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Katia Savelyeva

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Katia Savelyeva

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Dr. Mara Scanlon

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Little Women, Little Houses:

Authorship and Authority in Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder

1. Introduction

In the closing chapters of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Jo March declares in an overflow of emotion, "I do think families are the most beautiful things in all the world!" (375). This apparently wholehearted declaration follows a novel that is in certain places, and particularly on Jo's part, deeply conflicted about traditional visions of the family. Jo can in turn be read as the narrative precursor to another American protagonist who resists marriage and gender norms as a child before eventually conforming to both: Laura Ingalls, of Laura Ingalls Wilder's series of seven semi-autobiographical novels, now usually referred to as the *Little House on the Prairie* or *Little House* books. A particularly fruitful comparison between the two protagonists can be achieved through focusing on the latter four novels in the *Little House* series, which center on Laura's teenage years in the South Dakota town of De Smet: *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years*. The texts' shared status as children's literature centered on girls and young women, taking place in formative time periods within American history, makes them productive sites of observation for how ideologies of gender, familial duty, and American patriotism are internalized or resisted.

An unquestionable didactic tendency is present in both works; Jo and Laura are both deeply concerned with conforming to religious, familial, and societal ideas of "goodness" and

duty. Nonetheless, I open this paper by discussing Jo and Laura's divergences from normative ideologies, by examining their status as two of American children's literature's most notable tomboy protagonists. I then analyze the ways in which parental identification and sisterly dynamics within each set of texts parallel one another. In both texts, families are part of a process where normative values are instilled through love, in a context determined by ideologies of sentimental discipline, disability and illness, and religious values. These forces of authority are counteracted in turn not only by gender nonconforming tendencies on the parts of the two protagonists, but by each protagonist's tendency towards imaginative capacity and the development of a personal authorial voice. Despite such a capacity being renounced on each protagonist's part in favor of normative national projects centered on didacticism and schooling, the presence of such a non-normative middle informs audience takeaways from each text, as Jo and Laura each achieve artistic *and* didactic acts within the texts they're a part of. Each larger text's greater effect, however, rests with audience reaction to the instillation of a normative ending: core elements of the two texts' ultimate legacies thus lie in the fact that *Little House* masks the transition successfully, while *Little Women* does not.

2. "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy": Gender Nonconformity

Jo March and Laura Ingalls are positioned at separate points within a greater history of gender nonconforming female protagonists in children's literature. Jo comes at the start of such a literary moment, but the time gap between the two characters features a lengthy time period. Renee M. Sentilles describes the tomboy protagonist as a recurring, compelling center point for American coming-of-age novels: "She was both a good girl (in her natural morals) and a wild girl (not yet civilized)... Part of her charm but also her folly was that she pitted her will against

adulthood—a battle that she could not win” (48). Sentilles pinpoints the 1880s as the point in the history of American literature, particularly children’s novels, where tomboy protagonists gained particular popularity (48). Therefore, Jo is positioned at the forefront of such a moment in time, while Laura emerges half a century after its establishment. Nonetheless, both protagonists partake in a bigger pattern within American literary history: an initially rebellious or noncompliant female character undergoes a necessary arc towards convention, but one where she “remains just boy enough to make her womanhood more admirable” (Sentilles 67). In other ways, however, the contemporary resonance of Jo and Laura as compared to other tomboy protagonists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries implies a potential further complexity in their status as protagonists.

In the scholarship pertaining to the two writers, Jo is by far the more studied character of the two in the context of tomboy identity. This is unsurprising given the intense visibility that such an identity is given in the text. In the very opening chapter of *Little Women*, Jo declares “It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott 12-13). Jo’s name itself, of course, is a boyish shortening of “Josephine,” the construction of which is explicitly alluded to within the text: in response to the quoted outburst, Beth, the sister Jo is closest to, responds that Jo “must be contented with making [her] name boyish, and playing brother to us girls” (Alcott 13). Even as Jo fits into Sentilles’ articulation of the tomboy protagonist pattern of “pitt[ing] her will against adulthood” (48), she also pits her will more specifically against gender norms and expectations, in an act that has resulted in a scholarly conversation regarding queer readings of Jo. Certainly, Jo is not only critical of gender norms but drawn specifically to masculinity; in the opening chapter Jo wishes she could run away to the Civil War to exist alongside her father as a drummer.

Perhaps part of what makes *Little Women* a particularly enduring tomboy text is its frequent return to the occasional pain, conflict, and loneliness that nonconformity entails. The wish to “run away” is a frequently expressed one for Jo. Escape (whether physical escape or imaginary escape into writing) is her frequent first answer to a world she cannot change, or, in cases like Jo’s fury with her sister Meg’s marriage, a forward progression of time she cannot prevent. Jo’s imaginative forays into heroic masculinity, wishing to participate in such acts first-hand, and wishing to escape the limiting structures of the world are significantly inhibited on an external and internal level. Her desires are frequently weighed down by a sense of obligation to familial expectation and social norms. Towards the end of the first volume, Laurie, Jo’s next-door neighbor and best friend, offers that Jo run away to Washington, D.C. with him. The thought of mobility tempts her severely, but she shuts him down by alluding specifically to the limiting structures of her gender: “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 stop at home. Don’t tempt me, Teddy, it’s a crazy plan” (Alcott 168). Later, she throws out the idea of running away to sea with Laurie and having the aesthetic appearance of a boy as if it’s a joke: “I often think I should like to [run away], especially since my hair was cut, so if you ever miss us, you may advertise for two boys and look among the ships bound for India” (Alcott 170). This dialogue’s context is Jo trying to put Laurie’s grandfather, Mr. Lawrence, at ease, after the grandfather and grandson have had an argument: the image is comic enough to Mr. Lawrence that his anger at Laurie is assuaged.

Despite being delivered in the cadence of a joke, and being taken as a joke by Mr. Lawrence, Jo’s twinning of herself and Laurie as imaginarily perfect equals demonstrates the degree to which she is both drawn to fantasies of escape centered on boyishness, and prone to self-censure concerning their non-normativity. This scene is one of several cases in which Laurie

is inextricable from understandings of Jo's tomboyism. Significant critical attention has been devoted to the mirrored nature of their two names—Laurie, a feminized boy's name, and Jo, a masculinized girl's name—and to the androgynous, egalitarian nature of the friendship between the two. Such a reading of their dynamic is replicated through language — Laurie frequently refers to Jo with variations of the comradely terms “good fellow” (Alcott 101) and “dear old fellow” (Alcott 120). Laurie also participates in the March sisters' traditionally all-female spaces, such as the Pickwick Club, a secret club where (in a fascinating act of recursion) the four girls dress up as men and refer to each other with the names of male Dickens characters. Such mutual forays into gender subversion give rise to “a relationship that most strikingly destabilizes Victorian notions of sexuality, for his girlishness and her boyishness provide the text with multiple layers of possibility” (Trites 153).

No such destabilization is equally centered in the *Little House* novels, which feature no recurring characters equivalent to Laurie and allow Laura limited space for declarations of unhappiness with womanhood. Nonetheless, Sentilles' history of tomboy literature parallels the two characters explicitly as the contemporarily resonant figure who “pulls the reader in... provid[ing] the personable central heroine needed to ground the series” (185). Laura partakes in her own doubts of gender conformity and restrictions, which manifest in frustrations with women's work and clothing as well as larger-scale philosophical desires. Particularly in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, the first of the four De Smet novels, Laura is attracted to the mobility of men's work, and resents the restrictions associated with women's work. At times such a fascination is grounded in visual admiration of men's work and the nondomestic sphere. This pull is evident in the Silver Lake chapter “The Wonderful Afternoon,” in which Laura's father (“Pa”) takes Laura to watch teams of men build the railroad. This construction process is a sight

neither Laura's mother ("Ma") nor Laura's older sister Mary are interested in, reinforcing an ongoing binary in which Laura's interests (travel; the natural world; outdoor work; the American West) are aligned with Pa's, while Mary's interests (stability; comfortable homes; indoor work; the East) are aligned with Ma's. Ann Romines characterizes Laura's attraction to the railroad as indicative of her larger attraction to a freedom traditional femininity can't access: "Silver Lake... is alive with men working on the railroad and with thousands of flying birds. Some of Wilder's most lush and successful description is lavished on the birds and the men" (150).

Despite Laura's capacity for escapist fantasy, not wholly unlike Jo's desire to run away to war or to sea, one part of her fascination with men's work is more practical in nature. Laura is a child from a poor family in which Pa, the dominant decision maker, is responsible for repeated financial mismanagement. Thus, Laura's gender nonconformity is not entirely grounded in the pull of visual admiration; partly, she is frustrated with norms, including those imposed by Ma, that prevent her from helping her family in ways she thinks or knows she can. The opening of *The Long Winter* is one example of this more practical iteration of gender nonconformity, reluctantly endorsed by both Pa and Ma as a material necessity. Pa has bought an expensive mowing machine, enough so that he has no money to pay for help. After considering this problem, Laura offers to help with the hay herself, thus acknowledging a degree of arbitrariness in the division between men's and women's work. Pa responds in the affirmative; Laura "[can] see that the thought was a load off Pa's mind" (*Long Winter* 4). Ma's response, on the other hand, is tempered with disapproval: "She did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men's work" (4). This entry into nationalist ideology is immediately followed up by Ma's acknowledgement that, despite this belief, the material need to make hay supersedes these ideological restrictions. This episode is an

example of what Sentilles argues “gives the nineteenth-century tomboy her contemporary appeal: she is cognizant of the myopia of her own time” (187). Laura is able to recognize her family’s material need for her nonconformity through performance of “men’s work,” and places herself into a heroic position through these means.

In granting a tomboy protagonist the freedom to explore unfeminine spheres, the case of the hay is one in which the Utopian sphere of the March household and Laurie’s friendship is replaced in *Little House* by the regional setting of the frontier itself. In the West, certain standards – partaking exclusively in “women’s work,” avoiding exposure to danger and unfeminine language – cannot be enforced. Part of the nonconformist potential of *Little House* is the fact that, despite its recurring characters being more limited to the nuclear family, it gives a great deal more space outside voices and ideologies than *Little Women*. Specifically, given the novels’ dependence on the settlement of frontier, whiteness cannot function as the same invisible default in *Little House* as it is in *Little Women*. Frequently, and justifiably, whiteness and the settler-colonialist right to “free soil” in *Little House* is read by critics as wholly stable and uncontested. However, Donna Campbell argues that minor characters within the novels – sometimes indigenous characters, and sometimes white characters who have “embraced” the West while figures like Ma resist it – form “competing discourses” that “interrupt and transform the stability of the narrative voice,” thus temporarily destabilizing this ideology ([] 111).

Such characters and voices are relevant to Laura’s gender nonconformity because the text – particularly Ma – frequently intertwines the stability of womanhood with the stability of whiteness. The most potent symbol of this fact is perhaps the sunbonnet, which Mary always wears and which Laura lets hang loose down her back. This image, intertwined with racial connotations, is enduring enough that it reoccurs at the very end of the book. As Laura leaves

home with her new husband, Grace “anxiously” cries out, “Remember, Laura, Ma says if you don’t keep your sunbonnet on, you’ll be brown as an Indian!” (*Golden Years* 283-284). In a manner distinct from that of *Little Women*, therefore, the normative womanhood that Laura resists in the opening texts is frequently and explicitly racialized. This also means that Laura’s resistance to womanhood ties to an extent into a resistance of the larger colonial ideologies that whiteness entails in her world. Proehl articulates a telling ideological paradox at the heart of the *Little House* series: while it is “undoubtedly infused with colonialist nostalgia,” it “paradoxically, turns to the tomboy child to interrogate the ethics of Manifest destiny and white settlement of Native American territories” (63). In other words, Laura’s identifications with Pa, with the freedom of the open prairie, and with the visual appeal of American West-specific masculinity and its “dissenting voices” enable her to express non-normative thought.

The respective concerns of both *Little House* and *Little Women* – duty and morality within the home, interpersonal relationships, the nature of work and self-sufficiency, regionalism and racial dynamics – are frequently tied in with the two protagonists’ gender nonconformity. Such a positioning of the self can manifest through admirations of unfeminine-coded spaces (like the railway) or identities (like Jo and Laurie’s imaginary sailor disguises.) It can also occur through larger structural critiques of the spheres that women are limited to. Both Jo and Laura can break through these barriers temporarily through the vehicles of individual relationships, material necessity, or regional contexts. Nonetheless, gender nonconformity is a resistance to authority that cannot eliminate responding assertions of authority in either text. As is the case with much of children’s literature, the most visible espousers of such an authority come in the form of each character’s parents.

3. “I had lovely long hair when your Pa and I were married”: Authority and Parents

Mrs. March (“Marmee”) and Mr. March in *Little Women* and Ma and Pa in *Little House* originate in the same historical moment, the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and overlap as they represent intergenerational relationships in each set of texts. A central point among these overlaps is that both sets of parents are grounded in the literary and ideological impact of sentimentalism. In the mid-nineteenth century, shortly before *Little Women*’s publication and *Little House*’s temporal setting, the family’s place in culture shifted from a practical institution to a morally-charged one: “it was to serve as a moral counterweight to a restless, materialistic, individualistic, and egalitarian society” (Strickland 5). Related to this concept was the idea of authoritative discipline as achieved through covert ideologies and expressed through love and affection. The home became a “repository for... values of love, warmth, and intimacy” (Strickland 9), manifesting as “Utopian impulses” (Strickland 8) towards the formation of a household. The two texts share this focus on the family structure as an enduring, safe sphere that protects Alcott and Wilder’s protagonists from a potentially cruel or immoral world. The context of sentimentalism has been used to analyze both authors; Christine Proehl, for instance, argues that Wilder used the *Little House* novels to showcase “nineteenth-century affective pedagogical philosophies of discipline through love” (81).

Such philosophies are similarly central to *Little Women*. While the second volume has a more overarching sense of narrative, much of the first volume depicts a set of succeeding moral lessons learned by the four sisters. In concert with the sentimental model, Marmee is the primary orchestrator of these lessons, able to “work a subtle influence there, both as cultural arbiter and as mother” (Strickland 10). Many of Marmee’s forays into sentimental pedagogy center around the virtues of self-discipline and hard work; the chapter “Experiments” addresses this most

directly. In this episode, Marmee tells the girls that they may attempt for one week to avoid all of their household tasks and duties, but warns them gently that “by Saturday night you will find that all play, and no work, is as bad as all work and no play” (Alcott 93). Following a sequence of days in which the sisters’ experiences with leisure are proven to be unsatisfactory, Marmee returns to comment on the results of the “experiment” in largely gentle, nonauthoritative turns that nonetheless impress the point onto the sisters. “Don’t you think that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes... that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all?” she asks them, and is met with wholehearted agreement (Alcott 99).

Such episodes display the conditional nature of the power sentimental philosophies granted to the mother, and the ultimately normative values she espouses. Marmee may be a female leader, but in the words of Kathryn Mason Tomasek’s analysis of utopian ideals in *Little Women* she is still acting “as enforcer both of Mr. March’s wishes and of the domestic ideal” (245). The discipline that Marmee expresses, despite its lack of punitive authority, makes a significant, lasting impact on Jo. “I almost wish I hadn’t any conscience... I can’t help wishing, sometimes, that father and mother hadn’t been so dreadfully particular about such things,” she comments towards the end of the novel (Alcott 281). This thought immediately follows Jo’s renunciation of writing sensation fiction, an activity that grants her independent financial power through publication while also requiring her to access newspaper accounts surrounding violence and crime: voices that “desecrate” what the novel’s narrative voice calls “the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character” (Alcott 275). In other words, the power of Marmee as a sentimental disciplinary force—one tied in part to moralized images of work and gender expression—operates on an internalized basis, not only an externally enforced one.

There is no room in an ever-shifting frontier setting, where daily farm work is a fact of life, to teach a “lesson” of the sort Marmee communicates to the March sisters. In fact, *Little Town on the Prairie* contains something of a reverse parallel to the “Experiments” chapter: the spring cleaning project that Laura and her younger sisters Carrie and Grace undertake while Ma and Pa take Mary to college. In both cases, a group of sisters are left to run a household they do not possess all of the necessary domestic skills for; the Marches fail and must be rescued, whereas the Ingallses fail initially but must rescue themselves. Their temporary failures are fixed through “work[ing] far into the night... but for Sunday the house was immaculate” (*Little Town* 119-120). Interestingly, the conclusions of both episodes still align: hard work, in both books, is both a moral good and an invaluable tool of emotional containment. In this case, Laura’s impulse to clean the house is born from a desire to displace her distress about Mary’s absence, and from the sense that “for a whole week, everything was in Laura’s charge, and Ma must be able to depend on her” (*Little Town* 116). Thus, for Laura, authoritative discourses surrounding the value of work are, too, tied to the parents. Laura imitates Ma and Pa’s modes of a more direct discipline than Marmee’s in the same scene: when Grace cries over Mary’s absence, Laura snaps out, “For shame, Grace! For *shame!* a big girl like you, *crying!*” despite being on the brink of tears herself (*Little Town* 114). Similarly to the case of Jo and her conscience, the scene acts as a case in which the Ingalls parents’ disciplinary models are internalized by their children; Laura’s approach to disciplining herself and others mirrors Ma’s and Pa’s example.

Laura’s imitations of Ma and Jo’s internalization of “conscience” testify to the overarching power of parental discourse between the two texts, and Jo and Laura’s ultimate status, within an arc towards normativity, as narrative successors to their two mothers. This imitation is seen in the progression of Jo and Laura’s lives and marriages, not just their

approaches to self-discipline. Marmee's philanthropic interests and sentimental didacticism are translated into Jo's desire to start a school for poor boys, while Laura and Ma both get married after a period of teaching school. Marmee and Jo both marry philosophically-oriented, strictly religious men who act as disciplinary, didactic forces in their lives and those of others; Ma and Laura both marry daring, masculine farmers who embody the frontier spirit. The potential towards such acts of narrative inheritance is highlighted by each text's allusion to the idea of the protagonist and her mother having parallel temperaments. In each text this delayed revelation acts as somewhat of a surprise: the stable, conventional figure of the mother is revealed to share common ground with the rasher, more noncompliant protagonist.

In *Little Women*, this revelation unfolds in one of the text's most famous scenes. Following an argument that unfolds between Jo and Amy, Marmee chastises Jo's fury at her youngest sister from a place of understanding, following the model of non-punitive sentimental discipline that unfolds across the text: "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years or so" (Alcott 68). In many ways this scene embodies the liminal status of *Little Women* and its didactic models: on one hand, Jo is allowed to make mistakes without always suffering deadly consequences. As Richard H. Brodhead's scholarship illustrates, *Little Women* is permissive for its time, compared to the other sentimental novels of the nineteenth century. In reference to the societally agreed-upon goals that society sets for adolescent girls, he argues that "Alcott makes a new allowance for, and takes a new pleasure in, the phase where such goals are not yet achieved" (624). On the other hand, of course, this scene is perhaps the most evident example of Marmee's promotion of normative values. Jo's anger is followed by "contrition,

repression, and a firm vow to follow in the footsteps of Marmee and never let her anger get beyond a tightening of the lips” (Fetterley 38).

It is also crucial that Marmee’s learned acts of repression explicitly take place within a patriarchal setting. In explaining her own journey towards restraining anger, Marmee positions Mr. March as the catalyst and enforcer of her change. Similarly to Marmee’s lessons, this enforcement occurs through subtextual, emotionally-grounded acts. She describes seeking to avoid Mr. March’s disapproval as expressed through a mere “startled or surprised look,” as well as through the more general comparative basis that he “works and waits so cheerfully that one is ashamed to do otherwise before him” (68). At the end of the novel, in the course of describing Jo’s experiences with running the Plumfield school, this narrative inheritance as a repressor of feeling guided by a male authority figure appears to have fulfilled itself. In the narration of the closing chapter, Alcott’s narrative voice communicates that “Jo made queer mistakes, but the Professor steered her safely into calmer waters” (376), the same way Marmee says she “found it easy to be good” (68) in the presence of Mr. March. Therefore, the aforementioned “particularity” of Mr. and Mrs. March’s voices extends into Jo’s narrative inheritance; her deviations from gender and womanhood are resolved through becoming her mother.

It appears initially that *Little House* is distinct from *Little Women* in this sphere by means of its emphasis on Laura’s identification with her father. Mr. March’s feedback on the girls’ moral development serves as bookends for *Little Women*’s first volume: its first chapter features a letter in which he hopes that Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy can “do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves...beautifully” (Alcott 17). When he returns from the war in the closing chapters of the novel, Mr. March serves as the authoritative voice that can update the sisters and the novel’s audience on their progress; to Jo in particular, he comments

on her development into a “a strong, helpful, tender-hearted woman” (176). In contrast, Pa is not *just* a philosophical shaping force of the novels but a physically almost ever-present figure. In fact, Laura is often spatially positioned alongside Pa, a trend seen even in the four De Smet books’ beginnings – *Silver Lake* opens on the whole household sick except for Laura and Pa, *The Long Winter* opens on the two of them making hay together, *Little Town on the Prairie* opens on Laura and Pa both working in town, and *These Happy Golden Years* opens on Pa driving Laura to her first teaching job. This emphasis on his beginning the book correlates with a narrative anxiety on the occasions of his absence. When Pa leaves home at the opening of *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura experiences a feeling of profound loneliness and lost childhood, one in which she also unconsciously assigns herself an adult, potentially masculine caretaker’s role in Pa’s absence: “Now she was alone; she must take care of herself... Laura was not very big, but she was thirteen years old, and no one was there to depend on. Pa and Jack had gone, and Ma needed help to take care of Mary and the little girls” (14). This identification with a masculine caretaker role reoccurs in episodes such as Laura’s desire to help with the hay.

Pa, then, is more present in the text than Mr. March; his voice is given space and prominence, rather than serving as a bookend or behind-the-scenes motivator. Nonetheless, Laura cannot “become” Pa: gender categories can be temporarily blurred by the regional unpredictability of the *Little House* books’ setting, but they cannot disappear. This can be witnessed as early on as a scene in *Silver Lake* where worker riots unfold across the railway camps, and Pa leaves home to address the situation at a neighboring camp. In the eerie, atmospheric passage that follows, Ma is reconfigured the same way Marmee reconfigures herself by revealing her experiences with anger. Rather than seeing her as a straightforward enforcer of gender norms, Laura and the audience must acknowledge that Ma is bound by them herself:

“Ma, let me go out and find Pa,” Laura whispered.

“Be quiet,” Ma answered. “You couldn’t find Pa. And he doesn’t want you to. Be quiet and let Pa take care of himself.”

“I want to do something. I’d rather do something,” Laura said.

“So would I,” said Ma. In the dark her hand began softly to stroke Laura’s head. “The sun and the wind are drying your hair, Laura. [...] You must brush it more. [...]”

“Yes, Ma,” Laura whispered.

“I had lovely long hair when your Pa and I were married,” Ma said. “I could sit on the braids.” (*Silver Lake* 87)

Ma’s self-alignment with Laura’s desire to “do something” is potentially surprising from a character who has spent much of the novel aligning herself against Laura’s attraction to masculine worlds, or admiration of frontier heroism and bravery. Even as she admits to being bound by the rules of the private and public spheres, Ma reinforces “the narrative possibilities she approves for her adolescent daughter: stay inside, distant from the sphere of male action” (Romines 164). Her specific appeal to marriage and the memory of Eastern white femininity through the criticism of Laura’s hair as sun- and wind- dried coincides with the act of stroking Laura’s hair, one of the most vividly described scenes of physical affection in the series.

Romines describes Laura as “feel[ing] the sensory pull of her mother’s agenda” (164). In other words, the maternal criticism Laura has resisted for much of the book is communicated and accepted in the intersecting space of crisis and intimacy. Sentimental pedagogy exerts a hold on Laura here, in the same way it does on Jo: what cannot be internalized through pure criticism is successfully internalized through love and common ground.

A similar moment of alignment between Laura and Ma occurs in *Little Town on the Prairie*, where one of the series' trademark scenes of clothing preparation features a revelation: Ma dislikes sewing. As in the *Silver Lake* scene, Wilder's communication of this domestic work is initially grounded in sensory experience: heat, discomfort, and confinement. The observation on Ma's position comes as a realization on Laura's part, one that echoes Marmee's embrace of repression for the sake of normative womanhood: "Her gentle face did not show it now, and her voice was never exasperated. But her patience was so tight around her mouth that Laura knew she hated sewing as much as Laura did" (*Little Town on the Prairie* 90). In this case, repression is modeled specifically in the context of the indoor "women's" work that Laura hates; her model of feminine destiny can feature a hatred of sewing, so long as she patiently sits through it all the same. Thus, while the relative positionalities of the father differ between *Little Women* and *Little House*, internalizing the authoritative voice of the mother occurs through the same process of coming-of-age, in which Jo and Laura must both acknowledge their apparently unwavering mothers as human beings with desires and "faults" potentially similar to their own.

It is through this process of acknowledgement that both protagonists begin a journey away from emulating masculinity or the father, and towards the final narrative inheritance of the mother's position. Even as Laura and Jo resist arbitrary convention and the forces of gender expression, they internalize and acknowledge both if it is in the form of a trusted and loved authority figure. The contextual fact of sentimental pedagogy furthers this pattern. Sentimentalism makes authority more covert as it is internalized by Jo and Laura: the question of responding to a disapproving glance, of leading by example or experiment, and of identification as a crucial process of coming of age. Identification with the mother is thus a primary vehicle of

sentimental authority as it is internalized by a frequently resistant protagonist: both Jo and Laura grow to acknowledge themselves as participants in a greater history of womanhood.

4. “I’m the one that will have to fight and work”: Authority and Sisters

If mothers in *Little House* and *Little Women* assert power over protagonists through the revelation of common ground, the figure of the sister asserts it through ongoing difference. Jo and Laura have three sisters each, one elder and two younger; out of the three, however, one particular sister—Mary in Laura’s case, and Beth in Jo’s—are particularly crucial vehicles for the protagonist’s long-term development. Both Beth and Mary are religiously pious and characterized by a “goodness” that Jo and Laura can admire but cannot always imitate. Both also suffer illnesses that result in lifelong blindness for Mary and eventual death for Beth, with a sentimental emphasis exacted in each case upon the virtue, acceptance, and patience through which each character endures physical suffering.

This emphasis on virtue and goodness means that, more so than the parents or any formal religious authority figure, the figure of the sister is closely entwined in each set of texts with religion as an authoritative force. Jo’s father is a chaplain in the Union Army, but he is, as mentioned, largely absent from the text; while the four March girls read the Bible at home and pray frequently, they are never depicted attending church. The Ingalls family does go to church, but the church fails to act as primary disseminator of religious authority. The De Smet books’ primary minister character, the Rev. Brown, fails to act as a force of religious leadership from Laura’s perspective: in fact, the very end of *These Happy Golden Years*, ostensibly the novel in which Laura is closest to normative adulthood, depicts Laura sitting in church and “wishing... that he could say something interesting” (260). In that very scene, Mary’s status as the voice of

religious authority occupies the position of a simple taskmaster: she asks Laura after the episode is over, “Will you never learn to behave yourself properly in church?” (*Golden Years* 262).

Mary’s outward goodness, however, matures over the course of the series. Rather than a simple enforcer of outside authority, she becomes the closest Laura has to a spiritual leader, a role in which she mirrors Beth’s role for Jo. Proehl’s commentary on Laura and Mary can also be applied to Beth and Jo: “they are prone to feelings of guilt and compulsively evaluate their own state of ‘goodness’” (73). A particularly telling scene of this sort occurs at the end of the first volume of *Little Women*. When Meg mentions Heaven, Beth laments that seeing it “seems so long to wait, so hard to do; I want to fly away at once, as those swallows fly, and go in at that splendid gate” (Alcott 117). Quick to position herself as morally lesser than her sister, Jo answers, “You’ll get there, Beth... no fear of that... I’m the one that will have to fight and work, and climb and wait, and maybe never get in after all” (117). Parallel depictions of such a positionality occur in *Little House*. In *The Long Winter*, for instance, the sisters play a game in which they compete to see who can remember the most Bible verses by heart. Mary is previously acknowledged as the best in the family at this game; thus, when Laura gives up first, the family expects by default that Mary’s won. Instead, Mary admits that they’re tied, since she can’t remember another verse either. Laura reacts to the episode with a morally-charged sense of shame: “Laura was ashamed. She had tried so hard to beat Mary at a game, but no matter how hard she tried she could never be as good as Mary was” (*The Long Winter* 128).

In both texts, the gender non-conforming protagonist has a sense of herself as morally lesser than her sister. The results of this positionality, as well as Beth and Mary’s ability to wield religious discourses, are not limited to passive guilt. Rather, in contrast with the gradual and steady influence of the mother, these traits in each sister combine with forces of disability and

illness to enact dramatic transformation. In her history of American tomboy literature, Renée M. Sentilles points to the role of disability as punishment in less-enduring works with gender nonconforming protagonists, pointing to a trend in which “curing girls of their boyish rebellion through dire and faithful consequence became nearly as popular as curing them through marriage” (66). In other words, gender-nonconforming protagonists frequently suffer painful illness or injury as a direct result of their gender nonconformity, thus creating a pathway towards traditional femininity. This straightforward structure of punishment is alive to a certain point in *Little Women*, though the punishment is the suffering of others rather than the suffering of the protagonist; Beth’s initial illness can be read as “Jo’s fault” due to resulting from an argument as to who will see to the Hummels, the poor immigrant neighbors by whom Beth is infected.

Laura’s own transformation comes about through a combination of guilt, admiration, and practicality: the aforementioned scene with the Bible verses results in Laura’s realization that “for the first time Laura wanted to be a schoolteacher so that she could make the money to send Mary to college. She thought, ‘Mary is going to college, no matter how hard I have to work to send her’” (*The Long Winter* 129). Shame over Mary’s perceived greater internal goodness acts as part of a process in which “Laura’s continual self-scrutiny, encouraged by parents and other authority figures, becomes an internalized force of social normalization” (Proehl 74). The transformative power of Beth’s illness, meanwhile, is even more dramatic than that of Mary’s blindness, because Jo’s gender conformity is explicitly Beth’s dying wish. In a telling alignment of writing and physical mobility in the public sphere as related noncompliant desires, Beth says, “You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to father and mother when I’m gone... 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” (Alcott 327).

The degree of conservatism in this explicit textual call for Jo to “take Beth’s place” has been read in various ways. Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant’s “The Horror of *Little Women*” goes as far as to claim that “Alcott’s true victim is Jo; Alcott has, in fact, killed the self-celebratory Jo and replaced her with the self-effacing Beth” (578). Sentilles reads the dynamic between the two more optimistically, saying that, despite Beth’s “convincing Jo to impose the kind of feminine control she has hitherto resisted and avoided,” Jo “remains masculine in her drive to act rather than influence” (52). Both critical works nonetheless share the feeling that Beth’s illness and death are a site of profound transformation for Jo, a character who has resisted change for much of the text. Laura’s transformation is less motivated by any direct request, but nonetheless significant; from somebody who balks at the idea of teaching school in *By The Shores of Silver Lake*, she has come to accept and often enjoy it by the end of *These Happy Golden Years*. As late as the final school Laura teaches in this novel, she returns to the idea of supporting her family and Mary’s college education through teaching with pleasure and pride.

In the shared figures of the parents and the sister, a crucial common undercurrent connects the way authoritative voices impact Jo and Laura: while they cannot be influenced by social standards they find arbitrary—their time’s “myopia,” to use Proehl’s word—they are inevitably influenced and transformed by the forces of familial love. In this way the function of authority in each text reinforces the influence of sentimentalism. Not only is the family a social force in the instatement of national-level values like normative womanhood; familial love is in certain ways the only method through which such values can be successfully imparted, fulfilling the family’s sentimental-era role as a moral center opposed to society.

5. “Everybody’s Born Free”: The Nation and the Schoolroom

If the role of the family can in many ways be neatly paralleled between the two texts, the national-level authority the family enforces is less consistent between the two. Both texts are intimately concerned with the instillation of “values” on the familial level; both take place in distinctly American historical periods and settings, and are thus informed by national-level ideologies. Nevertheless, the Ingallses engage with the nation they live in explicitly—far more explicitly than the Marches. *Little Women* is concerned with an aspirational Utopian vision of the American family; its values of hard work, philanthropy, and religious faith project ideal American values through the smaller scale of the March family. To a certain extent, *Little House* operates in a similar way. Written during the Great Depression, the books are frequently read by critics and casual readers as idealized paeans to American self-reliance, as witnessed through the Ingalls family. But *Little House* contains what *Little Women* does not: larger-scale, abstract American values as they are received and internalized by the American family. This disparity is interwoven with the respective families’ engagement with schooling and community, with schooling acting as a primary vehicle through which national-level values come to light.

One of the most visible occurrences of national values in *Little House* is the Fourth of July celebration in *Little Town on the Prairie*, the De Smet novel that most consistently involves the public sphere. Firstly, aligning with the pattern of attention to regionalism, Wilder depicts the entirety of the patriotic speech a citizen of De Smet makes, the syntax and ideology of which is deeply informed by the non-normative forces of Western regionalism, almost approaching what *By The Shores of Silver Lake* calls “rough language” (76): “Yes sir! We licked the British in 1776 and we licked ‘em again in 1812 and we backed all the monarchies of Europe out of Mexico and off this continent less than twenty years ago” (*Little Town* 72-73). His speech is followed by a

reading of the Declaration of Independence, and then a singing (spearheaded by Pa) of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.” In a characteristic pattern wherein emotional truth is revealed through song across the *Little House* series, this scene serves as a sight of personal epiphany for Laura. Synthesizing the two texts, she interprets her family’s sense of personal responsibility through the lens of patriotic ideology:

She thought: Americans won’t obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn’t anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good. (*Little Town* 76)

It is noteworthy here that American ideology is intertwined closely both with the familial authority Laura still defers to, and with the religious authority around which she structures “goodness” in her dynamic with Mary.

If *Little Town on the Prairie* begins with Laura’s internalizing national-level authority in the public sphere, it ends with her disseminating the same, specifically in the context of schooling. The culminating event of the novel is Laura and her friend Ida’s star positions in De Smet’s school exhibition, in which they are tasked with reciting American history from memory. Romines analyzes this scene at length, referencing it as a “rite of passage in which Laura proves herself as mouthpiece and enforcer of prevailing U.S. culture through the recitation of sanctioned history... before an overflow audience in the ‘sacred’ space of the community church” (201). Power and authority act in several interweaving ways within this scene. On one hand, Laura takes on the power of wielding an authoritative voice: every eye in the room, including older male eyes, is on her, and it is in her hands to impart the narrative of U.S. history to them. On the

other hand, the history she imparts is still within patriarchal interpretive authority. Before the exhibition starts, Mr. Owen, the teacher who has set her with the task, instructs her to borrow his pointer to guide the audience by pointing to pictures of U.S. Presidents that are being hung up on the wall: “When you come to George Washington, take up the pointer, and point to each President as you begin to speak about him” (286). In other words, Laura borrows a male facilitator’s tool to guide an audience through male actors.

Finally, Laura is also wielding her own authority as a white settler of the West. In the same way the Fourth of July speaker asserts white authority to rewrite the Mexican-American war as the act of standing up to European despots, it falls within Laura’s normative national duty to frame U.S. history as a site of white heroism and birthright. The two speeches, though different in setting and cadence, have significant thematic overlap: Laura discusses “the new vision of freedom and equality in the New World” (291-292) and “the war against tyranny and despotism” (292). Tellingly, her section of the speech concludes with an allusion to the frontier history she herself partakes in: “Then the first wagon wheels rolled into Kansas. Laura had finished. The rest was Ida’s part” (293). Laura’s speech is thus in part structured to mythologize the settler project that every person in the room partakes in, positioning it alongside acts of heroically-coded military struggle and national self-definition. The larger purpose of the initiation ritual becomes clear in the final, transitional chapter of *Little Town on the Prairie*. Laura’s performance in the school exhibition directly enables her to assume her first schoolteacher position. In other words, her public adherence to dominant national-level values qualifies her to convey the narrative of American history in the classroom, disseminating these ideologies to a new generation growing up in settler society.

The relationship between schooling and national-level values is less immediately evident in *Little Women*. In its characteristic mistrust of spaces outside the Utopian space of the home, for instance, the text is suspicious of Amy's school (she is the only one of the four sisters who attends). Mrs. March comments after Amy is punished at school that "I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching, and don't think the girls you associate with are doing you any good" (*Little Women* 61). The difference between schooling in the two texts thus mirrors the distinction in their approach to national ideology: the Ingalls family internalizes and takes up the dissemination of national-level values, while the March family expands its utopian vision outward. The dissemination of large-scale values through schooling nonetheless shapes the philanthropic project that ends *Little Women*. This project is Plumfield, a school for young boys meant to convey the same sentimental lessons that Marmee's model of authority had previously conveyed to Jo. Jo's narrative inheritances from Marmee and assumptions of the maternal are reflected in her description of the project: "a school for little lads—a good, happy homelike school, with me to take care of them and Fritz [her husband] to teach them" (374). While Laura quits teaching school to get married, the text of *Little Women* closes with Jo's national and familial projects intertwined: Marmee's birthday is being celebrated at Plumfield, a school administered by a married Jo, surrounded by its students. Even in the conventionally extrafamilial space of the school, then, sentimental family structures continue, rendering Plumfield an extension of Marmee's – and now Jo's – authoritative domain.

Jo's assumption of schoolroom authority is precipitated by the fate of her relationship with Laurie. Even as much as Laurie's friendship with Jo often occupies a sort of temporary, androgynous safe space away from the authority figures that structure their lives, it is Jo who frequently reminds Laurie of his familial duties, as when she refuses to run away to Washington

with him. Her familial penchant for didacticism through love ultimately, too, conveys certain national-level ideologies: temperance, personal responsibility, duty to parental figures. When he proposes to Jo, Laurie summarizes the years of their friendship as a series of renunciations: “I worked hard to please you, and I gave up billiards and everything you didn’t like, and waited and never complained, for I hoped you’d love me, though I’m not half good enough—” (Alcott 285). This proposal is a turning point for their friendship, as Jo rejects Laurie on the basis that they are “too alike” (285); at the end of the novel, their renewed friendship is restructured by Jo to center didacticism. In proving her capacity to act as a teacher for young boys, Jo takes direct credit for ‘guiding’ Laurie, asking with an almost maternal affect, “haven’t I brought up one boy to be a pride and honor to his family?” (375). Therefore, national-level values and the presence of their dissemination are not absent from *Little Women*; they are, however, unspoken, manifesting through interpersonal relationships rather than formal schoolroom structures. Through framing Laurie as her first student, however, Jo transfers these interpersonal models of development into a larger-scale project. The March model of American masculinity, which gels with the Northeastern Protestant values of the time—duty, responsibility, self-restraint—is pioneered in *Little Women* through interpersonal didacticism, but expanded into a classroom context.

Laura, too, inherits her mother’s models of authority and puts them into didactic practice. Much is made from the start of the novels of Ma having once been a teacher, and this shared profession is most clearly expressed between the mother and daughter in the opening of *These Happy Golden Years*. After having to face a difficult student, Laura returns home for a weekend and asks Pa and Ma for help. Pa’s advice is grounded in national authority and ideologies of self-determination. “Brute force can’t do much,” he tells her, “Everybody’s born free, like it says in the Declaration of Independence” (*Golden Years* 54). Ma’s insight, in contrast, is a great deal

more specific, and broadly resembles the “experiments” initiated by Marmee in their covert, indirect nature: “I’d give way to Clarence, and not pay any attention to him. It’s attention he wants; that’s why he cuts up. Be pleasant and nice to him, but put all your attention on the others” (54). Mirroring Marmee’s sentimental pedagogies, Ma suggests using covert feminine power to assert dominant values. In Proehl’s reading, this episode is an explicit moment of maternal narrative inheritance; Laura takes up a “strategy of disciplinary intimacy, a combination of withholding affection and then rewarding with love,” and “uses some of the same disciplinary methods on her students that her own parents used to control her tomboy behavior” (88).

Ultimately, then, Laura and Jo’s status as schoolteachers end with them in similar places: inheriting their mothers’ sentimental disciplinary methods, which they internalize through familial love rather than coercion, the stage is set for them to enact the national projects of education; for Laura, temporarily, and for Jo, as a life’s work. The process of “teaching” is explicitly tied to national-level ideologies in the case of Laura, and implicitly in the case of Jo.

6. “We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean”: Authorial Voice

It is then clear that Laura and Jo are transformed by the intertwined forces of familial-scale and national-scale authority, ultimately internalizing these authoritative voices as they impact personal relationships (like Jo’s with Laurie) and community roles (like that of schoolteacher). It would be a mistake, however, to position “teacher” as the single uncontested identity of either protagonist, particularly at the start or center of either narrative. This is most evident for Jo, who (aside from her moments of ‘schooling’ Laurie in moral behavior, which are paralleled by Meg and the rest of the Marches, and fairly decentered in the center of the book) positions herself for the vast majority of the text not as a teacher but as a writer. The

development of her writerly voice, as well as the evident pleasure Jo takes in the act of writing and publication, is given ample narrative space within the novel; in fact, it is the ambition to be a famous writer that Beth, in her dying moments, asks Jo to give up. The alignment between “writing splendid books” and “seeing all the world,” desires made parallel in Beth’s dying comments, is a resonant one: authorship and physical mobility grant Jo nonfeminine power, transporting her outside of her prescribed spheres. Beth’s request also draws attention to the fallibilities of writerly voice as a form of resistance to authority. In both texts, authoritative voices seek to school the expression of an independently-developed writerly voice, thus complicating its initial status as a site of resistance.

The text of *Little Women* contains enough tension between Jo’s writerly career and her eventual marriage that this tension is noted and responded to by readers. These two threads have been categorized as “the quest plot (in which Jo becomes the model of independent womanhood and literary achievement) and the marriage plot” (Quimby 5). Readerly identifications with one plot or the other are defined by their variability, indicating the affective textual power of both. The “quest plot” is certainly set out as the center point of Jo’s story arc at the point that the novel starts; the development of Jo’s writerly process, voice, and career receives far more textual attention than the question of romantic possibility. Alcott devotes vivid psychological and sensory attention to the “vortex” of creativity that defines Jo’s creative process (211). Jo’s devotion to craft over bodily existence or familial duty is framed as unsustainable, but this sense of narrative priority is described in terms deeply unusual for a female character of the time:

When the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world... Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untasted, day and night were all

too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no fruit. (Alcott 211)

This consuming and seductive vision of a developing creative process is matched by the joy embedded in narrating Jo's early navigations of the publishing world. In this scene, Laurie reacts to the news of Jo's submitting two stories for publication by throwing his hat into the air and crying out, "Hurrah for Jo March, the celebrated American authoress!" (Alcott 124). In the same way she breaks through a male-dominated sphere through falling into the "vortex" of creative process, the Jo that pursues a writerly quest narrative has ambitions worthy of joyous, hyperbolic celebration. The question of publication is also crucial because, for a time, Jo successfully makes money writing in a family that needs financial support. This act of independent income is a further assertion of nontraditional femininity as it operates in relation to Jo's writerly identity.

While the authorial development of Laura in *Little House* is given less space than Jo's in *Little Women*, the status of the novels as fictionalized narrative grounded in the real Laura Ingalls Wilder's life grants them an unusual space in the realm of authorial development. Some parts of the books operate from this point in terms of explicit dramatic irony: one scene between Laura and Mary features Mary's comment that "I am planning to write a book some day... But I planned to teach school, and you are doing that for me, so maybe you will write the book" (*Golden Years* 136). Even before then, Laura and Mary's dynamic in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is used to express the adolescent Laura's sense of verbal articulation and artistic voice. Tasked with "being Mary's eyes" following her visual impairment, twelve-year-old Laura faces the challenge of seeing and describing her surroundings, as well as navigating the role that literacy, artistry, and figurative language play in this process.

Romines cites this dynamic between Laura and Mary as one of several factors that qualify the novels as “a woman artist’s plot... a serial female *kunstlerroman*” (244), thus aligning it more explicitly with the arc of *Little Women* than the internal subject matter of the novels might suggest. In one scene particularly oriented around writing voice, Mary takes issue with Laura’s use of a metaphor, telling her that “We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean” (*Silver Lake* 58). In response, Laura must process the fact that the nonliteral, artistic interpretation *does* express what she means; furthermore, that “there [are] so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them” (58). A few paragraphs later, after watching the prairie, the flaw in Mary’s advice is revealed through Laura’s explicit failure of articulation: “The endless waves of flowery grasses under the cloudless sky gave her a queer feeling. She could not say how she felt” (*Silver Lake* 59). Mary’s resistance to metaphor is particularly significant due to its alignment with the teacher-artist binary both Jo and Laura must navigate. Mary is positioned from early in the texts as the more discipline-oriented and passionate about school of the two sisters, but her competence comes in the form of repetition and memorization (of Bible verses, and of male-authored literary texts) rather than artistic expression. As previously established, Mary is initially aligned with Ma and domestic work while Laura is aligned with Pa and outdoor work; as noted above, following Ma’s footsteps and teaching school is initially Mary’s ambition, and not Laura’s.

In the debate about what “saying what you mean” entails, then, Laura and Mary express one of the novels’ ongoing tensions. Mary seeks clarity, didacticism, structure, and authority; Laura favors multivocality, artistry, freedom, and romanticism. If Jo’s artistic identity is expressed through the act of writing, Laura’s is expressed more abstractly through her adoration of and attention to the natural world that surrounds her. In fact, narrative voice and sensory

description is a crucial vehicle through which Wilder communicates her allegiances to sites of non-normative pleasure. A particularly vivid case of this is an episode in which Laura and her cousin Lena ride ponies in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. The scene is described in vivid, sensual terms: “Everything smoothed into the smoothest rippling motion. This motion went through the pony and through Laura and kept them sailing over waves in rushing air... She and the pony were going too fast but they were going like music and nothing could happen to her until the music stopped” (*Silver Lake* 54). The acknowledgement of limitation and unsustainability in the label of “too fast,” and the embrace of temporary forbidden pleasure in the assurance that “nothing could happen” for the moment evidences Laura’s understanding of this experience as unsustainable.

This narration of an act that resists gender norms in its wild, uncontrollable status means that, as for Jo, writerly identity is tied to a certain extent to gender nonconformity. As established earlier, gender nonconformity is in turn intertwined for Laura with a nonconformity to the norms of *white* womanhood specifically. In fact, Ma continues a pattern of making this positioning explicit by declaring “I don’t know when Laura’s looked so like a wild Indian” (*Silver Lake* 55) in response to the episode with the ponies. This case is not the only one where writerly voice allows Laura to express non-normative allegiances. Conflicts between dominant, authoritative voices and the “dissenting voices” that disrupt them proliferate throughout *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. The character of Big Jerry, whom Laura and Pa admire and Ma distrusts, in part explicitly because of his mixed indigenous heritage, “epitomizes freedom and acquires mythic status from his first appearance” (Campbell 116). Observing and describing Big Jerry engenders the same kind of aesthetic inspiration in Laura’s narration as the kinetic, mobile status of the prairie, the wild ponies, and the men working on the railway. “Oh, Mary!” she exclaims, “The

snow-white horse, and the tall brown man... And they rode right into the sun as it was going down. They'll go on in the sun around the world" (*Silver Lake* 65). In a continuation of their earlier argument, Mary objects to these terms on the grounds of their unliteral nature. Ever the voice of rationality and didacticism, Mary, like Ma, cannot be moved to romanticize "wild men" synonymous with the prairie.

Laura and Pa's trust or admiration of indigenous figures is not unproblematic, but these sentiments *are* positioned by Ma as threatening to familial safety or stability. This act of potential resistance to dominant voices and ideologies, however, cannot sustain itself. As Proehl traces, Laura's nonconformity to the most hardline of settler-colonialist belief correlates with her gender nonconformity, and Laura's gender nonconformity is schooled away through the forces of love and authority as she gets older. This also means that these fascinations are ones Laura must grow out of as she disidentifies with Pa in favor of Ma. Whether this switch happens all the way or only part way, and whether it means she gives up the voice of artistic ambiguity in favor of "saying exactly what she means" as recommended by Mary, is a more complicated question. But it is vital to note that Laura is ultimately *not* a writer within the text, but is a teacher; this didactically-oriented identity in turn correlates with her movement away from metaphorically grounded, self-driven observation and towards the espousal of stable, predictable discourses. The most public act of speech and expression performed by Laura in the course of the texts is not an artistic enterprise; rather, it is her performance at the school exhibition in *Little Town on the Prairie*, in which she discusses normative white and male American history; a story that isn't hers, in terms set by her white male teacher rather than herself.

If Laura undergoes a shift away from gender nonconformity, creative expression, and non-normative identification between the start of *By the Shores of Silver Lake* and the end of

Little Town on the Prairie, it is a more gradual one than Jo's transformation, which—as spurred on primarily by Beth, though partly by Jo's eventual husband, Professor Bhaer—happens much faster. Curiously, Proehl's book frames Jo as having a sort of reverse arc to Laura: growing away from tomboyism and sensation fiction makes Jo *more* sympathetic and community-oriented and not less, though race is invisible in *Little Women* in favor of class. “As Jo's sympathy increases for those who are marginalized due to class oppression, her tomboy traits gradually subside,” claims Proehl (35). Indeed, Jo's narrative resolution consists of didactic philanthropy, whereas Laura's is continuing her parents' settler-colonialist project as part of her own marital unit. Such an alignment of Jo's tomboyism with selfishness also occurs multiple times as it concerns the very writerly ambitions and quest narrative that have made Jo such a frequent object of readerly affection. After the dying Beth disparages “writing splendid books, and seeing all the world” in favor of dedication to the home and the family (Alcott 327), Jo is demonstrated to have internalized those terms in the final chapter of the novel. Returning to the chapter “Castles in the Air,” in which Jo had expressed a desire for a successful writing career and a life full of travel and adventure, the adult Jo comments that “the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now” (Alcott 379).

Jo's identity as a writer does not *altogether* disappear from the moment Beth dies. In fact, in this same monologue, Jo mentions that “I haven't given up hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these” (Alcott 379). But by “experiences and illustrations,” Jo means her school, husband, children, and domestic life; she can now assert a continuity of writerly identity only as it falls into a conventionally feminine sphere. In fact, Jo has already written a book that fits into these kinds of gender norms more so than her sensational or entertaining works: in the aftermath of

Beth's death, she writes a domestic novel on her mother's recommendation, which is sent to a magazine by her father. Jo is surprised by the success of a work she refers to in diminutive terms as a "simple little story" and a "small thing" (Alcott 340). This vision of the creative process, with both the writing and publishing process spearheaded and carried out by parental authority, is nothing like the sprawling, hyperbolic terms that frame Jo's writing process and authorial ambition earlier in the text. Beth's death does not strip Jo of her writerly identity altogether, but it repositions this identity as newly normative and nonthreatening in terms of subject, scale, and priority. This internalization of Beth's ideology as it applies to Jo's writerly voice follows a troubling underlying pattern within *Little Women*, in which Jo's respect for authority as it exists in the form of loved ones is at war with her writerly identity. Beth's disparagement of Jo's writing ambitions invokes the fear of death, as part of a pattern in which "Fear is always cropping up in Jo's relation to writing – fear of being selfish, fear of losing her womanliness, fear of becoming insensitive, fear of making money, fear of getting attention" (Fetterley 35). Earlier in the book, even Laurie's exclamation of Jo as a "celebrated American authoress" is one that she must laugh off. Jo's writerly identity is thus persistently limited by the internalized familial ideology she identifies as her "morals," in the tellingly cut-off moment of clarity in which she "can't help wishing, sometimes, that father and mother hadn't been so dreadfully particular about such things" (Alcott 281). Authorial voice, therefore, can only be a truly resistant voice to a certain extent; like Jo's self-censure as a byproduct of her "morals," like her parents' initiative in publishing her final novel, like Mary's guidance of Laura towards "saying what she means," and like Laura's own pride in her more nationally normative expressions of voice, it is subject to internally- and externally- directed revision, often in authoritative directions.

7. “Selfish, lonely, and cold”: Normative Endings and Audience Response

I have thus far examined the way that authority functions within the text, and the way Jo and Laura’s non-normative impulses and desires are transformed through the means of outside authority, especially that of the family. I have also devoted attention to authorial voice and creative identity as factors that may counteract these authoritative forces at times, but are ultimately beholden to authoritative voices, particularly as they are communicated through identification with and sacrifice for family members. It is in many ways easier to list off the shared contradictions between the two texts than to make authoritative claims about the final effect of Jo and Laura’s arcs from nonconformity to conformity. However, as a pair of texts selected for comparison partly due to their shared status as much-beloved by succeeding generations, the answer to whether authorship or self-definition can triumph over normative authority in either of the two texts seems to lie at least partly with the question of audience response. (Certainly my *own* response is implied by my use of the word “can,” and the framing of the question—far from every audience member of *Little House* and *Little Women*, frequently remembered as quintessentially American and quintessentially domestic texts, enters them in search of the protagonist’s triumph against authority, traditional family structures, or normative American values.) Past the scale of their own families and communities, are Jo and Laura’s final roles as cultural figures those of writers, or teachers? Each engages in the opposition between the family and personal freedom: Laura embraces teaching for Mary’s sake, Jo puts aside her writing career for the sake of Beth. Less dramatically but perhaps more enduringly, reflecting a more universal model of ideology and its internalization, both Laura and Jo internalize lessons from their parents, some of which – notably, Marmee and Ma’s shared interest in teaching their

daughters the value of emotional repression – are not positioned as harmful by the text, partly by means of the kindness of their delivery.

Do, then, the narrative voices and characters of *Little House* and *Little Women* exercise the same effect on the reader? Significant scholarship is devoted to the question of audience response in the cases of both Alcott and Wilder. Juxtaposing these critical voices as they relate to Jo and Laura's parallel arcs from nonconformity to conformity, the angle of audience response reveals a potential across both texts to either destabilize or reinforce the linear, chronological conclusion of each text as its final effect on the reader. On one hand, Anita Clair Fellman's *Little House, Long Shadow* is concerned with the series as a site of normative ideological dissemination through readerly affection. Through the apparently apolitical vehicle of the children's novel, Fellman argues that Wilder exposes audiences to the rhetorical structures of libertarian individualism throughout her texts. In Fellman's terms, Wilder-as-author performs the same act of nationalistic reinscription as Laura-as-speaker at the school exhibition, but through the form of narrative rather than structured speech: Fellman sets out to examine the ways in which readers are "responsive to associations made in the stories and... accept as axiomatic certain assumptions about the nature of the American historical experience" (4). Conversely, scholars such as Catharine R. Stimpson have argued for reader responses to *Little Women* as the force through which *non*-normative ideologies are internalized. Advocating for the study of *Little Women* through awareness of its status as part of a "paracanon" determined by readerly love, she argues that *Little Women*'s readers exercise their own interpretive authority over the text: "tutor[ing] themselves in unfeminine will through choosing... which Jo they will imitate, or at the very least, find enchanting... Recidivists of reading, they return again to the far naughtier beginning and middle of the narrative" (Stimpson 75).

Is it possible, then, that the same is true for *Little House*? Certainly some of the novels' most vivid sensory moments concern Laura's moments of noncompliance, and the Laura of *Silver Lake* and the earlier, childhood novels is "enchanting" (to borrow Stimpson's terms) to many readers in large part because of her identifications with freedom, resistance to gender norms, and love of mobility and the natural world. It may be difficult for a modern reader to read or accept certain scenes in which Laura surrenders or decries her acts of non-normativity; one such example is a schoolyard scene in *The Long Winter*, where Laura catches a ball thrown to her by a group of boys her own age, and is praised by them for her skill. Laura's internal monologue then displays shame about the act: watching her female classmates, she observes that "Those girls would not play with boys, of course. She did not know why she had done such a thing and she was ashamed, fearful of what these girls must be thinking of her" (*Long Winter* 78). It is hard to imagine Jo March expressing such self-consciousness at an early point in the text of *Little Women*, but she is far crueller to her young self (termed "selfish, lonely, and cold") at the end of the text. A similar dynamic emerges between Jo and Laura's arcs towards marriage. At the start of *These Happy Golden Years*, much like Jo at the start of *Little Women*, Laura adamantly expresses a desire not to marry; at the end of the novel, like Jo, Laura gets married. But the arc of Jo's marriage comes about through her being told to give up writing, and she is married to Professor Bhaer, an older man whose affect of kindly authority indisputably evokes that of Mr. March. In contrast, the arc of Laura's courtship occurs through a series of acts Laura has demonstrated affection for over the course of the texts: the taming and aesthetic appreciation of horses, shared observation of the Dakota landscape, and the eventual commitment to a farming project. Though the general arcs of resistance and eventual capitulation to normative compliance assume the same shape, the two marriages' effects on a reader with affection for the protagonist

cannot be equivalent: the marriage plot of *Little Women* creates more textual gaps and unanswered readerly questions than the equivalent arc of *Little House*.

I would argue, then, that the distinctions in how authority and conformist thought function *Little House* and *Little Women* do not lie in the presence of a non-normative opening and middle. Rather, they are found in the protagonist's own willingness to denounce her own prior non-normativity, and the intensity with which she does so. By resolving itself into a less unsatisfying, more ideologically coherent text, the *Little House* series disguises and obscures its divergences from normativity more successfully than *Little Women*, rendering them invisible. Jo's self-condemnations are harsher than Laura's, and the consequences of her actions more severe: by the narrative and by Jo herself, Amy's death by near-drowning is credited to Jo's temper, and Beth's life-threatening illness to Jo's lack of philanthropic sympathy. But paradoxically, these forays into intense didacticism make *Little Women* a less effective didactic text. Rather than readerly love, Karin Quimby draws attention to the power of readerly frustration by describing the ending of *Little Women* as a situation in which "Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer powerfully disrupts the textual and sexual narrative logic rather than render it coherent" (10). *Little House* may at times disrupt its primary cultural identity as a site of nostalgia for the settlement of the West, but the identification of such countervoices takes a particularly careful reader. In contrast, the "unfairness" of Jo's marriage is evident enough that non-academic readers pick up on and discuss it, even if it's within the potentially limited context of frustration with whether Jo marries the "wrong person."

The two texts' contrasting efficacy in communicating normative thought to their audiences does not prevent tendencies towards nonconformity from being visible in each; nor does it prevent each text from impacting readers through explorations of resistance to authority,

gender nonconformity, and female writerly identity. Such is the benefit of reading the two texts alongside each other: they share immense popularity and cultural staying power, centered around readerly love of an indisputably American but time-disruptingly gender-nonconforming protagonist. Comparing them can thus illustrate the more “invisible” sides of each text: the prevalence of sentimental parenting conventions in *Little House*, the invisibilities of race and nationhood in *Little Women*, and the relationships that each text builds between writerly voice and identity. The explicit binary within the two texts between Laura and Jo’s two central “voices”—the didactic voice, and the creative voice—is worth tracing across the larger history of American children’s literature. In Alcott and Wilder’s texts, at least, this tension shapes embedded authoritative and non-authoritative voices, and the power that each kind of discourse exerts on audiences and characters prevents a wholly stable resolution. Nonetheless, examining the contrasting frameworks of resistance, authority, the successes and failures of each, enables further understanding of covertly normative *and* noncompliant features of each text.

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