

The Ethical Journey of The March Sisters: A Study in Morality and Growth

Martina Girsang¹, Cindy Ardauli²

^{1,2}Universitas Methodist Indonesia, Indonesia

Email: martinagirsang253@gmail.com; cinyardauli@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

"Little Women" karya Louisa May Alcott (1868) tetap menjadi tonggak penting dalam sastra Amerika, menggambarkan tantangan dan perkembangan empat saudara perempuan March—Jo, Meg, Beth, dan Amy—selama Perang Saudara Amerika. Makalah ini mengeksplorasi tema-tema sentral dalam novel tersebut, dengan fokus pada ketegangan antara keinginan individu dan harapan masyarakat, terutama mengenai peran wanita pada abad ke-19. Alcott menggambarkan bagaimana setiap saudara perempuan berjuang dengan tekanan pribadi dan sosial: Jo menolak peran gender tradisional demi kemandirian dan menulis, sementara Meg menerima femininitas dan pernikahan. Makalah ini juga membahas konflik moral dan emosional yang dihadapi oleh karakter-karakter tersebut saat mereka menyeimbangkan ambisi pribadi dengan kewajiban keluarga. Dengan menganalisis perkembangan karakter, simbolisme, dan struktur naratif, studi ini menunjukkan bagaimana Little Women tidak hanya merupakan refleksi dari zamannya tetapi juga eksplorasi abadi tentang keluarga, identitas, dan pencapaian kebahagiaan. Pemeriksaan novel ini tentang tugas feminin dan kehidupan domestik terus beresonansi dengan perdebatan kontemporer tentang gender dan peran masyarakat."

Keyword: Peran Wanita; Harapan Masyarakat; Keinginan Individu

ABSTRACT

Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868) remains a cornerstone of American literature, depicting the challenges and growth of four March sisters—Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy—during the American Civil War. This paper explores central themes in the novel, focusing on the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, particularly regarding women's roles in the 19th century. Alcott addresses how each sister grapples with personal and societal pressures: Jo rejects traditional gender roles in favor of independence and writing, while Meg embraces femininity and marriage. The paper also examines the moral and emotional conflicts faced by the characters as they balance personal ambitions with family obligations. By analyzing character development, symbolism, and narrative structure, the study demonstrates how Little Women is not only a reflection of its time but also a timeless exploration of family, identity, and the pursuit of happiness. The novel's examination of feminine duty and domesticity continues to resonate with contemporary debates on gender and societal roles.

Keyword: Women's Roles; Societal Expectations; Individual Desires

Corresponding Author:

Cindy Ardauli,

Universitas Methodist Indonesia,

Jl. Hang Tuah No.8, Madras Hulu, Kec. Medan Polonia, Kota Medan,

Sumatera Utara 20151, Indonesia

Email: martinagirsang253@gmail.com



1. INTRODUCTION

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, first published in 1868, has long been recognized as one of the most influential works in American literature. The novel chronicles the lives of the four March sisters—Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy—as they grow up in New England during the American Civil War. Through their individual struggles and victories, Alcott explores themes of family, sacrifice, love, and the societal

expectations imposed on women in the 19th century. This blend of domestic realism and moral development has secured the novel's place as a timeless classic in literary scholarship (Showalter, 1975).

As a narrative centered on female characters, *Little Women* reflects the complexities of femininity and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Each sister represents a different dimension of womanhood: Jo defies gender norms and aspires to become a writer; Meg embraces domestic life as a wife and mother; Beth exemplifies self-sacrifice and devotion; and Amy pursues artistic ambition and social status. According to Saxton (1998), Alcott deliberately crafted these characters as reflections of diverse female responses to societal norms and personal aspirations.

Contemporary studies situate *Little Women* as a key text in feminist discourse and ethical reflection. As Putra (2020) notes, the novel does not present a monolithic portrayal of women, but rather offers a plural and dynamic representation that demonstrates how women respond differently to the demands of their era. Furthermore, Suraya and Kurniawati (2023) highlight Jo's narrative as an emblem of resistance to domesticated gender roles, with each sister's journey reflecting the negotiation between personal desire and societal expectations.

Beyond being a story of family, *Little Women* serves as a subtle critique of value systems that limit women's choices. Through symbolism, character development, and intricate narrative structure, Alcott underscores the importance of female agency in determining one's own path in life. As such, the novel remains relevant to contemporary debates on gender, identity, and societal roles (Fadhilah, 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a feminist literary criticism framework combined with virtue ethics to analyze Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, focusing on how the four March sisters—Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy—navigate the gender norms and moral expectations of 19th-century American society. The feminist lens is applied to examine how each sister either challenges or conforms to the prevailing social constructs surrounding womanhood, marriage, ambition, and domesticity. Simultaneously, virtue ethics is used to investigate the sisters' moral growth, particularly in how their evolving understanding of virtue, duty, and self-fulfillment influences their life choices.

The methodology follows a qualitative approach with an emphasis on close textual analysis. Selected narrative passages are examined to identify representations of gender, morality, and identity formation. The study draws upon both primary textual evidence from the novel and secondary scholarly sources that support the feminist and ethical readings. This allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the characters' internal and external conflicts.

In particular, Jo's resistance to traditional gender roles is analyzed in the context of her literary aspirations and rejection of marriage; Meg's reconciliation between domestic ideals and material expectations is viewed through the lens of economic gender dynamics; Beth's self-sacrifice is interrogated for its moral implications within the domestic sphere; and Amy's ambition and romantic development are assessed for their alignment with evolving societal views on femininity and class.

This analysis is further contextualized within the historical framework of 19th-century American culture, taking into account the limited social and economic roles available to women at the time. The study integrates critical perspectives from literary scholars such as Showalter (1975) and Saxton (1998), whose work illuminates Alcott's subtle critique of patriarchal norms through her character construction and symbolic use of domestic space.

By combining literary theory, ethical philosophy, and historical context, the research method provides a multidimensional understanding of how *Little Women* remains a significant narrative in exploring women's agency, identity, and moral autonomy. The methodological integration also supports the findings that each sister's journey represents a different response to societal and moral pressure—affirming that Alcott's work is both a historical document and a timeless reflection on gendered life choices.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to the internal and external conflicts that shape the growth of the March sisters, it is essential to consider how these struggles resonate within the broader context of the 19th century and how Louisa May Alcott uses them to challenge societal norms. The struggles of Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy are not merely individual dilemmas but reflections of the larger societal restrictions placed on women during this period. Each sister's journey underscores the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, and in doing so, Alcott subtly critiques the rigid gender roles that sought to confine women to the domestic sphere.

For instance, Jo's rejection of traditional gender roles—particularly the pressure to marry and focus on domesticity—illustrates the limitations placed on women's potential in a society that valued women primarily for their ability to nurture and manage a household. Her pursuit of a writing career, an unconventional

ambition for a woman of her time, forces Jo to navigate both internal and external obstacles. Her evolving relationship with Laurie highlights this tension further, as societal norms push her toward marriage, but Jo remains steadfast in her desire to build a career and retain her independence. Alcott, through Jo, presents a critique of the restrictive gender roles of the time, suggesting that women should have the freedom to pursue their passions and career aspirations without sacrificing their autonomy.

Similarly, Meg's internal struggle between love and material wealth highlights the intersection of social class and gender expectations. While Meg's love for John Brooke transcends wealth, her initial hesitations about his humble financial status reveal the pressure women faced to marry well and secure a comfortable life. This conflict exemplifies how economic considerations were often tied to marriage, with women expected to choose security over passion. Meg's eventual choice to prioritize love over wealth, despite financial strain, reflects a shift in her understanding of what truly constitutes a fulfilling life—a notion that Alcott encourages readers to embrace.

Beth's journey, on the other hand, speaks to the traditional ideals of femininity, self-sacrifice, and quiet service. Beth's devotion to her family and her selflessness are both admirable and tragic, as they come at the expense of her own well-being. Alcott uses Beth's character to underscore the dangers of conforming too strictly to societal expectations of women as passive, nurturing figures. Beth's fate serves as a poignant reminder of the limitations of self-sacrifice, particularly when it erodes one's sense of self and health. While her actions may be seen as virtuous within the framework of traditional femininity, Alcott ultimately suggests that women must also care for their own needs and desires to fully live.

Amy's external conflicts, particularly her ambitions for social success and artistic recognition, are complicated by her youth and position within the family. As she grows older, her relationship with Laurie develops into a central aspect of her character arc, highlighting the evolving expectations of marriage and social standing. Amy's eventual choice to marry Laurie is influenced by both her personal growth and the shifting dynamics of their relationship. Her journey reflects how women navigated societal pressures surrounding marriage, often having to balance their own desires with the expectations placed on them by family and society.

Alcott's depiction of these conflicts, both internal and external, speaks to the universal themes of self-discovery, identity, and the search for fulfillment. By portraying the March sisters' struggles, Alcott critiques the social constructs that confined women to predetermined roles and emphasizes the importance of personal agency. Her characters' journeys suggest that true fulfillment lies not in adhering to societal expectations, but in finding a balance between duty, love, and personal growth.

Furthermore, Alcott's use of symbolism throughout *Little Women* serves to reinforce the thematic exploration of sacrifice, ambition, and identity. For example, the recurring motif of the March family's modest home, the "little" in *Little Women*, represents both the limitations and possibilities of their lives. While the family's financial struggles prevent them from living in luxury, their home is also a place of warmth, love, and moral growth. Alcott's use of this setting contrasts the external materialism of society with the internal values of love, service, and personal development. Similarly, the symbolic significance of the "fourth sister," the absent father who influences the family's moral compass, highlights the idea that family and love are central to the sisters' development.

Alcott's narrative structure, which weaves together the daily lives, dreams, and growth of the four sisters, allows readers to see the contrasts in their personalities and choices. Through the lens of these contrasts, Alcott emphasizes the idea that there is no one path to fulfillment or happiness. Each sister's journey is unique, but they are all united in their shared experiences of love, loss, and self-discovery.

The moral of *Little Women* lies in the balance between ambition, sacrifice, and personal growth within the context of family and love. Alcott teaches that true fulfillment is not found in conforming to societal expectations but in finding one's own path. Each sister learns that navigating the complexities of life requires balancing personal ambitions with family responsibilities. Ultimately, the novel suggests that happiness is not solely derived from individual achievements but from the love and support of family and the wisdom gained through sacrifice.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Little Women* offers a timeless exploration of family, identity, and the struggle for personal fulfillment within societal constraints. Alcott captures the complexities of womanhood through the experiences of the March sisters, who face both internal and external conflicts as they navigate the pressures of personal ambitions and familial duties. The novel transcends its 19th-century context, offering valuable insights into universal themes such as sacrifice, love, and self-discovery.

Jo's rejection of traditional gender roles, Meg's choices between love and material wealth, Beth's selflessness, and Amy's pursuit of success all highlight the varying ways women respond to societal expectations. These themes remain relevant today, as the novel continues to provoke discussions about gender roles and personal freedom. Alcott's mastery of character development, symbolism, and narrative structure

(Martina Girsang)

makes *Little Women* a profound commentary on the nature of womanhood, familial bonds, and the quest for individual fulfillment.

REFERENCES

- DeGuzman, K. (2025, January 14). *What is prose — Definition and examples in literature*. StudioBinder Inc. <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-prose-definition/>
- Fadhilah, A. (2021). Women's struggle in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. *UNCLLE (Undergraduate Conference on Language, Literature, and Education)*, 1(1), 1–8. <https://publikasi.dinus.ac.id/index.php/uncle/article/view/8921>
- Literary Devices Editors. (n.d.). *What is prose?* Literary Devices. <https://literarydevices.net/prose/>
- Literary Devices. (2021, May 28). *Prose – Examples and definition of prose as a literary device*. <https://literarydevices.net/prose/>
- Putra, E. E. (2020). An analysis image of women in *Little Women* novel by Louisa May Alcott. *Journal of Education, Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching*, 3(2), 29–36.
- Saxton, M. (1998). Feminism and children's literature: Fitting *Little Women* into the American literary canon. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 23(3), 151–159. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44378244>
- Showalter, E. (1975). *Little Women – Literary criticism and analysis*. *The New England Quarterly*, 48(2), 245–252. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177602>
- Suraya, A., & Kurniawati, N. (2023, August). Women's struggle in *Louisa May Alcott's Little Women*. In *UNCLLE (Undergraduate Conference on Language, Literature, and Culture)* (Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 414–426). <https://publikasi.dinus.ac.id/index.php/uncle/article/view/8921>