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## Pants, Not Petticoats: Transgressive Female Characters in Literature

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**Pants, Not Petticoats:**  
**Transgressive Female Characters in Literature**

by  
Sarah Bott

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of B.A. in Literary and Intercultural Studies

Dominican University of California

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## ABSTRACT

Female character development in literature can be revolutionary, especially for protagonists that bend the rules and replace a socially-based image of classical femininity with their own gender non-conforming expressions. In *Pants, Not Petticoats: Transgressive Female Characters in Literature*, comparative analysis is used to study the non-conforming aspects of three gender rebels: Jo March from *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1980 Illustrated Junior Library Edition), Scout Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (2002 First Perennial Classic Edition), and Eliza Sommers from *Daughter of Fortune* by Isabel Allende (2006 First Harper Perennial Edition). Through a close reading of each novel, aspects of their physical appearance, mannerisms / behaviors, and aspirations for the future are examined. Family structure and social construction are weighed in the influence over the formation and expression of gender identity. This essay illustrates the impact that gender bending characters such as Jo, Scout, and Eliza can have upon young and adult readers alike. Each novel has been notably celebrated for its coming of age story and the ways in which it has resisted gender norms. With each generation, a new wave of young readers discovers the rich complexity of these characters and are shown that there are alternative ways of being a girl.

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To all of my instructors at Dominican that introduced me to Women's Studies.  
My eyes and heart have been opened.

"I don't like to doze by the fire. I like adventures, and I'm going to find some."

Josephine March, *Little Women*

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## INTRODUCTION

The first time I can recall being moved by a character in a book was when I read *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. It was my first introduction to complex female characters, and I wasn't quite sure how to interpret them. A gift from my aunt, the thickly bound and beautifully illustrated book was by far the most challenging text that I had ever attempted. It was intimidating at first glance, but just a few pages in, I was completely taken by the March sisters. Each of the four was so different from the next, and the various ways in which they displayed their femininity was fascinating to read. Small slices of each one made sense to me, but Jo most boldly made her mark as a unique and unapologetic non-traditional female. I searched for her in every chapter – wanting more of her story – celebrating in her rebellious victories and admiring her love of writing. Jo March hooked me into seeking out alternative female characters like her and seeded my deep respect for the women who write them.

The following is a comparative analysis of Jo March from *Little Women*, Scout Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Eliza Sommers from *Daughter of Fortune*. Hailing from varied backgrounds, geographic origins, and social classes, each iconic female protagonist sheds the expectations of family, friends, and the patriarchal society surrounding them, setting forth her own gender expressions in the form of alternative dress, behavior, and aspirations – typically undesirable of young females in their respective time. Infused with elements of feminism and social issues, these characters not only succeeded in anchoring their respective texts, but also endeared themselves to countless readers for their bravery and skill in exhibiting alternative ways of being a girl.

## THE CONTEXT OF GENDER

Going far back into ancient Greek literature, and possibly even earlier, writers and orators invoked female characters that embodied classic femininity. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Athena is depicted as a nurturing helper, assisting Odysseus along in his epic journey towards home, while Penelope held fast in her role as a wife and mother, patiently awaiting his return. Calypso relied on her sensually enigmatic ways to seduce a homesick man into staying with her forever. Writing a character neatly within the parameters of a gender stereotype makes for a reliable and predictable contributor to the narrative. When a female displays characteristics on a page that are all at once demure, sensual, nurturing, or domestic, we read her as a lover, a wife, and sometimes a mother. In this way, she fits the role of a classic female. But every so often, a heroine appears that rocks the boat and upends a long-held understanding of femininity. That non-conforming bend to her character can provoke a deep reaction in a young reader who might be looking to identify or make connections between herself and the page: curiosity, admiration, celebration, or possibly even distaste.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to note the difference between one's sex and her gender. A simplified explanation can be found in Daphna Joel and Luba Vikhanski's book on gender and the brain, *Gender Mosaic: Beyond the Myth of the Male and Female Brain*. "Sex refers to the biological features that go with having male or female genitals and *gender* to the social features." (27) The character's analyzed here are female in sex but display a wide range of gender traits that are both typical and non-typical of their sex. It is the unexpected presentation – clothing, actions, even her way of thinking – that ladder up into creating a



gender non-conforming character. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines gender nonconforming as “exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one’s sex: having gender expression that does not conform to gender norms” (“gender nonconforming”). To put the concept of gender into physical terms, an example would be a female child, quietly role playing and caring for a baby doll as a mother would do. That behavior is typical of her sex and expected on a social level by the adults around her. Nonconforming behavior would be the same little girl digging in the muddy soil with a toy truck – more widely expected of a male child and not usually representative of her sex. Biologist author, Anne Fausto-Sterling, explores gender expression in her book *Sex/Gender: Biology in A Social World*. There she notes that every individual, “...has a sex (male, female, not designated, other); but they engage with the world via a variety of social, gender conventions.” (7) This engagement translates into masculine and feminine behaviors, appearances, roles and responsibilities.

Just as in real life, in literature there are many ways in which a character may step outside of her socially defined gender, as well as many reasons why she was written that way. Masculinity and femininity is felt, learned, and conditioned when modeled by others. Literature is an important contributor to this equation, especially books and stories read by young readers. A female character that stands out against what is most common is instructive and offers another layer of context into gender expression.

### ***Dress and Appearance***

On and off of the pages of a book, the most immediately recognized expression of one's gender is their outward appearance. A female character's physical description is typically provided early on to situate the reader and help them conceptualize her. Personality and actions aside, a visual image in the mind of the reader promotes early investment in the character. A lot can be gleaned about a heroine from the details of her clothing, the way she wears her hair, and even the way in which she carries herself and moves her body. Her femininity footprint is derived in part from these early descriptions of what she looks like on the outside: dress versus pants, silk blouse versus cotton work shirt, manicured nails versus rough working hands, jewelry versus a lack of adornment. Visual representation of gender in written words is silent but powerful.

In these three novels, there are well defined gender appropriate expectations around female appearance; in all three novels we see our characters willfully disregard them. The March sisters are aware of the latest fashions and answer with full skirts and delicate gloves; not Jo March. She tows the line precariously in her choice of clothing. Valuing comfort over custom, Miss March gravitates to simple dress without the use of customary lady-like accessories or embellishments such as gloves, jewelry, or parasols. Not overly concerned with a refined or feminine appearance, she often stands too close to the fireplace, singeing her skirts and instantly demoting her status within a room full of polished peers. When outdoors in the rain, she braves the inclement weather without an umbrella and sinks boot-deep into the mud. Much to the exasperation of her overtly feminine sister Amy, Jo makes concessions on her appearance only when forced to do so.

While Amy dressed, she issued orders, and Jo obeyed them; not without entering her protest, however, for she sighed as she rustled into her new organdy, frowned darkly at herself as she tied her bonnet strings in a irreproachable bow, wrestled viciously with pins as she put on her collar, wrinkled up her features generally as she shook out the handkerchief, whose embroidery was as irritating to her nose as the present situation was to her feelings; and when she had squeezed her hands into tight gloves with three buttons and a tassel, as the last touch of elegance, she turned to Amy with an imbecile expression of countenance, saying meekly: "I'm perfectly miserable; but if you consider me presentable, I die happy." (375)

Jo's lack of concern in her appearance is not without consideration. This is one place where she can be herself. Her clothing is literally an extension of her body, directly tied to her attitudes about traditional femininity and the unfairness of being born a female – even though she is surrounded by three sisters that eagerly conform to the standards of the day and relish in the array of fashion possibilities bestowed upon their gender. With *Little Women* set in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England, this would include a variety of garments that were meant to be worn together to produce an hourglass illusion of a slim waist and swelling hips.

In the 1860s the skirt was very full and worn over a cage crinoline, a petticoat supported by a frame of steel hoops that held it away from the legs. A boned corset was worn over a chemise. Large shawls were sometimes worn indoors or outdoors instead of a coat or cloak. (V& A Museum, Introduction to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion)

While Jo is aware that her simple and functional attire stands out against that of her peers, she simply does not subscribe to the importance of a polished appearance. Choosing to rebuff the

practices of dressed hair and pressed gowns, she opts for a wardrobe that is best suited for long stretches of time spent writing and most representative of her belief that there is more to life than looking like a lady.

At approximately the same time and in another part of the world, Eliza Sommers has grown up in Chile as a native expat. Born in-country but adopted into a British merchant family, she alternates between dressing the part of an English young lady and stripping down into the plain clothes of the working class. When in the care of family, her gowns are elaborate and finished feminine – fine fabrics complete with ribbons and underpinned by a stifling corset. In this attire, she truly is the daughter of fortune – the sole charge of Miss Rose, an unmarried woman of means. Eliza doesn't mind dressing the part, but she is equally as happy to spend her time in the company of Mama Fresia, the Sommers' family cook and housekeeper. There she is free to don a smock and work alongside her Nana in the kitchen.

Eliza grew up between Miss Rose's sewing room and the back patios, speaking English in one part of the house and a mixture of Spanish and Mapuche, her nana's native tongue, in the other, one day dressed and shod like a duchess and the next playing with hens and dogs, barefoot and barely covered by an orphan's smock. (11)

Her ability to transition and feel equally comfortable in either setting shows her attitude of indifference when it comes to the gender norm of feminine dress. She is generally fluid and unconcerned with a classic feminine appearance. In *Daughter of Fortune*, it is later in the novel that Eliza's character makes a drastic pivot towards masculinity. Seeking to distance herself from the likelihood of an arranged marriage and longing to reunite with her chosen lover, she

attempts to board a ship bound for California undetected, by shedding her female identity completely for that of a young male.

As the articles of a young English lady's clothing piled up on the floor one by one, she was losing contact with known reality and irreversibly entering the strange illusion that would be her life in the months to come. (152)

At this point, her new choice in clothing is a means to an end, but it exhibits bravery and risk taking more often attributed to men. Eliza spends the remaining part of the novel passing as a young man, learning how to act like, dress like, and interact with others as is expected of a young man in a highly competitive and dangerous part of the wild west. Eliza experiences a transformation in the second half of the novel and her reasons for stepping outside of her sex are altogether different than what motivates Jo to do so. In a region of the world where very few women exist safely, Eliza's sole purpose is anonymity and survival in a place dominated by the opposite sex. In men's clothing, she feels a sense of safety – gold rush California is very much a man's world and the only real value of women is attributed to the trade of prostitution and the pleasure of men. Surprisingly, she discovers an ease over time in this disguise. Her ability to mingle with others when dressed as a male is straightforward and uncomplicated. Her underlying sex and all of the gendered baggage that it would have brought to her are of no concern. This type of freedom is precisely what Jo is looking to achieve in *Little Women*; to be seen as an equal in all areas of life, free of the restricting expectations set upon her sex.

Once the mad rush for prosperity dwindles, women begin to join their husbands and populate the newly founded city of San Francisco. As a new society begins to take shape, Eliza is

free to live out in the open, but struggles to reclaim her sex and finds it difficult to live outside the comfort of her fictitious male identity.

She smiled at the thought that she had never dressed as a woman without help, then put on the petticoats and tried on the dresses one by one in order to choose the one most appropriate for the occasion. She felt alien in those clothes and got tangled in the ribbons, laces, and buttons; it took her several minutes to button the boots and get her balance under so many petticoats, but with each garment she put on she was overcoming her doubts and confirming her desire to be a woman again. (393)

Her inclination towards femininity is shown in these first few moments as a woman again. Having spent so much time living as a man, Eliza is clumsy and awkward in women's clothes. This is a pivotal moment where she straddles two sexes. Neither fully male nor female, she allows herself time to reacclimate into the female sphere. "Somewhere along the way she had lost what made her a woman and turned into a strange, asexual creature. (387)

Jean Louise Finch is arguably the most gender neutral character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Growing up in the southern portion of the United States during the 1930s' depression era, she is young and wild with independence of body and mind. Not fond of her given name, she prefers and is known by the name Scout. Young Scout curses (sometimes quite literally) the occasions in which she is required to fall in line with her female peers and wear a dress. The rest of the week she chooses overall pants, a more suitable choice for adventuring. Slightly younger than her older brother, Jem, she acutely resembles him in her choice of clothing and mannerisms. To look at Scout side by side with Jem, one may not be able to tell that she is female, so few are her visible female traits. Much to the dismay of others, her hair is plain and

unkept, her clothes dirty and well-played in. When walking to town with Jem one afternoon, she is critically berated by Mrs. Dubose, the neighborhood's bad-tempered senior resident.

“And *you* -” she pointed an arthritic finger at me - “what are you doing in those overalls?

You should be in a dress and camisole, young lady! You’ll grow up waiting on tables if

somebody doesn’t change your ways – a Finch waiting on tables at the O.K. Café – hah!

(117)

Scout is frequently reminded that she is headed down the path to delinquency, destined for a less-than life as an adult, should she continue to dress and carry herself in the ways of a tomboy. Aunt Alexandra, Atticus Finch’s younger and well-structured sister, takes a particular interest in Scout’s shortcomings as a girl and makes it her mission to correct. “Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn’t supposed to be doing things that required pants.” (92) Similar to Jo, Scout just seeks to be herself, uninhibited by the confines of what is deemed socially acceptable of her age and gender. The disapproval that she faces mostly comes from the adult women around her, excluding one. Miss Maudie, a neighbor who is both a friend and an ally, accepts her as a child who is simply living true to herself. At a ladies’ tea, organized by Aunt Alexandra, Scout is scrutinized by the guests with a judgmental eye.

I took a seat beside Miss Maudie and wondered why ladies put on their hats to go

across the street. Ladies in bunches always filled me with vague apprehension and a

firm desire to be elsewhere, but this feeling was what Aunt Alexandra called being

“spoiled...Miss Maudie’s gold bridgework twinkled. “You’re mighty dressed up, Miss

Jean Louise," she said, "Where are your britches today?" "Under my dress." I hadn't meant to be funny, but the ladies laughed. My cheeks grew hot as I realized my mistake, but Miss Maudie looked gravely down at me. She never laughed at me unless I meant to be funny. (262)

Unlike Jo and Eliza, Scout's character is shown a considerable amount of disdain for her rejection of feminine attire. The circumstances of each characters' life situation and the general social etiquette of the time could be responsible for some of that, but Scout's age is likely the largest driver for the openly judgmental treatment. She is considerably younger than the other two and of an age where others seem to feel the right and obligation to course-correct the path she is taking.

Traditionally viewed as an asset for women, hair is also a key point of comparison in deciphering each characters' relationship with femininity. Once long and admired for its beauty, Jo crops hers short and sells it to earn transportation money for her mother. Even though it initially distresses her, she does not think twice about letting it go. Eliza also disassociates herself from this female-focused physical trait and cuts her hair as a final step in her transition into masculinity. "...she honed her knife on a leather strop and cut her hair to chin length. Her long black braid lay on the ground like a dead snake." (245) This reference to a dead snake is a fitting metaphor for the female identity that she leaves behind. The much younger Scout hasn't given herself the opportunity to grow her hair long, much less form a gender-associated attachment to it. She wears her hair short and messy because it suits her perfectly.

Jo, Eliza, and Scout visually identify as gender non-conforming females in various degrees. They also have different reasons for shunning the camisoles, petticoats, and skirts that



are expected of them. But one constant connection between the three is their need to *feel* comfortable. This is both an emotional and a physical sense of comfort or security. Also consistent across all three novels is the author's method of juxtaposition when it comes to contrasting the appearance of their heroines. Setting Jo aside of her sisters and Eliza next to the prostitutes that she travels with is an effective way to position these young women as unique, independent, and imaginative in their self-expression.

### ***Gender Bending Behavior***

Appearances aside, behavior in the context of gender, can be as complex as the individual. All of the characters studied here present actions and behaviors that flip their expected gender role upside down. When a young girl behaves in a non-feminine way, conducting herself in a masculine manner that is socially reserved for boys, she is typically deemed a "tomboy." In Laura Hakala's 2010 master of arts thesis, *Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, she explores the slow rise of the tomboy character and notes how gender rebellion progressively became a more common trait found in children's literature. The term "tomboy" evolved into an acceptable adjective for female youth in mid-nineteenth century novels. Hakala credits characters such as Jo in *Little Women* for placing the "tomboy" squarely on the literature map, albeit noting that this was acceptable behavior for younger girls only. (19) This observation supports a long-standing opinion that females who fall into the tomboy category as children must grow out of it by young adulthood, at which point the social expectation pivots to the more traditional roles of grown women: wife or partner, domestic goddess, and nurturing mother. In addition, Hakala

points to researcher Michelle Abate's assessment of the topic in her book *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*. Abate argued that the literary period between the Civil War and the Depression era should be known as the "Golden Era of tomboys in literature because the characters were so prominent." (qtd, in Hakala 14) The term is a socially constructed name for a girl who behaves outside of her gender and is reserved for youth. Labeling Scout Finch as a "tomboy" in the novel is a way of acknowledging that her behavior and appearance is narrowly acceptable, for now.

Comparing the non-conforming behaviors of Jo, Eliza, and Scout cannot be done without considering the possible motivations each girl has for acting in a manner uncommon to her sex. Working that out and connecting those dots helps us to understand them a little better and appreciate their relationships with their gender identities. The most straightforward of the three is Eliza. While her physical transformation was described previously, Eliza's mannerisms and actions also say a lot about how she felt while passing as a member of the opposite sex. Taken up by necessity, Eliza enjoys an unexpected sense of freedom as a male that she never could have enjoyed as a female in Chile. Shedding her female persona initially leaves her exposed and insecure, but also introduces her to a veiled feeling of safety. "Once she got over the feeling that she was naked, she could enjoy the breeze blowing up her sleeves and pants legs. Accustomed to the prison of her petticoats, she could now breathe deeply." (222) Eliza begins to experience the benefits associated with male life: the freedoms, the opportunities, the inherent dangers. It wasn't until she experienced the world as a boy that she realized she had been missing out on a truly unobstructed view. The ability to cook meals and sell them at a profit to exhausted miners allows Eliza to work and support her existence on wages of her own.

No longer does she subscribe to the patriarchal notion that she would need a husband to financially support her. She is able to walk freely about, not ogled for a rare glance at a woman in a place where the only females were prostitutes. She feels and exudes a sense of empowerment in this new boy's body. Her carefully crafted gendered behavior and appearance opens up new opportunity and a life she had grown up believing would not be available to her.

Unique to Eliza, as compared to either Jo or Scout, is her internal conflict of self-identity. To her core, Eliza Sommers is a feminine being, but she also experiences a comfort in her disguise and the constant effort leaves her confused. At one point, traveling with a troupe of actors, Eliza is accepted at face value and lives a type of transgender life, fluidly able to cross over between male and female roles easily as she plays the parts of women with such natural talent that she forgets her intentional gender. "...everyone was amazed by how well I played the part of a woman. I couldn't stay with them, though, because the confusion was driving me crazy; I didn't know whether I was a woman dressed as a man, a man dressed as a woman, or an aberration of nature." (274) Eliza's character struggles with gender and presents a level of awareness that the other two don't grapple with.

Less drastic but slightly more dynamic on the scale of non-conforming behavior is Jo March. Jo is a mixed bag in terms of feminine and masculine attributes. This may be one of the main reasons why her character is generally the most celebrated in the novel. In Jo, there is something for everyone; a reader can locate a little piece of herself and this connection is the seed of self-exploration. Jenny Zhang, a co-author of personal reflections, *March Sisters: On Life, Death, and Little Women*, felt a deep connection to Jo's gender rebellion and found it confusing to come to terms with it:

...there I was, twelve years old, a self-professed “rebel” and “writing prodigy” who decided by the end of the first page that there was nobody that I detested more than Jo March. Her boyishness, her impetuosity, her obliviousness, her agility at all types of masculine movement and her clumsiness at feminine preening, her utter lack of interest in the romantic attentions of men... (54)

Zhang continues to reflect on the basis of her resentment and eventually concludes that even while she herself aspired to break free of a classically female gendered role, she found it absurd that Jo March would conduct herself as if *she didn't have to* fall in line with her sisters and the rest of the female population in post-war New England. This response encapsulates our socially driven inclination to classify people into a binary role, whereas you are either masculine or feminine, as if it were not possible to be anything in between.

The reality of Jo's gender expression is indeed something in between. Jo does possess the more typically feminine virtues of compassion, kindness, and nurturing of her family. But she also aspires to live those virtues outside of the classically female role of wife or mother. An example exists in her friendship with Laurie, the refined and charming neighbor who slowly and steadily falls in love with Jo. Much to his dismay, Jo takes a sisterly approach to their relationship and sees it as her mission to bring up “her boy.” Instead of seeing him as a suitor, Jo wishes to nurture Laurie into a fine young man; the basis for her rejection coming from the disbelief that she will ever fall in love with anything other than her writing, much less with an actual man.

Jo also crosses between gender behaviors in the ways in which she interacts with and serves her family. Her place in the March household is both functional and emotional in terms

of support. For example, she is well-skilled in sewing “At that minute Jo was particularly absorbed in dressmaking, for she was mantuamaker general to the family, and took especial credit to herself because she could use a needle as well as a pen.” (374) Alternately, she sees herself as a leader, (a role more commonly reserved for either a father figure or a first son) capable of managing the family in times of crisis and filling the shoes of her father who is away during the war. “I’m the man of the family now papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone.” (8) This statement is made with pride. She finds purpose in filling the male-dominated role of provider for the family.

Jo’s feminine traits stops short of refinement. She is hotheaded and short of temper, awkward in her body mechanics, frank and somewhat crass at home and in social situations. Her utter lack of feminine charm and polish exasperates Amy, who cannot imagine such an existence. “Jo does use such slang words!” observed Amy, with a reproving look at the long figure stretched on the rug. Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle. “Don’t, Jo; it’s so boyish!” “That’s why I do it.” (5) Jo’s response overflows with gender rebellion. There are instances in *Little Women* where Alcott peels back the layers to expose Jo’s resentment at being born a girl.

I hate to think I’ve got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys’ games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment at not being a boy; and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a pokey old woman! (6)

But often times, the meaning behind Jo's actions speaks volumes for her character and points to a universal desire to remain young and carefree – a yearning felt by both sexes and one which is not grounded in gender norms. As it becomes more and more apparent that older sister Meg is falling in love and will marry soon, Jo finds herself resentful and angry. In this instance, the root cause offers some context into her actions to thwart the union. She desires to keep everything in her family sphere the same, just as it stands, delaying the socially defined expectation of marriage and motherhood. Jo shows us that she is actually struggling with the inevitable ticking clock of maturity, wishing to not only save herself from it, but also her sister Meg.

The purest display of gender-bending behavior is presented by Scout Finch. A tomboy through and through, Scout is the youngest of our characters and more extreme in the ways in which she rejects femininity. Her gender identity leans heavier towards that of a little boy, as does her behavior at school and at home. Her closest confidant is her brother Jem and her favorite summer-time playmate is Dill, a boy who visits Maycomb in the summers and teases Scout with his intentions of marrying her someday. It's not at all unusual to find Scout spitting or fighting, should she find herself at the center of an unfair situation. Early in the novel, she believes that she is doing a decent thing by explaining to her teacher why Walter Cunningham did not have a lunch. Scout is promptly punished by Miss Caroline for speaking out of turn and talking back. She takes her frustrations of this punishment out on Walter in the school yard by, "...rubbing his nose in the dirt..." because "...he made me start off on the wrong foot." (25) Her temperament is volatile and swings to the aggressive side, unusual for a female child in Maycomb.

What drives this type of reaction in Scout is up for debate. Most of the adults in Scout's life see her as suffering from the lack of an adequate female role model. Her aggressive or boyish behaviors are attributed to her motherless upbringing, with only Atticus to address and instill a lady-like education. However, the first person narrative by Scout as a reflective adult actually paints this instinct to fight her way in or out of a situation as a natural response, driven by a sense of fairness and justice that her father models for her and Jem. She is an inquisitive child and consults with Atticus regularly, values his opinions, and spurns opposing views from those that feel Atticus is an inadequate parent. This fierce connection with her father and her inbred sense of justice blooms to life when she pummels her cousin Francis for calling Atticus a racial slur. "This time, I split my knuckle to the bone on his front teeth. My left impaired, I sailed in with my right, but not for long. Uncle Jack pinned my arms to my sides and said, "Stand still!" (96) The passion in Scout's "tomboy" behavior would likely be overlooked or at least mildly accepted, should she have been born with male genitalia. When digesting *To Kill a Mockingbird* as required reading in middle school, Scout makes for an attractive character to female readers because she stands out. Her uncompromising resistance to authority, especially when her behavior goes against the grain of lady-like behavior, is noteworthy even to someone who would never herself behave that way. Closely reading Scout Finch inspires the underdog in female students who might feel restricted by their sex.

In addition to her physical appearance and the use of physical strength, Scout also utilizes language as another test against the expectations set upon her. Pushing the boundaries over dinner conversation, Scout asks Uncle Jack to, "...pass the damn ham, please. Uncle Jack pointed at me. "See me afterwards, young lady," he said." (90) Scout's verbal rebellion and

distaste for traditional behavior is exacerbated by those that demand it of her. As a disciplinarian and an ally, Uncle Jack struggles to reconcile what he sees in her.

I'll be here a week and I don't want to hear any words like that while I'm here. Scout, you'll get in trouble if you go around saying things like that. You want to grow up to be a lady, don't you?" I said not particularly. "Of course you do. Now let's get to the tree.

(90)

Even in a close family member who loves and sees Scout for who she is, there is obvious struggle to guide or direct her; so strong is the power of socially driven gender expectation.

One key difference in the behaviors of Jo, Eliza, and Scout have much to do with their age. Jo and Eliza's characters are written as young women, beyond childhood and forging their way into adulthood. While they all share various levels of what can be deemed socially unacceptable dress for a young lady, their individual behaviors are directly associated with where they are in life. Jo and Eliza are painfully aware of the milestones to come. Jo's passion with becoming a professional writer and Eliza's decision to brave the Wild West alone, are propelled by a staunch rejection of a "good match" marriage. Scout differs because she is still a child. She straddles the grey area of what is socially expected of her as a little girl and also what is to come as a young woman. Tara Anand, a writer for the India based website *FeminismInIndia.com*, evaluates Scout's behaviors and reflects on the gender stereotyping within *To Kill a Mockingbird*,

This bildungsroman, a coming of age novel, makes interesting observations about many aspects of Scout's life and surroundings, but perhaps the most astute are about her existence as a young girl expected to conform to societal standards for women. These



standards are best illustrated by the personalities and behaviours of the women in the novel. Scout is used by Lee to demonstrate how societal expectations of feminine behavior are pushed upon girls right from a young age. (Anand)

This is illustrated over and over again in the reproachful remarks coming from Aunt Alexandra, Mrs. Dubose, Uncle Jack, and the female guests at the ladies' tea party. They are altogether confused by her gender expression as a child and concerned what that will translate to as a grown woman.

Soon after publishing *Little Women*, female readers were curiously invested in the fate of the March sisters. Zhang recalls that Louisa May Alcott wrote in her diary, "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life." (introduction, ix) What happens next to beloved characters means a lot to an invested reader. All three of the subjects analyzed here share a common aspiration for their own futures – to live life on their own terms, free of what is required simply due to sex. Despite fleeting moments of doubt, Scout, Eliza, and Jo are confident in who they are and show great resolve in becoming the young women they want to be. This is their common thread and what imprints onto a female audience.

### ***Daydreams and Aspirations***

Many believe that Louisa May Alcott penned Jo in her image and struggled to write an ending that she felt fitting for her spunky main character. Jo's north star aspiration is to be a working writer, a very rare profession for a woman in that time period. Knowing what she's up against and hoping to be published, she submits her stories to the local paper under the guise

of doing so for a friend. It is a bold move, classic of Jo's adventurous character, and stands out in the novel as a pivotal moment where she attempts to take hold of her own destiny. Zheng's assessment of this particular scene touches upon the deep gender bias present in the situation. "Being egotistical about having genius and daring might be lauded in a man, but for a woman, it's considered indulgent and immature." (76) Having experienced professional success herself, Alcott allowed Jo a relative amount of privilege as a writer. Some of her work is eventually published and she is able to contribute to the family financially in support of Beth's convalescence. Here again, Zheng identifies the irony of Jo's aspiration to be a writer when she notes,

Of course, a girl can grow up into a woman and hold multiple identities – daughter, sister, mother, wife, friend, comrade, artist, writer, iconoclast, leader – but without being a "wife" and especially without being a "mother," one's womanhood is called into question. To pursue art at the cost of starting a family, to not have it all, but to just have one – a career and not a family – is seen as brave, but tragic. (86)

While this is still true today, forethought is evident in the fact that Alcott chose to write four sisters into *Little Women*. This left some space to show a young audience that there are many ways in which a women's life can evolve, that women do have choices when charting out a path for themselves, and that what is right for one may not be right for the another. Unfortunately, for many readers this did not go far enough. Over the years, critics have been unhappy with Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer, calling it unrealistic of her character, a betrayal to the feminist that Alcott had crafted her to be. An alternate point of view takes the nature of her relationship with Mr. Bhaer into consideration; together they open a school for boys and create a place

where Jo can thrive as an educator and entrepreneur. In this way, her marriage is a true partnership and she succeeds at happiness, both personally and professionally.

Similarly, Eliza Sommers aspires to have access to a future not typically afforded to a woman. In the early days of San Francisco, travelers begin to plant roots. Women arrive to set up homes and establish commerce. With closure accomplished in her original quest, she sees fresh opportunity in California, living out in the open as a woman, with far less gendered restriction than what she faced in Chile or even in Britain. To her friend and confidant Tao Chien, she expresses her intentions to stay.

Mr. Sommers would say that this is an uncultivated land: no morality, no laws; the vices of gambling, liquor, and brothels rule, but for me this land is a blank page; here I can start life anew and become the person I want....no one knows my past, I can be born again. (280)

There is gravity in the moment of her metamorphosis back into a female. Even though living as a male eventually comes naturally to her, the grind of the illusion has worn her down.

Oh Tao, you cannot imagine how much I long to take a bath, brew some tea, and sit down and talk with you. I would like to put on a clean dress and the earrings Miss Rose gave me, so you would see me looking pretty and not as a mannish woman. (80)

Eliza has demonstrated that she cannot be defined by her sex. In a wild and young city like San Francisco, she is allowed to craft her own existence, alongside whomever she chooses. Tao Chien is a Chinese man, a class of immigrant often less respected than the few women in the region. The end of Allende's novel sees Eliza acknowledge her deep connection with Tao and insinuates that they will remain together as a couple. This is a choice that Eliza never would

have had the opportunity to make in Chile. She takes advantage of the looseness around her and aspires for happiness.

Naturally, Scout has more time to nurture ambitions for her future. But her young age doesn't spare her from the pressure of growing up too soon. The first person narrative suggests that as an adult she's reflected quite a bit on her childhood and settled into a space that is more Miss Maudie than Aunt Alexandra. But young Scout is often put on the spot and judged for her masculine presentation. She knows what is ultimately expected of her, (becoming a lady) but she is not in a hurry to begin working on a socially accepted version of herself. At the ladies' tea, Miss Stephanie asks into what long-term ambitions Scout has. Young Scout is keenly aware of the freshly powdered faces before her and tries to frame her reply to suit.

Don't you want to grow up to be a lawyer?" Miss Maudie's hand touched mine and I answered mildly enough, "Nome, just a lady." Miss Stephanie eyed me suspiciously, decided that I meant no impertinence, and contented herself with, "Well, you won't get very far until you start wearing dresses more often." Miss Maudie's hand closed tightly on mine, and I said nothing. Its warmth was enough. (262, 263)

The focus upon her is unlike anything felt by Jem because she is actively stepping outside of her gender every chance she gets. The social construct of sex and gender is so strong in the community of Maycomb, Alabama, that even a young child is suspect for non-conforming gender expression and behavior. In her world, her only plans for the future involve Dill, her brother, and the dog days of the coming summer.

Once again, the link that unites Scout, Jo, and Eliza is determined independence. Each girl struggles against the grain and desires more for herself than what is provided by the

roadmap of her sex. Each of these girls also have a male counterpart that enjoys so many of the freedoms and opportunities that they long for. Scout looks to Jem for instruction on just about everything that is new to her. Eliza walks beside Tao Chien in a strange new land, absorbing male characteristics by osmosis. Jo connects with Laurie on the deepest level of friendship, regretful that she cannot join him on spur of the moment adventure.

She was tired of care and confinement, longed for change, and thoughts of her father blended temptingly with the novel charms of camps and hospitals, liberty and fun.” “If I was a boy, we’d run away together, and have a capital time; but as I’m a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stay at home. Don’t tempt me Teddy, it’s a crazy plan. (74, 275)

### ***Family Structure and Influence Upon Gender Identity***

With the comparative points of appearance, behavior, and future aspirations explored, it is worth mentioning the role models and adults that influence their budding gender identities. Immediate and extended family members all imprint and impress upon these young women. Fausto-Sterling provides some insight into this dynamic by explaining the significance of the family structure upon a person’s developing gender role. Referring to a study in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, she notes a that “...having an older brother is linked to both more masculine *and* less feminine behavior in both boys and girls.” This theory is clearly exhibited in Scout Finch. She goes on to include parental figures as well:

“Parental characteristics also correlate with sex-typed behaviors. One study found, for example, that more educated mothers or parents who adhered less strictly to traditional sex roles had children who were themselves less sex-typed.” (56)

Scout is heavily influenced by her father, Atticus. A widow and single father, Atticus is a character of strong values and modern social attitudes. He is both a mother and a father to his children and does not limit their ability to explore the world around them. He treats his daughter with the same respect as his son and does not confine her to the social constructs of typical female behavior. He looks at her as a person first, female second. When Scout is reprimanded about continued physical fighting with other children, Atticus expresses disappointment that she is not acting her age, not that she is behaving in a way that is highly undesirable for a girl. He runs his home with a relaxed social structure that is most evident in the fact that both of his children refer to him by his first name. Another influential person in Scout's life is Jem. As an older sibling, he watches over her and often saves her from herself. He sometimes treats her like a brother, including her in all aspects of play, casting her in male role-playing parts, and blowing up in frustration when she exhibits even the slightest trait that is seen as classically female. In response to her fear at retrieving a lost tire in the yard of the mysterious Boo Radley, Jem takes the task up himself. "See there? Nothin' to it. I swear, Scout, sometimes you act so much like a girl it's mortifyin'." (42)

Jo inherited the strong will and independence her mother, Marmee; two traits less celebrated in females living in the mid 1800s. Eliza presents the willful attributes of Miss Rose, calm and collected with a penchant for individualism. All three also share in benefit of a certain type of extended family member; a domestic worker that doubles as a maternal figure, offering a moral compass and immense comfort in times of need. Mama Fesia, Calpurnia, and Hannah step in to support these characters throughout the texts, but more importantly, they accept each girl for who she is without judgement. Essentially, this implies that family organization and

dynamics have some basic level of input on the way we come to see ourselves as it relates to gender.

## CONCLUSION

It would be unfair and limiting to solely credit Scout, Eliza, and Jo as the sole anchors in any of these texts. Published in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* wrestles with deep seated racism in southern Alabama; the sensational rape trial of Tom Robinson an equally captivating storyline to Scout's tomboy coming-of-age story. In his book titled, *Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters*, Tom Santopietro recognizes that the novel was quickly banned in some areas due to the racial content in the book. In 1966, the Hannover County School Board deemed it "immoral literature" and stripped it from the reading lists. (32) The brilliance of Scout's character and the spotlight that she shines on gender was diminished for a time with the censoring of the book itself. *Daughter of Fortune's* Eliza shares her story with Tao Chien, the immigrant Chinese healer and her one true confidant in the strange and misogynistic western frontier. As a man without a country, struggling to find peace in a peaceless place, the complexities of his journey rival her own. *Little Women* hosts so many competing story lines that there are times when Jo is left wandering, chapter after chapter, while her sisters' lives continue to be sorted out. But so compelling are these young women that when reviewed from way up high, the books are known mostly for *their* contributions. Jo, Eliza, and Scout are truly the secret sauce to each book, ensuring the success of not only their respecting works, but also in drawing attention to

the ways in which gender is presented in literature. So impactful was Jo March to Zhang, that in *March Sisters* she asserts,

After all, Jo March has always been the fan favorite, the little woman everyone thinks herself to be, the clear front man of the four-piece band, the one who hogged all the charisma and daring, the only one of the sisters whose vision of what a woman's life should be and could entail doesn't seem so miserably dated today, the one character that has been cited by a roll call of prominent women writers as inspirational and as essential to their own artistic and feminist development, not to mention all the women whose names and lives were not famous enough to be recorded for posterity but who nonetheless were altered by Jo March. (53)

Each time Jo turned her back on an occasion for a typical feminine appearance or failed at a domestic task, she casually taught a reader what it looks like to ignore stereotypes and simply be herself. When Eliza shed her feminine identity and adopted a male persona, she displayed courage and sacrifice in the face of adversity and a long-shot goal. Every time Scout willfully endured a lecture at the hands of a disapproving adult who questioned her tomboy appearance, she answered back with innocent defiance, presenting all the qualities of a young person who is searching for a place in the world around her. These are very unique characters embedded in very different stories. Therefore, there is a wide variety of gender rebellion across all three texts, with each supporting a broader coming-of-age theme. The gender-bending undertones of each character's personality captures a young readers' attention in a way that the larger themes of the texts might fail to achieve. Issues of race, class, and poverty are topics more easily identified by adult readers. But a girl who spits and settles a score with a dust-up on



the school yard strikes a chord with a young reader. These heroines succeed in communicating two stories in tandem. On one hand offering alternatives to the status quo of classic femininity, and on the other they still manage to advance the larger stories of the texts. It is through Eliza's experiences as a young man that readers learn what life was like in gold rush California in the mid 1800s.

One of the many attributes that have made *Little Women* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* classic texts that stand up over time is the authenticity they deliver to their audience. It is widely rumored that Scout and Jo were penned in the image of their creators. Santopietro explores the idea that both Scout and Boo Radley were based in Lee's self-image. (20) If true and Alcott and Lee infused even a small part of themselves in these two characters, their success is evident in the fact that adults re-read the works years later to revisit these characters as old friends. Interpreting Scout through the lens of a 14 year old is a very different experience than re-reading her as an adult; her gender expression more apparent and her motivations better understood. These works and the young women that ground them stand as inspiration to readers of all ages, pillars to those that might be searching for a meaningful connection back to their own gender expression and ways in which they traverse the world.

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