

Unmasking Gender and Agency: A Feminist-Historical Synthesis of Social Contexts in Louisa
May Alcott's *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Résumé	4
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
The Dual Literary Identity of Louisa May Alcott.....	19
Alcott's Authorial Timeline and Contexts.....	26
Gender, Autonomy, and Performance in Alcott's Works.....	33
Publishing, Economic Realities, and Theoretical Perspectives.....	37
Subverting Social Structures: Literary Production, Gender, and Class.....	54
Conclusion	69
Works Cited	75

Abstract

This thesis, titled “Unmasking Gender and Class: A Feminist-Historical Synthesis of Social Contexts in Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*,” explores the contrasting representations of gender roles, autonomy, and class in Alcott’s two seminal works. Through a feminist-historical lens, the research examines how *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* reflect and challenge nineteenth century societal expectations of women. *Little Women* portrays a sentimental and moralistic view of domestic life, aligning with cultural ideals of the “Cult of True Womanhood” prevalent in post-Civil War America. Conversely, *Behind A Mask* critiques these norms through its subversive heroine, Jean Muir, whose manipulative and performative actions expose the limitations imposed by rigid class and gender roles.

The research situates these works within the broader socio-economic and literary contexts of Alcott's time, including the constraints of the nineteenth century American publishing landscape and Alcott’s dual identity as a commercially successful author and a writer of pseudonymous radical fiction. Employing insights from feminist criticism, cultural historicism, and Marxist theory, the study highlights the interplay between Alcott’s personal struggles, economic realities, and creative aspirations. It argues that Alcott’s dual literary output—sentimental domestic fiction and sensational thrillers—reflects her navigation of a restrictive literary marketplace while subtly critiquing the ideologies it upheld.

This research ultimately sheds light on Alcott’s complex legacy, illustrating her nuanced engagement with feminist discourse and her contribution to the literary exploration of autonomy, class, and gender in the nineteenth century.

Résumé

Cette thèse, intitulée “Unmasking Gender and Class: A Feminist-Historical Synthesis of Social Contexts in Louisa May Alcott's *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*”, explore les représentations contrastées des rôles de genre, de l'autonomie et de la classe dans les deux œuvres phares de Louisa May Alcott. Dans une optique féministe et historique, l'étude examine comment *Little Women* et *Behind A Mask* reflètent et remettent en question les attentes de la société du XIXe siècle à l'égard des femmes. *Little Women* dépeint une vision sentimentale et moraliste de la vie domestique, s'alignant sur les idéaux culturels du « culte de la vraie féminité » prévalant dans l'Amérique de l'après-guerre de Sécession. À l'inverse, *Behind A Mask* critique ces normes à travers son héroïne subversive, Jean Muir, dont les actions manipulatrices et performatives exposent les limites imposées par la rigidité des rôles de classe et de genre.

L'étude situe ces œuvres dans le contexte socio-économique et littéraire plus large de l'époque d'Alcott, y compris les contraintes du paysage éditorial américain du XIXe siècle et la double identité d'Alcott en tant qu'auteur à succès commercial et auteur de fictions radicales sous pseudonyme. S'inspirant de la critique féministe, de l'historicisme culturel et de la théorie marxiste, l'étude met en lumière l'interaction entre les luttes personnelles d'Alcott, les réalités économiques et les aspirations créatives. Elle soutient que la double production littéraire d'Alcott - fiction domestique sentimentale et thrillers à sensation - reflète sa navigation sur un marché littéraire restrictif tout en critiquant subtilement les idéologies qu'il défendait.

En fin de compte, cette recherche met en lumière l'héritage complexe d'Alcott, illustrant son engagement nuancé dans le discours féministe et sa contribution à l'exploration littéraire de l'autonomie, de la classe et du genre au dix-neuvième siècle.

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Introduction

Louisa May Alcott, best known for her beloved novel *Little Women*, was a writer whose works spanned a range of genres and themes, from domestic novels to sensation fiction. Before entering the space of domestic fiction with *Little Women*, Alcott had published several works of sensation fiction under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, among other forms and genres. Popular magazines and newspapers for which Alcott was able to write, such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Flag of Our Union*, catered to a range of tastes, offering serialized novels, moralistic tales, and sensational thrillers. These periodicals served not only as entertainment but also as tools for shaping cultural values, reinforcing ideals of domesticity and virtue, especially for women—as “both newspapers and books were considered key to the successful functioning of a public sphere that would produce a national culture” (231). In other words, the written word, produced and distributed to the masses at this time was already beginning to be a method of ascribing and representing homogenized cultural values and sentimentality.

In general, newspapers in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were important to the development of the book industry for authors. Newspapers “served as a training ground for authors,” serializing, reviewing, and advertising books (230). Some notable white authors who were part of this tradition earlier in their careers (in addition to Alcott) were Walt Whitman, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells (230). The development of the book and authorial professionalism that came out of the late nineteenth century began in the trenches of periodical and serial publications. Alcott’s sensational *Behind A Mask*, published serially in 1866, was part of a regular progression for many aspiring authors at this time. However, this is not to say that *Behind A Mask* should be viewed as a pubescent

product of Alcott's writing career before her first large-scale success with *Little Women*. In continuing to describe the development of print culture and Alcott's complex relationship with the path to success, this research realizes the intention and implications of the thematic versatility and differentiation that is shown between these two texts. In other words, their differences, when viewed alongside one another, pair more like the sweetness of a pastry and the bitterness of coffee, than they do oil and water: they are distinct, but complementary.

Growing together, news culture and book culture influenced one another, so their infrastructures were often intertwined. Important regional book publishers produced newspapers and vice versa until they began to differentiate culturally (230-231). "Book culture," Groves writes, emphasized timelessness, the authorial persona, and the cultivation of the reader's interiority," while "[n]ews culture emphasized ephemerality, collective anonymous production, and the collision of the reader's mind with the exterior world" (230-231). Periodicals represented a duality in the industry as it transitioned from a unified book and news culture to distinct entities. In this space of development, they also provided an avenue for subversion. Alcott, who contributed to both mainstream and regional magazines, navigated this literary landscape by publishing works like *Little Women*—a celebration of domestic life—in venues aligned with moralistic cultural reform, while using pseudonyms in lesser-known periodicals to explore darker, more subversive themes, as seen in *Behind A Mask*.

Alcott's stylistic diversification within the periodical market reflects both the opportunities and constraints of the time, showcasing how serialized literature was a space where cultural norms were both upheld and challenged (a distinction from the "rules of engagement"

with culture that occupied book publishing).¹ In her work on literary authorship in the mid nineteenth century, Susan Williams writes that, “[l]iterary historians often contrast two discrete types of nineteenth-century American authors: the ‘romantic genius’ (male, white, antipopular, original, and in frequent conflict with the growing market for print) and the ‘popular writer’ (often female, derivative, and catering to a commercial market)” (“Authorship” 90). Here, Williams contrasts two archetypes of nineteenth century American authors—the “romantic genius” and the “popular writer”—highlighting, to an extent, the cultural and gendered dynamics of literary production in this era.²

The “romantic genius” represents a masculine ideal of originality and artistic rebellion, often detached from commercial demands. This archetype was celebrated in cultural discourse, aligning with the era’s valorization of individualism and creativity as inherently male traits. In contrast, the “popular writer,” often female, was seen as catering to market forces by producing accessible, derivative works designed to appeal to mainstream tastes. This dichotomy, each side representing parts of Alcott’s writing, reflects broader societal assumptions about gender roles, creativity, and economic agency during the nineteenth century.

Alcott’s career straddles both these categories, revealing the constraints and opportunities for female writers in her time. As the author of *Little Women*, she aligned with the “popular writer” archetype, crafting a domestic narrative that catered to cultural values of morality,

¹ The term “rules of engagement” here is a reference to a set of guidelines and customs that define how people interact and work together in a business setting—implying that there is an established set of mores and topics that were acceptable and would be rewarded with success in the literary marketplace.

² “Gender dynamics” represents just one of many factors in publishing including age, race, ethnicity, and legal status, and family of origin.

family, and feminine virtue. However, her work as A.M. Barnard, publishing Gothic thrillers in periodicals, demonstrates her desire to experiment with themes of power, ambition, and social transgression—qualities more aligned with the masculine “romantic genius.” The influence of the cultural mainstream, particularly its preference for sentimental and morally instructive literature, was a contributing factor in Alcott's decision to write *Little Women*. This novel's success reflects her ability to answer the call of the marketplace, presenting an idealized vision of womanhood and domesticity that resonated with readers while subtly embedding critiques of gender constraints. In contrast, her pseudonymous *Behind A Mask*, allowed her to explore darker, less culturally acceptable themes, revealing her frustration with societal expectations.

This tension between Alcott's domestic narratives and her more transgressive works speaks to the complex ways she engaged with issues of gender and performativity. By examining the roles her characters play within the confines of social expectations, Alcott interrogates the ways in which gendered identities are both shaped and performed, offering a nuanced critique of the limits placed on women's agency during her time. While *Little Women* is often celebrated for its portrayal of domestic virtue and the struggles of women³ within the confines of nineteenth century American society, Alcott's lesser-known work, *Behind A Mask, or A Woman's Power*, presents a stark contrast with its depiction of a calculating, manipulative heroine who defies

³ Here, and throughout this thesis deals the general term “women” is used; the distinction needs to be made that it is a reference to white women. This distinction is to call attention to the division between the experience of white women in life, work, publishing, and society, from those of Black women, especially during Alcott's lifetime. It would be a glaring inaccuracy to generalize the theory and analysis at hand in Alcott's life to those of any person of color (man or woman) during the same period. This especially relevant in discussions of (white) feminism and the inherent differences found in any form of Black feminism relative to white feminist movements at any point in time. The “white” descriptor may be included later in this project as a reminder but will be largely excluded for the sake of concision.

social norms in pursuit of personal and material gain. These two texts—while distinct in tone, style, and genre—both grapple with the social expectations placed upon women in Alcott's time, exploring the constraints of gender roles and the possibilities for female autonomy. This research seeks to address key questions as to how Alcott's works depict social expectations of women in nineteenth century America, how Alcott's own career is indicative of broader trends in publishing at this time, and how both her life and her work reflect and further both feminist and cultural critiques of gender roles.

The primary research questions guiding this analysis are as follows: How does Alcott's work depict the social expectations of women during the nineteenth century? How do her depictions of gender roles challenge or reinforce the norms of her time? Specifically, how do her portrayals of autonomy and resistance, particularly in *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*, reflect the broader feminist discourses of the period? Through a comparative study of these two seemingly opposite texts, this project aims to explore the ways in which Alcott's characters navigate the social limitations imposed on women in their respective settings. The juxtaposition of the innocent, family-centered values in *Little Women* with the subversive, gender-bending manipulations in *Behind A Mask* provides ground for examining the complexities of Alcott's portrayal of gender and autonomy in fiction and reality.

The objective of this study is to analyze both *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* for their representations of autonomy, class, and gender, with attention to the way in which these themes intersect within the context of Alcott's life and the social-historical forces at play. By employing feminist, historical, and cultural-Marxist lenses, this research aims to uncover how Alcott's works both challenge and reinforce the gender norms of her time. This approach will provide an

understanding of Alcott's contribution to feminist discourse and reveal the ways in which her writing both reflects and critiques the cultural and social constructs that shaped women's roles (especially in publishing) during the nineteenth century. In doing so, this analysis will fill gaps in existing research regarding the ways in which Alcott's dual literary identity, as both a beloved author and a pseudonymous writer of radical fiction, complicates our understanding of her legacy in the context of women's literary history.

In exploring Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*, this research will explicate the duality within Alcott's body of work—a duality shaped by the constraints and expectations of nineteenth century white American society (from publishing to social norms). Known widely for *Little Women's* portrayal of family values and moral integrity, Alcott also wrote under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard, where she often explored darker, more subversive themes through characters like Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask*. This “sensationally double literary life,” as scholar Sara Hackenberg describes it, reflects Alcott's skill in navigating a restrictive literary marketplace while subtly challenging the era's limitations on women's roles and independence (435). By employing each of these critical lenses, this study examines the ways in which Alcott's two distinct writing styles address themes of gender, class, and autonomy. In doing so, it situates Alcott within the broader framework of feminist thought and historical context of American publishing in the nineteenth century, revealing how her works resonate with the societal conflicts of her time and anticipate modern debates surrounding women's autonomy and literary freedom.

This research includes an analysis of Alcott's *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* in the context of nineteenth century publishing and authorship in the United States, Alcott's biography, various voices in feminist criticism, Raymond Williams' cultural historicism, and Terry

Eagleton's work with ideology.⁴ This will include an in-depth textual analysis of the works themselves at the foreground, with historical context of American publishing, theoretical frameworks, and biographical information woven in. The goal is to connect the answers to a number of questions such as: Why did one sort of story require a pseudonym, and what rewards were possible that way? How does Alcott's dual authorship reflect and critique nineteenth century societal norms? In what ways do *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* offer distinct yet interconnected portrayals of female agency? What influence does Alcott's socio-economic background have on her themes of autonomy and class? And how do these works engage with feminist and cultural historicist themes? In other words, this research will assess these texts and place them in the contexts of appropriate historical frameworks and critical perspectives, with hope that they answer questions of authorship, historical relevance, and cultural value in a way that is additive and expansive to the existing conversation around Alcott's work. Following is a brief overview of several secondary historical sources and criticisms that will be referenced throughout the project:

Cult of True Womanhood

In mid-nineteenth century America, societal expectations for women were heavily shaped by what can be referred to as the "Cult of True Womanhood," a pervasive ideology⁵ that emphasized four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 152). Feminist critic Barbara Welter, who began to discuss this term in the context of a suppression of female desires, describes how women were encouraged to embody these ideals, reinforcing a narrowly

⁴ The work of Williams's cultural historicism and Eagleton's ideology will be discussed as a part of their expansion of Marxist principles.

⁵ In this context, the term "ideology" is used in a general sense to refer to a system of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape social norms and behaviors. This is distinct from the more specific notion of ideology within Marxist criticism, which will be explored in detail later in this project.

defined, patriarchal vision of femininity in which women were expected to find fulfillment solely within the home and family life, referring to them as “hostage[s] in the home” (151). Welter describes that these ideals were not only enforced but also internalized by women, shaping their identities and self-worth. She challenges the idea that these values were timeless by demonstrating the ways in which the ideals were not only enforced externally but infiltrated the subconscious of women. This societal framework positioned women as moral and religious guides whose influence was confined to the domestic sphere, thereby discouraging interests outside traditional roles. As Welter describes these four ideals she belabors this point, stating that “without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes” (152). Louisa May Alcott’s work, in both *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*, challenges these norms by portraying female characters who either subvert or struggle against these prescribed ideals. Confrontations of these norms also appeared in Alcott’s own life, as “[w]omen were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God” (154). Alcott was raised in a liberal Christian home, appreciating aspects of several different Christian denominations with varying perspectives on specific facets of Christian doctrine, rather than a strict adherence to a singular denomination.⁶ Even more counter-culturally, her pursuit of a literary career was certainly not traditional in relation to values Welter describes. In addition to her work as a writer, Alcott also worked as a nurse during the Civil War, a role that was rare for women at the time. She also took on other jobs that were not strictly domestic work, including teaching, working as

⁶ Alcott’s religious views combined pieces of her parents’ beliefs and were further influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, among other Transcendentalists a part of the Radical Club. Alcott had few strictly doctrinal beliefs, viewing God as a presence in nature and Christ as a teacher. This also included an emphasis on good works and personal growth, as seen in *Little Women*. This quasi-Universalist and Transcendentalist blend of devotion and non-dogmatic spirituality, coupled with her feminist and service-oriented values, allowed the morals of her writing to resonate with a wide audience (*Encyclopedia* 273-284).

a governess, and writing sensational fiction—careers that stepped outside the typical participation in the domestic sphere for women in nineteenth century American society.

Economic constraints further complicated the lives of lower middle class women—whether it was the inevitable financial dependence that they had on their husbands or their limited opportunities for independence and meaningful employment outside the domestic sphere. Scholar Sarah Elbert’s *A Hunger for Home* illustrates how Alcott’s own financial struggles as a lower class woman influenced her literary exploration of autonomy and class dynamics, revealing her protagonists’ complex relationships with social mobility (Elbert 20, 94). This sociohistorical context not only frames Alcott’s critique of nineteenth century gender roles but also underscores her nuanced portrayal of women seeking agency within and beyond the constraints of economic dependence. This project will delve further into similar cultural contexts that surrounded Alcott’s career, her home life, and as a result, her characters.

The Nineteenth Century Publishing Landscape

In the nineteenth-century United States, the publishing industry shaped and influenced the opportunities and challenges faced by authors like Alcott, who both adhered to and subverted the conventions of various genres to achieve success. Alcott was no stranger to this, her works displaying a wide array of genre differentiation—particularly the principal works at hand in this research. *Behind A Mask*, one of Alcott’s pieces of sensation fiction, marked by dramatic, suspenseful, and often gothic elements, sits opposite Alcott’s *Little Women*, firmly in the category of domestic fiction, focusing on family life, moral lessons, and a stronger adherence to the mainstream cultural echo-chamber.

The publishing landscape played a pivotal role in shaping literary production, influencing both the themes and formats that reached readers. Additionally, the state of publishing in America at this point in time in part dictated which types of people read what type of literature—both in form and content. During this era, serialized fiction dominated the market, with novels and stories frequently appearing in periodicals before being published as standalone books. In some ways, this format made literature more accessible and affordable, expanding readership and setting genre expectations that often favored moralistic and sensational narratives in more national popular fiction.⁷ As highlighted later in this work, *The History of the Book in America* outlines the proliferation of periodicals and novels as they catered to a growing public demand for engaging, instructive, and entertaining literature, with domestic fiction and gothic writing emerging as popular genres. These trends were a double-edged sword, creating both opportunities and limitations for writers like Alcott, whose career illustrates the tension between adhering to these popular genres and subverting them to explore themes of autonomy, ambition, and social critique (ideas that will be explored later in the project).

The publishing market in nineteenth-century America placed significant constraints on female authors, often confining them to domestic genres that reinforced societal expectations for women as moral guides and nurturers. Publishers and audiences alike expected women's literature to reflect the principles of this "Cult of Domesticity" or the "Cult of True

⁷ The regionality of periodical writing and publishing in the nineteenth century played a significant role in shaping the development of American literature and is a key factor in a discussion of the ideals proliferated in literature at this time. As will be explored later in conversation with *The History of the Book in America, Volume 4*, different regions had distinct literary traditions and publishing practices, with the North, South, and West each contributing unique perspectives to the national literary landscape. These regional differences influenced not only the content of periodicals but also the accessibility of literature, which helped shape genre conventions and readership expectations across the country.

Womanhood,” leaving little room for female writers to explore themes of ambition, autonomy, or power without facing social and professional backlash. This market dynamic created a narrow literary sphere for women writers, but it was a dynamic that Alcott subverted through the use of her pseudonym. By writing under an alias, Alcott was able to venture into other genres, exploring darker and more complex themes like high drama and revenge that may have been received as inappropriate for a female author, especially one who had already written some shorter children’s fiction.

Alcott’s career thus reflects broader trends in publishing at this time where genre expectations dictated content. Nonetheless, Alcott worked subversively within this set of expectations, nonetheless. Through *Little Women*, Alcott met the market’s demand for moralistic domestic narratives, crafting a story of family life and personal growth that resonated deeply with readers. However, her work under a pseudonym, including *Behind A Mask*, allowed her to negotiate these literary marketplace expectations by reaching an entirely different audience. By balancing her work between these two contrasting genres, Alcott navigated a restrictive publishing environment, producing works that addressed both mainstream and subversive themes, although she only achieved wider, national industry success with her more culturally acceptable content during her lifetime.

Alcott’s Use of Pseudonym

Louisa May Alcott’s literary career exemplifies a dual approach to storytelling, balancing her public works with pseudonymous publications that ultimately allowed her to delve into themes typically deemed unsuitable for female writers within the context of her genre. *Little Women*, her most well-known work, embraced domestic themes, focusing on the moral and

emotional growth of its characters within a family setting. This novel catered to nineteenth-century expectations for female authors by highlighting acceptable themes such as piety, family loyalty, and social conformity. In contrast, Alcott's pseudonymous works, as with *Behind A Mask*, allowed her to explore another literary space. By adopting a pseudonym, Alcott could more freely write about women who defied traditional gender roles, showcasing characters driven by personal gain and control rather than self-sacrifice—though she did not have large-scale success from this work while she was alive.

The expectations surrounding the genre at hand further shaped Alcott's work, as her domestic fiction and sensational thrillers appealed to distinct audiences with different interests. Domestic fiction, which emphasized virtue and familial values, attracted a readership aligned with mainstream values, enabling Alcott to gain public acceptance and commercial success with *Little Women*. However, her other works under a pseudonym met the demand for sensation fiction, a genre that allowed for morally complex characters and intense plot twists. Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* underscores how sensational and domestic genres were crafted to satisfy different social needs; while domestic novels reinforced moral codes, thrillers provided a space for characters to break from societal expectations, often embodying hidden desires and ambitions (143). Alcott's navigation between these genres allowed her to cultivate a diverse readership and explore a fuller range of the female experience, presenting both adherence to and rebellion against traditional gender roles.⁸

⁸ This is not to say that Alcott's legacy as an author can be categorized with a binary "before and after" representation of her literary themes and implications in her fiction before *Little Women*, and after its publication. Her style was not sensational, or demure, but rather a product of her historical, economic, and social environment at any given moment.

The sources presented above far emphasize the need for a deeper investigation into the intersection of Alcott's dual literary styles and their socio-historical contexts. This is because scholars have often addressed her works in isolation—comparing *Little Women* with its cultural impact to *Behind A Mask* with its more radical critique of gender roles. But few have examined how these texts and Alcott's broader literary output can be understood through theoretical frameworks that reveal the complexity of gender, power, and social mobility in the nineteenth century. To fully grasp the significance of Alcott's narrative choices, this research does the expansive work of considering the theoretical lenses that not only contextualize her work within its historical moment, but also illuminate its engagement with broader cultural and feminist discourses.

The Dual Literary Identity of Louisa May Alcott

The tonal, stylistic, and topical differences between *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* portray domesticity and morality in strikingly opposing ways. Written during a period of post-Civil War social transformation, *Little Women* adopts a moralistic and sentimental style that embodies the ideals of Fetterly's "Cult of True Womanhood". The narrative portrays a New England life, focusing on the March sisters' personal growth and challenges, which resonated with a post-war readership seeking stability and reassurance amid the broader uncertainties of Reconstruction. This style aligns with the mainstream cultural values of the time, offering a vision of feminine virtue and resilience that upheld the era's emphasis on domestic reform. On the other hand, *Behind A Mask*, portrays a protagonist who manipulates societal expectations of domesticity and morality as tools to gain power, highlighting the constraints and hypocrisies within the very systems that *Little Women* idealizes. In other words, these texts are, on the surface, ideological opposites. Even at their most similar, the characters' actions and motivations seem to be in conflict with one another.

A direct comparison between the styles of *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* has significant applications in understanding how and why these works of Alcott's are so distinct from one another—from cultural propriety to success in the marketplace. Their stylistic differences mirror their individual representations of a cultural, economic, and social moment—despite their shared author. Take this introductory narration from *Little Women*:

As young readers like to know 'how people look', we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a

comfortable room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain, for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it. (*Little Women* 4)

Alcott employs several rhetorical strategies in this passage in order to present the readers' first impressions of the Alcott sisters in a calming, nostalgic way. While the third person omniscient narrator of this text creates a degree of separation from the characters that may have been reduced in the first person, this perspective makes readers privy to details that may not have been offered by the bias or self-consciousness of a first-person narrator. This narrative perspective allows for Alcott to posture all the characters, especially the March family, with any degree of suitability she chooses. Within this point of view, Alcott does not need to accommodate any cultural unseemliness that may exist in the unfiltered conscience of several young characters—particularly the headstrong Jo. Simply put, this narration provides her with more control over the thoughts and opinions that readers have. Alcott, by way of the narrator, goes so far as to refer to this narrative endeavor as giving readers “a little sketch of the four sisters” (4). The passage above exemplifies the care with which Alcott presented characters to her reader—*particularly* the March sisters, *particularly* in this introductory scene.

Just as a portrait artist frames, postures, and presents their subject on a canvas, so has Alcott done with these narrations of the sisters. This portrait, or “little sketch” creates a fitting setting with which to frame them (4). Almost as important as the physical descriptions of the sisters themselves is this scene of “home-peace” that backgrounds the March sisters (4). Alcott uses personification and descriptive language to provide the non-human background with a

tranquil atmosphere that fits the subsequent outlines of the sisters themselves. The narrator represents the snow as falling “quietly . . . the fire crackl[ing] cheerfully” and “chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloom[ing] in the windows” (4). The quiet security of the setting’s surroundings as displayed by this imagery depicts the March home as a safe place. From a symbolic standpoint, this could have been a presumed respite from the uncertainty that characterized the Civil War period.⁹ The March family lived in a small town in Massachusetts, more separated from the military action of the Civil War than border or southern states. Yet, for the March sisters, as is later described in Alcott’s opening chapter, the war still meant that their father was away fighting for the Union. His absence from the family for much of the book is a departure from the completeness of the domestic picture that Alcott paints. This provides a point of relation for many readers who experienced the same thing with the men in their family.

Alternatively, here is a passage of a similar purpose in *Behind A Mask*—introductory and descriptive:

Of course, every one looked at her then, and all felt a touch of pity at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat. Small, thin, and colorless she was, with yellow hair, gray eyes, and sharply cut, irregular, but very expressive features. Poverty seemed to have set its bond stamp upon her, and life to have had for her more frost than sunshine. But something in the lines of the mouth betrayed strength, and the clear, low voice had a curious mixture of command

⁹ *Little Women* was published in 1868, just three years after the ceremonial end of the Civil War with General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox.

and entreaty in its varying tones. Not an attractive woman, yet not an ordinary one; and, as she sat there with her delicate hands lying in her lap, her head bent, and a bitter look on her thin face, she was more interesting than many a blithe and blooming girl. Bella's heart warmed to her at once, and she drew her seat nearer, while Edward went back to his dogs that his presence might not embarrass her. (*Behind A Mask* 6)

This description of the protagonist, Jean Muir, is divisive. The narrative perspective, similar to *Little Women*, is outside the story—third-person omniscient. In *Little Women* it provided space for Alcott to control the presentation of the March sisters, but here it allows the narrator to draw social lines between the characters. The “pity” that the family “felt . . . at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress” creates a distinct in-group and out-group—those with social station, and the plain governess (6). The narrator goes on to elaborate on the family's first impressions of Muir: “[s]mall, thin, and colorless she was, with yellow hair, gray eyes” (6). However, the narrator continues on in a way that would complicate any flat characterization of Muir at this point in the narrative—describing her as having “something in the lines of the mouth betray[ing] strength . . . [n]ot an attractive woman, yet not an ordinary one” (6). Though this section alludes to further mystery surrounding Muir's character, Muir's plainness has a clear place in the hierarchy of the Coventry household (at least at first).

Readers may assume a mysterious but “pitiful” opening depiction of Muir to be a sign of the novelty that Muir's arrival signals for the Coventry family. However, it also implicitly divides Muir, who will come to represent a departure from societal traditions (both in the narrative setting and Alcott's biographical setting), from those who will eventually work to uphold the tradition and order to which they are accustomed. In addition, dreary language such

as life having “had for her more frost than sunshine” or “bitter look on her thin face” casts for the reader a cool, wearisome person in the protagonist (6). This is vastly different from the comfort and familiarity provided by the opening descriptions in *Little Women*.

The introductory scene in *Little Women* is ultimately characterized by lightheartedness and domestic humor, which reflects Alcott’s sentimental and engaging narrative style. On the other hand, the narrator’s description of Muir carries a more Gothic tone, featuring darker, psychological undertones and themes of deception and ambition. While the soft, traditional, and familiar descriptions in *Little Women* imbue a sense of safety and comfort for female readers in the 1860s, the narrator’s distance from the characters and cold language used to describe the protagonist in *Behind A Mask* represents this female experience of the world almost in symmetrical opposite.

As the plots and characters develop, Muir’s calculated actions and use of theatricality to exert control serve as a sort of foil to Jo’s innocent and joyful creative expressions when assessed in tandem. Towards the end of *Behind A Mask*, Muir’s identity and intentions become more clear as pieces of her plan within the Coventry household begin to be revealed. She eventually tells the family: “My glass showed me an old woman of thirty, for my false locks were off, my paint gone, and my face was without its mask” (*Behind A Mask* 99). The narrator later divulges more of Muir’s history, sharing that “[h]er own child died, but this girl, having beauty, wit, and a bold spirit, took her fate into her own hands and became an actress” (*Behind A Mask* 102). These revelations about Muir demonstrate her deliberate performance of identity and her ability to construct her destiny through deception and calculated self-reinvention. Her reflection on her unmasking before the family highlights her awareness of her dual existence as both an individual

and a constructed persona. The imagery of removing her “false locks” and “paint” emphasizes the artificiality of her social presentation, which is carefully designed to elicit sympathy and admiration from those around her. Unlike Jo March, whose creative acts—whether in her writing or in her playful performances with her sisters—stem from genuine self-expression, Jean’s creativity serves as a tool of manipulation. Her theatricality is not a joyful outlet for her imagination, but a weapon wielded in pursuit of power and security in a patriarchal society that leaves women with few options.

The narrator’s information on Muir’s backstory at this point in the novel further underscores her self-reliance and rejection of traditional feminine roles. Having endured personal loss and social marginalization, Jean uses her beauty, intelligence, and audacity to “take her fate into her own hands” by becoming an actress (something she does literally in her youth and figuratively in the Coventry household as a governess). This choice symbolizes her embrace of artifice and performance as a means of survival. Muir’s story aligns with the Gothic heroine archetype, subverting the sentimental ideals of femininity that define the characters in *Little Women*. While Jo also aspires to defy societal expectations, her rebellion is tempered by her eventual integration into domestic life and her fundamental role as a moral exemplar for readers. Muir, in contrast, rejects such resolution, embodying a darker, more cynical view of women’s agency.

The theatricality demonstrated by Muir throughout the novel acts as a foil to Jo’s innocence by exposing the limitations of authenticity and virtue in a society that privileges appearances and rewards compliance with traditional gender norms. While Jo’s creative endeavors ultimately align with cultural ideals of feminine virtue and familial loyalty, Muir’s

performances lay bare the transactional nature of gendered power dynamics. Muir's calculated control over her image and actions challenges the sentimental notion that women's worth is inherent or natural, suggesting instead that it is a performance crafted to meet the demands of a restrictive social order.

These two characters and their stories seem to be different answers to the same questions. Though seemingly at odds, Muir's theatricality and Jo's innocence together reflect the multifaceted strategies that women, especially Alcott, employed to navigate nineteenth century gender expectations. Muir's calculated self-presentation in *Behind a Mask* is demonstrative of Alcott's critique of the constraints placed on women, providing a stark contrast to the more conventional portrayal of Jo in *Little Women*. This juxtaposition highlights Alcott's ability to navigate and interrogate the cultural mainstream while addressing broader questions of gender, agency, and self-expression.

This juxtaposition also reflects the evolution of Alcott's authorial voice, which shifted as her experiences and publishing contexts changed over time. Early in her writing career, among other genres and works of writing, Alcott wrote sensational fiction, using it to critique societal norms, but as she became more established, she transitioned to increasingly more conventional forms and genres like those on display in *Little Women*. To fully understand this development, it is important to explore Alcott's authorial timeline and the other dynamics that affected her career, particularly her diverse publishing ventures and how they interacted with the broader literary and cultural context of the nineteenth century.

Alcott's Authorial Timeline and Contexts

Jo's youthful idealism in *Little Women* in some ways serves as a reflection of Alcott's own ambitions during her early literary career, paralleling Alcott's struggle to find her place within a restrictive cultural and economic environment. Jo's declaration, "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous," mirrors Alcott's early desires to make a name for herself in literature, fueled by both financial necessity and an innate drive to express her creativity (*Little Women* 143; *Alcott* 70-74). Jo's unbridled ambition and dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles reflect the energy and hopefulness that characterized Alcott's beginnings as a writer, and general dispositions towards writing "little girl" stories. Alcott sought not just a livelihood from writing, but respect—for in the fall of 1859 she had a piece accepted as a periodical:

In Louisa's own life, as in Concord's, November marked a milestone, when Mr. Lowell accepted 'Love and Self-Love' for inclusion in the *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁰ Besides the pleasure of knowing that her story would appear in the same magazine with the products of Boston's littérateurs, there was the delight of receiving fifty dollars and of feeling that she could write the flat kind of tale that the *Atlantic* critics endorsed . . . Louisa's halleluiahs echoed to the roof top, for despite Mr. Fields' advice that she stick to her teaching,¹¹ she has launched a ship upon the *Atlantic* that had not foundered. (*Alcott* 94)

¹⁰ This mention of a simultaneous milestone in the "life" of the town of Concord, Massachusetts, is a reference to abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Brown had visited and spoken in a Concord Town Hall just a few months prior. Stern, in her biography of Alcott, notes the impact that news of Brown's raid had on the town, particularly Alcott's parents, "Mr. Thoreau" (Henry David Thoreau), and Alcott herself (93-94).

¹¹ Mentioned earlier in this research, Alcott received this remark and those similar to it from several people throughout her writing career.

The acceptance of a piece to the *Atlantic Monthly* marked a turning point in Alcott's career. For Alcott, receiving payment for her work and recognition in a prestigious magazine brought both financial relief and validation, reinforcing her belief that she could succeed as a writer. However, Madeline Stern's biography of Alcott also hints at the compromises Alcott made, noting her satisfaction in producing "the flat kind of tale that the Atlantic critics endorsed" (94). This illustrates the tension between her desire for full creative expression and the demands of the market, a dynamic that deeply influenced the trajectory of Alcott's writing career.

Like Jo, Alcott started with dreams of literary success. "That would suit me, so that is *my* favorite dream," Jo remarks—with echoes of Alcott's voice embedded in the youthful exclamation (143). Yet, Alcott quickly encountered the realities of a market that demanded specific forms and narratives from female authors. This is critical when examining Jo's journey in *Little Women*. While Jo begins with aspirations that challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations, her eventual adoption of more conventional ideals emulates, in some respects, Alcott's own experiences. Much like Jo, Alcott started with a desire to write boldly and authentically but found that success required an eye for and attention to mainstream tastes. For example, Jo's initial resistance to "'knitting like a poky old woman'" reflects Alcott's youthful rebellion against societal norms, while her eventual embrace of domestic narratives in *Little Women* mirrors Alcott's later works, which balanced commercial appeal with subtle critiques of gender roles (*Little Women* 3).

As Jo spends time with Beth in some of her final moments, Beth says to her: "[y]ou must take my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone . . . don't fail them . . . you'll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world, for love is the

only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy” (418). Here, Beth words to Jo demonstrate a seemingly inevitable path to capitulation. According to Beth, Jo’s highest calling is to honor her parents in any way she can. The words of her ailing sister directly oppose Jo’s “favorite dream,” exacerbating the inner conflict that Jo experiences, no doubt an affirmation of the cultural mainstream and a representation of Alcott’s own conflict between her creative aspirations and providing for her family (143). This is not to say that Alcott opposed domestic values or that she was inherently against self-sacrifice for the sake of one’s family, but to call attention to the conflict in Jo’s own consciousness and its similarities to Alcott’s.

Where Jo’s journey represents Alcott’s hopeful beginnings and eventual “compromise,” Muir embodies Alcott’s more developed understanding of the performative aspects of success—whether in literature or society. The juxtaposition of Jo’s innocent ambition with Muir’s strategic self-reinvention highlights Alcott’s duality as a writer navigating the nineteenth century literary marketplace. Alcott’s conciliatory choice to write *Little Women* within the domestic genre was driven largely by the financial and publishing outcomes she knew it could offer.

Authorial intent is a crucial consideration in analyzing these texts—and comparing them with one another. To get to a closer understanding of intention, eventual cultural implications, and reception, one must also assess the economic and historical climate that Alcott faced when writing these works—after all, one always checks the weather before choosing a jacket. Thus, this research, in analyzing the ways in which the texts themselves vary, also requires an assessment of the climate—as each text carried its own suitability both economically and stylistically.

In other words, to reach a more whole understanding as to Alcott's intention behind this variation in style between her works (a variation not necessarily unique to *Behind A Mask and Little Women*), it is important to understand the economic and historical landscape she was in as she wrote. One of Alcott's strengths as a writer was her acute awareness of this climate and her ability to adjust to it for her own benefit. As noted in the close readings of some introductory scenes of both these texts, Alcott's characterization and use of descriptive language were some of her greatest resources in shaping her works to fit their structure and purpose. That being established, the purposes for each of these texts were determined by the ever-shifting publishing landscape and the career opportunities that Alcott had—dependent on the type of writing she produced.

Beginning with a brief background of her early writing career helps to create context for the place of the two texts at hand. Alcott wrote early and often while growing up in her Massachusetts home. Her father encouraged her creativity—this encouragement was bolstered by the literary community that her family's home afforded (*Alcott* 43). While her adolescence and young adulthood was rich in community, with Ralph Waldo Emerson as one example of a mentor who had a significant influence on her life and writing, her family's economic situation did not reflect the same wealth. Alcott's attendance in school was intermittent because of her family's financial struggles (Orchard House; Wilburn). The relationship between her work as a writer and the money it provided was clear from her first publication of a poem in a local paper, to the publication of her first novel, *Flower Fables* in Boston's *Saturday Evening Gazette*: "the publisher decided to print 1,600 copies of *Flower Fables* . . . [she] had made thirty-two dollars

through the sale” (*Alcott* 72-79).¹² According to Stern, Alcott’s early successes in publication were a surprise to the developing writer (71-73). Yet, as early as December of 1855, at just twenty-three, the “self-proclaimed breadwinner” was determined to continue to alleviate the poverty of the Alcott family that had “never been more acute” (*Alcott and the Boston* 66). Alcott herself wrote in her journals that after her first publications, she “decided to seek [her] fortune; so, with my little trunk of homemade clothes, \$20 earned by stories sent to the ‘Gazette,’ and my MSS., I set forth with Mother’s blessing one rainy day in the dullest month in the year” (*Journals* 75).

Her early writing career was characterized by a desire to write stories she liked—combined with her developing ability to discover what sells. Many of her writings were published in the *Boston Gazette*. As her writing career progressed, she began to experiment with genre and style—eventually expanding into both the “‘children’s friend’ and the celebrity author of *Little Women* and its sequels . . . [and] the epitome of the veiled lady ‘behind a mask,’ publishing Gothic thrillers under an assumed name” (“Revising Romance” 97).

Balancing economic necessity with her creative ambitions, Alcott’s early writing career represents her desire to alleviate her family’s financial struggles while also honing her craft as she navigated the evolving literary market. This dual purpose associated with her writing not only shapes her development as an author but also positions her within the broader context of nineteenth century publishing practices, where emerging methods like serial publication and genre experimentation offered new opportunities for amateur writers like Alcott to achieve both

¹² Alcott names her profits as thirty-two dollars for *Flower Fables* in her journals, but “she had given the figure as thirty-five dollars” in the “Notes and Memoranda” to 1854 (*Journals* 75).

artistic expression and financial stability. Understanding this historical context not only underscores Alcott's navigation of genre and audience but also highlights the applicability of critical theories, such as feminist and cultural historicist lenses, in analyzing her works. By examining *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* together as complementary texts, readers can gain a comprehensive view of female authorship during this era, revealing how societal constraints and publishing opportunities informed Alcott's multifaceted literary voice.

The Nineteenth Century American Literary Market

In her chapter titled, "Amateur Authorship," Ann Fabian calls a beggar selling his art on the docks of London in the 1851 novel *Moby Dick* "a figure of the amateur" (407). She goes on to describe this "figure" as: "a man whose works of art would never be printed in the modest commercial establishments located on the streets of Wapping, the neighborhood behind the docks. But he is also a professional—a man trying to find a market for his pictures and make a living by selling his art" (407). Similarly, Alcott had local market connections through which she could try and earn money for her writing. Yet, she endured periods of rejection—one publisher, even saying: "[s]tick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write" (*Alcott* 70). But, like the beggar in *Moby Dick*, Alcott was just trying to make a living with her art (though she worked several professions before her writing career was at this point).

Fabian goes on to assert that "this history of authorship in the United States in the nineteenth century . . . [was] a slow emergence of an organized profession out of a chaos of amateurism" (407). The "chaos" that bred this history, was catalyzed by the structure and process of the literary market in the mid-late nineteenth century. Additionally, this "chaos" furnished Alcott with an opening to make a name for herself in an otherwise male-dominated field. Had the

literary market in the United States been more “established” at this time, Alcott may not have been able to utilize it in the same way. Because periodicals and serialized publications became a dominant force in the eastern United States in the 1860s and 1870s, the malleable literary culture and provided writers like Alcott with a platform to reach diverse audiences.

Periodicals were “published serially with a continuing title and maintain[ed] topical character and timeliness in content . . . [to] . . . forg[e] an ongoing relationship with subscribers who often formed a community by means of print” (Groves 224). Between 1840 and 1880, the growth in the number of periodicals was “tremendous . . . almost a sevenfold increase” (225). According to Groves in “Periodicals and Serial Publication,” “census records overall may not paint an absolutely accurate picture of periodical publication, they nonetheless suggest large-scale trends” as many census reports did not divide periodicals by genre (such as advertisements, newspapers, and magazines) (224-225). Knowing what to count and how to count it was an issue throughout these decades, yet census officials estimate that the data collected between 1840-1850 “fall[s] short of, rather than exceeds reality” (225). During this period, the expansion of literacy, urbanization, and the growth of a middle-class readership fueled a demand for accessible and engaging literature. Although during the decade of the Civil War, “periodical publication slowed considerably, especially in the South,” the subsequent decade of the 1870s “saw the number of periodicals very nearly double,” regardless of the economic downturn in the post-war United States at the time (225). While the majority of Alcott’s works published serially or in periodicals occurred before this period, this demonstrates the high potential and enduring popularity of the serial publishing industry with which many writers sought to engage in the decades after 1840.

Gender, Autonomy, and Performance in Alcott's Works

These two novels are representative of a pressure that Alcott managed her whole career. They illustrate the conflict between these two archetypes, showing how cultural norms and economic pressures shaped her work. This binary is particularly relevant to a synthesized view of *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*, as it underscores the cultural pressures that influenced her decisions to navigate both artistic aspirations and economic necessities.

The very publication politics of *Little Women* reflects this tension. Originally published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869 respectively, each volume was originally called *Little Women*, or, *Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* (the second volume containing a “Part Second” subtitle) (Showalter xxxi). However, in 1880, the chapters were renumbered to be consecutive, and it was republished as one volume titled, *Little Women*. This is the form in which it is still published in the United States today. Yet, in England, it continued to be published in two volumes, the second volume being renamed *Good Wives* (xxxix). According to Showalter in her editor’s “Note on the Text,” “Alcott had no part in this decision, and would have scorned such a moralizing domestic title” (xxxix). In spite of this likelihood, it is still published this way in England. These changes are reflective of a cultural response on the part of the publisher—adapting and adjusting the novel to prime readers to expect her novel to represent particular values that uphold dominant cultural values. In this editor’s note, Showalter also explains that Alcott “made a number of changes in the text” (xxxix). While this included some grammatical errors, Alcott also made changes to “her diction and some of her frank descriptions to suit her publisher’s expectations of polite ladylike

prose” (xxxi).¹³ Not only does Alcott make a massive stylistic shift in writing the type of novel that *Little Women* became, departing from her sensationalist serial fiction, her style is further expunged of its character to align with “publisher expectations” (xxxi). Showalter describes the effect of these changes as leaving “a bowdlerized text, in which the rough edges of Alcott’s imagination have been smoothed away, and the pungent originality of her voice toned way down” (“Introduction” xxii).

The work that scholar Madeline Stern performed to “[identify] and [recover] Alcott’s sensation fiction provides an important context for the reading of *Little Women* and for an understanding of the implications of its style” (Fetterly 370). The necessity of this research is only exacerbated in light of the revisions made to the 1880 edition of the *Little Women* (as it relates to Alcott’s legacy as a writer). When held edge to edge with *Little Women*, *Behind A Mask* presents a sharp departure from the refined conventions, employing a darker, sensational style filled with intrigue, manipulation, and psychological complexity (as was seen in a brief comparison of some introductory descriptions in each novel).

Investigating this tension, Judith Fetterly in her article, “‘Little Women’: Alcott’s Civil War,” explores Alcott’s internal conflict between societal expectations and personal ambitions, as reflected in *Little Women*. Fetterly identifies a deep tension in the text, stemming from Alcott’s struggle to reconcile her own nonconformist inclinations and feminist ideals with the cultural norms of post-Civil War America, which emphasized domesticity, family, and female submission.

¹³ The edition of *Little Women* used for this research “reproduces the original 1868 and 1869 editions” (xxxi).

Little Women, says Fetterly, positions the March family matriarch, Marmee, as the “model little woman,” who serves as the ideal of self-sacrifice and maternal devotion, yet her character also reveals traces of Alcott’s underlying resistance to these restrictive roles. Fetterly argues that Marmee embodies the contradictions within the novel, as she both instructs her daughters in the virtues of patience and duty while acknowledging the frustrations of female constraint. This duality reflects Alcott’s own experience, having worked as a nurse during the Civil War and witnessed firsthand the strength and independence women were capable of outside the domestic sphere. At one point, Marmee admits that she, too, has struggled to “keep [her] temper” suggesting a suppressed, or dual experience that mirrors Alcott’s own frustrations with gendered limitations. Fetterly highlights how this repeated presentation of restrained emotion complicates the novel’s seemingly celebratory depiction of domesticity. Additionally, the text’s emphasis on Jo’s rebellious spirit juxtaposed with Marmee’s resigned acceptance underscores Alcott’s conflicted stance—while the novel advocates for conformity, it also impresses critique. Ultimately, Fetterly positions Marmee as a figure who both upholds and undermines the ideal of the “angel in the house,” revealing the ideological tensions at the heart of *Little Women*.

As alluded to earlier in a comparison between protagonists Jean Muir and Jo March, Fetterly argues that this same conflict is manifest in Jo March, who embodies Alcott’s independent spirit but ultimately conforms to societal expectations by marrying and embracing domestic life. This narrative shift, according to Fetterly, reveals Alcott’s internalized awareness of the constraints imposed on women by the cultural mainstream and her need to adapt her work to appeal to a mass audience. Throughout the article, Fetterly notes a conscious transition that Alcott makes into another style. She says, “Alcott’s commitment to her ‘true style’ was evidently somewhat less a choice than a necessity, somewhat less generated from within than imposed

from without” (369). From a Marxist perspective, Fetterly’s analysis highlights how the economic and cultural forces of the nineteenth-century literary market shaped Alcott’s creative output. Marxist criticism emphasizes the role of material conditions and societal structures in influencing art and literature, the circumstances of Alcott’s life and career as an author is a direct representation of these concepts.

Furthermore, Fetterly’s argument underscores how these forces constrained Alcott’s ability to fully express her “radical” ideas. The pressure to conform to the cultural mainstream reflects the commodification of literature, where writers—particularly women in the example of Alcott—were forced to cater to prevailing ideologies in order to achieve financial stability and success. This was especially true after the success of *Little Women*, reminds Fetterly, as Alcott did not write any more sensation fiction after *Little Women* was published. Referring to the landscape of sentimental children’s fiction as a “niche,” yielding “golden eggs” that produced “lucrative rewards,” Fetterly presents these new stylistic “constraints” that Alcott faced as “too comfortable to abandon” (369-370). It is important to clarify the “comfort” that Fetterly references here— it is not necessarily a holistic sense of “home-peace” and tranquility, similar to the opening descriptions in *Little Women*, but rather an authorial angst gilded in the comfort of added financial stability. Ultimately, Fetterly’s article examines Alcott’s internal conflict as a writer navigating between personal ideals and market demands, revealing how cultural and economic pressures shaped both the narrative arc of *Little Women* and Alcott’s broader literary career. When taking into account the subliminal conflict that Alcott experienced in the latter, more successful half of her career as a writer, Fetterly’s analysis can be enhanced by ideas in Marxist criticism— illustrating how literature is both a product of and a response to the socio-economic forces of its time.

Publishing, Economic Realities, and Theoretical Perspectives

To analyze Alcott's stylistic divergences in *Little Women* compared with *Behind a Mask* through the lens of Marxist criticism, it is helpful to start with Terry Eagleton's assertion that literature, like all forms of art, is a social institution, rooted in the conditions of its time, and shaped by the ideologies it seeks to either critique or uphold (Eagleton 10-14). Here, Eagleton establishes the importance of social conditions in relation to literature as they dictate the intention and meaning of said literature. In other words, literature, as a social institution, is implicitly connected to, shaped by, and associated with the social environment and therefore ideologies with which it is in conversation.

In his introduction to *Ideology*, Eagleton writes:

The study of ideology is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness. It is because being oppressed sometimes brings with it some slim bonuses that we are occasionally prepared to put up with it. The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power; and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation, freeing ourselves from ourselves . . . [i]f it is rational to settle for an ambiguous mixture of misery and marginal pleasure when the political alternatives appear perilous and obscure, it is equally rational to rebel when the miseries clearly outweigh the gratifications, and when it seems likely that there is more to be gained than to be lost by such action.” (*Ideology* xiii-xiv)

Here, Eagleton's statement on ideology as the mechanism through which individuals “invest in their own unhappiness” resonates deeply with the tension Fetterley discusses in “Alcott’s Civil War”. This tension reflects Alcott's dual role as a writer seeking both economic survival and creative autonomy within a society that often demanded her complicity in reinforcing oppressive norms.

Consciousness and Capitulation in Alcott’s Life and Fiction

Fetterley’s article ultimately highlights Alcott’s inner conflict in working to “free herself from herself.” Her financial dependence on writing *Little Women* required her to embody the ideological norms that readers found comforting and affirming, while her own frustrations with societal constraints found expression in the subversive tone of *Behind A Mask* (though they are subtly represented in *Little Women*). Set within Eagleton’s framework, Alcott’s stylistic differences reflect her oscillation between complicity and rebellion, illustrating how the oppressive forces of her time shaped her writing while also providing a platform for her resistance. As Eagleton goes on to discuss several definitions of ideology, he notes that while “ideology” can sometimes simply refer to a systematic set of beliefs, it often implies more specifically when beliefs are tied to power dynamics. Eagleton cites John B. Thompson’s writing, stating that ideology is frequently connected to legitimizing the power of dominant social groups assertion that studying ideology involves understanding how meaning reinforces relations of domination (*Ideology* 5-6).¹⁴

¹⁴ Here Eagleton cites Thompson’s general work on Ideology: Thompson, John B. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. University of California Press, 1984.

Fetterly, in another article titled “Impersonating ‘Little Women’,” describes what she calls the “radicalism” of *Behind A Mask*. She provides a critique of the cultural and economic forces that shaped Alcott’s career and creative decision making. Fetterley argues that Alcott’s work encapsulates the inherent contradictions of her time, particularly the oppressive demands placed on women to conform to idealized notions of femininity and moral virtue. This tension is portrayed in *Behind A Mask*, which Fetterley describes as “a radical critique of the cultural constructs of ‘femininity’ and ‘little womanhood,’ exposing them as roles women must play, masks they must put on, in order to survive” (2-3). This analysis underscores Alcott’s internal struggle to navigate a society where women’s survival depended on strategic self-presentation, often at the expense of their true selves.

In *Behind A Mask*, Alcott portrays the protagonist, Muir, as a subversive figure who manipulates societal expectations to secure her place in a world that offers women little in the way of economic prospects. Fetterley notes that Muir, though a “victim” of her circumstances—a “thirty-year-old woman of extraordinary talents, with no conceivable means of support, no access to social status, and no possible career except marriage”—is forced to adopt the guise of the “acceptable victim” (9). As Fetterley explains, an acceptable kind of woman (as fits into the ideology¹⁵ of the novel’s setting) must be “nineteen, not thirty, attractive not ugly, humble not proud, innocent not informed, helpless not determined” (9). Jean’s calculated behavior supplements the sense of superiority of the men in the narrative, but, as Fetterley astutely observes, it also exposes “their essential stupidity . . . [for] Jean is quite careful to reinforce male mythologies about female nature, even while her behavior provides ample counter evidence” (9-

¹⁵ “Ideology” as described above by Eagleton in tandem with Thompson as “the ways in which meaning . . . sustain[s] relations of domination” (5).

10). Alcott's portrayal of Muir, in her embarrassing deceit of the Coventry family, ultimately serves as a condemnation of these rigid societal norms and an ironic critique on the double standards women experienced.

This evaluation is deeply personal for Alcott, who herself grappled with the disparity between the rewards of conforming to societal expectations and the costs of pursuing a more subversive path. Additionally, Fetterley recounts how Alcott's financial realities starkly mirrored these contradictions. While working as a nurse during the Civil War, a position imbued with the ideas of self-sacrifice and virtue, Alcott "lost her health" and received a mere ten dollars (2). In contrast, her first step into sensational fiction, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," earned her ten times that, a sum of one hundred dollars. This disparity in her wages was more broadly reflective of the value society placed on "encouraged virtue" versus "proscribed vice" (2). Out of anger over this inequity, emerged *Behind A Mask*, a work that, as Fetterley notes, "asserts that there is no honest way for a woman to make a living; survival depends upon one stratagem or another—sell your hair, sell your body, sell your soul; all are equivalent moves in the same game" (2).

While Fetterly largely assesses *Behind A Mask* in this particular study, her analysis also helps reframe our understanding of *Little Women*. For example, characters like Beth and Meg reinforce the dominant ideology that existed in Alcott's environment, portraying the rewards of conformity to these ideals. Meg, the oldest March sister, ascribed a high value to many aspects of her femininity that rewarded her with stability later in her life. She is described as, "sixteen [years old], and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain" (4). This directly contrasts the

subsequent description of Jo, “tall, thin and brown, and reminded one of a colt; for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way . . . [h]er long, thick hair was her one beauty; but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way” (4). While Meg’s physical features are presented as assets, and she is said to have been “vain” about her “white hands,” Jo’s very locks and limbs are a nuisance to her (4). From their personalities to their physical traits, Jo and Meg are presented as diverging paths originating from the same place.

While Meg gets excitement in participating in some of the more performative activities in which many other girls her age take part, Jo, whether consciously or unconsciously, recognizes the fallacy in them. When Jo asks Meg about a New Year’s Eve party she’s just attended, Meg replies, “‘I declare, it really seems like being a fine young lady, to come home from my party in my carriage, and sit in my dressing-gown with a maid to wait on me,’ . . . as Jo bound up her foot with arnica, and brushed her hair” (32-33). The cultural “performance” demonstrated by her eager participation at this party, wearing the right gown, gloves, and moving with the correct mannerisms, makes her feel like a “fine young lady” (32). On the other hand, Jo “[doesn’t] believe fine young ladies enjoy themselves a bit more” than the March sisters, “in spite of [their] burnt hair, old gowns, one glove apiece, and tight slippers, that sprain [their] ankles when we are silly enough to wear them” (33). Jo’s slight of Meg’s debrief of the party—followed by a direct endorsement from the narrator who says they “think Jo was quite right” validates Fetterly’s argument from before that to “sell your hair, sell your body, sell your soul; all are equivalent moves in the same game” (2). Here, as Jo critiques the pain Meg endures at the party in order to feel like “a fine young lady,” Jo and Alcott (through the narrator) agree with Eagleton’s assessment of ideology. In addition to Jo’s remarks, Meg sprains her ankle on her shoes at the

party and must deal with a stained glove throughout the evening. Here, Meg's "beauty pains" are a representation of the ways in which people may "invest in their own unhappiness," because they may "[bring] . . . slim bonuses that we are occasionally prepared to put up with" (*Ideology* xiii-xiv). For Meg, these "slim bonuses" are social capital, participation in another socio-economic ecosystem that she cannot usually afford, and the possibility that she may meet a male suitor who could elevate her standing. Meaning more to Meg than the pain along the way, Meg desires the access to another life that material wealth provides—something that is inconsistent through much of her youth.

As Fetterley's analysis demonstrates, this surface conformity masks deeper frustrations with the limited opportunities available to women. Without the accompaniment of *Behind A Mask*, Fetterley argues, readers risk misinterpreting *Little Women* as an uncritical celebration of domesticity and "little womanhood" (2-3). In her introduction to the Penguin Classic edition of the texts, editor Elaine Showalter notes that while the "critical reputation" of Alcott "has been forcefully challenged by feminist critics such as Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins . . . scholarly editions of Alcott's pseudonymous sensation fiction [such as *Behind A Mask*], satiric writing, feminist novels, and letters have showed how much her work demands serious attention and analysis" (Showalter viii).

When the texts at hand are paired together, the subversive undertones of *Behind A Mask* demonstrate Alcott's inner conflict in creating a work like *Little Women*, which required her to embody and promote the ideological norms her readers found comforting. This duality of complicity and rebellion is in alignment with Eagleton's discussion of ideology as both a tool of domination and a potential site of resistance. As Eagleton has described, ideology not only

legitimizes the power of dominant social groups but also reveals the ways meaning reinforces systems of oppression (*Ideology* xiv-xv). When these two novels of Alcott's are read together, they reflect her internal and external negotiation of these power dynamics— which, as seen in this research also illustrates how, in Eagleton's words the “oppressive forces” of her time shaped her creative output while simultaneously providing her a platform for critique.

Classical Marxist thought is much more narrowly “economic,” which is, as Eagleton writes, “a focus which was clearly incapable of explaining the particular conditions of women as an oppressed social group, or of contributing significantly to their transformation” (*Literary Theory* 140). Here, “their transformation” is a reference to women in the late twentieth century, as Eagleton discusses the cultural responses to Jacques Derrida's views on deconstruction and its political implications in the 1960s and 1970s. Eagleton notes that Derrida's work has had criticism for being politically evasive and lacking historical considerations but argues that the common interpretation of deconstruction as denying meaning or truth is a misrepresentation. Derrida's approach, Eagleton suggests, is more nuanced and focused on revealing how meaning and identity are shaped by deeper historical and ideological structures. This is important to understanding Eagleton's definitions of ideology and the extent to which “women's movements” were in conversation with various literary and ideological understandings at the time—informing an analysis of the “meaning” in Alcott's work from a feminist lens (*Literary Theory* 128-129).

Thus, Eagleton goes on to emphasize the extent to which factors apart from the “oppression of women” cannot be reduced to a mere consequence of “material realit[ies]” (129). He cites motherhood, domestic labour, job discrimination and unequal wages along with the “question of sexual ideology, of the ways men and women image themselves . . . in a male-

dominated society” as some of these “other factors” (129). Eagleton emphasizes that “women’s oppression” is not simply the result of economic realities, but also of the cultural and sexual ideologies that dictate how women should behave, what they should value, and how they should see themselves (and others) in a male-dominated society. The context of Alcott’s life is a representation of her internal competition with many of these ideologies—being particularly marked by economic hardship, social expectations, and the evolving political landscape of the Civil War.

As Fetterly and other critics note, these factors provide a backdrop for understanding how women’s roles were both culturally enforced and challenged through her writing. Fetterley’s insights illuminate Alcott’s ability to assess the demands of her cultural and economic moment while exposing its contradictions in a way that her works may also reveal the masks women were forced to wear in order to survive and the costs of maintaining these facades. For example, in *Little Women*, the Civil War’s backdrop is not just a historical setting but a powerful ideological force that shapes the characters’ understanding of duty, sacrifice, and identity. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are deeply affected by the war, but they are also shaped by the social ideologies that dictate their behavior as women — the need for women to be self-sacrificing, nurturing, and morally upright, even in the face of hardship.

Feminist Theory and Economic Systems

On one hand, this is a reflection of reality for young women in the nineteenth century. Although sentimental, Alcott’s portrait of the March sisters is accurate. However, when considered in light of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s writing on social gendering in societal economics, it is evident that women’s roles were not only shaped by cultural ideologies but were

also inextricably tied to economic systems that constrained their freedom and agency. This is why incorporating a literary Marxist lens is beneficial. Gilman and Fetterly share a critique of the limitations placed on women's roles in the nineteenth century—especially as they relate to the state of economic dependency and household domestic roles that were imposed upon women in this time. In her book, *Women and Economics*, Gilman argues that the traditional roles assigned to women—ranging from marriage to motherhood—function as a sort of economic and social oppression. In Alcott's *Little Women*, this framework is represented in the way the March sisters are duty-bound by the societal expectations to be self-sacrificing and nurturing, despite their personal desires or needs. Even though Jo has life and career aspirations, she eventually succumbs to the societal and social pressure of the economic dependence that is imposed upon her and the rest of her sisters. Despite her headstrong nature, she is ultimately economically dependent on the male figures in her life and society at large, which limits her choices and reinforces her role as a caregiver and moral exemplar as she ages (just like the paths of her sisters). Without the synthesis of *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* readers are left with the impression of an inherent passivity to the destinies of the March sisters.

At one point, Gilman uses corsets as a metaphor for societal oppression—offering a visual way to connect her views on gendered constraints to the experiences of women in both *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*. Gilman suggests that individuals and entire societies can become so accustomed to disadvantageous conditions that they fail to notice or question them, just as women in the nineteenth century were so used to wearing restrictive corsets that the discomfort became almost invisible, even though they were physically constraining (77).

Similarly, in *Little Women*, the March sisters are tethered by cultural and societal expectations that restrict their personal freedom, much like the tight, restricting corsets that Gilman describes: “the action of the whole body . . . checked in the middle, the stomach is choked, the process of digestion interfered with” (77). Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are, in a way, “wearing” the social corsets of their time. They are expected to embody virtues such as self-sacrifice, humility, and domesticity—values that limit their personal agency and, at times, even their physical well-being. They are expected to conform to these rigid roles and often fail to question the discomfort or limitations of these roles, as it is simply “how things are” for women in their society. For example, Meg feels pressured to conform to social expectations around marriage, sacrifice, and domestic duties, even when they conflict with her desires for personal happiness or freedom. Jo, too, chafes against the limited roles prescribed to women, yet she often finds herself caught between her desire for autonomy and the pressure to fit into these expectations, much like a woman struggling with the literal and metaphorical tightness of a corset.

On the other hand, in *Behind A Mask*, the protagonist, Muir, wears a physical “mask” to conceal her true identity and manipulates the roles society expects her to play in order to achieve her goals. This can be likened to the corset that constricts not just the body, but also the spirit, as women like Muir (and the March sisters) are forced to operate within societal confines that limit their true selves. Muir’s manipulation of her role represents the idea of women becoming so accustomed to playing roles that they do not recognize the personal cost of doing so. Though, a primary difference between Muir and the March sisters is the consciousness embedded in the roles they play. Meg’s level of awareness is different from Jo’s, whose apprehensions are not capitulated as maliciously as Muir’s own impersonations of cultural values. Regardless of their

subconscious of conscious resistance, these roles are similar to the physical discomfort of a corset, the societal constraints limiting their freedom and driving women to learn to function within them without questioning the harm they do to their psychological and emotional well-being.

Gilman's metaphor ultimately highlights the discomfort caused by these societal expectations. Just as a corset can restrict a person's movements and bodily functions, the roles that women are expected to play in both *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* restrict their ability to fully express themselves. Yet, like Gilman's example, these women often become accustomed to this discomfort, not realizing the full extent of how much it limits their growth, agency, and happiness. In *Little Women*, the March sisters' struggles with gender roles might feel natural to them, but in the larger context, they are indicative of the constraints placed upon women by their society—Jo being the best example of consciousness within these roles. Because she grows out of her resistance, like the corset, her restrictions remain invisible and unchallenged.

Thus, Gilman's writing on the invisible discomfort of the corset serves as a fitting metaphor for understanding how the female characters in these works have internalized and become accustomed to the oppressive societal conditions they face. Whether it's the invisible restrictions of gender roles in *Little Women* or the manipulative masks Muir wears in *Behind A Mask*, these stories reveal how women are often forced to conform to the "corsets" of their society, accepting these limitations without varying degrees of consciousness as the extent to which they restrict their personal growth and happiness.

Gilman's corset informs Alcott's exploration of gender roles and identity in *Behind A Mask*. Just as the corset represents an uncomfortable, restrictive force that individuals are often

conditioned to endure without fully recognizing the harm it causes, the societal roles women are expected to perform—roles that are depicted in both *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*—are internalized as natural and necessary, even though they suppress personal freedom and agency. However, as alluded to, *Behind A Mask* pushes against this passive acceptance. Through Muir's story, Alcott further challenges the traditional representations of women by exploring the manipulation of gender roles and the fluidity of identity, suggesting that women are not simply passive recipients of societal norms but are also active players in shaping their own destinies, even if that means subverting the very ideologies that confine them. Muir's actions represent a consciousness of the “corset” in a way that is similar to Alcott's own internal experiences as she navigated genre restrictions in her career as an author. This aligns with Eagleton's critique of Marxism's inability to address the complexities of gendered oppression, as Alcott is not just critiquing the material conditions of women but also the deep ideological systems that reinforce them.

This research, in studying these two very distinct pieces of literature together, unified by Alcott's life, continues to unearth their similarities. Additionally, they each hold similar but distinct frameworks through which Fetterly's “immasculation” is defined.¹⁶ In other words, the novels take place in separate historical contexts, but the overarching “male systems” of values through which the female characters “immasculate” remain similar. This concept, when applied to *Little Women*, is straightforward in the sense that the protagonists, particularly Jo, adopt a

¹⁶ Fetterley's concept of “immasculation,” also developed by other Feminist theorists refers to the unconscious process by which individuals, particularly women, are shaped to “think like a man” through their exposure to male-dominated literature, language, and education, emphasizing the pervasiveness of male-coded language (Fetterly; Bleich 69-70).

consistent pattern of deviation, reproof, and reformation. The immasculation is not necessarily unconscious, but subconscious.

In *Behind A Mask*, Jean Muir recognizes the resources that are afforded to her by this process—while not always true of immasculation, it allowed her to manipulate the system itself to her own gain. For Muir, immasculation is both conscious and intentional. This is not to say that an association with the values of a dominant society always poses an advantage. But for Muir, a resistance to the framework proved even worse—as she had no other prospects through which to make a living. Fetterly, when writing about Alcott’s stylistic dissonance, argues that *Little Women* reflects and responds to gender roles or aspects of male society in relation to the Civil War era—bringing into the conversation the interplay between Alcott’s personal publishing choices and the way that the characters in *Little Women* represent that struggle.

It is well established that Alcott faced significant commercial pressures, which led her to publish both sentimental works like *Little Women* and more subversive, darker stories under a different name. Alcott’s duality reflects the tension that Fetterly identifies—Alcott had to navigate the demands of the literary marketplace while still trying to express her own complex views on gender. In *Little Women*, this tension is evident in the way the March sisters’ lives are shaped by both the ideal of self-sacrificing womanhood and the emerging realities of post-war America, where women’s roles were being questioned, particularly in terms of their contributions to the war effort and societal rebuilding. The liminal space created by this transition allowed for Jo to also operate and mature within this space. The dynamic between consciousness and capitulation is a large part of how Alcott operated in her oscillation between writing styles.

Judith Fetterly’s *The Resisting Reader* provides a critical framework for understanding how *Little Women* operates within this cultural context of the nineteenth century. Fetterly argues

that the novel portrays women's roles as self-sacrificing and domestic, aligning with the ideals of stability and moral reform that were heavily promoted during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. The March sisters embody these virtues, representing an idealized vision of womanhood designed to resonate with a broad, middle-class audience. This aligns with cultural historians like Nina Baym, who in *Woman's Fiction* describes how sentimental novels were tools of social conditioning, promoting values of feminine selflessness and resilience.

However, *Behind A Mask* provides a complicating foil to Baym's definitions of sentimental and anti-sentimental fiction and Fetterly's assessment of the March sisters. Baym calls the definition of sentimentalism, "plastic and ambiguous" (337). As a result, she notes that establishing a particular definition for sentimentalism is important to an assessment and interpretation of such texts (whether sentimental or anti-sentimental): "[i]f one equates sentimentalism with the production and enhancement of bourgeois interiority, then this plot motif might be interpreted to support an argument for the sentimentality of women's novels; whereas, if one identifies sentimentalism with the cultivation of sympathetic relation and ready emotionality, then a protagonist's pursuit of her own well-furnished mental space can be plausibly interpreted as a gesture of anti-sentimental disengagement" (337). In other words, if sentimentalism is seen as reinforcing bourgeois values by focusing on the interior lives of characters (such as their emotions, moral growth, and domestic lives), then it could be said that women's novels simply enhance or perpetuate these sentimental ideals. But, if sentimentalism is defined by the cultivation of empathy and a "well-furnished mental space," then a protagonist's journey toward creating her own mental or emotional space can be seen as rejecting or distancing herself from those very sentimental norms.

While making this distinction is important to understanding interpretations of sentimentalism in women's novels, *Behind A Mask* shifts this expected dynamic of sentimentality in a dramatic way. The protagonist, Muir, begins by fully engaging in sentimentalism—portraying the image of the demure, submissive governess, acting out the role expected of women in bourgeois society. However, this external persona is revealed to be a mask, and as Muir manipulates those around her, she also creates her own emotional and mental space. Muir's strategic navigation of her inner and outer worlds suggests a merging of the two versions of sentimentalism mentioned by Baym. Muir uses the cultivation of sympathy and emotional openness to achieve a form of personal empowerment. In this sense, Muir's development isn't just about moral growth or nurturing relationships that align with bourgeois values¹⁷; it's about using sentimental tools to carve out a space for her own emotional and mental autonomy, which stands in contrast to the traditional confinement of women's emotional lives.

Thus, *Behind A Mask* merges these seemingly opposed elements of sentimentalism. This text's affront to these "two-sides" of sentimentalism create an understanding that, in light of Fetterly's commentary, concepts from Marxist literary critics like Eagleton, and historical analysis, begins to create a framework through which these two texts, as well as Alcott's life, can be seen as similar (despite their differences on the surface). *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* are truly similar stories with different endings—based on the relative levels of conscious engagement the protagonists have with the societal "corsets" that bind them. When the same framework is impressed on Alcott's life, the three narratives, Muir, Jo, and Alcott's lives, run

¹⁷ In Marxist literary criticism, "bourgeois values" are a reference to the values of the class who owns the means of production and controls the working class—in other words, popular culture or the Cult of Domesticity.

together in a complementary fashion—as a progression of one another. Jean’s emotional openness and her creation of an independent mental space allow her to simultaneously critique and adapt bourgeois expectations, suggesting that women can both conform to and subvert sentimental ideals. In this way, Alcott blends the development of domestic life with the creation of personal space, showing that these two aspects of sentimentalism are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in a protagonist who consciously navigates her emotions and societal roles. This application of language Baym uses to discuss sentimentalism to Alcott’s works offers a more complex understanding of how sentimentality can empower a character, allowing for both engagement with and detachment from societal norms.

Behind A Mask is able to critique these bourgeois ideals through its Gothic tone and subversive portrayal of its protagonist, Jean Muir. Alcott’s own journals reveal her duality as a writer: “[I] decided to seek my fortune,” she wrote in 1855, balancing the economic need to write commercially viable stories with her desire to challenge gender norms (and write entertaining literature). In *Behind A Mask*, Alcott constructs Jean Muir as the antithesis of the sentimental heroine. Jean’s cunning and manipulation reveal the performative nature of femininity, echoing the insights of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler’s concept of gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” underscores how Jean adopts a “mask” to navigate societal constraints, reflecting the pressures that women of Alcott’s time faced to conform outwardly while harboring inner resistance (179).

Additionally, sources such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Weekly*—two periodicals that shaped the literary tastes of the era—offer insight into the types of narratives that succeeded commercially. These publications celebrated domestic narratives like *Little Women*,

which upheld ideals of home and family, especially during the uncertainty of the Civil War. Alcott's decision to publish Gothic thrillers like *Behind A Mask* under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard allowed her to explore themes of ambition and power that were less marketable under her own name. This dual strategy exemplifies the divide between "popular" and "romantic genius" authors that Fetterly critiques.

The following section will explore key theoretical frameworks—particularly aspects of Marxist theory and Raymond Williams' cultural historicism (in more depth than Eagleton's concept of ideology)—that provide critical frameworks for understanding the tensions between conformity and rebellion that shape Alcott's portrayal of womanhood in nineteenth century America. These frameworks offer a lens through which to examine historical and economic contexts of Alcott's life and how Alcott's writing reflects and challenges the social expectations of her time, positioning her as both a product and critique of the cultural forces that shaped her life and work. These frames ultimately build upon the structure and process through which *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* can be analyzed in a way that accentuates their similarities.

Subverting Social Structures: Literary Production, Gender, and Class

Muir's power lies in her ability to manipulate social structures despite her societal disadvantages—being unmarried, of an undesirable class, and lacking economic prospects. Her control over the narrative underscores themes of manipulation, power dynamics, and social hierarchy, reflecting broader societal structures and ideologies of the time. These themes serve to echo Alcott's own experiences and highlight the potential of artistic expression and the agency of the lower classes within their historical context. Literary Marxist Terry Eagleton posits that the purpose of criticism is to analyze historical structures as they present in history and how they affect the text (44). Using Eagleton's understanding of the relationship between historical structures and their effect on the text and Raymond Williams' concepts of the ways in which an awareness of ideology helps to reveal the social, economic, and political interests it serves, this section will analyze the structures that foreground and create meaning in the text for the characters in Alcott's *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* (*Culture and Society* 266; "Base and Superstructure" 22; Eagleton 44-45).

Alcott employs the use of a distinctly traditional historical backdrop and ingrained gender norms in *Behind A Mask* to symbolically destabilize society's frameworks and structures. As suggested by Raymond Williams, rather than a static construct, society's structure is depicted as dynamic, because it is shaped by human consciousness (*Culture and Society* 266). Alcott's creation of a deceitful protagonist in Jean Muir, symbolizes the oppressed social class, thus disrupting the orderly facade of Victorian England's social norms. Through Muir's economically driven actions, Alcott unveils the nuanced evolution of culture, emphasizing its fluid nature rather than a fixed definition confined to the nineteenth century (*Culture and Society* 295). This

approach both acknowledges and empowers “the female” in the text, highlighting Muir’s historical agency within the cultural narrative.

An analysis of *Behind A Mask*’s “radical gender and class dynamics” is one of the most common approaches to this text—and is language that would never be applied to *Little Women* (Hackenberg 436). The earlier inclusion of Eagleton’s understanding of the text’s relationship to societal structures and ideology only bolsters these analyses and provides a fuller understanding of the implicit structures for an expanded application of both texts. Eagleton argues that in literary theory, the text should be regarded as the central focus rather than just one component among others (44). He suggests that it can be viewed methodologically as a distinct layer in relation to other elements that are being discussed. Through his exploration of Marxist literary theory, Eagleton asserts that criticism’s role is to dissect the intricate historical interconnections of these structures that shape the text. In essence, he frames Marxist literary theory components by emphasizing that criticism’s aim is to scrutinize these historical structures and their impact on the text. This impact is how the threads of *Little Women*, *Behind A Mask*, and Alcott’s life are all intertwined.

In a chapter of Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology*, titled “Categories for a Materialist Criticism,” Eagleton introduces the concept of the General Mode of Production (GMP) as the initial structure in his discussion. He defines it as a mode of production closely intertwined with social forces and relations (45). This mode, he argues, represents the dominant form of production within a given social framework (45). In contrast, Eagleton distinguishes the Literary Mode of Production (LMP) as a specific configuration of forces and social relations within literary production in a particular societal context (45). He highlights that the totality of Literary Modes of Production can exhibit asymmetry, with certain LMPs exerting more influence (45).

Alcott's *Little Women* contains both themes and characterizations of femininity and a young woman's relationship to her family. The novel is packed with ideas that are ultimately a commodification of the coming-of-age experiences that young women have. Eagleton discusses the relationship of art and cultural production to capitalism and writes that this commodification is ultimately to reinforce dominant ideologies that serve the interests of the ruling class (*Ideology* 329-330). When applied to *Little Women*, the connection between Eagleton's perspective on capitalism, and the ways in which Alcott's novel operates within this perspective is straightforward. Eagleton's understanding is based in a criticism of capitalism's exploitative qualities and societal impact. Alcott's traditionally published *Little Women* fits into this schema. Its concepts reflect social consciousness and the ways in which dominant ideologies sit inside aesthetic discourse.

However, when applied to Alcott's novella *Behind A Mask*, published under a pseudonym in an inexpensive periodical, *The Flag of Our Union*, Alcott's work subverts the dominant ideologies of the society in which it exists—a space only allowed by the nature of print culture at the time she was developing her writing career. Alcott had periodical novellas published in smaller magazines under an assumed name, though she was able to publish some works under her own name that were more tonally similar to *Little Women*. Among these works were stories, poems, and other forms of written literature that, over about a decade, developed her voice and style while also serving to bolster her resume as an amateur author. “[O]ut of a chaos of amateurism,” Alcott had to develop her own agency to define her career in the field (Fabian 407). Fabian, commenting on the transition of the amateur author into the professional reminds us that they “came into being together,” and “most literary careers must have contained elements of both” (408). William Charvat denotes that professional authorship, “provides a

living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than an intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer . . . that it is written with reference to the buyers' tastes and reading habits'" (408). This was not the case for Alcott for most of her writing career—being surely motivated by not just authorial aspiration, but financial need, publishing stories was a means of repaying family debts and contributing to “the Alcott fund” (*Alcott* 167). In particular, *Behind A Mask* was “quickly composed and as quickly accepted”—as a means of paying for a period of Alcott’s travels abroad—“‘A.M. Barnard’ . . . the mysterious author” again “start[ing] work to pay for” Alcott’s other ventures (167).

Alcott’s own relationship to periodical publishing is consistent with the marks of “amateurism” that Fabian describes. Coming from a position of condescension by “would-be professionals,” she says, the nature of the line between amateur and professional authorship at this time was malleable, at best (408). As the idea of a “national literature” and desire to preserve the “development of the native genius” grew in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly between the 1840s and 50s due to the expansion of magazine publishing, “aspiring professionals warned against both the dangers of reprinting English materials and the temptation to publish amateur authors” (409). The warning was that “[a]mateurs who wrote at their leisure misappropriated the income true authors needed to live” (409). In the tumult of the animosity between “classes” of authors in this period of rapid development in publishing and print culture, Alcott, by 1868, after the publication of *Behind A Mask* and several other sensational thrillers was hired as the editor of *Merry’s Museum*, an illustrated children’s magazine. This transition into editing, along with her sporadic periodical publications (both named and pseudonymous) provided her with a means of sending more money back to her family, labelled her as a “superior writer for youth in the country”, and moved her through this amateur chaos, bit by bit (171). Stern, in Alcott’s

biography, writes that “[i]t was a wish devoutly to be hoped that the girl who had gone out to service and worked as a lady’s traveling companion would find success at last, that L.M. Alcott would emerge from her long apprenticeship in varied fields to mastery in one” (171). Here, Alcott was on the cusp of emergence into a more “professional” form of authorship, and *Little Women* was the steppingstone that moved her across the blurred line between them.

Alcott’s transition to a professional writer, particularly with the eventual success of *Little Women*, mirrors the strategic maneuvering of Muir in *Behind A Mask* as both characters navigate societal structures to secure their place within them. Alcott, like many writers of her time, was forced to balance artistic integrity with the commercial demands of the publishing world. Her rise to professional status was fueled not only by her talent but also by her ability to align her work with the tastes and expectations of her readers. In *Little Women*, she created a narrative that adhered to culturally prescribed ideals of femininity, domesticity, and moral growth, all while embedding her personal values and critiques subtly within the story. The novel’s success, thus, was as much about meeting cultural norms as it was about advancing her literary career, which, as she had learned in her decade or so of periodical publishing, was heavily shaped by financial considerations and market forces. Her history publishing a variety of pieces in periodicals, her emergence out of amateurism, helped to familiarize her with the LMPs in her contexts.

Similarly, in *Behind A Mask*, Jean Muir’s ascension through the social hierarchy is predicated on her ability to navigate, manipulate, and ultimately subvert the rigid gender and class expectations of Victorian England. Like Alcott, Jean’s success is a product of her developed understanding of the societal norms she must adhere to while simultaneously exploiting those very same norms to gain power. She performs the role of the dutiful, demure

woman but does so strategically, leveraging this facade to cultivate advantageous social relationships and manipulate others, much like how Alcott crafted her works to fit into the larger cultural narrative of what readers expected from women's fiction.

In both cases, the adherence to societal expectations is not passive or submissive but is an active, calculated process—whether it's Alcott conforming to the sentimental ideals of her readers to achieve commercial success, or Muir using her societal role as a tool for manipulation and self-empowerment. In this way, both Alcott's professionalization as a writer and Muir's social ascent in *Behind A Mask* reflect a nuanced negotiation with cultural norms. Both characters—Alcott as a writer and Jean as a protagonist—consciously engage with and adapt societal expectations to carve out their own spaces within systems that might otherwise limit them. This strategic engagement with societal norms not only highlights individual agency but also intersects with broader ideological structures, as seen in Eagleton's argument about the aesthetic's role in reinforcing social order.

Muir and Alcott's Shared Subversion and Interpellation

Further into Eagleton's *Ideology*, he argues that the aesthetic has been appropriated by the ruling class to promote certain cultural values and maintain social order (334-336). The plot of *Behind A Mask* does not adhere to this pattern in the way that the events of the narrative oppose the cultural values of womanhood in the way that the protagonist carries herself and manipulates the class system in which the story is set—Victorian England. This destabilization of a highly structured social and cultural era, coupled with the outcome of the novel, with Muir escaping the cycle of economic dependence set out for her by society's structures, this story questions the validity of the agency given to Muir's social class. These themes are part of what

necessitated that *Behind A Mask* was still published pseudonymously, as Alcott had nominally published other works that had already begun to categorize her as a children's writer. Having a sensational narrative published under her name at this point would have changed the trajectory of what was possible for her in the future.

A deeper analysis of these social structures provides a greater context for the impact that the novel's social reversals have. The text contains class structures set within the historical backdrop of Victorian England. In this framework, the Coventry family represents the bourgeois class and Muir embodies the proletariat.¹⁸ As a former female actress in Victorian society, Jean Muir faces societal prejudices regarding the "suitability" of her profession for women (Davis 15; Alcott 94). This exemplifies Raymond Williams' notion of literature as a social process, where new feelings, meanings, and values emerge within the traditional framework of society. By setting the novel in Victorian England, a bastion of tradition and bourgeois pride, while portraying the economic significance of femininity, Alcott blends the dominant and developing sectors of society. This fusion of old and new values underscores the intricate relationship between literature, the base, and the superstructure. Alcott's work illustrates how influential literature and art can shape cultural ideology, serving as a dynamic force within society's socio-economic framework. In other words, how literature can affect a culture's ideology—therefore representing the responsive dynamic between the base and superstructure (Williams 135-138).¹⁹

¹⁸ The "bourgeois" in this context means the social class that owns the means of production and holds the economic and cultural power. The "proletariat" is a reference to refers to the working class, particularly those who do not own significant property and must sell their labor to survive.

¹⁹ Here, the "base" is the economic foundation of society, including the means of production and the relations of production/labor and capital, while the "superstructure" is the institutions, culture, and ideologies built on the base, such as government, law, education, religion, media, and art (or literature).

Muir effectively subverts the typical role of the proletariat in Williams' base and superstructure model, ultimately claiming agency within her social class through this inversion. But she destabilizes the structures in place by playing into them as a means of exposing their fallacy—further contradicting Eagleton's understandings of the power relationships between dominant classes, ideology, and aesthetic cultural categories. This process is called interpellation, or the acceptance of her "fulfillment of function" in society (Williams 139). Within the framework of Victorian England, characterized by its rigid class distinctions, social norms, and customs, Muir's identity is shaped by her position within these established boundaries (Calhoun). Calhoun goes on to write that interpellation is the "process" that "positions" people in "appropriate social roles" within "an ideologically structured field" (Calhoun).

This interpellation, or the process of social construction, arises from the interaction between individuals and the ideology that assigns them specific roles. It often imposes limitations on marginalized groups, particularly those from lower classes or lacking power (this process is similar to Fetterly's description of "imasculation" when applied to gender roles. The aim of this interpellative superstructure is to maintain order, enabling the upper class to retain power by controlling the value and contributions of those beneath them. In *Behind A Mask*, Muir's identity is interpellated, defining her name, position, and worth in relation to her economic role as a woman—a governess serving the Coventry family. By occupying this role, she solidifies her identity and perpetuates the oppressive social hierarchy. Despite the assumption that Muir's economic status in the lower class restricts her upward mobility, she ingeniously manipulates the structure to her advantage. In this instance, Muir's consciousness, or

mental space (to use Baym's understanding of anti-sentimentalist concepts), is primarily what distinguishes her from both Jo and Meg.

The Coventry family, symbolizing the upper class, undergo a shift in their consciousness due to Muir's manipulation of the identity assigned to her. Despite being of a lower class, they assume superiority over Muir's role on the estate. However, Muir subverts this dynamic by conforming to their expectations and traditional social structures. Excelling in her role as governess, she earns praise for her refined demeanor and attentive service to Mrs. Coventry. She is described as "'well-bred, unassuming, and very entertaining when she likes,'" and "nothing could be more unobtrusive and retiring than her manners" (*Behind A Mask* 19; 25). Her interactions with Gerald, the youngest Coventry, and her refined demeanor further enhance her reputation. Muir's adeptness at her duties earns her widespread admiration on the estate, transcending the typical image of a governess as a marginalized figure: "Jean Muir was the life of the house" and was not what "most governesses are . . . forlorn . . . hovering between superiors and inferiors" (25). Leveraging the Coventry family's dependence on her, Muir transforms her lower status into a position of influence. Furthermore, she harnesses the power of her perceived submissive female identity to assert her control. In this way, Muir is opposite Meg, and eventually Jo's capitulation. All three characters perform very similar actions in aligning themselves with the cultural values of their social settings, but they differ in their intentions. Alcott, through Muir, writes female agency back into this association with mainstream ideology—directly mirroring her own actions in her writing and publishing process with *Little Women*.

Various ideologies prevalent in the historical setting shape Muir's femininity, including masculine-dominated cultural norms, traditional notions of domestic womanhood, and

patriarchal scientific beliefs. These ideologies collectively contribute to the construction of a subservient female identity deemed “proper” within society. Embedded within the superstructure of the novel’s setting is the acceptance of male dominance over females in all aspects of life. Men hold significant power within society, often through ownership of land and property. Furthermore, within the ideological framework of the domestic, males wield authority over defining individuality, partly influenced by the relevant historical perceptions of biological differences between sexes—part of the ideology that drives and perpetuates the interests of the ruling class (Schewe 578; Eagleton 334).

In her article on domestic performance and conflict in *Behind A Mask*, Elizabeth Schewe explores the significance of emerging social distinctions in mid-nineteenth-century United States, particularly regarding perceived “inherent biological and genetic traits” (Schewe 578). This context is important to understanding the economic implications of the text, for gender-based social inferiority (relative to the historical setting’s social ideology) plays a central role in the character of Jean Muir. Schewe argues that the governess figure embodies class conflict and symbolizes societal anxieties surrounding social and sexual boundaries during the nineteenth century. Muir, as a character who challenges these boundaries and asserts power within her traditionally marginalized role, exhibits agency over her own identity in opposition of societal expectations. Contrary to Raymond Williams’ assertion in *Culture and Society* that individual expression is a privilege reserved for the bourgeois and withheld from the proletariat, Muir disrupts this hierarchical structure by leveraging individual expression as a means of economic advancement (325). Another way, Muir’s ability to invert social structures provides agency for marginalized groups such as herself within this historical context.

Fetterly, while analyzing destabilizing female actions in Alcott's work, notes Muir's failure to secure a husband and ensure her economic survival (3). Consequently, Muir must fabricate an "illusion" of femininity that aligns with men's expectations, perpetuating the belief in the idealized concept of "little women" (3). Fetterley's insights underscore the importance of society's entrenched gender ideology in Muir's role as the governess desired by the Coventry family. Here, as Fetterley alludes to, the narrative represents an idealized bourgeois aesthetic around femininity that serves to perpetuate existing power dynamics. This aesthetic is represented in Alcott's own experiences with these existing gender dynamics in culture. Alcott writes on her birthday in 1865 that she "feel[s] rather old with my 33 years," and "began to realize that love, with its restlessness and its sweet urgencies, might never be hers" (*Journals* 145; *Alcott* 155).

Conversely, Muir, in addition to leveraging her interpellated female identity to captivate the younger Coventry men, adeptly assesses and engages with Sir John's values (as the head of the estate, Sir John represented the highest social position in the "world" of the Coventry family). By manipulating the highest piece of the social hierarchy, she secures her own safety by gaining a foothold in the bourgeois economic sphere. In her final bid for a marriage proposal at the end of the novel, Muir keenly observes Sir John's consciousness and behavior, sensing his interest and goodwill toward her since learning about her background (78). This culminates in an engagement that marks the end of her prolonged manipulation of Sir John's pride and dominant persona, which all began with their first encounter. For, when they first met in the Coventry courtyard, Muir's demeanor transformed as she appeared entranced by the picturesque surroundings of the garden, appealing to Sir John's appreciation for beauty (13). Essentially,

Muir has become exactly what the bourgeois wants to attain, in order to ascend the social hierarchy, a mobility from which she is otherwise excluded.

Although Muir in her ascension does not venture into traditionally male-dominated fields such as science, literature, or philosophy, she belongs to a cohort of “remarkable women who navigated life's challenges and uncertainties,” utilizing the theater and ambiguity of aesthetic disciplines as a place of independence, responsibility, and self-direction (Davis 15). Within the story, Muir harnesses her background in a profession that is often stigmatized so she can amass wealth and social capital, all while adhering to traditional gender roles. By accentuating her feminine qualities and conforming to bourgeois ideals upheld by the societal superstructure, a calculated move within bourgeois interpellative strategies, Muir secures a marriage with Sir John, gaining title, economic stability, and a family. It is through this subversion without a complete upturn of social structures that allowed Muir to work within the space that she created to garner agency where there was none. However strategic, the shame and anger that the other members of the Coventry family experience after hearing the news of Muir’s union with Sir John is clearly indicative of the mocking rebuke of bourgeois values, order, and tradition that Muir represents to the Coventry family, and in the broader sense of the narrative.

This “rebuke” of the dominant ideology, exposing a vapid foolishness about it demonstrates, in part, the tension within Alcott’s critique. Her ideological sidestep from affirming mainstream culture does not fit into the mores upheld in *Little Women* or those that Alcott experienced in her youth. However, in her own reversal (like that of Muir), Alcott capitulated to the desires of the LMP as indicated by society’s superstructure to create agency for herself. The agency displayed in Muir’s life is demonstrative of Alcott’s own ability to carry out a “controlled capitulation” as she aligned her writing with popular ideology to achieve literary

success and financial stability. This dynamic in Alcott's work aligns with Eagleton's discussion of structural conflicts within LMPs, highlighting how different forms of literature—despite coexisting—do not necessarily share equal footing in terms of economic or social reception.

Eagleton also notes the potential for structural conflict between different LMPs, exemplified by the coexistence of capitalist fiction and handwritten poetry in Western societies (45). Their cohabitation, he says, does not necessitate harmony or equality, and these diverse LMPs can coexist without being historically synchronous (45). Expanding on *Literary Modes of Production*, Eagleton explores the relationship between oral and written LMPs (45-47). While *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* both have a written LMP, *Behind A Mask* was circulated in a more casual, less respected fashion, reaching a different audience than a regularly published novel like *Little Women*, or even a novel with subjects less brazenly portrayed than the romanticism and complex moral protagonist of *Behind A Mask*. There is certainly not an equality in the economic and social treatments of Alcott's various works—as Eagleton notes (“Categories” 48-49).

Eagleton further elucidates that “the literary text bears the impress of its historical mode of production as surely as any product secretes in its form and materials the fashion of its making” (48). He goes on to say that “[t]he product of an ‘oral’ LMP is typically more socially stylised, ‘anonymous’, shorn of idiosyncratic introspectiveness than the product of a private printing press (48). While *Behind A Mask* was not the product of an oral LMP, it still carried this anonymity relative to culture – both literally, as Alcott published it under a pseudonym, and it was not attributed to her until 1975 when Madeleine Stern republished it under Alcott's name (Durrans). Eagleton explains that products of an oral LMP, or “work which survives solely by word of mouth from region to region is constrained to deploy conventions of ‘impersonality’

inimical to the confessional forms of a producer whose relatively ‘privatised’ LMP is under severe pressure from more public modes which threaten to dislodge it” (48).

In a comparison of the vastly different publications and respective market consumptions of *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*, the dominating ideological structures (or lack thereof) that are ingrained in the monopoly of production, distribution, and consumption become very clear and stand as an example of what the text itself represents ideologically as it reflects its historical moment. Yet, even in an isolated analysis of *Behind A Mask* LMP, it seems to reflect in part what Eagleton describes in his account of oral LMPs. Even if *Behind A Mask* as a product of its historical setting and LMP is not identical to all instantiations of products of oral LMPs, it is worth noting that Eagleton’s analysis may be applied in a broader context than he originally intended.

In conjunction with Eagleton’s LMPs, Raymond Williams’ work contributes significantly to an analysis of the role of cultural hegemony in shaping the motives of the protagonist in Alcott’s *Behind A Mask*. Muir cleverly exploits interpellation to her advantage by embracing the societal oppression she faces as an unmarried woman within the cultural hegemony, ultimately advancing her economic status. Williams’ understandings of base, superstructure, culture, and social structures help to arrange the structural contradiction that Muir creates in an orderly fashion. By emphasizing her femininity to the point where it becomes an economic asset rather than a liability to her social standing, Muir strategically acknowledges and manipulates her culturally assigned value, effectively challenging, and subverting the oppressive systems in place.

Eagleton ultimately suggests that criticism’s role is to examine historical structures as they manifest in history and their impact on the text (44). This framework, including the

relevance of LMPs, ideology, cultural hegemony, and the assessment of base and superstructure, illustrates how these structures influence the literary, historical, and economic contexts of the novels as they contribute to past and present interpretations of the text. Both Williams and Eagleton's theories shed light on the structures and techniques at work in Alcott's *Behind A Mask*, particularly in comparison to *Little Women*. This defiance against the hegemonic structures within the narrative's setting and historical context, combined with the insights from Eagleton's exploration of literary modes of production and his work on the *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, serves to contemporize Alcott's *Behind A Mask* and make it more pertinent to modern audiences (a task not necessary for *Little Women*).

Understanding the interactions between culture and other societal elements of literature, like those related to Williams' superstructure, is crucial for grasping how human consciousness both shapes and is shaped by the material world (Alcott and Stern xvii). Works of literature, such as those by Alcott, have the potential to introduce more nuanced cultural representations, despite the fact that they may seem to reinforce existing mainstream norms.

Conclusion

The economic analysis of *Behind A Mask* displays the interpellative subversion that Muir carries out, bringing out of abstraction an argument for Alcott's own agency and control in her own instance of interpellation. It also expands the significance of *Little Women* in an analysis of the decisions that the March sisters make in their own lives—how they adapt and respond to society's ideology over the course of the text. By calling attention to intention and agency for characters like Muir, Jo, Meg, and the real life of Alcott, the similarities between the narratives rise to the surface. They are multiple representations of the same story—each with a different outcome. *Little Women* is often referred to as semi-autobiographical. The trajectory of Muir's life in her reclamation of economic stability and agency through what seems like capitulation is certainly an argument that both of these texts, *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*, are semi-autobiographical. They are dual representations of Alcott's life, and her legacy—as a woman, a writer, a sister, a daughter, and ultimately a provider for her family.

The argument at the heart of this research is that Louisa May Alcott's literary duality—exemplified by the contrast between *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask*—expands the existing conversation around Alcott's career as a complex negotiation between societal expectations and authorial resistance. This research matters because it challenges the traditional perception of Alcott as an author who merely capitulated to cultural pressures, instead positioning her as a writer who strategically engaged with dominant ideologies while subverting them from within. By employing feminist, historical, and Marxist critiques, this study expands the understanding of Alcott's literary legacy, revealing her work as a calculated response to the limitations imposed on women writers in the nineteenth century. These critical applications also leave a framework through which subversion is revelatory of resistance.

Some research is driven by necessity, a way to resolve pressing social or scientific issues, while other research is driven by curiosity and the pursuit of a deeper understanding of a particular subject or idea. This study falls primarily into the latter category—it is an expansion of an existing conversation rather than a direct response to a specific crisis or issue. However, this does not diminish its significance. The importance of curiosity-driven research such as this lies in its ability to reshape prevailing narratives and reassess overlooked aspects of literary history. By examining Alcott's work with the addition of Marxist lens, this study contributes to an ongoing conversation about gender, authorship, and economic survival in literary production, as well as discussions around Alcott's seemingly conflicting representations of gender roles in *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*.

One of the central aspects of this project is its mapping of connections between Alcott's life and the lives of her protagonists. The study delineates the ways in which Jo March's struggles and Jean Muir's cunning reflect different facets of Alcott's own experiences navigating the restrictive publishing landscape. These connections help to dispel (or rather challenge) the myth that *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* exist in separate ideological spheres. Instead, this analysis and application of several overlapping critical lenses demonstrates that they are inextricably linked—both products of an author acutely aware of the socio-economic forces shaping her career and the limited avenues available to women seeking financial independence. The purportedly night and day *Little Women* and *Behind A Mask* are in fact more similar than they are different, in that they are representations of the same narrative, the distinguishing factor being consciousness.

Expanding upon existing scholarship, this research reframes Alcott's legacy, not as one of acquiescence to market demands, but as an intentional and subversive negotiation of societal norms. This aligns with Jane Tompkins' argument, which asserts that "the novel functions both as a means of describing the social world and as a means of changing it . . . not only offer[ing] an interpretive framework for understanding the culture . . . reinforc[ing] of a particular code of values, recommend[ing] a strategy for dealing with cultural conflict, but it is itself an agent of that strategy, putting into practice the measures it prescribes" (191). Alcott's body of work operates precisely in this manner—describing the social world as it was while embedding within it a subtle resistance to the very structures it appeared to uphold. By reassessing Alcott's engagement with market forces through this framework, we gain a richer understanding of her work as an instrument of cultural critique rather than mere submission to economic necessity. As Stern notes in Alcott's biography, "she [Alcott] served an apprenticeship, to life as well as to literature" (80).

One of the least explored aspects of Alcott's writing in current critical discourse is its resonance with Marxist literary criticism. By incorporating the perspectives of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, this research introduces an economic framework that can be applied across Alcott's diverse texts. Despite their tonal and thematic differences, her works consistently engage with class struggles and the commodification of literature. This study argues that Alcott's navigation of these economic realities was itself a form of subversion. Moreover, this Marxist lens offers broader applications beyond Alcott's work, providing feminist literary critics with additional tools for examining the intersections of gender and economic structures in other literary texts.

When research employs a universal theoretical framework or maintains consistency in methodology, such as the application of Marxist literary structures to *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women*, it creates a structured means of analyzing the abstract and fluid concept of culture. This does not reduce culture to something quantifiable, but rather establishes a “measuring stick” that allows for greater clarity in assessing literary agency and resistance. The application of Marxist and historical criticism in this research provides such a structure, revealing the ways in which Alcott’s protagonists—like Alcott herself—navigated and resisted dominant cultural narratives. Jo March, Jean Muir, and Alcott all enacted versions of resistance, though their outcomes differed they are three narratives with different endings, almost as if Alcott was practicing her life outcomes or working out a decision by writing outcomes into the characters of her stories. Additionally, by highlighting the facets of Muir’s resistance and applying them to Jo and Alcott this study highlights the importance of intention in acts of masking—whether through Jean Muir’s calculated deception or Alcott’s strategic use of literary genres.

Feminist literary criticism has long engaged with questions of gendered agency, performance, and resistance, and this research places Alcott within that continuum. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* provides a useful lens for understanding the dual nature of Alcott’s literary output. Their discussion of women writers’ negotiation with patriarchal expectations echoes Alcott’s own struggles with balancing commercial success and creative autonomy (as did Fetterly’s “Civil War” article). Alcott, like the women writers Gilbert and Gubar describe, created heroines that simultaneously conformed to and subverted dominant cultural narratives. Muir, in particular, embodies what Gilbert and Gubar call the “madwoman”—a female figure who resists and manipulates social norms rather than merely succumbing to them.

Additionally, the economic realities of women's writing in the nineteenth century can be further contextualized in this research's application of Raymond Williams' concept of cultural hegemony in the domestic novel as it played a critical role in shaping and reinforcing middle-class ideologies. Alcott's *Little Women* appears to align with cultural hegemony, reinforcing ideals of domestic virtue and feminine self-sacrifice. However, *Behind A Mask* disrupts this reading by offering a heroine who weaponizes these very ideals to achieve power. In doing so, Alcott complicates the simplistic binary of compliance versus resistance, revealing the ways women writers engaged with and repurposed dominant ideologies to carve out space for alternative expressions of agency.

The historical development of the domestic novel at this time also serves as a bridge between Alcott's reality and her fiction, affirming that her supposed submission to societal norms was, in fact, a means of calculated resistance. The connections between *Behind A Mask*, *Little Women*, and Alcott's life affirm that Alcott's engagement with cultural expectations was far more nuanced than it has often been portrayed. Muir's resistance was Jo's resistance, which was, in turn, Alcott's resistance. Their stories differ in conclusion, but their lives follow the same trajectory, exposing the limitations of prescribed gender roles and demonstrating the potential for subversion within them.

Additionally, the prevailing notion that *Behind A Mask* and *Little Women* stand in ideological opposition is challenged by this project's investigation. Instead of opposites, it presents them as complementary, sister texts that illuminate different aspects of Alcott's negotiation with nineteenth-century cultural and economic constraints. The assumption that *Little Women* represents conformity while *Behind A Mask* embodies rebellion oversimplifies the

complexity of both texts. Rather, when read together, they reveal a consistent authorial strategy—one that engages with and critiques societal expectations from within.

Ultimately, any time a narrative of empowerment that transcends historical context can be revealed in a text, as in *Little Women*, *Behind A Mask*, and in Alcott's life—especially a text traditionally assumed to conform to dominant ideology—it is important to explore that alternative reading. This study does just that, as a work of expansion, providing a more comprehensive understanding of Alcott's authorial legacy. By challenging the narrative that *Little Women* was purely a product of cultural submission, it instead presents a more subversive reading—one that acknowledges the economic pressures Alcott faced while celebrating the ingenuity with which she navigated them (similar to Jo's resistance of cultural norms and ideology in her youth). This reframing not only enriches our understanding of Alcott's work but also encourages further scholarship that examines hidden narratives of resistance in other literary works.

The broader implications of this study extend beyond Alcott's work, highlighting the ways in which economic and ideological forces continue to shape literary production. Future research could apply similar frameworks to contemporary literature, examining how female authors today navigate market forces while embedding resistance within their narratives. By expanding the application of Marxist, feminist, and historical methodologies, one can continue to uncover the hidden complexities of literary resistance, ultimately reshaping our understanding of literature as both a product and critique of its cultural moment.

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