Her inability to accept her circumstances is a wifely failing (she should support her husband at all times).

One week later, Mr. Brooke reveals that he's cancelled the order for his new winter coat, given that he can no longer afford it. Meg weeps bitterly, and the two end up having a long discussion that helps Meg to "love her husband better for his poverty, because it seemed to have made a man of him…."

Is Mr. Brooke playing up his martyrdom a bit in this scene? Possibly. He is able to do this because Meg isn't being a subservient wife, and he knows that she'll feel guilty. Alcott once again pushes the idea that poverty actually breeds virtue.

The next day, Meg goes to Sallie and asks her to buy the dress from her as a favor; Sallie obliges. Meg then orders Mr. Brooke a new greatcoat – when it arrives and he tries it on, she asks him "how he liked her new silk gown."

Meg exhibits that she's learning to be a devoted wife – sacrificing her own happiness for her husband's.

The following summer, Meg experiences "the deepest and tenderest" experience "of a woman's life:" she gives birth to twins, a girl and a boy, nicknamed Daisy and Demi.

In the patriarchal 19th century, it was understood that the greatest thing a woman could do was become a mother.

PART 2, CHAPTER 29: CALLS

Amy insists that Jo should go with her on a series of house calls one day. Jo is reluctant, but agrees to go along under the condition that Amy is in charge. "You shall be commander of the expedition, and I'll obey blindly," Jo says. Amy dresses Jo in a manner she sees fit (in clothes that Jo finds uncomfortable), and the two sweep out to make their visits.

Amy isn't pleased with Jo's typically boyish or sloppy appearance, so she does her best to make Jo appear more feminine. In making house calls, Amy is working to strengthen her connections with wealthier families.

Before they arrive at the Chesters' house, Amy instructs Jo to be "calm, cool, quiet," behaviors that are "safe and ladylike." Jo agrees to do so, and remarks that she'll rely on her acting experience in order to play the part.

One of Little Women's more radical aspects can be found in its sympathy for Jo's boyish behavior and unfashionable looks; both of these things are valuable in part because they're genuine.

At the Chesters', Jo horrifies Amy by sitting in icy silence as their hosts try to make conversation with her. One of the Chesters remarks on how haughty Jo is as the sisters leave, and Amy is mortified.

And the minute Jo pretends to be something other than she actually is, disaster strikes.

Before they reach the Lambs' house, Amy instructs Jo to be more sociable. "Gossip as other girls do," she says. Jo agrees to do so, once again citing her acting abilities. When they reach the Lambs' Amy is once again mortified by Jo's behavior. Jo tells an outlandish story about how Amy learned how to ride a horse (a story that Amy fears will lead the Lambs to believe that Amy is a "fast" girl). Amy rushes Jo out of the Lambs' house and chastises her for once again misunderstanding her instructions.

This chapter exposes the contradictions inherent to the Gilded Age notions of how a proper lady should act. Jo's satirical send-up of these behaviors makes it clear how impossible the prospect of being a perfect lady actually was. To be a perfect lady meant being everything to everyone, it seems.

Amy gives up on Jo at the next house, bidding her to act however she likes. Jo is pleased, and when they arrive she begins chatting merrily with three boys. Amy remains in the house to chat with another guest, Mr. Tudor, who has aristocratic ties. After taking her leave, she exits the house to discover Jo sitting in the grass with the boys, her dress in ruins.

Jo is thus allowed to behave as she normally would, which leads her whole feminine charade to come tumbling down. Amy, meanwhile, continues to make valuable connections with the upper class – ones that will serve her well.

After they depart, Amy asks Jo why she paid no attention to Mr. Tudor, and yet was so kind to one of the boys, whose father owned a grocery store. Jo replies that she thinks Mr. Tudor "puts on airs, snubs his sisters, worries his father, and doesn't speak respectfully to his mother." The grocer's son, on the other hand, "is a gentleman in spite of the brown paper parcels."

Once again, Alcott puts forth the idea that social class is no basis by which to judge someone. Jo, for better or worse, chooses to involve herself with anyone she considers genuine.

For their final visit, the girls go to Aunt March's house. Before they reach the house, the girls have a conversation about how poor women should behave toward men. Jo argues that she should be allowed to snub men like Mr. Tudor, given that her disdain might influence him to reform his behavior. Amy argues that poor women "should learn to be agreeable…for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive."

Jo's attitude betrays her feeling that women can be on equal footing with men. Amy's assertion that women "have no other way of repaying" the men they interact with assumes that the only currency women wield is their ability to be charming. It thus makes sense that Jo (who has earned quite a bit of money) disagrees.

It turns out the Aunt Carrol is visiting Aunt March. Aunt Carrol makes conversation with the girls about an upcoming fair to be held by the Chesters. Amy reveals that she'll volunteer there, as a favor. Jo – riled up after her discussion with Amy, not to mention a day's worth of house calls – is in a feisty mood, and declares to Aunt Carrol that she doesn't like favors, given that they oppress her and make her feel like a slave. "I'd rather do everything myself, and be perfectly independent," she adds. Aunt March exchanges a glance with Aunt Carrol, and it's clear that they've made an important decision based on Jo's saucy statements.

Socially savvy Amy is digging her tendrils into the wealthy set yet again with the news that she'll be volunteering at the Chesters' fair. This scene offers a bit of backlash against Jo's desire to be completely and utterly genuine, despite whether it might offend someone. This is one of Little Women's cautionary tales against feminism: even if you're an independent, free-thinking woman, this doesn't exempt you from the consequences doled out by the patriarchal society you live in.

PART 2, CHAPTER 30: CONSEQUENCES

The day before the Chesters' fair, as they set up the tables, Amy is snubbed by Mrs. Chester and her daughter May, because May is envious of Amy. Mrs. Chester has Amy change her station from the art table (for which Amy had prepared a number of beautiful handmade items) to the **flower table** (located near the back of the fair). Amy is hurt, and sweeps the artworks she had made for the fair off of the table. She resolves to be kind to the Chesters, regardless of her anger. "Because they are mean is no reason why I should be," she tells Mrs. March. Her mother agrees that this is the right course of action.

Amy is worthy of envy because she has good breeding, has artistic talent, and is good looking. Her ability to navigate between social classes means that she presents a genuine threat to the likes of a wealthy girl like May Chester. It's fitting that Amy should be relegated to the flower table, as flowers in Little Women signify true, genuine beauty. Amy's decision to turn the other cheek is clearly Christian.

The day of the fair, Amy spies an entry in an old book that she had been illuminating: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Amy realizes that she shouldn't hold a grudge against the Chesters, and returns her artworks to the art table. Amy spends a long, disappointing day at the flower table – many of her flowers wilt, and she sells few things. After supper, however, the tide turns: Laurie sends in a new shipment of **flowers** from his conservatory, and brings a group of his college chums to the fair to buy Amy's wares.

Amy again turns the other cheek, a Christian act. Her virtue, and the suffering she endures as a result of it, doesn't go unnoticed: she is rewarded by male attention (something that May Chester no doubt envies). The fact that she's selling flowers echoes all other instances of flowers in Little Women: she is dealing in good, wholesome, simple things.

One week later, Amy is rewarded for her selfless, ladylike behavior. Aunt Carrol sends word that she wishes to take Amy with her on a trip to Europe. Jo is devastated – she was sure that Aunt Carrol would pick her. Mrs. March explains that Jo was passed over due to her "blunt manners and too independent spirit."

Amy is essentially rewarded for being more ladylike than Jo. Jo recognizes that there are consequences for women who don't live their lives according to the dictates of a patriarchal society.

Amy packs her things and leaves for Europe soon after. Before she leaves, Amy reminds Jo that this isn't "a pleasure trip" for her, given that she hopes to seriously study art while in Rome. Laurie sees Amy off at the docks, and promises her that he will go to Europe and comfort her if anything bad should happen back home.

Amy seems to believe she deserves this trip more than Jo, given that it represents more opportunities to make wealthy connections (connections that Jo would ruin). Laurie's tenderness toward Amy foreshadows later events.

PART 2, CHAPTER 31: OUR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

Amy writes from Europe. She tells of her adventures in London, where she runs into the Vaughns. Fred Vaughn seems to be infatuated with Amy, so much so that he follows Amy and the Carrols to Paris (under the guise of being en route to Switzerland). In a letter to Mrs. March, Amy reveals that she thinks Fred wishes to marry her. She tells Marmee that though she's "not madly in love," she's decided that she will say yes if he asks. "One of us *must* marry well," she writes.

Amy is aware of her power as an attractive, socially adept woman: she is capable of "making a good match," so as to pull her family out of poverty. In the patriarchal 19th century, a woman's power rested largely in her ability to marry well. Marriage was often considered to be a business decision rather than a matter of love.

PART 2, CHAPTER 32: TENDER TROUBLES

Something in Beth's behavior worries Mrs. March. After observing Beth in secret, Jo concludes that she has fallen in love with Laurie. This leads Jo to daydream about love and marriage. She considers, briefly, her family's speculation that Laurie has become fonder of her lately. Jo dismisses this notion, citing how Laurie is too much of a "weathercock."

To Jo, the worst thing that could befall Beth is falling in love (which means she'll be married off and taken away) – hence her assumption that she's in love with Laurie. Mrs. March, however, secretly worries that Beth is dying.

That night, Jo watches Laurie talk to Beth in the Marches' parlor. Jo retreats to the sofa, so as to give the two some space. As she considers where in the house she might hide away, Laurie suddenly sits down beside her. Jo tries to send him back to Beth, but Laurie won't hear of it.

Jo is in denial about Laurie's infatuation with her, perhaps because she regards the idea of marriage with nothing short of horror.

Laurie and Jo banter about flirtation. Jo scolds Laurie for flirting with girls who don't care "two pins" for him at college, and Laurie quips, "Sensible girls for whom I do care whole papers of pins won't let me…." Jo admits that she doesn't understand flirting, and Laurie replies that he's glad Jo isn't capable of flirting.

Laurie is, in effect, blaming his flirtations with other women on Jo, given that she isn't giving him what he wants. In rejecting love, Jo is rejecting another facet of what at that time was considered feminine.

Later that night, as she lies awake in bed, Jo overhears Beth weeping into her pillow. She assumes that Beth is crying about Laurie.

Again, given her strong anti-romance sentiments, Jo can't fathom that Beth might be upset about something else.

Several days later, prompted by both Beth and Laurie's behavior, Jo tells Mrs. March that she thinks it would be best if she left town for a while. Jo's plan is to go to New York, where she will work as a governess for Mrs. Kirke, a friend of the family. Jo admits to Mrs. March that Laurie is in love with her, and Mrs. March is relieved that Jo isn't in love with him – she fears they would "both rebel" if they were married. Mrs. March agrees to Jo's plan, and bids her to enjoy life as a single woman until she tires of it, "for only then will you find that there is something sweeter."

Jo and Laurie's relationship in Little Women is curious. It seems that both Jo and Mrs. March fear Jo's involvement with Laurie. There's often a sense that they're both too hotheaded, both too passionate – hence Mrs. March's feeling that they would both "rebel" if married. One might speculate that there's strong sexual tension between Laurie and Jo, and that such feelings are regarded with suspicion. Marriage, according to Little Women, shouldn't be passionate. This is very much in line with popular thought in the 19th century.

On the day of her departure, Jo asks Beth to take care of Laurie for her while she's away. As she says goodbye to Laurie, he leans in and whispers, "It won't do a bit of good, Jo. My eye is on you, so mind what you do, or I'll come and bring you home."

It's speculated that Alcott based Laurie's character on Laddie, a Polish musician whom she met while traveling in Europe. Their affair was brief and passionate. This may explain her rendering of Jo and Laurie's relationship in Little Women.

PART 2, CHAPTER 33: JO'S JOURNAL

Jo writes to Mrs. March and Beth about her adventures in New York. Mrs. Kirke is the proprietor of a large boarding house, and the place is filled with numerous characters. Jo is in charge of taking care of Mrs. Kirke's two little girls: Minnie and Kitty.

In spite of being a tomboy, Jo is depicted as having strong maternal instincts – one of her few stereotypically feminine traits. Her time as a governess will illustrate this.

Jo befriends Professor Bhaer – a jolly, bearded German man who has the custody of his two young, orphaned nephews. (His deceased sister had married an American, and had wished for her sons to live in America.) Jo is tickled by Professor Bhaer's intelligence and kindness, and she's delighted by how much the children in the boarding house adore him.

Jo's admiration of Professor Bhaer has to do as much with his poverty (which breeds virtue) as it does with his genuine manner and his love for children. It's also worth noting that her admiration doesn't involve passion.

At Christmastime, Jo is pleased to discover that Professor Bhaer, in spite of being quite poor, has given everyone in the house a gift. He gives Jo a copy of Shakespeare's works. Jo gives him several small gifts in return. Their friendship flourishes, and Jo concludes that she is very happy with her new life in New York.

Mr. Bhaer's generosity is a product both of his strong Christian beliefs and of the poverty he's endured. It's worth comparing his relationship with Jo to the relationship Jo has with Laurie. There is no passion or spark in this instance; theirs is a kinship of the mind.

PART 2, CHAPTER 34: FRIEND

In spite of keeping quite busy in her work as a governess, Jo still makes time to write stories for money. "She saw that money conferred power, money and power, therefore, she resolved to have, not to be used just for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than life."

Jo recognizes that money is power – moreover, it is a power that's typically wielded by men. Beauty and refinement offer power to women in a patriarchal society; because Jo lacks these, she seeks power in a different (arguably more potent) way.

Jo "dresses herself in her best" and goes to the offices of the *Weekly Volcano* with her latest sensation story. Jo tells the editor that "her friend" would like to publish the story. The editor gruffly takes her manuscript and chuckles over her ruse. Jo leaves feeling embarrassed and nettled.

Jo is nervous about admitting that she herself wrote the story given that it's full of sensational filth (most likely murder, scandal, and romance). She worries that she'll be considered an immoral woman.

In spite of her less than desirable welcome at the *Weekly Volcano*'s offices, Jo is pleased to learn, the following week, that the editor will pay her "twenty-five to thirty" for her story. She's crestfallen and confused, however, that the editor has chosen to cut out all references to morals in her story.

Jo's inclusion of morals in her sensational stories is her way of attempting to be true to her Christian upbringing. It is understood that she's compromising her morals by accepting money for the edited story.

Jo continues to write stories, and soon she has made a tidy sum from her writing. She can't help but feel, though, that her parents would not approve of her stories. Her character begins to be affected by the subject matter of her stories. "She was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her…."

In the world of Little Women, association with unsavory people or ideas is dangerous. Simply by writing stories about criminals and villains, Jo opens herself up to moral corruption.

Meanwhile, Jo studies Professor Bhaer, trying to discern what it is that makes him so attractive to everyone in his wake. Jo concludes that even though Professor Bhaer is poor and none too handsome, his "genuine good will" toward humanity was able to beautify and dignify him.

Mr. Bhaer serves as a role model to Jo at this point. She recognizes that his simple, natural, Christian goodness is enough to give him beauty. Again, note that there is no passion in Jo's admiration of Bhaer.

A well-connected lady at the boarding house takes Jo to a symposium featuring a number of literary and philosophical luminaries. Jo is shocked to discover that many of her idols are flawed – a great novelist is drinking to excess, a famous divine (a clergyman) is flirting shamelessly, etc.

Alcott may well be mining her own experiences growing up around famed Gilded Age luminaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson in this scathing party scene. Again, the idea that poverty and hard work breeds virtue is at play in this scene (the luminaries are flawed in part because they're famous and wealthy).

Professor Bhaer joins the ladies. Nearby, several philosophers begin talking about the possibility that God doesn't exist. Professor Bhaer is furious, and staunchly defends the existence of God. As she listens to him, Jo is relieved to find that "God was not a blind force, and immortality not a pretty fable, but a blessed fact." Jo is deeply impressed, and leaves the party thinking "character is a better possession than money, rank, intellect, or beauty…."

Conversations such as this were commonplace among intellectuals in the Gilded Age. Alcott rejects this notion, steadfastly advocating for the character-building benefits of Christian beliefs and ideals. It's worth recalling that Jo's father is a minister; Bhaer must strike Jo as a kind of father figure in this scene.

Professor Bhaer has taken it upon himself to teach Jo German. One evening, he arrives to their lesson wearing a paper hat (a gift from one of his students). Jo breaks out in laughter, and Professor Bhaer removes the hat from his head. Jo realizes that the hat is made from a paper that prints sensational stories, and she blushes. Professor Bhaer realizes that Jo must be writing sensational stories, and he feels it's his duty to protect Jo from harm. He denounces sensational stories, and throws the paper hat in the fire.

Again, Professor Bhaer takes the role of father figure in Jo's life. He's not only taking it upon himself to tutor Jo in German; he assumes it is also his role to teach her about morality as well. Jo's subservience to Bhaer is strongly in line with the accepted role of women in the 19th century.

Jo returns to her room that night and, upon further reflection, realizes that she's writing nothing but trash. "I've gone blindly on," she thinks, "hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money."

It's assumed that just the simple act of reading pulp fiction will lead to the corruption of one's character.

Jo attempts to write in other genres, but is unable to come up with anything good. She resolves to set writing aside for a time, with the hope that someday she might try again afresh.

Jo's abandonment of her writing is troubling, insofar as she's done it not simply in order to be more virtuous, but in order to please the patriarch in her life (Bhaer).

Winter and spring pass, and Jo readies herself to leave for home in June. Before she leaves, she invites Professor Bhaer to visit her in a month, when Laurie graduates. Professor Bhaer seems troubled by the mention of Laurie, and he politely turns down her invitation. That night, Professor Bhaer resigns himself to the thought that Jo doesn't love him. Meanwhile, Jo is left with the feeling that she's made a wonderful friend, and she hopes to keep him all her life.

The fact that Jo doesn't recognize that Bhaer is in love with her is another indication of the lack of passion in their relationship. Contrast this with Laurie's ardor, which Jo is very much aware of, to the point where she feels anxiety about it.

PART 2, CHAPTER 35: HEARTACHE

Laurie has worked hard during Jo's absence, and he has graduated with honors. After his graduation ceremony, Laurie makes Jo promise to meet with him the following day. Jo secretly worries that he'll propose to her.

Laurie has put Jo on a pedestal. She is the force that keeps him on the straight and narrow path of a moral life. This is a traditional role for women in a patriarchal society.

Jo meets with Laurie the following day. While they walk through the woods and fields near Laurie's house, he has it out with Jo. Laurie proclaims his love to her. "I've loved you ever since I've known you, Jo," he says. Jo pushes him away and tells him that she can never love him the way he wants her to. Laurie is crushed, and Jo apologizes profusely.

It's not clear whether Jo actually feels this way, or if she's frightened of the prospect of being romantically involved with Laurie. Laurie's almost overwhelming passion could be seen as a vice – something that would corrupt Jo's morality.

Laurie bitterly speculates that Jo is in love with Professor Bhaer. Jo denies it, and then tells Laurie that he will fall in love with someone else. Laurie stamps his foot and cries, "I can't love anyone else, and I'll never forget you, Jo, Never! Never!" Laurie implores her again to marry him, this time appealing to Mr. Laurence's hopes that they would marry, and Jo loses her temper. "I'll never marry you, and the sooner you believe it the better for both of us – so now!" she cries. Laurie storms away.

Little Women can be seen, in part, as a love letter to Laurie. - no other male character in the book is so tenderly, vividly rendered as he is. It's because of this vivid rendering that scholars speculate Laurie is based on Laddie, Alcott's former paramour. In appealing to his grandfather's wishes, Laurie appeals to Jo's affection for the old man, as well as reminding her of his wealth.

Jo goes to Mr. Laurence and tells him about Laurie. Later that day, Mr. Laurence confronts a distraught Laurie. Mr. Laurence reveals that he has business to attend to in London, and that he's like for Laurie to come with him. Heartbroken, Laurie agrees, and preparations are made for their departure.

Mr. Laurence recognizes that Laurie's passionate spirit can only be tamed by time away from Jo. It's also implied that working with his grandfather in Europe will heal Laurie, as work is (according to Alcott) a "panacea."

As Laurie says his goodbyes, he embraces Jo and begs her to reconsider. "Teddy, I wish I could!" Jo says. Laurie leaves, and Jo realizes that "the boy Laurie never would come again."

This is the breaking point for Laurie and Jo. It's implied that this is the most virtuous choice that the two could have made.

PART 2, CHAPTER 36: BETH'S SECRET

Jo realizes that Beth's health has waned in her absence. Jo reveals to her family that she has made some extra money selling sensation stories, and offers to send Beth on holiday to the mountains, with the hope that it will help her gain strength. Beth declines, and asks instead to go somewhere closer to home. It's decided that she and Jo will go on holiday to the seaside instead.

The upside of Jo's writing is that it affords her a degree of power that most women of her station in life often never enjoyed: the ability to confer comfort and luxury to those she loves most. Beth's suggestion of going to the seashore implies that she is on death's door.

Jo and Beth go to the seaside. During their trip, Jo somehow senses that Beth is going to die soon. She refrains from discussing this, however, as she doesn't know how to broach the subject. One day, while they sit in the sand, Beth looks at Jo and (without hesitation) says she's glad that Jo knows that she's near death. Beth reveals that this was the source of her unhappiness the previous fall.

Jo's relationship with Beth reveals another of her stereotypically feminine traits: that she is a caretaker. It's implied that the sisterly love between the two is so strong that Jo is able to telepathically understand that Beth will die soon.

Jo implores Beth to not give up on life just yet. Soon after, a **small brown sandpiper** sits on a rock near them. Beth finds the bird comforting, as it reminds her that "a pleasant world was still to be enjoyed."

The bird, though a dull color, is nonetheless beautiful insofar as it belongs to the natural world. This bird can be seen as representing Beth.

When they return home, Mr. and Mrs. March plainly see that Beth is not long for the world. Beth is tired from the journey and immediately goes to bed. The rest of the family quietly grieves.

The family understands that Beth was never long for this world, given that she is so pure of heart.

PART 2, CHAPTER 37: NEW IMPRESSIONS

It's Christmas Day, in Nice, France. While strolling up the Promenade des Anglais, Laurie unexpectedly runs into Amy, who's driving a little carriage. She's overjoyed to see him, and Laurie climbs into the carriage. They drive out into the country. As they talk Amy realizes that something is different about Laurie, though she can't quite figure out what it is. Laurie agrees to return that night for the Christmas dance.

Now that she's abroad, Amy is able to act as if she's from the upper class. Her sisterly bond with Laurie affords her some insight into his character, which is why she's able to sense a change in his person.

Amy primps for the ball. She wears her cousin's old white silk dress and freshens it up with swaths of tulle "illusion," which is inexpensive in Nice. She adorns the dress simply with **vines and azalea**. "If I only had a classical nose and mouth I should be perfectly happy," she thinks as she gazes at her reflection.

Amy, being an artist, is able to adorn herself cunningly using the simplest, most down to earth accessories. It's no surprise, then, that she adorns herself with flowers, which are symbolic of ideal natural beauty. Still, Amy longs (sinfully) for a better nose.

Amy sweeps into the ball and greets Laurie, who has brought her **flowers**. The ball is filled with minor aristocrats (including a Russian prince), and Amy is pleased to with the knowledge that she looks attractive and that she dances well.

Thanks to her beauty, Amy is able to transcend her social class and move among minor royalty. For women in a patriarchal society, beauty is equal to power.

Laurie and Amy flirt – they dance together, and then Amy coquettishly pushes him away in lieu of dancing with a Polish count. Laurie decides that Amy is growing into a charming young woman. When she stops dancing, he asks her where she learned to act this way. Amy is puzzled. "Well – the general air, the style, the self-possession, the – the- illusion – you know," he explains. Amy reveals that foreign life "polishes one in spite of one's self" and that she's learned to make the most of her inexpensive luxuries. Laurie finds himself with newfound admiration for Amy.

"Illusion" here has a double meaning. Amy literally swaths herself in mesh, giving herself the illusion of having a more expensive dress. On a figurative level, Amy swathes herself with the illusion of being in the upper class. It is this illusion, in part, that causes Laurie to see her in a new light.

PART 2, CHAPTER 38: ON THE SHELF

Meanwhile, back at the Dovecote, Meg is wearing herself thin by devoting all of her time and energy to the twins. Mr. Brooke feels neglected, and he begins spending more and more time at the house of a friend of his.

Meg's attempt to become the ideal mother has ironically turned her into a less than ideal wife. Mr. Brooke's loss of interest in Meg is seen as her own fault.

Meg begins to feel abandoned, and she goes to Mrs. March for advice. Marmee explains that Meg has "made the mistake that most young wives make – forgotten your duty to your husband in your love for your children." Mrs. March suggests that Meg let Hannah come over to help out more often, and that she give Mr. Brooke more responsibilities regarding Demi.

Mrs. March's advice is both staunchly patriarchal and mildly feminist. On the one hand, to blame Mr. Brooke's behavior on Meg is clearly patriarchal (women are supposed to please their husbands). On the other hand, her advice for Mr. Brooke to be more involved in raising his children flies in the face of traditional patriarchal gender roles.

Meg tries this formula, and discovers that Mr. Brooke is far better at disciplining the children than she is. One night, when Meg plans a special evening for her and Mr. Brooke, Demi throws a tantrum and refuses to go to bed. Mr. Brooke is finally the only one able to tame the toddler. When he comes downstairs, he's pleased to find that Meg tries to engage him in a conversation about politics. In turn, he asks her questions about the bonnet she's working on.

Alcott's assertion that men should be involved in their children's upbringing is again feminist, insofar as it subverts the traditional role of the distant, unemotional father. Meg then works to please her husband by feigning an interest in politics.

Meg reveals to her husband that she's trying to take Mrs. March's advice, and Mr. Brooke is overjoyed. In the end, though experiments such as this, the Brooke household achieves happiness by increments. Meg thus learns that "a woman's happiest kingdom is home."

Ultimately, Little Women is a conservative text thanks to moments like this. The notion that women are happiest in the home is a patriarchal ideal.

PART 2, CHAPTER 39: LAZY LAURENCE

Laurie remains in Nice for a month. He seems to have become quite lazy, and Amy grows disappointed in him. One day, she asks him to accompany her on a drive to Valrosa. When they arrive, Amy comments that it's a "regular honeymoon paradise," given the abundance of roses and romantic nooks. A thorn pricks Laurie as he attempts to pluck **a single red rose** that sits just beyond his reach, and Amy suggests that he try one of the roses lower down, as they have no thorns. Laurie laughs as she says this – it makes him think of Jo.

Once again, the symbol of the flower enters into the text. This time, the rose bears a direct relation to Jo and her thorny treatment of Laurie. The notion that Laurie should try the roses lower down, as they have no thorns, is one that he will soon put into practice when he pursues Amy. Amy notes that Laurie's laziness has made him prone to sinful behavior and attitudes.

Amy asks Laurie when he's going back to Mr. Laurence – she's asked him this before, and each time he's said he'd go soon, to no avail. Laurie shrugs her question off. He lounges near her and she begins to sketch him. Amy asks him for news from home, and he quickly changes the subject. Laurie asks Amy about her art (she's relegated it to a hobby, having become discouraged in Rome) and about whether she plans on marrying Fred Vaughn.

Mr. Laurence, you'll remember, is currently attending to business in London. Amy's query implies that she thinks a bit of work (namely, working for his grandfather in London) would do Laurie good. Laurie recognizes that Amy is now a grown woman, and as such she will marry soon.

Laurie continues to lounge indolently, and Amy grows frustrated. She tells him that she and her cousin have taken to calling him Lazy Laurence. "I despise you," she says. She mocks the softness and whiteness of his hands, and wishes out loud that Jo were there to help her. Laurie agrees, and something in the tone of his voice makes Amy realize that Jo has spurned him.

Soft, white hands were associated with femininity and weakness in the 19th century. Amy's insult implies that she thinks Laurie's idleness is causing him to become morally lax.

Amy feels bad for Laurie, but continues to scold him for being lazy. She tells him that Jo wouldn't have wanted to see him this way. Amy then shows Laurie two sketches – one old one of him trying to tame a young colt, and another (freshly drawn) of him lying in the grass. Laurie suggests that they should return to the hotel. Amy fears that she's offended him, but her scolding has actually done Laurie good. Laurie bids her adieu at the hotel and begs off dinner, saying that he has an engagement.

In a patriarchal society, women were often put in the position of being role models to the men around them. They were expected to uphold morality, so as to inspire the men around them to be better. Amy clearly fills that role in this scene.

The next day, Amy receives a note from Laurie, stating that he's returning to London to be with Mr. Laurence. He sends his regards to Fred Vaughn, and insinuates that Fred might be in need of a "rouser."

Laurie recognizes that it was wrong for him to have been so idle. He insinuates that Fred may be guilty of the same.

PART 2, CHAPTER 40: THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

Back in the March household, the family is coming to grips with Beth's imminent death. Beth is given a special room in the house. The family gathers with her here (Daisy and Demi often visit, and Mrs. March, Jo, and Mr. March often do their work in the room), and for the first few months they experience a good deal of happiness.

Familial love serves to offer solace, and even joy, in the face of Beth's demise. The fact that the family members often do their work in Beth's room is no surprise, as work (according to Alcott) has the power to soothe and heal.

Beth eventually becomes weaker and weaker, to the point where she can no longer sew. One sleepless night, Beth comes across a poem written by Jo ("My Beth") amongst the papers on her desk. She reads it and finds immense comfort in its lines, as Jo writes that Beth was useful and industrious in her life. (Beth has secretly felt that she was worthless.)

Beth's feelings of worthlessness can be seen either as an extension of her extreme humility (borne of religiousness) or as a symptom of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

Spring arrives. Lying asleep on her mother's chest, Beth dies one day at the break of dawn. Sunlight streams onto Beth's face, and **snowdrops** are blooming outside. Her family is glad to know that "Beth was well at last."

The appearance of snowdrops can be seen as symbolic of the release of Beth's soul after her long and difficult illness.

PART 2, CHAPTER 41: LEARNING TO FORGET

Laurie works to forget Jo. At first, he tries to bury his sadness in music, attempting to compose a requiem that would "harrow up Jo's soul." Failing at this, Laurie next attempts to write an opera. He fails at this, too, given that all he can remember are Jo's quirks and failings. When Jo fails as his heroine, he then tries to compose it for an imaginary woman – a figment with "golden hair…enveloped in a diaphanous cloud." Ultimately, this too fails, and Laurie decides he isn't cut out to be a musician.

The cloud in Laurie's imagination is eerily similar to the "illusion" Amy was wrapped in at the party. This vision is obviously Amy given that she's a blonde. Laurie's attempt to forget his pain in work is well intended. However, it fails because this seems to be the wrong kind of work – it's frivolous, and so it leads him back to thoughts of Jo.

Laurie realizes that his pain is subsiding far more quickly than he thought it would. He realizes that his love for Jo is subsiding into a "brotherly affection." Glancing at a portrait of Mozart, Laurie thinks, "Well, he was a great man, and when he couldn't have one sister he took the other, and was happy."

Laurie realizes that his infatuation with Jo was fleeting. The interchangeability of the two sisters can be seen as a symptom of a patriarchal society; Jo and Amy are suddenly interchangeable simply because they're female.

Laurie shakes himself from his growing contentment and writes one last letter to Jo, begging her one last time to marry him. Jo writes back and tells him that she decidedly "couldn't and wouldn't." She encourages Laurie to write to Amy. After some hesitation, Laurie does so.

It is as if Jo intuitively understands that Laurie should pursue Amy. His sudden changes of mood are exemplary of what Jo refers to as his "weathercock" nature.

Meanwhile, Amy has decided to turn down Fred Vaughn, as she "didn't care to be a queen of society now half so much as she did to be a lovable woman." She and Laurie take up a lively correspondence, and Amy starts to show signs of lovesickness (she becomes pale and solitary).

In 19th century literature, blushing and growing pale were often signals of deep emotional shifts. In this case, it signals Amy's realization that she loves Laurie. She realizes that the most virtuous path is to marry for love, not money.

A letter about Beth's failing health is lost in the mail, and by the time Amy hears about her it's far too late. The Marches tell her to stay in Europe, and Amy resolves to bear the pain as well as she can. Laurie receives a letter about Beth the same day; he makes preparations to be with Amy (who is currently in Vevay, France) the minute he receives it.

A trip to Europe such as the one Amy is on would have been a once in a lifetime affair for most working class American girls in the 19th century. The trip back to America would have taken weeks. This is why her family encourages her to stay put.

Laurie finds Amy sitting by the shore of the lake, and the minute he sees her he knows that his view of her has changed. The two embrace, and from that moment they know that they are meant for one another.

Note that there's none of the fiery passion Laurie showed towards Jo. Their love is virtuous and right, insofar as it isn't passionate.

Aunt Carrol realizes that Amy had been pining for Laurie, and she invites him to stay with them. One day, as Amy and Laurie are rowing on the lake, Amy comments how well the two row together. Laurie turns to Amy and says, "So well that I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?" Amy agrees.

The notion that Laurie and Amy row well together is to say that they work well together. Their partnership isn't built on passionate love; rather, it's built on a desire to get work done as a team. They're affectionate, true, but their engagement bears resemblance to a business deal.

PART 2, CHAPTER 42: ALL ALONE

Jo realizes she has to come to grips with life without Beth. She finds it difficult to act virtuous without her sister's pious influence, and she realizes that she can never fully take Beth's place (something Beth had asked her to do before she'd died). In despair, Jo goes to Mr. March and tells him her troubles. She finds comfort in confiding in him, and she also eventually finds comfort in performing the small household tasks that were once Beth's responsibility.

As women in the Gilded Age were lauded for their ability to serve as virtuous role models for men, it's interesting to note that Beth played this very role in Jo's life. Jo, for whom feminine virtue doesn't come easily, therefore finds it difficult to be good once Beth is gone.

One day, while sewing with Meg, Jo reflects on how good marriage has been for her sister. Meg suggests to Jo that love will make her show her heart one day. "Frost opens chestnut burrs…and it takes a good shake to bring them down," Jo retorts. The narrator reveals that grief is the frost that has pried Jo's heart open.

Interestingly enough, it seems like Beth had one more lesson to teach Jo. Somehow, Jo finds herself newly able to fall in love as a result of her deep grief over Beth. In recognizing Meg's happiness, Jo revises her thoughts about marriage; it may be that, because she's a woman, she would be happiest if she were married.

Mrs. March suggests to Jo that she start writing again. Jo takes her advice, and pens a short story that, after publication, goes on to garner quite a bit of praise. Jo is puzzled with her success, and Mr. March tells her it's because "there is truth in it," given that Jo wrote it with no "thoughts of fame and money."

Jo's break from writing seems to have cleansed her spirit. Because she isn't striving for power (a masculine pursuit), her writing is finally deemed good.

Amy writes to tell her family about her betrothal to Laurie. Jo is grave when she reads the news, but soon reveals that she's happy. Jo retreats to her garret, where she reflects on the winter she spent at the Kirkes' house. She finds a note from Professor Bhaer tucked away in one of her books – the note bids her to wait for him. She clutches the note fast and longs for the professor to fulfill his promise.

Jo's real feelings aren't clear in this passage. Is she happy for Amy? Or does she feel regret for letting Laurie go? Her regret may have to do with her realization that she is now ready to marry. Jo's romantic feelings for Bhaer signal that she's grown more in line with the 19th century ideal of femininity.

PART 2, CHAPTER 43: SURPRISES

The night before her birthday, Jo sits on the old sofa and reflects on her life. She's turning twenty-five, and she speculates that she's destined for life as a "literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse…." She drifts off to sleep.

It's worth noting that Alcott herself was a "literary spinster." Although she had a number of romances throughout her life, she never married.

Jo awakens soon after to find Laurie standing before her. Laurie reveals that he and Amy eloped while they were in Europe. Laurie tells Jo that he still loves her, but his love for her is "altered;" he no longer has romantic feelings for her. He begs Jo to let things be as they once were. Jo warns him that they can "never be boy and girl again," and that they are "man and woman now, with sober work to do...we must give up frolicking." Laurie quietly accepts this state of affairs.

By "frolicking," Jo refers to the innocent play and flirtation that she and Laurie used to engage in. Because Jo has assumed her role as a grown woman (rather than an overgrown girl), she sees that the most virtuous path is to take on a different sort of relationship with Laurie based on their adult selves.

The whole family, accompanied by Mr. Laurence, enters the parlor. Amy's European airs are noted by the Marches, and Jo notes that she and Laurie look wonderful together. The party goes upstairs, leaving Jo alone. She feels sorry for herself (for she feels Laurie has abandoned her), but her sorrow is interrupted by a knock on the door. Jo is ecstatic to discover that it's Professor Bhaer. He reveals that business has brought him to her city.

Amy seems like the perfect match for Laurie, insofar as she can wrap herself in the illusion of being from the upper class. Jo's despair can be seen as patriarchal, insofar as she needs a man in her life in order to be happy. (She is despondent when Laurie abandons her; ecstatic when Bhaer arrives.)

Jo invites him in and introduces him to her family. They welcome him as one of their own, and they feel "all the more friendly because he was poor." Professor Bhaer falls into a conversation with Mr. March, and Jo considers how much her father would love to have the professor to talk with every day. Jo also takes note that the professor has dressed up as much as he can, as if "he'd been going a-wooing." Jo's family approves of the professor – Mr. March suspects that he is "a wise man."

Bhaer is seen as a virtuous and good person as a result of his poverty. Bhaer's father figure status is reinforced by Jo's musings that her father would love to talk to him. One could say that Bhaer is simply a younger version of Jo's own father, given that he's bearded, poor, pious, and highly intelligent.

PART 2, CHAPTER 44: MY LORD AND LADY

Laurie and Amy have a private conversation. Laurie exclaims that Professor Bhaer is going to marry Jo, and this precipitates a playful debate about how young women shouldn't marry for money. Amy grows serious and tells Laurie that she wishes they could do something for Jo and Professor Bhaer, should they marry. She and Laurie vow to help Jo and Professor Bhaer somehow, in due time. Laurie and Amy then go on to vow to help all sorts of people, especially those who toil in silence without asking for charity.

Amy and Laurie reflect on the power they wield as members of the upper class. Their discussion underscores the extent to which their relationship has some aspects reminiscent of business partnership. Given her upbringing, it's natural that Amy would want to help those who "toil in silence," for this is what her family has done for so many years.

PART 2, CHAPTER 45: DAISY AND DEMI

In this chapter, the charming childhood adventures of Daisy and Demi are described.

This chapter really doesn't expand upon any of the book's themes. It's essentially a throwaway chapter to provide a bit of comic relief after the heaviness of what's happened in the chapters prior.

PART 2, CHAPTER 46: UNDER THE UMBRELLA

Jo and Professor Bhaer begin to spend more and more time together, and by the second week of his visit the Marches (all but Jo) are sure of his intentions. However, after two weeks of daily visits, the professor is away for three days. Jo is frustrated, and she decides to take her mind off of things by running some errands in town (secretly harboring the hope that she would run into the professor). Her mother reminds her to take **an umbrella** before she leaves – Jo forgets this.

It's not clear whether Jo is in disbelief about Bhaer's intentions because she's oblivious (given that she's very innocent and natural) or whether it's because she has low self-esteem (given that she's not an ideal woman). She leaves the house without the protection of an umbrella, a symbol of masculine protection.

Jo finds herself walking in the men's district of town – the counting houses, banks, and wholesale warerooms – where she hopes to catch a glimpse of the professor. It begins raining, and Jo chastises herself for forgetting her umbrella in her foolish search for the professor. As she walks, she notices that **an umbrella** is being held over her head. She looks up and sees that it belongs to Professor Bhaer.

Lo and behold, here's Bhaer with an umbrella, the symbol for male protection! It's significant that he offers her some protection in this, the men's side of town. Given that she's a writer, Jo has (up until now) had to navigate the male world (that is, the world outside of the home) on her own.

As they walk, the professor reveals that he's been offered a position at a college in the West. Jo is shattered, but keeps her feelings to herself. She numbly accompanies him on a number of errands, and finally tells him that she must return home. She begins to weep as they walk, prompting the professor to ask her what's wrong. Jo confesses that she's heartbroken that he's going away. Professor Bhaer is overjoyed, and he proposes to Jo on the spot. Jo joyously accepts

The professor has taken this position in order to raise money for his adopted children; this is yet another example of the intertwining of hard work and virtue. Note how platonic their love seems. It is deep and true, and yet it seems to lack the passion of Jo's prior interactions with Laurie.

The professor reveals that he got the courage to court Jo from a poem of hers ("In the Garret" – detailing each of the March girls' hope chests) that he found published in a paper. The poem convinced Professor Bhaer that Jo was lonely and might accept his love. When they arrive at the March family's house, Jo kisses him while they still stand under **the umbrella**.

Bhaer made the assumption that Jo would accept his proposal given that she was lonely...not because they were especially compatible or in love. The assumption here is that women are happier when they're married; Bhaer assumed that Jo would be no exception.

PART 2, CHAPTER 47: HARVEST TIME

Professor Bhaer has gone West to work at the college and earn money for his nephews. Meanwhile, he and Jo keep up a brisk correspondence. Aunt March dies, and Jo is floored to learn that she has been left Plumfield, Aunt March's estate. Jo reveals that she wishes to turn the old mansion into a school for boys.

This chapter signifies that the March family will enjoy a rich harvest at the end of their labors. Jo, for instance, is gifted with Plumfield – launching her solidly into the middle class.

The months fly by, and soon Jo finds herself married and living at Plumfield. They open the school, and after some trial and error the place flourishes. Jo goes on to have two boys of her own, Rob and Teddy.

Though the fit isn't perfect, Jo finds herself much more in line with the 19th century feminine ideal now that she's married and has children.

Five years after her marriage, at apple-picking time, Jo and Professor Bhaer host a harvest party at Plumfield. The Marches, the Laurences, and the Brookes all show up in full force, and the apple orchard is overrun with children. A toast is raised to Aunt March, and to Mrs. March's sixtieth birthday. Jo's students disappear into the branches of the trees and soon begin to sing a song written by Jo.

Jo's students cling to the branches of the apple trees like ripe fruit. It's implied that Jo and her sisters' harvest is their children; this is in line with the 19th century ideal of womanhood. On a more feminist note, the entire scene wouldn't have been possible without the matriarchs of the March family: Mrs. March and Aunt March.

Mrs. March sits "enthroned" in the grass, surrounded by her daughters. They all reflect on their respective gains and losses, and Mrs. March proclaims that Jo's "harvest will be a good one." Jo swears that there can be no greater harvest than Mrs. March's. She thanks her mother heartily, and Mrs. March gathers her daughters into her arms. "Oh, my girls," she cries, "however long you may live, I can never wish you a greater happiness than this!"

The image of Mrs. March seated with her daughters recalls the first chapter of the book, when the girls gathered at her feet in the sitting room of their modest house. Having grown into virtuous mothers, the March girls have fulfilled every wish their mother might have had for them. Familial love is seen as the greatest happiness of all.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Reges, Margaret. "*Little Women*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Nov 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Reges, Margaret. "*Little Women*." LitCharts LLC, November 24, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/little-women.

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MLA

Alcott, Louisa May. Little Women. Signet Classics. 2012.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Alcott, Louisa May. Little Women. New York: Signet Classics. 2012.