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The Afterlife of *Little Women* as a Feminist Text

Trabajo de tesis

Maestranda: Elisabet Adriana Lanzi

Directora: Dra. Marcela Gonzáles de Gatti

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Abstract

This thesis closely examines the classic novel *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott and three contemporary reworkings: *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* (2004) by Marcela Serrano, *The Little Women Letters* (2012) by Gabrielle Donnelly and the manhwa *Dear my girls* (2005 to 2012) by Kim Hee-Eun. In relation to *Little Women's* hypertexts: pastiche, sequel and adaptation, respectively, part of the analysis contemplates to what extent the texts both pay homage to their nineteenth-century predecessor and refurbish it for a more contemporary perspective from a postfeminist stance. Despite the fact that these texts were created in different settings and times, they reveal how the patriarchal authority prevailing in the past persists in this century. The main characters in each of them are strong and resilient women trying to survive in a hostile world. These stories come together as a political appeal for recognition to women who must be acknowledged and empowered.

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Introduction

Interest in the topic

This Master's thesis purports to shed light on the question of why a canonical nineteenth century text continues to generate novel reformulations and adaptations, even across cultures. Indeed, this work is concerned with establishing significant comparisons between the classic *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott and three contemporary reworkings: *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* (2004) by Marcela Serrano, *The Little Women Letters* (2012) by Gabrielle Donnelly and the manhwa *Dear my girls* (2005 to 2012) by Kim Hee-Eun. The main purpose is to put the nineteenth century text and the three contemporary rewritings in a dialogue with one another to identify the nature of the classic text's afterlife as a feminist text, with due consideration to the temporal and spatial contexts in which the texts are set.

Presentation of the classic hypotext

Little Women was written by Louisa May Alcott in 1868. It is considered to be the first book for children in America to break with the didactic tradition of conduct books because Alcott introduced realism and entertainment to American children's literature. The American conduct book has been studied as a genre by many scholars, among them Sarah Newton, who describes it as "a text intended for an inexperienced young adult or other youthful reader that defines an ethical, Christian-based code of behavior and that normally includes gender role definitions"(5-6). The author further elaborates on the notion that such books "have promoted political ends, have aesthetically influenced female characterization in early American as well as English novels, and have certainly helped perpetuate traditional American views about female places and roles that emerged ... as the 'cult of true womanhood'" (5-6). In other words, conduct books were likely to contain deeply entrenched

views about the traditional role of women in society which offered a fertile ground for *Little Women's* mold-breaking project.

Alcott had written a series of sensational thrillers that examined the darker side of human nature and criticized the Victorian ideal of femininity as unrealistic and false. One such example is *Pauline's Passion and Punishment*, which she wrote before the success of *Little Women* under the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, for fear of disappointing her family and friends. In a letter to her childhood friend, Alf Whitman, June 22, 1862, Alcott wrote:

I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compose' & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare so don't be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates, wolves, bears & distressed damsels in a grand tableau (qtd. in Stern 50-51).

Her thrillers are sensational, not because they mention dishonesty, envy, passion, and other feelings objectionable in the proper Victorian female, but because her stories defy the role of female domesticity, or little women.

In the fall of 1867, hearing of Alcott's financial worries, publisher Thomas Niles asked her to write a "girls' book" and to contribute as an editor to "Merry's Museum", an "instructional" children's magazine that included poems and stories (Saxton 294). Niles's recommendation was the origin of *Little Women*. In its first version, the novel was subtitled *A Girls' Book* (Saxton 295). Although Alcott was required to produce moralizing tales, she showed a certain amount of resistance to that imperative in *Little Women*, preaching self-control rather than excessive religious feeling. The girls in the story are guided less by rigid moral structures than the words of wisdom of their Marmee.

With reference to the legacy of Alcott's powerful voice, Elaine Showalter's book, *Sister's Choice* (1991), devotes a whole chapter of her study to *Little Women* and concludes it with suggestions and arguments about famous women writers, who embraced Alcott as their

spiritual godmother and as an inspirational character. Among the writers mentioned by Showalter are Adrienne Rich and Joyce Carol Oates, Gertrude Stein and also Simone de Beauvoir. Showalter quotes two or three sentences from Beauvoir's *Memoirs* and her sole point is to illustrate the idea that Alcott's voice reached far beyond the limits not only of New England, but also of the United States.

Many scholars, like Ann Douglas, Sarah Elbert and Anne Rose have analyzed the text as an important piece of feminist criticism targeted at the Transcendentalist movement. The novelist Cynthia Ozick recalls that "I read 'Little Women' a thousand times. Ten thousand. I am no longer incognito, not even to myself. I am Jo in her 'vortex'; not Jo exactly, but some Jo-of-the-future" (Ozick, qtd. in Spengler 235). Many other women, writers or not, have been inspired by Jo, as varied as Christine King Farris, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Carla Hayden, Patti Smith, the Empress of Japan, Gloria Vanderbilt, Connie Chung, Gloria Steinem, J.K. Rowling and Caitlin Moran (Rioux, xviii). Elena Ferrantes, the Italian author, recounts in her acclaimed novel *My brilliant Friend* (2011) the adventures of two little girls growing up in 1950s Naples who meet every day for months in the courtyard to read *Little Women* together, "so many times that the book became tattered and sweat-stained, it lost its spine, came unthreaded, sections fell apart. But it was our book" (89). Lenú explains, "we loved it dearly" (Rioux, xii). Some well-known men have also been readers of *Little Women*, such as Theodore Roosevelt and John Green.

As the preceding synthesis demonstrates, this classic book's impact and legacy are quite impressive. Indeed, *Little Women* has been studied by different generations of scholars, who have found in it a variety of riches, depending on what they were searching for. The next section will trace the main antecedents which are relevant to the present exploration of *Little Women* from a contemporary perspective.

Antecedents and changing views of *Little Women* as a feminist text

Little Women continues to be read worldwide, reprinted, staged, filmed, condensed, referenced, and translated in its more than one hundred and fifty year history, even though the novel was historically limited to young girls in the late nineteenth century.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Alcott was credited, like many other American women writers, with a talent for portraying the domestic field concretely. At university, her novels were studied only by scholars dedicated to children's literature until the 1960s and 1970s, when it came under feminist critics, some of whom were annoyed by its old-fashioned sentimentality; others dismissed it because it seemed to maintain the traditional separation of men's and women's spheres (public versus private). But decades later, according to Madelon Bedell, Alcott's text became "the American female myth" (Showalter viii), and Alcott's heroine Jo March the most influential figure among independent and creative American women. Nina Auerbach has defined *Little Women* as a novel about self-sufficient feminist communities (*Communities* 58, 61, 55), while Judith Fetterley (1978) considers that the novel is divided by opposite impulses about femininity and creativity in "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War" (370).

When in the twentieth century, Leona Rostenberg discovered Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous thrillers in nineteenth-century periodicals, Alcott studies re-emerged and her work has been reviewed widely since then. Because of this discovery, scholars have analyzed her characters from various perspectives, particularly feminist criticism.

Alcott was highly aware of women's assigned place in the nineteenth century. Sarah Elbert proclaims that Alcott, like Margaret Fuller, thought that women should not have to choose between private and public lives and should have meaningful public roles in a democratic society. Alcott accepted that growth involved a difficult process. In 1850 she wrote in her journal: "Seventeen years have I lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much

remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire, a truly good and useful woman” (Alcott qtd. in Myerson et al. 61). Nineteenth-century society, however, generated a conflict when it insisted on keeping strict control over women’s advance and over the range of their involvement in activities and employment under the supposedly protective umbrella of the physical limitations of gender.

Patricia Spacks in *The Female Imagination* (1975) explores a number of patterns that are repeated in the stories written by Alcott among other women writers. Nina Auerbach’s in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978) studies different visions of female independence particularly families ruled by mothers and daughters. Judith Fetterley (1979) asserts, from a feminist standpoint, that the novel is about going through adolescence to turn into a graceful little woman. The author also stresses how the story itself makes a retreat from this position in the articles “Impersonating Little Women: The Radicalism of Alcott’s Behind a Mask,” “Little Women: Alcott’s Civil War.” She describes how the character who persistently struggles against the traditional expectations of modest femininity and domesticity (Jo) is the true heroine, and the character who reliably responds to it (Beth) dies immediately after reaching adulthood.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) dedicate a chapter to Little Women “The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott,” in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Other articles that go deeper into Alcott’s writings are: “A Necessary Mask: The Sensation Fiction of Louisa May Alcott” by Jeanne Bedell; “Beneath the Surface: Power and Passion in Little Women” by Brigid Brophy; “Sentimentality and Louisa May Alcott, Sweet, If Somewhat Tomboyish: The British Response to Louisa May Alcott” by Mary Cadogan, published in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott* edited by Madeleine Stern (1984). Sarah Elbert reveals Alcott’s passionate

commitment to abolition and women's rights in her book *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and Little Women* (1984).

It can be said of Louisa Alcott that her works are a revelation of herself. It is important to know which influences were parts of Alcott's life. In the Introduction to *Little Women*, Elaine Showalter affirms that these influences include Alcott's family, people she knew well, such as the important writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. She also included the places where she traveled and people she met, the performances she attended, books and periodicals that she read, and trends such as occultism. Alcott was also influenced by what she observed and read as well as by her own employment experiences, mainly those during the Civil War when she tended the wounded soldiers in the Union Hotel Hospital in Washington.

Alcott detested writing for the market, sacrificing her adult ambitions and transforming herself into *Louisa May Alcott, The Children's Friend*, as the title of her first biography released in 1888 affirms, written by Ednah Dow Cheney. Her novel *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), published anonymously, may have been inspired by her feeling that, like Faust, she had sold her soul, though on this occasion the buyer was virtue rather than vice. But because of these concessions, *Little Women* is a perennial book, one that describes its author's best self.

Little Women is not "moral pap for the young" (Alcott qtd. in Rioux 26) as she herself described the novel in one of her diaries. Its energy, sadness, and anger, its sense of cheerful potentiality, are too real for that. She resisted her material, calling her first version of life among the Alcott's *The Pathetic Family*. Her publisher thought it would have only modest life as a girls' book; yet its compliment to the intense lives of girls raises it above the category of children's literature, aligning it with the great themes of nineteenth-century America.

The busy, emotionally active life of the March cottage—like that of Melville’s Pequod in *Moby-Dick* or of *Huck Finn*’s raft—represents the vigorous energy of a human community in a torn and empty world. Like its literature, nineteenth-century America dreamed of holy communities, of transfigured little Americas within America: Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands joined Brook Farm, the Oneida Community, the Shakers, Thoreau’s Walden (a sanctified community of one), the small, visionary world of Transcendentalist Concord itself, as attempts to enthrone a new Eden within the larger and less controllable new world.

The scope of contemporary critical writing on Alcott is significant, and the studies mentioned here are by no means a thorough bibliography: Biographies written in the twentieth century include *Eden’s Outcasts* (2007) by John Matteson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, which analyzes father and daughter’s relationship as difficult, uneasy and yet affectionate adding facets to Alcott’s life and work, and the relationships of fathers and daughters in general. *Marmee & Louisa* (2012) by award-winning biographer Eve La Plante portrays a sensitively touching and realistic portrait of Louisa May Alcott and her mother, the real “Marmee” of *Little Women*. Exploring Alcott’s private diaries and other papers discovered not long ago, La Plante revives the outstanding daughter and mother’s relationship, and particularly the magnitude of Abigail May Alcott’s activities, since she was a politically active feminist revolutionary who fought for universal civil rights, for the end of slavery, and women’s suffrage.

In *The Afterlife of Little Women* (2014), the author Beverly Lyon Clark discloses how the novel resounds throughout traditional family values and advanced feminist ones. She bases her work on analysis of children’s literature, book history, cultural studies, feminist criticism, and adaptation studies. *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy. The story of Little Women and why it still matters* (2018) conveys a renewed and appealing look at the circumstances leading

Louisa May Alcott to write *Little Women* and why this memorable story of family and community bonds set in the Civil War has persisted with audiences across time.

Just as Alcott herself could synthesize a multiplicity of influences, her classic work has influenced a multitude of people around the world through the years and has been appropriated as a basis, strategically used to establish a dialogue with other domestic stories across time and space by writers from different countries and different cultures as the texts analyzed in this work.

Theoretical and methodological framework

As regards methodology, this thesis will offer a comparative analysis of the classic *Little Women* (1868) and three contemporary reworkings *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* (2004), *The Little Women Letters* (2012) and the manhwa *Dear my girls* (2005 to 2012). The idea that fiction writers transform and reformulate narratives from the past with a contemporary perspective is an invitation for the adoption of a comparative outlook. Comparative literature, here considered as a methodological approach to the study of fiction, is “one that foregrounds the role of the reader but which is always mindful of the historical context in which the act of writing and the act of reading take place” (Bassnett 9-10). From this approach, the corpus will be analyzed as three contemporary hypertexts that voice a variety of concerns about women’s position in society from a *postfeminist* perspective and that stand in an intertextual relationship paralleling the relationship between past and present in the neo-Victorian cultural phenomenon. According to some authors, such as Ulrich Weisstein (1975), comparative studies engage in the analysis of genres and how these relate to each other. In this respect, the present study aims at comparing how each of the hypertexts reformulates the source text as a form of replenishment of past literature from a variety of formats and cultural perspectives.

Feminist theory

The theoretical approach that informs the first chapter of this thesis is feminist theory. Alcott situates her characters in settings where she shows that women must defend themselves and discover how to compete in a patriarchal capitalist economy. This patriarchal ideology teaches women to internalize these concepts in the process of their socialization. Alcott's enlightened approach plays an important role and contributes to raising awareness about women's need for self-assertion, within a society submerged in the idea of separate spheres for women and men. Of all the various trends and approaches developed within the context of what is generally known as feminist criticism, the principles which emerged out of the second wave of feminism which occurred after the Second World War seem most appropriate to deal with such topics as the workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights. During this time, women had met their equality goals with the exception of the failure of the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

In particular, this thesis will find theoretical support for a feminist analysis of the source text *Little Women* in the feminist views put forward by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman In The Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary imagination* (1984) and Showalter's essay "Feminist criticism in the wilderness" (1981)

These works had quite a number of intentions: to develop different analyses of women writers in the canon and to recover other lost or neglected ones; to broaden descriptions of the textual and narrative ways by which women writers tried to find a voice to provide a rationale for their experience; and to revise the women characters portrayed by authorized male writers. The thesis will discuss the new ideas that these scholars brought to the field of literary feminism as feminist critics and writers as well.

In previous centuries the literary scene had been dominated by men and, as a consequence, the literary tradition in the Western World was patriarchal so when a woman

wanted to write, as Gilbert and Gubar have perceptively shown, she would not confront her predecessors, as there were none, but she would have to face the complete patriarchal literary tradition (48).

Moreover, this patriarchal literary tradition had not only excluded female authors; it had also defined the image of a woman in two extremes, the passive Victorian angel in the house and the monster (Gilbert and Gubar 48). As Gilbert and Gubar have observed, the male author symbolizes authority, yet he fails to exactly define how a woman experiences her own identity (48). In the absence of a possibility of finding a place in a standing authoritative dynasty that may legitimate their creative impulse, women writers face a twofold challenge, or a task that must be addressed and confronted in two stages. Definitely, the female author must first fight against the image her male precursors have shaped (Gilbert and Gubar 49). As such, the female challenge to write becomes first a challenge of self-creation, against her male precursors, and then, her writing must become a revisionary process (Gilbert and Gubar 49).

As Showalter remarks, the female author was compelled to occupy a second place in relation to her male colleagues (Gilbert and Gubar 61). She had to be discreet, submissive, and almost apologetic for her writing, otherwise she ran the risk of being ignored, attacked or judged as mad. Actually, the female author was forced to either debase her work or publish it anonymously or under a pseudonym (Gilbert and Gubar 65).

Assuming a male identity was a widespread strategy for female authors in order to gain approval of their intellectual worth by their male counterparts. Gilbert and Gubar find it quite intriguing that something that was taken for granted for men should be such a struggle for women (65). Being able to author a literary text and have it not only published under their genuine female names but also recognized as a valuable cultural artifact was difficult in the nineteenth century because, as Judith Butler explains in her book *Gender trouble: Feminism*

and the Subversion of Identity (1990), women were a category restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation was sought (2). This patriarchal model, so deeply entrenched since Aristotle declared that the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities (qtd. in de Beauvoir xxii), began to find opposition as women acquired education and pursued development and civic and intellectual participation with fairer possibilities and increasing equality with men during the nineteenth century in America.

The first chapter of this thesis approaches *Little Women* from the perspective of this Second Wave of Feminist Theory and reviews Showalter's feminist reading of the classic text.

Postfeminism

Given the fact that the thesis will also concentrate on the afterlife of *Little Women* through the analysis of contemporary texts, namely *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* by Marcela Serrano (2004), *The Little Women Letters* by Gabrielle Donnelly (2012) and the manhwa *Dear my girls* by Kim Hee-Eun (2005 to 2012), it is necessary and reasonable to invoke more contemporary waves of feminism.

Postfeminism, in its turn, makes possible a comprehension of the level of awareness of feminist discourse in contemporary society. Although it is obvious that we are not living during the height of second wave feminism, it does not mean that feminism has become obsolete or out of date. Postfeminism represents a change in feminism, both chronological and theoretical, which consists in moving away from second wave equality discourses while at the same time continuing to recognize the enormous impact those discourses have had on the present era.

Many authors published books and articles about *postfeminism*. Ann Brooks's book *Postfeminisms* (1997) is among the ones consulted for this thesis. It has been significant in developing recent understandings of *postfeminism* and its connection between feminism and

other 'posts'. Brooks claims that it is "a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundation list movements including postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism" (1). This conception of *postfeminism* suggests that the 'post' does not indicate the death of feminism or antifeminism. More exactly, it indicates a constant transformation of feminism. Brooks argues that *postfeminism*

Is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminism political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. (4)

As if reaffirming Brooks's theory, the postcolonial approach can be identified in the western conceptions of beauty as a legacy of colonialism on women and their identities. Many women still adhere to this approach despite their struggle to break down these societal ideologies. The neo-Victorian genre was originally seen as a subgenre of postmodernism, but lately it has been considered an independent genre itself. This postmodern, critical look directed to the past has tracked the Victorian fiction and its social structures to rewrite them in a style understandable to contemporary audiences. The representations of the patriarchal abuses in the long Victorian times brought to life in twenty-first century texts, have inspired women to perceive their agency and encouraged them not to choose the traditional roles nor to assume the exclusive existence of binary genres. If nineteenth-century women writers were restrained by feelings of exclusion to write the distinctive fiction they wrote, twenty-first century women writers are bound by exclusion of a different sort. These texts are invaluable resources for their commitment to the disclosure of a disturbing social and literary issue: the patriarchal social order's tries to limit the expression of women writers.

Brooks proclaims that *postfeminism* used in this theoretical context implies feminism's maturity. She reflects that rather than 'post' meaning going beyond or breaking

with, in these contexts it means “a process of ongoing transformation and change” (Brooks 1).

Other post-feminist scholars like Rosalind Gill, a British sociologist and feminist cultural theorist, have drawn attention to the repeated and harmful effects of customs and traditions that have made possible the oppression of women across historical periods. Gill writes in her on-line article “Postfeminist media culture” (2007) that “postfeminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products.” Elements of this sensibility embrace: an obsessive preoccupation with the body; the move from women being depicted as obedient, passive objects, to being depicted as active, appealing sexual subjects; the predominance of belief in choice, ‘being oneself’ and ‘pleasing oneself’, an emphasis on self-control; an improved paradigm and the restatement of sexual difference.

Sarah Gamble (1998) observes that “a general definition” of feminism might state that feminism is “the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society that is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns” (vii). Feminism tries to find a solution, although “there has never been a universally agreed agenda” (vii, viii). The word *postfeminism* that became familiar in recent years implicates that ‘feminism’ has become “an increasingly contested term” (viii).

Another conception of *postfeminism* is proposed by Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabbon (2018), who describe it as “a plurality of feminist positions from the second wave of feminism onwards “(Genz and Brabbon 3). This definition of *postfeminism* confronts the idea that feminism has been successful in attaining its goals whereas acknowledging that new agendas have appeared since the Women’s Movement. This interpretation is significant because it prevents a split between twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist discourses

that cast one perspective in a hierarchical position to another, or that portray *postfeminism* as a “saboteur” to a previous feminist generation and its politics (Genz and Brabbon 3),

Postfeminism criticism, therefore, is a useful lens through which to view neo-Victorian fiction in order to highlight the overlaps, intersections and continuities (as much as dissonances) between feminist histories and cultural critiques of women, gender, and sexuality. (O’ Callaghan 67)

Neo- Victorianism

An important part of the theoretical framework that may be used to account for the second part of the corpus – that is, the contemporary reworkings of the classic hypotext – is Neo-Victorianism, which is both a cultural and literary phenomenon and a body of theoretical formulations to critically approach it. As a cultural and literary phenomenon, Neo-Victorianism is the pervasive trend to revisit the Victorian era. As an expanding new field of literary research, Neo-Victorianism refers to a range of critical debates over the contemporary fascination with the world of the Victorians, their literature and the arts. And if the word *Victorian* is deemed as hardly appropriate to discuss a literary text emerging from nineteenth-century *American* society, it is difficult to dispute the inclusion of *Little Women* within the realm of neo-Victorian texts by virtue of Neo-Victorianism’s consistent expansion of its canon. Such systematic effort to open up the scope of Neo-Victorianism is attested to by the explicit decision, articulated by one of the most distinguished neo-Victorian critics, and founder of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian studies*, Marie-Luise Kohlke,

to adopt the widest possible interpretation of ‘neo-Victorian’, so as to include the whole of the nineteenth century, its cultural discourses and products, and their abiding legacies, not just within British and British colonial contexts and not necessarily coinciding with Queen Victoria’s realm; that is, to interpret neo-Victorianism outside

of the limiting nationalistic and temporal identifications that ‘Victorian’, in itself or in conjunction with ‘neo-’, conjures up for some critics. (Kohlke 2)

It is important to understand, so as to further delimit Neo-Victorianism that it would be wrong to link neo-Victorian literature only with historical fiction set in the nineteenth-century. As Helen Davies (2020) asserts neo-Victorian fiction “is doing something with the Victorian era; critically engaging with nineteenth-century fiction, culture and society as opposed to just repeating or nostalgically harking back to a past era”(2). According to Marie-Luise Kohlke, Neo-Victorianism is “the afterlife of the nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary “(1). Thus, a definition with ample consensus among researchers and critics is one that accepts that the term *Neo-Victorian* refers to “the engagement with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4).

The rewriting of the Victorian period in neo-Victorian texts often includes ventriloquism, a term which, in its metaphoric implications, can be defined as the act or the process of supplying subjectivity to the subordinated, the oppressed and the forgotten. As this revision is almost always ideological, frequently defying Victorian values, it does not always involve postmodern experimentation with form. However, although the narrative form of neo-Victorian novels may incorporate realism of description, imitation of Victorian styles or the reoccurrence of the omniscient narrator, the irony and humor frequently contained in those texts serve to destabilize apparently stable narratives. The connotational value of ventriloquism, as a narrative feature inherent in the neo-Victorian enterprise, is particularly apt to make reference to the contemporary reformulations of *Little Women*, which seek to ventriloquise its author, its narrator or its main characters so that the resulting texts not only allude to nineteenth-century concerns but also reuse nineteenth-century voices to express more contemporary concerns.

In the attempt to establish a meaningful connection between Neo-Victorianism and Feminism, it is accurate to quote Adrienne Rich's (1972) assertion that re-vision is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," which also included a request to "understand the assumptions in which we are drenched" (18), considering that for women, self-knowledge is more necessary "than a search for identity: it is part of [women's] refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (18). The neo-Victorian undertaking of bestowing "historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory" (Kohlke and Gutleben 31), can be evidently related to *postfeminist* ambitions.

The Victorian period continues to be considered a significant age for historical revision due to its strict sexual codes and restrictive female roles and to the impulse of twenty-first century writers of retelling the story of the fallen or madwoman. Beyond these already clichéd representations of women whose voices tended to be elided from the official historical record of mainstream literature, there seems to be a strong temptation among contemporary writers to dwell on female characters whose predicament as well as their personal responses to it continues to be illuminating. In this respect, the perennial attraction of female characters from *Little Women* perfectly sums up the marriage between Feminism and Neo-Victorianism in that such characters point both ways – to the past and to the present – underscoring both what was undesirable and even intolerable in the Victorian era and what remains to be done in order to fully overcome the lasting prevalence of patriarchal ideologies at present.

The concept of literature of replenishment

Considering that the hypertextual texts included in the corpus of this thesis are rewritings of a nineteenth-century novel, it is appropriate to consider possible approaches to the study of their gestures of revision and reformulation. In this respect, the categories created

by John Barth – *literature of exhaustion* and *literature of replenishment* – present themselves as a suitable theoretical context within which to frame a discussion of contemporary reworkings of canonical texts from previous centuries. “The Literature of Exhaustion”(1967), sometimes considered to be the manifesto of postmodernism, claims that the typical ways of literary representation had been used up by the time the essay was written. In “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980) Barth proposed new options to recreate the heritage of our cultural traditions. He set out to clarify and reconsider some of the statements he had made in 1967. In conclusion, John Barth, after twelve years since the publication of his 1967 essay, explained that the essay “The Literature of exhaustion” was about the actual “exhaustion” not of language or of literature, but of “the aesthetic of high modernism” (206). In his second essay, Barth declared that he expected postmodernist fiction might one day be considered “literature of replenishment.” Indeed, based on Barth’s categories, it is possible to argue that the contemporary reformulations of the classical novel are instances of literature of replenishment. As a result, an important part of the critical analysis will be oriented towards exploring the precise ways in which the dialogue between the canonical text and the contemporary versions, regardless of whether these texts are written in a postmodern style or not, illuminates current debates on the position of women and the need to intensify the struggle against patriarchy in specific areas.

Thus, even though the terms *literature of exhaustion* and *literature of replenishment* are terms that precede the emergence of the neo-Victorian phenomenon, and they are even broader denominators than the more precise neo-Victorian label, for the purposes of this thesis, the terms are still useful in that they perform at least three specific functions. First, the category of *literature of replenishment* as surpassing the term *literature of exhaustion* in its application to contemporary reformulations of a nineteenth-century novel clearly disowns unfair indictments leveled against contemporary hypertexts under the charge of lack of

originality. Second, the clear allusion to the act of refilling – replenishment – an emptied container with new meanings bespeaks the potential of both the container – the perennially versatile hypertext that can lodge an infinite number of reworkings – and the new contents – which reinterpret, enrich and give new life to the old container. Last but not least, the positively connoted practice of replenishing attributes further value to the repetition with variation – through the reemergence and rearticulation of texts from the past – that ensures the permanence and mutual allegiance of texts as interlocking links in a cultural chain. Thus, more than invoking the term *literature of replenishment* as a specific formal category in its strictly Barthesian application to postmodernist ironic and parodic rewritings of canonical and traditional texts, it is invoked in the context of this thesis, as a reminder of the authenticity of any literary project – such as the neo-Victorian phenomenon – that seeks to unbury texts from the past with the aim of exploring both past and current concerns, thereby infusing such texts with new life.

Parody without ridicule

Further, one particular concept that will prove to be relevant to this thesis is Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody (1985). According to Hutcheon, parody is often called "ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality" and it "is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders" ("The Politics of Postmodernism" 93). "Parody is a perfect postmodern form," Hutcheon argues, "for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" ("A Poetics of Postmodernism?" 11). Though Hutcheon is very careful to link her concept of parody to postmodernism, and – strictly speaking – the hypertexts explored in this thesis are not necessarily postmodernist in style, her view of parody as a resource that simultaneously installs and subverts that which is parodied is inordinately useful for the sake of analyzing *Little Women* and its hypertexts. Indeed, in this respect, part of the analysis will account for

the ways in which the hypertexts reinvent characters and situations in parodic ways but with the effect of both contradicting the source text and validating its unique status as a precursor text with an agenda that, even in contemporary societies, is obviously still incomplete. Hence, the source text, by way of its contemporary rewritings, both validates the current vociferous protests and is vindicated by them.

In his book *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), Gutleben explains the usefulness of the combination of parody and pastiche in neo-Victorian fiction:

If Victorian fiction obviously represents a spellbinding model for the retro-Victorian novel, this fascination does not prevent contemporary fiction from finding faults with its ancestors. At the same time as it pays homage to its Victorian model, the contemporary novel challenges, warps and undermines it. That the neo-Victorian novels both venerate and subvert its [sic] precursors can best be traced in the copresence of pastiche and parody. To the imitative impulse of pastiche is opposed the distorting tendency of parody. (89)

What Gutleben is trying to come to terms with is the fact that in neo-Victorian writing – which in this text he calls *retro-Victorian* fiction – there coexist two apparently contradictory tendencies: the tendency to imitate without any scathing criticism, or pastiche, and the tendency to be critical of and hold up to ridicule, or parody. Both parody and pastiche can be found even in the same neo-Victorian text and this encounter of polar opposites is due to the duplicitous nature of the Janus-like neo-Victorian gaze, which looks at the Victorian society to vituperate its starchy rigidity but longs for the certainties that its ordered universe guaranteed.

In the article “Parody Without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody” (1978), Hutcheon states that,

The modern use of parody, though, does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction. Parody implies a distance between the background text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive. (202)

It is the critical distance that is found in *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas*, a combination of “homage” and “thumbed nose” (Hutcheon 202). Actually, in this novel, like in *The Little Women Letters*, respect and admiration are more evident than the desire to ridicule the original novel. Being parody a sophisticated literary form, it needs enlightened readers that can recognize a parody because they know the original text (Hutcheon 206). Parody is also an “act of incorporation, its function is one of separation, of contrast” (203), if readers are not aware or cannot identify elements of the text being parodied, the form is disregarded and, the elements are naturalized as part of the new text.

Intertextuality

No text on its own has unity or cohesive meaning but it is part of the ongoing socio-cultural processes. Intertextuality, as a transhistorical phenomenon, is also an important theoretical concept that should be invoked in the analysis of the rewritings of *Little Women* that are the object of this work: *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* by Marcela Serrano (2004), *The Little Women Letters* by Gabrielle Donnelly (2012) and the manhwa *Dear my girls* by Kim Hee-Eun (2005 to 2012).

Intertextuality as a term was coined by the Bulgarian linguist Julia Kristeva in her essays “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966) and then in “The Bounded Text” (1966-67) where she analyzed Bakhtin’s concepts of *Dialogism* and *Carnival*. Her concept of intertextuality suggests literal and actual presence of a text in another text. She describes text as “a permutation of texts, intertextuality in the given text,” where “several utterances, taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva “The Bounded Text” 36).

Kristeva clarifies this idea by reinterpreting Bakhtin's theory of dialogic text: "Horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (*Desire in language* 66). While Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is founded on the use of language in certain social circumstances, Kristeva thinks more in terms of text and textuality.

In his essay "From Work to Text" (1971), Roland Barthes, who was deeply influenced by the Bulgarian linguist, makes a distinction between *work* and *text*. For him, *work* is the "material book offering up the possibility of meaning, of closure, and thus of interpretation," while text should be used to refer to the force of writing which although it is "potentially unleashed in some works, is in no sense the property of those works" (qtd. in Allen 66). He thus left open the possibility of conceiving of a literary text as a site of potentially endless meaning and the notion that no text can lead an independent existence, a fact that the relationship between *Little Women* and the three hypertexts under analysis certifies in a literally extreme way.

In relation to this abstract category of intertextuality, it will also be useful for this thesis to consider the transtextual relationships that Genette establishes in *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree* (1982). He outlines five types of transtextual relationships (Genette uses the term *transtextuality* to designate what others generally mean by intertextuality). These relationships are *intertextuality*, *metatextuality*, *paratextuality*, *hypertextuality* and *architextuality*. One of these relations that applies to this work is *intertextuality*, which he describes in a more restricted way than Kristeva to mean a 'relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts' (Genette 1-2) and 'the actual presence of one text within another' (2). From this point of view, *Little Women* is present as an intertext in the three contemporary works that somehow reformulate some of

the canonical text's key issues. One more relation considered is hypertextuality in view of Genette's concept that it includes "any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text a (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5).

Therefore, hypertextuality embodies the relationship between a previous text and a new text, in which the hypotext is changed, reformed, elaborated or enlarged. What is analyzed in hypertextuality is the impact of a text on another, not its mere presence, considering the hypertext the future meaning of the hypotext. The meaning of a hypotext is incomplete without the hypertext that it generates; they are a sign of unity of meaning between the past and the present. Other modes of connections between texts are pastiche, parody, sequel, prequel and retelling.

Finally, this dissertation will be framed, in general terms, within comparative studies based on Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), in which she displays these issues by theorizing about the adaptive process. Hutcheon maintains that all media have a sharing of features in common concerning their role in the practice of adaptation. Hutcheon presents literary adaptation from three interrelated perspectives. The first perspective is being described as "a formal entity or product... an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (*Theory* 7). This suggests that the process may change the medium (a novel to a film) or genre (a painting to poetry), or a change of context. In the second place, Linda Hutcheon places adaptation "a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging" (8). The final perspective is described as "process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8).

Hypothesis

This Master's thesis purports to demonstrate that the three hypertexts studied as part of the selected corpus, driven by the transgressive energy of the original text and its main character, Jo, reformulate the version of feminism of the precursor text in accordance with a variety of contemporary demands.

The transformations operated in the contemporary versions, in turn, enhance the hypotext by replenishing it in a Barthesian sense and extending its life establishing new and divergent alternatives answering to familiar but very dissimilar circumstances.

Objectives

Through their appeal to a canonical nineteenth-century text, the three contemporary hypertexts endorse the value and importance of a literary text that has transcended its own time and culture and the source text is conferred lasting permanence by virtue of its constant reinterpretations and reworkings which continue with no sign of abating. Thus, the source texts and their recreations stand not only in an intertextual but also in a symbiotic relationship that parallels the relationship between past and present in the neo-Victorian cultural phenomenon.

General objective

This thesis primarily seeks to demonstrate that the nineteenth-century novel's situations and characters are revised and recreated to shed light on and voice a variety of contemporary concerns about women's position in society to disclose and underscore a still incomplete emancipation from patriarchal hegemony.

Specific objectives:

This thesis sets out to fulfill the following main specific objectives:

- a) To identify and describe the specific concerns with women's position in society which are voiced, from a *postfeminist* perspective, in each of the hypertexts selected;

b) To analyze whether pastiche or parody prevails in each of the reworkings of *Little Women* in order to elucidate the nature of the reformulation of the source text proposed by each hypertext;

c) To validate the claim that the three hypertexts can be enrolled as part of the neo-Victorian dynasty of texts which put canonical nineteenth-century texts and contemporary texts into a dialogue with each other for mutual illumination of social worries;

d) To bring out the value of each reformulation of the source text as a form of replenishment of past literature from a variety of formats and cultural perspectives.

Structure

The first chapter presents an analysis of *Little Women* from an orthodox, traditional feminist perspective because Louisa May Alcott has been studied, examined and praised for her feminist writing by many feminist critics and her writings influenced a great number of female writers and intellectuals.

The second, third and fourth chapters deal with three texts that pay tribute to the nineteenth century novel and analyze the intertextual interaction between them and *Little Women*. The second chapter will be devoted to a critical analysis of *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* by Marcela Serrano; the third chapter will focus on *The Little Women Letters* by the English writer Gabrielle Donnelly; and the fourth chapter will explore the manhwa *Dear my girls* by the Korean writer Kim Hee-Eun.

This corpus has been carefully selected so as to demonstrate the way in which literature processes meaningful social discourses and influences readers in different societies as well as social and cultural historical realities distanced in terms of space and time.

Chapter I.

Denying and confirming the feminism implicit in *Little Women*

This chapter will discuss why *Little Women* came to be considered as early feminist literature in the twentieth century, which tried to subvert the patriarchal culture of nineteenth-century America, and how it advocated for changes that would balance society between men and women through a reform that would begin in the family. This interpretation is approached by first describing feminist theory according to Showalter's essay "Feminist criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), and in the following subsections, the analysis of meaningful issues that appear underneath the story of the March family and disclose how the fictional characters' struggles expose Alcott's own difficulties as a female writer in a patriarchal society considering Judith Fetterley's "The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction" (1978), "Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott" (2005) and Jonathan Culler's chapter, "Reading as a Woman" (1985), both place resistance and critical thinking at the center of their arguments.

In suggesting that feminist criticism lacks an exclusive theoretical framework, Showalter begins her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" by quoting Judith Fetterley, who declared in her book *The Resisting Reader* (1978) that feminist criticism has been characterized by "a resistance to codification and a refusal to have its parameters prematurely set" (viii). Showalter also mentions that Mathew Arnold states that criticism, in general, is a process that has to go through a period of wilderness before reaching an ideal standard.

Showalter points out that feminist criticism tries to act in response to male ideas and this has to be changed into a "women centred, independent and intellectually coherent" criticism (4). According to her there are two modes of feminist criticism: "feminist reading"

and “feminist critique”. The former dedicates itself to revisionary readings of texts (4) to understand the image of women portrayed and perpetuated by literature and to decipher, and eventually deconstruct, the concepts and stereotypes of women presented in literary texts.

The second mode of feminist criticism concentrates on defining what is “feminine”, analyses women as writers, deals with the “history, styles, themes, genres and, structures of writing by women” (5). Showalter has coined the term “gynocritics” to refer to “specialized critical discourse” (5) that uses women’s writing as its special subject. Four different models are used by theories of women’s writing: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural, and each one with its own methods and values. The first three factors are influenced by the cultural condition of women. As women have a history of lack of representation, they have become a “muted group” while men belong to the “dominant group”. As part of a subordinate group, women have to learn and use the dominant language to express themselves.

In the following subsections, the analysis will develop the most significant issues present connected to feminism in the novel and how the fictional characters struggle in a patriarchal society.

Teaching Little Women to be altruistic

Reading *Little Women* used to be undemanding. Before feminism changed the way American girls looked at the future, Louisa May Alcott’s book was a modest manual that showed girls how to be perfect women helping other people, forgetting themselves, and hiding their negative feelings. It is not possible to read *Little Women* without paying attention to its unconcealed messages about the nature of femininity. In the novel, the female community is described as one of the most important social institutions. A contemporary feminist reading of *Little Women* will be inevitably ironic in relation to the social practices described and will read its scenes of social realism as if they were cast from a critical glance that interrogates the supposedly appropriate manners and behaviors portrayed.

In the first chapter, the four girls remember the happiness of Christmas when they were rich and they complain about the present: “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents”; “It’s so dreadful to be poor!”; “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all” (Alcott 11). Although they keep in mind their mother’s words that they should not be self-indulgent when so many people are suffering, they claim that they have worked hard and deserve some fun. Some minutes later when she arrives home, her first words are an implicit reprimand to the girls’ self-centered, “‘poor me’ discontent: “Well, dearies, how have you got on today?... Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death” (Alcott 6). This is followed by the reading of a letter from father, away at the war, a sermon admonishing his girls “to conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women” (Alcott 19). Marmee, the model little woman, proposes them to play again their childhood game of “*Pilgrim’s Progress*” in which they act out scenes from John Bunyan’s didactic novel. In this game, each girl assumes a burden and tries to make her way to the Celestial City. Meg’s burden is her vanity, Jo’s is her temper, Beth’s is her housework, and Amy’s is her selfishness. In Bunyan’s novel, the male character has grand adventures; Alcott dignifies women’s lives implying that the endeavors of common women are as important as the endeavors of daring men.

A recurrent topic is that selfless, spiritual values create happiness and comfort. The importance of forsaking their wishes to help others is described in the first chapters, in several occasions, among others: when Marmee reads Father’s letter, Jo states, “I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, ‘a little woman,’ and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else” (Alcott 10). On Christmas day and after having visited the Hummels, Marmee tenderly asks her girls to give up their breakfast to the starving family. They learn that bread and milk make the best food when you feel satisfied to have

helped others. Or Amy, after learning a lesson not to be vain and selfish, expresses, “It’s nice to have accomplishments, and be elegant; but not to show off” (Alcott 67).

Mr. March’s letter encourages the girls to accept their burdens peacefully, to become unpretentious, good, and dutiful. Alcott does not consider this project trivial, even though it takes place in a domestic sphere. By making her characters emulate *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a novel in which the male character has inspiring adventures, Alcott raises women’s everyday lives and implies that the battles of ordinary women are as important as the ones of adventuring men.

The March sisters’ journey to womanhood seems to implicate a degree of altruism that is no longer reasonable, psychologically healthy, or even fashionable from the perspective of a contemporary audience and even from a progressive point of view adopted in the nineteenth century, such as the author’s own disapproving look. In particular, contemporary readers feel disappointed at Jo March’s last decision to get married and become a mother after her relentless determination to “paddle her own canoe” as Alcott wrote in her journal in 1860. Considering the novel as a product of post-Civil War New England, and assuming that the results of the plot are dependent on those circumstances, we can read a novel of female development that reproduces not only the cultural model of its time, but also specific female conflicts that have not disappeared despite the fact that it was written more than a century and a half ago. *Little Women* shows strong resistance to cultural restrictions placed on girls; Jo and Amy’s rebellion against the cultural imperative shows the struggle for individual realization in conflict with the duty and affection they feel for their family and with the domestic sphere that most women of the time accept.

Domestic Feminism

When Marmee tries to lead her girls toward the realization of their destinies, she says:

I want my girls to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send.

(Alcott 118)

The only difficulties Marmee predicts for her daughters are domestic; it seems that there are no opportunities for public success and achievement. However, this concern is useful to girls reading *Little Women* today, because they can contrast and value their own possibilities with those of the March sisters.

The significance and value of relinquishing the self and thinking of others and the battles that the girls must fight are particularly found in the first two chapters: discontent, self-interest, quarrelsomeness, bad temper, materialism. “Yet the drama of *Little Women* is the making of a little woman; and much of the book must be read as a series of lessons designed to teach Jo the value of a more submissive spirit and to reveal to her the wisdom of the doctrines of renunciation and adaptation announced so clearly in the opening” (Fetterley “*LW: Alcott’s Civil War*” 380).

In her article “At home we work together: “Domestic Feminism and Patriarchy in *Little Women*” (2005), Berthany Wester states: “Woman’s rights, feminism, and domestic reform are more noticeable in *Little Women* than temperance, dress, and education reform, yet they are not necessarily blatant, either. Jo is the obviously feminist character, but her ideas stem from Marmee’s instruction” (38).

Marmee presents marriage as a choice, but not as the only choice. Meg does choose to marry, therefore Marmee advises Meg to consider including John in domestic responsibilities, particularly in the care of their twins, additionally to involve herself in John’s “sphere.” She admonishes, “Don’t shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world’s work,

for it all affects you and yours” (Alcott qtd. in Wester 39). Meg prefers to stay at home. “In her secret soul, however, she decided that politics were as bad as mathematics...but she kept these feminine ideas to herself” (Alcott 312). Even if she prefers to be outside public sphere, she is aware of the possibility she has to be part of it, or share it with her husband.

On the other hand, Jo regrets that she cannot accept Laurie’s proposal to run away to New York together, ““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.... ‘Prunes and prisms’ are my doom, and I may as well make up my mind to it”” (Alcott 168).

Later in the novel, Jo’s biggest sacrifice is to conceal her feelings when Amy and Laurie start a relationship when they are in Europe, while she is all alone and still loves Laurie: “I *am* lonely and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said- Yes” (Alcott 248); but she does not want to interfere, she keeps her feelings only to herself and her mother: “it is better as it is, and I’m glad Amy has learned to love him” (Alcott 248). She considers it is more important to protect her sister from suffering even it would cost her own heartbreak. Jo manages to control her feelings and carry on with her life without placing an additional burden on others; this willpower makes her a strong positive model for women.

Castles in the air

When each girl confesses her dearest hopes in a chapter entitled “Castles in the Air,” the reader notices that their innocent wishes contrast with their mother’s. Beth’s “castle in the air” is to “stay at home safe with Father and Mother and help take care of the family” (Alcott 173). She is “perfectly satisfied” with that and her piano. She is related to domestic things like “a little mop” and an “old brush” (Alcott 484). Beth devotedly visits the Hummels, carries a basket of food for them and as a result contracts the scarlet fever that causes her death. Beth has generally been labeled a flat character and this epithet is totally justified

because it stresses the fact that her character neither changes nor has any aspirations other than to be kind, sweet, and pleasing.

According to the feminist scholar Judith Fetterley, the implication is that “to be a little woman is to be dead” (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 380). And even though readers cry for her death, they rarely identify with her. Beth has a very poor self-image, and although everyone loves her, she thinks of herself as “stupid little Beth” (Alcott 417). She even gives justification for her own death:

I only mean to say that I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long.

I’m not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I’d do when I grew up;

I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn’t seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there.

(Alcott 383)

There is no need to coach Beth in the art of becoming a little woman; she eliminates herself literally and symbolically in the process. Judith Fetterley states, “One also sees in Beth that negative self-image which is the real burden of the little women” (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 380).

According to Fetterley, *Little Women* is based on a paradox . As a matter of fact, Fetterley states:

[T]he figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman is the most attractive and the figure who most succumbs to it dies. Jo is the vital center of Alcott’s book and she is so because she is least a little woman. Beth, on the other hand, is the least vital and the least interesting. She is also the character who most fully internalizes the overt values of *Little Women*: she is the daughter who comes closest to realizing the ideal of imitating mother. Like Marmee, Beth’s devotion to her duty

and her kindness toward others are never-failing and, like Marmee, she never expresses needs of her own. (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 379)

This contrast drawn between the two sisters clearly dramatizes the dilemma women were faced with and just as clearly signals the choices open to the reader between empathizing with Beth but favoring Jo or fully subscribing to the nineteenth-century prevalent values and rejecting the figure of a defiant and insubordinate Jo. There is no doubt that a contemporary feminist reader would not only embrace Jo’s inspiring disobedience but also see in Beth’s unbecoming portrayal only indictments against a male-dominated society.

In her book *Louisa May* (1977), Martha Saxton quotes Harriet Martineau’s observations, which encapsulate the strong adverse reaction readers may experience when confronted with the model of femininity embodied by Beth:

While woman’s intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weakness encouraged, and her strength punished, she is told that her lot is cast in the paradise of women: and there is no country in the world where there is so much boasting of the ‘chivalrous’ treatment she enjoys. (qtd. in Saxton 65)

Saxton affirms that the novel alludes to certain aspects of unfairness which prevailed in nineteenth-century America. For example, illness was a consequence of the many domestic tasks assigned to women (66–67). Being unable to express themselves, women became emotional and physical invalids. Rather than encouraging women to seek out appropriate medical attention, women’s illnesses were praised, especially if their illness designated them as delicate and “interesting” (Saxton 67).

Keeping in mind that Alcott based Beth on her sister, Elizabeth, with whom she had a very close relationship, it seems improbable that Alcott was deliberately trying to express such a negative observation of women who dedicated themselves to domestic tasks. It seems

more than likely that she was using the representation of her sister as a vehicle to convey her earnest and uninhibited plea for a radical social change concerning women's roles.

Meg, the eldest sister, is able to accomplish the ideal with some difficulty, but her fate is much less tragic than Beth's. Meg's "castle in the air" is a nearly perfect reflection of her mother's hopes for her:

I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things—nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I should never need to work a bit ... I wouldn't be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly. (Alcott 172)

When she is invited to a party offered by well-off friends, she gives in to the pressure to dress up in the latest fashions and preen before trendy ladies. But when she meets Laurie there, the boy next door, who clearly prefers the unpretentious Meg, she feels ashamed and as soon as Meg returns home after the visit, she confesses her silliness to Marmee, who is satisfied that the lesson was not lost on Meg. While Marmee wishes good and sensible marriages for her girls, she tells Meg and Jo that it is "better [to] be happy old maids than unhappy wives or unmaidenly girls running about to find husbands" (Alcott 119). It is clearly not adequate for a little woman to choose and chase a good husband; she must be chosen and chased by him.

When Meg falls in love with John Brooke, Laurie's tutor, who is not wealthy and will probably never be, she realizes she will not build the castle in the air she dreamt of. She has accepted and understood her mother's teaching about marriages. But after her marriage, Meg is not content with the limitations of his modest salary and gives in to the drive to buy a fifty dollar silk dress in order to keep up with a wealthy friend. John, who is a kind and understanding husband, calls off his order for an overcoat, because he cannot afford to buy

the two garments. Meg feels guilty and asks her wealthy friend to buy the dress so John can have his coat. Her “selfish” action affects Meg in two ways: first, she realizes that John is the one that earns the money, so he is entitled to buy whatever he wants or needs. On the other hand, Meg’s work at home does not have an economic value so she feels she should put herself and her needs after her husband and his needs.

Meg finds in Marmee the model of wife she was raised to be: sweet, happy, and smiling, with dinner ready at the end of the day. So she tells John that he could invite home dinner guests when he pleases, that he need not notify her, because she will always be ready to welcome guests. As expected, John takes her word, but chooses a wrong day. Meg has all day unsuccessfully tried to make currant jelly and as a result, the house is a mess, dinner is not ready, and Meg is hot and tired. Inexcusably, she is angry with John for not warning her he was bringing a guest. John peacefully but efficiently teaches her a lesson by going away with his friend. Meg evokes her mother’s advice: “Be careful, very careful, not to wake John’s anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err...” (Alcott 338). It is the wife’s duty to be forever friendly, charming and available to her husband.

The major difference between Meg’s childish “castle in the air” and her married reality is that she finds out that she needs to do some work other than the domestic labor not to feel useless. These are slight alterations, however, for Meg’s dream, focused on home, and she is finally convinced that her reward is to be loved by everyone. Thus she can say at the end, “My castle was the most nearly realized of all” (Alcott 541). A contemporary girl will certainly be dismayed by Meg’s subservience, consequently increasing the value of *Little Women* for *postfeminist* generations because Meg’s gradual submission emphasizes the degree to which, in certain respects, social expectations about women’s submissive attitude have changed for the better.

Since Amy has an artistic disposition, her “castle in the air” involves painting, going to Rome, and becoming “the best artist in the whole world” (Alcott 172). In Amy’s castle there is no mention of traditional womanly realization. But, once in Europe she faces Michelangelo’s genius, she gives up on her art, claiming “I want to be great or nothing” (Alcott 489). Amy herself leaves behind her aspirations and this decision opens a new possibility of fulfillment through marriage to Laurie and through him, she becomes a patron of the arts, thus accomplishing the womanly command to serve others. Again, the pattern is reinforced; in the world of *Little Women*, the only activities suitable for women are assisting others and being loved and chosen by a good man. In fact, Amy adds,

My castle is very different from what I planned, but I would not alter it, though, like Jo, I ‘relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty. I’ve begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I’ve ever done (Alcott 442).

Like Amy’s, Jo’s aspirations have nothing to do with fulfillment in the domestic sphere. Meg describes Jo’s “castle in the air” as full of “nothing but horses, inkstands, and novels;” Jo wants to do “something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it and mean to astonish you all someday” (Alcott 172). Jo’s struggles are the most difficult because of all the girls, she is the farthest from the ideal. Her journey to little womanhood is full of frustrations, bitter lessons and incomprehension, leaving Jo and her readers with the impression that becoming a woman is hard. At the end of the novel, this is resolved effectively when stubborn Jo finally accepts the role society approves for her, although she does put her own imprint on it.

Jo refers to herself as “the man of the house” (Alcott 5) while her father helps in the Civil War, introduces herself to Laurie as a “businessman—girl, I mean,” (Alcott 55) and usually laments the great unfairness of being born female. She seems to undergo fairly

serious gender confusion, enjoying the performance of all the strutting, romantic male roles in the sisters' homemade plays, and assuming the role of breadwinner for her genteel but poor family. Throughout the novel, Jo discovers and learns to enjoy her place among women. In a society with clearly drawn roles for men and women, it is vital for Jo to acknowledge and accept her feminine attributes.

Jo's first and most difficult flaw to beat is her wild temper. The novel's narrator writes that "[p]oor Jo tried desperately to be good, but her bosom enemy was always ready to flare up and defeat her, and it took years of patient effort to subdue it" (Alcott 90). After Amy burns her treasured manuscript, she falls through thin ice when Jo and Laurie are skating and almost drowns, but Laurie rescues her in time. Jo feels guilty for not forgiving Amy because the consequences for Jo "having her feelings" (Alcott 87) are that her sister nearly dies. As Judith Fetterley points out, "in the world of 'little women,' female anger is so unacceptable that there are no degrees to it" ("LW: Alcott's Civil War" 380); all anger has horrible consequences. Marmee strengthens this view by repressing all angry feelings. This is a turning point for Jo; she is deeply remorseful, and swears to repress her anger in the same venerable way her mother has done it.

Marmee's reasons for becoming angry have never been conveyed, possibly because she has repressed her feelings so well that she might be unable to articulate them herself. Yet, the unconcealed message of this episode is that a woman is "weak and wicked" (Alcott 88) if she gives vent to her anger. This idea of somebody trying so earnestly to suppress all hints of anger, even to herself, is so magnified that it is possible to speculate whether Alcott was not perhaps being ironic. Jo is never entirely successful in suppressing her feelings and her eccentricity is her most appealing characteristic, but with the passage of time, she finds more acceptable channels for her sometimes uncontrollable feelings.

In the last chapter Jo remembers her “castle in the air” and expresses that “the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven’t given up the 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 547) and she points to her husband, walking with her father, to her children and her mother. The association between being a mother and serving others to being happy appears one more time. Jo “told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers” and “found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world” (Alcott 543). She limited her ambitions and her passion to write became constrained by self-sacrifice. Although Jo March was a woman ahead of her own time and regardless of her self-determination, she made sacrifices for her family and she went further than the stereotypical woman and undertook a profession that fascinated her. Even though she was definitively against the discrimination against women, she never thought of men as enemies. Her character traits have made her a model of not just “early Feminism”, but also an inspiring figure for the Feminists in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Vicissitudes on the road to independence

Although Jo and Amy have dreams in common, Jo has a real calling for writing and she is not worried about fitting standard conceptions of what literature is. She does not desire to be a genius but she enjoys the power she has to earn a living for herself and her family. Jo makes good money selling her “sensation fiction” stories. She is, however, not proud of her topics, publishing her work anonymously. Undoubtedly, this literature is now conceived as dangerous for the innocent Josephine and she should somehow be saved from this untimely mastery of the darker side of life. She certainly will be rescued, Jo “thought she was prospering finely, but unconsciously she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character. Wrongdoing always brings its own punishment, and when Jo most needed hers, she got it.” (Alcott 422-23)

Professor Bhaer cautiously tells Jo that sensation stories are “bad trash” (Alcott 395) and earning money from selling them is not decent, like putting “poison in a sugar plum” (Alcott 395) and letting others eat it. Feeling absolutely embarrassed, Jo burns all her manuscripts and comes to the decision to reach higher standards in her future writings, accepting a more submissive role and relinquishing independence:

They are trash, and will soon be worse than trash if I go on; for each is more sensational than the last. I’ve gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money; I know it’s so, for I can’t read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it; and what should I do if they were seen at home, or Mr. Bhaer got hold of them? (Alcott 365).

Her next story is moralizing, but no editor buys it. Jo returns to her family home to take up the more acceptable vocation of caring for her dying sister, putting aside her writing for the time being. Jo is finally distressed at her solitude: “An old maid, that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps” (Alcott 530). This is unmistakably an unhappy vision, because although Marmee’s discourse preaches the contrary, it is evidently not desirable to be an old maid under any circumstances.

After Beth’s death, Jo falls into a deep depression. She does not want to spend the rest of her life tied to her parents, as it means endless responsibilities and little fun. They try to teach her to “accept life without despondency or distrust, and to use its beautiful opportunities with gratitude and power” (Alcott 522). And as if sprinkled with fairy powder, she begins to see the beauty in “brooms and dishcloths [that] could never be as distasteful as they had once been” (Alcott 522) because they were Beth’s magic elements. She appreciates Meg’s domestic peace for the first time, noting “Marriage is an excellent thing after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have if I tried it” (Alcott 523). Now, when

she is ready to be accepted by Professor Bhaer with contentment and delight, she essentially jumps at her last opportunity to become a little woman.

Jo cannot marry Laurie because they are equal in age, intellect, and personality. Laurie is more suitably married to Amy, who is his clear inferior—not unlike a parent/child relationship (Fetterley “LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 381). Professor Bhaer is not only considerably older than Jo, but intellectually and morally superior to Jo. The end of *Little Women* shows Jo and the professor happily established in Plumfield, a home and school for orphan boys.

Feminists’ responses to the novel do vary. Judith Fetterley thinks that it is difficult to see Jo’s submission to the doctrines of little womanhood with “unqualified rejoicing” (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 382). Her marriage to a figure who has influence on her helps to diminish her significant vitality, and worst of all, the fact that during the first months of friendship, Jo mends Professor Bhaer’s socks in return for German lessons, evidently showing that her domestic skills are the only thing of value. In her article, “‘Little Women’: Alcott’s Civil War,” Fetterley states: “But more important than the revelation that women’s work is ugly and degrading when done by men is the implication that women’s work is not real work. Before their marriage, John Brooke says to Meg, ‘You have only to wait, I am to do the work’” (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 262)

Because Jo marries Bhaer, Fetterley states that Jo’s annoyance is neutralized, confirming once and for all that she is a good little woman who realizes herself under the influence of a superior male (“LW: Alcott’s Civil War” 382).

Jo’s story marriage to Bhaer is not conventional, for Bhaer is not a conventional man. Nevertheless their marriage offers Jo the support that eventually allows her to write. Showalter states that although contemporary readers might wish Jo had lived autonomously, such a wish is really not true to Jo’s time, place, or personality. Jo is rather a foremother to

those women who came after her, who had fewer limitations than Jo had to contend with (Showalter 64).

Simone de Beauvoir focused on the choices Jo made, identifying with Jo and learning that marriage was not necessary for me ... I saw that all the March girls hated housework because it kept them from what really interested them, the writing and drawing and music and so on. And I think somehow, even when very young, I must have perceived that Jo was always making choices and sometimes they were neither well reasoned nor good. The idea of choice must have frightened me a little, but it was exhilarating as well. (qtd. in Showalter 64)

Again and again, as this text suggests, feminist critics crash into the messy, apparently childish novel: the absent, passive, feminized father who yet heartlessly devalues his “little” women; the present, devoted, self-sacrificing—and always angry—mother who makes girlhood so appealing and adulthood so absolutely tedious; the passionate, wealthy, musical, half-Italian brother-lover, Laurie, whom Jo finally refuses to marry and instead accepts the mature, patriarchal German professor; and above all Jo March, with whom so many women so fervently identify: clumsy, affectionate, extreme, comical, annoyed, imaginative, and extraordinarily active. It is through Jo that we are forced to question the few choices accessible to women artists. It is through Jo that we are forced to acknowledge her severe disappointment with Bunyan’s model of *Pilgrim’s Progress*—and the nineteenth-century model of lively girls becoming submissive little women.

Louisa May Alcott’s depiction of Jo March’s is an expression of women’s self-determination and freedom: “Little Women’s implicit paradigm is not an escape to childhood innocence, but the formation of a reigning feminist sisterhood whose exemplary unity will heal a fractured society” (Alberghene 9).

Regardless of the fact that Jo was living in an epoch where women were assumed to live under the support of men, Jo always felt she should take the responsibilities of her life. She did not accept to be confined to the house; she wanted to be independent and contribute to society's progress and welfare. Despite having difficulties with dominating her anger in public she understands that in order to protect the people who care about her, she needs to act rationally so that no one gets into any kind of trouble. Whereas the Feminists are often being criticized for being indifferent towards family and personal life, Jo March's character demonstrates that with the help of the family and friends, an independent woman can balance both her personal life and career.

Androgynous characters

Although it is still debatable whether the plot of *Little Women* reinforces androcentric stereotypes of womanhood, it unambiguously presents some hints that run contrary to those stereotypes. The novel is populated by independent women, the father is physically absent in the first half of the book, shut up in his study for most of the second half, and while he is the titular head of the household, it is his wife and daughters who keep it together, physically, economically, and emotionally. It is through Jo that Alcott makes her indirect suggestions refusing to accept social norms for women. Jo obstinately clings to a platonic relationship with Laurie despite social pressure to view male/female relationships as possible only within marriage.

The two most appealing characters in the novel, Jo and Laurie, make an androgynous pair, as their names imply. Their friendship in the first part of the novel shows that Jo's growth as a woman owes much to her romps with Laurie: she becomes independent, assertive, and powerful. In the same way, through his contact with the March family, and mainly his close relationship with Jo, Laurie learns to worry about others, to be industrious and to develop properly into a gentleman.

The characters themselves do not seem compelled by society's gender expectations. At the Gardiners' New Year's Eve party, Jo, escaping from an enthusiastic boy, runs into Laurie, who is also looking for refuge. They talk about the Marches' cat that Laurie rescued and then about their names. Their dialogue is quite enlightening:

'How is your cat, Miss March?' asked the boy, trying to look sober, while his black eyes shone with fun.

'Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence; but I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo,' returned the young lady.

'I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie.'

'Laurie Laurence,—what an odd name!'

'My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead.'

'I hate my name, too—so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo, instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?'

'I thrashed 'em.'

'I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it;' and Jo resigned herself with a sigh (Alcott 30).

They do not show surprise at the other's unusual name. Although names are important, this lack of gender-stereotyped names installs their roles in the story. But, while Laurie is able to beat the boys in order to make them stop calling him Dora, Jo cannot take action against anybody because she is a girl. This exemplifies the prison of gender stereotyping: girls must repress their feelings and yield to other people's expectations.

Moreover, both characters roles and actions go beyond normal gender stereotypes. Laurie personifies a typical nineteenth-century woman, because he is often locked away in the mansion and moved toward female activities, such as playing the piano. For example, one

of the March visitors refers to Mr. Laurence and his grandson, Laurie, states, “He keeps his grandson shut up, when he isn’t riding or walking with his tutor, and makes him study very hard. We invited him to our party, but he didn’t come. Mother says he’s very nice, though he never speaks to us girls” (Alcott 24). In *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (1993), Elizabeth Keyser states, “Ironically, Mr. Laurence’s efforts to ensure that his grandson prove his manhood by taking over the family business keep Laurie as sheltered from the world as any girl” (66). Similarly, many young women would not be at ease speaking to those of the opposite sex, similar to how Laurie was originally embarrassed when interacting with girls. By emphasizing Laurie’s embarrassment with women, Alcott defines Laurie as a shy man and at the same time presents him as a man interested in piano playing and music, emphasizing that they are not activities just for females and ignoring society’s imposed stereotypes.

Keyser claims that the mansion and the March home are representative of masculine and feminine spheres (66). By fusing these two different worlds, the difference between men and women’s gender-stereotypical roles wanes, as observed in Jo and Laurie’s relationship. Each gender group can go across those frontiers and interact with each other. When Jo and Laurie meet, these worlds relate and expand; Keyser suggests that they become “a whole, androgynous person” (66). Laurie and Jo’s traits complement one another’s. Alcott does not ask readers to disregard the importance of gender, but rather to get rid of the stereotypes that have confined the genders because society’s gender expectations and stereotypes restrict a person, not biological sex.

Jo recognizes in Laurie some of the male otherness and thus tries to differentiate herself from her sisters and the maternal home by bridging the gap that exists between them. That is, she aims to transform Laurie, the-stranger-on-the-other-side-of-the-fence, into Laurie, the-friendly-next-door-neighbor.

Gender issues

This section intends to make Louisa May Alcott's multifaceted novel come into contact with queer theory literary analysis. Alcott's work allows this study not only because it describes unconventional young women but because it overtly makes gender identity, social conventionality and female insurrection vital issues. Feminist literary criticism is largely dedicated to the depiction of women in literary texts, the restoration of women writers in literary history and female viewpoints in literature. Queer theory is committed to recognizing the complicated functioning of desire and sexuality in literature, and concentrating on the contradictions that focus on representations of both hetero and homosexuality. A young Jo March reveals to her three sisters that she cannot "get over [her] disappointment in being a woman." This line, in the first chapter, has left readers wondering if she is actually queer for over 150 years. Throughout *Little Women* and its many adaptations, the essence of Jo's narrative is how she handles the conjectures placed on her because of her gender. As she yearns to make her own name as a writer, she wishes to be a man so she can enlist in the war, not worry about finding a husband, and not be bothered about "girly" things like dresses and parties — unlike her sisters Meg and Amy. And, in spite of the fact that Jo has a special friendly relationship with her rich neighbor "Laurie" Laurence when they are teenagers, she refuses his marriage proposal when they are adults.

That twenty-first century readers still identify with Jo, the rebellious March sister, implies that they too feel uncomfortable with contemporary social and cultural expectations. Jo's central conflict is how she will reconcile her unwomanly aspirations and predispositions with the undeniable fact of her gender. What does it mean to be a woman? What can a woman do in life to be accepted by society? What must she give up? Her response to these questions and the resolution of apparently conflicting desires is at the core of *Little Women*. It is this issue that promotes a sentimental girls' book to an important place in the American

canon. The challenge to find a definition of womanhood can be critical for girls across the world.

Like Kate Chopin's or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, Louisa May Alcott's critical resurgence has been the work of feminist scholarship. Although a passionate promoter of women's rights and suffrage, Alcott, on the other hand, has upset feminists with her portrayals of female domesticity and self-effacement. In response to this paradox, feminist critics have searched for traces of subversion under the apparent submission to Victorian female norms depicted in *Little Women* (1868-1869). Much of this criticism has predictably focused on the tomboyish Jo, Alcott's unusual alter ego. More recently, critics working under the umbrella of queer theory have also begun to explore Alcott's work and, like feminists, have been attracted by the gender-bending Jo March. Yet Alcott has never registered any gay or lesbian literary history.

Jo March's confrontation with conventional gender roles is the most outstanding issue in *Little Women* since Alcott's most famous work is known both for its apparent conformity to Victorian prescriptions for female behavior and its one outstanding and beloved exception. Feminists have seen in Jo a character that faces the troubles all women face in their evolution from the freedom and ingenuity of girlhood to the straight-jacket of adult womanhood, while queer critics such as Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet in her article "Louisa May Alcott's Many Masks: An Encounter Between Feminism and Queer Theory" (2014) see in Jo more specifically the drama of the sexual nonconformity of an adolescent.

Jo's famous expressions about wanting to marry Meg herself and keep her in the family or that "mothers are the best lovers in the world, but I don't mind whispering to Marmee that I'd like to try all kinds" (Alcott 488) might denote some sort of lesbian sign but it is clear that in Alcott's case, home represents everything but sexual love. It embodies maternal love, sibling affection, and personal support instead. As an extreme report of a

largely shared view, contemporary critics Angela Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant (1991) argue that Alcott murders Jo in *Little Women*, replacing her with “a false Jo, a broken doll, a compliant Beth,” (582) a mutilated Stepford Wives version of Jo. However, this is not at all fair to the adult Jo of Plumfield, *Little Men* is focused on the children who live there. Yet Jo is a vital presence to make both the school and the novel successful.

Meg’s first thought, after being married, is for her mother: “The minute she was fairly married, Meg cried, ‘The first kiss for Marmee!’ and turning, gave it with her heart on her lips” (Alcott 311). Later in the novel when Jo admits her loneliness after Beth’s death, she refuses her mother’s description of heterosexual love as “the best love of all,” declaring that “Mothers are the best lovers in the world, but I don’t mind whispering to Marmee that I’d like to try all kinds” (Alcott 486).

Jo’s resistance to appropriate nineteenth century feminine conduct stands for Alcott herself when she speaks of falling in love with “pretty girls” rather than men (from an 1883 interview with Louise Chandler Moulton), she suggests that perhaps she justifies the marriages in her novel, so disciplined, innocent, or definitely “funny,” as she calls Jo’s and Professor Bhaer’s, because she herself loved women more than men. The complete passage of Louis Moulton’s biographical outline of Alcott deserves to be quoted:

How well I remember the humorous twinkle in her eyes, which half belied the grave earnestness of her manner, when she told me once that she was inclined to believe in the transmigration of souls. “I have often thought,” she said, “that I may have been a horse before I was Louisa Alcott. As a long-limbed child I had all a horse’s delight in racing through the fields, and tossing my head to sniff the morning air. Now, I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.” “Why do you think that?” I asked, in the spirit of Boswell addressing Dr. Johnson. “Well, for one thing,” and the blue-gray eyes sparkled with laughter,

“because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls, and never once the least little bit with any man.” (49)

Many critics have often quoted the last sentence, but no one has quite taken into account Alcott’s complete declaration. It seems unthinkable that a woman would confess so openly to being a lesbian in the nineteenth century and neither the terms “lesbian” nor “homosexual” were widely current at the time of Alcott’s interview. Alcott considers that she must be a man because she likes pretty girls and not because she was a tomboy girl. This declaration also reminds readers about the way Jo is described as a “colt” in *Little Women* (10).

The Alcotts were fervent suffragists and this condition influenced the novel. Alcott herself encouraged women in Concord to raise consciousness about the magnitude of voting but not many women attended her Reading sessions. Alcott states, “[I] gave them a good scolding and offered to drive the timid sheep to the fatal spot where they seemed to expect some awful doom” (qtd. in Reisen 266). Alcott proudly wrote, “[I] was the first woman to register my name as a voter” in her journal (qtd. in Reisen 266). Few women could envisage the scenario she proposed.

Considering all this, evidently, she did not have the purpose of repressing her female characters. Alcott used her books to display problematic topics, such as feminism. In Nancy Porter’s film, *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*, Geraldine Brooks declares, “Louisa really was an early feminist. It’s underappreciated how she was able to [use] her success to make her really a megaphone for feminist issues” (Porter).

During Jo’s time, most people would agree that spinsterhood was not precisely romantic, and as Alcott disliked the idea of marrying Jo, in the end, Louisa married her to an unromantic character.

Eventually, it seems that Louisa's aim was to concede Jo the perfect combination of maintaining her true self but also harmonizing that with feminism. At the end of the novel, Jo can now run the school for boys while keeping up a marriage and a family. She is not alone anymore and she may always pick up her pen and write stories if she wants. In *A Hunger for Home* (1984), Sarah Elbert writes that Jo hopes to fulfill a "woman's special mission," and she "adds the feminist postscript: 'I'm to carry my share Friedrich and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go'" (Alcott 164). According to Elbert, Jo and Friedrich's marriage bond differs from Meg and John's. Both Friedrich and Jo are prepared to work and support themselves together, side by side. On the other hand, John tells Meg that he will work and earn the Money, and that she just has to sit and wait.

Alcott seems to imply that there are many kinds of marriages; there is no right or wrong way to approach it. She is not trying to reprove couples who have a more traditional marriage; rather, she proposes that in marriage both parts have equal partnership.

Throughout *Little Women*, Alcott questions traditional gender stereotypes, inviting her readers to see each other as equals. Through the character of Beth, Alcott underlines the danger of being a conventional woman. Through Jo, Alcott illustrates her ideas about feminism fairly well. She describes a woman who can be not only feminine but also powerful, reliable and outspoken. This image of a strong, independent woman is the connection between contemporary readers and Alcott's timeless novel.

Little Women is, as many have declared, the American female myth. It has deeply influenced generations of women, and not simply taught them to be good little wives and mothers who never lose their tempers. In 1989, there were only three women governors in America; two of them named *Little Women* as their favorite childhood book (Showalter 42). While the novel openly praises the place of women in the home, it absolutely suggests the availability of options. Each succeeding generation of readers try to construe the meaning of

Little Women through the lens of their times and continue to consider the novel a vital role model of the passage from girlhood to womanhood.

In spite of being considered as a moralistic and even superficial children's novel at the beginning, *Little Women* presents issues central to sociocultural debates of Victorian America—partnership in marriage, the positive aspects of spinsterhood, female community, and male-female friendship—are all treated with sensitivity and depth.

In her book, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Elaine Showalter (1989) states that reading “*Little Women* at the end of the twentieth century is thus to engage with contemporary ideas about women's literary identity, critical institutions, and the American literary canon, as well as with nineteenth-century ideas of the relationship between patriarchal culture and women's culture” (44).

A new cinematographic adaptation directed by Greta Gerwig in 2019 of *Little Women* revisits the text as a cherished rite. Louisa May Alcott's classic 1868 novel has been adapted five times for the American screen alone since its publication, offering to each new generation the appealing story of the four March sisters living in discrete poverty in 19th-century Massachusetts. Gerwig's adaptation brings back the rebellious, loved Jo March. The movie was nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards, and it is basically about the writing of *Little Women* blending Alcott's and Jo's narratives into one. The film captures the lively, remorseless, feminist spirit of the woman who penned the original novel since reading it in the twenty-first century is much more intricate as *postfeminism* has helped young women understand that the future is not limited by gender—that biology is not destiny.

The next few chapters deal with three of the multiple hypertexts that the nineteenth century classic has spawned. By means of the insights gained from the application of the theoretical framework proposed, the analysis seeks to disentangle the feminist concerns that

give impetus to these texts as well as the nature of the dual time relationship that engages the contemporary text with this classic from the Victorian age.

Chapter II

Little Women in the twenty first century: Farewell, Little Women

The present chapter explores how Marcela Serrano offers in her novel *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* (2004) a contemporary feminist vision of *Little Women*, drawing attention to the persistent and harmful effects of humiliating attitudes that have oppressed women across centuries. Most of the protagonists of this novel are professionals and their personal dramas are set in a particular historical moment, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are responsible for their own fate and owners of their decisions. They believe in the importance of education and question their own situation as housewives, mothers or professionals. In this way, they are able to define their identity as active members of society in this globalized world.

The chapter begins by presenting a small biography of the author and then, in succession, the findings that emerged after the analysis of the dialogue of this novel with the canonical one referring to *postfeminist*, intertextual and neo-Victorian issues intermingled with the retelling of the plot of *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas*.

Knowing about the author

Marcela Serrano was born in Santiago de Chile in 1951. She has become a prominent voice in the Chilean and South American literature of the last decade of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. In the eight novels that Serrano has written, the author's narrations offer women readers models for asserting their rights, enabling them to connect her female characters with their life stories making visible the restraining effects of patriarchal gender roles.

Postfeminist issues in a Neo- Victorian text

The significance of *postfeminist* theory “that can be used critically in making sense of contemporary culture” (Gill 2) is a valuable lens through which to study women readers’ respect for texts created by female writers and to emphasize its potential for reading feminist neo-Victorian fiction “with fresh eyes” (Rich 18). The impact of the relationship between women/readers, women/writers and women/protagonists sets into action significant empowering issues. The interactions that women readers have with popular female literature are complex, these interactions provide them with a channel for the encouragement and promotion of female self-expression and women-affirming-women activities.

For the above mentioned reason, it is appropriate to assert that Serrano’s texts can best be described as consciousness raising. They underline the importance for women readers of taking the time to generate a space of reflection to achieve the necessary equilibrium between both personal and social wants. Serrano calls these female characters “*nuevas mujeres*” in opposition to more traditional women without this consciousness, or “*mujeres antiguas*” (Mafla-Bustamante qtd. in Kuhlemann “Bonded by reading” 96).

Intertextual echoes

The category that best describes the relationship between *Hasta siempre, mujercitas* and *Little Women* is what Gérard Genette calls “hypertextuality,” the special intertextual link whereby a literary text presents a significant relation with a previous text, which goes beyond incidental quotes or allusions. In this way the American novel functions as “hypotext” (Genette 5) in relation to *Hasta siempre, mujercitas*, which becomes the “hypertext”.

Other intertextual elements (paratextual) link both texts in perhaps more subtle or subsidiary ways. The cover of the first edition shows a copy of *Mujercitas*, open and face down, and a piano which represents the third sister, Beth March. According to Genette, “para” means “beside” and paratextuality is the relation between a text and its ‘paratext’ –

that which surrounds the main body of the text – such as titles, headings, prefaces, acknowledgements, footnotes, and illustrations (Genette 261). These perceived tools used by the author, both within the book (peritext) and outside it (epitext), mediate between the book and the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords. According to Genette, “the paratext performs various pragmatic functions which guide the readers to understand when the text was published, who published it, for what purpose, and how -it should or should not be read.” (Simandan 31). The most prominent of the paratextual elements is the opening epigraph, a confirmation of the transtextual nature of the relationship between the novels:

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress. “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff. “We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other, anyhow,” said Beth contentedly from her corner (Alcott 3).

The beginning of *Little Women* reveals that class was an important matter in the mid nineteenth century, including prestige, family name and honor, community reputation, as well as established economic markers. Readers are invited to assume that for the protagonists of the contemporary novel these topics keep a central place.

The connection between the two novels further develops throughout the story. The four Martínez cousins feel somehow oppressed by their gender roles in the twentieth century as the March sisters had felt in relation to the mandates of Victorian society. They also share the ideal of a happy and united family and a peaceful and domestic place far from city enticements.

Through explicit intertextual interlockings, the genre expectations of Victorian domestic fiction and the features introduced as background enlighten the reading of *Hasta*

siempre by imbuing the hypertext with qualities of the hypotext, including docility and self-sacrifice as female roles, a utopian family peacefulness as a common end, and a pleasant place away from city temptations as an ideal domestic setting (Fetterley, “*Little Women*” 372-75; Saxton 4-5).

Farewell, Little Martínez cousins

Hasta siempre, mujercitas (*Farewell, Little Women*), published in 2004, is based on Louisa Alcott’s *Little Women* in a revisiting of the classic text to expose the obscure underside of fictitious domestic paradises. In *Hasta siempre, mujercitas* Serrano portrays four women, the Martínez cousins, who embody each of the March girls: four upper-class cousins who wish to recover their *locus amoenus* in the south of Chile where their family owned a sawmill and some land. They considered this place a rural Paradise, it guaranteed the possibility of endless well-being and prosperity, social status and welfare.

The reader meets Nieves/Meg; Ada/Jo; Luz/ Beth and Lola/ Amy. Each chapter in the novel develops the story of one of them. During their childhood and adolescence they spent the summers in *el Pueblo*, as they call the little village where their aunt and uncles lived in the family state. As the reader comes to know more about their lives at this time than in their adult lives, it is reasonable to think that the influence of their experiences in *el Pueblo* shaped the cousins’ personalities.

Serrano offers different versions of the same story guided by the memory of each character. In this way the text does not follow a chronological order. This condition represents a challenge for readers, as the different testimonies go back and forth in time, differing with the hypotext (*LW*) where the story is told in the order of time it occurs.

Well-known world events are mentioned, such as the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, the Afghanistan war in 1979 or the coup of Pinochet in Chile occurring in 1973, to allude to the epoch when the story happens and to illustrate the fact that the characters are citizens of

the world and have left behind the domestic sphere. These female characters have faced pressures (both from outside and from inner mandates) to restrict their lives to the household, but despite these constraints, they manage to raise consciousness about the importance of challenging the hegemonic patriarchal rules that aim at controlling women's minds and bodies to produce docile subjects.

The beginning of the story

Chapter 0 in Serrano's novel tells the story of the Martínez originated in Peru in the eighteenth century where sor María Trinidad, an aristocratic woman entered a convent in Arequipa to hide her pregnancy for the reason that she was single. She brought her poor cousin Verónica de las Mercedes to the convent and introduced her as the pregnant woman who had been abandoned by her Chilean husband. When the baby was born, he was baptized as José Joaquín Martínez. Sor María had invented a surname for Verónica's husband. When José Joaquín grew up he went to Chile to look for his fake origin with the help of sor María Trinidad's money and in this country became very rich and founded a dynasty. Sor María Trinidad and Verónica's roles are often discussed by the Martínez cousins and provided them with models to follow.

The parallel story

The rest of the chapters follow a particular format and each section of the novel offers readers two alternative titles: Name of the March sister/ or/Noun phrase/Place/Date. This structure helps the reader to focus on the story of the character and her equivalent in *Little Women*. An epigraph quoted from the original novel precedes each chapter. Serrano maintains authority over her text and the reader does not get lost in an intricate system of references but recognizes the author's plan by decoding the signals and indicators inscribed in the novel.

Nieves /Meg

Chapter 1 is Nieves's story and its title is "*Meg o una conferencia sobre la sombra (según J. Donne) Santiago de Chile, setiembre de 2002*" (Serrano 13). It is narrated in the third person but it can be read as Nieves's internal monologue allowing the reader to become conscious of her lack of confidence and loneliness. The poem "A Lecture upon the shadow" is a poem by Donne about love and, somewhat metaphorically, about vision. Donne's poem associates the representation of lovers (and their delusions) to a condition of light and shadow where sight is only unrestricted at noon when the light of the sun produces no shadow. The central idea or subject of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" is a promising relationship between two people which at first thrives, but as the day advances, "shadows" enshroud the characters' romantic impression and they become disillusioned with one another.

This chapter is preceded by a quote from chapter eighteen in *Little Women*: "I wish I had no heart, it aches so," (Alcott 174) expressed by Meg when Beth was very ill. Nieves, like Meg, is the eldest beautiful cousin. She got married very young and has four children. Disappointed and frustrated, she loses the romanticized version of marriage and begins to reject the passive role of Verónica de las Mercedes that she considers to be hers. In this chapter, Nieves confesses her passion for reading and analyzing crime reports and expresses her dream of enrolling in a School and studying to become a detective.

Ada's proposal to travel to their former family state to be present at Pancha's funeral, a loyal family servant, gives Nieves an opportunity for reflection, admitting with sadness that "*no me ha pasado nada en la vida*" (Serrano 275).

Ada /Jo

Chapter two is about Ada and the title is "*Jo o la manzana prohibida/ Tanger, setiembre de 1996*" (61). The quotation here cites Jo's words in Chapter thirteen: "Wouldn't it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in

them?” (Alcott qtd. in Serrano 63). As in *Little Women*, during childhood the cousins spoke largely about their dreams, dreams lost forever in their adulthood.

The chapter brings back an event in the lives of the cousins when their grandfather put four beautiful apples in a basket, which were meant for his wife and not for the girls, and it was Ada who took one of the apples challenging the rule. It is also a reference to a similar situation in Louisa Alcott’s life when she was a little girl and ate a forbidden apple that her father had left to prove their self-control.

Ada speaks about the other three cousins stating her condition of “tomboy” and her refusal to become a little woman: “¿*No habré nacido hombre y por equivocación me metieron dentro del cuerpo de una mujer?*” (Serrano 87), the same feeling that Jo expresses: “It’s bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy’s games, and work, and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott 3). In the same way Jo was considered a “colt”, Ada’s uncle, Felipe, named her as “*mi potrillo*” (Serrano 77).

Ada becomes infatuated with Oliverio, who is Luz’s half-brother. And although there is no blood relationship between them, she considers Oliverio the “forbidden apple”, and her love for him a kind of incestuous relationship. With reference to Jo’s question presented at the beginning of the chapter, Ada’s dream “*viajar y poseer miles de libros*” (Serrano 79) is progressively revealed to be unsatisfactory for this woman who “*había hecho una renuncia a la convención de la dependencia sin certeza de haber alcanzado una nueva identidad*” (Serrano 232).

Luz/ Beth

The third chapter is called “Beth o el escaso mañana/ Kampala, Uganda, setiembre de 1982”. The quotation that precedes the story is pronounced by Marmee profoundly worried about her daughter. “Jo, I am anxious about Beth” (Alcott 342). Luz feels she is Verónica de

las Mercedes, the poor and tolerant cousin who accepts a passive role in life, as she considers herself “*siempre insegura*” (Serrano 117).

Luz, who has built her place within the group of cousins in reference to Lola, narrates her gloomy, sad story. Luz, like Beth, is the least beautiful of the group: “*Ella (Lola) era hermosa y fuerte, y de una enorme presencia física; a su lado, mi existencia parecía menguarse*” (Serrano 117). Her shyness and insecurity take her to Uganda where she helps the victims of the civil war, her kindness has turned into resentment; she says she lives her agony naturally because her whole life has been miserable: “*si (...) los seres humanos demuestran su hambre, los objetos del deseo escapan lejos, no por premisas morales, no, solo por lo fea que es la necesidad. Por tanto, escondí mis carencias*” (Serrano 148-149). They both suffer and die young: Beth at home being looked after by her mother and sisters “cherished like a household saint in its shrine” (Alcott 441), Luz in a hospital in Kampala far from the loved ones. It is here that Marmee’s words quoted at the beginning of the chapter regain meaning: Luz would want somebody to pronounce these words about her.

At some point both have embraced the role of worldwide caregiver, resigning pleasures and enjoyment. Illness and disorders are described in Serrano’s novel as a form of aggression women carry out against themselves due to their incapacity to verbalize doubts, dissatisfactions, and frustrations they undergo on account of the oppression that a patriarchal society exercises over them: “*Mi cuerpo ha gozado poco, tiene pocos placeres impresos en él para ganarle al dolor, no posee la acumulación suficiente, no cuenta con recuerdos que le hagan peso*” (118).

Lola/Amy

Chapter four is “Amy o la consentida”/Caracas, setiembre de 1994” (Serrano 151) and it is about Lola. The epigraph here is: “If I can’t have it as I like, I don’t care to have it at all”

(Alcott qtd. in Serrano 274), quotes Amy's answer, as Marmee tells her daughter that the family cannot spend money on an expensive lunch for her schoolmates.

Lola is beautiful and has a strong personality; she knows what she wants and modifies her actions cleverly to realize her objectives. She loves painting, but when she realizes that art is dangerous and unprofitable in a country where the government is a dictatorship, she starts studying Economy and becomes a successful economist. She married and has two children but at the time of the cousins' reunion she is separated from her husband.

During a business trip to Caracas, she witnesses a woman committing suicide by throwing herself from a building from the window of her hotel. The fact that she meets the woman's eyes just before jumping disturbs her to the point of reevaluating her own life. Lola starts thinking about *el Pueblo* with nostalgia, she remembers Ada's humiliations when she bragged about her intellect and laughed at Lola's femininity and takes a significant decision: fly to New York to look for Oliverio, the half-cousin whom she and Ada love. At this point, Lola is no longer the little woman displaying her charms and waiting to be "loved and chosen by a good man" (Alcott 105). She becomes "Sor María Trinidad", the woman who takes decisions without considering the needs of others.

Ada's wish for autonomy

Chapter five is called "Jo o la lejana tierra mía/Le Luberon, setiembre de 2001" (Serrano 203). It refers to a song by Le Pera and Gardel. This song represents the *Tango-canción* at its best. It expresses an immigrant's longing for his home country. It is the second chapter about Ada. In it, she evokes *el Pueblo* as a placenta, a place with warm and protected water, as the lost paradise. The epigraph here is "God seems so far away I can't find Him" (Alcott 195), words pronounced by Jo when Beth gets worse and becomes delirious with fever. At the moment Ada is living in a small village in France invited by Jaime, Oliverio's friend. He had rescued her from an unhappy incident in Tanger where she had escaped from

a bored diplomat and became ill after consuming some drugs. They have become good friends and lovers.

Jaime challenges her to write a novel, a remake of Alcott's *Little Women*. In this way she could tell the stories of the cousins in the lost idyllic paradise, implying that she should connect the mandates the March girls received in the nineteenth century to the ones Ada and her cousins, born during the fifties and the sixties in Chile, received.

¿Un remake de Mujercitas? -pregunta Ada, incrédula. - Exactamente eso. Y te puedes basar en ustedes cuatro, las primas. En una versión libre, ¿qué importa que no sean hermanas? Después de todo, Ada, los mandatos que cada una de ustedes recibió al nacer en la década del cincuenta y sesenta en Santiago de Chile no son muy diferentes de los que reciben las hermanas March a mediados del siglo XIX en la ciudad de Concord. Lo importante es que ellas siguieron los mandatos al pie de la letra, y ustedes, ¿qué hicieron ustedes con ellos? (Serrano 239)

Ada's wish for autonomy is full of uncertainty. She actually wants to become a writer but is afraid of failure and consequently, she has a job as editor and critic to earn a living since she had studied literature in England. Jaime dies in a car accident and leaves her a good sum of money. He represents here a kind of a benefactor who helps her to achieve her dream through encouragement and money. Therefore, she attains a certain degree of self-fulfillment, unlike Jo in *Little Women*, who gave up writing "her sensation stories" (Alcott 385) because Professor Bhaer did not consider them appropriate.

The chapter ends with the words "*Compañero del alma, compañero*" (Serrano 242, italics in the original), a reference to the poem by Miguel Hernández, "*Elegía a la muerte de Ramón Sijé*". The two literary mentions represent Ada's different visions of her life, the first corresponds to the return to a deceptive past connected to her obsession with Oliverio, the second refers to a more mature attitude to love based on her relationship with Jaime.

El pueblo

The title of Chapter six is “Meg, Jo y Amy, o las desheredadas/ Sur de Chile, setiembre de 2002” (243). The epigraph in this case is: “and yet your life is very different from the ones you pictured so long ago. Do you remember our castles in the air?” (Alcott qtd. in Serrano 245).

The cousins attend the funeral of Pancha, grieving over the past. It is a time for mourning not only the loyal servant but also their childhood memories. They notice that the village and the circumstances have changed and the four women become conscious of the oppression and exploitation of the *campesinos* realizing how the social and economic condition they had enjoyed depended on the workers and on Aunt Casilda, in a parallel way that reminds the readers of how the Marches depended on Aunt March.

Aunt March is, as her name suggests, the March girls’ aunt. She is their father’s sister-in-law. Aunt March employs Jo as her companion: she has to read to her and take care of her insufferable little dog. Aunt March is hard to please and picky. She teaches Jo brutal yet helpful lessons about holding her tongue by not sending her to Europe. Involuntarily this keeps Jo at home, closer to Beth in her time of illness. However, when Aunt March passes away, she leaves Plumfield to Jo allowing her and her husband, Professor Bhaer, to open a school to educate poor children.

In *Hasta siempre*, there is Casilda, the girls’ great aunt and the administrator of the family’s sawmill, which she inherited at the death of her eldest brother. Casilda is strong and hard working but her only option when they need cash is to mortgage the land and the sawmill. Her other three brothers had left *el Pueblo* to study in Santiago but they all abandon their families and careers and come back to be maintained by their sister.

A dark character appears, Eusebio, who had been accused of raping Ada when they were teenagers because Lola denounced him to the family when she saw them together in the

forest. As it is expected in these circumstances, where keeping up appearances is preferred to being exposed to ridicule and tragedies, Casilda decides that “*aquí no ha pasado nada*” (50), makes some arrangements to send Eusebio out of *el Pueblo* “*como parte de magia*” (Serrano 51). Eusebio becomes a soldier in times of Pinochet, he tortures Oliverio and chases Ada accusing her of being the head of the revolutionary group. Ada confesses to her cousins that Eusebio had not actually raped her, that she had consented to have sexual relations with him, but when Lola found them together, she did not dare to tell the truth to their aunt and uncles.

In spite of this confession, they still consider burning the sawmill to destroy their painful memories. Ada, who always feels she is the protagonist of a novel, associates the event with *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier’s novel and agrees to this reckless plan. Nieves is the only one who does not believe in revenge. Ada is angry with Lola because, among other things, Lola married Oliverio. On the other hand, Lola is also angry with Ada but they join against Eusebio and burn the building before leaving *el Pueblo*. Ada apparently abandons her personal impression of *el Pueblo* as a secure place where she could be with Oliverio, and hopes to cure this obsession.

Luz, whose character is foregrounded in this chapter, inherits Beth’s traits and difficulties: Luz is generous, finds her happiness among her family and, like Beth, who takes care of the Hummels, becomes seriously ill after visiting a girl who had a severe infection. They both become weak and die very young. And while Beth suffers and accepts her fate, Luz questions it and distrusts her decisions. Their total commitment to others results in illness, however; their giving nature to a masochistic martyrdom offers them some kind of peace.

Psychological conflicts present in the two generations

Ada, although willful and tomboyish like Jo, shows behaviors that are symptomatic of antisocial personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association 701-06), including

emotional abuse of Lola (184-85), destruction of her youngest cousin's property (181-82), extreme impulsivity (63-73), cruelty to animals (86, 267), and an inability to assume responsibility for her own behavior (281). Lola is selfish and ambitious like Amy, but goes beyond childish egocentrism to something more like narcissistic personality disorder, with evidence of a number of its diagnostic symptoms (American Psychiatric Association 714-17): Lola has a grandiose sense of self-importance (117, 255); requires excessive admiration (17, 24, 173, 175-76, 185); has a sense of entitlement —she “deserves” what she has (161, 276); shows arrogant haughty behaviors or attitudes, and lacks empathy (255). Luz matches Beth's shyness and self-effacement, but extends her giving nature to a masochistic martyrdom, refusing to ask for help for herself in the direst of circumstances (117, 127). Finally, Nieves mirrors Meg's domesticity and family orientation, but suffers from anxiety, in the form of panic symptoms of overwhelm, concerning transitional scenarios, e.g., as she travels from the countryside back to her home in urban Santiago (42-43), or when the day transitions into night (265) (Kuhlemann).

Ada's rebellious personality and Lola's narcissism are the dysfunctional means the cousins employ to show their anger as a consequence of fitting into gender roles assigned. These psychological traits appear as a result of not being able to convey the distress and discontent they undergo as a consequence of the pressure that patriarchal society exercises over them.

The cousins display some characteristics of each March girl but there are many differences. Nieves is as beautiful and romantic as Meg: “*su verdadera vocación era el matrimonio*” (Serrano 18); they both want to get married and be happy in their domestic realms. But while at the end of the novels Meg becomes adapted to her household reality, Nieves dreams of becoming a detective. In the case of Nieves, she is described as “*el ángel alado, la muchacha de las manos blancas, la figura a la que seguían las menores*” (Serrano

28). She and Meg are admired for their beauty, elegance and social gracefulness, they become wives and mothers thereby turning into women whose existence matter only in relation to their family. Unlike Meg, Nieves has another interest and professional ambitions outside the domestic realm; she keeps her articles about crimes in a secret place under the sewing machine, a domestic appliance and symbol of gender and generational divisions.

Luz, like Beth, hides from others the pain that their inferiority complex causes them. Unlike Beth, who is a domestic and spiritual being destined to die young and remain a little woman forever, Luz confronts her complex, and travels to Uganda, a decision taken as a mature person who tries to overcome her limitations by helping the victims of the civil war in that distant country.

Both Jo and Ada are alike: tomboyish and wishful girls, would-be writers and unmanageable. Laurie and Oliverio are their friends and frustrated loves. The most interesting point in these relationships is the love triangle with Amy and Lola respectively. The sanguine personalities of Jo and Ada diverge from the feminine, sweet personalities of Amy and Lola.

Amy and Lola are the intelligent, the most beautiful and the artists of each family. But they are selfish and ambitious. Both pick the most convenient option for their security and welfare; Amy chooses to get married over her career as an artist and she chooses Laurie over another rich boy, and Lola chooses economics over art in the times of Pinochet.

In *HSM (Hasta siempre, Mujercitas)* the relation between Oliverio and the cousins is more complex. Lola feels resentment against Ada because she has mistreated her during their adolescence. Amy's marriage is not vengeance against Jo, but Lola's becomes a way to show her cousin that she is superior to her. Ada, the cosmopolitan editor and translator, and Lola, the successful economist, rivals in their struggle for the love of their only male cousin, Oliverio, leave their rural family estate in southern Chile, without making the effort to put an

end to their personal conflicts caused by the limitations of traditional gender roles inflicted by that outmoded universe.

In *Little Women*, Jo was not in love with Laurie, yet she seems to be jealous when Amy and Laurie get married because of the existing rivalry with her sister who falls in love with Laurie while traveling in Europe. In *Little Women*, considering the genre perspective and the moralizing message of patriarchal nineteenth-century texts, it is clear that the lesson is that women should behave in a ladylike way. In *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* Ada and Lola cannot overcome differences, although their blood bond is strong.

Another interesting element is the influence of Marmee and aunt Casilda on Jo and Ada. They both help them to grow and develop: Marmee stimulates Jo's wishes to become a writer, a subversive aspiration in those times; aunt Casilda chooses Ada to be her beneficiary because she knows that Ada would never get married. In the end, both achieve their goals in some way. Jo gets married, starts the school in Aunt March's big house, and eventually becomes a writer. Ada remains single and writes her novel.

At the novel's end, the cousins make an impetuous crusade to the former family property, but it concludes in a sterile argument with each other and in an act of revenge against the new owners of their worshipped piece of land.

The interpersonal dynamic in this closing episode of the novel is one of desperation and disorientation, rather than of actually coming together as a family. Ada and Lola do not rescue anything from this return into their past "paradise," and their eldest cousin Nieves, a stay-at-home mother who has been trying to find a more productive way to reframe her life, is not able to snap her cousins out of their self-destructive behaviors. Luz's spirit reappears to describe her cousins' meeting at the place that had been the family's rural estate.

The dysfunction caused by the existence of accepted gender roles, in combination with these women's psychological makeup and their social upbringing, are highlighted in

Hasta siempre, Mujercitas. The novel combines at a thematic level the traditional claim to equate one's own necessities and comfort with the needs of others that one might need to provide for. The idealized home and romantic domestic happiness that the surviving March sisters reveal in the concluding chapter of *Little Women* are not found in Serrano's novel. The end in *LW* is moralizing, in *HSM* is subverting, the cousins leave *el Pueblo* after purging the past that haunts them without any certainty about their future.

Parody with respect

In relation to the prevalence of pastiche or parody in this hypertext, it is feasible to affirm that it "is signalled by the presence of parody: in the background of the author's work will stand another text, against which the new creation will be measured" (Hutcheon 201). Part of the analysis has evidenced to what extent *HSM* both pays homage to its nineteenth-century predecessor and renews it for a more contemporary relevance telling a story about four passionate women, where men are not important characters. Serrano's novel as a literary intertext mediates a story told in the nineteenth century and another in the twenty-first century about the limitations and restrictions women suffered, both financially and sexually, and still suffer.

This twenty-first century text (*HSM*) allows women readers to associate the protagonists' stories and battles not only with their own, but with those of Alcott's characters as well. *HSM*, as a neo-Victorian feminist text exposes oppression of the past that persists in the present, best summed up by the characters of Jo and Ada in an attempt to shed new light on this issue. In saying farewell ("*hasta siempre*") to the circumstances of the world of the Marches and Concord, and consecutively discovering the uncertainties and grief existing in the strong bond between the Martínez cousins and *el Pueblo*, Serrano's novel challenges women readers to reject assigned social roles that lead to harmful ends of union and separation in order to experience growth and fulfillment.

Thus, Serrano's text performs the quintessential neo-Victorian function of illuminating the past through the present and showing the huge shadow the past still casts on the present. The text uses past characters, refurbished and adapted to the contemporary world, in order to ventriloquise a message that speaks dually to the past and to the present. Using the energy derived from the nineteenth century characters infused into the new life of the contemporary characters, the text fuses past and present in an act of indictment of certain gender issues, such as restriction to a private sphere and economic dependence which were deeply entrenched in the Victorian age but have not been completely uprooted from our own age.

Chapter III

Little Women in the twenty-first century: The Little Women Letters

This chapter explores the presence of Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, as a hypotext in Gabrielle Donnelly's *The Little Women Letters* (2012) as significant and unambiguous. Donnelly pays homage to the original novel creating three main characters full of compassion, heart and fun that represent three of the March sisters. It is the story of a year in the life of the Atwater sisters Emma, Lulu, Sophie and their mother Fee, direct descendants of Jo March from *Little Women* who live in London. Lulu finds a box containing "Grandma Jo's" (Donnelly 15) letters in the attic and this event transforms what began as a rather hopeless year into a remarkable one for the girls and their family.

In the following paragraphs, I approach the matter of how neo-Victorian texts replenish nineteenth century stories, contextualizing the impact of *postfeminist* theory and its influence through the letters written by the Victorian character, Jo, read by Lulu in the twenty-first century. Donnelly sheds light on the persistence of difficult conditions for women and how these letters can still provide comfort and helpful advice.

Knowing about the author

Gabrielle Donnelly was born in London and has always wanted to be a writer. She got a Bachelor of Arts degree from London University. When she was twenty-two, she got her first job as a reporter in the London office of the DC Thompson newspaper *The Weekly News*. In 1980, she moved to Los Angeles, where she began to write about show business for a variety of British magazines and newspapers, and voted every year for the Golden Globe Awards as a member of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

The Little Women Letters is Donnelly's fifth novel. Previously, she wrote *Holy Mother* (1987), *Faulty Ground* (1988), *All Done With Mirrors* (1990) and *The Girl In The*

Photograph (1998), which was printed in America by Penguin Putnam. *The Little Women Letters* (2011) was the first to be published in the United States and in England, and the one she has had the most pleasure writing.

Donnelly is a Corporator of Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House Museum in Concord, Massachusetts and attends the Summer Conversational Series every year. On her website page she has declared:

I can't even remember the first time I read it, because when I was a child it was not so much a book for me as an integral, and most precious, part of my life. I had a quite lonely childhood in many ways – I was the only girl among four brothers.... I was probably about nine when I discovered the March sisters – I know that 12-year-old Amy seemed quite grown-up to me, while Meg was unthinkably sophisticated – and the idea of a world where siblings sat by the fire and had conversations instead of throwing footballs at each other was pure Paradise. The Marches immediately became the family I didn't have and remained so throughout my teens. I still turn to *Little Women* for comfort reading and one of the many wonderful things about it is that it doesn't change. I don't agree with all of its messages – I wish, for instance, that Meg were allowed to admire pretty things a little less guiltily, and I think that Jo had every justification for being furious when Amy burned her book – but I've always thought that. The Marches aren't perfect and Louisa May Alcott isn't one-size-fits-all. That's why I love them (“Gabrielle Donnelly: Author of Little Women Letters”).

Minor feminist and postfeminist characters

Old feminist worries are renewed subject of *postfeminist* criticism, David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2009) imply that contemporary feminist writers “use the Victorian period to revisit the unresolved issues of what kind of opposition gender is, and what kind of ethics and politics can be assigned to traditional femininity” (42). Neo-Victorianism is a remarkably

creative genre to deal with some of these “unresolved” feminist topics like the right to decide on spending money on anything, expensive or not, without feeling at fault.

To illustrate what Kaplan and Glover propose – the idea of going back to the Victorian past by neo-Victorian writers as a challenge to restore some unanswered matters – Donnelly creates many interesting secondary characters that contribute to “re-write the historical narrative” of the nineteenth century and speak for “marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” (Llewellyn 165).

Probably the most obvious exemplar of *postfeminism* is the minor character Aunt Amy, great-granddaughter of Jo’s sister Amy, who reminds us of rich Aunt March because both of them are commanding and inclined to boss people around. Aunt Amy refused to accept the traditional woman’s role at a time in history when it was unquestioningly expected that she would. The men she grew up with were not able to understand that it was possible to have so many traditionally masculine traits and yet be a woman, who wanted to be loved, and was interested in romance. It was fair for her to find a love later in life, someone who was her match, who had a strong and eccentric personality, and had spent his life in the theatre. The girls invited her to have dinner one evening before Emma’s wedding and, during dinner Aunt Amy was rude to Charlie, “We can trace our family back to the Mayflower. And you have no idea who your grandfather was” (Donnelly 278). In the same way Jo argued with Aunt March. Sophie, the youngest sister, argued with her, “Would you please stop being so bloody rude to our friend Charlie? It’s rude to be rude to people anyway, and what you’re saying is just stupid. I thought Americans were supposed to admire self-made people” (Donnelly 279). Through Aunt Amy the author illustrates the fact that it is necessary for *postfeminism* to continue focusing on these women’s concerns and on a new agenda contradicting the idea that feminism has achieved its aims.

Having succeeded in guaranteeing women's rights, feminism can be cast aside nowadays; it is the "very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture" (Tasker and Negra 8). Rosalind Gill observes the importance of concepts of choice and agency to *postfeminist* media culture: "the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities" (31). Particularly, in the novel, Alice Weathers, an actress who embodies a feminist, is obviously living the life that feminism has made possible – she has found self-fulfillment in her work and married a man with whom she is an equal partner. She is the one who shows Emma, through example, that marriage implies compromise and occasionally some measure of self-sacrifice on both sides.

When Emma is resolving whether or not to go to North Dakota with Matthew, her workmate Rosie suggests that going with him would mean a betrayal to her feminist principles,

This is all about Matthew's work. It's not about you at all. It's the same old story all over again. They say times have changed for women, but they haven't, not really.

When it comes down to it, it's the man's job that's the important one, not the woman's. They don't care about your life at all. (Donnelly 214)

According to Alice, this is a situation where either Emma or Matthew has to give way to the other, and Emma freely chooses to make the sacrifice this time, with the expectation that next time, it will be Matthew who will do so and also shows that it is possible to be kind to a partner without losing one's individuality.

Donnelly's text presents two different examples of contemporary working women struggling to find their identity. Taking the job of waitress-serving, culturally associated with female work and female identity, she creates on the one hand, Michelle, Lulu's frivolous boss at the pub, who would regard herself as a feminist – she earns her own living and has a

responsible job where she is taken seriously. But she is not a pleasant character – she is mean-spirited and envies people who, she suspects, have come from a more privileged background than she has. On the other hand, the author endorses Jasmine’s attitude, the other bar tender, who comes from an even less privileged place than Michelle, but appears as a happy and kind-hearted person, with an inner confidence that allows her to fend off unwanted sexual advances without difficulty. Through her actions, readers can guess she is a feminist, although she probably would not consider herself one.

Mrs. Scott-Ramsay, Lulu and Sophie’s downstairs neighbor, is someone who follows the ancient patriarchal norms. She devoted her life to being a housewife and mother, and when her husband died and her daughters moved away, she was left alone and lonely,

There was a portrait on one wall of a stern-looking man in military uniform, and on the mantelpiece beside the clock, a silver-framed photograph of two young women with hard faces wearing the fashions of thirty years ago. Sophie looked around at the rest of the room and felt in her heart a sudden sharp pang of sadness. (Donnelly 83)

She does not have women friends, she is from the generation of women who regard each other as rivals instead of allies, and she reads Dickens, whose portrayal of women easily falls under the Victorian stereotypes and, definitely he is not considered as a progressive writer for women. Last but not least, it is suggested from the lemons and the tonic bottles in the refrigerator that she suffers from a drinking problem.

One of the most disappointing and annoying female characters in the whole novel is one who never actually appears, David’s old college friend Jane, with whom he nearly has an affair. Being willing to sleep with someone else’s husband is unacceptable. Donnelly draws attention to the recurrent nature of this argument across history: a woman does not do that to another woman.

Claire, the girls' father's fantasy wife, is the prototypical anti-feminist character, blown up to such comically exaggerated proportions suggesting that she serves the feminist purpose of throwing Fee's strength of character and personality into sharp relief. When David and Fee's relationship become problematic, the joke of Claire becomes less funny to both of them. After Lulu knew about her father's affair,

she wondered now if she should rather been concerned. She wondered if David's joke about Claire had been really jokes at all, or whether they had been the only way he could find to express that he would rather spend his life with a less assertive woman than her mother, a woman more like, yes, Jane. (Donnelly 174)

But when they fully relax with each other at the end of the novel, Claire reappears, which is a signal that their marriage is back on track.

Donnelly's lively tale has many others appealing and engaging secondary characters like Charlie, Nigel-Manolette and Liam, Charlie's brother, who remain with the reader when the book is finished. Nigel-Manolette is an eccentric fashionable shoe designer who sells Emma a pair of shoes for her wedding as expensive as a fridge and, gives her the opportunity to be a little more frivolous and selfish. In the first dialogue between them, he made it clear that he cannot be bothered with pretexts of affectation and that includes not toning down his eccentricities in order to comply with conventional expectations: "I can't afford new shoes, she said. "I have to buy a fridge." Nigel looked pained, as if he had caught her kicking a puppy. "A fridge? he said. "A refrigerator, Josephine? We're talking about your wedding day, my love" (Donnelly 98). He also sees a side of Emma that does not have room in the family structure. With respect to Liam, Charlie's brother, his advent gives the author the opportunity to engage Lulu to a young person instead of the middle-aged professor, Professor Bhaer's equivalent.

Intertextual overtones

To elucidate the fact that in this text there is evidence of hypertextuality, it is necessary to mention Genette, who defines hypertextuality as involving “any relationship uniting a text B (*hypertext*) to an earlier text A (*hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (Genette5); the hypertext transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends the hypotext. Examples are parody, spoof, sequel, and translation. A hypotext and its hypertext symbolize the past and the present as a unity of meaning. Considering a hypertext as the ongoing and potential meaning of its hypotext, it is possible to affirm that it would remain incomplete without the hypertext that it generates.

Paratexts are like text doorways that allow full access to the world of the book. Since there is no text without cover, just as Genette says, in the case of *The Little Women Letters* (from now on *LWL*), its cover with this title creates a set of expectations about the novel alluding to and in close association with the famous nineteenth century story just by adding the word *the* and *letters*. Intertextuality, in general, provides the possibility to observe and appreciate a text from a shared perspective with the author. In this case the novel builds on what the reader already knows from the original text.

Echoing Hutcheon, parody “is a more complex form than pastiche, adaptation, allusion, or quotation” (203) and the reader must be aware of the original work. Donnelly evidently loves *Little Women* and is completely immersed in it as revealed by the authentic air of these letters by Jo. It has to be acknowledged that even though a text is evidently being parodied, it is in a certain way being paid tribute to in a relatively new and peculiar approach. There is hardly any mockery but admiration, “Often, in fact, reverence for the text parodied is more in evidence than any desire to ridicule or even gently mock an outmoded form” (Hutcheon “Parody Without Ridicule” 204). It felt like Louisa Alcott had written a secret

additional number of chapters for *Little Women* which made these letters seem extra enjoyable.

Gabrielle Donnelly was offered to write a *Little Women* sequel, a story to continue the original story, and she imagined one that interweaves the lives of Jo March's great-great granddaughters with some lost letters written by Jo. The letters are appealing, true to her style of writing, her capacity of observation and eccentric humor. Donnelly's story is interesting in the way she broadens the scope of the original by setting the story in London. Yet, due to the author's different life experiences and epoch in which she is writing, *The Little Women Letters* is not a mere imitation, but a far richer sequel, "relation between a text and a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends" (Genette 5), full of meaning due to the time that has passed since the original novel was published.

A correlation between the past and the present is the essential theme of this twenty-first century novel about women's rights. Thematically, the text invokes this archetypal Victorian controversy: "For it is important to remember that, as the neo-Victorian text writes back to something in the nineteenth century, it does so in a manner that often aims to re-fresh and re-vitalize the importance of that earlier text to the here and now. The contemporaneous historicism present in the text thus becomes the key to its neo-Victorian classification." (Llewelyn 170-171). Jo March has been a model for numerous feminists who have come after her, and her independent attitude was carried down through her line of female descendants. The girls' mother, Fee, is described as a member of the second wave feminist movement who fought in the seventies against inequality and discrimination, encouraged women to understand how their personal lives reflected sexist power structures and allowed the contemporary Atwater sisters to take it for granted that they are equal to men, which is not a very new state of affairs. When Lulu gets to the attic looking for the old recipes, she finds on the top shelf of the bookcase piles of photographs, "some in albums, some not, ranging from

old-fashioned sepia to the faded, once bright colors of thirty years ago.... and finally, delightedly, happening on one of a younger, thinner Fee, with wild curly hair and stern expression, waving a banner that read THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL” (Donnelly 22).

Therefore, by creating a dialogue between narratives of the present day and the nineteenth century, based on the concept of intertextuality, Donnelly succeeds in supplying another perception of the canonized Victorian character, Jo, through the letters and allows readers to trace the echoes of the original text in the sequel. By rewriting the story of the sisters from a contemporary feminist perspective and considering the principles which emerged out of the second wave of feminism, the author deals with topics as workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights.

Lulu is Jo’s equivalent like Meg is Emma’s and Sophie embodies Amy. Emma is a model daughter, sister and future wife; she gets married to Matthew and at the end of the novel they move to North Dakota. Sophie is an actress, who hopes to play an interesting character in the theatre, but she works for the television in the meanwhile and goes to every casting. She is beautiful and has many love affairs although her best friend is in love with her and at the end of the story it seems they have some future as a couple. Lulu is very smart; she has been to university where she studied biochemistry but she cannot decide what to do. In the meantime, she does many menial jobs after losing her post in an antique shop.

Donnelly imagines that Emma, called Josephine Emma “when Lulu’s inability to pronounce the name caused the family to adopt her middle name instead” (98), feels that her behavior is entailed in questions of morality, “Emma would entertain herself by fancying that out somewhere, in an alternative world...there was another self who was still called Josephine... self-indulgent and more than a little lazy.” (98-99). This assertion suggests “that both Victorian and contemporary approaches to ‘woman’ are utopian ideals far removed from

egalitarian sociality” (O’ Callaghan 73). This is a confirmation that Victorian mandates to be good and selfless are still applicable for women.

The Letters which were lost in the Atwoods’ attic

In the nineteenth century, letter writing was the only way to communicate with those living at a distance. For Victorian ladies, letter writing was far more significant than merely scrawling a note. The rules for appropriate correspondence included suitable colors of paper and ink and clear handwriting, wax seals, and conditions under which a woman must write, such as “Ladies, when writing to gentlemen who are not related to them, should make their letters mediums of improving conversation, brilliant wit, and moral obligations, and always of so high and pure a tone, that they would be fit for publication should they ever be needed” (Rayne 100), a Victorian etiquette book that taught ladies the basics of letter writing.

There is a subtext to the story of the contemporary girls, the letters that assumedly Jo wrote in the nineteenth century. Thus, the subtext interweaves throughout the novel, for example, in the mere fact that Lulu spends a good part of the story reading Jo’s letters lost in the attic, somewhat at a loss wondering what she is passionate about and what direction she would take. The influence of Beth is felt through the letters. Beth was greatly significant to the character of Jo, and she would not have been the strong, compassionate and bold woman she was without her sister. This influence is transmitted to Lulu who finds out what she likes to do at the end of the novel.

Little Women spills over with letters that basically have the purpose of taking pleasure in reading their authors: “as one of these packets contained characteristic notes from the party, we will rob an imaginary mail, and read them” (Alcott 186). There is not new information in these letters save for the fact that Meg is Meg, Jo, Jo, Beth, Beth, and Amy, Amy.

Some of the letters are more significant than others. For example, there is an intriguing one about Jo going with Laurie to the Tudors' ball and telling young Tudor that he is a dandy for having more rings on his hand than her sister, "You are the rudest and most disagreeable young man I have ever met!.... He has horrid hands, Marmee, as white and plump as a girl's hand- and he loves to load them down with heavy rings set with diamonds and rubies. The devil came to me, and before I could stop myself I had added, "And you wear more jewels than my sister!" (Donnelly 54). In this letter, Jo conveys the traditional stereotypes of men and women. Men were not allowed to wear jewels if they did not want to be called effeminate.

The fact that so many of the letters were written by Jo to Beth, even after Beth's death is something every reader of *Little Women* can believe Jo to have done, missing her sister so much and not being able to share significant moments of life with her. A sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that Alcott found it difficult to keep Jo single, and maintain her assertive image of a self-sufficient woman. Donnelly surely accounts for the sense of loneliness some single women go through and reminds readers how contemporary society still considers marriage the perfect destiny and single women, incomplete.

One letter Jo sent Amy includes a recollection of that disaster of a dinner party involving lobster and strawberries swimming in sour cream soaked with salt and readers are given to understand that after her mother's advice, she masters the art of plain cooking because Jo is not a gourmet. Lulu, on the other hand, cooks deliciously for every occasion.

In one of the last letters found in the attic, Jo mourns Beth, after Fritz's proposal, she writes "I think I shan't write to you again, Bethie. I'm leaving this home where for so long I have lived quietly with Mother and Father....But don't think dearie, that I've forgotten you or ever will, even for an hour"(Donnelly 326). She argues that her life will change from now onwards, and will have little time to write. Domestic labors will not allow any free time to

spare; Donnelly suggests that “Victorian” attitudes keep women confined at home, too busy to write and read, stepping beyond the bounds of female freedom, although readers come to know that Jo is not going to accept those limits. The author intends to demonstrate the difference with contemporary times when women surpassed the limit of the domestic sphere.

Letters were of essential significance in literary cultures in the nineteenth century as a genre and as a social and cultural practice. A genre mainly associated with women, letters reveal their ideas and feelings. They also inform about secrets, confessions in a period in which censorship existed and provided an important impression of key issues in domestic life and social affairs. Letters emphasize the relationship with the Victorian era, considering that epistolary literature is treasured, in the first place, by researchers interested in history and biographies. “Nothing,” as Horace Walpole reasonably notices in one of his letters, “gives so just an idea of an age as genuine letters; nay, history waits for its last seal for them” (qtd. in Lewis 72), and Bacon says that “letters of affairs... are, of all others, the best instructions of history, and to a diligent reader the best histories themselves” (qtd. in Klein 87). To Donnelly, Jo’s letters are important because they allow readers to get closer to this woman’s inner life, to her motivations, opinions, and plans.

Matching characters

The author creates a parallel between Fee and Marmee. Fee is an understanding and intelligent twenty-first century mother, “the product of a long line of strong-minded Yankee women from Massachusetts” (Donnelly 4) Mrs. March, although she exercised more authority over her girls, was a more atypical mother of her time than Fee of hers. For Mrs. March bestows upon her daughters significant freedoms that explain why the book has been so cherished for over a century: the freedom to remain children, and for a woman, the more valuable freedom not to fall in love:

Right, Jo; better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls running about to find husbands... One thing remember, my girls: mother is always ready to be your confidante, father to be your friend; and both of us trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives (Alcott 110).

As regards their positions as women, Marmee appears on some occasions as an example of patriarchal oppression, rather than matriarchal strength. For instance, when she admits: "How lonely and helpless we should be if anything happened to Father" (Alcott 48). Fee forgives her husband after she finds out he is having an affair with a colleague in order to preserve the family and retain a husband. However, both are the strong characters in the families and the virtuous and reliable ones.

Charlie, Lulu's friend, plays the role of Laurie in *Little Women*. Charlie generously invited Lulu to stay with her in her flat in Belsize Park; she pays her rent mostly by cooking their meals and doing odd jobs,

Charlie was darkly beautiful, rather rich, and in the eyes of the Atwaters, a little exotic, the daughter of an Irish hotelier who traveled extensively and an Italian model who had died in a plane crash when Charlie was small... Fee worried a little about Charlie, who had little family of her own and sometimes seemed lonely to her. (Donnelly 6)

The treatment of this relationship is quite similar to the relationship between the Marches and the Laurences in *LW*. When after that uneaten breakfast the March girls take to the poor family on Christmas Day, they are rewarded with a fabulous supper for their generosity by Mr. Laurence's masculine kindness in appreciation of their good deed. But the supper is less important in itself than it is the relationship established between the two houses that makes possible the friendship between the four girls and this neighbor's rich, lively,

lonely grandson, Laurie. The March girls offer Laurie all the richness of interchange between them: company, fun and love.

Marches vs. Atwaters

By a resourceful use of intertextual reference, Jo -2, as I will refer to the Jo in the hypertext, keeps all the qualities that we have already noticed in the original Jo – the energy, the fierceness, the loyalty, the humor, the untidiness, and bursts of hot temper, which she always regretted afterwards. At the end of *Jo's Boys*, Jo is a celebrated author, but Jo-2 is one of those authors who are briefly famous but when readers' interests change, they fall into oblivion. According to what Jo has expressed throughout the novels, it is possible that the original Jo would not have minded ceasing to be famous, as she made it plain that she found celebrity quite irritating, a trait that Donnelly incorporated into Jo-2. Lulu was introduced to the March family as ordinary readers are introduced to their ancestors. She experienced the enthusiasm that anyone has had while researching the family history to uncover the fact that a distant relative who was just a name suddenly becomes a real person, in this case, through letters. In addition to this, the other different fact about Jo, the original, is that Jo-2 has another child. Possibly the biggest character stretch lies in presenting her delighted to be the mother of a girl, because, certainly in *Little Women*, Jo did not have much time for other girls, although by the time *Little Men* came along, there are some very interesting young women whom Jo/Louisa treats with respect and affection.

The reader does not meet Beth alive, but they see the influence her life had on her sisters. This is one of the departures from the original, partly from respect for the real Lizzie who died very young. The fact that modern medicine would have saved her made it disrespectful to bring her into the twenty-first century. She appears as a character that is much more at home in the nineteenth century than she would be now, shy, quiet and self-effacing.

The Atwater sisters do some sort of volunteer or charity work, similar to what Marmee and the March sisters did for the civil war soldiers and poorer families in their neighborhood, considering that in Victorian times women were expected to try their hands in charity and to remain free from unnecessary passions or commitment.

The Atwaters' father stays away most of the novel. He travels because of business. In the same way, Mr. March is away from home during the first half of the novel, and even after his return, he stays behind the story and his presence is felt rather than seen.

On one occasion, after getting married, Meg spends too much money on silk for a new dress, far more than she should spend on a single piece of cloth. She has always had a soft spot for pretty things, and her well-off friend Sally encourages her to spend more than she can afford. When John finds out, Meg feels mortified, but she also admits that she dislikes being poor. The moment these words are out of her mouth, she regrets, but she cannot take them back. John begins working longer hours, leaving Meg at home alone in the evenings, and he cancels an order for a new winter coat he actually needs. In the end, Meg settles the matter by admitting her mistake to Sally, who buys the silk as a favor. Meg then uses the money to buy John his winter coat. Then, all is forgiven. Meg does not have the right to spend money on what she desires because she is not the supplier, as most women in those times, and she must her generosity to be considered a good woman/wife according to Victorian values.

Emma also has a weakness for pretty things, and pushed by Nigel Manollette, the shoe designer, buys the expensive shoes. Feeling terribly guilty, she runs to her mother's house to ask for comfort:

Fee sat for a moment, pursing her lips with the look that Emma knew meant she was composing her thoughts... Mathew is a good man, Emma... but I notice that already you *do* more things than he does. It always happens... So-do you know what the

answer is? Emma thought. “Communication?” she hazarded. Maybe if she had asked Matthew to cook dinner more often. Fee shook her head. “Treats,” she said firmly... I’ve noticed over the years that men have very little hesitation in buying themselves treats when they feel they deserve one. And my philosophy is that, if they’re allowed to reward themselves on occasions, then I don’t see why we shouldn’t be, too.

(Donnelly 120-121)

The author makes it clear in this speech made by Fee that the financial decisions in a couple, especially when they refer to large amounts of money are still made by men.

As for differences, Sophie is made an actress rather than a painter, probably to give her a more active life and to include the world of television and theatre to make a difference with nineteenth century circumstances. Like Amy, she takes an interest in her appearance and she is also concerned with behaving properly and being popular among her peers. Both are the artists of the family.

As regards the most important character of the novel, Lulu is presented as an expert cook while Jo had been a bad one. Although she has a degree in biochemistry, what she really enjoys doing is cooking for people and she does it exceptionally well, so much so that her roommate, Charlie, gives her free rent in exchange for cooking the meals, since she does not like cooking. At the end of the novel, Lulu makes an announcement and tells her family that she will study to become a chef.

In the hypertext, the engaging romantic aspect of the story occurs almost at the end when Tom, the lodger in Lulu’s parents’ house, becomes an important character. A reader might naturally expect Lulu to fall in love with Tom, because Tom is clearly Professor Bhaer’s equivalent (being an eighteenth-century foreigner Literature professor who is older with solid moral principles), and yet, there is a twist. Lulu falls in love with Charlie’s (her roommate) brother, Liam, a somewhat unusual character. And Tom starts an affair with

Susan, Fee's American cousin. *The Little Women Letters* makes up for Alcott's decision to marry Jo to Professor Bhaer who was not considered a perfect match for readers of all times.

Donnelly also draws attention to the way in which Friedrich Bhaer's role in the story in part neutralizes the hazard of Jo's disruptive writing by «authorizing» her authorial project. This patriarchal validation may appear benevolent, but presenting Jo's authorship in some way acquiescent with patriarchy weakens her authority over her body of work. Mary Eagleton observes that “the loss of a woman's authority over her work [...] results not in a dispersal of power and a liberating deposing of ‘The Author’ but in a redistribution of power which confirms existing hierarchies of gender, class and race” (46). The tamed Jo is definitely unable to produce thrilling stories. *Little Women*, the authorized text is compliant both with Friedrich's expectations and patriarchal expectations of female domesticity, although the fact that Jo wrote a male-authorized text turns her into a successful author.

Not wanting the story to end

As a sequel, which is not an adaptation per se in Hutcheon's sense (9), *The Little Women Letters* brings back one of the characters of the pre-text, Jo, through the forgotten correspondence found in the attic of one of the descendants. This re-used figure is removed from its original fictional context and inserted into a new fictional one to enrich *LW*, since it enlarges the hypotext describing the story of the family over several generations.

The Little Women Letters is a tribute to the original text; it can re-imagine a character in new circumstances, writing letters that Jo never wrote, in an open acknowledgement of the author to the source. Most often, sequels do not achieve the literary significance of the original being imitated, as in this case that the novel was praised as a marvelous entertainment evoking the spirit of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* with warmth and affection; nevertheless, it could get neither the popularity nor the recognition of the original.

The Little Women Letters, as a neo-Victorian *postfeminist* text illustrates the persistence of oppressions suffered by women in the past while elucidating the fact that women are free to choose their destiny in these times. With reference to these issues, a close reading of the two main characters show the diverse ways this matter affects both of them: Jo, having to abandon her style in writing, and adopt one accepted by her father and husband; and on the other hand, Lulu choosing a job without any restriction. Gill remarks the significance of notions of choice and agency to *postfeminist* media culture: “the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities” (164).

In other words, while Serrano’s text retells *Little Women’s* story in a different setting, with slightly different characters, Donnelly’s text extends it through letters written in the nineteenth century and read in the twenty-first century. Both stories remind us that “old” problems persist” (O’Callaghan 84) and evidence the importance of emphasizing the fact that women continue to be confined to strict paradigms of sexuality, gender and desire. The two works may be considered examples of parody: in the background of these texts stands another text, against which these new creations are measured (Hutcheon “Parody Without Ridicule”). They become both a “homage” and a “thumbed nose” to the canonical novel (211).

Chapter IV

Little Women in the twenty-first century: Dear my girls

This chapter analyses the presence of the hypotext, *Little Women*, in the manhwa *Dear my girls* and its connection with present-day readers. Since the late twentieth century, images of the Victorian age have appeared in Eastern popular culture genres such as anime (Japanese style of animation characterized by colorful illustrations), manhwa (South Korean comic books and graphic novels), and TV dramas. As this statement makes it clear, Victorian cultural influence is alive in the Eastern World. The analysis of this contemporary Korean manhwa can demonstrate the afterlife of this American Victorian text, even in the most distant locations, and in the most different cultures. It does not simply evoke the nineteenth century novel, but it encourages readers to take delight in the visual imagery present in this version of the resurrected text. Following the theory that Linda Hutcheon developed, the “theory of adaptation”, this work advocates one of the several categories she uses, the notion that adaptations are “palimpsestic” (9), stories that are repetitions of a classic story, but not replications.

Dear My Girls is a manhwa by Kim Hee-Eun, published in South Korea between 2005 and 2014, based on the characters of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. It is set in Victorian London, 1870. The heroines are rich; they belong to a prestigious family, the Machis, and they attend St. Francis Academy, where Meg, the eldest sister, is a teacher. Elizabeth March, the main character in this version, unlike her beautiful and talented sisters, is talentless. Although Beth, in the original version was loved and cherished by her family she did not live to be a woman. In this twenty-first century version, after she entered the same academy all her sisters are at, Elizabeth came across many exciting experiences including meeting a rich boy named Adrian Avery.

In order to adapt the concept of *postfeminism* that can be used analytically within *Dear my girls* and connected to cultural studies, this paper maintains that *postfeminism* includes a different consciousness, combines a number of related topics like the notion that femininity is body property, puts an emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment and holds the dominance of a renovated paradigm.

Knowing about the author of an Eastern revisit

Kim Hee-Eun (born in 1972) is a South Korean playwright and screenwriter. She has been working for the Kingdom TV series since 2011 and was nominated for the 9th Korea Drama Awards. She won many best screenplay and best writer awards.

Manhwa is a broad Korean term for comics and print cartoons or animated cartoons. The term *manhwa* started being used during the 1920s. Its origin is Japanese and, as Korea was under Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, elements of Japanese language and culture influenced Korean society. Its popularity rose during the 1960s, when it was mainly dedicated to political and social issues. Korea's agitated history brought about a multi-directional development of comics. At times their aim was to avoid censorship and persecution, at other times it was to thrive despite difficult economic conditions; and there were other times when creativity managed to unify renewed sensitivity with ancestral inheritance. In the eighties, it turned to children's and humorous topics and romantic stories aimed at young women

Female-centered comics in Korea, the so-called 'Sentimental comics' are based on a strong culture among female readership, female writers and amateur clubs. Since the eighties they have escaped the narrow genre of 'love and romance stories', to encompass a wider variety of subjects such as historic epic, daily lives and (of course) feminism. The quantity and quality of female artists have continuously grown to make up almost half of the comic artists in Korea.

Postfeminist appropriateness

Borrowing Gill words in the on-line article “Postfeminist media culture”: “post feminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products”. It presents women that basically expose the difficult but crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals of beauty are internalized and globalized. The girls’ bodies in the manhwa are presented as examples from contemporary Anglo-American media in order to correspond in some way to the narrow judgments of female attractiveness.

In other words, under *postfeminism*, the political is personal. Unlike the feminist slogan “the personal is political” that is set more exclusively on personal issues such as family division of labor and has ignored systemic sexism and political problems and solutions. Mary Douglas Vavrus (2002), a post-feminist scholar, defines *postfeminism* as a media constructed “middle ground, between the feminist and pre-feminist extremes... an essentialist ideology which privileges individualism and the interests of elite, white, straight women at the expense of a collective politics of diverse women’s needs” (415). As such, the manhwa represents one *postfeminist* significant issue: to exhibit attractive bodies presented as women’s main attribute, as a source of power in order to fit in models of female beauty; but not to disclose other problems persisting these days, in particular the intersection of gender with other types of difference such as race and class, aristocracy versus bourgeoisie. It has besides attempted to outline the elements of a *postfeminist* sensibility that highlights heterosexuality and whiteness, as well as to make a fetish of a young, appealing female body.

Adaptation theory meets Neo-Victorian studies

This contemporary manhwa can lead readers to associate it with Neo-Victorian studies considering that it brings into play nineteenth-century locations and situations to

bridge the distance between them and the present. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in the article “Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009” assert that neo-Victorian texts must be “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation” (4). It could be added that revisiting the Victorian themes in contemporary literary global texts has become one of the main commemorative issues on adaptation, appropriation and revitalization, confirming the fact that producing new stories from previous sources has become increasingly popular, while also demonstrating that the concept of neo-Victorianism has very much accomplished broader critical acceptance.

By looking at the ways stories evolve over time, scholars can determine the values and ideologies of that culture, making them worthy of analysis. Frequently, when neo-Victorian reviewers comment on the “afterlife” of Victorian texts, they emphasize the idea that these texts preserve the distant past and also include the influential present.

Given the popularity of neo-Victorian literature in this century, it is understandable that many Korean manhwas and Japanese mangas adapt nineteenth century texts. Elizabeth Ho in her article “Neo-Victorian Asia: An Inter-imperial Approach” (2019) states

In keeping with the memory of the Victorian as empire, some critics define Asian neo-Victorianism as the attempt to recapture and critique the ‘urge to empire’ within Asia in the nineteenth century and to recall how Asian cultures, their self-understandings, cultural forms and knowledge were formed by contact with Euro-American empires.(3-4)

In agreement with the idea that the Victorian texts inspire Asian authors, it is necessary to recall that the British Empire expanded its territory to Asia and influenced its culture and ideology, although neither Japan nor Korea were British colonies. To this extent, Asian neo-Victorianism portrays intricacies and geographical issues “that move beyond coloniser/colonised binaries and center/periphery spatiality” (Ho 5). Countries that were not

colonized received strong influences from the Western ideology and the memory of the nineteenth century continues adapting its stories while acknowledging that the authors can deliberately create a version of the nineteenth century to fit the needs of contemporary memory world.

The artist draws the Machis sisters and their classmates in glamorous dresses and attending fabulous balls, superfluities that were sparse in *Little Women*. Making use of nineteenth-century designs, Kim Hee-Eun embodies the project of neo-Victorianism which “looks into the processes and politics of adaptation [and that] shape our contemporary perspectives of the past” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2). The pastiche costume effect is not only significant, but also visually appealing; the Neo-Victorian dressing directs the reader’s interest in historicizing, as well as decoding, the elements involved.

Comics theory meets Neo-Victorian studies

In this particular adaptation of *Little Women*, it is necessary to resort to a comics theory presented by Thierry Groensteen, a French researcher and theorist who wrote the book *The System of Comics*, originally published in 1999 in France. Thierry Groensteen brings comics into the field of semiotics and designs a new systematic framework and vocabulary for its study. His main topics are the two forms of the comic structure: “spatio-topical and margin location” (26). He maintains that the “ontological foundation of comics” depends on “the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images” (45). This “relational play” allows a “double maneuver of progress/retention” in which “each new panel hastens the story and, simultaneously, holds it back” (45). The frames and the spaces between them generate syntagmatic associations, move the storyline ahead or freeze it. These devices, present in this post-modernist neo-Victorian genre (the manhwa), keep past and present connected and are reminiscent of the structure of novels in the Victorian period that were published in serial parts in newspapers and magazines. Illustrations portraying scenes from the text were also a

significant characteristic of the serial novels. Many artists like John Everett Millais, British painter and illustrator who lived and worked during the Victorian era, were recognized for their artworks. This reveals that for Victorian readers, the novel was not an autonomous object but rather a text surrounded by frames of various types and pictures, which generated a singular reading process.

One important element of comics or manhwa is the panel. The panel is a portion of the page and occupies, in the hyperframe, a precise position. According to the position (central, lateral, in the corner) and the general configuration of the page layout, it maintains numerous neighboring relations with other contiguous panels. “The position of a panel on the page corresponds to a particular moment in the unfolding of the story, and also in the process of reading” (Groesteen 36).

Following this concept, it is possible to analyze the panels in *Dear my Girls*; they provide important information for the interpretation of the manhwa. From the point of view of perception, the double page (see fig. 1) constitutes a pertinent unit and merits our attention at this time. The layout, the color, and the effects of interweaving are the chief parameters implicated in this conception of “doubling.” The horizontality is like infinity, like carelessness (Groesteen 40). It draws the readers’ attention to characters and setting.



Fig. 1. Double page panel.

The panel is not always rectangular or square, sometimes, it presents a montage of irregular panels (see fig. 2) to express a significant moment of uncertainty in the story; to make the reader experience the uneasiness the characters are suffering. Beth, who does not want her sister to stay with her in Francis Academy, tears apart the letter that informs the acceptance of Amy into the college and throws it away. Laurie, the family friend, finds it, sticks it together and hands it to Amy. Beth is surprised and angry with Laurie (see fig. 3). Laurie does not want Amy to know that her own sister



Fig. 2. Irregular panels.



Fig. 3. Acceptance

has attempted to avoid her entrance to the school. It is the moment of unveiling Beth's intentions.

Multiframe¹ (see fig. 4) not only suggests a way of reading, but, according to the degree of visual unity that it expresses, appears like an aesthetically rewarding break in the story for the reader to obtain essential information about the setting, in this case information about Victorian London.

¹Meaning the relation of all frames that constitute a comic piece

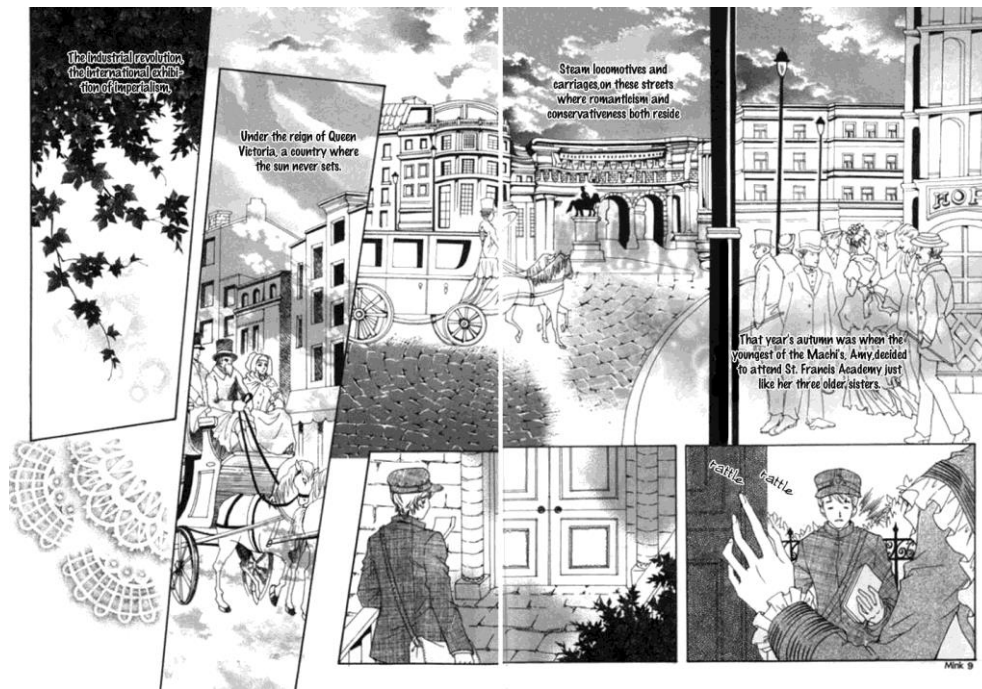


Fig. 4. Multiframe.

Considering Groensteen's "double maneuver of progression/retention" (45) in the case of manhwas, the tension between the images creates suspense and invites the reader to turn the page or, if the image is meaningful, invites the reader to pause. The frames (see fig. 5) are striking, in size and placement, irregular, there is no dialogue in some pages, they just appear as visual allusions.

While the young girls-heroines personify suitable feminine virtues and express their feelings in a fussy style, the visual codes of manhwas deploy the gigantic sparkling eyes so common in female characters, which are considered windows of their emotions. The nineteenth century is often pointed as the moment when social norms exerted considerable pressure on the idea of self-control and intensified the need to refrain from expressing emotions in public. As

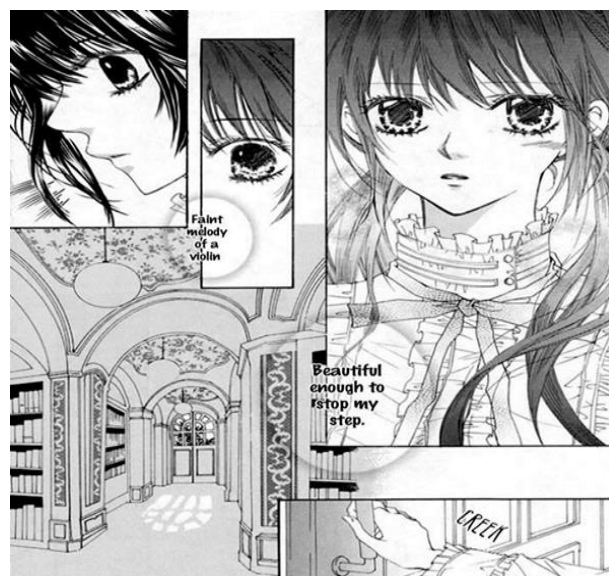


Fig. 5. Irregular frames.

a result, while to express emotions was allowed in the domestic sphere, in the public spheres rationality prevailed and emotions were communicated by the look in the women's eyes. One of the actual differences between men and women include men's natural superiority in



Fig.6. Admiration eyes.

matters of the brain and women's inferiority because of their sentimentality, and as a consequence Victorians frowned on women's unrestrained spontaneity that was considered an indicator of poor education and a social threat. Some examples of how eyes are exploited to communicate emotions can be observed

when Amy looks at herself in the mirror with admiration (see fig. 6), the anger that Beth shows (see fig. 7) and Amy's disenchantment with Beth (see fig. 8).

when Amy looks at herself in the mirror



Fig.7. Anger eyes.



Fig.8. Disenchantment eyes.

Gothic elements present in the manhwa

As Kohlke and Gutleben acknowledge in the introductory article of the book *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-imagined Nineteenth Century* (2012), the influence of the Gothic on the neo-Victorian is unmistakable and they add that the neo-Victorian is “by nature quintessentially Gothic” (4). They imply that there is a “generic and ontological kinship” (4) between the Gothic and the neo-Victorian, as both share a special characteristic, the urge to resuscitate the past and to delve into its mysteries.



Fig. 9. Gothic elements.

In line with Gothic settings, *Dear my Girls* presents gloomy, scaring altars in ruined churches and claustrophobic interiors with bleeding corpses. Supernatural beings (see fig. 9), in this case the spirit of a girl sacrificed in the eighteenth century, appears when a student drips three drops of blood in the staircase.

An intertextual palimpsestuous condition

One of the major types of hypertextual derivation is transformation, where the hypertext (*Dear my Girls*) (B) derives from a hypotext (A) (*Little Women*). The connection is achieved by means of shared characters and/or plot elements. Because of these hints of association, literary spinoffs guide readers to recognize the text's deliberate relationship with the literary precursor. The image of palimpsest, one text overlaid on top of another that is not completely disguised, implies that the later text does not mention the earlier text but is unable to exist without it. Evoking the earlier text is what Genette calls the "simple" or "direct" transformation (6).

Linda Hutcheon described adaptation as "inherently palimpsestuous" (9), and gives reasons why adapters might choose a particular story and then transcode it into a particular medium or genre. Among them, one reason could be to pay homage to the original text. Whatever the motive from the adapter's perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new. With reference to *Dear my girls*, Kim Hee-Eun evidently did not reproduce the adapted text but paid homage to *Little Women*. To borrow Hutcheon's words, "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-) creation as a form of intertextuality; we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (8).

There is an issue of intertextuality when the reader is familiar with the original text. In this case, the manhwa supplies images to the story and modifies the reader's experience of the text. Comics reading comes out as habit that shares elements with other reading activities but that also has distinctive features that make it particularly appropriate for contemporary young readers who are the addressees of this text.

Hutcheon implies that the significance of adaptations is that they can be studied as stories that are repeated in a specific culture for a reason

Like the idea of the meme, a story too can be thought of as a fundamental unit of cultural transmission [...]. As our culture has added new media and new means of mass diffusion to our communications repertoire, we have needed (or desired) more stories. What we have in fact often done, however, is to retell the same stories, over and over again – on film and television, in video games and theme parks. (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 447)

Hutcheon's description of the concept of adaptation as "repetition with variation" becomes realized in this Korean manhwa through the combination of the Victorian novel and pictures:

Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change. Thematic and narrative persistence combines with material variation [...], with the result that adaptations are never simply reproductions that lose the Benjaminian aura. Rather, they carry that aura with them. (Hutcheon 4)

American little women in Victorian Britain

In accordance with what was stated above, adapting a work justifies changes to the structure. *Dear My Girls* essentially represents a transgression for the Victorian Era females, considering that the heroines are studying in an elevator school (see fig. 10), an institution where girls did not have the possibility to be co-educated with boys. An elevator school is a kind of school that offers education from elementary or even from kindergarten to middle school, where the nouveau rich like the Machi family were disdained by authentic aristocrats. It appears in the manhwa the British aristocracy's ambition to retain their privileges and

economic power as part of post-colonial issue related to characters coming from the USA, a country that was once a British colony.

Apart from the differences in setting, place and time, while *Little Women* told the story of four sisters, giving Jo the most important place, this adaptation focuses on

Elizabeth “Beth” March. In the original text, Beth is a very shy, modest, humble sort of girl who plays with kittens and behaves in a quiet and gentle way and does not have many aspirations in life, preferring to stay at home with her family. She gets very ill after contracting the scarlet fever and dies in her teens becoming the least remarkable character, basically because she did not live much.

This is the major alteration of the original plot; the author chose to make Elizabeth the main character and recreated her character completely. Beth becomes a strong and resolute little woman to fulfill one of the objectives of the neo-Victorian project according to Kohlke and Gutleben, of giving “historical non-subjects a future by restoring their traumatic pasts to cultural memory” (31). In this case, Beth, a secondary character from the American novel is



Fig. 10. Elevator school.

moved to a central position in the neo-Victorian manhwa becoming an adolescent heroine featured as an empowered character in an alternative history of Victorian England.

The second important difference with *Little Women* is that the absence of parents in the story complicates the generic values of the original work and the little women appear to be out of control pushing the boundaries that result in conflict between them and school authorities.

Love and family relationships

In this story, Elizabeth combines intellectual acumen and physical beauty but she is an awkward little woman who finds herself in all sorts of difficult situations. She often tries to stay away from her sisters' glamour and notoriety. Most of the plot revolves around the love triangle she is involved in with Laurie and Adrian, a rich boy she meets at school.

The friendship between Beth and Laurie is rapidly confirmed when Laurie firmly announces he is Beth's childhood friend. Their romantic relationship stands out from other relationships and it soon becomes evident that Laurie's purpose is to allow Beth to explore her other options before realizing whom she actually loves. Considering that in the original story Laurie was in love with Jo, and later on married Amy, the author makes Beth able to love the same man her sisters loved, placing her as an equal, giving her the opportunity to become a woman.

Besides, the arrogant aristocrat Adrian harbors Beth's hate at the beginning when she says that he looks like her old pet lizard, but gradually, their relationship becomes definitely better. Beth and Amy fight with each other, probably because Beth feels like the black sheep particularly compared to Amy, who cannot understand why Beth can easily captivate people despite being talentless whereas she has to work hard at her art for recognition and acceptance. The fact that Amy is in love with Beth's suitor Laurie does not help. But when

there is a difficult situation, the sisters protect each other from shame, humiliation, dishonor and bullying.

The source of this manhwa's allure can be found in the intricate eroticized relationships: Amy loves Laurie, who loves Beth, who cannot make a decision between Laurie and Adrian, the latter is engaged to Leonora, a girlfriend from childhood, for sociopolitical reasons. At the same time, there is a situation of Unresolved Sexual Tension, which refers to the undercurrent of romantic and sexual attraction between Adrian and Jo, something neither of them will acknowledge. Besides, Beth used to like Greg, a student, who Meg also loves and gets together with, but Beth is now currently trying to break them apart when she finds out how manipulative Greg can be.

The end is quite disconcerting, sharply concluding in the middle of a twist of the story without explanations. As Byatt argues in her essay 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' (2000), "We are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles and ends. Storytelling in general, and the Thousand and One Nights in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings" (qtd. in Parey). It could be a conceivable explanation for this, or it is also possible that Kim Hee-Eun considers writing a continuation of the story

Character of the adaptation

Kim Hee-Eun adapts Alcott's story validating the afterlife of *Little Women* in a distant country – spatially and temporally – with a totally different culture. This manhwa-version does not respect the characters' features of the American text, nor even the setting, but it encourages contemporary readers to come into contact with those little Victorian women, distant from and strongly connected to them.

Adaptation should not be perceived as a copy or profanity but, in this case, as a mere exchange between literature and comics. The author is not only brave enough to portray

something that might be considered old-fashioned and unrelated in literary eastern fashion, but in the adaptation process she also tries to draw the readers' attention to the weakest character, the one who dies early in the adapted story and bestows a talented and enjoyable life on her.

Given the vast variety of manhwa and the global popularity of neo-Victorian texts, it should not be surprising that many manhwas adapt Victorian literary and cultural content remaining faithful to some elements, just the names of the characters and the fact that they were sisters. With reference to the last name, it was changed to the similar Machis.

This work attempts to validate the importance of describing the impact of adapted works, not merely by questioning the differences between versions but by extending the questions to audience reaction and enjoyment and how different kinds of audiences, intergenerational as well as intercultural, acknowledge different readings and reactions. When the transfer is made from one medium to another (novel to manhwa in this specific case), it produces a complete change of perspective. The South Korean author shifts the setting from USA to England moving the center away from the scenery of Civil War and American educational models. Kim Hee-Eun repurposes *Little Women* into a comic aimed at twenty-first century Korean readers.

In conclusion, the prototypical female protagonist is both different in the context of the historical setting and yet absolutely recognizable to contemporary viewers or readers. The heroine, Beth, is evidently Jo in *Little Women*, although Kim Hee-Eun disrupts the setting adding and playing with it in the intricate eroticized relationships.

In short, this chapter has provided an overview of the way in which *Dear my Girls*, as a Neo-Victorian text pays homage to *Little Women*. This attempt to interpret *Little Women* as an uncompromisingly feminist text offers the possibility of a regressive reading.

We might apply this particular neo-Victorian genre, then, not to enlarge the expansion of the corpus of scholarly palimpsestuous achievements but to celebrate the return of the Victorian past in a new exotic text that recreates the original story to entertain Korean twenty-first century little women who may be neither familiar with the adapted text nor the Victorian era.

Conclusion

This chapter deals with the conclusions of the analysis of the classic novel *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott and three contemporary reworkings: *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* (2004) by Marcela Serrano, *The Little Women Letters* (2012) by Gabrielle Donnelly and the manhwa *Dear my girls* (2005 to 2012) by Kim Hee-Eun.

This concluding chapter outlines its discussion around the general and specific objectives of the thesis. This thesis has primarily sought to demonstrate that the nineteenth-century novel's situations and characters are revised and recreated to shed light on and voice a variety of contemporary concerns about women's position in society to disclose and underscore a still incomplete emancipation from patriarchal hegemony, conferring lasting permanence to the source text by virtue of its constant reinterpretations and reworkings. The specific objectives aim to identify and describe the specific concerns with women's position in society which are voiced, from a *postfeminist* perspective, i.e., a perspective which highlights temporal continuities in gender issues across the centuries, in each of the hypertexts selected; to analyse whether pastiche or parody prevails in each of the reworkings of *Little Women* in order to better understand the nature of the dialogues taking place across the centuries; to validate the claim that the three hypertexts can be enrolled as part of the neo-Victorian dynasty of texts and to bring out the value of each reformulation of the source text as a form of replenishment of past literature from a variety of formats and cultural perspectives.

My thesis set forth by providing a feminist study of the novel *Little Women* and articulating reading connections between this canonical text and the three twenty-first century texts analysed here to disclose the nature of its afterlife as a feminist text. These texts demonstrate how the nineteenth century novel's issues and characters are updated and transformed to express some of women's concerns about their position in society and to

unveil and draw attention to a still unfinished process of emancipation from patriarchal authority.

The first chapter put forth a feminist analysis of *Little Women* and explains how the nineteenth century novel's themes of female development and empowering are still valued and why, due to its many rewritings, sequels and adaptations it is rediscovered time and time again. The theoretical approaches that support the analysis are developed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman In The Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary imagination* (1984), Showalter's essay "Feminist criticism in the wilderness" (1981) and Judith Fetterley's "The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction," and "Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott" (2005).

What distinguishes Alcott's novel from the sentimental model popular in her times is that she conscientiously resisted her readers' pressures and evoked a properly sympathetic reading, calling attention to the limitations of gender: far from being a sentimental children's novel, *Little Women* is a realistic portrayal of nineteenth century adolescents "where female narrative collides against patriarchal boundaries- the problem of desire" (Murphy 573-4), that Alcott makes clearly evident in Jo's battle for recognition.

Throughout *Little Women*, Alcott breaks traditional gender stereotypes, suggesting that her readers should not classify people merely based on gender and, by transcending the normal rules of the time. Alcott encourages people to see each other as equals. Substantially, the novel is concerned with ideals including women's rights, war, and the importance of the family as a force to help individuals survive against all odds.

Chapter 2 describes how what Gerard Genette calls "hypertextuality" (5), the specific intertextual link is made available to readers through the hypertext (*Hasta siempre, Mujercitas*) by the Chilean author Marcela Serrano. The more significant intertextual interlockings found in the hypertext refer to the four sisters of the hypotext transformed into

four cousins, the patriarchal mandates of a conservative family in a conventional society and the model of family as a paragon of virtue. With regard to the paratextual elements (Genette 261), the most evident are: firstly, the name of the novel that mentions the *Little Women* (*Mujercitas*); secondly, the cover that displays a copy of *Mujercitas*, one of the Spanish editions, and a piano that represents Beth and then, the epigraph that quotes the first paragraphs of the original edition.

Chapter 3 explored how the English author Gabrielle Donnelly, relates *Little Women* to her novel *The Little Women Letters* creating three characters, the Atwater sisters, who live in contemporary London and are direct descendants of Jo, the main character in the old American story. Following Genette (5), this hypertext (*LWL*) extends the hypotext (*LW*) throughout letters found by chance in the attic by Lulu, one of the Atwaters sisters and written by the great- grandmother early feminist woman (Jo). These letters interweave throughout the novel because Lulu spends a good time reading them because she finds comfort and guidance in them. The title, as a paratext, alludes to the close association between the two novels.

Chapter 4 analysed the Korean manhwa *Dear my girls* by Kim Hee-Eun as an adaptation of the canonical American text, changing the genre from narrative to comics. According to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, this manhwa re-interprets the novel in a process called "appropriation and salvaging" (8), leading readers to experience the adaptation as an "intertextual palimpsest" (8). Intertextual relations become clear for the readers who are familiar with *Little Women* and can recover the four sisters Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy whose last name has been changed into Machi. In this version of the story they come from a wealthy American family and are studying in an elevator school in Victorian London. Unlike the original story, the protagonist is Beth and she is neither shy nor ill and their parents are absent in this version.

In looking at different possibilities of interpretation of the three contemporary texts and considering that the hypertextual texts included in the corpus of this thesis are rewritings of a nineteenth-century novel, it is appropriate to consider them recreations of the classical novel based on the idea of “Literature of Replenishment” that Barth proposed in 1980. The Reference to the act of refilling – replenishment – an emptied container with new meanings indicates the potential of the hypotext to admit the rewritings that give new life to the old text. They enlighten current debates on the position of women and the need to intensify the struggle against patriarchy.

It is possible to assert that the two novels analysed here are parodies in the sense of Hutcheon’s definition of parody as a resource that simultaneously installs and subverts the original text. In this respect, the analysis accounts for the ways in which the hypertexts reinvent characters and situations without contradicting the source text and validating its unique status as a precursor text. In the article “Parody Without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody” (1978), Hutcheon claims that “The very choice of the text to be parodied, of course, implies a critical act of evaluation on the part of the parodist” (208). This decision is generally connected to reverence. Hence, the source text, by way of its contemporary rewritings, both validates the existing enthusiastic protests and is vindicated by them.

All these things considered, it is conceivable to conclude that *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas*, by Marcela Serrano, and *The Little Women Letters*, by Gabrielle Donnelly are examples of parodies because they pay homage to the hypotext, refurbish and evoke the original novel with sympathy and affection. In the case of the Chilean author, her novel (*HSM*) invites women readers to identify with the four cousins, oppressed by their gender roles as the March sisters in Victorian society and to reject them. They not only share the gender roles but also the ideal of a happy family and a peaceful refuge (Concord and El

Pueblo). With reference to the novel written by the English author, it can be considered a sequel, since it enlarges the hypotext extending the family story as far as the twenty-first century. Jo March struggled for her economic and social independence being her life a model for her line of female descendants. The girls' mother, Fee, was a member of the second wave feminist movement who fought in the seventies against inequality and discrimination, bestowing a very new state of affairs on the contemporary Atwater sisters.

Following Hutcheon's conception of adaptation, it is possible to consider *Dear my Girls* as an example of adaptation, differing from the original text while still maintaining the source's fundamental elements, specifically the characters' relationship. Therefore, innovation gives adaptation its value. The recreation of the characters, which assigns Beth the leading role and empowers her to become a healthy, strong and determined little woman accomplishes the neo-Victorian project of restoring historical non-subjects and give them a prospect of a meaningful life (Kohlke and Gutleben 31).

This master's thesis revises the dialogue that is part of the progressively globalised Anglophone and non-Anglophone context of adaptation studies, challenged by the differences of the East-West binary, and examines how neo-Victorianism fosters the recognition of the literature of the nineteenth-century period and the rewriting and recycling of the source text. It validates the importance of highlighting the connection between the nineteenth century and the present, pointing out that evidently past problems are still relevant, consequently, the gains of feminism remain fraught with "unresolved" tensions and contradictions (Glover and Kaplan 42).

To describe the specific causes of the magnetism of the neo-Victorian text is difficult; however, explaining what it is proves to be even harder. Eventually, we remain with various questions,

What is a neo-Victorian engagement? What is a neo-Victorian text? Can it be any text published after 1901 which is set in the Victorian period, or is it about characters from a Victorian text, or about real life Victorians? Can it be a text set in the contemporary period but with recognisable allusions to Victorian texts, characters, people?

(Llewellyn 175)

Mark Llewellyn's questions imply that not any text referring to the Victorian times can be considered neo-Victorian. The ones analysed in this thesis are clearly neo-Victorian as long as they bring the earlier historical moment "for re-reading, re-voicing, re-imagining the collective memory of a global cultural moment" (180).

Therefore, *Hasta Siempre, Mujercitas*, is a neo-Victorian feminist text that reveals how the patriarchal authority dominant in the past persists in this century. The characters in this novel say farewell ("hasta siempre") to *el Pueblo* and the childhood memories without any certainty about the future. Serrano's novel defies women readers to throw away social roles established in the Victorian age that prevent them from experiencing freedom, growth and fulfilment. In the same way, *The Little Women Letters*, as a neo-Victorian feminist text is another example that seeks to appraise women's roles in the nineteenth century and demonstrates the perpetuity of oppressions suffered by women in the past, while, at the same time, narrates the characters' awakening to feminist consciousness in the successive generations.

While the research presented here shows that the two novels reveal long-standing dominant attitudes towards the female gender, they demonstrate that neo-Victorian feminist texts present a multifaceted means of uncovering oppressions of the past, and at the same time shedding new light on feminist issues at the present time. The manhwa exposes how and why feminist texts keep Victorian topics alive in the present, Neo-Victorianism's textual and graphic manifestations can also be explained as a way to show how the narrator conceives a

different version of the same story, making a fresh, recombined production for dissimilar audiences, contexts and aesthetic. Asian neo-Victorianism exposes acts of appropriation that enlarge neo-Victorian studies to new geographical contexts and innovative narratives.

In this thesis, the term *postfeminism* has been used as a term of reference that makes possible a comprehension of the level of awareness of feminist discourse in contemporary society. Echoing Gill's on-line article "Postfeminist media culture", it is viable to affirm *postfeminism* "is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products". Elements of this sensibility include: the shift in the portrayal of women from submissive, passive objects, to active, desiring sexual subjects as in *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas*; the pre-eminence of notions of choice, 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself', a focus on self-surveillance and discipline as in some characters of *The Little Women Letters*; an obsessive preoccupation with the body as in *Dear my Girls*; a makeover paradigm and the reassertion of sexual difference in the three of them.

The implication of *postfeminist* theory, according to what Gill states in her article "Post-postfeminism? New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times" is "that can be used critically in making sense of contemporary culture" (2). It is a helpfulness through which to study women readers' respect for texts created by female writers and to highlight its potential for reading feminist neo-Victorian fiction "with fresh eyes" (Rich 18). *Hasta siempre, Mujercitas* shows how the complex interaction between women/readers, women/writers and women/protagonists promotes female self-expression and encouragement to raise consciousness among the "nuevas mujeres", as Serrano calls her female characters.

Postfeminist characters appear in *The Little Women Letters*, like Aunt Amy who is a contemporary version of Aunt March, commanding and bossy, emancipated and rich. Donnelly creates interesting secondary characters that add features to the "re-writing of the

historical narrative” of the nineteenth century and speak for “marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” (Llewellyn 165).

In the case of the manhwa, the characters are young women, beautiful and thin, in accordance with mass mediated ideals of beauty. Moreover, it describes young people trying to develop skills in independence or autonomy experimenting with new activities and seeking exciting experiences such as living alone in a different country and having romantic adventures out of conventions like courtship and marriage.

For the above mentioned reasons, it is appropriate to affirm that these texts can best be described as consciousness raising. They set up questions about the extent to which *postfeminism* presently delimits what it means to be a woman and verify women’s driving force. The terms in which the authors in these works depict the female development suggest that women are released from the old, safe, and imprisoning domestic sphere. Although it is a fact that women have more civil rights today and there is a great difference between the Victorian past and the present, these texts provide examples that equality is still an illusion.

This study enables the appraisal of the potential contribution of every text to encourage women readers to reflect on the restrictions that patriarchal gender roles inflict on them. In this regard, the model of female genealogies expressed in Serrano’s and Donnelly’s novels reveal a capacity for transcending the boundaries of the text themselves, disclosing to women readers new paths for pursuing self-definition. In the case of the manhwa, an emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment holds the dominance of a renovated paradigm.

Though composed in different locations and time periods, Jo in *Little Women*, Ada in *Hasta Siempre, Mujercitas*, Lulu in *The Little Women Letters* and Beth in *Dear my Girls* are strong and resilient women trying to survive in a bleak world. This picture of passionate,

independent women is what provides readers an association with and a love for Alcott's timeless novel and, it is this immortality that enables these women, both authors and characters, to never cease to share the story of their greatest hopes and fears with women today. These heroines set a precedent for readers to follow, and these texts offer possibilities for social disruption in the name of little women's empowerment.

Uncovering the work of these writers is important because these stories come together as a political call for recognition to women who must be heard and seen as individuals with specific challenges and desires and empowered to do something about them.

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