Constructing Gender in a Comparative Analysis
Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868) and Rainbow Rowell’s Fangirl (2013)

Diplomarbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
einer Magistra der Philosophie

an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

vorgelegt von
Carina KÖBERL, BA

am Institut für Amerikanistik
Begutachterin: Ao.Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr.phil. M.A.
Roberta Maierhofer

Graz, 2017
EIDESSTATTLICHE ERKLÄRUNG

Ich erkläre ehrenwörtlich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst, andere als die angegebenen Quellen nicht benutzt und die den Quellen wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe. Die Arbeit wurde bisher in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form keiner anderen inländischen oder ausländischen Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegt und auch noch nicht veröffentlicht. Die vorliegende Fassung entspricht der eingereichten elektronischen Version.

Graz, Mai 2017

..............................................

Carina Köberl
For my parents, Gerlinde and Wolfgang
You are priceless to me
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the course of my time studying at the University of Graz many people have guided me, helped me, and pushed me to do as well as I could. I’m deeply thankful to all of these people who were there for me when I needed them most. To start, I would like to thank Dr. Maierhofer for her help and input regarding this diploma thesis. Without you, who knows what this paper would look like. A big, heartfelt, and all-encompassing thank you to my parents, Gerlinde and Wolfgang, who have been there for me my whole life, who held my hand, gave me shoves when necessary, and whom I love without reservation. Another huge thanks to Benjamin, who has been my rock, and who has helped me tremendously throughout this last year. Who always understands when work has to come first and without whom my life would be a lot bleaker. I love you, bear. To Alina, who, for the majority of my time at university, has been a partner in crime, kicker of butts, and all around amazing friend, and who was so kind as to proofread this paper. Thank you for all the times you holed up with me to study and annoy every person in the general vicinity. To Nicole, Elli, Livia, Viola, and all the other wonderful people who accompanied me throughout these last six years at university, another big thank you. Life would have been a lot harder, and a lot less fun, without you. And last, but not least, a thank you to the numerous people who taught me at this university. You truly had a hand in shaping my life.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 6

1 Chapter 1: Theoretical Background ................................................................................................. 9
  1.1 Young Adult Literature: A Synopsis ............................................................................................ 9
  1.2 Relevant Facts About Gender Theory .......................................................................................... 13
  1.3 A Brief Summary of Nineteenth Century Gender Perspectives .............................................. 24

2 Chapter 2: *Little Women* (1868) .................................................................................................. 32
  2.1 Contextualizing Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* ................................................................. 32
  2.2 Tomboys and Peacocks: Comparing Traditional and Subversive Gender Performances ............. 39
  2.3 A Story within a Story: Regarding Writing as A Means of Crossing Gendered Lines ................... 59
  2.4 Love Is Divine: Analyzing Nineteenth Century Gender Dynamics in Relationships .................... 62

3 Chapter 3: *Fangirl* (2013) ............................................................................................................. 76
  3.1 Contextualizing Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* ............................................................................ 76
  3.2 Closing In: Considering the Progression of Gender Convergence ........................................... 84
  3.3 Fans of Fiction: Contemplating the Gendered Space of Writing ............................................. 94
  3.4 Love and War: Analyzing Gender Dynamics in Relationships of the Twenty-First Century .......... 101

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 124

Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 129
  Primary sources .............................................................................................................................. 129
  Secondary sources .......................................................................................................................... 129
  Internet Sources ............................................................................................................................ 133
INTRODUCTION

Comparison is the death of joy, Mark Twain once said. We shall disregard this notion during the course of this thesis as comparison constitutes the heart of what is to follow. As a historian as well as student of the English language I am interested in change. I am interested in how time changes things but also in how some things, no matter how much time goes by, still stay the same. One of these matters, both subject to change and stagnation, is gender; its performance, its roles, its stereotypes, and its subversions. In the last decades and centuries we have made great strides into the direction of gender equality, but gender is still a frequently and often hotly discussed topic that has yet to lose its significance both in everyday life as well as in literature. As I am a teacher to be, the genre of literature that I concern myself with the most is Young Adult fiction with all its complexities both in plot, teenage issues, and gender performance. In an effort to combine my interests as efficiently as possible this paper is concerned with the scrutiny of two books that fall neatly into this genre. One of which has been published long enough to be considered a vintage classic and both of which are remarkably similar, and dissimilar, to each other in terms of plot and gender issues. Compare them, we shall, and joyfully so.

Following this introduction the first part of this thesis is concerned with providing a theoretical and as historical background for the analysis that will follow. This background is comprised of information on Young Adult literature, gender theory relevant to this thesis, and historical information pertaining women and men living in nineteenth century America. As this is a thesis concerned with the comparative analysis of gender performance between two different books, the need to establish theoretical knowledge about such things goes without saying. The same is true for the explanation about Young Adult literature, since both books chosen for the analysis are part of this particular genre. Furthermore, as one of the books takes place in nineteenth century America, a brief summary of different expectations for the genders as compared to contemporary times will be given. In order to conduct a context-oriented analysis (Nünning 2011: 38-39) I will use a mixture of feminist literary theories as well as gender theories, which will both be discussed as part of the first chapter.

After providing the theoretical and historical background necessary for this thesis I will go on to analyze the two books chosen for this purpose, following a brief biography of the authors as well as a summary of the books. This analysis will focus on gender differences and similarities between the characters of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Fangirl* by
Rainbow Rowell. As the title of this thesis already states these books were written a century and a half apart, thus rendering this analysis in part also a historical comparison. *Little Women* and *Fangirl* were chosen for their similarities that occur despite the decades of time lying between their publications. Both of these books are highly popular with both young adult and adult audiences. *Little Women* has been published for a long time and has been established a classic. Comparatively, the literary history of *Fangirl* is a much shorter one, though the book has resonated with an abundance of people and has become a bestseller in its own right. Both books revolve mainly around girls, their sisters, families, and friends. Additionally, the protagonists of these books, though different in age, are taking their first steps out of the sphere of childhood and into the realm of adulthood. Besides that, the protagonists of each book share similarities in recreational as well as occupational pursuits, and the depiction of both men and women can be called progressive for its time of publication.

The analysis of these novels will commence chronologically to their date of publication, starting with *Little Women* in Chapter 2, followed by *Fangirl* in Chapter 3. The aim of this paper is to compare the gender performances in both of these books in order to attempt a description of the many differences these books share in spite or because of the time that has passed between their publications. In doing so I will attempt to answer, among others, the following questions: How do the representations of gender differ in *Little Women* and *Fangirl*? What do the gender representations in these books have in common? How important is the overall existence of gender and performance thereof in *Little Women* as compared to *Fangirl*? Has it become less significant? Can we observe any efforts to do away with gender stereotypes or to break norms in the texts?

To answer these questions I will take a look at the outward appearance of characters and how it is conceived by others. I will analyze which traits and behaviors are praised in characters and which are punished. Tied into such actions is always the relationship between characters and the ways these relationships are gendered. Thus, I will include parental relationships as well as any romantic or non-romantic connections the characters engage in. Subsequently, sex, sexuality and any other topics associated with such relationships will be discussed also. Furthermore, I will focus on hobbies, occupations, and future plans of characters to determine differences and similarities between the genders as well as the books. It has to be noted that this thesis is not occupied with pointing out whether the depictions of gender roles and performances described in these novels are harmful or commendable in any way. Nor is the effect these may have on any prospective readers up for discussion. This thesis is solely
interested in a comparative analysis that is both occupied with gender theory as well as changes and constants of these theoretical applications throughout the historical context of the chosen texts.

As a last point, I will summarize my findings in a conclusion where I will discuss what differences and similarities in gender performance, stereotypes, and subversion can be found in *Little Women* and *Fangirl*. I will also attempt to conclude whether a certain trend to a less gendered society can be observed within the scope of these books, taking into account the small sample size used in this paper.
1 CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Young Adult Literature: A Synopsis

What exactly is Young Adult literature? As this paper is concerned with the comparison of two novels that fall neatly into this genre this is a question we must ask ourselves. While it seems a simple enough question, the answer is surprisingly hard to find. Young adult literature used to mean literature written for children aged twelve to eighteen. The protagonists of these books ranged mainly between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, which changed during the late eighties. With the emergence of more and more Young Adult books with heroines aged twelve to fourteen this meant that the definition of “young adult” was broadened to include younger audiences, as younger protagonists also meant younger people starting to read Young Adult fiction as early as ten years old (cf. Cart 2001: 95).

At the same time, the range expanded into the other direction as well. Publishers embraced what they called the “MTV-demographic” in order to extend their market to include young people up to the age of twenty-five into their readership for Young Adult fiction (cf. Cart 2001: 95). The readership of Young Adult literature, however, is increasingly older than the members of its target audience. Garcia (cf. 2010: 16) calls this the ‘Harry Potter effect’. Through the transitional nature of the books and the decade it took J.K. Rowling to finish the series, many readers, and there was an abundance of them, grew up along with the characters. When the series finished, many of the readers were adults themselves and used to reading Young Adult fiction, even if they themselves could not be counted among the members of this age group. It became socially acceptable to read books intended for younger audiences and so they did. Nowadays the majority of Young Adult literature readers are above the age of eighteen (cf. Garcia 2010: 16).

The history of books intended to be read by children and young adults as well as by adults is a long and rich one. Oftentimes, such literature was meant to guide children on their way to adulthood and to provide them with the virtues and morals necessary to live a good, praiseworthy life. Such guides can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century where some children who were lucky enough to be taught to read were given books primarily written for adults for their moral education. This stems back to the fact that during the Middle Ages children were simply seen as unformed adults and were treated accordingly. Literature that was popular with adolescents were, for example, Mallory’s Morte d’Arthur written in 1485 or, during later times, Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to
Come written in 1678, which also features prominently in Little Women. Here, the reader is taught the ways of God through religious allegory. It is easy to see how such an approach might have fit a younger audience much better than attempting to understand scripture by itself (cf. Bushman and Haas 2006: 272-273).

As such, it was mainly religious and didactic literature that was given to children. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, other books emerged that became popular with the younger population. The most important of them were Defoe’s *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1726) and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Both of these books were adapted for younger readers and became children’s classics. This was also the time around where John Newbery began publishing books for children, though most of them were still moral and didactic in nature (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 274). The “first age of great children’s books” (Winter & Fisher quoted in Bushman & Haas 2006: 274) dawned during the 19th century. Here we can find not only an increase in books written and published for young adults and children, but we can also observe a division between books intended for girls and boys. Publications for young women emphasized “home and family values, conforming to social expectations” while young men’s literature emphasized “that hard work would be rewarded by success, and traditional values were upheld even by their literary heroes” (Bushman & Haas 2006: 274). Books that fit into this first great age of children’s books are, for instance, Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 274).

Throughout all these books one characteristic held steadfastly constant: they all reflected moral values their readers were encouraged to emulate. During the late 19th century, however, a shift occurred and literature about “bad boys” became popular. These novels told stories about boys as they were and not as their mothers and fathers wished them to be. The already mentioned story of Tom Sawyer is part of this genre. The stories became more varied, dipping into science fiction, adventure tales, and other genres (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 276-277). Such a variety is still present today and has been expanded thoroughly, as shall be discussed in later paragraphs. While children’s literature existed, it was only in 1934 that a publishing company called ‘Longman’ first started publishing books intended specifically for young adults and other companies soon followed this company (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 277). The term Young Adult Literature itself is argued to have first been marketed as such in 1942 with the emergence of youth culture during the nineteen thirties and forties and is part of the American tradition. The focus of these books lies on the interests of its target group; issues,
culture, and life choices of adolescents. Through these books the definitions of what it means to be a young adult in Western culture, however flexible this term has become, is reflected (cf. Garcia 2013: 5). In turn, Young Adult literature helps reinforce youth culture as culture, since any kind of culture is partly constructed through the “ways society reads, interprets, and reflects the books of Young Adult literature” (Garcia 2013: 5-6). It is a circle that sustains itself.

Young Adult literature of the forties and fifties concerned itself with all of these points. Beyond that family, jobs, romantic relationships and athletic pursuits were common themes. More problematic aspects of the lives of adolescents were largely disregarded. These aspects include drug and alcohol abuse or illegitimate pregnancy (cf. Hauk quoted in Bushman & Haas 2006: 278). Such matters were likely hushed up in an effort to stifle any interest or curiosity youths might have had for these subjects. The literary and cultural climate of the sixties was much more permissive. The realism of earlier decades was joined by “new realism” that cared for a more accurate depiction of youths no matter if such content was in any way problematic. Premarital sex, out of wedlock pregnancies, drug abuse, and similar issues were not hushed up anymore. Instead, Young Adult literature explored them (cf. Hauk quoted in Bushman & Haas 2006: 278-279).

Novels with such content usually feature a precocious protagonist whose parents are cast into a role adjacent to the one of the villain. During the course of the story, the characters mature or understand themselves more (cf. Hauk quoted in Bushman & Haas 2006: 278-279). One example for such a novel is Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), which features in *Fangirl* (cf. Bushman and Hauk 2006: 279). The sixties also feature the first Young Adult novel with gay content. John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* sparked much skepticism about its appropriateness for young readers. Like literature featuring racial minorities, gay and lesbian Young Adult fiction is still a margin category with only about five titles per year having been published up until the year 2006, with interest numbers slowly growing larger (cf. Cart 2006: XV).

During the decades that followed it became more and more apparent that the subcategories within the genre of Young Adult literature are akin to a kaleidoscope of possibilities and realities. What they all have in common is that the characters “face significant difficulties and crises, and grow and develop to some degree” (cf. Russell Williams 2014). This means that many books of this genre fall neatly into the category of *Bildungsroman*. Growing up, facing challenges and changing one’s worldview can all be achieved within the bounds of multiple
subgenres as well as by using more specific issues than general teen angst. For instance, in *The Contender* (1976) we have an African-American protagonist. Portraying minorities and using protagonists from non-white ethnicities continues to be an important, though still fiercely underrepresented, category within the genre, even in contemporary Young Adult fiction. Diversity in race and culture as well as in sexuality and gender performance is becoming an increasingly important topic with minorities, just as much as during the sixties’ protest movements, not willing to be silenced, under-, and misrepresented anymore. Thirteen percent of American citizens are African-Americans, with Hispanics as the second largest minority. As around thirteen percent of the student body in any given American school has a disability, such minorities are also represented less in Young Adult literature than may statistically be appropriate (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 188-189).

We can also still observe a separation of girl’s and boy’s books. Books written by Judy Blume in the seventies mark some of the texts that are intended to be read by girls and focus on ‘girl problems’, such as menstruation and certain body issues (cf. Bushman & Haas 2006: 280). Nowadays, literature for girls usually has a female protagonist that has to navigate adventures and falls in love on the way. These female characters retain their femininity through post-apocalyptic landscapes, hunt monsters, and overturn autocratic regimes. One such book is Suzanne Collin’s *Hunger Games*, which is part of the subgenre of dystopian fiction that has enjoyed high popularity among readers during the last decade, possibly as they seem to reflect a certain zeitgeist of America’s political climate (cf. Garcia 2013: 16). Besides that we can also observe other subgenres that occur similarly in adult novels such as fantasy, mystery, and thrillers.

Interestingly enough, novels from any genre featuring a female protagonist, whether she is an adventurer or simply a navigator of everyday life, are often disregarded by male readers. If we look at the issue the other way around we cannot observe the same phenomenon; while men seem to prefer books written from the male perspective, women display no such preference, or at least not overly so (cf. Wolitzer 2012). What we can glean from this is a certain devaluation that still clings to feminine spaces, matters, and stories. Femininity is seen as lesser or at least not consumable by some men. Male protagonists are less gendered, however. Their problems are seen as universal for all human beings, while female issues are marginalized as issues only other females may be interested in or understand. These and other issues and hierarchies of gender will be further discussed in the following section.
1.2 Relevant Facts About Gender Theory

We live and have been living in a gendered world. Many things, actions, and objects in our daily lives are gendered, meaning they are supposed to be used or done by either one of the officially recognized genders. There are, of course, matters that are not gendered, where neither males nor females have to ask themselves whether or not they should be participating in an event or using a certain object. During recent years such ambivalence has become more and more acceptable just as much as the terms genderfluid and a-gender have been given more and more attention. At this point, it would probably be good to take a step back and explain more of the basics in further detail, before we get swamped with unexplained terms and no foundations.

First, we have to establish the now widely known idea of sex and gender not being interchangeable terms but instead being words with different meanings. When we talk about sex we are talking about biology. If the sex of a person is female then their body is in possession of predominantly female sexual organs. Whether a person would identify as female because of this biological imperative is another matter altogether, as the gender of a person does not have to correspond with their sex. Gender has a sociological connotation attached to it and is less concerned with the reproductive capabilities of a body and more with the workings of a person’s mind and whether they feel an affiliation to the male, female, both or none of the sexes. While often the sex and gender of a person correspond with each other there are a range of recorded cases where they do not (cf. Stephan 2006: 52). The split between sex and gender was originally created to dispute the idea of the biology of a person being their destiny. While sex is generally seen as being biologically constructed, gender is man-made; a cultural construct. As such, it is also much more fluid than sex (cf. Butler 1990: 8).

The distinction made also suggests a discontinuity between biological sexes and culturally constructed genders. Furthermore, as Butler (cf. 1990: 9) proposes the idea that there is no reason why genders need to be confined within a binary since gender is a human made construct and constructions can be expanded upon within the scope of cultural change and adjustment. What needs to be considered for this idea to have merit is how gender is ascribed to a person. For one thing, gender is usually presupposed to coalesce with sex. A person is born with what are considered female reproductive organs and markers and thus femininity is inscribed upon them from an early age. This would mean that, as it is a cultural phenomenon that gender goes hand in hand with the corresponding sex, culture is destiny, instead of
biology. However, as Simone de Beauvoir stated, one is not born a woman, one does become a woman. Being female, or male for that matter, has to do with gender performance and there is no reason to suggest that this could not be done later in live as well. While it can be a cultural compulsion to conform to one gender in the sense that usually boys and girls are held to a different standard and given different choices or a different lack of choices from an early age on, gender performance can also be a choice once a person managed to become unfettered from any such compulsion society may dictate based on sex (cf. Butler 1990: 10-11). This raises the question of whether it is possible to break with the societal compulsion to act either male or female altogether. While one might choose to not act according to the gender ascribed to one at birth it is harder to act like somebody who has no gender altogether, as culture is a gendered place that leaves little to no room for ungendered matters.

This need to make gender an either-or situation goes as far as using surgery on infants that are born intersex, meaning they display physical attributes of both genders. Children’s genitalia used to be operated on in order to make sure they could better be classified as male or female. The idea of leaving matters be as long as everything was operational was dismissed. For children born with an XY chromosome the size of the penis was used as an indicator, whether or not to employ surgery to render the child more physically female or male. In the late nineteenth century it was the existence of ovaries within an intersex child’s body that determined whether it could be called female or not, indicating that a woman unable to procreate was regarded as not much of one (cf. Lorber 1993: 569). The bodily markers that indicate an intersex condition are coded as ‘DSD’, meaning ‘disorders of sexual development’ (cf. Kleeman 2016). Whenever a state of being is called a disorder it speaks volumes about how it is regarded in a culture. Around 1.7 percent of children worldwide are born intersex every year and though immediate surgery has become rarer the stigma of having or being a child that defies sex assignment is still very real (cf. Kleeman 2016). The fact that such people exist, it has to be said, also challenges the validity of the gender binary, seeing as there are obviously more than two naturally occurring sexes to be found in humans (cf. Lucal 2008: 522).

Because of this, the idea that the sexes are a construct just as much as gender is has arisen. One proponent of this theory is, for instance, Gerald N. Callahan, who argues that the sex of a person is not as forthright as it may appear, even when outwardly all markers such as genitalia or gonads are present. He argues that there is no binary when it comes to the sexes but much like with sexuality proposes a spectrum. For example, it is seen as common knowledge that
people with a Y chromosome are boys and those with two X chromosomes are girls. However, there are women in this world who have a Y chromosome and there are men without one, just as there are humans with more than two X chromosomes and beyond that there are some who live their lives with a single unpaired X chromosome. There are many chromosome variations in this world and yet we still persist on using an either/or distinction when there actually is no such thing (cf. Callahan 2009: XI-XII). Another scientist proposing that it makes no medical sense to only officially recognize two sexes and operate on those who do not fulfill this ideal, is Anne Fausto-Sterling. She explains that other markers for biological sex aside from genitalia exist; gonads, meaning testes in men and ovaries in women, chromosomes, as we already discussed above, as well as hormones, such as low estrogen and high testosterone. As there are rather a few combinations of these markers possible in humans, it would make sense to extend the gender binary to a spectrum (cf. Anne Fausto-Sterling 1993: 20-24).

However, society still clings to the idea of such a binary when it comes to both biology and gender. Because of this biology and the thought of congruence between gender and sex it has been argued for a long time that any cultural or social arrangements between men and women were nature given. The discrimination in economic, social, and political matters as well as the dominance of men over women was seen as biologically imperative. Feminism calling for equal rights was regarded as a war on nature and anyone not wanting to conform to gender norms was asked to not try and change what nature had intended. This is a black and white view imposed on a world of grays that cannot withstand against persistent questioning. If patriarchy was simple nature, there would be no need for laws, conventions, customs, and the threat of violence against any non-conformers. There would be no individuals fighting to enter spheres that they have no right to enter according to the gender they were assigned. For instance, women would not want to not have children or enter careers, such as the military, which they have been told they are unsuited for (cf. Kimmel 2000: 42). On top of this, studies have shown that children only realize that their gender is immutable once they reach the age of six or seven, meaning they believe in gender being a choice until then. Before that age is reached, a girl, for instance, may believe she can be a father once she grows up. It is around this time, they become aware of the stereotypes and roles the culture they life in ascribes to them as boys or girls (cf. Orenstein 2006: 37). Another piece of evidence in favor of gender being a construct is the fact that gendered roles and ways of doing gender change over time. Men stay home on parental leave with their babies, and gladly so, and women have started to wear pants just as often as men do, for example (cf. Lorber 1994: 15-16).
It goes to show, then, that gender is learned rather than inherent. After all, what a person learns may be internalized just as much as it may be questioned and improved upon. We start acquiring our gender identity during our early childhood and usually within the familial sphere (cf. Kimmel 2000: 88). In fact, gendering starts the very minute humans are born with and sometimes even prenatally, if the parents of a child find out about their baby’s sex in utero. However, once a baby is born, responses to the way this child looks and acts are often tailored to gender. A girl may be called pretty while a boy may be called strong for his loud screaming. While this example is pretty harmless, studies have shown that parents treat their babies differently as well. For instance, males are usually stimulated and engaged with more while females were often imitated by their parents (cf. Oakley 1987: 173-174).

These interactions mark the start of learning gender but there are other processes through which children are socialized. These processes are manipulation, canalization, verbal appellation, and activity exposure. During manipulation a child subsumes their parents’ view of them in their own concept of themselves. For instance, if a girl is called pretty and is fussed over, she will believe in the importance of this in herself. Canalization focuses on directing the attention of children towards objects or their aspects. This happens, for instance, through gendered toys. Boys are likely to be given cars or play guns while girls are likely to be given dolls. This works even better when they are restricted to play with toys that are not tailored to their own gender and rewarded for playing with the ‘appropriate’ toys. This way, children start rehearsing for their later roles in life and in fulfilling them, they are reminded of their joyful childhood times. Moving on, verbal appellations have to do with how a child is addressed. Through language a child learns their assigned gender and to identify with other members of their category. Finally, during activity exposure, both male and female children are exposed to activities traditional for their genders. For instance, when doing chores girls are more likely to be asked to perform duties such as doing the dishes, while boys are more often asked to take out the rubbish (cf. Oakley 1987: 175-176).

While Oakley uses these methods of socialization to show how learning gender might be achieved, Kimmel (cf. 2000: 70-71) shows his readers a method used primarily in the sixties, through which a successful acquisition of gender identity is supposed to occur. This is called the ‘M-F’ test where boys and girls were expected to answer questions in a way that was thought to correspond with their genders. Girls were anticipated to know about cooking and color palettes and were expected to be more emotional and to want to choose traditionally female occupations such as librarian or music teacher. As for the boys, they were expected to
know about politics and geography, were estimated to be emotional only if severely provoked, and to engage in occupations such as soldier and forest ranger.

These points are prime examples of the dichotomy expected to exist between males and females. The idea is that men express the harder side of humanity by being more aggressive, independent, braver, more extroverted and controlling, while women represent the softer side through acting more sensitive, perceptive, dependent, introverted and emotional. According to this, humanity is made up of a cacophony of opposites with no place for overlapping personalities (Oakley 1987: 49). Those men who do tend to be more sensitive, for instance, will often be called out on this “female” behavior, while assertive women can be called “bossy” instead of being admired for their zest. While gender confines have loosened more and more in recent years, many traditional expectations for males and females still have their foothold in contemporary times. For instance, while women take jobs in traditionally male fields of work more and more often, there is still a stigma attached to men taking traditionally female jobs such as hairdresser or kindergarten teacher.

However, just as much as individuals conforming to gender exist so do individuals who do not conform. Men who are sensitive, not very physical, inclined to work with children. Women who like the competitiveness of sports, who are not attracted to motherhood. Individuals who display one or more markers of gender non-conformity are treated with varying responses by their peers and superiors. Some are encouraging, others damning. Research into the responses of parents to their children’s non-conforming behaviors suggest that there is a difference in how girls as opposed to boys who do not conform are treated. Daughters were mostly encouraged and praised for behaving in a way that was perceived as masculine. Generally, the parents saw nothing wrong with girls aspiring to traditionally male occupations and playing with toys produced with boys in mind, one woman even expressing gladness over her daughter not embodying the stereotypical, fragile princess persona (cf. Kane 2006: 156-159).

The catalogued responses to boys exhibiting traditionally feminine behavior were mixed and thus less favorable. While the acquisition of domestic skills and an inclination towards nurturing behavior and emotional openness were lauded, boys wearing female attire such as dresses or frilly clothing were discouraged from doing so. A desire to play with Barbie dolls and crying were met with the same reaction. While parents tried to be open-minded, with mothers more so than fathers, they were trying not to step over any carefully construed gender boundaries. Especially so, if the ‘threat’ of homosexuality was seen lurking around the corner
in the case of some parents. The same study showed that heterosexual parents were afraid that feminine behavior in their son might mean he was homosexual or might make him so. The issue of a possible correlation between sexual orientation and gender non-conformity was not raised in the case of girls, however (cf. Kane 2006: 159-163). This, again, suggests a certain devaluation of femininity and traits and actions associated with it as well as hegemonic constrictions of gender, the top of which is inhabited by masculinity.

Bridges (cf. 2013: 60) proposes that forms of masculinity can both perpetuate and challenge such constrictions, depending on which form they take. Hybrid forms of masculinity, meaning masculinities that are composed of aspects both feminine and masculine, for instance, a man that unites toughness and tenderness within himself, can be considered “expressions of existing forms of inequality” (Bridges 2013: 61). He states that lines may be blurred between gender affiliations. In his case study, he interviewed men that saw what they were doing, for instance, being feminists, as something ‘gay’, as in that this can be construed as a feminine pursuit (cf. Bridges 2013: 79-80). However, the fact that they felt the need to ascribe this label to their actions while defending their heterosexuality in the same breath may showcase blurred but no crumbled lines. In fact, it seems that even though men might feel more secure than in the past when exhibiting traditionally feminine behavior, they still feel the need to assert their masculinity. This is an example that shows us that, while adopting certain feminine aspects of life may not be a necessarily bad decision, adopting masculine aspects is still preferable.

At this junction we also need to talk about sex and sexual violence as it plays part in the analysis to come. Differences in sexual needs and wants are gendered just as much as any other facet of a human being is. Men report to have sex more frequently, with more alternating partners than women do. This is attributed at times to differences in biology, with the male of the species needing to distribute his genes. Other times this is credited to societal norms, wherein men need to display their sexuality ferociously in order to be dubbed masculine, while women need to be more moderate in their sexual appetites, lest they be called promiscuous (cf. Schwartz and Rutter 2000: 4). Men and women are therefore both sexualized in culture. However, this sexualization is done in different ways. Men are seen as the distributor, the active part of the equation, that needs to assert its masculinity via dominance and frequency. Women are the ones to be conquered; they are the recipients who require intercourse less, which makes the conquest all the sweeter and the man who succeeds
in convincing her the bigger a catch. This rapidly leads us over blurring lines and into non-consensual territory.

Such territory, including sexual violence, including rape, abuse, and harassment, is regarded as a part of human life by many. Studies have shown that about twenty percent of adolescent girls experience physical and sexual violence in their youth, with only very few of them reporting the crime. While most victims are female, attackers are usually male. The reason for this may be found in the idea that female submissiveness and passive sexuality are perpetrated in contemporary as well as past Western culture just as much as male sexual aggressiveness and strife for power and dominance are. Men are told to take what they want, women are told to give and submit, often being made to believe that their sexuality is not their own (cf. Hlavka 2014: 337-339). That this is a cultural rather than biological phenomenon is supported by studies showing that the usual excuse for male aggressiveness, meaning the inherent condition of men showing higher level of testosterone, does not hold up. While aggression can be linked to testosterone, individuals with high testosterone levels do not automatically exhibit more aggressive behavior than those with lower levels. Testosterone does not cause aggression; it exacerbates preexisting aggression and thus depends on the state of mind of an individual (cf. Sapolsky 1997).

Taking this into account, it has to be the culture and views on gender we learn and cultivate that must be responsible for the power imbalance we can observe in matters of sexual violence just as much as in other parts of life we already discussed. However, though women have spoken out against such imbalances, sexual violence is a topic victims often keep silent about, which is due to many factors. For one, there is a ‘boys will be boys’ attitude towards violent male behavior as long as it does not get out of hand. Minor harassments doled out by men are seen as a cultural constant that womankind is asked to endure on account of males supposedly being unable help their inborn behavior. Even more harmful is the fact that harassment is often misconstrued as romantic, seeing as attention, even if it is bad, may be decoded as a male caring and showing it in a way permitted to men (cf. Hlavka 2014: 344-345). Another valid point is the fact that it is sometimes the victim of rape or harassment that is blamed for what transpired. They are chastised for not clearly stating that they are not giving consent, have been drinking or walking alone at night, or have been flirting and thus giving the perpetrator the wrong idea. They are often not believed by the public and regarded as a plea for attention (cf. Hlavka 2014: 351). All of these facts construe what is called a rape culture (cf. Buchwald et al 2005: XI).
In this culture women are silenced but it is in fact not only a female problem. According to Kimmel (cf. 2005: 145) the reason for male entitlement is the fragility of masculinity. He states that the fear of being conceived as feminine or weak, the fear of being humiliated, especially in front of other men, and the fear of being dominated by other men are what reinforce male gender stereotypes and corresponding behavior. It is a constant struggle to prove oneself, to not be considered a ‘sissy’ or ‘faggot’, to not be denied manhood. Statistics show that those males who exhibit the most violent behavior are usually individuals who have been bullied for not neatly fitting into the box of male masculinity drawn up from tradition (cf. Kimmel 2005: 146-147).

However, power and the imbalance of it also play a part in other sexualities besides heterosexuality. The Western world is heteronormative in that everybody is assumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise, though homosexuality has a history as long as humanity itself. We will not go back this far, and views on nineteenth century homosexuality will be discussed in the following chapter. Here, let us look at more recent views and discoveries. During times such as the nineteen seventies, when views on homosexuality were rather anti-gay, it was thought to be insufficient prenatal hormones, masculine or feminine, that rendered a person homosexual and as such that homosexuality was a hormonal defect. Other theories accounted homosexuality to prenatal stress. In any case, there have yet to be any conclusive studies on the biology of homosexuality that could not be seen as circumstantial. However, over decades, ‘cures’ have been searched for and were never found (cf. Kimmel 2000: 39-40). The fact that some societies in the Western hemisphere believe homosexuality to be a condition that needs curing is a cultural phenomenon as well. However, it has been found that homosexuality is definitely a biological matter and not a phase somebody “can grow out of”. This, in the end, spins another perspective on the idea that nature dictates the predominance of a patriarchal world. After all, it was nature that made human beings nonconforming to heteronormative ideals (cf. Kimmel 2000: 43).

But what does being homosexual mean exactly? What qualifies someone to call themselves gay or lesbian or bisexual? First, it needs to be established that sexuality is a spectrum. Often used to measure this spectrum is the Kinsey scale, though it was not intended for this use when originally published. Nowadays, the scale, which ranges from zero to six, is used to determine just to which degree a person considers themselves hetero- or homosexual with zero being exclusively heterosexual and six being exclusively homosexual. This scale leaves a lot of room for fluctuation and variation in the middle (cf. Fausto-Sterling 2012: 83-84).
Alternatively, people could be marked ‘x’ for asexual or nonsexual. Of course, this scale leaves out other orientations that defy the gender binary, such as pansexual. Sexuality, just as much as gender, has found more and more definitions and categories within its confines, not necessarily making it more complicated, but ascribing terms to its preexisting complexities.

But just as much as sexuality has to do with biology it also has to do with gender roles. Just as much as a man is expected to act and look certain ways, a gay man is, by many, expected to look and act the part. This falls in line with the, flawed, thought of gay men essentially being feminine men and lesbian women being masculine. That, according to Kimmel (cf. 2000: 235), would suggest that the gender of our partners is more important than our own, which is not true. While on the surface it may seem as though homosexual individuals defy gender conformity, they actually confirm it, meaning that they uphold gender roles rather than defying them and in some cases even adhering to them more religiously in order to appear as heterosexual to the public as possible, since there is still a stigma attached to any other sexuality but heterosexuality (cf. Kimmel 2000: 235-237). What has to be kept in mind is the notion that there are always two ends of the spectrum with most people falling neatly somewhere in the middle.

Now that we have talked about forms of sexuality outside the heteronormative sphere it is time address gender performance and identity outside of this sphere as well. Much like bodily ambiguity, any ambiguities in gender identity are usually met with skepticism and rejection by society. First we need to make a distinction between the terms transgender and genderqueer. Transgender men and women adhere to the gender binary. However, they identify with the gender opposite to the one assigned to them at birth due to their biological sex. The disconnection between sex and gender these people feel can go as far as to lead to cases of body dysphoria, which in turn may lead to sex-reassignment surgeries (cf. Kean 2015). The fact that transgender individuals exist defies the notion that sex and gender are congruent (cf. Luca 2008: 520). However, genderqueer individuals challenge the binary at times. They may feel no strong attachment to either sex and call themselves agender, but they may also fluctuate between genders stating that some days they feel male and others female (cf. Kean 2015). In any case, their gender identity does not sit right with many, especially if a person’s gender is not immediately apparent or does not fit within the binary.

Why is it so hard for the majority of people to accept that two genders may not be all there is to the world? Why do we become frustrated when we cannot accurately say whether a person is male or female? That it has a lot to do with tradition was already established. Aside from
the biological implications of, in some cases, sex-reassignment surgery that may not be approved of by people due to a myriad of reasons, some religious, some conservative, another part of it is the fact that we attribute a gender to every person we look at. If we cannot do it within a second, we puzzle over it and if further investigation does not yield any definite results we become frustrated. In most cases, people “do” gender according to the same parameters and rules. If rules are mixed or disregarded the general onlooker feels confused, as one of the constants in their world does not work in these cases. Gender is so deeply ingrained in our everyday lives that making a quick attribution usually does not need any active though processes. This normally works by the way of exclusion. For instance, if a person does not display any female markers or if the markers are in the obvious minority, the person is gendered as male. Maleness is the canvas, femaleness is a thing to be added to it. Being unable to read what is displayed deprives us of much needed context as how to view and how to interact with a person (cf. Lucal 1999: 783-784). After all, we do adjust the way we treat people not only according to how well we know and how much we like them. We also adjust it to what gender they appear to be.

Kimmel (cf. 2000: 264) suggests that men and women are far more alike than they are different. With the emergence of more and more people trying to blur the carefully drawn lines between genders and the idea that the gender binary is not the only system to be considered having gained a small foothold, what does this mean for society? Is there a chance that our culture may become degendered someday? Taking into account the fact that over the past century people have worked to lessen gender inequality it may seem possible that the ideas of difference may lessen in importance and make way for ideas of similarities. There is no way of telling when or if this can be achieved, but the fact remains that matters are changing. How they will change remains to be seen.

What does all of this mean for literary studies? This is a question that needs to be addressed as this thesis is concerned with the portrayal of gender in two literary works and shall be discussed here. According to Stephan (cf. 2006: 284-285), reading and writing can never be gender neutral actions, a perspective that can be traced back to modernity. ‘Male’ and ‘female’ became part of aesthetic discourse, with authorship being mainly attributed to men while female authors inhabited a place on a lower rung concerning prestige and artistry, often being called amateurs. The men were the artists, the women were only welcomed gladly as consumers of or inspiration for art, incapable or unlikely to produce masterpieces (cf. Stephan 2000: 285). This view may seem outdated now but in fact men are still more likely to be
published authors than women are and while women tend to read books written by members of both genders, men tend to gravitate towards books written by fellow males (cf. Berry 2017). On the other side of this gender specific argument about art we have the idea that art is absolutely not influenced by gender. The idea here is that art should not be measured according to gender, nationality, class, or religion, and any other such category. Poets should be seen as androgynous, according to this, as they unite both the male and female within themselves. However, this does not mean that gender is not important in writing according to it. Indeed, the joining of genders within one person refers back to gender roles just as much as the separation of them does (cf. Stephan 2000: 285).

Feminist literature and research go back to the generation of 1968 and the subsequent women’s movement during the seventies. Women’s literature developed that revolved around women’s problems and experiences and looked at general issues from a female instead of a male context. It was feminist literature that seems to have made gender part of literary theory. After two decades of focusing mainly on the female perspective of research, more time was invested finding out more about male gender standpoints during the nineties. This fits into the changing idea that feminism was just as much a tool for men as it was for women, as it became not only a symbol for liberty from male oppression but also for equality in all things, including allowing men to be more ‘feminine’ (cf. Stephan 2000: 286-287).

Concerning literary studies, gender research is interested in the answer to more than one question or aspect. One of them is why some literary genres are seen as feminine while others are seen as masculine. The idea is that women feel drawn to some topic while men are drawn to others. Furthermore, women are said to be more inclined to take moments that happened in their own lives and use them in their literary works (cf. Stephan 2006: 288-289). This is especially interesting in the context of the books we will be discussing in this paper as both authors are female and both used their own lives as inspiration for their books as we will see throughout the next chapters. This thesis is concerned with the analysis of Young Adult novels, a genre that is dominated by female authors, with around sixty percent of writers of the genre being women. According to the same article, the target audience for Young Adult fiction is also predominantly female (cf. Lewitt 2012).

Lewitt also writes that many Young Adult novels are said to have little nuance compared to adult fiction. If we were being cynical we could read a certain disparagement into this, seeing as the all hallowed, but recently not as popular, adult fiction market is dominated by male authors. Whatever other questions this field of study may want to answer, the fact remains
that how gender is depicted in literature is not completely free of cultural, historical, and individual influence. However, what literature can do is question and try to subvert sex-gender relations and try to show the world their destructive power (cf. Stephan 2006: 291).

1.3 A Brief Summary of Nineteenth Century Gender Perspectives

While gender roles of the nineteenth century still echo in contemporary times there are certain views, roles, and expectations specific to men and women of the time that now hold less to no significance. As *Little Women* was written during the eighteen sixties, it is imperative that some idiosyncrasies regarding gender performance be explained briefly. This needs to be done in order to provide the reader with a fundament of understanding towards what was generally expected of men and women during this century regarding their everyday lives and their performance throughout. One text that provides aid towards such an understanding, especially in regard to women and girls, is Barbara Welter’s article *The Cult of True Womanhood*.

In nineteenth century America women were regarded as the upholder of morals and values. Their husbands and other men in general were focused on the more worldly side of things, taking care of their jobs, businesses, and the economy. As such, they had little time to care about values such as piety and left this role to their women. While men were focused on the outer world, women were focused on the inner one. A true woman knew that it was her role to uphold the values of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, which she was judged by and judging others herself. Any other achievements were secondary to these values and no other achievements could procure happiness and power in a way close to what these core points of femininity could (cf. Welter 1966: 151-152).

Piety and subsequently religion was seen as the core of a woman’s virtue. In fact, it was the prime virtue men were urged to search for in any woman they might marry. Through her religious nature, women would be the redeemer of men (cf. Welter 1966: 152). This idea is rather consistent with highborn women’s roles during the early middle ages and the start of the high middle ages. Men waged war, made treaties, ruled others and could thus not partake in religious virtues as much, as the very nature of what they had to do went against such ideas. Women took over this role for them, often educating them on religious points, softening them when needed, and living pious lives and chaste marriages (cf. Goetz 2002: 44). It was a woman’s job to herd erring men back to Christ as best she could and thus, it was argued, a woman’s education should be largely religious as it suited her dependent nature perfectly and
did not take her outside of the domestic sphere. That women should study other subjects as
thoroughly was regarded as a danger to them, as other intellectual pursuits may have led them
to a fall from grace, an idea to terrible to think about (cf. Welter 1966: 152-154).

The lack of purity in a woman was seen just as unfeminine as the lack of faith. An impure
woman was regarded as a fallen angel, situated on a lower rung than other women. She was,
in a sense, unworthy of respectful attentions of the opposite sex. In fact, impurity could even
lead to madness or death, though it is not specified in The Cult of True Womanhood whether
such madness might stem from the way such women were treated by society. Nonetheless,
death was preferable to the loss of innocence, an idea that still permeates through some
cultures nowadays. Virginity was regarded as a woman’s single most treasured asset, a gift to
be given to only their husbands on the wedding night. Women were urged to maintain their
virtue, again as a counterbalance to the incorrigible sinfulness of men. Concerning this,
women were seen as stronger and purer than men, capable to reigning in their urges, if they
were even credited with having any. It was a source of power over men and a way to save the
world (cf. Welter 1966: 154-157). Thus, women could save men from themselves, especially
if they were virtuous, as nothing could “preserve a young man from the contamination of low
pleasures and pursuits than frequent intercourse with the more refined and virtuous of the
other sex” (William Alcott quoted in Welter 1966: 156-157). This went as far as women even
being considered “fallen” if the sexual intercourse she engaged in had not been consensual.
Rape was stigmatized and women were often blamed more for the act than the men who had

Submission was another virtue and was not only to be exercised in the bedroom. It was seen
maybe as the most feminine of the bunch, as it was a virtue that could not be expected of men
in any form or shape. Men were supposed to be religious and they were supposed to exact
some moderation on their sexual habits. Submissive they were not. Women were seen as
responders to the actions of their men. She was not supposed to feel or act for herself but
always for her husband and with his needs in mind. This was seen as the natural order of the
universe. Thus, woman was stuck in a perpetual limbo of childhood, ever dependent and
timid. Own talents were to be swept under the rug in favor for actions taken to please a
husband and make his life easier. That is not to say that women were supposed to always
accept what their husbands were saying. They were allowed to know that men could be wrong
at times, though such knowledge need not be pointed out. It was enough that, in their hearts,
they knew who was right. Women should to their best to reform men, but if it was not
possible, they were supposed to give up with grace (cf. Welter 1966: 158-162). This is also a trait women are expected to display nowadays, by taking the subordinate role and leaving dominance to men (cf. Cortese: 2008: 58).

Submission, purity, and piety were all performed in the sphere of a woman’s home; her true place of belonging. As such, domesticity was seen as a core value of a wife and mother. The making of a home and familial duties were here pleasure and occupation. There, she could provide a safe haven from the dangers and pitfalls of the outside world, which was not her mission to change. Part of this domestic bliss was taking care of her loved ones, for instance, by assuming the role of nurse, as the nineteenth century was fraught enough with illness to make it typical for a woman to have some nursing experience. In the sickroom she exercised patience, gentleness, and mercy, all part of a housewife’s qualities. Here, she was beautiful as well as useful. Women’s magazines of the time were full with advice on how to handle big and little sufferers and cookbooks contained treatments just as much as recipes. On top of nursing being part of the assumedly nurturing female nature, the sickbed was also a place where a woman could exercise power over a sick male, who was dependent on them in his ailing state (cf. Welter 1966: 162-164).

When nobody in the family was ill, women were expected to keep busy at home, with all needful tasks being regarded as a lesson in virtues such as patience, self-reliance, and the proper management of a household. According to Welter, one could even apply scientific principles to housework; cooking was basic chemistry after all and housework did not preclude learning. An accomplished woman was not only well versed in domestic duties, however, she was also able to sing and play an instrument to regale the family with. She was proficient in her knowledge of flowers and took part in the science of writing letters. Reading, though only done in moderation and never about topics the reading of which alone could potentially ruin her, was another drawing room skill, that kept women perfectly detained in domestic bliss. Should reading cause for genius or inspiration to strike, she should direct it to homemaking and not literary pursuits. Of course, some women still took to the pen, which was overlooked as long as they did not neglect their domestic duties or spouted ideas that were too wild. Failing her duties in the house led to the ruin of many a marriage, after all, though the firm hand of a husband could guide her back to salvation (cf. Welter 1966: 164-167).

Of course having a husband meant marriage, the sphere many thought woman had been intended for. She was to be a friend and councilor to her husband, to ease his burdens and
soothe his troubles after a long day of work. Marriage also increased a woman’s authority. While husbands ruled over a wife’s “person and conduct”, she ruled his “inclinations” (Welter 1966: 171) through soft touches and tears. According to Welter, such a marriage should never be entered into because of money but because of love, as this purest of feelings should vanquish the power the materialistic world might hold over society. Again, women were used to counteract the more worldly fallacies of eighteenth century males. Hand in hand with marriage went children, as motherhood was seen as the climax of happiness, with America depending on women to rear Christian patriots. Indeed, it was not the vote women needed to affect politics, according to propaganda, but staying home, listening to their husbands, raising sons and daughters in the spirit of the country, and be rewarded through love for it (cf. Welter 1966: 170-172).

Welters text sheds light mainly on the expectations society had for women during the nineteenth century. However, by looking what was expected of women we can also see what was expected of men. While women lived life in the private sector, men lived in the public one. The public and economic sphere (cf. Dorsey 2002: 13), providing for the family and representing them fell to the men, safe for exceptions were it was hard to make ends meet and women had to step up and help with the household income. If a man was the one taking actions in the world, a woman was his conscience. While some sectors overlap, as explained before piety and sexual moderation was also expected from men though not insisted on, we have many that are separated according to sexes. Men were supposed to be dominant where women were submissive. Men were the intellectuals. Women should let such pursuits lie, lest they get any ideas. What went on in private homes is a different matter, as there are sure to have been households were lines blurred and exceptions were made. The general public opinion of matters was explained above, however, and it is this view that we shall work with for the sake of simplicity.

As for how men should treat their wives, Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine advises men in the form of a little poem:

Be to her faults a little blind;  
Be to her virtues very kind;  
Let all her ways be unconfin’d,  
And place your padlock on her mind.

(Godey quoted in Saxton 1977: 65)
This advice can be read as benevolent condescension; turning a blind eye to a partner’s bad habits and flaws is not so different compared to contemporary times, as is an appreciation to their strengths. What is interesting is the last line, which, according to Saxton (cf. 1977: 65) suggests that they should make sure they are the one person they talk to and confide in as to discourage gossip between women, which was considered disturbing, for it could reveal weaknesses about their men. Strength is to this day seen as an essential attribute in men; both strength in character and integrity and bodily strength. Dorsey (2002: 14) counts “patriotism, military honors, chivalry, and good natured compassion” among other manly virtues. As already mentioned, women were expected to be patriots as well. However, while women were urged to do so in the private sphere, men did so publicly which again shows a dichotomy between what was considered female spheres and male spheres and historians have taken to call this “separate sexual spheres” (D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 57). War was another inherently male pursuit that women were not allowed or even thought of entering at the time. It was only permissible to do so as a nurse, which was close enough to the domestic to be allowed. Corporal fighting, killing, military strategy fell to the men as part of their less virtuous nature, though such acts were deemed necessary enough.

Chivalry is a point to do with a man’s treatment of women, for despite them being regarded as the weaker sex, or perhaps because of it, men were expected to treat women gently, attentively, and with due respect. Manners, civic virtue, and success evolved to become the mark of a true gentleman, especially in gentility during the late eighteenth century. Another point that reaches across the boundaries of class is independence. To feel like a man, males had to not be beholden to anyone, which went so far to even include children (cf. Dorsey 2002: 15-18). On the first glance this seems to be exaggerated, but on the other hand, it is yet another opposite to what was expected of women. Women, by their nature, had to be, were even wanted to be, as clingingly dependent as possible. When we consider the already mentioned dichotomy that seems to lie like a barrier between all things male and female, it makes sense that a man, who is everything that is not female, should be as independent as possible, especially in the domestic sphere. The masculine ideal was that of the self-made man that conquered nature and acquired wealth (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 57). A good character and as Christian a life as possible were expected of all people, however.

While all of this is true, we also have to take into account the fact that the nineteenth century followed a time of revolutions and upheavals. Just as much as countries freed themselves of the rule of kings, women decided to strain against their confines, too. The wars had upturned
many rules and women had had to support their families without their husbands. The idea of the pragmatic young woman was born through writer Judith Sargent, who called this woman Penelope in deference to Odysseus’ wife. She diligently did her work, was not distracted by frivolous matters, and did not adapt her character to the one of her future husband. She did not daydream about Prince Charming, but instead studied and learned valuable skills. This way, she would be able to deal with various calamities that could one day befall her. Women were compelled to train their talents so that they could subsist should another war strike the country. The new American woman was born (cf. Godineau 1994: 25-39).

In some of the above paragraphs we have already discussed the matter of sexuality in nineteenth century America in that it was seen as something private that should be kept between husband and wife. Its chief purpose was reproduction, though it was also used to insure the individual health of spouses. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, sex as an expression of love and intimacy started to make its way forward. During this century the average amount of children dropped from 7 (1800) to 4.24 children (1880) meaning that children and duties linked to them took over less and less of a woman’s day. This was due to a mixture of economic reasons, a change in religious beliefs, and women empowering themselves more and more in the domestic sphere. Forms of birth control, such as celibacy or coitus interruptus were practiced when necessary and apparently not subject to stigma, at least within the bounds of a marriage. The use of contraception made it possible for people to think about sex as more than just a means for reproduction and information about contraceptives circulated widely from the eighteen thirties onward. Knowledge about such things was passed along to family and friends and women especially developed folk remedies for pregnancies, such as drinking gun powder or eating dried chicken gizzards. If such remedies failed there were others to abort an unwanted fetus. Such knowledge also started to appear, for instance, in home medical manuals. The effectiveness of these procedures was of a varying degree and recipes included drinking rusty nail water and hot baths (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 55-63).

With knowledge about contraception and abortion more readily available than before, people’s attitude towards intercourse changed. The church never quite managed to keep on shaming individuals for their urges, especially since the state no longer backed up church discipline as it did in earlier times. A new form of genre within literature was born called sexual advice literature. At the same time authority over sexual matters shifted from the church over to medical professionals, who agreed that control over sexuality should be
internalized by individuals. However, moderation was still advised as excessive intercourse could become a disease of the body and the mind if not governed properly (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 66-67). Thus, while sexuality was regarded as something enjoyable and not inherently sinful, outside of procreation it was still a private matter to be engaged in within the marriage bed and not on the streets, out of wedlock, or in brothels. Women, as already mentioned, had by far worse consequences to face if they did not observe these rules.

This was also to the time were attitudes towards marriage were romanticized. From the mid-eighteenth century on marriage had become a union based more on affection than political gain, wealth, or other practical matters in the middle class, with the poor still marrying for the survival of the family by pooling together labor resources. The rates of couples marrying because of pre-marital relations rose during that time, with thirty percent of recent brides giving birth within eight and a half months after the wedding had occurred. To prevent such happenings as effectively as possible courtship between potentials spouses had to be done in public either with chaperones or other couples coming along. It became more important to do so since, in this sexually integrated world, men and women formed friendships while working, went to church, or spent time in mixed-gender social groups. During such courtships, confidences were exchanged and weaknesses exposed. People expected to fall in love before marriage, rather than learning to love a spouse after the wedding had already taken place (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 73-74).

While relationships between individuals of the opposite gender were romanticized and encouraged, sexual relations between members of the same gender were condemned and seen as immoral or unnatural. Despite this, same sex relationships still took place and some kinds of such relationships even flourished. The cult of friendship that had become more important for the middle class fostered some relationships with the same sex, not necessarily sexual ones, but it was a fertile ground for love to bloom. Within the lower classes it was especially places in which one gender was isolated from the other where such couples found each other, for instance in cowboy towns or within female academies. However, most of the nineteenth century was a time where the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality did not exist and any tender feelings someone may have had for a person of the same sex was often seen devoid of sexual urges (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 121).

This goes so far that some historians have taken great pains to deny the possibility of certain historical figures having felt homoerotic love, even though their letters and other writings would not allow any other interpretation when read from the context of a later century. Emily
Dickinson is such a figure; she is rumored to have had romantic feelings for her sister in law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, as well as other women. The emotion she expressed for Susan in letters and poems are usually regarded as too ardent, even when taking into account the liberal conventions about affection of the nineteenth century (cf. Aldrich & Wotherspoon 2002: 151), meaning that romantic friendships between women were tolerated, as long as they did not turn sexual (cf. Walkowitz 1994: 440). It was only in the late eighteenth century were doctors would use these terms and describe same-sex relationships as a form of sexual perversion, sometimes calling it “congenital inversion”, meaning that a person had inverted gender traits not only limited to a longing for sexual and romantic partners of the same sex. During most of the nineteenth century the police was not concerned with prosecute consensual sodomy, only taking action if the act had involved the use of force or a minor. It was only by the end of the century that cities started to criminalize consensual homosexual intercourse (cf. D’Emilio & Freedman 1997: 121-122).
2 CHAPTER 2: *Little Women* (1868)

Legend:

2.1 Contextualizing Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*

Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women*, was born the second child and daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail May Alcott (cf. Saxton 1977: 33) on November 29, 1832 (cf. Saxton 1977: 76). The family was living in Germantown, Pennsylvania at that point, as her father had started to run a school in this town. Amos B. Alcott, once a peddler and son of a farmer, had reinvented himself, and become a largely self-taught educator. Her mother, Abigail, was the daughter of a distinguished Colonel, meaning she and her husband came from very different backgrounds. The family moved to Boston when Louisa was three years of age, where Alcott opened his own school. While the general didactic idea of the time was made up of obedience and punishment, Bronson Alcott subscribed to the Romantic idea that described children as holy innocents and believed that adults could learn from them. Louisa, however, was an unruly child (cf. Cheever 2010: 5-10).

She was neither her father’s nor her mother’s favorite daughter. Her father took her dark complexion and dark eyes as a sign that showed she was further away from god’s grace than he himself and his blond-haired, favorite child Anna (cf. Saxton 1977: 76-77). Throughout her life, Louisa was regarded as a disappointing rebel by her parents and accordingly received little love from them. Her father dominated her and used her as a subject for the experiments he conducted in the name of teaching. While she still loved him, he called her a “fiend” (cf. Cheever 2010: 5). Though his role in her life was not wholly pleasant, it was through his intellectual pursuits that Louisa’s own intelligence and creativity were nurtured as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were counted among her teachers (cf. Showalter 1997: XIII). Alcott’s mother was famous for her temper that served as the inspiration to Jo’s character in *Little Women*, who once shakes her sister until her teeth chatter (cf. Cheever 2010: 17). Contemporaries describe Louisa May Alcott herself as “full of spirit and life; impulsive and moody, and at times irritable and nervous” (Reisen 2009: 3). Her eyes were described as by turns “fierce, funny, and thoughtful” (Reisen 2009: 3). Much like Jo March resembled her mother in anger, Alcott herself bore many physical and mental similarities to her heroine (cf. Reisen 2009:3).
Alcott’s parents were in favor of abolitionism and the women’s rights movement and transferred these values to their children as well. Alcott was schooled by her father, who is regarded as a famous transcendentalist. While this means her schooling must have been comparatively thorough and well looked after, her father’s intellectual pursuits also kept him from providing a livelihood for his family (cf. Cullen-DuPont 1998: 8). He was more concerned with achieving transcendental perfection and his inability to provide for his loved ones became infamous even among his transcendentalist peers, such as Emerson, who had no understanding for this failing, high-minded as they were themselves (cf. Showalter 1997: XI). Alcott found herself in the position of needing to help out her parents and sisters financially and thus took up the role of provider for her family along with her mother. She worked various jobs, including seamstress, governess, domestic servant, and teacher. It was also during this time when she first took up the pen. In the end she was able to support her family through the proceeds of her writings alone (cf. Cullen-DuPont 1998: 8).

These writings span more than two hundred and seventy works of different length (cf. Cullen-DuPont 1998: 8). They encompass children’s literature as well as novels for adults, sensation stories, and feminist essays (cf. Showalter 1997: XI). During the process of reading her works, the reader will stumble upon many experiences that mirror the author’s own life, including life in poverty and war, and the death of siblings. At first she wrote as much as she could in order to make as much money as possible, writing about demonic men and love affairs under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard. But it was during the year 1868, the effects of the mercury used to cure the typhoid fever she had contracted during her time as a Civil War nurse (cf. Showalter 1997: XIX) still causing her pain in her writing hand, when she sat down to write a book for girls, as her publisher had suggested. Said book turned out to be her most renowned work and the story of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March can be found under the title *Little Women* (cf. Cheever 2010: 1-3).

For this book she also drew on her own experiences and the shenanigans she and her sisters got up to during their childhood. While some events of the book are based upon Alcott’s memory it needs to be said that it is still to be considered a work of fiction as many points, for instance, the March girls’ loving relationship with their father, is different from what Alcott herself experienced, as already mentioned (cf. Cheever 2010: 3-4). *Little Women* was followed by *Good Wives*, often published jointly with its predecessor under the title *Little Women*. Another two sequels called *Little Men*, and *Jo’s Boys* were published after (cf. Reisen 2009: 3).
Alcott, like her parents, supported the women’s rights movement, though she took no active part in it. She was more focused on women’s right to labor instead of the right to vote, as she told a friend in a letter in 1873. This is also supported by her book *Work: A Story of Experience*, which was written for adult readers. Same as in *Little Women*, Alcott draws on her own experiences, this time in the world of work, to illustrate what a woman’s life as a worker looks like and to bring to light the struggles that came with being a working woman in the nineteenth century (cf. Cullen-DuPont 1998: 9). She ascribed many of her own experiences and feelings to her characters and much like Jo has no time for husbands at first the author herself never married stating that her husband was called liberty and that he was better to love than any man, and that marriage was not the sole purpose of a woman’s life (cf. Cheever 2010: XIV-XV). Two years after the death of her father she died on March 4, 1888, aged fifty-five, her death being credited to mercury poisoning (cf. Showalter 1997: XXVI).

As for the novel itself, *Little Women*’s preface consists of an excerpt from John Bunyan’s novel *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, a novel about living a Christian life. The excerpt talks about the novel’s female character, Mercy, not its main male character, Christian, which indicates that Alcott’s novel will be a guide for young girls. After that, the story starts around Christmas time during the American Civil War. An omniscient narrator tells us the story of the March family, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. March, usually referred to as father and marmee, and their four daughters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. We join these four little women on their way through growing up and mastering challenges as well as reigning in their flaws and developing their own individual virtues (cf. LW: 3).

At the start, all of the girls complain about their current situation, with their father currently being away serving in the war and them being rather poor concerning their monetary wealth. All complain about their chores and Meg, who is the oldest, talks about how she despises her job as a governess. Jo declares she will never stop acting as boyish as she does and Amy, the youngest, is dubbed a goose for being too particular and prim. The only sister who seems to have no mortal flaws is Beth, the second youngest, who is simply described as a very dear girl. When their mother arrives back home it becomes evident that her girls adore her and it is decided that instead of using their pocket money to buy things for themselves they will use it to buy their mother gifts to reward her for being such a good maternal figure (cf. LW: 5-13).

On top of this, they resolve to better themselves to make life easier for their mother. Meg, for instance, thinks too much of her looks and hates to work, both of which she wants to change. Jo will try to aspire to become a little woman and be less wild. Amy will try to be less selfish.
Beth does not seem to possess any vices but always seeks to better herself anyway, thinking that she is too shy and that is something to be remedied. Marmee gifts each of them a little book, which we can surmise is a little bible. They all decide to read a bit of it each day. Their mother asks them to help her help a German family that will go hungry this Christmas if they do not give them some of their own food and the girls gladly oblige before giving their mother her gifts (cf. LW: 14-31).

After Christmas we are introduced to Theodore Laurence, the boy who lives next door. Having been invited to Sallie Gardiner’s New Year’s party, Meg more so than Jo, is in a frenzy to find the perfect outfit. Meg cares a lot about social etiquette and it becomes apparent that Jo is not good in dealing with social appearances like this party. Once the two girls have arrived Meg conducts herself beautifully while Jo keeps to the side of the ballroom where she meets the Laurence boy, who is nicknamed Laurie. The both of them hit it off with each other and when Meg hurts her ankle he helps the two sisters arrange a way home. This is the start of a lifelong friendship between Laurie and the Marches (cf. LW: 42-59).

With the holidays over the girls all have to go back to their respective chores and duties. As mentioned, Meg is a governess, but does not particularly care for the children she has to look after. She works this job to help out with money, not because of a personal calling. Jo is a companion to their Aunt March, who is a stern woman that makes her read out loud books Jo, who is a literary type, does not care for. Beth does not go to school as she should, because she is too shy and instead stays home and helps around the house, while the youngest sister Amy attends school. After they have all complained they receive a lecture from their mother who helps them find value in the things they do not like to do. This is a very usual concept for the chapters in these books; in every chapter one or more of the girls have a problem and learn a lesson at the end of it (cf. LW: 60-79).

Later, still during winter, Jo keeps Laurie, who has been sick, company in the mansion next door. We are introduced to Laurie’s grandfather Mr. Laurence, who is a stern but caring man, who takes a liking to Jo and soon all the March girls start spending time at his house. Beth, who loves playing music, becomes enamored with Mr. Laurence’s piano, but is too afraid to play it. When Mr. Laurence hears this he conducts a scheme to lure the girl into his mansion so that she will play. As a thank you, Beth makes him slippers and he gifts her the piano of his granddaughter. Little, shy Beth marches over to him and kisses him in thanks (cf. LW: 80-111).
Later on, Amy faces some troubles at school where the girls have taken to gifting each other pickled limes to show who they like or to trade for favors and other gifts. Amy, who has fallen into debt because she has been given many limes without having any to distribute herself, incurs Meg’s pity. Meg gives her money for the limes and Amy buys a parcel of twenty to take to school. Her teacher has forbidden them, however, and she is made to throw them out of the window, before being struck on the palm as a punishment. Her mother and sisters are outraged, not because she was punished, but because the punishment was corporeal. Amy is allowed to stay home for a while and have lessons at home with Beth (cf. LW: 112-123).

Some time later, Amy finds more trouble when she burns Jo’s book of self-written stories. She does this in retaliation for Jo forbidding her to go to a play with her, Meg, and Laurie. Jo is so upset that she stops talking to Amy, who does not know how to apologize for her transgression. The situation escalates when they go ice skating with Laurie when does not warn Amy about the ice being thin, resulting of Amy breaking in and falling into the water. Jo is overcome with guilt and swears never to let her anger rule her again, if Amy lives, which she does. Her mother gives her advice on how to reign her temper in, as she herself is also guilty of having a bad one (cf. LW: 124-141).

The attention then turns to Meg, who has been invited to spent two weeks with her friend Annie Moffat, whose family is rather wealthier than the Marches are. Meg wishes she had more fashionable clothes to fit in better with the party, a wish that turns out not to be baseless, as the other people present pity her. She also hears them gossiping about her mother’s alleged plans to marry her off to Laurie for his money, which Meg is terribly embarrassed to hear. The other girls decide to let her borrow some of their finery and lend her clothes as well as jewelry. Laurie, as well as a few other men, is not happy with the prettied up Meg and she later regrets having let her friends dress her, and at home talks to her mother and Jo about what happened. Her mother reassures them that while she has plans for her girls, they mainly consist of wanting them to be happy and good, which is when Meg realizes how shallow she has been (cf. LW: 142-168).

Once spring arrives the girls start gardening, with each one of them having their own plot. They also hold meetings at their secret society, the Pickwick Club, and they write newsletters for it every week. Jo proposes to let Laurie join and after some objections about him being a boy he is allowed to become a member. When spring turns into summer, both Meg and Jo have some free time on their hands, as the Kings, to whom Meg is governess, and Aunt March
all go on a holiday. Beth and Amy also decide to take a break from their lessons and the girls decide to be idle for a while. They do not manage to do it for very long, especially after their servant Hannah and their mother take time off as well, which means that they have to step up and do their chores for them. They are happy for the work and grateful for the lesson their mother taught them (cf. LW: 169-203).

One summer day Meg receives one of her two lost gloves along with the translation of a German song by Mr. Brooke, Laurie’s tutor. She wonders where the second one is and why she only received one back. Also, the girls are invited to a picnic at Laurie's the next day and they gladly go. There are other boys and girls of varying ages invited as well, some of them British. One of these girls, Kate, looks down on Meg for being a governess, a position that is less prestigious in Britain than in America. Jo has some trouble getting along with a boy named Fred, who cheats at cricket. In the end they all play a story telling game and learn to like each other (cf. LW: 204-236).

Some days later Laurie is bored and asks the girls if he can join them, when he sees them working on their chores, reading, and drawing on a hill. He is welcomed and the five of them end up talking about their dreams. Laurie wants to be a musician, Jo a famous writer, Amy an artist, Meg want to be rich and Beth wants everyone to be happy and together as a family. Laurie is advised to be good to his grandfather so maybe he will be allowed to pursue his dream (cf. LW: 237-252).

Jo does her best to start the career she dreams of by finishing two of her stories and bringing them to a newspaper. She does not tell anyone about this but Laurie. In return, Laurie tells her that his tutor, Mr. Brooke, has Megs second glove because he is in love with her, a fact that disgusts Jo, because she does not want him to take her sister away. A week later Jo reads a story from a newspaper to her family only to reveal that she wrote it, and everyone is proud of her. The good mood does not translate over to the next chapter, when the family receives a telegram that tells them their father has fallen ill. Mrs. March goes to Washington, D.C. to nurse him back to health and Mr. Brooke comes along as an escort, while Hannah and Mr. Laurence promise to look after the girls. Before they can go, Jo goes to a barber and sells him her hair in exchange for money to help out the family. Jo pretends to not miss her locks, but later cries over them (cf. LW: 253-283).

The girls, Hannah, Mr. Laurence and Laurie write many letters to Mrs. March while she is away in D.C. and update her about everyday things and send their love. Left without their
mother, the girls perform their chores very dutifully for some time but start to slack off again. They were asked to visit their German neighbors, the Hummels, each day to help them out but one day none of the girls are willing to go. Beth, who is feeling poorly, does it in the end and it turns out that the Hummel children have come down with scarlet fever and that the baby died in Beth’s arms. The other girls are immediately sorry and even more so once it becomes clear that Beth has contracted the disease as well. The doctor comes by and Hannah does not think that Mrs. March should be notified, lest she worry unnecessarily. But Beth is much more seriously ill than anybody thought and Laurie, who is a pillar of strength to all the girls, writes to Mrs. March behind everybody’s backs, a fact they are grateful for once it is revealed. Beth, as if through a miracle, recovers from her illness the same night her mother arrives (cf. LW: 284-323).

While Beth is sick, Amy stays at Aunt March’s house. The old lady likes Amy, but she makes her work hard and does not give her as much free time as she is used to. Esther, her aunt’s servant, spends a lot of time playing with her and informs her that once the aunt is dead, Amy is to receive an old turquoise ring, which leads Amy to behave very well in order to really get it. Esther is a catholic, and she and Amy set up a shrine to pray for Beth. Amy also writes a will in case she herself dies unexpectedly and bequeaths all her belongings unto her family and friends and has both Esther and Laurie witness and sign the document (cf. LW: 324-337).

Meanwhile at home Mrs. March watches over Beth while she recovers and Amy is told to return. She was given the turquoise ring by her aunt for being good and asks her mother to be allowed to wear it, not as a sign of vanity but as a reminder to be less selfish. Her wish is granted. Jo later tells her mother that Mr. Brooke is in love with Meg and as it turns out her mother already knows, for Mr. Brooke has told her. It now all depends on whether Meg returns his feelings. Jo confesses she wanted Meg to marry Laurie and be rich instead of marrying poor Mr. Brooke. Mrs. March surmises that Meg does not love Mr. Brooke yet but will learn to do so in the future (cf. LW: 338-349).

Jo is unhappy about the situation with Mr. Brooke. Meg receives a love letter from him and answers it. However, it turns out that it was not Mr. Brooke who wrote it at all, but instead Laurie playing a prank, when Mr. Brooke writes Meg a letter stating that he never wrote the first one. The girls are initially angry with him but decide to forgive him. Mr. Laurence has found out that Laurie has done something wrong, though not what, and has reprimanded and shaken him as a punishment. When Jo goes to Mr. Laurence and explains what happened, the old man is contrite and writes a note of apology to Laurie (cf. LW: 350-369).
Christmastime arrives again but this time the family celebrates with Mr. March, who comes home along with Mr. Brooke who has looked after him since Mrs. March returned home. Their father tells the girls all the changes he can see within them Meg has become hard-working and less vain, Jo has become more of a woman and less boyish and rough, and Amy is now less selfish and also less vain than she used to be. Beth has always been a little angel. Their father is very proud of them. It also becomes apparent that Meg is not indifferent about Mr. Brooke, though when he asks her if she loves him, she tells him she is too young to marry. When Aunt March declares that she should not marry someone so poor anyway, Meg completely changes her attitude and defends Mr. Brooke and her right to love him. The man in question heard her defense of him and asks her to marry him in a few years, to which she says yes. Everybody but Jo seems happy at the development and the book ends with the family gathered around each other (cf. LW: 370-400).

2.2 Tomboys and Peacocks: Comparing Traditional and Subversive Gender Performances

For the first part of our analysis let us establish a baseline. What main characters can we, the readers, as well as them, the characters, characterize as adhering to gender roles and expectations? It is important to form such a starting point first as it will be easier to identify where characters, who can be considered outliers, deviate from the norm. Also, we can directly compare how both of these character groups are treated by other characters and what the consequences of their actions are. Is stereotypically female behavior always lauded? Or are there variations within the theme of femininity, with some female traits ranking above others? Who or what is seen as the ideal? Who resembles it most closely? To do this we will mainly focus on the sisters Meg, Amy, and Beth first, as they seem to adhere to femininity most closely. They all do so in different ways, however, that fit their personalities. Gaining a perspective on what is considered a good man in *Little Women* is harder, as there is a shortage of male characters around. The men in the book, safe for Laurie, all seem to occupy mainly a parental or supportive role and thus shall be discussed in the section about relationships later on.

Let us start with Meg, who seems to embody many a female spirit and is described by Jo as being good and pretty enough to be the heroine of any book (cf. LW: 270). She is the oldest of the sisters and the closest to becoming a woman. Meg is described as a beautiful girl; in fact while the other girls’ personality is talked about a little at the start as well, Meg is mostly characterized through her appearance, which does fit into the time she has been born with
eyes large, her hair full, mouth sweet, and her form plump (cf. LW: 10). All bodily features Meg possesses are seen as pleasing, thus her full figure is as well. This deviates from contemporary Western beauty standards that promote thinness as the goal to be achieved. While times were getting better food wise, the nineteenth century still regarded a certain plumpness in a person’s figure as a status symbol and also as a symbol of a woman’s nurturing capabilities (cf. Knibiehler 1994: 374). Another such point is Meg’s hands, which are described as white (cf. LW: 10). The fact that her hands are not tanned is a mark of modern era beauty in that only those who did not have to work hard outside of the house usually had white hands and white skin was usually associated with aristocracy. Possessing this feature spoke of money and a privileged lifestyle, though the trend was not pursued to the same extent as it had been during the early modern era (cf. Matthews Grieco 1994: 78-79). Though aristocratic paleness was not en vogue anymore, girls did their best to cultivate a pearly look to give the illusion of domesticity (cf. Knibiehler 1994: 375). This is where Meg’s greatest vice comes into play; she is vain about her looks, which is the flaw she is supposed to overcome during the course of this book. A feat she manages not completely, but partly, through many lessons dispersed over the chapters. As such, while a woman’s beauty is still an asset, an infatuation with her own looks is not seen as attractive, much like it is nowadays. Humility was and continues to be a virtue, after all.

Meg’s beauty and the idea of what kind of beauty is valued, is discussed during chapter nine ‘Meg Goes to Vanity Fair’. Meg was invited by a friend to attend a social gathering that lasts two weeks. Meg can only take rather plain clothes that are a bit out of fashion, as the family does not have much money (cf. LW: 142-145). She is subsequently pitied by the other women present, though they compliment her white arms (cf. LW: 147), and in a fit of charity, they dress her up in their own clothes, lend her some jewelry, and make her up. The men present in the room are unhappy with the change, since at first Meg wears her own modest clothing and uses flowers Laurie sent to her as her only ornament (cf. LW: 152-158). Laurie especially voices his unhappiness with the new way Meg looks, and tells her she does not look like herself (cf. LW: 159). It is suggested that a more natural beauty, emphasized through the use of flowers as jewelry, is regarded as more valuable than artificial beauty and that such beauty lies in modesty and demureness. This is not the only time during which flowers play a role in this. For instance, Meg is described once as looking as “fresh and sweet as a rose” underlining the fact that she is a natural beauty and has so little need for artificial frills that adding them to her appearance actually lessens her looks instead of amplifying them (LW: 238).
While many of the women present value a louder look, the men decidedly do not, and it seems that it is the men’s opinion that is given more credit, which is similar to the contemporary trend of men telling women they look much more fetching if they are wearing less make-up. It seems as though the beauty of women is mainly a gift to men and not something in which the woman in question herself should find pleasure. This idea is supported by one of Meg’s utterances in a different chapter, where she states that there is no use in making herself look pretty if nobody will see and comment on it (cf. LW: 60). On the other hand, the lesson of the chapter may also be that a girl should not undermine her integrity in order to try and fit in with others as Meg also acts more brazenly and flirts freely with the others. We can therefore also make a connection between emphasizing one’s beauty and promiscuity, which of course would not have been encouraged in women of that time. It is also hinted that the way Meg acts, dancing, giggling, and chattering, is not considered a good way of conducting oneself, though the other girls do it as well (cf. LW: 162).

Meg realizes the error of her ways and feels like a fool for letting the others dress her up. She later confides in Jo and her mother, and her mother praises her for having learned the value of natural beauty and modesty, and tells her that indulging in such behavior once in a while is not harmful as long as she does not let it become a habit (cf. LW: 164-166). Marmee, in this instant, seems to have internalized the ideal of natural beauty being prized above other forms. Additionally, realizing Meg’s error like all the men present at the party so easily did, Mrs. March and also Meg and Jo in the end, are shown to be just as sensible as them and are alleviated above the superficial women at the party. However, this is not the only instance in which her vanity is punished. When she is getting ready for a New Year’s Eve party, Jo accidentally burns Meg’s hair off when she tries to curl it for her, and it is Meg herself that says it serves her right for trying to look overly nice (cf. LW: 46). This is also the same function where Meg wears high heels, which hurt her feet and lead her to spraining her ankle. She was scolded by Jo when she decided to wear these impractical shoes and warned about the possibility of hurting herself (cf. LW: 49-54). In the end it these fashionable shoes turned out to be another vanity to be punished in Meg which fits into how lessons are taught in this book; always with gravitas and either physical or emotional pain. The road to a virtuous life is a rocky one and Meg and the others do not always tread carefully.

Though she learned her lesson, Meg never stops fussing about her looks entirely, which can be attributed to her personality just as much as it may be to her gender. After all, Meg has likely been called a beauty from very early on. The features of a person can influence their
personality just as much as any other outside factors. If somebody is praised on the way they look often enough it is only natural that such a thing becomes important to a person, especially since it affects their life. For instance, Laurie once tells Meg that with her beauty it will not be hard for her to find a husband (cf. LW: 246). As acquiring a husband was a goal women tended to pursue out of both cultural and economic reasons, her beauty is always an asset to be tended to, though Meg herself does not entertain such notions openly. She is very innocent in her marital ambitions, but finding the idea of being engaged romantic (cf. LW: 147). However, at the end of the book this changes a little.

Another of Meg’s burdens besides her vanity is her yearning for luxury and being rich. She wishes she did not have to work and instead would like to have enough money for it to not be a necessity. This wish actually feeds into her vanity, as it would make it much easier for her to obtain nice dresses and for her hands to remain white if she was wealthy. That idleness that having enough money to hire an abundance of servants would bring is not something to be cherished, is a lesson she learns along with Jo and Amy during chapter eleven (cf. LW: 185-203). When all of the sisters decide to stop doing their chores and spend their time on more trivial pursuits, Meg goes shopping. However, like the other sisters, in the end she grows bored of leisure activities that are not interspersed with work. She vows to work on her sewing, a skill all women should possess, much like cooking, which Jo promises to practice (cf. LW: 202). This seems to happen in order for the girls to grow into good housewives and mothers. A mother’s work is never done, after all, and a woman who is prone to idle fancies does neither have the physical strength nor the mental resolve to discipline children or perform the Sisyphean tasks that characterize housework.

As already mentioned, Meg, like the other characters, undergoes a transformation throughout the book. Like her sisters, she is praised by her father for the favorable changes he can see in her (cf. LW: 378). He tells her that now that she has embraced her duties in the house more securely and her hands have turned from white to brown due to her hard work, she is prettier to him than ever before, as hard work speaks for good quality and also means that she has overcome some of her vanity. The fact that she has worked hard to hone the skills needed in a housewife also please him in that she is trying to fulfill her presumed biological destiny, which is becoming a wife and mother. This also lends credit to the idea that natural beauty as well as hard work are what is valued above beauty that speaks of leisure time and money in this book, which fits into the fact that the other classes of the modern era felt nothing but
derision for the frivolous and soft lifestyle of the upper classes (cf. Matthews Grieco 1994: 70). As we can see, some female traits are priced above others.

However, it is not only after her transformation is completed that Meg knows about the duties women are supposed to fulfill in the nineteenth century. At the start of the novel she comments on the fact that while the men are fighting a war, women have to make their contributions to the country in other ways, as they have to make their own little sacrifices during wartime. These sacrifices, such as not liking to wash dishes but doing it anyway, seem trivial compared to what the male soldiers of the time had to endure (cf. LW: 6). This emphasizes the view of women being much more delicate than men and that trifles such as not wanting to do certain chores were regarded as comparable to horrors of war. Though this is an exaggerated way of putting things, the fact remains that Meg makes this comparison, which may also highlight her immaturity. Her mother takes a more hands-on approach to helping with the war effort by volunteering at Soldiers’ Aid Societies (cf. LW: 68). While it never becomes quite clear what exactly her duties are at these societies, they likely were of a domestic nature, such as giving out food, nursing, and mending clothes. The fact that she works at such societies also shows that she is a patriot, a characteristic highly prized in American women that marmee likely wants to communicate to her daughters through example.

Now, let us turn to matters in which Meg seems to fit less into stereotypically female ideals. For one, it is said that Meg does not care for nursing when Beth falls ill (cf. LW: 309). This is an interesting point since nursing was regarded as a particularly female occupation and, on top of that, a means through which women acquired a certain amount of power, as mentioned in the theory section. We could read several meanings into this. On the one hand, it could mean that Meg is not particularly interested in caring for people. This theory is supported by the fact that she does not like her job as a governess and never learns to like it (cf. LW: 7). Both of these tasks have to do with taking charge and caring for others, though being a governess has to do with exacting discipline as well. That Meg likes doing neither of these things, not even for her sister, may indicate that she is not built for motherhood in a roundabout way. However, as she is the eldest of her sisters, she is known to give lectures to them and to reprimand her sisters for any transgressions they make (cf. LW: 8) which would make it seem as though it is simply children that are not part of her family that she does not wish to educate. Another reason for Meg’s apparent aversion may be the fact that Jo does enjoy nursing and does it for both Beth and Laurie (cf. LW: 310, 83). Meg not being interested in these tasks
may have been an implemented plot device that allows Jo to exhibit more traditionally female behavior, despite her boyish nature. However, it may also be counted simply as a quirk of character, since nobody is perfect, after all. As Alcott allows most of her characters a little, and in Jo’s case a lot, of freedom regarding gendered behavior, it seems likely that there is some truth in all of these points.

Meg’s occupation as a governess is also commented upon by a British girl called Katie during a gathering at Laurie’s house. The difference between America and Britain regarding middle- and upper-class women and jobs is highlighted here. Katie talks about governesses with a certain patronizing derision, which hurts Meg’s feelings. This also has to do with apparently Miss Kate being of higher social standing than Meg, and she assumes her not to be a governess but instead to have one. She is simultaneously insulting her lower social class and her lack of education. John Brooke comes to Meg’s rescue, stating than girls in America are far more independent that girls in Britain and that they are respected for supporting themselves (cf. LW: 227-228). While Miss Katie leaves her skepticism of American girls behind at the end of the chapter (cf. LW: 236) we can derive differences in the way countries within the Western world treated women. While compared to today American girls had little freedom, they still had more than women in Europe did. This also becomes apparent throughout other works of literature, such as in Henry James’ Daisy Miller, where the cultural differences between European and American girls ultimately lead to the heroine’s death after her European compatriots mistake her American independence and straightforwardness for promiscuity (cf. James 1878).

Now let us turn to Amy. She is much younger in age and in the way she conducts herself than Meg. Where Meg is almost fully formed and only needs fine tuning here and there, Amy is much more of what may be colloquially called a brat, as she is still a child in many ways. However, she busily builds upon her aspirations for the future and those are styled female in many, though not all, cases. If Meg is the embodiment of the ideal female coming into her own, Amy serves as the role model for a slightly different approach to achieve this ideal. They share several similarities. One of them is their vanity. Amy is very preoccupied with her looks and endlessly unhappy with her nose, which she deems too flat to look aristocratic. This goes so far that she sleeps with a pin on her nose in order to get it to be pointier (cf. LW: 70). What we can derive from this is that even in the nineteenth century girls tried to modify their bodies in order to fit into the current beauty standards, which is also showcased by the fact
that there were several medicinal encyclopedias around during the modern era that promised to help women achieve desirability (cf. Berriot-Salvadore 1994: 397).

On top of that, Amy is rather young, only being twelve years old and her blonde curls are her biggest pride. She loves them to such a degree that cutting them off, even theoretically, is seen as the greatest sacrifice she could make (cf. LW: 339). Like with Meg, the beauty of her hair is mentioned several times, from which we can derive that femininity back then, as much as today, is linked with beautiful, long, curly hair (cf. Knibiehler 1994: 375). While perceptions have started to change over the course of the last century, long, healthy hair is still considered a cornerstone of beauty. Since we have already established that Alcott prices natural beauty, hair has an even bigger importance, as a full head of hair was a boon only nature could bestow upon a woman, unless she was wearing a wig. We will talk about this more later.

In spite of her age, blue eyed Amy holds herself like a lady (cf. LW: 11). She has nice manners and is very refined, a fact she is rather proud of. Her aforementioned vanity could also be deemed pride, as it is not only her looks that are important to her, but also the way people regard her. She could be called a rather self-important girl and it is this selfishness that she has to overcome during the course of the book (p. LW: 18). Like the other girls, she learns her lesson in several ways. For instance, once she burns Jo’s book of self-written stories, because Jo refuses to let her come along to a show. Jo is so angry with her that she does not talk to her for a long time and, in the end, Amy almost dies ice skating because Jo does not warn her about the ice being thin, since she is so cross (cf. LW: 126-141). The lessons in *Little Women* oftentimes are very severe and strict, not shying away from being painful. This and many other instances help Amy to better her selfish ways and in the end her father praises her for keeping herself back and waiting on everyone in the house patiently and without drawing attention to herself. She is also credited with having learned to think of others (cf. LW: 380). It is unclear whether this discouragement from self-importance can be seen as a gendered phenomenon, but considering that modesty and humility seem to be valued in men just as much as in women, as we will see in later sections, it seems safe to say that this character trait has to do more with being considered a good person, instead of simply a good woman.

Like Meg, Amy very much likes pretty ornaments and dresses to the point that she is once described as a peacock (cf. LW: 115). Same as with Meg, her vanity is not encouraged and while she and everybody in the family is aware of her blooming beauty, she seems to grow less self-important about it during the course of the book, though the breadth of her
transformation only becomes completely clear in the sequel *Good Wives*, which does make sense as Amy is still very much a child in *Little Women* and only joins the world of adulthood in the following story.

Amy, while also assertive, is the antithesis to Jo. Where Jo is boyish to a degree where she seems to make a point of acting thus, Amy affects a very prim and proper air. Both of them declare disgust for each other at one point. Amy states that she dislikes “rude, unladylike girls” while Jo says she hates “affected, niminy-piminy chits” (LW: 8). Neither of these extremes are encouraged, which fits into the biblical idea of treating all things with moderation (cf. Eccles. 3.1-8). Acting out here and there and being proud of accomplishments is alright and well, but the girls are discouraged from taking this too far. Amy stays a lady throughout the book and nobody dissuades her from that because it is part of her personality. What she has to change are the aspects that have the potential to hurt her and members of her family. Again, this seems to have to do less with gender and more with being a decent human being in a world that condemns excess. However, it can still be argued that a sense of self-importance would be considered especially unwelcome in women, as they were supposed to put the importance of their husband’s and children’s wellbeing above their own.

Lastly, let us turn to Beth who strikes the reader as a perfect person, if not a perfect woman. She embodies the spirit of all the women who are easily turned aside and often forgotten in favor of louder and seemingly more pressing matters. She is described as first and foremost living for others and cheerfully making sacrifices so silently that she is never thanked for them if the sacrifices are even noticed at all. In the end, this may lead to such women vanishing into themselves and their sunny demeanor being lost (cf. LW: 69-70). Alcott seems to use her as a cautionary tale or at least as a reprimand to a society where such quiet women are often forgotten or overshadowed. She does not see Beth’s case as a solitary one, in fact, she explicitly states that there are many women like her.

The character of Beth is not criticized; safe for her shyness, Beth is basically the perfect person. She always puts family first, going above and beyond to care for them and forgetting herself in the process, as already discussed above. She is also a good little housewife and never complains about her chores and can often be found knitting or sewing, much like the other girls, but compared to the others she does not find the chores she has to complete utterly bothersome. In fact, during the chapter where the girls decide to take a little holiday from their duties, Beth is almost incapable of doing so, always returning to her work and later remembering that she should not be doing it (cf. LW: 189-190). While the other girls struggle
with many faults such as vanity, anger, or selfishness, and can be found playing pranks on each other, being mean in a way only siblings can be to each other, Beth never engages in such behavior. Her main delights in the world are her dolls, upon which she dotes and her piano, which she can play beautifully. Both of these leisure activities can be described as traditionally female pursuits, for playing with dolls can be seen as practicing for motherhood and Beth takes this task very seriously, even to the point of separation anxiety (cf. LW: 209). Playing the piano was considered the skill of an accomplished young woman and thus fits her gender as well. All in all, Beth is a character made to sympathize with. However, the fact that she is virtually without faults renders her more of a stock character than a character wrought with complexities, as the other characters in Alcott’s work are.

While Meg, Amy, and Jo not only fulfill functions but also have their goals, dreams, and struggles, Beth’s greatest fault is not being outgoing. She is praised by all throughout the book, never doing any wrong, and has little aspirations except for wishing everything to stay as it is, plus her father coming home from war. It is easier to see her as a mascot or a pet instead of a person. While she is loved by her family, her life and the near loss of it is used as a plot point to teach her sisters a lesson during chapter seventeen (cf. LW: 298-309). Because her sisters neglect their responsibilities, Beth has to go and visit a German family, the Hummels, whose children have contracted scarlet fever, the youngest child even dying in Beth’s arms. Beth catches the disease, too, and for a long time it is unclear whether she will recover. While she does, it seems only to be as a reward for her sisters behaving well in as much as her contracting the illness served as a punishment for them (cf. LW: 310-323). Beth never recovers completely, however, and dies in the next installment of the series (cf. Alcott 1869: 304-313).

That is not to say, however, that she does not exhibit any personality towards other characters and the reader at all. Most of it can be classified as stereotypically female. To start, let us examine Beth’s one hamartia, her crippling shyness. Her shyness is first mentioned at the start of the novel, accompanied by her voice being described as “timid” (LW: 11). She is, by nature, a quiet soul, also called “little tranquility” by her father (LW: 11). Shyness is a character trait that could be regarded as female rather than male. With women expected to be the submissive ones, shyness and a little timidity would not be terribly out of character for a woman, as long as said shyness did not become crippling in the way it is for Beth. That she is unable to go to school because of it (cf. LW: 67-69) would be more of a hindrance than a charming asset, as it would prevent her from completing social engagements. Entertaining,
whether it be through reading, playing an instrument, or simply idle conversation, was seen as essential for an accomplished young lady, and Beth’s shyness prevents her from doing all of these tasks outside of the protective sphere of her own house. She opens up a little when she dares to go play the piano over at Mister Laurence’s house (cf. LW: 104-105) and later, as a thank you for the piano he gifts her, kisses him on the cheek (cf. LW: 111). However, this constitutes the whole breadth of her character development. She never overcomes her flaw.

Nothing much is said about her appearance, except for her being described as “rosy”, “smooth haired”, and “bright eyed” (LW: 11). She does not seem to be an exceptional beauty like Meg or Amy, nor is she comical looking like Jo. Everything about her is designed to be forgettable and plain, which fits into the idea that she was made to represent the neglected portion of womankind. She is not preoccupied with her looks as Amy and Meg are, either. She never talks about her hair or fusses with her dresses. She is once described as someone with a peaceful nature that lives in her own world (cf. LW: 11). She is content with what she has, be it her material goods or her family.

There is little else to say about Beth. She is an unremarkable little woman in the way she conducts herself. Her worth is derived from what she means to her sisters and what she represents for them. She is loved by them all, as she is such an unproblematic person that she is inherently lovable. For Jo, she represents an opportunity to practice maternal skills, just as much as Amy provides this opportunity to Meg (cf. LW: 72). As learning to be a mother and how to care for others is regarded as a necessary skill for any nineteenth century woman, the provides an essential service to Jo and, as virtuous as Beth is, she is a good, unproblematic starter choice for any aspiring mother. However plentiful her virtues may be, Beth is also utterly dependent.

While a certain dependence may even have been encouraged in women of that century, especially when it came to dependence on fathers and husbands, Beth is dependent in a way that obstructs her from leading a normal life. It seems wholly implausible that she should find a husband and move out of the Marches house at one point. For instance, when she and her sisters attend Laurie’s garden party, she asks her sisters to make sure nobody talks to her (cf. LW: 208), a tactic which, if employed throughout the rest of her life, would be more of a hindrance than anything else in the pursuit of acquiring a husband. In the end, she talks to a boy after all, though he has some kind of bodily disability, and it is likely she chose him because, in her mind, he would be unlikely to be a threat to her in any way (cf. LW: 211). Throughout the whole book nobody ever expects her to ever move out of her parents’ home.
One may try and reason that Beth is still young and could easily grow out of her shyness. While this may be true theoretically, she never manages to become more extroverted before her death in the sequel (cf. Alcott 1869).

Summarily, it has to be said that Meg, Amy, and Beth all adhere to the points made in Welter’s “The Cult of True Womanhood” most of the time. The adherence to the domestic ideal has already been discussed throughout the above paragraphs and we shall turn to the points of submissiveness and purity in later sections. The last point that needs to be covered here is whether the girls are at all religious. This question can be answered with an unequivocal yes. Religion is interspersed throughout the book like seeds in a garden. This happens mainly through the means of the book The Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan. The book talks about a pilgrimage taken from a place called the ‘City of Destruction’ to the ‘Celestial City’ atop of Mount Zion, which represents heaven (cf. Bunyan 1684). Little Women features an excerpt of the second part of the pilgrimage taken, mainly by women, at the start of the book. This work of Christian allegory features heavily in the lives of the March girls, as their mother gifts a copy of the book to each of them, so they may be guided by it. The girls resolve to read a bit of it every day, inspired by Meg, who first takes this vow in order to better herself and find strength in the reading (cf. LW: 24-25).

The book is mentioned several times throughout Little Women and never fails to bolster the girls’ spirits or help them to be good. On top of that, the headlines of many chapters correspond with headlines and happenings from The Pilgrim’s Progress. For instance, ‘The Valley of Humiliation’ in The Pilgrim’s Progress corresponds with ‘Amy’s Valley of Humiliation’, as ‘Combat with Appollyon’ does with ‘Jo Meets Appollyon’. There are other parts of religion interwoven in the story as well. God is mentioned both casually and solemnly a handful of times and Amy finds peace in prayer when Beth is on the verge of death’s door (cf. LW: 329-331). The girls never once stray from their faith, no matter how difficult the times are. While Alcott tinkers with representation of gender, the points of The Cult of True Womanhood are apparently where she draws the line. This gives credit to the idea that the points listed in Welter’s article where deeply ingrained into the society of nineteenth century America.

Now that we have established how characters perform gender in a way that is largely approved of by the rest of the cast if Little Women, let us turn to two characters who defy gender norms more or less openly, in subtle and not so subtle ways. As we have established what kind of behavior is encouraged in the March household and what kind of feminine
behavior the girls are asked to fine tune, it is time to consider how characters are treated that defy gender norms. The first person we have to consider is Jo March, who throughout the book makes it very clear that she is less than happy with the way she is supposed to act according to her gender, even going as far as stating that she dislikes being female (cf. LW: 9).

On the most basic level of identity, we have her name to consider. An abbreviation of Josephine, it is not the most female nickname she could have chosen, though it is not clear whether she started calling herself that and the family just followed suit, or if it was her loved ones who decided to go with the moniker. A more feminine name would have been the traditional Josie, which leaves no room for ambiguity as to whether the owner of the name is a man or a woman. ‘Jo’, however, though spelled differently, sounds exactly like ‘Joe’, which would be an abbreviation of Joseph, or a male name in its own right. If one did not go into specifics when talking about her or did not use any female pronouns, the listener would very likely assume that the subject of conversation was a man and not a woman. It could be that Alcott chose this name to highlight Jo’s boyish nature and reoccurring gender non-conformity, but without asking the author herself we cannot be sure.

Alcott plays with gendered language a few more times when it comes to Jo. For instance, Mister Laurence calls her ‘Doctor Jo’ when she keeps Laurie company while he is sick (cf. LW: 96). Fitting to the times she should have been called ‘Nurse Jo’, by all accounts. It seems that the characters are willing to indulge Jo’s boyish behavior and make concessions like this to her when they can and it can all be regarded as in good fun. Jo refers to herself in male terms as few times as well. At the start of the story, she calls herself the “man of the family” (LW: 12) now that their father has gone off to war. The Marchs have no male relatives to speak of, it is true, but there still is no need to ascribe a different gender identity to someone simply because a male is absent. While this happens in other countries with individuals, such as the Balkan Sworn Virgins (cf. Malfatto & Prtoric 2014), there was certainly no cultural need for that in nineteenth century America. Later during the story, Laurie thinks that he finds Jo’s “gentlemanly demeanor” (LW: 52) amusing and encourages her ways at several times, be it when he offers to teach her fencing (cf. LW: 256) or when they roughhouse down a hill together, much to the consternation of Meg (cf. LW: 236). It seems that all family and friends acknowledge Jo’s behavior as fun and harmless; a simply quirk of character she will grow out of, only to reprimanded for sometimes by Meg.
When we turn to her looks, we find more evidence to Jo not being overly feminine, aside from wearing dresses, as the nineteenth century culture did not look favorably upon women wearing trousers outside of using them as undergarments, yet (cf. Knibiehler 1994: 377-378). At the start of the novel Jo is described to possess comical looks. With sharp eyes that are likely a tip of the hat towards her intelligence and, assumedly, a rather plain face, since her long brown hair is said to be her only beauty. Her body is described in a rather curious way, as Alcott writes that Jo has long, coltish limbs, that she has a hard time controlling (cf. LW: 10-11). This gangly kind of look is mostly associated with adolescent boys, as they usually are hit by a growth spurt in their late teens that often leaves them looking a little emaciated due to the speed and suddenness at which such development occurs. Ascribing such a look to a girl evokes a rather androgynous picture of the character in front of the mind’s eye.

Later in the novel this idea of androgyny is further emphasized when Jo sells her hair to a barber so that she can support her family with money, since her father fell ill during the war. With her one beauty gone, Jo looks even more like a boy. At this point in the story, Jo has grown a little softer in character already. Her reaction to her shorn locks gives us a glimpse into the inner workings of her mind. Throughout the book it is easy to assume that Jo does in fact not like being a woman. Had the book been written in a modern context we would probably go as far as ascribing a transgender or at least a genderqueer label to Jo. However, as this book was written in a different context, I would like to argue that this notion would be wrong. Turning back to the matter of her hair, Jo reacts rather bravely to her heroic deed, saying that the upkeep of this hairstyle will be easier as it was with long hair and that it will be far more agreeable during the hot summer months. Sometime later, she breaks down in tears, not exactly regretting what she has done, but still mourning the loss of her hair.

As we have already established, good hair was a marker of natural feminine beauty in nineteenth century America, so much so that poor women like Jo resorting to selling their hair was not a rarity (cf. Knibiehler 1994: 375). If Jo would actually identify as male it is likely that she would regard her newly short hair as a mark of freedom and her tears would be the kind a person sheds out of relief. Jo, in fact, cries because she had been vain about her hair. She had been proud of it, and her family reacts with shock, as well, as they consider Jo’s act as a big sacrifice. Considering that even nowadays cutting off the hair of someone unwilling is regarded a crime in some countries (cf. Leonard 2006), the context of the time makes the sacrifice even bigger. Though Jo let her hair be cut off willingly, she must rather have felt like she lost a limb. While it may seem that Jo has shed her last mantle of femininity through the
loss of her hair, the way she reacts to this situation actually makes her more feminine than she was before. Also, while the family reacts with shock, Jo is not reprimanded for what she did. She did not bring shame over the family. In fact, she is lauded for what she did and her sisters actually call her new hairstyle charming (cf. LW: 289). What we have here is another instance where sacrifice is regarded very highly. Jo put her family in before herself, which is, after all, another trait expected of the women of the time.

Let us look at a few other moments where Jo acts in ways not considered typically girlish. There is, for instance, the matter of crying. While the other girls never hesitate to show their emotions, Jo expresses reluctance over crying, deeming the act an unmanly weakness (cf. LW: 131). The prospect of acting in a way not befitting for men should not disturb Jo, but it seemingly does. However, this stoicism does not extend very far, as Jo breaks down crying a few pages after thinking this anyway, as though she could not help herself (cf. LW: 135). We could regard this as proof that female nature will not be denied or that this was an instant where Jo’s affinity for all things male was deemed as going too far to still be considered quirky or fun. Another way Jo expresses herself is the way she talks slang, using words such as ‘jolly’, and liking to whistle. She is reprimanded for this several times by both Amy and Meg who find this kind of behavior too masculine, with Jo stating that she does it precisely for that reason (cf. LW: 8-9). Perhaps what we can see in Jo here is teenage rebellion just as much as an affinity for masculine traits. Teenagers of contemporary times are known to exhibit behavior simply because it provokes people in their general vicinity, after all. Jo may be taking part in this kind of behavior as well, since she is only fifteen in the story (cf. LW: 10). These are by far not the only instances in which Jo does not act according to gender, but cataloguing them all would go too far in this instance.

In one of the above paragraphs we have already established that Jo is expected to grow out of her boyish ways once she has become an adult. We have already mentioned that Mr. March praises the girls for the favorable changes he can see in them after he comes back from war. When it is Jo’s turn to be praised he mainly remarks upon her newfound femininity. He remarks that his “son” Jo seems to have disappeared and made way for his daughter. Gone are the days where she used slang, whistled, or lay about on the floor. Now he has a daughter who dresses neatly, has grown gentler, talks and moves more quietly, and has developed a certain motherly spirit (cf. LW: 379). Therefore we must surmise that, just as Welker wrote, in blooming adulthood Jo is adopting domestic and submissive characteristics. Mr. March also states that he misses the wildness she had exhibited in childhood, but also that he is quite
satisfied with the woman she is rapidly becoming. This lends further credit to the idea that her traits were just seen as childhood antics, comic and to be missed, certainly, but also needed to be left behind. The only one to state that she likes Jo better the way she is right now and wishes that she would never grow up and change is Beth (cf. LW: 258) who, incidentally, never gets to grow up herself.

This expectation is probably also the reason why Mrs. March never reprimands Jo for her behavior, safe for the time where Jo’s anger gets the better of her and almost leads to Amy’s death. Even then, Jo is not offered a scolding, but help instead. It is revealed that gentle, quiet marmee, has a bit of a temper herself and fights to deal with it every day (cf. LW: 136). This way, Jo’s rather unfeminine quirk of character is not condemned as masculine, but instead seen as something women are capable of as well. It is acceptable, though only if said woman learns to control her temper and not let it outwardly show. If Mrs. March had not told Jo about her anger problems there would have been no instances through which a reader could have guessed at it, except for one time where she is rather short with the girls when they squabble too loudly (cf. LW: 62). Therefore, it seems that, while the possession of male traits in a woman is not seen as impossible, it is something to be hidden, if it has negative connotations attached to it.

Summarily, it needs to again be emphasized that it is unlikely that Jo was supposed to portray someone who does not identify with the gender that was ascribed to them at birth, especially because of the nineteenth century context this book was written in, as such an affliction would have been dubbed a mental illness, since that view has only dispersed in science during recent decades (cf. Steinmetz 2016). What is likely, however, is the idea that Jo liked the freedom masculinity afforded to men in a way femininity did not to women. Though the roles of both gender where deemed important, in the end, a woman was always confined to the domestic sphere, whether she had to work because of money troubles or not. While masculinity had strict rules about ‘softer’ feelings such as sadness, all in all, Jo likely craved the independence afforded to men, as becomes obvious with her wish to be able to support her family through her writings (cf. LW: 64). The point could be made that perhaps Alcott was trying to show that women who do not fit the bill of femininity a hundred percent could still fulfill core feminine duties and roles, while maintaining more autonomy over their personality and characteristics by the example of Jo March. Additionally, it became more and more common for women during the nineteenth century not to find a husband and to have to support themselves, mostly because there was a surplus of women, due to factors such as wars (cf.
Dauphin 1994: 482). Other women refused to get married because they saw marriage as a
form of sexual slavery and prominent women such as Florence Nightingale refused to bind
themselves to a man and give up their autonomy (cf. Dauphin 1994: 495). Such ideas, though
not given voice with these exact words, seem to have appealed to some extent to young Jo
March.

Now, to the matter of Laurie Laurence, whose actions also do not quite play inside the court
of masculinity. It has to be said, however, that Laurie is by far not as much of an outlier when
it comes to nineteenth century gender performance as Jo is. To start, much like Jo, his name
does not quite fit into stereotypically male names. His first name being Theodore it would
make sense to bestow upon him a nickname such as Teddy, Ted, or Theo. While Jo later in
the story takes to call him Teddy (cf. LW: 315) most of the time he is called Laurie by all of
the other characters, as per his own request (cf. LW: 50). ‘Laurie’ sounds very much like the
female name ‘Lori’. At first, this preference of his raises eyebrows, however, it is explained
that he took to wanting to be called by this nickname because an acquaintance of his decided
to call him ‘Dora’ as an abbreviation of his first name and he did not like that (cf. LW: 50). It
is unclear why he did not insist on a more masculine name since it seems that he did not
approve of the name Dora because of it being a female name. It could also be that the
feminine connotations sticking to this unwanted moniker had nothing to do with his dislike
for it or perhaps he did not realize that Laurie sounded very much female also.

While Jo’s acting out against the confines of her gender is very obvious, Laurie approaches
the matter more subtly and, as it seems, subconsciously. He never once states that he wishes
he had been a woman, as Jo does with her wish for the opposite. Nor does he engage in any
behavior that could be deemed feminine simply for the purpose of appearing in such a way.
He is called a true gentleman by Mrs. March and likes masculine pursuits such as riding and
is certified with having good manners (cf. LW: 40). Throughout the book he does his best to
help the March family however he can, often acting as a sort of knight in shining armor for
the girls. During his first encounter with them, for instance, he makes sure to take Meg, who
sprained her ankle, and Jo home in his carriage, when they have no other means of returning
(cf. LW: 56). All of the men appearing in the book take over this role at one point or another,
as we shall see in later sections. As such, gallantly helping damsels in distress when they
cannot help themselves is a rather masculine pursuit and Laurie fulfills it wonderfully,
meaning that, in most of his efforts, Laurie seems as masculine an upper class boy as they
come.
However, there are certain occasions where Laurie deviates from the norm. During the time where it is uncertain whether Beth will die from her illness there comes a point where Laurie gets choked up by tears. He maintains his composure and stiff upper lip, but it is a close call. Earlier on it was already established that crying was deemed unmanly back then just as much as it often is today. While Laurie does not actually cry, he comes very close to it. The interesting point is that the narrator claims that they are glad for him showing such a display of emotion even if it did not culminate in tears. Thus, the narrator actually judges that men being moved by occurrences such as a loved one dying is not a thing to laugh about or belittle, but instead a credit to the person. This way, Alcott allows men a measure of freedom regarding emotional displays that cannot be classified as aggressive or happy. Much like Jo is afforded certain freedoms that are coded male within her femininity, Laurie, at this instance, is afforded the same courtesy the other way around.

Another rather outstanding matter in Laurie’s gender performance is when he joins the girls when they are working on several chores outside on a hill. He asks to be allowed to help them in any way, even offering to sew. It the end he reads a book out loud to them, winds up cotton for Meg, and helps Amy with a collage (cf. LW: 239-251). None of these engagements appear to be overly feminine but there are two facts about this that need to be considered. For one, he was perfectly amenable to actually performing chores deemed to be feminine, even going as far as asking to do this in a way described as meek, submitting his services to the girls (cf. LW: 240). The girls delight in this behavior. It could be that they find a man acting submissively comical, much in the way that Jo is allowed to behave in a masculine way because it has such an effect. However, the novelty of the matter may also hold a certain appeal to them.

Another point is that Meg tells Laurie that she will teach him to knit as men in Scotland at the time were wont to do (cf. LW: 251). We can see a blurring of lines between male and female chores here and Meg actually mentions the fact that there are other men in the world that knit probably to appease all of the people present by telling them that it is considered a perfectly acceptable thing for some men to do and nobody needs to feel out of their element. Additionally, Laurie’s vision for his future is another matter where he does not fit quite neatly into the box of masculine pursuits, which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter. Summarily, it needs to be said that Laurie is never overly much scolded for any behavior that can be considered female, most likely because such occurrences take rather subtle form, as we have seen.
Lastly, Alcott wrote about an instance where actual gender bending occurred. The girls form a secret society, which they call the Pickwick Club. Within the society they all have code names. Meg is called Mr. Winkle, Jo is Mr. Snodgrass, Beth is Mr. Tupman, and Amy is Mr. Pickwick himself. When Laurie joins, he assumes the name of Mr. Weller. All of these men are characters in Charles Dicken’s work *The Pickwick Papers* (cf. Dickens 1837). This form of play actually fits into the typical structure of children’s make belief. We all have played ‘house’ numerous times with our friends when we were little. Traditionally, the family whose life you play out is comprised of a father, a mother, and children. If there is no boy present to take the role of the husband, there usually never occurs any form of hesitation over one of the girls taking over this position. It would be rather more difficult, doing this the other way around, however. While girls have no qualms about impersonating boys, there is more of a stigma present for boys who impersonate girls nowadays, even if it happens for the sake of play. If there is a comic element to the interaction, such as during comic sketches, the matter is different, but if the situation is more serious, such a gender swap generally does not occur. Thus it also makes sense that while the girls assume masculine personas for the Pickwick Club, Laurie does not assume a female role, even though there are several female characters present in Dicken’s novel.

When analyzing a book according to gender roles it is not only important to look at what the characters are experiencing now. It is also crucial to observe any limitations or expectations that are put upon the characters when thinking or talking about their futures. What do men and women want to achieve? What can they achieve? What is dreamed about but never quite taken seriously by anyone? Who has no aspirations at all? Thankfully, the March girls accompanied by Laurie, take a whole chapter of the book to ruminate about what they want to do with their lives if they could do anything at all with it. If there were no limits or expectations placed upon them. Safe for Beth, who wishes for everything to stay the same and to always stay with her mother and father, some of them have goals that may well be out of their reach (cf. LW: 245).

Let us start with Laurie. He would like to move to Germany and become a renowned musician that never has to worry about financial matters (cf. LW: 244). This is not in line with what is grandfather would like him to do with his life. Mr. Laurence wants his grandson to go into business in order to become a merchant, as he was. Laurie is not interested in this whatsoever, stating that him going to university in the future should be enough for the old man, but also lamenting that he will likely not be let off the hook. Meg advises him to do as is guardian asks
for now, so maybe he will be rewarded with being given a choice in profession if he does well (cf. LW: 248). That Laurie is not quite a paragon of nineteenth century manliness has already been established, but his love for music is another rather female pursuit of his. Of course, most all famous musicians of that century have been men but the ability to play music in any kind of leisure activity was rather considered a female accomplishment than a man’s (cf. Sonnet 1944: 148). This is reflected in Mr. Laurence’s reaction to his grandson’s wish; he is against it. Additionally, it was and continues to be the dream of businessmen to impart their legacy, in this case trade in India, over to the company heir. Since Mr. Laurence’s son was not up to the task, he likely regards Laurie as his last chance to hand over his company to related hands.

Much like Laurie, Amy also wants to try her hand as an artist. She would like to travel to Europe, Rome especially, paint pictures, and become famous (cf. LW: 246). She voices her desire with childish passion that makes it clear that this ambition will likely never be fulfilled and is little more than the dream of a little girl. However, none of her siblings, nor Laurie, try to dissuade her from her idea or show any indication to want to steer her to a different path. Much like Jo’s boyishness, they probably see Amy’s idea dream as harmless, though likely unobtainable. The chapter is not called Castles in the Air for nothing. The idea is to dream up an ideal future, possibility does not necessarily play a part in this. Childhood is a time where everything is possible, no matter the gender of the dreamer. Jo herself is not dissuaded by impossibility or unlikelihood, either, though her dream is far vaguer. She states that she want to do something “splendid” (LW: 245) with her life, so that she will not be forgotten after she is dead. As before, she also remarks that she should like to do that through her writing, which she would like to make her rich and famous (cf. LW: 245).

Meg is the only one that is interested in more domestic pursuits for her future. The oldest, her dream also seems more realistic than the ones of Amy, Laurie, and Jo. Though she mentions that she would like to live in luxury one day, her dream is also to manage a household. Though she does not mention a husband or children, Jo is quick to fill in that Meg forgot to mention them and Meg does not deny her wish for such company. Laurie assures her that her pretty face will definitely aid her in obtaining her desire (cf. LW: 244-246). All in all, ignoring Beth’s unambitious but completely in character wish, Meg’s dream is the only one that is likely to be attained fully, even without the knowledge of what happens in the sequel Good Wives. Her desires fit well into the domestic role women of the time had to play and actually, if we take Laurie mentioning her beauty being an asset in this, Meg is the only one
that receives any affirmation of her dream being obtainable, thus making it clear, that out of
all of them, it has the most merit.

Marriage is clearly an event that is expected to happen at least to some of the March girls,
though only Meg actively mentions wanting to wed. However, this expectation need not be
fulfilled if it would put the girls’ happiness in jeopardy. While Mrs. March admits that she has
certain plans for their girls’ future this future is described as follows: Marmee wants her girls
to be “beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a
happy youth, to be well and wisely marry, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care
and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the
best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (LW: 167). She also adds that she
would like it more if her girls were happy spinster than unhappily married or acted in a way
that could be called unmaidenly (cf. LW: 168). While marriage is the ideal to aspire towards,
Mrs. March would rather her daughters never marry at all if this cannot be obtained without
sacrificing something of their happiness. The worst thing, becoming a fallen woman, is hinted
at here. This is to be avoided.

It also needs to be pointed out that, while Laurie will go to university, none of the girls intend
to obtain a higher education. This is not surprising, seeing as Amy is the only one currently
going to school during the novel, as both Jo and Amy have apparently outgrown the need for
primary schooling, and Beth is too shy to go to school (cf. LW: 67). Amy also goes to an all-
girls school (cf. LW: 115), showing that co-ed classrooms were still a rather modern thing. A
girl’s education was much different from that of a boy. While boys were allowed to study
everything from the sciences up to the languages in order to be prepared to support a family,
girls were educated in more female coded subjects that would help them manage a household,
be a good wife, and rear children. Aside from that, a lot of female education also took place in
their homes with the mother as a teacher of customs and rites (cf. Mayeur 1994: 253-255).
The fact that Amy or Jo, for that matter, do not even consider the possibility of going to
university speaks volumes to how much of a pipe dream getting a higher educations would
have been like both due to their gender and monetary restrictions. So much so, in fact, that it
is too absurd even for a castle in the air.
2.3 A Story within a Story: Regarding Writing as A Means of Crossing Gendered Lines

Artists use writing for many purposes. Some use it as an outlet for their feelings. Others as a means to be somewhere else and live the life they wish they could have had. Other again, use it as a means to express themselves. All of these purposes for writing can be tied to a way of performing gender as well and thus we must take a closer look at the why and what of Jo March’s writings in order to determine how her writing may be influenced by the way she performs gender, and what hidden meanings her stories could contain. Is the content of the stories affected by the way society refuses to let her act? Do the stories hide forbidden desires? Or can we surmise a budding traditional femininity in the texts that foreshadows Jo’s transformation by the end of the book?

First, let us look at what Jo March produces. At the start of the story she and her sisters put on a play for Christmas that Jo has written. There are male and female parts and Jo plays the male roles to her heart’s content, as no men are admitted. None of the other girls take over a male part, though they all act. Perhaps, this is a way for Jo to safely act the way she is sometimes scolded for in real life. After all, acting is not reality, so she can perform freely and without any constraints. There is a certain freedom to be found in shedding one’s identity in favor of the identity of somebody one can never be. As for the plot of the play, what we have here is a play akin to many others. It involves witches, a rakish hero, a nefarious villain, and a damsel in distress. The foe is slain in the end and the hero, of course, gets the girl. What is unusual is the fact that the true hero of the story ends up being the witch and not the young man who seems to have been intended for that mantle by tradition. Both he and his lady love need rescuing and the witch, Hagar, who has plotted against the villain from the start, delivers and sets them on their way. When after that not all is well still, as the lady’s father does not wish her to marry her suitor, because he is poor, Hagar bequeaths wealth upon him, so that the match will be permitted (cf. LW: 32-38).

We can see a certain resemblance between Jo and Hagar here. Jo is, objectively speaking, the black sheep of the March family, with her father even telling her so outright (cf. LW: 379). It is Meg and Amy who are regarded the most likely to marry and Beth may not be marriage material but she is the good spirit of the house. Jo is neither of these things but tries to make up for it by providing for the family in other ways. As already mentioned, she sacrifices her hair to make additional money and, as we will see in later paragraphs of this section, she also wishes to make money through her writings so that her sisters and family may be well off.
The idea to marry for money may have started to seem despicable during the modern era, especially in the upper classes (cf. Matthews Grieco 1994: 100), but there was still a certain need to do it in the case of the March girls, as they are rather penniless. Their Aunt March once even urges Meg not to marry a poor man (cf. LW: 390). Thus, we can theorize that Jo put a part of herself into the writing of this play, as many authors do, and made an atypical person the heroine of the play in a way she herself wants to be a hero for her family.

It also makes sense that Jo would equate herself with the role of a witch, because of other reasons. Jo’s play is likely a mixture between a few of Shakespeare’s plays with some personal touches. We have the witch aspect, as in Macbeth (cf. Shakespeare trans. 1990), we have star-crossed lovers, as in Romeo and Juliet (cf. Shakespeare trans. 2013), and a hero who is tricked into thinking his love has not been true, as in Othello (cf. Shakespeare trans. 2011). Thus it would make sense to think Jo saw herself a little like the witches in Macbeth. Not quite male or female, but androgynous, with much more independence than other women had. Additionally, the Weird Sisters in Macbeth can be called strong-willed and with a mind of their own (cf. Petsche 2011). All of these characteristics must have a certain appeal to Jo and in the form of this play, though she herself does not play Hagar, she can give these thoughts form.

Aside from the play, it never becomes quite clear what Jo writes about exactly. The only other story written by her that is discussed more in detail is the one that becomes published and there we only know the title, which is “The Rival Painters” (LW 266) and that it features a romance with most of the characters dying at the end (cf. LW: 266). Jo’s writing is not very refined yet, being prone to dramatics. However, Jo is only fifteen and later sixteen in the book so that is to be expected. Suffice it to say that the story she and a few others make up during the garden party Laurie gives, is in no way less dramatic. Although, there can be seen a difference in the parts of the story the boys make up and the ones girls make up. The parts conjured up by the boys feature far more adventure and less frills than the girl’s parts. They also focus less on the romance of the story and more on the hero’s escapades. The story itself is made up of the typical knight tries to save lady narrative, with a twist at the end; the knight cannot enter through the gates the woman is trapped behind, and she says she cannot do it for him, as it is his job to rescue her. While the story is never quite finished, the youths agree that the girl likely takes pity on him later on and opens the gates for him (cf. LW 218-224). This leaves the impression that women allow men to perform any heroic deeds they deem necessary while minding their own business, which would mean that they are actually
indulging them instead of urgently needing their help, insinuating that women are far more independent from men than they are thought to be.

Now let us turn away from these musings and reminisce why Jo writes at all. No other character in *Little Women* does it, after all. What drives her? What makes it all worthwhile? For one, Jo seems very preoccupied with living in worlds other than her own. Throughout the story her preferred leisure activity is reading; once she even reads to the point where her eyes give out on her (cf. LW: 189). Like many people, reading probably is a form of escapism to Jo. Living as she does in a world where her proclivities are not exactly appreciated, though tolerated, reading may grant her a reprieve from the life she lives. She is a very independent person, or tries to be, and this may tie into another reason for why she writes; being an author was an occupation a woman could pursue from the domestic sphere of her house. As already established, women were not expected to write any masterpieces, but writing was still a respectable enough occupation, if only something to be pursued on the side. During *Little Women*, Jo shows little inclination to start a family, not understanding the sense behind romantic entanglements outside of the scope of plays and stories. Before one reads the sequel, it would not have been wrong to assume that there was a likelihood that she would remain unmarried, much like Alcott herself, as well as other famous authors of the time, such as Jane Austen (cf. Mason 2016). Without a husband, it would likely fall to her parents, and later on any of her married sisters to take her in. It makes sense that anybody with a sturdy character and a good sense of what is right and wrong, like Jo, would take exception to being a burden to anyone.

Stifling this fear through the ability of being good enough of an author to be paid for writing would be a good way to put her mind at ease. Even here, Jo goes a bit further, however. She also writes to help the family out with their current situation. Early on, she tells Meg that she wants to become a famous author so that she can make sure Meg can live in luxury (cf. LW: 64). Later in the book when she manages to sell a story to a publisher she declares that this accomplishment makes her very happy, as in time she may be able to support her sisters and herself (cf. LW: 268). This lends credit to the above theory and it also paints a picture of Jo’s character and strong sense of morals. She wants to help her struggling family out in dark times and it does not even occur to her to do otherwise.

The next reason for Jo to write must be ambition. She once states that it is her goal in life to do something very splendid (cf. LW: 67). She knows from her family’s reactions that she is good at it, always putting on plays like she did at the start of the novel, and earning praise, for
instance, for the story she managed to get published (cf. LW: 268). Ambition for something other than raising morally upright sons and nubile daughters, besides making a husband happy, and managing the household successfully, may be considered as a not very feminine preoccupation. However, nobody throughout the whole novel ever discourages her from her literary pursuits, which is why we must conclude that it was not seen as a scandalous endeavor at all. Much like Jo is expected to grow out of her boyish ways, it seems her parents have faith that she will be able to write and still live a life befitting of a young lady.

The last reason Jo seems to write is a simple one; she likes it. This may seem like a frivolous matter, but the fact that she derives pleasure from thinking up relationships and plots is a part of Jo March just as much as her love for overly big hats is. The nineteenth century was a major decade for female writers and Jo March is part of them. To be able to do something well is a reward in itself. Even if she never turns out to be famous, as she wants to be, writing is a big part of her life. Perhaps, if she had been a man, she could have gained more fame than she did, but that is nothing but speculation. It is safe to say that in *Little Women*, writing is much more a female pursuit than it is a male one, as the main person who thinks up stories is Jo. The only exceptions can be found at Laurie’s garden party, as discussed. In conclusion it can be said that what Jo March writes and the fact that she writes can be attributed to her gender as well as her personality, though part of her personality may well have been shaped by her gender. It is hard to separate the two, after all. However, there are also economic reasons to why she writes.

### 2.4 Love Is Divine: Analyzing Nineteenth Century Gender Dynamics in Relationships

Relationships, be they romantic, non-romantic, or parental are essential to human beings. They act as places of refuge, love, heartbreak and anger and define people on a very personal basis. However, with relationships also come gendered expectations, roles and behaviors, all of which we will discuss during this section. Let us start with the first relationships we usually form in our lives; those with our caretakers. Parents, whether absent or present, take a central role within the lives of children and the March girls, as well as Laurie, do not present an exception. To understand more about people there is a certain need to examine their relationships with their parents or parental figures. There are many different blueprints for families in the world. Some follow the typical formula, others are made up of patchwork. Not all fathers inhabit the same role just as not all mothers do, either. When we look at Mr. and
Mrs. March, and Mr. Laurence we can observe certain similarities but also differences. Let us start with the Marches, as the story’s focus lies firmly on them.

While Mr. March is off to war, the girls are left in the care of their mother or ‘marmee’. Interestingly, while the girls’ appearances are painstakingly described, no such effort is afforded into a description of marmee. She is said to be a “stout, motherly lady” (LW: 15) with a helpful look around her that would make anyone want to run to her with their problems. Additionally, she is described to be rather plain, which is no matter, since all children are said to think their mothers look beautiful (cf. LW: 15). Within this one paragraph at the start of the story, Mrs. March is already shoe boxed into her one role in life: mother, with a dash of wife. While beauty is a quality prized in the other girls, it is not in Mrs. March. She does not need to be particularly beautiful, as she is already married and a mother. What she does need to be is good at her domesticity and, as her children think her to be the “most splendid woman in the world” (LW: 15), it is safe to say that she fulfills this role just as splendidly. Throughout the whole novel there is never any indication that her children disagree with her or are simply just cross with any decisions she makes. Marmee is respected and certainly beyond any reproach. In fact, Jo almost cannot believe it when her mother tells her that she struggles with her temper just as much as Jo does (cf. LW: 136).

Mrs. March certainly incorporates the valued angel of the house persona and serves as a role model for the girls. That Jo aspires to be like her is obvious after their talk about their respective tempers, especially since she never would have guessed at her mother ever being angry at all. Through her mother, she sees that a certain tranquility may be achieved and thus, takes heart. While the other girls never outright state their aspiration to be like their mother, it is abundantly clear through the tone they take when thinking of and talking about her. They trust their mother to know best, always submitting to the little lessons she teaches them. These lessons range from their mother showing them that there can be pleasure found even in unpleasant days (cf. LW: 60-79) or that there needs to be a balance between pleasure and play, even though this ends with Beth’s bird dying because she did not feed it and neither did marmee (cf. LW: 194). Mrs. March is not afraid to deliver harsh lessons just as much as gentle ones, always mindful of what her children need, even if by today’s standards, letting the family pet die would be considered over the top. However, the girls do not question even lessons like this, complimenting marmee if she is clever in her approach and mournfully submitting to any other flagellation. Additionally, marmee never lays hand on her children, this, apparently, being anathema to her.
When someone else does, she is beyond furious. Amy’s teacher strikes the palm of her hand with a ruler once, because she brought limes to school, which he has forbidden. After being made to throw all of them out of the window, she has to submit to this corporeal punishment. Once at home, she, of course, tells her sisters and mother about it. While her sisters tearfully comfort her, Mrs. March is furious about what happened and goes to have a word with the teacher, and leading to Amy being allowed to stay home from school for a while. Though she says that, while she does not condone corporal punishment in girls, she thinks the humiliation of being punished in front of all her classmates probably did Amy some good, as it hit her weakest point, meaning her vain selfishness (cf. LW: 112-123). Mrs. March defends her children like a proud mother bear, a trait that endears her to her children even more. What is interesting is the fact that she emphasizes that corporal punishment is especially inappropriate for girls. She does not elaborate why she makes the distinction, so we can surmise that it has to do with the idea that girls’ weaker bodies can withstand less punishment or at least that, while boys are used to brawling and subsequently hurting each other, girls are discouraged from such acts. This is especially interesting, since, as we will see, Laurie is bodily punished by his grandfather once in the novel.

While marmee is also a paragon in all things concerning the household, though Hannah does seem to do most of the cooking and cleaning, with Mrs. March mainly managing the household, she also teaches the girls other precious values. One of them is Christian piety. She gifts each girl a copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to help them with their faults and as a guideline for their lives (cf. LW: 24-25). There is always encouragement given by her to her children to find solace and help in their faith. Once, she praises Jo in a letter for her efforts at staying calm. She tells her that she has noticed it and that the “Friend whose help [she] daily ask[s]” also has seen it (cf. LW: 206). This is not the only time that there is a connection between parents and God. Mrs. March at one point tells her children that they should confide in God in equal measure as in their mother and that she hopes that they will learn to feel the love of their ‘Heavenly Father’ just as much as the one of their earthly one (cf. LW: 140-141).

Additionally, God seems to deal them lessons as well. While they all pray to Him when Beth is at death’s door it seems that God only grants them their wish once He can be sure that the girls have truly learned their lesson and would not slack off because of convenience again (cf. LW: 322). Another point where God seems to be very similar to a parent is the way the girls’ father is absent throughout most of the book, but is always appraised by letters from Mrs. March. He always knows what is happening in the house and sends his daughters words of
encouragement. The girls vow to make him proud and better themselves (cf. LW: 18-19). Much like a godly figure he is omnipotent and inspires his worshippers to do better, and worship him they do, with praising him for his courage to go to war as a chaplain because he was too old to go as a soldier and vowing to be good so that his mind may be at ease at least when he thinks of home (cf. LW: 17).

In addition to Christian piety, Mrs. March also teaches her children Christian charity and American patriotism. She always encourages them to help their neighbors, especially a poor German family called Hummel. She asks them to give the Hummels their breakfast on Christmas (cf. LW: 28-29), which the girls do with delight, and later, when Mrs. March is gone to nurse her husband when he is sick, she asks them to look after them in her wake (cf. LW: 300-301). Patriotism is taught jointly with her husband. He has gone to war despite his advanced age and she volunteers at Soldiers’ Aid Societies (cf. LW: 68) and never complains about her duties once, fulfilling them as if they were the most natural thing to be done. Everything she does seems to be a lesson that will shape her daughters, thus once again, emphasizing her main role is the one of mother and not the one of woman. This certainly fits within the expected parameters of the time. She is selfless to a fault, with her own needs taking their spot at the end of the queue. This assessment may be a little bit wrong in that she never once seems unhappy with her lot in life, being seemingly content with her role as wife and mother. This, in itself, says a lot about what was expected from the women of the time.

As for Mr. March, he is largely absent throughout the book, as already mentioned, and serves his role as a distant surveyor of his kingdom, sending letters throughout the book until he becomes ill. Not much can be said about his role, other than that the girls love him and want to make him proud, which they do. However, his approval does not seem to mean more to them than their mother’s does. In fact, while they love their father and miss him a lot, it seems that they place their adoration firmly on their mother, which does make sense, as she is their primary caretaker. However, to say that there can be a distance observed between the children and Mr. March would be wrong to say as well. He is not a distant father, but simply takes the role he has chosen in the war due to his gender seriously. The role distribution between the March parents is traditional, while he is off to work, or in this case war, she is at home and looks after the children. But unlike some other fathers, Mr. March is invested in the character of his girls and seems to know them very well if we can take his sermon at the end of the novel as proof (cf. LW: 379-380).
Mr. Laurence, who can be described as Laurie’s parent, is a more present figure throughout the story, as he is too old to join the war effort in any way. He took over caring for Laurie since his parents died and seems to see him as a chance to start over and rectify mistakes he made in the past. He drove his own son, Laurie’s father, away when the man married a musician and he did not approve of her. Thus, he is afraid of losing his grandson as he did his own boy (cf. LW: 97). There is a certain helplessness in the way Mr. Laurence interacts with Laurie. While Mrs. March always seems to know what exactly is right for her daughters, Mr. Laurence struggles. Jo once even declares that Mr. Laurence does not know what is good for Laurie, as he makes him study all the time and leaves little time for play (cf. LW: 82). He wants his grandson to make something out of himself and not follow in his mother’s footsteps to become a musician as he wants (cf. LW: 244). He also seems a little inept at showing his grandson affection, once pulling Laurie’s hair by way of caress (cf. LW: 94). This is a problem that can be observed nowadays as well with men being unable or unsure how to show their male children affection at a certain age and not having quite as big a problem with bestowing it upon their daughters.

There is also the time where he is very mad at Laurie and lays hand on him, something that incidentally only seems to be done by men in the book. The act is described as Mr. Laurence “shaking” him (LW: 359) for keeping a secret from him. Laurie is unhurt physically but his pride is hurt severely (cf. LW: 359). Jo rectifies the situation, telling Mr. Laurence that the situation has already been resolved. During their chat, Mr. Laurence confesses the frustration he feels about the stubbornness of his grandson and Jo ends up giving him advice, telling him that often a kind word helps more than a harsh one, or any form of punishment does (cf. LW: 364-365). Here we actually see a woman, though gently, educate a man on a matter that is in her purview rather than his. He takes the advice uncomplainingly. It seems that what we have here is the idea that a man has a harder time taking care of a child without the help of a woman than a woman does without the help of a man. He needs Jo to help him manage Laurie and accepts that she may know better what to do than he does.

There is also the fact that Laurie seems to be drawn to the March girls, especially because they are female. When he sees them working and playing together on a hill once, the idea of joining them calms his restless spirit and an unease he has been feeling all day, which gives the impression that a certain warm, homey feeling is missing from his house that is devoid of women (cf. LW: 239). At the end of the meeting he wishes to come again and Meg allows it, as long as he is good and “loves his book” (LW: 251) which is likely to be the bible. By doing
this, Meg educates him on being a good Christian man, a task women are supposed to fulfill for their men. Thus, Laurie receives a certain amount of motherly attentions from the girls, which seems to be something he needs, as Laurie improves his moods over the course of the books, which can be attributed not only to growing up but also to the March girls’ influence.

Like it is the case with parental relationships, *Little Women* is mainly made up of non-romantic bonds with only glimpses into the romantic. As such, the book offers up an abundance of social interactions between friends, family, and acquaintances. It would take a very large amount of words and time to work through all of these interactions and the natures of many relationships have already been glimpsed in previous sections. This is why in this section we will focus on four social gatherings where men and women mix or where women engage in rituals that are gender specific. This will help us determine how the two genders presented in the novel interact with each other in public and what measures have to be taken for certain interactions to occur according to a culturally developed protocol.

A step that is very important and described in detail is the process of young ladies getting ready for such gatherings or parties. The first time the girls participate in this ritual is at the New Year’s Eve party Meg and Jo travel to. They spend a long time getting ready, fussing over outfits and, in Meg’s case, bemoaning the fact that all their clothes have gone out of fashion. The age old question ‘whatever shall we wear’ is uttered at least once which shows that some things actually do not change with time (cf. LW: 43). Getting ready before an event with many different people present is a ritual women engage in almost daily. Some women agonize over their public image more, others less, and certainly, men are not immune to the pressure of looking good, either. However, for a long time beauty has been defining women; both the possession and the lack of it. A beautiful woman, if rich, has fortune on her side, while a poor, beautiful woman may be more prone to dangers of the sexual kind. A poor and ugly woman, however, has no identity at all, since it is beauty that makes men notice her. If she is not beautiful, she has no voice (cf. Farge & Zemon Davis 1994: 16). Thus, looks play a very important role during the modern era which explains the book’s preoccupation with the topic. Now as much as then, women often band together throughout the process of getting ready, while men usually prefer to do so alone. The March sisters are no exception. All four of them are present when Meg and Jo are readying themselves and they are offering up opinions and helping each other out.

Jo’s gloves are both sporting lemonade stains so Meg trades her one of hers so that each of them will wear one spoiled and one tidy glove. Jo then sets out to help Meg with her hair, and
even though she manages to botch it up, the fact that she did it at all speaks to a certain tenderness and familiarity (cf. LW: 43-46). While we have no qualms letting a hairdresser touch our head, letting people outside professional services touch us for a prolonged time and in a way that is akin to a caress requires a certain amount of trust and love in Western society. Of course, Jo and Meg are sisters, however, it would still be questionable, whether one brother would help another style his hair. It would be more likely that a sister helped her brother. However, we have no point of comparison about casual and not so casual touching between men, other than some more aggressive forms. We have already established that, except for one time pulling gently on his hair, the only time Mr. Laurence ever touches Laurie is in anger. As such, we can see a certain difference between how people of the same sex who are close touch each other in *Little Women*.

The idea that it is only familiarity between women that indicates how much they are allowed to touch each other, seems to be disproved when Meg goes to Anne Moffat’s party and the other girls help her to get ready one day (cf. LW: 154-156). Meg knows some of the women who primp and preen her but some she does not. It seems to make no difference. She wants to fit in with these women and letting them engage in helping her transform into a more made up version of herself is a method to fit in. It seems that the ritual of helping other women getting ready is not only a way to prove familiarity, but also to establish it. By complimenting and accentuating a quality that is seen as essential for women a service of caring and friendship is performed. Additionally, it seems that women were far less worried about casually touching each other, which may well have to do with the fact that caring and love coming from women was seen as something natural and desired, whether this be directed to other women or men. While men could be caring towards their family and friends, men embodied rationality while women did emotionality, much like as it is seen today still. Men had to always take a step back when it came to emotions, while women could be as free with them as they wanted.

Now how do men and women interact in public spaces? At the New Year’s Eve party, Jo keeps to the sides of the ballroom, not wanting to dance and, even though she is hiding, she meets Laurie, who she gets on with famously (cf. LW: 49-55). One might think that them spending time together unsupervised may have been regarded as improper. But apparently both Jo and Laurie are considered too young and innocent to think of such things yet. They are regarded as children and still allowed to spend time together throughout the book without a chaperone. Meg is the only one of the girls who in the end is old enough to be considered ‘in danger’ from men, which we will see in the next segment. Jo and Laurie treat each other like
old comrades. They don’t much indulge in specifically gendered behavior, safe for maybe the
part when Jo does some nursing for him when he is sick. However, Jo sometimes takes to
lecturing Laurie. When he tells her later in the book that he sometimes frequents saloons, Jo
becomes worried that he might change from the respectable boy he his and that their mother
will not want them to associate with him anymore. Laurie seems to take this advice to heart
(cf. LW: 257-258). Like we have discussed before, Jo adopts a bit of a maternal attitude
towards Laurie at times, no matter that he is older. There also is the idea that girls have to be
saved from the bad influence of certain boys. However, since we do not have a point of
comparison whether that would apply to girls who could be a bad influence, we shall let this
rest.

There are only a few times between Jo and Laurie when their respective gender comes up.
When Mr. Laurence shakes Laurie, Jo remarks that she has shaken him too and he has never
been cross about it. He then tells her that it is fun when a girl shakes a boy (cf. LW: 360). Jo
does not take any offense to this. This means that any physical violence doled out by women
is not taken seriously. This is in line with today’s attitude of women being allowed to slap
men without it having any consequences. This can be regarded as a devaluation or
infantilization of women, who, in their overemotional rage, still do not deal much harm with
their tiny, powerless fists. However, it also needs to be said that it is unfair for men, or in this
case, Laurie, having to take any abuses laid upon him from women as good fun, as there
should not be a difference made based on gender when it comes to inflicting physical harm,
no matter what degree. Additionally, that women are considered the weaker sex in Little
Women also becomes apparent when Jo talks to Mr. Laurence at the start of the novel, stating
that they are “only” girls but still would like to help out Laurie in any way they can (LW: 93).
Jo is being humble, true, but Mr. Laurence does not contradict her in her assessment. They are
mere girls and it is heavily suggested that boys could help Laurie in his loneliness far better.

To return to Meg and her interactions with men at the party, it needs to be said that what she
does mainly is dance (cf. LW: 59). Dancing, much as it does now, has its uses. Meg is on the
cusp of womanhood and just so still allowed to associate with men without a chaperone. Even
so, dancing was considered a rather intimate act and even more so with the introduction
dances like the waltz where, other than in minuets, both parties had to touch each other.
Touching or not, dancing together offered an opportunity to more or less talk privately and get
to know the person one was dancing with, which was also why dances were good places to try
and meet a future spouse. Meg may be too young for most of the book to seriously consider
marriage, however, the men in the room find her pretty enough for her never to have a problem getting a dance partner. Dancing can be considered a courting ritual that can be harmless as well as done with intent, though in Little Women it is only ever harmless. The same is true for Meg’s time spent at Anne Moffat’s event.

A time where a few boys and girls get together is when Laurie hosts a garden party. There is one instant when boys and girls are firmly separated by Laurie himself. He states that the boys at ‘Camp Laurence’, as he calls his little endeavor, will all be officers that will oversee the whole thing, while the girls shall be company. They put a tent up especially for them so that they may have a drawing room (cf. LW: 213). This little separation of men into the active role of law enforcement and women into keeping them company while observing their idle duties or enjoyments is rather traditional. However, it also seems like children playing pretend at being adults, using the traditional roles of their genders as a reference. They soon go on to play croquet, with both boys and girls taking active roles, but the way Laurie splits Camp Laurence up into two camps according to gender shows how the world of adults is constructed around them. Men take the active role while women take the domestic, passive role or at least, each group is expected to. Perhaps we can observe a certain discrepancy between reality and ideal. While there are expectations and roles to fulfill by men and women both the lines between the genders may blur and individuals may put a toe or a whole foot over the line without raising eyebrows. This also makes sense since an ideal is something to strive for. If it were easily obtained it would not be a precious or valued. This may be the reason why ‘almost’, in many cases, is equal to ‘good enough’.

Now, romantic love in Little Women is portrayed as wholly innocent. Most of the girls are deemed too young throughout the majority of the book to be interested or ready for any kind of courtship. This is why, for most of the novel, the only point of reference for what romantic love might look like is the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. March. An analysis of this relationship is limited, because Mr. March is away at battle until the end of the story. What we can glean, however, is a warm relationship, built upon love and trust. When Mr. March falls ill Mrs. March never hesitates before declaring that she must go see to him (cf. LW: 273). Nothing about the way she reacts lets the reader think that she only does so out of duty or that she would rather not go or send someone else. While it may be the duty of a wife to see to her husband, marmee’s reaction speaks of urgency and caring. This is not the mark of an unhappy relationship.
What can be regarded as the mark of romantic relationships in *Little Women* is the idea of the man as an educator of his woman. At first, this notion may seem absurd, but even nowadays it has not vanished entirely. We all have seen, heard, or experienced a man leaning close over a woman, trying to show her how to swing a golf club or to hit a ball with a billiards queue. The nineteenth century was not different in that, though there may have been less public touching involved. For instance, when Mrs. March tells Jo about her own temper, she also confides that it is her husband that helps and has helped her in the past to keep it in check. She says that because he is such a patient man that never complains and is full of hope she is ashamed to behave otherwise (cf. LW: 138). He makes her want to do better and so she does. While Mrs. March is virtually flawless, Mr. March actually is. The girls see their mother as a role model and their mother sees her husband as one. This relationship is not a circle but a hierarchy with Mr. March at the top. While their parents are married and do seem to represent a united front, their relationship does not seem quite equal.

We can also observe this kind of hierarchy, including the role as the man as educator, in the relationship Meg develops with John Brooke, Laurie’s tutor. Meg is a romantic at heart (cf. LW: 147) which means it is interesting that she does not unmask Brooke’s attentions for what they are when they occur at Laurie’s garden party. Their love story begins when Brooke asks Meg to read a bit of Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* out loud for him. While he praises her reading and apparently quite falls in love with the way she reads the text he encourages her to work on the skill, as it is a valuable accomplishment, before fleeing quite suddenly (cf. LW: 229-231). Of course, since Brooke himself is a teacher, him encouraging her to work on it may simply be part of his nature, but even so, he is very obviously more educated than she is and thus at an advantage.

While Meg’s feelings for him have not quite taken root yet, Brooke is quite smitten and Laurie reveals that he has stolen a glove of Meg’s that has been missing since the garden party (cf. LW: 261). This behavior falls in line with Brooke’s apparent character which is that of a quiet and cognitive man. He is described as a rather grave, silent young man with nice eyes and voice. Meg likes him because of his manners and knowledge (cf. LW: 212-213). Of course, what a person finds attractive is individual to everyone. While Meg seems to prize quiet competence over heroic antics, Jo remarks that she most values honesty and courage in a man when asked (cf. LW: 226). A handsome face never hurts, either. However, it can be summarized that it is skill as well as the typical virtues such as honesty and humility that are
prized in men. Another such virtue must be a certain helpfulness, though Brooke’s special brand of it is not quite selfless.

When Mr. March falls ill Brooke accompanies Mrs. March to where he recuperates and when she has to hurry back to look after sick Beth he stays with him to nurse him the rest of the way back to health (cf. LW: 274, 374). Everyone is very grateful to him and they dub him “Mr. Greatheart” (LW: 286) for his sense, kindness and strength. Much like Laurie and Mr. Laurence have helped the March women out very often, Brooke now joins them. However, while the first two did so out of friendship, Brooke has an ultimate goal in mind; he wants to gain Meg’s favor.

All of this would much seem like sinister speculation when the poor man did not basically admit to it when he asks Meg, after various attempts in letters, to marry him. Meg had declined before because, for one, he should ask her father first, and second she feels that she is too young to marry yet (cf. LW: 355). The tradition of asking a girl’s father for permission to marry her is a long standing tradition going back to when women were never considered to be fully mature and were charges first of their father, later to be given to their husband (cf. Goetz 1986: 35). Marriage was more of a transaction then and thus, their father had the right to consent for them, though elopement could always happen. While Mr. March would not marry Meg off to a man she does not want, he actually has the power to do so. It is a power Meg accepts. Brooke, it turns out later, has actually talked to her parents while her father was sick. He told them that he loved her and it turns out that Mr. March is not actually against the match. However, he thinks Meg too young to marry as well. Beside that Mrs. March is less worried about age and more about feelings. She asks Jo if she thinks that Meg loves Brooke. Jo, who is completely against the match, wheedles out of answering the question and declares that she wishes she could marry Meg herself (cf. LW 344-345). Mrs. March remarks that maybe Meg could learn to love him with time and that they will wait (cf. 349). Thus, Mrs. March, at least, does not regard love as a wild, passionate thing, but more as a gentle feeling that comes with familiarity and work, which is actually a sentiment fitting for a person that has managed the feat of holding up a long and loving marriage.

Meg has the good fortune to have parents who look out for her and thus, largely leave the decision of whom to marry to her, although they have decided that they will not let Meg wed anyone before she has turned twenty, which can be considered a way of assuring that Meg does not succumb to such a youthful folly as love sickness and also to establish a bond between Brooke, should he be the one, and Meg (cf. LW: 346). In any case, as already
mentioned, Brooke has done his best to endear himself to Meg through writing letters and helping her father. When they meet again he actually states that he would consider her hand in marriage a reward for his tribulations (cf. LW 386-387). Meg does not take exception to the thinly veiled insinuation. To give the man some credit, he may not actually have meant it in the crass way he put it, as love can make a fool out of the best of us. However, one should think a teacher would be better-spoken than that.

In any case, when Brooke tells Meg that he loves her, she answers that she does not know if she returns his feelings. This answer is described as a “foolish little reply” (LW:387) which actually undermines Meg’s character in a way, by making it obvious that she is not to be taken seriously on her word. Brooke does not seem to do so either, further pressing her to say yes to his suit. He asks her to consider it and to try and learn the “lesson” of liking him (LW: 387). To say that this is not a terribly romantic notion would be an understatement. All in all it seems like a bit of an infantilization of Meg yet again with Brooke asking to teach her a lesson. Additionally, Brooke, though a gentleman, is pressuring a seemingly unwilling Meg to agree to something she seems to be not quite ready for. While it has become obvious throughout previous chapters that Meg has a crush on Brooke (cf. LW: 352) it seems quite inconsiderate of him to press her so. It is possible that he attributes her seeming unwillingness to innocence or coquetry instead of actual rejection, but it may also be that Brooke is a fan of the hunt, as some men are.

In the end, Meg holds her ground against the man, but her decision is turned around by her aunt, who declares that she needs to marry a more wealthy man and will not inherit a lick of her money if she chooses Brooke. Meg instantly turns her decision around and defends the man vehemently against her aunt (cf. LW: 389-393). This serves as a comic plot device, as it shows how contrary young people can be. Sometimes they will do something, simply because they were forbidden to do it. It also shows the reader once more how young Meg is and how little her decisions can be trusted and it seems to further undermine her capability to make them for herself. Though Meg never was quite such a willful little woman as Jo, once she commits herself to Brooke she seems to further demure. Her whispers become “meek” (LW: 394) and she sits on his lap “wearing an expression of the most abject submission” (LW: 395). It is a sudden transformation that takes place here. Meg may have been a paragon of femininity before but now she seems to have embraced all of the points that make up a woman, by showing submissiveness to her future husband and thus growing up fully.
Marriage, all in all, is regarded as a worldly matter that some of the girls may dream about in abstract ways but none of them seem to know what it all entails or any of the specifics of what married life means. Once, Meg overhears some women talk about how Mrs. March must have certain plans for her to marry Laurie as he is of good breeding and has money. Overhearing the conversation Meg feels her friendship with Laurie has been spoiled for it and it is also remarked that, though Meg is innocent, she quite understood what they were talking about, even without them explicitly mentioning the word marriage (cf. LW: 149-151). This makes it seem as though they were talking about quite different matters, such as sexual intercourse, when they only attributed a certain cunningness to Mrs. March's plans for her girls. When Meg later tells marmee and Jo about this, Mrs. March is ill pleased, calling the gossiping women “worldly”, “ill-bred”, and “full of these vulgar ideas” (LW: 165).

Again, apparently prospective marriage seems to be equaled with much more physical pursuits pertaining the marriage bed if talk about it is enough to attract the fury of Mrs. March. It may be that, since sex was not something to be talked about publicly, marriage was a synonym for all the acts and feelings traditionally belonging to it. Considering how private nineteenth century society was about such matters, talking about marriage even without any sexual connotations may have been in bad taste. It could also be that Mrs. March’s displeasure stems from the idea of her planning to marry off her daughter to a certain man because said man has money. As marrying for money was seen as despicable during these times, the allegation that marmee may not deem it so, might have been the thing that further made her unhappy with the gossips. It has to be said, however, that there was no romance in marrying someone too poor to take care of a family, either. When Meg and Brooke become engaged, he will use the time until she is twenty to build up some money so that he can support his wife and a small household (cf. LW: 397)

If marriage itself is already considered a worldly matter, so is sex. Sexual intercourse is not a necessity for romantic love, either because it can occur without love being involved or because not every being in love with another requires sex for this love to flourish and last. That said, sex is something that does not heavily feature in Little Women at all, let alone characters talking about the why and how of it. The most explicit romantic gestures come in form of the two kisses Meg and Brooke share (cf. LW: 374, 395). There comes a time when Meg is suddenly discouraged to spend time in the presence of young men (cf. LW: 271) and when Mrs. March is away it is said that Hannah, the servant, guards Meg like a dragon (cf. LW: 296). This happens around the time Meg nears her eighteenth birthday. She has suddenly
stepped over an invisible threshold where being alone with men equals possible ruination. This is never quite explained. Alcott simply insinuates this and lets the reader come to their own conclusions about the matter. Meg herself also never raises a fuss about it. This may be explained through the insistent denial of women being interested in sexual intercourse outside of procreation. The myth of the asexual woman was propagated throughout the middle classes (cf. Walkowitz 1994: 418) and thus may be a reason as to why nobody talks about sex to the March girls, who are, after all, virtuous young ladies.

Sexual harassment is not talked about at all in the book, either. The only indication of the characters being aware of even the possibility of it is, for instance, when Laurie wants to walk Jo home hinting at the fact that it is not safe for a woman to walk long stretches without protection (cf. LW: 96). This is perfectly in line with the sentiment towards affairs of the ‘marital bed’, meaning that such matters are not talked about and only readers who are informed about the logistics of the act and are not, as the March girls are, innocents will know about the implications of a woman traveling alone or what is expected of them once married. There is also the fact that even if women experienced passion or sexual violence they only had a small repertoire of words to use to talk about it, which made matters of expression harder (cf. Walkowitz 1994: 419). It goes without saying then, that homosexuality is not mentioned, or even hinted at in Little Women, either. It is unlikely that the sisters even know about the existence of such a thing. Even if they did, it would likely not be a subject to be talked about in polite company.
3  **CHAPTER 3: *FANGIRL* (2013)**

**Legend:**


3.1  **Contextualizing Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl***

Author Rainbow Rowell was born in 1973, the daughter of what Rowell herself calls a hippie, which is further showcased by the names of her three siblings which are Forest, Jade, and Haven (cf. Wilson 2011). Rowell was born in Omaha, the same city where she worked as a journalist for the Omaha World Herald. There, she was the author of a column that appeared several times a week, a job that never quite fulfilled her. The now published author claimed that she felt boxed in by this profession that required her to write the exact same amount of words every few days. In the end, she left this square box of an occupation to ride on to greener, more creative pastures and became an advertising copy editor and creative director for an advertising company that was located in Omaha as well (cf. Ford 2014). Rowell states that she wishes she had quit this job sooner, as she felt depressed working there. Having grown up poor she felt that she had to take a job that would earn her a living, however, instead of reaching for the stars and going into creative writing. Nevertheless, she also admits that writing for the Herald for ten years gave her the routine and experience necessary to write great books (cf. Green 2014).

The writing of said books started while she was employed at the advertising agency she switched to. She started writing her first novel called *Attachments* as a hobby, but did not start searching for a potential publisher immediately. In fact, she set the manuscript aside before it was finished, as she felt the need to concentrate on the first of her two sons, who was a newborn then, and the thought of hiring a babysitter to complete a book written on the side as a pastime felt strange to her. This feeling was intensified by the fact that she had no reason to believe the book was ever going to be accepted by a publishing company at all. This fear turned out to be unfounded after all when *Attachments* was published in April 2011 (cf. Ford 2014). The story took her five years to write and finishing it was a constant struggle until Rowell herself got used to her full days comprised of work and no play. These days, she says that writing has become her life and she has to do it whenever she can (cf. Green 2014).
*Attachments* is a story rather different from the majority of her other novels, as it is a book written for adults. The story is written almost entirely in e-mail form and revolves around a man hired to read these messages and he falls in love with one of the women writing them. The novel was much more successful than anticipated and allowed her to quit her day job in favor of writing (cf. Ford 2014). To do so, she had to come to terms with her childhood. She grew up in rural areas, often having no access to electricity, phones, and cars. Her father was seldom around and if he was, it was not a pleasant experience, as he was an alcoholic and drug addict. Her mother protected her and Rowell credits her sanity to her. She was a strict woman that allowed her to watch little television but encouraged her to read as much as she could. Rowell took her advice and became a very prolific reader to the point where it became problematic, as she did little else (cf. Ford 2014).

She used the way she grew up to write a story about two teenagers whose story was published under the title *Eleanor & Park* in 2013, thus marking her venture into the field of Young Adult fiction, an easy switch she has made multiple times, earning her the title of literary shapeshifter (cf. Green 2014). *Eleanor & Park* earned much praise by its audience. However, it was also a cause for much outrage among some American citizens who called the book obscene and wanted it removed from library shelves (cf. Ortberg 2013). The book is still the subject of much debate because of its mentions of sex and sexual abuse and its use in classrooms keeps being challenged by schools (cf. Williams 2017).

*Eleanor & Park* was followed by another Young Adult novel, called *Fangirl*, which was published in the same year. The story revolves around a girl called Cath, who is a big fan of the Simon Snow books, a book series reminiscent of the Harry Potter books, which Rowell admits to have drawn inspiration from. Rowell calls herself a fangirl of various fandoms and calls the book her “love letter to fandom and fanfiction and fiction” (Whyte 2013). In 2015 she wrote *Carry On*, a fantasy novel about Simon Snow and his fellow heroes and heroines, as she felt that she was not done with the world she had created for *Fangirl*, yet. The novel revolves around Simon’s last year at school, his final attempts to vanquish his enemy, and about his romantic relationship with his former enemy and roommate Baz; a relationship that took a front seat in the stories of *Fangirl* protagonist Cath (cf. Feeney 2015).

On top of that Rowell wrote another novel fitting into the category of Adult Fiction called *Landlines*. The story revolves around a woman working as a co-showrunner of a popular sitcom, while her husband acts as a stay at home dad. Their marriage is crumbling when she suddenly has the opportunity to revisit her past through the landline at her mother’s house,
which somehow connects to her husband’s phone in the past (cf. Green: 2014). About her penchant to switch between writing books for adult and for young adult audiences she says that she does not see much of a difference between the two, except for the characters being of younger age in her Young Adult novels, stating she does not shift between styles. She does not write about adults or teenagers. She writes about people (cf. Block 2015).

To write she put many of her hobbies on hold and she reportedly wrote about three and a half books at Starbucks, before she installed a study in her house, stating that she has a hard time concentrating with her children around (cf. Green 2014). When asked if she can see herself in her characters, Rowell has stated that she is part of all of them in a way. Her childhood, for instance, was similar to the childhood of Eleanor in *Eleanor & Park*, as her husband is a stay at home dad like Neal in *Landlines*, she wanted to be a writer and had social anxiety like Cath in *Fangirl*, and she worked at a newspaper like the characters in *Attachments* do. As such, it is fair to say that Rowell, at times, draws on real life experiences to fuel her stories (cf. Green 2014).

Her novel *Fangirl* starts when Cather Avery, in whose point of view the entire novel is written, and her sister Wren move into their dorms at the University of Nebraska. Despite Cath wanting to room with her sister, Wren decided that they needed some time apart, as they are twins and spent the majority of the last eighteen years of their lives in each other’s presence. Wren is more than happy with this arrangement while Cath, the shier of the twins, visibly struggles with the idea of not having the security and support of a person she already knows in this new environment. She meets her new roommate Reagan and a boy, Levi, who she assumes must be Reagans boyfriend when she first arrives in her new room. It is clear that Cath is not quite sure what to make of these two people while desperate trying to keep herself together, lest her father have a breakdown as well. They leave each other with mutual reassurances that they will both be fine with the new situation; Cath being away from home for the first time and her father left with an empty nest (cf. FG: 4-12).

Cath and her sister start off university very differently; while Wren seems to be out partying with her roommate Courtney every night she can, Cath still hasn’t spoken more than a few words with Reagan and basically lives off the power bars she brought with her, because she does not know where the dining hall is. However, going to classes on her own is less of a problem to her and it becomes evident that her passion is writing. She has been allowed to attend a junior-level course on fiction writing. While the others in the class tell the professor they write mainly to express themselves and create something new when she asks them, Cath
thinks she writes so that she can disappear. This thought reflects the way Cath lives her life at the start of the novel very well, as she tries to get noticed as little as possible and does not even try making any friends, going as far as not letting Levi in the room she shares with Reagan because she does not know him and feels uncomfortable staying in a room with a boy she has not talked to very often yet (cf. FG: 14-24.)

While Levi hangs out in their room all the time anyway as Reagan has no such qualms to let him in, Cath is trying to continue the fanfiction she is writing for the Simon Snow series, which is a book series consisting of seven books, with an eighth book due to be released in a few months. The books revolve around the namesake of the series, Simon Snow, and his adventures as a magician. The story is reminiscent of the *Harry Potter* books but both book series exist within the fictional world of *Fangirl* (cf. FG: 3). The story Cath is writing revolves around two of the main characters, Simon and Baz, who she has cast into the role of each other’s boyfriend. Her sister Wren seems to be rapidly outgrowing the fanfiction scene if her sarcastic comments regarding Cath writing yet another romance scene between Baz and Simon is any indication while Cath is still very much in the middle of it all (cf. FG: 25-32).

While Reagan finds her love for Simon Snow, which is apparent through all the fan articles Cath has on her side of the room, a little peculiar, the two of them become friends despite neither one really being interested in the formation of such a friendship. However, when Reagan finds out that Cath has been living off protein bars she decides to take her under her wing, complaining about it every second of the way. It is established that Levi is not Reagan’s boyfriend, though Cath does not quite seem to believe her and thinks he is just one of the many boys Reagan is seeing and has coming and going from their room. This is also around the time Cath starts talking with Nick, a boy from her fiction writing class. The two of them start working on a project for the class together and it is clear that Cath finds him attractive (cf. FG: 33-45).

However, it is apparent that she finds Levi just as attractive, even if Nick and him are polar opposites, with Levi being a very sunny and affable guy and Nick being darker and less transparent. Levi is using every opportunity to try and draw her into conversation, but Cath is always acting rather stand-offish with him, which does not deter him much. It also becomes clear just how much time she puts into writing her fanfiction story *Carry On, Simon*, which poses as an alternative eighth book of the series. She has thousands of readers online and while she is still coming to grips with her fame within the world of fandom, Cath very much does not want to disappoint her fans (cf. FG: 45-51).
Besides fanfiction she also has writing for her fiction writing class to do and so Nick and her meet up at night to work on their project together. They meet in the library he is working at and get down very late around midnight. Levi offers to meet her at the library to walk her home so that she will not have to walk the ten minutes back to her dorm in darkness, and Cath takes him up on the offer when it becomes clear that Nick will not do it. Meanwhile Cath has trouble getting in touch with her father, which worries her. Her fiction-writing teacher, Professor Piper, loves what Nick and Cath wrote and they decide to always pair up for assignments from now on and regularly meet for late night sessions in the library, which Levi always accompanies her home from. Wren and Cath drift farther apart when all Wren seems to do is party, which Cath does not like, and keeps making snide remarks about Simon Snow. On top of all of that, Cath’s high school boyfriend Abel breaks up with her (cf. FG: 52-81).

Now that Abel has broken up with her, Cath suddenly notices boys a lot more than she did before. Different than her sister she has never felt boy-crazy before, but that is rapidly changing, especially with Nick and Levi in her life now. When she decides to buy a coffee at the Starbucks Levi works at it kind of puts into motion her friendship outside of seeing him when he visits Reagan or when he is helping her out by walking her home from the library. While Levi is different from her in many ways since he is so outgoing and a people person, she starts liking him very much. One weekend Cath decides to go visit her father in Omaha while Wren stays at university to party. It becomes very obvious for the first time that Cath’s mother is not part of her life and that her father, Art, raised Cath and her sister alone. He seems to have some kind of mental disorder that is never wholly explained or given a name throughout the book, but it shows itself by him losing himself in his work and neglecting himself as well as the household. Cath is worried what will happen to him now that she and her sister are not home anymore to look out for him (cf. FG: 82-100).

It turns out that their mother decided to step back into her daughters’ lives. Cath wants to have nothing to do with her as she stepped out on them when they were eight on September 11 (cf. FG: 150) and she has not forgiven her. Wren, however, is thinking about it, making Cath mad. She receives more bad news when she is called into Prof. Piper’s office. Her teacher is unhappy with her latest work because Cath handed in a work of fanfiction, which Prof. Piper sees as plagiarism. Cath is devastated that her favorite teacher seems to disapprove of something so close to her heart. Later that night, after an emergency dance party with Levi to let all of her frustration out, Wren texts her 911 and asks her to come to a club. Cath and Levi rush to the club to help Wren, where it turns out that Wren is not having an emergency at all and actually texted the wrong number. Levi gets into a fight with a guy who harasses both
Wren and Cath and the rift between the sisters deepens. Instead of telling her sister about her bad grade she talks about it to Levi, who becomes her confidant more and more (cf. FG: 101-132).

One day Levi asks Cath to read him some of her fanfiction. She is reluctant at first, as she does not understand why he would want to hear a story about two boys falling in love and also because she is shy about it, but Levi insists because he is curious. It becomes an ongoing activity between the two as Levi enjoys listening and Cath enjoys his company. He and Reagan rapidly turn into her best friends at university by the time Thanksgiving arrives and the twins drive home to Omaha to celebrate it. Cath and Wren have a huge fight about their mother where Cath explains that she does not need a mother anymore now that she is grown up. Her father lets both of the sisters handle the situation as they want, though it is obvious that he is still hurt by his ex-wife leaving him (cf. FG: 133-172).

Back at university, Cath ends up helping Levi studying for a test as Reagan, who promised to help him, forgot about it and went out. It turns out that Levi has a reading disability that makes it difficult for him to read long texts. He has an exam about *The Outsiders* the next day and cannot study for it alone. It takes Cath a while to understand that he is not simply being lazy but once she does she reads the whole book to him. They end the evening by kissing each other and falling asleep on her bed together. Reagan finds them later and it is finally unmistakably stated that Levi is Reagan’s ex-boyfriend and that Cath does not need to feel bad for having feelings for him. Reagan grapples with the situation for a few minutes but decides to be fine with it. A two days later there is a party at Levi’s house. Reagan persuades Cath to go with her. At the party Cath, not having talked to Levi since their night together, sees him kiss a girl in his kitchen and promptly leaves with Reagan (cf. FG: 174-204).

Cath is heartbroken, already having convinced herself that a guy like him would never really like a girl like her. She tells Reagan that she does not have to ignore him even though it seems that she would. All her interactions with Levi are very cool and it is clear that he does not know why. Meanwhile Nick and Cath are still writing a story together, this time, however, it is just for fun as their last assignment in the class is to write a 10,000 word short story that will make up half of their grade. Cath cannot bring herself to start writing it, because she has no idea what to write about. It also becomes clear that Nick sees himself as a bit of a more sophisticated writer than Cath and is still surprised that they work well together. She also meets a girl that is reading and loving her fanfiction and this stresses her a little as she has not
had much time for writing chapters of *Carry On, Simon* very often in the last few weeks. On top of that the deadline for her fiction-writing project is fast approaching (cf. FG: 205-216).

Nick shows his true colors when he tells Cath that he will hand in the story they have been writing together for his writing project. He feels that it is mainly his story and that Cath has basically just been editing it. He does not see this as a betrayal while Cath is shocked, and this marks the end of their friendship. Soon after that a colleague of her father calls her, telling her that her father has suffered a breakdown at work and has been admitted into a mental hospital. Distraught, she first calls Wren who sees no point in driving to the hospital, as their father is unconscious and it is finals week. She then calls Levi who promptly offers to skip work and drive her. Levi stays to wait with her and asks her why she is mad at him, and she tells him about what she saw at his party, for which he apologizes. When she comes back after being allowed to see her dad he is gone. She stays at her father’s house and misses her last exam (cf. FG: 217-245).

Wren comes home the same day as their father does and they celebrate Christmas. Wren stays with her mother for a bit and brings Cath home a present from her. They have another argument about the topic. Cath tells her father that she does not want to go back to university but instead wants to go to the community college near the house so that she can stay with her father and help him out. Reasons like her writing class, Levi, and Nick also factor into this wish. Her father does not want her to lose her scholarship because of him and asks her to think it over. She ends up staying at the University of Nebraska, simply because it is easier. She is allowed to retake the exam she missed and Prof. Piper tells her that she can complete her writing assignment during the new semester as part of an independent study with her. The professor also knows that Cath helped Nick with his assignment, though he did not tell her. Levi and Cath become a couple after he tells her that he just kissed the girl at the party because he was not sure where he stood with her and that he would like to convince her that he likes her and only her (cf. FG: 246-299).

Reagan and Cath come to the decision that they are not going to talk about the more intimate details about Cath’s and Levi’s relationship. Cath goes on her first date with Levi and learns more about him. After that they see each other every day, but Cath has a hard time getting to the more physical part of their relationship as he is far more experienced than she is and she is afraid to make a fool of herself. Cath has a meeting with Professor Piper where she tells her that she will take her up on her offer to write the short story. Prof. Piper tells her to meet her regularly to monitor her progress. Levi asks Cath to drive her to her dad’s house for the
weekend because he would like to get to know him and ends up staying the night because the weather is too bad to drive in it. They talk a bit more about the differences in their families; whereas Cath’s family is split up Levi has a very big family with four sisters and a loving mother. However, his family is also more conservative than hers (cf. FG: 300-348).

Cath is very far behind on *Carry On, Simon* and is stressed about that as she wants to be done and have posted the rest of her story before the author of the Simon Snow series publishes the last book of the series, since Cath’s fanfiction revolves around her own ending for the books. While writing, Cath receives a phone call from her mother, who tells her that Wren is in the hospital because she needed to get her stomach pumped. Reagan drives her there and at the hospital she meets her mother, who refuses to stay once Wren is allowed to receive visitors because she feels that she would only intrude. Wren is in a bad condition and once their father arrives he takes the both of them home. Wren’s boyfriend Jandro as well as Levi found out about the situation and are outside in the waiting room to support them. Cath’s father is very upset about what happened and thinks about telling Wren to stop studying, but Cath manages to convince him not to do that. Instead, Wren is told to stop drinking, go to AA meetings, and come home every weekend for the rest of the semester. After a long time the sisters finally take the time to talk to each other and sort a few things out between them (cf. FG: 349-381).

Back at university Cath goes to Levi’s room for the first time. She is nervous about it and he asks her to read him some fanfiction so that she will relax and let him touch her. She does and at the end of it they kiss for the first time since that night where she read him “The Outsiders”. Kissing fast turns into making out, but nothing else happens. Levi tells her that he is falling in love with her. Wren and Cath are getting closer and start spending time with each other again, which also means talking about *Carry On, Simon*. She uses Wren as a sounding board for her ideas and Wren helps her focus on the story so that she has the chance to finish it in time. When meeting Prof. Piper she tells her that her short story will be about her mother (cf. FG: 382-417).

While it is not explicitly stated it is hinted that Cath sleeps with Levi after she has finally become comfortable with the more physical aspect of their relationship. A few days later Nick approaches her at her dorm room. He tells her that his, their, story was selected for Prairie Schooner, the university’s literary magazine. As Professor Piper knows that he did not write the story by himself, she told him the story could only be published if Cath agreed to it and if she will be credited as well. Cath is not comfortable with this and tells him to publish it without her name. Angry, Nick tells her that he is not allowed to do that and tells her he also
lost his position as Prof. Pipers teaching assistant because of this. Cath is sorry but does not give in (cf. FG: 418-431).

Levi is afraid that Cath is embarrassed by him because she never takes him to meet her sister. She tells him the real reason for that is that she is afraid he will realize that Wren is the better twin between the two of them. Levi tells her he loves her. An unspecified amount of days later Cath tells Levi she will not be writing the short story for Professor Piper because her self-assigned deadline for Carry On, Simon is fast approaching and she does not have time to do both. After an argument he convinces her to finish the fanfiction later and concentrate on the short story. She has ten days left to do it and finishes on time. The book ends with Cath and Levi reading the eighth book of the Simon Snow series together. On the last page we find an excerpt from her short story, which won the underclassmen prize and was published in the Prairie Schooner (cf. FG: 432-460).

### 3.2 Closing In: Considering the Progression of Gender Convergence

It almost goes without saying that there have to be marked differences in gender performance, expectations, and roles between Little Women and Fangirl; two books that were published within one hundred and fifty years of each other. In the years following the publication of Alcott’s work and up to Rowell’s second Young Adult novel, a wind of change swept over the gendered landscape of America, leaving ideals and ideas upturned, slightly changed, or simply disguised. When considering gender in Fangirl after just having read Little Women, one could make the assumption that gender does not hold all that much importance in this novel. After all, we have a world where the female characters are allowed the same freedoms, privileges, and rights as men are, right? It would be easy to look at this modern landscape, compare it with olden times, and think that the dichotomy between genders has been erased almost completely.

However, as is the case with most seductive thoughts, it is rather untrue. Where Alcott has the habit of spelling everything, even differences between genders, out so that the reader does not have to spend their time puzzling over them, Rowell takes a more subtle approach and the reader has to make up their own mind about matters of gender. While the differences between men and women are often blatant in Little Women, they are more subtle in Fangirl. Adding to this does the fact that the world of the March girls is situated in a time that has long passed, while Fangirl is very much a contemporary novel. It is easy to call out our ancestors on their behavior, as it often differs greatly from what is done in the here and now. But to hold up a
mirror to contemporary times and find gendered behavior in our day to day business is much harder work, though infinitely interesting once accomplished. As such, I would like to argue in this section that, while the world of *Fangirl* seems to be a step towards a society where gender does not matter anymore, this idea is simply a mirage. While gender matters less in some ways, it still very much colors everyday behavior, even in the smallest of ways.

Let us start off with outward appearances. While in *Little Women* clothes are gendered in that dresses are worn by women and pants by men, the change time brought is reflected in *Fangirl* by the way that women may alternate between the two. Cath, especially, is a woman that prefers a more boyish look; she never wears a dress throughout the whole of the novel. However, as we all know, this is not something to be remarked upon in Western culture. Still, her usual look, consisting of jeans, t-shirt, and cardigan, (cf. FG: 16) could be worn just as likely by a man. Her sister, Wren, who is much more into partying, is the one who took all the more feminine attire of their shared wardrobe, such as dresses, when they split up their clothing before going to university (cf. FG: 198). See what happened here? While talking about the fact that women may wear what they want to, more or less, we still managed to classify one of these groups of clothing as boyish and the other as feminine. While it has become commonplace for women to wear pants, dresses are still considered the more female choice, leading to women who never wear dresses or actively dislike doing so sometimes being dubbed as tomboys.

Additionally, while Cath’s preferred choice of clothing may be worn by men just as well, there is still a separation between men’s and women’s sections in stores. Some of that has to do with practicality, of course, with women and men needing different cuts to accommodate broader shoulders or bigger chests. However, while there is less of a stigma attached to women buying clothes in the men’s section, especially clothing for comfortable needs or sleepwear, the same is not true for men shopping in the women’s section. This ties nicely into the fact that, while women and pants have become fast, inseparable friends, men’s relationship with dresses operates on a strict no touching policy. In the theory section, we have already talked about a certain devaluation of femininity, with masculinity always ranking higher in the hierarchy, and the action of lowering oneself into the female sphere as a man often being seen as shameful. Outside of the kilt, Western culture leaves little space for men wearing a garment on their lower body half that does not meet between their legs. This goes to show that, while it has become more and more acceptable for women to act in masculine ways, the same is not true for men acting in a way that is perceived as feminine.
However, it needs to be said that some of the male characters in the book, especially Levi, have greater freedom when it comes to the way they act, than is often afforded to other male characters in literature or in *Little Women*.

When it comes to clothing, the focus lies more heavily on what the women in the novel are wearing than what the men are. This makes a certain sense, as the protagonist whose point of view the story was written in is a girl herself and socially awkward on top of it. She spends a certain amount of time cataloguing the differences in how she presents herself compared to how other girls such as her sister or her roommate do. That her sister is a more feminine dresser has already been established. Her roommate is also a girl of the pants-wearing variety, though she still appears to dress more feminine than Cath does. She usually wears her hair down and applies makeup in the form of prominent eyeliner (cf. FG: 68). Makeup is something Cath rarely uses, if the fact that she has to search for her makeup when she applies it for a party is any indication for it (cf. FG: 198). This is simply personal preference and nobody ever makes any fuss about it, except for Reagan, who only mentions that she looks slightly nicer than usual when she has her hair down and some makeup on (cf. FG: 199). This fits neatly into contemporary beauty standards. If we look at women that are considered beautiful, be it for commercials or in movies, these women usually have flowing hair and are wearing a certain amount of expertly applied makeup. It is simply what is in style nowadays. Nobody much comments on Reagan’s preferred style either, with Cath only thinking that despite Reagan being a bit on the heavy side weight-wise, she holds herself with such confidence that nobody would dare consider her anything but attractive (cf. FG: 68).

This is a rather body positive attitude if we take into account that, different from in *Little Women*, thinness is rather hyped in contemporary society. While Reagan is described as seriously busty and it is insinuated that the rest of her body matches her chest, this is never a problem. Reagan is still considered attractive by Cath as well as the various men that come and go from her bed throughout the novel (cf. FG: 38). Cath, though it is not turned into a huge problem, has a less favorable attitude towards her own appearance. She considers herself the ugly one between her and her sister (cf. FG: 81) and is rather unhappy with how her body is shaped. She describes both her sister and herself, since they are identical twins, as bottom heavy. She wishes her breasts were a bit bigger to balance her hips out (cf. FG: 197). It is again suggested that for others to regard you as beautiful you need to see yourself that way, as Cath tries to pretend that she is her sister and does not care about her hips. Again, this is a
rather body positive attitude that urges a person to love themselves and this love and confidence being the key to attract others.

We do not have such insight into the men of the novel, though at least Levi has one zone on his body that could be considered a problematic one. He has a rather receding hairline that leads him to have a prominent widow’s peak. Much like Reagan and Wren, however, he does not let this bother him and actually wears his hair in such a way that emphasizes this feature that others would perhaps rather hide (cf. FG: 49). Cath comes to find this point in his appearance exceedingly attractive (cf. FG: 296), further proving how much confidence can to for a person’s aura and not limiting this effect to girls. As for what they boys wear, the matter is rather simpler than for the girls. Levi usually wears black and white, as he is a barista at Starbucks and that is what is required by employees (cf. FG: 48, 92). Nick is a bit more on the fashionable side, often described as looking old world, a bit dark, like Hemingway, and once, memorably, like “he had a steerage ticket to the Titanic” (FG: 37). The only other boy described a bit further is Wren’s boyfriend, Jandro, whose clothes are given little consideration, but who is described as looking clean-cut and is built to play football (cf. FG: 384). Cath herself ruminates a lot on the looks of both Levi and Nick, but this has to do mostly with the fact that she is attracted to both of them. Once she breaks up with her boyfriend Abel, she actively starts noticing the men around her, sexualizing many of them (cf. FG: 88). The fact the female sexuality is displayed rather openly will be discussed later during this chapter as it stands in stark contrast to how the matter is handled in Little Women. To conclude, clothes seem to still play a larger role for women than they do for men, though the old proverb on clothes making people has merit for both genders that feature in Fangirl. We do not know Rowell’s take on non-binary people, as none are included in the story.

Haircuts are another part of outward appearance that needs to be addressed. We have established that in Little Women, hair plays a big part in female beauty. Hair needed to be long to be considered feminine and losing it, whether willingly or unwillingly, was seen as a great shame or sacrifice. This is another point that has significantly changed compared to Fangirl. While Cath wears her hair long and usually tied up in some way (cf. FG: 69) her sister Wren wears hers short in a pixie cut (cf. FG: 11). Though Cath still regards her choice as bold and brave, she also states that it adds to her beauty or underlines it, rather than detracting from it (cf. FG: 11). We can still see remnants of old thinking here; cutting off one’s luscious mane is still a choice not to be considered lightly, as hair takes some time to grow back and there always is the chance of the cut not suiting a person’s face. However, nowhere in the book is
Wren’s loss of hair mourned, shamed, or called unfeminine or ugly, except by the grandmother of Cath’s ex-boyfriend, who deems her loss of hair pity (cf. FG: 251) Mostly, it is not a point to be disputed. Cath’s choice to almost always wear her hair up, however, is commented on by her roommate Reagan, who promptly wants to know if there are religious reasons for her modest look (cf. FG: 69). It is interesting that short hair is seen as less conservative and sexier than long hair that has been pulled into a bun or pony tail. Possibly, the reason for that is that the various religious groups throughout America advise women to wear their hair in a modest style. Reagan, in this case, refers to Mormons when she asks her question, and though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not require their women to put their hair up, they do ask them to present themselves conservatively and plainly (cf. Sterbenz 2014). With this, Reagan shows American culture’s devaluation of ‘prudish’ behavior in women that usually goes hand in hand with the prerequisite of not being too promiscuous either, making it a high wire act to find the perfect balance. This, however, is not an issue in Fangirl, as we will see later.

While we are talking about the pixie cut, we also need to talk about language, again, as gender may be presented through appearance and actions, but is reinforced and perpetuated through language just as much. A pixie cut is a short haircut reserved for women. Nobody would refer to a man’s short hairstyle as a pixie cut; this is a given fact. However, there are other points throughout the novel where language seems to bump against certain limits when it comes to trying to cross the wall between genders. For instance, Cath muses about her friend Nick’s hair and is at a loss whether to call the hair falling into his eyes ‘bangs’ or whether these strands of hair can only be called that in women (cf. FG: 84). At another point, she wonders whether boys can giggle or if that particular form of laughter must be called something different when a male of the species performs this action (cf. FG: 127). These are small things but it is interesting that Cath feels unable to apply these terms to men like she would to women. If they are not ‘bangs’, what indeed are they called? And if men do not giggle, would the manlier alternative be a dark chuckle à la Edward Cullen? Why does it matter, anyway? The lack of words for male hair of the frontal bone variety may stem from the simple fact that most hairstyles worn by men feature a certain amount of short hair gathering in this general area, while ‘bangs’ constitute a specific part of a few specific hairstyles in women and thus had to be named, while it was not needful to do so in the other case.

As for manly giggling, the fact remains that no such thing seems to exist. Giggling is an action performed by girls and little boys. Effectively, it is probably not even done by women,
but is instead associated with an immature, childishness that poses together with cuteness. In culture, there is a general difference made between girls and women within the scope of females. There has recently been a debate about whether calling fully grown women ‘girls’ can be seen as devaluing them, as nobody would call a thirty-something male a ‘boy’, except maybe to showcase his immaturity or as a racial slur, while women will often be called girls until the day they die. Being referred to as a girl when one clearly has exited that stage of development some time ago, can often be seen as a tool to patronize or sexualize women (cf. Parkinson 2015). It can be patronizing, because little girls are not capable of many things and need somebody to do it for them. It can be sexualizing, because who has not heard about the much sought after dirty girl who is asked if she knows who her daddy is? Giggling falls into the same section as this and as such, cannot be used by men. It feels absurd even to somebody who knows about the performative nature of gender to use the word ‘giggle’ for a man’s laugh, even if the description would technically fit, except maybe for discrediting the man in question or even to make him seem creepy. Language and thought, and as such, culture, being tied together is not a new idea and has been discussed by linguists for some time. While there is some debate whether language determines or only influences thought, we can, in this case, definitely see how language can limit us when it comes to the sphere of gender (cf. Yule 2010:269-270).

Moving on, what also needs to be pointed out is the fact that men and women are offered a great deal of freedom in the way they behave. No character throughout the whole book is shamed for either behaving too feminine or too masculine. Behavior stereotypically attributed to men may be exhibited by women and, quite extraordinarily, the other way around as well. This is rather special, as in everyday life it is often the women who are allowed to act like men but the men are not afforded the same courtesy. Had this been the case in *Fangirl*, we would have had to argue that *Little Women* values its women more than *Fangirl* does, with femininity being a boon to society just as much as masculinity. Thankfully, this is not the case in this contemporary work of literature, though it very much is in others. For instance, let us look at emotions. While women crying in the novel is still far more common than men doing the same, with Cath being an exceptionally frequent crier, the fact remains that men in the novel do cry and that nobody comments in any way on it. Simon Snow cries in one of Cath’s fanfictions when thinking about his dead mother (cf. FG:61). His crying is not devalued in any way, not even by his nemesis, Baz, who is looking on. Of course, the Simon Snow of Cath’s imagination is gay, and some people might attribute his crying to that. However, let us disregard that for the moment and simply be happy that a boy, who is the hero of a series of
books, is allowed the solace crying brings. Another man crying in the book is Levi who cries at the sad ending of a book Cath reads to him (cf. FG: 185). Though it is not clear whether he actually performs this action or whether Cath imagines him doing so, the fact remains that she does not further think about it. A sad book ending is enough of a reason to justify anybody crying in Cath’s eyes and that very much characterizes both Cath’s and the story’s attitude towards such matters. Not to mention Cath’s father Art, who freely admits to crying for three hours after his ex-wife called him (cf. FG: 172).

Levi continues to behave atypically in other ways throughout the novel. For instance, the domestic part of procuring food falls to him. He often brings Cath drinks from work and does this and other food related favors for her so often that she winds up asking him why he keeps feeding her, and he answers that it makes sense given his work and his major in agriculture (cf. FG: 233). While a man buying his woman food may not necessarily be equated with the domestic task of cooking for a spouse and family, the fact remains that throughout the book it is mostly him that feeds her instead of the other way around. All in all, Levi is a very nurturing character, one of the rare breed of men that can be called a genuinely good guy. It is once remarked that he basically derives a form of high from making other people happy (cf. FG: 135). He does not do so by sacrificing parts of himself, but instead reaffirms who he is by procuring happiness for his friends. If we were being facetious we could say that he has the potential to be the perfect nineteenth century woman in that putting others before himself is not a sacrifice to him but rather something that he does gladly. Of course, much like with Laurie, we could attribute some of his behavior simply as the one of a knight in shining armor, for instance when Cath does not even have to ask for him to drive him to her sister when she texts her an S.O.S. from a bar (cf. FG: 115). He likes her and that is enough for him to help her out.

If Levi is in some ways softer than the stereotypical male, Cath is a little harder around the edges. For instance, the reader finds out that she was once fired from a job because she did not smile often enough (cf. FG: 111). In a society that often tells women unbidden to smile more so they will look more beautiful, refusing to smile can actually be considered a bit of a rebellious behavior. Though Cath cries easily and often that does not make her softer. Other than her sister, she holds her anger tight to her chest and does not forgive easily or at all. To know this, we only have to consider her relationship with her mother, whom she has not forgiven for leaving her and Wren all those years ago, even though Wren is trying to rebuild her relationship with their mom (cf. FG: 171). Furthermore, she is fiercely protective of and
loyal to her father, as he never left her and her sister and has to grapple with some form of mental instability that is never given a name during the course of the story (cf. FG: 239). Her protectiveness goes as far as Cath wanting to quit university and moving back home (cf. FG: 261). This could be considered in two ways. On the one hand, Cath is prepared to sacrifice her education to care for a father who has trouble doing so for himself. This could be seen as the kind of behavior wanted from females, especially in the nineteenth century; putting family before self. However, Cath uses her dad’s illness as an excuse to do something she wants to do for herself. She is struggling with school and the realities about her writing she has to face because of it. Being able to stop going would be a way out her father does end up not allowing her. On the other hand, we have the idea of a woman acting as a protector to a man, as Art’s health is on the line and he could end up seriously hurting himself. This mixture of nurse and protector leans a little into the direction of expectations for males. In addition to that, there is one instance where Cath tells Levi that she would give him the moon and he playfully retorts that he would rather she’d slay it for him (cf. FG: 367). As such, women are given a more active and even dominant role in Fangirl than they are in Little Women. We will see other ways in which this is true in later sections.

Now let us look at the points of true womanhood we considered in the case of Alcott’s work. Matters like purity in women do not seem to be of high importance in Fangirl, beyond sexual relations having to occur on a consensual basis when both parties are ready for them. Piety is a non-issue as well. While we can still see domesticity playing a certain role for both men and women in Fangirl, religion is mentioned hardly ever during the course of the story. None of the characters seem to be overly faithful towards a deity, with Art once mentioning that Cath and Wren were raised without a religion on purpose, though he does not specify why (cf. FG: 380). The only one person who actually still seems to embody almost all of the values Welter wrote about is Levi’s mother, who is a god-fearing woman that either seems to be a stay-at-home-mom or who effortlessly combines this occupation with the work that needs to be done on the farm she and her husband own. She has five children and expresses a certain dislike towards promiscuity in that she never liked it that Reagan and Levi used to be a couple, because there was some history in Reagan’s family about girls getting pregnant while still in their teenage years. She seems to see this as a female issue rather than holding both parties needed to make a baby responsible (cf. FG: 342-345). However, she is a side character and one that embodies values from the past, as well.
In *Little Women*, the future of the characters was discussed in no uncertain terms, much like gender performance was. They all explicitly express what they want from the future and it is implied heavily that family ought to be a part of that in some form. Less clarity comes forth from *Fangirl* pertaining future plans and dreams. Often, we have to speculate on what the characters want to do with their lives and actually it also says something about how much society has changed that even the characters themselves are uncertain about what they should do with their lives once university is over. As such, university, or at least freshman year, seems to be a time where young adults are allowed to figure out what they want from life. Nobody expects them to know at this stage what they would like to achieve and freshman year is a time to make new experiences and celebrate their newfound independence. It is a short reprieve from adult life, a time of limbo, where a person is technically of age, but has almost none of the obligations expected from adults to be performed. This is true for both boys and girls as universities and schools are not segregated according to gender anymore, unlike in *Little Women*. That is perhaps the greatest difference between the books when it comes to the future; the fact that girls can get the same education as boys and that they are supposed to use what they have learned to support themselves and start careers, instead of using it only within family and to be considered accomplished enough to attract a husband.

So, what is known about the future plans of the characters? Let us start with our main concern, Cath. Cath explicitly states at the start of the novel that she cannot imagine having an actual career at this point in her life. Additionally, she cannot even think up a career she would like to pursue. All she knows is that she wants to write (cf. FG: 16). But how that need to write will manifest itself in the shape of a job she does not know. Maybe she will become a famous fiction writer. She has the talent for that as the fact that she wins a prize for her short story at the end of the book proves (cf. FG: 461), but whether that is what she will do or even if it is what she intends to do is not wholly clear. Cath receives encouragement for this pursuit at least from Prof. Piper, who wants to see her thrive as her frequent compliments and encouragements show and no other character wants to actively detain her from entering such a career. Much like with Jo, entering a career as a writer is perfectly possible for Cath, though female writers nowadays are allowed far more range and receive more prestige than they did in Jo’s times. While Jo’s wish to become a writer was seen as a harmless idea, Cath becoming a writer is something that could very well happen.

Cath’s sister Wren, on the other hand, wants to follow in their father’s footsteps and is studying marketing (cf. FG: 16). That is all that is ever said about the subject throughout the
book, so we do not know if maybe she changed her mind during the course of the year or even why she wants to study this. What it shows, at least, is the fact that many jobs are not coded according to gender anymore, especially if they are jobs performed in an office or have a creative component. Wren wanting to work in marketing is not a pipe dream; it can become reality. Additionally, it used to be the boys that stepped into their fathers’ footsteps and not the girls. Nowadays, a father can find an heir for his business in his daughter as well. Levi, on the other hand, is reading range management at university, which makes sense since he grew up on a farm. While it is, by his own assessment, unlikely that he will inherit the farm of his parents, it is the one thing he is passionate about and wants to do with his life, no matter whether he will instantly find a job in this field or not (cf. FG: 309-310), though with them living in Omaha, they are at least in the right region to start looking. What this shows is that trying to achieve your dream is more important than studying something that will guarantee you a job, and it seems that none of the characters are actively concerned with the question if their choice of studies will help support them in their adult life. College can be seen as a form of second childhood. You are allowed to find out who you are and who you want to be. Adult responsibilities come later. This is true just as much for girls as it is for boys in Rowell’s work. In this we can find no gender stereotypes.

As for the other characters, we simply do not know what they want to do with their lives. It is likely that Nick wants to pursue a writing career, though he never says so and we do not know if what happened with Cath will discourage him from pursuing that idea. Reagan remains a mystery in this as well. Aside from the specific dreams of characters, one thing seems to pertain to all of them; marriage is not a very big concern. It is never much discussed with either the men or the women. In the limbo of college, freshman year, and figuring things out, marriage is as much of an abstract as it can be. None of the characters even think about marrying and becoming parents yet, while in *Little Women* Meg was already engaged at Cath’s age. Furthermore, all of the March girls spent their young adult life learning skills needed by a housewife and mother, as the men tried to build up a career that would be profitable enough to support a family. Neither childrearing, nor household skills are a concern for anybody in this book, as is the need to make money to support a family. College itself seems to be a more important coming off age ritual than marriage. While for women in *Little Women* marriage meant an increase in status and even freedom, college has taken over the mantle of emancipation in Fangirl. Marriage is something to be considered later and has different implications than it used to have. Times, to put it simply, have changed a lot.
Additionally, the topic of children never comes up and the only person who seems to genuinely like babies is Levi (cf. FG: 70), which also does not fit into traditional norms.

Gender still matters in *Fangirl*. Be it because of linguistic constraints or because of the simple matter of the dorms being separated by gender, with each floor either only housing women or men (cf. FG: 182), be it, because the narrative of the book is rather heteronormative in that the only two genders mentioned are men and women, with all characters assumed to be heterosexual, even the ones in the stories within the book, such as Simon Snow and the X-Men (cf. FG: 248). However, while gender still very much plays a role in *Fangirl*, just as much as it does in real life, the constraints placed on people seem to have loosened considerably compared to how things are portrayed in *Little Women*. While in Alcott’s work many actions were deemed either feminine, unfeminine, boyish, manly, or unmanly, such discourse does not occur in Rowell’s novel. Characters have more freedom within the sphere of their gender and have more options on how to perform the gender they identify as. While in *Little Women*, the girls had to be molded, in some cases almost forced, to fit the form of woman, here the reigns aren’t as tight and the garments of gender less restrictive, leaving each individual some room for personal expression. While the characters of *Fangirl* are still eons away from living in a world that does not concern itself with gender, it is not wrong to say that, compared to the March girl’s lives, things have gotten better, if less clear, and a little more muddied as to what it means to be a man or woman.

### 3.3 Fans of Fiction: Contemplating the Gendered Space of Writing

Writing takes a far more important role in *Fangirl* than it does in *Little Women*. Jo March loves writing and reading, but she is not the only character in the book that can be seen as the main character, her sisters also play a role and it seems that there is not one literary bone in them. In *Fangirl*, writing, reading, and participating in fan culture is the center of the one main character’s life. Cath lives and breathes literature. It is both a source of relief and refuge as well as anxiety for her. Stories influence almost every corner of her life with her writing and escaping into words for fun and also considering making it her profession by attending a creative writing class at university. Additionally, she is not the only character who writes. Her sister used to write along with her, as does her friend Nick, and the other students attending the class with her, as well as, of course, the professor teaching it. To find out what exactly stories, both the reading and writing of them, mean to Cath, we need to look at what and why of her writing, just as we did for Jo March in the previous chapter.
To start us off chronologically, it all started with Simon Snow for Cath. Cath is an avid fan of the Simon Snow series, as we already established. As such, she lives out her love for the books by engaging in the Simon Snow fandom as well as writing fanfiction about the characters of the series, usually pairing together two male protagonists, Simon and Baz, who are canonical enemies. While fandom itself is not restricted to any gender, writing fanfiction, especially slash fanfiction, meaning stories that revolve around a romantic relationship between two characters of the same sex, is a sector dominated by heterosexual females. In their article about slash fanfiction about the Star Trek characters James Kirk and Sch’n T’gai Spock, one of the oldest standing slash ships there is, Falzone suggests three reasons why this might be. Firstly, just as much as heterosexual men enjoy seeing two women together sexually, heterosexual women have the ability to find pleasure in two males engaging in sexual as well as romantic activities as well. Secondly, as many TV-Shows and books often feature a limited amount of female love interests for the male heroes, or sometimes offer options that do not appeal to fans, writers like to pair together those characters with the most chemistry, no matter their gender. It is the love, the relationship that matters. Thirdly, this marginalization of female characters in fiction leads women to having to try and emphasize with male characters, and as such, learn to make little difference between the genders, thus again making the relationships they imagine about feelings and not gender (cf. Falzone 2005: 247).

Interestingly enough, this phenomenon has ceased neither in the Star Trek nor in other fandoms even though TV-shows have become better about representation, with the Star Trek franchise including more and more female protagonists, and even a female captain in the case of Star Trek Voyager. Why does it occur then? Some scholars simply call it deviance on the part of women. However, while sex plays a role in many of these stories, it is not a focus or even part of all of them and as such, slash fanfiction cannot be dubbed female pornography. Others see slash fiction as a female attempt to overthrow the patriarchy, by writing romantic and erotic fiction about two men and attributing softer and, arguably, more feminine characteristics to these characters. Making heterosexual characters queer opens up new options and helps readers break free from oppressive norms and an opportunity to rethink traditional patterns of the self and relationships. (cf. Falzone 247-249). Such a break in tradition, to read about men being affectionate, giving, and often unbound by social pressures, can be liberating to the female gender, which continues to be ranked lower in the gender hegemony. Fanfiction may, of course, mean something different to any one person, and it is
never fully explained which part of the above mentioned it is that resonates the most with Cath.

Whether it be slash fanfiction or not, Cath writes it not only because of conscious or, which is more likely, subconscious rebellion against the patriarchy, but simply because she loves Simon Snow so much that the canon of the books is simply not enough to quell the need for more inside her. She remarks that she loves fanfiction because a fan can use the characters they love and put them into new situations, or embellish and rewrite situations they were already put in by the original writer (cf. FG: 126-127). Being a fangirl is part of her just as much as being a general reader, or having social anxiety, is. Aside from the gendered part of slash fanfiction, there also can be found some evidence in the story that maybe Cath sequestered herself in the world of Simon Snow to deal with the fact that her mother left her. This makes sense because her sister Wren used to be just as much of a fan as Cath, but starts withdrawing from all things fandom once she starts to reconnect with their mother (cf. FG: 66-67). Cath still needs the refuge of losing herself in fandom offers and never ‘grows out of it’ either.

The characters throughout the book react in different ways to her obsession with Simon Snow and to the fact that she is a slash writer. Her sister, of course, always knew about it, writing fanfiction together with her or simply posing as a beta reader (cf. FG: 57, 413) and her boyfriend Jandro finds Cath deviant for writing about two men (cf. FG: 427). He is not the only one that seems to think so. Cath once accidentally meets a girl that reads her fanfiction, as her story, *Carry on, Simon*, is really popular within the fandom. The girl states that she is glad to have found somebody she can talk to about the topic, since many people still find slash strange and think the women who read it perverts. She also states that she finds the way Cath writes Simon and Baz together is hot (cf. FG: 212-213). Why is it that women who enjoy reading stories about two men together, often not even sexually but simply romantically, are dubbed perverts but men who enjoy watching lesbian pornography are usually not? Even if fanfiction was written simply for arousing pleasure in women, which we have established it is not, why is there a stigmatization to be found in that? That female sexuality is still a sore point in America is not a secret. With recent developments, such as President Trump reinstating rules that, for instance, prohibit government funded agencies to give out information about abortions if they do not want to lose said funding (cf. Terkel 2017), it is very apparent that this is a trend that will not go away any time soon.
Even more interestingly, while lesbian porn offers no context, it is suggested that women like to read ‘smut’, i.e. fanfiction with sexual content, between men because there is an emotional level involved in the proceedings, making it less about raw sexuality and more about connectivity between two human beings. Apparently, it helps some women come to terms with their own sexuality, not necessarily with finding out about their sexual orientation, but more with getting in touch with the fact that they are sexual beings that are allowed to derive pleasure from sexually suggestive material (cf. K.B. 2015). Perhaps that is one of the reasons why outsiders find shame in reading slash fanfiction; because it can help women realize that they are sexual beings and also, perhaps, because of male fear of not meeting raised standards for emotional connection these many male characters can find between each other. All in all, it seems to have to do, once again, with hegemonic restrictions, that dictate men being in charge of sexuality, with women submissively obeying.

However, we also see at least one man not caring about Cath’s habit of reading and writing slash fanfiction. Levi actively encourages her to keep writing it and, after a short explanation, does not care about the fact that Cath likes to write stories about Baz and Simon. He actually asks her to read him some of it to understand it and her better and in the end even admits that he can see the homoerotic subtext, too (cf. FG: 138-140, 163). Fanfiction between them is used to make Cath feel comfortable in his presence and actually helps them establish a form of connectedness between themselves that can be found in many slash fanfictions as well. Levi and Cath, among other reasons, learn to establish a bond between them much as Baz and Simon do in the fanfiction she reads him. If Cath was reading fanfiction partly because of the different way slash relationships work, with less gender stereotypes and traditional roles to be fulfilled, then it is actually rather beautiful to think that fanfiction has helped her establish a relationship that resembles the dynamics of some slash ships.

While Levi supports her, her fans love her, and outsiders think her a pervert, her creative writing teacher, Prof. Piper, thinks that fanfiction is nothing else but good, old-fashioned plagiarism. When Cath has to hand in an assignment written from the point of view of an unreliable narrator, she hands in a story written in the point of view of Baz, as she tries and fails wiring an original work. Prof. Piper asks to see her and is very distressed that she plagiarized Gemma T. Leslie’s work. Cath tries to explain to her that it is not plagiarism, but Prof. Piper will not hear it. She compares fanfiction to the birth of a stillborn baby (cf. FG: 275-276). We do not know what Prof. Piper thinks about slash, but she is definitely not in favor of the existence of fanfiction due to legal issues and she is not the only person
subscribing to this point of view. George R.R. Martin, for instance, is famously known for his hatred for fanfiction (cf. Bochenski 2013). For Prof. Piper, much like Martin, writing is about creating something new, about a Big Bang, instead of rearranging people and worlds that already exist. As such, she basically accuses Cath of a lack of creativity, a harsh critique indeed for an author. So why does Cath have such a hard time writing something original?

To answer this we need to come back to the topic of motherhood. Prof. Piper equates the act of creating a new world with the act of creating life itself. She compares creating characters to giving birth and then compares motherhood to godhood (cf. FG: 275). We can see this, for one thing, as an elevation of people capable of giving birth, as her analogy not only renders writing something very feminine, but also makes the capability of giving birth something divine. Additionally, she helps make clear once more that Cath may have trouble creating something of her own because the person who put her into the world abandoned her, much like she abandons her fictional offspring when Cath cannot bring herself to complete original work. This narrative develops in such a way that it does not put down or disparage fanfiction, but we can see a definite connection between the points, as the book ends with Cath writing an award winning piece inspired by her mother leaving her and her sister, hence letting the healing about the old hurt finally begin (cf. FG: 450-461).

Writing slash fanfiction equals mainly writing romance, like Cath does. Like Jo does. What does this mean? Is writing about two people falling in love such a wholly female occupation? Perhaps it is. Much as one reason for slash writers being mainly women is the fact that women may live out any fantasy they like in such stories without being blocked by gender specific restrictions and rules that do not apply to non-heteronormative relationships, women may live out many a fantasy they cannot obtain in real life in romance novels. They can give men lines, no life and in the flesh male has ever uttered in their presence and, perhaps, never will. Additionally, romance has mainly to do with feelings and not the aggressive, but the soft kind. These kinds of emotions have long been relegated to the female corner, where many men do not dare enter. That is not to say that there are not any men interested in writing about romance, especially within the Young Adult genre. Names such as John Green, Jay Asher, and David Levithan come to mind. Furthermore, Fangirl also provides us with a male of the species that does not shy away from romance, though he approaches the genre vastly differently than Cath does.

Nick, as we already mentioned, is somebody that throws a striking picture, looking as if he stepped out of an old-timey movie. The way he looks also translates a little into how he
writes, in that the way he writes is quirky and unusual. Prof. Piper calls his writing “overly slick and impenetrable” (FG: 134). Cath and he write a story together that is definitely a romance, but Nick shies away from the label, calling it an “anti-love story” (FG: 208). He says that the story avoids all the clichés with Cath defending the clichés he seems to dislike, such as two lovers completing each other (cf. FG: 208). There seems to live a certain derision towards romance stories within Nick. He seems to think them, and to another degree, female writers, below him and needs to validate his choice of writing romance, by calling it an atypical love story. This becomes clear when he tells her that writing together with Cath is like Taylor Swift and John Lennon writing songs together. He sees himself as Lennon, of course (cf. FG: 210). The arrogance behind equating himself with one of the Beatles, while deciding in the same breath that Taylor Swift is not only a worse writer, but also beneath Lennon, is jarring. His arrogance does not stop at this, however. He regards the story they write mainly as his, with Cath editing, and sees nothing wrong with handing it in as his final project for the creative writing class. He does not even think to give Cath credit for it and does not understand her being angry (cf. FG:219-221). This reminds of stories such as the one of Einstein and his wife Mileva, who is rumored to have helped him with his paper on relativity and also never received any credit for her work (cf. Popović 2003: 23). While this may be a conspiracy theory, the fact remains that in the past women’s achievements have been swept under the rug or were used by men without giving the women helping them any credit. Nick engages in this behavior and, whether he does it on purpose or not, can be called something of a sexist, when taking into account the points above.

The women he writes about share similarities with the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Such girls are creatures without agency, quirky, and beautiful. They have no other reason to exist within a narrative except to help the male protagonist of the story realize something about himself. They are stock characters with little merit once gone from the male hero’s side. The existence of such characters stems, of course, from male dominated literature (cf. Beaumont-Thomas 2014). Cath realizes this herself while reading his work, comparing the women he writes about to Natalie Portman and Winona Ryder, both of whom are known to have incorporated the role of Manic Pixie Dream Girl in film roles such as Garden State and Autumn in New York. She calls him out on the fact that he lets his female character drive a vintage Volvo, since ‘all’ stereotypically quirky girls in stories drive one (cf. FG 208-209) and once thinks with derision about the girls in his stories having nicotine stains on their hands (cf. FG: 428). Another fact is the idea of Nick inserting himself as the male character of his stories, something called Mary Sue in fanfiction termini (cf. FG: 208). Much like the girls
in the stories exist to serve his character, Cath’s role in his life is to help him with the story. If we equate Nick with all male romance writers, we could say that, just as is the case for female authors, they fulfill some of their own desires through their work, be it through women adoring the male character or through the male character carrying the heroine on hands.

He does, however, not get the girl, as Cath is not without agency and chooses Levi over him. Together with Levi he presents a love option for Cath, with him being the darker, broodier, more enigmatic of the two. Levi is the good guy, while Nick is the rebel. Other than in so many other stories, Cath chooses Levi over Nick, refusing to forgive Nick for what he has done and not excusing his behavior. Rowell seems to try and discredit the narrative of girl choosing the, realistically, less attractive option, the decision to choose the proverbial asshole, as so many women are accused of doing. The phrase ‘nice guys finish last’ is dispelled, given no credit. In addition, she also shows that Manic Pixie Dream Girls do not exist in real life by making sure Cath has all the agency she wants. While we do not know how the story goes for the characters in Nick’s and Cath’s story, it seems that, to some degree, Nick puts himself into his stories, whether on purpose or not. This is, as we have already talked about, not an unusual thing for an author to do, and Prof. Piper also admits that she usually works with some of her own experiences when writing (cf. FG: 325) and in the end, Cath decides to do the same.

So, now on to the question of: why does Cath write? Why do any of the characters write? This question is discussed in the first of Prof. Piper’s classes. As all the students present in the class are different, they give reasons just as differing from each other. One student says he writes to express himself, another say authors write because they like to hear the sound of their voices, another says to explore new worlds, to be free, to make people laugh, to get attention, to leave a mark. Another calls it asexual reproduction. Most interesting, however, are the reasons Cath thinks up, but never voices out loud. She writes “to be somewhere else”, “to get free of ourselves”, “to stop being anything or anywhere at all”, and “to disappear” (FG: 24-25). It is hard to read any sort of gender stereotype into that. We could say that maybe Cath suffers from the same problem as Beth March does. That she is one of those women who disappear, remain unnoticed and like it that way. However, while Cath could definitely be called an introvert, she is not as crippling shy as Beth is and has no problem most of the time with voicing her opinions. To Cath, writing is a refuge, much as it can be seen a refuge for Jo. Both seem to seek something in their writing that they cannot have in real life. It could be argued that both write because only in writing can they find sides to their femininity that they cannot live out or express in real life. In Cath’s case there is also the
matter of her mother to consider, which we have already addressed. Additionally, the fact that she is socially awkward of course also plays a role, because writing is not only a place where one can hide, but also a place where one can speak without talking aloud. She can express herself and what she wants through written words that will not come to her spontaneously.

3.4 Love and War: Analyzing Gender Dynamics in Relationships of the Twenty-First Century

Now, let us turn towards relationships of the non-romantic, romantic, and parental kind again, as they are of just as much importance in regards to gender performance in Rowell’s work as they are in Alcott’s. Let us start at the beginning again. The depiction of family in Fangirl is very different from the one in Little Women. Where the March family is whole and hale, the perfect picture book family, the Averys are a broken up family unit, only consisting of Cath, Wren, and their dad, with their mother having left them. Laura leaving her twins and divorcing her husband is a very important theme throughout the book that has influenced both of her children’s lives immensely. That Laura leaving the family is equated with a disaster, even a terroristic act, is very apparent in the story, as she left them around the time of 9/11. Cath thinks this shows how selfish her mother truly is, how self-involved, that she could think about herself while there were so many people dead. According to her mother, she left, because she felt like she was living the wrong life, a life not meant for her (cf. FG: 150).

Immediately, we need to tie this section on family, parents, and issues that come with living in a broken family unit, to the previous one about writing and continue where it left off. As we mentioned, since Cath was abandoned by her mother, she is afraid of creating a mother-child relationship through creating her own original work, if we stick with the metaphor of authorship being comparable to motherhood. This would showcase how deep her abandonment issues caused by her mother actually run. Additionally, we can see her drawing parallels and trying to work out her inner conflict towards her mother in her fanfiction. Both Baz’s and Simon’s mothers are dead and they have various conversations throughout Cath’s fanfics about the topic. Baz’s mother, for instance, died protecting him when vampires attacked the nursery he was staying at as a baby in Cath’s world (cf. FG: 159). Different from Cath’s mother, she died heroically making the biggest sacrifice a mother can make for her child. It seems that Cath admires that and would rather have her mother had left her in this way too. Her own narrative can be found within Simon, who was abandoned by both his parents at an orphanage as a child. Baz remarks scathingly that he at least, was not willingly abandoned by his mother. She did not want to leave, making the insinuation that there must
have been something wrong with Simon for his mother to leave him (cf. FG: 160). Cath, though it is not spelled out, likely wondered if there was something wrong with her and Wren for their mother to leave them. She also lets Simon wonder what would be worse, having a mother and then losing her or never knowing one’s mother at all (cf. FG: 162). Cath likely has thought about the same in the aftermath of her mom abandoning her. It would seem she is trying to work through her issues with her Simon Snow fanfiction. That she sees the world of Simon as a place to retreat to is also emphasized by a snippet of the original series included in the book. There, Simon’s best friend Penelope tells him that magicians would never abandon their children, because they are too precious (cf. FG: 165). It is no wonder that Cath would rather live in a world like that, where she would never have been hurt so much by her mother.

Cath is not wholly unaware of her ‘mommy issues’, either. She sees Prof. Piper as a bit of a mother figure, craving her approval and dreading disappointing her. She once even calls her a fairy in her head, making her into a fairy godmother, just like the one in Cinderella and immediately recognizing that the fact that she gets “swoony around middle aged women” is tied to her abandonment issues (FG: 324). It could be that this is the reason why Cath is so hurt by Prof. Piper criticizing the fact that she writes fanfiction. If she considers her a mother figure, disappointing her would hurt far more than disappointing a teacher, especially if Cath sees her as somewhat of a mentor in addition. She also once thinks that she is afraid that she can never have a normal relationship because her mother’s betrayal will always haunt her (cf. FG: 247). That is the kind of damage her mother did to her. Cath calls herself broken within the same breath, showcasing how angry and hurt she still is by what happened.

While her sister Wren seeks to reconnect with their mother, Cath stays stoic and will not have it. She is endlessly mad at her sister for even attempting it (cf. FG: 246-247). In a perfect world, patching up their relationship with their mother would work, but comparisons to fairy tale characters notwithstanding; Fangirl is not a fairy tale. When Wren ends up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning it is their mom that calls Cath about it. When Cath asks her how she knew of the incident, it is revealed that the doctors went through Wren’s phone and it is apparently normal to call the mother of a minor first (cf. FG: 355). This shows very well what kind of importance today’s society places on mothers. It is not the father they tend to call first, but the mother, making the hierarchy of parents within a family very obvious. The mother is still seen as the primary caretaker of children and thus will be informed first if something happens to her offspring. In any case, they would have done better to contact their dad. Laura has no idea how to handle the situation and is overwhelmed by what is happening. She
decides to leave the hospital once it becomes clear that Wren has done herself no lasting harm. Cath can scarcely believe it but Laura is adamant that she does not belong here. She is furious, asking her what kind of mother would leave her child in the hospital. She also tells her that it is not her job as the child to earn her mother (cf. FG: 358-359).

It becomes clear that within the narrative the relationship between mother and child should be a constant, not something to be wanted or not wanted, but something to simply exist. A mother should be there for her children and not decide that it is not what she wants a few years in. It is interesting that in Fangirl it is the mother leaving a family and the father staying to take care of the children, as narratives often opt to portray this issue the other way around. This way we can see that women are, in fact, just as capable of such selfishness as men are and the scolding finger is for once pointed elsewhere. That Laura left them shows a certain, if small, shift in societal constraints. Yes, the mother is still considered more important in child rearing than the father, which is something that should be remedied. But through leaving, Laura defied many stereotypes about women and children. It is of no consequence that they are positive stereotypes. Laura decided to leave her children, and thus, her role as mother to them, behind. Cath cannot even bring herself to call her ‘mom’ during their brief exchange at the hospital. She keeps calling her Laura, wondering herself why she keeps referring to her by her first name. But the answer is actually obvious, when Cath looks at her mother and thinks that it feels like she is looking at nobody at all (cf. FG: 356-357).

She does not know this woman, who once used to be a mother to her. She certainly is not one to her now. Laura has forsaken that role in her daughter’s life. Cath, effectively, feels like she has no mother, even if the woman who gave birth to her is sitting right beside her. It is not her job to earn her mother (cf. FG: 359), but it seems that this does not go both ways. Laura would have to earn her daughter’s trust back. That sheds a different light on how motherhood is regarded in this book. Here, parents do not have rights to their children. Instead, motherhood is seen as a privilege, an honor not to be squandered. Laura, though her mother, is not in a position of power, Cath is. This is very different from the parental relationship the March girls had with their parents. Their relationship, though loving, was very clearly defined by their parents being in charge of them, pertaining all parts of their lives. Cath and Wren are given far more autonomy.

We do not know what life would have been like if their father had been the one to abandon them instead of their mother; if mommy issues were replaced by the far more famous daddy issues. Would the impact have been different if the ‘more important’ mother figure would
have stayed with them? Would the hurt have been less or simply different? Speculating does not do much good, because that is not the way it happened. What we do know is that their father tried to do his best raising them and his daughters love him very much. From the start of the novel and throughout the story it is very clear that the twins have a good relationship with their father, to the point where he says that they are all he needs when Cath suggests he could start dating (cf. FG: 9). It is interesting that he never remarried. In the past and sometimes in the present men often remarried because they felt their children needed a mother, or asked a female relative to come live in the household to take care of them, or alternatively sending his children to live with this relative (cf. Hufton 1994: 55). Since Art Avery’s mother still is alive, Wren and Cath could have gone to stay with her. Art apparently disagreed with that notion enough to never try and find a new wife. Also, it is never suggested that the girls would have wanted another mother or that the cards for that happening were ever on the table. While their mother leaving left some scars there also was no blatant need for a replacement. Their dad did just fine on his own, proving that the notion of men not being capable of exhibiting nurturing qualities on the same level women can is untrue. With her narrative, Rowell manages to validate the worth of the single father.

However, there may also be some evidence that Art did not always do a superb job helping his children grow up. There are some pointers towards him not doing jobs in the house a mother would definitely have performed. When Cath comes home the first time since the start of the semester, the house is a mess, with dishes piling up, the laundry not done, and her dad obviously having eaten nothing but fast food and Healthy Choice meals. She spends a good deal of her time cleaning the house (cf. FG: 97-98). But can we say that this has anything to do with his gender? On first glance it seems like that must be the case; it is the easy deduction to make. What better narrative than little women doing their jobs even in childhood times, taking care of the house, no matter that a perfectly capable adult is around, because the domestic need to do this is just so deeply ingrained in them, bravo. However, I would argue that such an evaluation would not be truthful. Instead of blaming his lack of housekeeping skills on his gender, Art’s mental illness is far more likely to be the cause of his daughters having to clean up after him.

We never quite know what he suffers from exactly. He is called manic once (cf. FG: 167) which may point to bipolar disorder, but it is never called that. However, there are certain symptoms described throughout the book. He seems to be prone to meltdowns that sometimes land him in the hospital. The first time happened after Laura left him, the second and third
time happened randomly during their school years, with him either never coming home from work or manically telling them they did not have to go to school anymore (cf. FG: 239). Other symptoms seem to include screaming or spitting during his breakdowns (cf. FG: 231) and, apparently, during the time before them occurring he seems to become obsessed with his work (cf. FG: 225). All of these are reasons why his children had to look out for him and become more self-sufficient than they would have had to be with a healthy parent (cf. FG: 245). The messiness of his house also seems to be part of his illness as the house is in special disarray when Cath first sees it after he is admitted to the hospital a fourth time during the course of the book (cf. FG: 236). Thus, his gender really cannot be blamed for any inability of being able take care of his children he exhibits. It is not his gender and any perceived notions of parenting skills that come with being a man, but it is simply his brain chemistry that can make matters difficult at times.

On top of this, we can see that he truly cares about his children in the way he handles their crises. Because of his mental illness, Cath wants to quit university to stay with him and help him out around the house. We have already discussed what kind of pointers this may give us about gender performance in Cath’s case. Art will not have it, though. He tells her that he would not be able to live with himself if she dropped out because of him (cf. FG: 260-261). This is different from Little Women, where the March girls were lauded for making such sacrifices. Here, in this contemporary depiction of family, children are not the ones supposed to sacrifice anything. Such things are firmly the job of the parents. This is underlined by the fact that Art’s mother, their grandmother, will take care of him while the girls are at university, meaning another parent taking care of their child (cf. FG: 258). So, Art takes a gentle approach with Cath, letting her come to the decision to stay in university on her own (cf. FG: 268-269). It seems that he knows that Cath will benefit from the gentle approach far more than from any ultimatums or orders. Instead of being harsh, he appeals to her emotional side.

Once Wren’s drinking problem becomes apparent, he takes a very different road with her. Where he was all soft words with Cath, he is furious with Wren. First, he wants to pull her out of university, no matter her age. When Cath convinces him this is not the way to go about it, he listens, and sets different rules. Wren is not to drink anymore, she will see a counselor at school, attend AA meetings, and come home every weekend (cf. FG: 374-381). Where Cath needed understanding and pleading, Wren needs strict ground rules and her father pulling rank, as he calls it. The fact that he takes such different approaches for either of his twins in
either of these situations shows that Art is capable of feeling his way into a situation and that he has enough empathy to know how to pick the right course of action that best fits his girls. Gender is no problem here; it does not matter that he is a man and not a woman. He still performs his parental role well, once again bolstering the fact that men can be just as good at parenting as women are said to be, even if an emotional approach is needed. In the case of Wren and Cath their father even turned out to be the better parent than their mother, showing that not all women must feel a natural connection to their children.

Now, let us turn to two different forms of relationship that are no less important than the bond between parents and children. Let us turn to friendship and sisterhood, two categories of human bonding that can bleed into each other and become almost the same thing. It would be wrong to say that Cath and Wren are not just as much friends as they are sisters, after all. Unlike in *Little Women*, *Fangirl* provides an equal amount of friendships between girls as it provides friendships between boys and girls. Interestingly enough, the differences between the two are not very obvious, though there are some. Compared to *Little Women*, relationships between grown-up people of different genders seem to have changed significantly. Relationships between women seem to have stayed mostly the same, however.

Some social engagements and traditions change, others remain the same even over the span of centuries. One such tradition pertaining to friends and sisters is the one about getting ready before dances or, in this case, parties. While Cath does not do so with her sister, she does it with Reagan. Most of the work she does herself, like getting dressed and applying make-up. Reagan delivers the last finishing touches. She puts her hands into Cath’s hair to shake it out at the roots, so it looks a bit nicer (cf. FG: 199). What we can see here is a definite familiarity between the girls. Reagan does not shy away from touching Cath’s hair, which is actually a rather intimate gesture. Tugging at the tips of her hair would be a different matter, but in order to arrange Cath’s hair the way she does she has to touch her scalp. In Western culture this is not something a person would let do just anyone. There has to be a certain familiarity involved. It is far less often that moments such as these are found between two men, as already discussed in chapter two. Much like in *Little Women*, friendships between two women have a different dynamic between them, with gentle and familiar touches being the norm and nothing to be ashamed of or feel strange about.

Women are still allowed to exhibit more tenderness outside of romantic relationships, especially between members of their own gender. Such a touch as Reagan applies to Cath does not evoke any questions about her sexuality or feelings for Cath at all. The same would
not be true if Cath and Reagan were both boys. It often seems that while women are allowed to be tender with anyone, boys are only allowed to be the same way with their significant others or close family members, especially if these members are younger or women. Additionally, women are allowed to judge each other’s appearances as appealing or not appealing without being questioned about their sexuality as well. A woman telling another that she looks good is simply part of female culture, where such affirmations are second nature and something to be taken as nothing other than a compliment. Such compliments may even come from women not overly familiar with each other. Between men such comments do not happen often and if they happen they are often not taken too kindly or made in jest. It is another way in which interactions between members of the same sex differ greatly.

Just as two women may help each other with their appearance and compliment each other, another activity concerning looks that women engage in is gossiping about the way other people look. Cath and Reagan engage in this pastime several times throughout the novel (cf. FG: 47). They talk about both boys and girls, so there is no difference made because of gender here. It seems that, perhaps, there can be found a certain preoccupation with looks and appearances in girls that is voiced a lot more than in boys. This may have to do with the fact that very often women are reduced to the way they look, as we already established. While men are supposed to look nice as well in order to be considered attractive, there is a virtual cult around women and how to make them look better, be it with clothes, makeup, creams, or plastic surgery. It is hard not to care about what other people, and yourself, look like when a certain ideal is pushed upon you through various media and certain appearances and behaviorisms are considered more favorably than others. However, it needs to be said that men have become victim to this more and more in recent years.

When we turn to look at how the dynamic between sisters can play out, we can see that it is not much different from friendships. Cath and Wren care a great deal about each other and it is very apparent that they have known each other their whole lives. They are not afraid of being angry with each other, and though being cross with their twin weighs heavily on them, there is actually never a real fear in Cath at least, that she might lose her sister, no matter her abandonment issues with her mother. During most of the story, Cath and Wren have a conflict to resolve. This conflict stems from Wren not wanting to room with Cath during their first year of college, wishing to meet their mother again, and basically partying the night away while drinking copious amounts of alcohol. Cath does not understand her, but she also still talks to her and does not overly judge her. However, the situation snowballs during the story
and Cath ends up not talking to her sister for a fair amount of time. While this may have been the end of a normal friendship it is not the end for them. To Cath it is deeply ingrained in her that she will look out for her sister, because that is the point of having a sister for her; to always look out for each other no matter what (cf. FG: 117). However, we can derive little to no gender dynamics from their relationship. What they have is the kind of relationship all siblings, who are generally on good terms, have with each other. Blood is thicker than water sometimes, after all. The only incident that may have a little to do with their gender is when Wren crawls into bed with Cath, slips under the covers, and watches her write fanfiction (cf. FG: 378). Taking comfort from a woman like that, invading personal space, and cuddling close may be something only female siblings would indulge in, considering the usual idea of men not being allowed to show weakness, especially to other males. It is hard to imagine brothers of the same age snuggling with each other in bed. The situation may be different if the brothers were of a dissimilar age. All in all it can be said that relationships between females seem to not have changed overly much over the last century if we compare Little Women and Fangirl.

Relationships between males and females have become more easy-going, however. No longer is it considered improper to spend copious amounts of time with somebody of the same sex even if both parties are of an age where they might be interested in something untoward happening. What adults do in their free time is their own business. This surely has to do with the fact that women are now afforded more faith in their decision making skills and are not, for all intents and purposes, considered perpetual minors in certain areas of life. Neither are they considered the embodiment of seductive Eve anymore. As such, Cath’s relationship with Levi and Nick are both rather casual. Of course, we could read into this that Cath at one point has romantic feelings for the both of them, or at least finds them cute, which may be the cause for the closeness between them, but I would like to argue that this is not the case. A fleeting feeling of attraction does a romance not make and so it would simply seem as though friendships between members of the opposite sex are a lot more hands-on as they perhaps used to be.

Compared to Little Women, Cath’s relationships with Levi and Nick are positively scandalous, as she spends a lot of time alone with them. Most of the time spent with Nick outside of classes happens at night at the library he works at, where they complete assignments for Prof. Piper. Though it is a public space there are not many people around after dark, so the setting is fairly intimate (cf. FG: 84-89). Different from Little Woman
nobody thinks much of anything about it. Cath and Nick are both adults and can do with each other whatever they want as long as it is consensual. Nothing ever happens between them, but not many people, and certainly none of the people Cath knows, would bat an eyelash at them if it did. The time she spends with Levi is held in an even more intimate setting. A lot of the time they talk to each other in the beginning and further along in the story, they both are in Cath’s and Reagan’s room, often without Reagan present. There can be found a certain intimacy in letting somebody invade your private space, the place where you sleep, and sit on your bed (cf. FG: 113, 183). This is not to say that young women of today let just anybody in their bedrooms. In fact, Cath is rather unsure about letting Levi in at the start without Reagan there, and only starts doing it once she knows him better (cf. FG: 17-19). This has less to do with propriety and more with the ever present threat of sexual harassment in a woman’s life. We will talk more about this later. However, the fact remains that interactions between members of the opposite sex have become far more casual since the time Little Women was written. This certainly has to do with the sexual liberation of women during the sixties and the decades following that. Though the fear of sliding into a coercive situation is instilled in Cath as it is in any woman alive, she never anticipates the ways that men actually use her during the story.

There is also an ongoing theme of men taking advantage of women, or in this case, of Cath specifically. This does not happen in a sexual, but rather in an academic way. First, we have Nick with whom she writes a story. He then proceeds to call the story his own and hands it in for a final assignment to Prof. Piper, as we have already talked about. He sees nothing wrong with the situation and when he tells Cath about what he did he is downright condescending about it, not understanding her being upset about the situation. It almost seems as though he is asking Cath between the lines what else she expected. This is an attitude displayed often by any kind of perpetrator. Nick seems to basically think that Cath should have known better. He has a certain air of superiority around him, and only apologizes for what he did once Prof. Piper finds out about it. Even then, he only does it, because the story was awarded a place in the school magazine, but they will only print it, if Cath gives him permission to print her name alongside his. His apology is not much of one, with him accusing her of being the reason he lost is teaching assistantship and not taking any of the blame for himself (cf. FG: 429-430). While the association seems to be a little far-fetched, it almost seems like Nick is engaging in victim-blaming. Additionally, the rumors about men being far more ruthless when it comes to academic success seems to be valid in the case of Nick and Cath.
Besides Nick, Levi is also accused of exploiting women academically, though his reasons for doing it are far different. Nick does what he does to further himself, to take what he thinks he already deserves. Levi’s situation has more to do with staying afloat. His learning disability is never quite labelled, but he explains to Cath that he has problems reading long stretches of text, reading paragraphs repeatedly but not remembering what he read (cf. FG: 176). This makes studying understandably difficult. We can detect a certain gender-relevant issue here because, compared to females, males are more likely to have reading disabilities (cf. Whaley 2015) and, apparently, Levi is one of them. Being a student at university, he has developed a coping strategy for this. He says that he is very good at identifying the smartest girl in class and cozying up to her. Then, he usually forms a study group with these girls. Cath finds this behavior despicable and tells him so. Levi simply retorts that it is not like they do not get anything out of studying with him as well and since he is always respectful to them, and cozies up to boys, too, if he has to, he does not see the problem. He does ask Cath if she feels exploited by him for reading the book he has a test on the next day out loud to him. She simply retorts that she knows he has no feelings for her (cf. FG: 181).

Apparently, the reason why Cath does not look upon Levi’s activity favorably, is the fact that the girls he studies with likely think that he finds them attractive and maybe wants to start something with them (cf. FG: 181). This sounds a lot like a reversal of the classic nice guy behavior where it is traditionally a boy who does something nice for a girl and then expects some sort of sexual favor. In this regard, we can see Cath condemning Levi for leading girls on with his behavior. In any case, this does not stay a point of contention between them for long, with Cath admitting a few chapters later that she feels like she may be exploiting him for car rides (cf. FG: 233). It becomes clear that there is a difference between using somebody for your own gain and using somebody to make ends meet, especially if the other person is not seriously hurt in the process and was not actually betrayed. Still, what Levi does feeds into the general assumption of girls being better in school than boys are, or girls doing most of the work concerning assignments with boys slacking off. It is a stereotype that is rather hard to shake and Rowell’s text feeds into it in unique ways.

Now, let us turn to interactions between men within Rowell’s narrative. Such interactions are few and far between as the focus of the story lies on Cath and her life. We have three main sorts of interactions where men actually talk to each other. Firstly, there is Levi who talks to Cath’s father, Art, when he drives her home during a snow storm. He is very respectful to her father, while Art is being his typically laid-back, scatterbrained self. He lets them in and has
no problem with Levi going up to Cath’s room with her unsupervised. Levi expresses some surprise at that (cf. FG: 337-339). His attitude towards the father of the girl he has feelings for shows how much of a person commanding respect someone can be simply by being the father of someone. Of course, it makes sense that Levi would want to make a good impression on Cath’s father; he likes her, after all. However, we can also see that a certain respect for adults, especially fathers and probably also mothers, is instilled in people who are considered to have enjoyed a good upbringing. Perhaps, though, what we are witnessing is the echo of a patriarchal system that still has not been put to sleep.

Secondly, we have Levi arguing with a man in a bar who harasses Cath and Wren. This man keeps remarking how arousing he finds twins and that he would like to see them together sexually. Levi cannot rein in his anger, but keeps his abuse verbal. While he is angry and berates the guy, it is Jandro, who later turns out to be Wren’s boyfriend, who actually punches him (cf. FG: 119-120). The situation is a rather violent one and it is the last one that actually occurs between two men outside of the realm of Simon Snow fiction or fanfiction. The only interactions between men in this book where actual words are uttered are thus either displays of respect or violence. This paints a rather stiff and dreary picture of male on male interaction in the world of Fangirl. While interactions between women range wide and are multifaceted, interactions between men are limited to stereotypes. This could be attributed to the fact that the story revolves around a girl and her problems, rather than the limited amount of men in her life. Still, if there were such a thing as a reverse Bechdel Test for books, this one would almost not pass it. It is interesting to see that almost all the men in the story are only a part of it because they are a romantic interest to one of the women. They serve little other purpose, no matter the fact that they are otherwise well developed characters. This reflects very well in the lack of interaction that can be witnessed between them and other men in the story.

Effectively, Simon’s and Baz’s interactions could also be seen as existing only for the purpose of entertaining Cath, a woman. After all, if Cath was not so interested in them and writing stories about them, they would have no place in the story. The difference is only that during the snippets of fiction and fanfiction set between chapters of Fangirl, as well as the fanfiction Cath reads to Levi, they have plenty of time to interact with each other, which they do. Of course, most of their talks are rather antagonistic; they are rivals in the Simon Snow series, after all. Baz, for instance, voices his distaste over having to work on an assignment with Simon (cf. FG: 107) or threatens to kill him (cf. FG: 2017). However, many interactions also fall into the romantic category. These shall be discussed in the later. As we can see, these
interactions are also anything but amicable prior to them developing feelings for each other or realizing that they have them. It is the romance, the fanfiction writer’s interference, that makes them somewhat softer, which is definitely a mark of fanfiction writing. On the other hand, it is a rather stereotypical perspective to think that a woman’s touch will render a man softer than he used to be. Perhaps it is simply the small pool of situations wherein men talk to each other that lets us come to this conclusion. As such, it would be prudent to stop speculating. All in all, this lack of interaction, as well as lack of friendly and informal interaction, between men showcases how women dominate the narrative of *Fangirl*. They are the main characters. They are in control. It is their story. While this is hardly a step towards equality it emphasizes the fact that this is a book mainly about women. It is not called *Fanboy* or simply *Fan*, after all. The story about a *Fangirl* is advertised on the cover and that is what the reader gets.

As for romantic relationships in *Fangirl*, they are very different from how they are portrayed in *Little Women*. While there is value placed on such relationships in both books the way they are allowed to unfold, and the time and situation they develop in are rather different, with only a few similarities. Where in Alcott’s work love is chaste and marital affairs are never discussed much less engaged in, Rowell gives her characters much more freedom here, which of course, has to do with the time each of these books were written in. While the innocent little romance Meg experiences is very much era appropriate, especially if we consider the age of the main characters, the romances or simple flings Rowell writes about are just as appropriate for contemporary times, thus, both writers manage to encapsulate the spirits of the eras their books were written in.

There are three romances, a potential romance, and a handful of flings we can concentrate on in this section. All of them help the reader or analyst find out more about how romantic relationships are handled, what is deemed appropriate, and what is seen as normal behavior within the paradigm of a romantic or sexual relationship. All of the relationships portrayed seem to be of a sexual nature as none of the characters are asexual or seem to want to abstain from having sex for any other reason. As such, sex can definitely be seen as part of a typical romantic relationship in this book. First, let us start with casual affairs occurring in the story. Reagan, Wren, and Levi are all said to have had or are still having a flurry of guys and girls leaving their rooms. Let us turn to Reagan, as she is the only one of the three that does not end up in a serious, monogamous relationship. She seems to have a parade of men coming and going from Cath’s and her room, but this is not further commented on, it is a simple
observation (cf. FG: 313). Cath is not judging her for this behavior and other characters are not doing it, either. Additionally, it is revealed that hers and Levi’s relationship did not hold because she kept cheating on him (cf. FG: 193). Nobody condemns her for this and she and Levi remain friends. This is rather atypical behavior but also shows how far sexual freedom is taken in this narrative. There is a distinct lack of slut shaming going on in the book, meaning the thought that women who have sex with a lot of men are somehow worth less. This is also true for Wren. It is remarked several times that Wren had a lot of boyfriends in school (cf. FG: 36) and that their father was used to boys being in Wren’s and Cath’s room (cf. FG: 339). This is regarded as nothing bad and simply part of somebody’s character.

The matter is at least a little different when it comes to Levi. He is a people person, and when he kisses another girl at his party after having kissed Cath, she is devastated and attributes a certain promiscuity to Levi for kissing her (cf. FG: 201-205, 235). When Levi finds out, he is distraught that she thinks he goes “around kissing other people all the time” (FG: 313). Why is there a difference made between women seeing a lot of men and men seeing a lot of women, even if the usual double standard, in which men are allowed many partners and women are not, is turned on its head? Are the characters trying to shame men for something women are often shamed for? It seems unlikely. Far more likely is the idea that Cath is an insecure person that could scarcely believe that happy, older, more experienced Levi would want to be with her glum, unexperienced self and that seeing him kiss another girl simply hits all of her worries at once. That Levi is upset about the assumption of him being free with his kisses may simply stem from the fact that she misjudges his nature and that he cannot believe that Cath does not know that he likes her. It has nothing to do with a general dislike for people having had a lot of partners and everything with personal matters. As such, we can say that sex and being open about expressing one’s sexuality is seen as something normal and nothing to feel disgusted about.

Additionally, all main characters seem to have had a significant other in high school that they have now broken up with. Reagan and Levi used to be together once upon a time (cf. FG: 190), Wren had several boyfriends then (cf. FG: 36), and Cath had Abel (cf. FG: 75). The notion that such a relationship will survive university is almost ridiculed (cf. FG: 94). It is seen as natural that these early, fledgling relationships do not endure the passage into university and nobody expects them to. This is a very different attitude to have towards relationships than exhibited in Little Women, where there are no first and last relationships, but, ideally, only the one with the person you will marry. In Fangirl, both men and women are
afforded more freedom to find out what they want from a partner, and are not expected to stay with a person, no matter whether they slept with them or not, if the fit is not right. As evident from what is said in the paragraph above, there is also an acknowledgement that different people may need different forms of relationships at different times. Having casual affairs is just as accepted as Cath’s statement that she is not a person that engages in flings and would rather have no relationship than having one that is not serious (cf. FG: 235). This is not a gendered matter in Fangirl, which, in and of itself, is rather remarkable considering the double-standard that still prevails in real life about such matters, with women being expected to be small scale serial monogamists (cf. Chun 2016: 145) and men being allowed to do whatever they wish to do (cf. Tanenbaum 2015).

Wren, as we have already said, first has no exclusive boyfriend. This means that she is on the prowl, so to speak. She conducts this business at parties, where she also consumes copious amounts of alcohol, which later becomes a problem for her. Such drinking can be equated with the balls and dances happening in Little Women. While parties are far less formal, they still serve some of the same purposes as dances a hundred and fifty years ago did. Meeting a man may not be the sole objective of going out, just as it was not back in the day, but parties often can still be a way to meet new people. Dancing usually still happens at parties and with inhibitions lowered by drinking, it can become physical rather quick. However, it is unlikely that somebody goes to parties trying to meet a future husband. While acquaintances made in bars and clubs may evolve into something deeper like friendship or even romance, the main goal is to have fun and maybe engage in a casual fling with somebody, or to take somebody home. This notion would have been rather scandalous in the setting of Little Women, of course, starting with the notion of promiscuity and ending with inebriation. While Cath is not much of a party person, Wren definitely is. Such a party is also where we first hear the name Jandro, who punches a guy that is harassing Wren and Cath (cf. FG: 120).

At his point it is unclear whether he is her boyfriend already or simply a date. However, we can still see the usual role of man playing protector of womankind, even if it is only her honor that is at stake. While Levi tries to use words to do this, Jandro does things the old-fashioned way and socks the offender in the chin. All in all we can say that Jandro is a little bit on the old-fashioned side. For instance, Wren tells Cath once that Jandro does not like it if she drinks because he finds it “unbecoming” (FG: 369), a word frequently used in Little Women, but certainly not in Fangirl. Another point that shows Jandro is a little conservative regarding his views of women is that he is a little bewildered by Wren and Cath liking slash fanfiction,
thinking it deviant (cf. FG: 427). Perhaps this can be attributed a little to the fact that he is Latino, but since we know next to nothing about his upbringing that would be pure speculation based upon stereotypes. What remains is the fact that he is a bit of an old-fashioned guy who likes to take care of Wren in whatever way possible, be it through bodily force or berating words.

Additionally, it is rather obvious that he cares for Wren when he waits for her in the hospital after her alcoholic episode, looking at her like she is the most beautiful woman in the world, no matter that she has vomit in her hair (cf. FG: 367). Perhaps we can deduce a little bit of female submissiveness in the way their dynamic works, at least on first glance. He protects her, he disapproves of certain choices of hers, and seems to lecture her on topics. This would fit with the idea of the man in a relationship acting as educator. However, it seems that Wren only follows his advice when she wants to. She stops drinking but she does so mainly because of the ultimatum her dad gives her. Jandro may have had some say in this as well, but it is Wren who decides for herself that she cannot go on as she has been. As for the slash fanfictions, Wren shows no inclination of stopping to indulge in them, simply because her boyfriend does not approve. While we may find hints of more conservative relationship patterns with Jandro and Wren, it would be wrong to say that their relationship is overly similar to the one Meg has with Brooke. Wren is still very much her own woman and has the final say in what she does. The same can definitely be said for Cath as well, though her situation and character is a little different from Wren’s.

Cath starts out having a boyfriend, Abel. She is not overly sad about the breakup, though definitely a little confused as to why it happened. Additionally, Wren keeps insisting that he was not a real boyfriend to Cath anyway because she was never in love with him; he was simply a steady choice for Cath. With no passion there could be no true anger or devastation, like with her parents (cf. FG: 75-78). What we can observe here is the idea of having a sensible relationship with somebody one does not love. Apparently, such relationships, though not seen as an ideal, do still occur. Much like in Little Women, however, such relationships are frowned upon and should be cashed in for relationships in which love is the main motivator. This is made clear by Wren’s criticism of Cath’s being with Abel in the first place.

After the breakup has occurred, Cath finds herself looking at men around campus more and more. She calls herself “boy-crazy” (FG: 88), noticing everything about them and feeling increasingly attracted to many males, including Nick and Levi (cf. FG: 88). It is clear that
Cath has never felt like this before and though she is bewildered by her new-found obsession, she is not entirely adverse to the idea of finding a new boyfriend, and this time one she has feelings for, as well. In the end, Cath finds herself in a bit of a love triangle Levi and Nick, as we have already mentioned. She chooses nice guy Levi over brooding rebel Nick and other than in many Young Adult stories it becomes clear very early who will be the one she will fall in love with. Cath pursues Levi in a rather long back and forth of a courtship. That they have chemistry is apparent early on, when Levi never lets himself be pushed away by Cath’s brusque attitude, likely because he is used to it because of Reagan (cf. FG: 46). The first time they honestly seem to connect with each other happens when Levi joins Cath as she dances her frustration away (cf. FG: 113). Again, we can see dancing used as a way to get to know each other better and to spend time in each other’s close proximity. However, the way Cath and Levi dance has little to do with the dignified and courtly dances the March sisters experienced, although this does not render the dancing less intimate. While men and women nowadays have more opportunities to spend some quiet time together, dancing in the presence of another person, especially if one is a little shy or socially awkward, always has to do with making oneself vulnerable by unselfconsciously moving one’s body. This is true even more so if the people dancing are not good at it. The fact that Cath, who definitely has some sort of social anxiety, is willing to dance in front of Levi reveals that she is willing to put a certain amount of trust in him. This sort of dancing also allows for a measure of equality in the dance partners as nobody is leading.

The fact that equality is a definite topic in their relationship is apparent throughout the story, for instance, when Levi is carrying Cath’s hamper for her. She insists that she can do it herself and has, in fact, done it before. While others would consider Levi carrying heavy objects for his girlfriend simple gentlemanly behavior, Cath feels like he thinks she cannot do it herself. In an act of subversion he simply answers her accusations by telling her that, as a woman, she has enough burdens to carry and he would like to help her with them in any way possible, even if he has to do it literally by carrying her dirty laundry. She is not entirely appeased but lets the matter lie (cf. FG: 326). There are also some other phrases, often little things, where usual gender stereotypes are subverted in their relationship. For instance, when Cath tells Levi she would give him the moon he demands to know if she would slay the moon for him as well (cf. FG: 367). While the comment is meant humorously, it still proves that there is a bit more freedom regarding gender roles in Cath’s and Levi’s relationship than there is in Meg’s and Brooke’s. This may have to do with the fact that Levi himself does not quite subscribe to typically male behavior, either. While he defends Cath against the guy in the bar that deems
twins too hot to be a gentleman about it, he does so with words. It is Jandro that punches the offender. Levi refrains from using physical violence, which once upon a time was considered a rather feminine trait, considering that is was a mark of manhood to allowed to carry a weapon to inflict violence or to protect (cf. Hay 2006: 36-37). Additionally, when Cath jokes that she, Levi, Jandro, and Wren could marry on the same day wearing matching dresses, Levi responds that he will pick out his own dress, thank you very much (cf. FG: 409). It is situations like these where it is apparent that Levi is secure in his masculinity and sees no need to assert it every few minutes.

Now, before changing the focus to the physical aspect of their relationship, we first have to look back to how Alcott approached this matter. Where Meg and Brooke shared a few chaste kisses, relations between Levi and Cath are a lot steamier, which makes sense considering how much society has changed. Not only is premarital sex not a taboo anymore, reading about such activities, especially if they are not described explicitly, has become more normal, too. However, as we have already discussed, there are still worried parents out there that do not agree with their teenage children reading about such things in the US. That notwithstanding, there definitely seems to be enough of a market of young adults wanting and being allowed to read about sexual activities in Young Adult novels for Rowell to keep writing such books, as they are well-received. While some parents are still worried about these books leading their children down the wrong path, rules regarding sex and similar actions in Young Adult novels have become less restrictive, which is also apparent in Fangirl.

Levi and Cath kiss several times throughout the book and for a long time kissing and cuddling like they did when Cath read Levi The Outsiders is the only thing they do (cf. FG: 179-186). The only hiccup in their relationship is when Cath finds Levi kissing another girl at the party after their little late night kiss occurred. She is angry and hurt, though she rationalizes that they were not a couple at this point, so technically speaking he did not cheat on her (cf. FG: 201-206). While Levi eventually manages to convince her that she means something to him and to become his girlfriend, Cath can never quite shake the fact that he is older than her and has more experience, while she is still a virgin (cf. FG: 192). It is interesting to see how the times have changed. While in the past women had to be virginal for a man to consider marrying them, Cath is afraid that Levi cannot actually want her because of the very same fact.

It is also explained that Cath is not a virgin due to religious beliefs or because she is saving herself until marriage. Before now, she simply has not felt she had the right partner. While
men are still portrayed to be more sexual beings than women, with Wren telling Cath she should not worry because boys want to touch you so badly that they do not care if you are good at sex, purity has become a non-issue for the average girl in America (cf. FG: 319-320). In fact, it could be said that moderation is key. Young adults will start having sex in their teens, but a high amount of sexual partners is still frowned upon in men just as much as in women, generally speaking, which is apparent in the way Cath and Reagan talk about Levi’s past conquests. Reagan says Cath makes Levi sound like a mountain man that has sex with prostitutes (cf. FG: 192). This shows that there is still a stigma attached to certain kinds of sexual interactions. A healthy middle ground is what is considered ideal, though there definitely lays some pressure on teenagers to experience their first time having sexual intercourse while still in high school. Cath likely feels this pressure now that she is eighteen and still untouched.

While it takes Cath and Levi some time, it is eventually insinuated that they do have sex towards the end of the novel. Cath has a bit of a hard time simply touching Levi, being afraid that she will never be able to stop. Levi actually asks her if she has taken an abstinence pledge, not to pressure her, but simply because he has started to wonder (cf. FG: 386). With the help of another fanfiction, Levi manages to help Cath relax and they engage in some foreplay. What is interesting here is that Levi is the submissive one in this interaction. Cath is given all the control, likely because she is so nervous and because Levi knows it is her first time and he does not want to do anything to spook her. That is not to say Levi is entirely passive, but he leaves it up to Cath how far they take their sexual interactions (cf. FG: 400-405). Still, it is Cath that holds the reins, which is the exact opposite of what women were expected to do in the nineteenth century according to The Cult of True Womanhood. It also is the opposite of the behavior Meg displays while sitting on Brooke’s lap. This shows a huge shift in the way women are acting now compared to how they were supposed to act a hundred and fifty years ago. While the girls in Little Women more or less adhere to all the points Welter writes about in her article, the girls in Fangirl observe none of them. However, it is sometime later, at a different instance, that it is suggested that they have some form of sex, when a scene ends with Cath taking off her shirt (cf. FG: 423)

Apart from heterosexual relationships we also have a homosexual one with Simon and Baz. Though they are not a couple according to the works of author Gemma T. Leslie, they are as far as Cath and many other fanfiction writers who like to put the two of them together and post stories about them online are concerned. Sadly, we only have snippets of fanfiction
where they are in a romantic relationship or building up to one, so trying to find out about the
dynamics of this couple is a little bit harder than it is when looking at, for instance, Levi and
Cath. However, we shall make an attempt anyway. Are dynamics different because these are
two men? Or can we attribute the differences that occur not to gender but simply to character?
Let us take a closer look. Over all what we can see is a relationship like any other. They hold
hands (cf. FG: 101), they argue (cf. FG: 143), and they are intimate with each other (cf. FG:
413). There is, however, one thing that is not quite so typical for heterosexual relationships or
at least not for stories written about such couples.

When Baz needs to be comforted, Simon gives this comfort to him and Baz is not afraid to
take it, going so far as to bury his face in Simon’s belly (cf. FG: 218). This is a rather
uncharacteristic show of unabashed vulnerability. Men taking care of women when they are
distraught in fiction is typical for any genre, but it only rarely happens the other way around.
If it does, the men often remain stoic throughout being comforted, allowing themselves to be
held instead of taking what they need and what is offered. This is not the case between these
two boys and perhaps we can attribute this to the fact that there are no real stereotypical roles
to be fulfilled with two men. They are allowed to play the role of both the protector and the
protected and they can switch these roles whenever necessary. The fact that they are allowed
to be more emotional in slash fanfiction is also shown by the fact that Simon cries about his
mother in one of Cath’s stories and is not mocked for it, nor does he feel ashamed about doing
it himself. Baz, though at this point still the enemy, simply tells him that he knows how he
feels, even though it would be a good opportunity to ridicule him (cf. FG: 61).

The beauty behind this is that Simon may act like this and still be described as the most
powerful mage in a hundred ages (cf. FG: 271) and wield a sword that is associated with
justice, courage, the defense of the weak, wisdom, and goodness (cf. FG: 291). In a society
where softness and homosexuality within a man are often equated with weakness there is a
freedom in fanfiction showcasing that it must not be so. Baz, additionally, is a vampire,
creatures who are regarded as fearsome monsters in the Simon Snow series (cf. Rowell 2015:
300-301, 342). The fact that they can be warriors and still have an emotionally open
relationship is atypical if we consider the stereotypical, heteronormative relationships often
occurring in novels about adventure, where the hero is softened by the heroine. Simon’s and
Baz’s relationship is a typical specimen of the slash fanfiction genre, where two men can be
together, emotional and not ashamed about it, but still can be powerful enemies to be feared
without needing to fulfill heteronormative stereotypes. However, Rowell herself does not
overly adhere to such stereotypes for her heterosexual couples either, as we have seen in earlier paragraphs. All in all, it can be said that Rowell takes a rather modern and forward thinking stance toward relationship dynamics in this narrative.

Rape and harassment are also topics relevant to every woman and man on the planet as well as in this book, though rather a bit darker than anything we have talked about up to now. Though being victim or perpetrator of such a crime does not presuppose a relationship between these opposing forces, we need to further look into this matter as it helps build relationships between characters and condemns others. Even if you have not experienced rape, the prospect of being raped is a threat that hangs like a black cloud above every woman and can lurk around every corner. According to RAINN, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, one out of six women in America has been the victim of attempted or completed rape. Most of them are aged between eighteen and thirty-four. Female college students are three times more likely to experience rape. About 17.7 million women and 2.78 million men have been victims of rape since 1998 in the US. Male college students are five times more likely to get raped (RAINN 2017). Wade at al (cf. 2014: 17-18) even argue that certain establishments such as college campuses could foster rape through psychological and situational factors. Sexual harassment is also a rather prevalent issue, both in everyday life and college campuses. When we consult a webpage concerned with the effort of stopping street harassment, their statistics show that ninety-nine percent of the women questioned answered that they had experienced harassment before. This includes everything from leering, honking, and sexual or vulgar comments up to being followed, grabbed, or masturbated to (Stop Street Harassment 2008). Both rape and harassment may, for instance, happen in the context of drunk partying, where inhibitions are lowered and lines blurred between consent and dissent (cf. Wade et al 2014: 19).

*Fangirl* describes rape and harassment as mainly a female issue. The possibility of men being raped is not discussed or alluded to. However, the fact that it is discussed in a rather in-depth way is very different from how the issue is addressed in *Little Women*, where the topic is only ever alluded to by the way the men in the novel tend to escort the women on some of their errands. It was likely not considered a topic fit for polite company, and especially not for any potential young adults reading the story. Society has changed in that the threat of rape is something most everybody in American society is aware of. Rowell does not shy away from making clear that this threat is an everyday issue, especially for girls living on a university
campus. As such, there is a variety of ways in which the characters in *Fangirl* address and experience the issue at hand, though nobody is raped and no rape is attempted.

One of the ways Cath and her friends deal with the issue is through the employment of dark humor. For instance, when Cath first moves into her dorm room and meets Reagan and Levi, she is afraid about the whole situation, thinking that they could walk in the room when she is naked and that they could be “cell-phone camera perverts” (*FG*: 14). Another time, such a thing is mentioned casually, is when Cath writes an e-mail to Wren, telling her not to let anybody roofie her at one of the parties she goes to (cf. *FG*: 96). Another instant has Levi asking Cath if he has to show her on a doll where he wants her to touch him (cf. *FG*: 387) which is an allusion to the practice of doctors asking rape or harassment victims, especially children, to show them on a doll where the perpetrator touched them. Rape and harassment are such an ingrained part of human life that humans have learned to cope with it using dark humor and flippant remarks. It also shows, however, that while the threat of rape is real and permeates everyday life, it also is nothing women are supposed to be ashamed of. They fear it happening, yes, but the fact that the possibility of sexual harassment is talked about so openly and even casually shows that there has been a significant shift when it comes to who is seen as responsible for a rape. Though victim blaming is still very much part of American culture, *Fangirl* takes a different approach by talking about the possibility of rape unashamedly without talking about how women can prevent getting raped, forgetting to address the idea that men should be taught not to rape in the first place. This is a role division that happens frequently in real life.

That rape is something Cath is afraid of becomes clear very early on in the book when she refuses to let Levi, then still a virtual stranger, into the room she shares with Reagan without her roommate there. Though Reagan bestows an odd look upon her when entering the room, having found Levi sitting outside by the door, what Cath has done is never questioned by her (cf. *FG*: 18-19) and Levi himself respects her decision throughout the book until she feels comfortable enough around him to let him wait for Reagan inside (cf. *FG*: 46). Eventually it even turns out that Levi has had a key the whole time but never disrespected Cath’s wish for him to stay outside (cf. *FG*: 178). This behavior shows that, while men do not think of themselves as potential rapists, they are portrayed as generally accepting that women who do not know them might be weary of them, at least in the case of Levi. His understanding of Cath in such situations actually helps establish the fact that he is a seriously good guy. Aside from respecting Cath’s wishes, he also insists on walking her home after her late night visits
with Nick at the library (cf. FG: 53). It is always Levi who does so; Nick never even once walks her home, even after she asks him to (cf. FG: 210).

During the time she and Levi do not speak to each other, she dials 911 on her phone, keeping the finger on the call button in case of emergency and runs home (cf. FG: 206). That Nick is unwilling to accompany her makes him instantly unlikable in the reader’s eyes. Though it is not required, though desired, behavior for a male to accompany home a female at night, in comparison to Levi Nick seems like a self-involved man that does not overly care for Cath, especially since she is actively afraid of walking home at night. The situation is seen as different when it comes to Reagan. Levi remarks that she exudes such a scary vibe that no rapist would dare approach her, though Cath quickly tells him that she does not think rapists care how confident you are (cf. FG 53). This may show that Levi holds a romantic interest in Cath from the very start, as he very much cares for her safety but not as much for Reagan’s. When it comes to physical violence men are seemingly still seen as the prime protectors of women in.

This is also shown when Wren writes Cath an S.O.S. text and Cath immediately assumes the worst. When it turns out that Wren meant to write someone else and that she is actually fine the two of them get into an argument. All the while, a drunk man has spotted them and instantly starts talking about how hot he finds twins and then he and a friend of his start getting into how much of a fantasy it would be to either watch them have sex with each other or have sex with them both. What exactly they fantasize about is not quite clear. Levi is instantly furious, telling the guys that what they want to see is not only incest but that it is disrespectful to talk about virtual strangers like that. Cath tells him to calm down, mentioning that this kind of thing happens to them all the time, which does not do much in regards of calming Levi down. Interestingly enough, Levi tries to get them to stop by telling them to think about the fact that they have a father who should not have to worry about his daughters having to go through this. This makes it seem as though he is trying to make these drunks respect Cath’s and Wren’s father instead of them. On the one hand, this could mean that he simply has given up trying to make them respect the twins and is trying to take a different route. On the other, it may mean that he too places respect for the father of women above respect for the women themselves (cf. FG: 115-120).

This would be a rather problematic point of view as it would make it seem that fathers have more control or rights to their daughters’ bodies than they themselves do. As it would not quite fit Levi’s character to regard women like this consciously, we could only assume that he
does do so subconsciously, if he does ascribe to such a notion at all. In any case, in the end, while Levi shouts insults at the two intoxicated men, it is Jandro who punches them (cf. FG: 120-121). While Cath and Wren would have ignored them, too used to such displays to be overly angry at them, their boyfriends or prospective boyfriends take it upon themselves to protect them with words and fists. This shows a bit of a disparity between male and female realities. While women can be so used to harassment that they are able to ignore it, men still become angry once the harassment is directed at a woman they care for. Levi seems actively surprised when Cath tells him that such harassment happens to her and Wren all the time. While such behavior is an everyday occurrence to women, it is more of a novelty for men, as they generally do not share similar experiences.
CONCLUSION

Much can change in a hundred and fifty years. State lines shift, regimes change, and rules for
gender performance evolve and form new shapes. What was a taboo in *Little Women* is taken
for granted in *Fangirl*. What is seen as a subject to be addressed in *Fangirl* was kept silent for
the sake of propriety in *Little Women*. Perhaps comparison can be the death of joy, but it can
also show us were one item works as the reflection of a simpler past and another shows us the
intricacies of a more complicated but also liberated future. Both novels we discussed take
place in the United States of America and yet we can see how much this place has been
transformed through the winds of change when comparing the fictional worlds of Louisa May
Alcott and Rainbow Rowell. But through this comparison it has also become easy to see what
has stayed the same or where the roots of what once was are still very much visible, even
when gazing down from the crown of the tree. As different as these texts are, there were also
found certain similarities, both of which shall be summed up here a last time.

As the differences between these novels can also be found in their style, so was the initial
approach to analyzing gender performance and role in this paper. Alcott prefers a
chronological approach to her writing that is rich in detail while Rowell’s style presents the
reader with a more gradual and blended way of writing, which reflects in the way general
matters of gender performance, such as looks, characteristics, and habits were laid bare in this
thesis. Both books portray multi-faceted protagonists that are, most of the time, products of
the era they were born into, as we all are. The March girls, including Jo, are all paragons of
femininity as they follow Welter’s points made in *The Cult of True Womanhood* implicitly.
While some of Jo’s personality and habits are seen as masculine by the other characters of the
story, the markers of womanhood Welter summarized are very much present in her as they are
in her sisters. What this shows is that characters may incorporate era specific trademarks of
their gender but also retain individual personalities. Most of the March girls exhibit female
characteristics such as a preoccupation with looks and clothes, as well as an interest in indoor
activities such as reading, playing music, and drawing. At the same time, they may be hot-
headed and ambitious. What is the most important to the people in Alcott’s world is the fact
that all characters become a good person. However, it also needs to be stated that all her
characters seem to become better persons through conforming to their gender a lot more, with
Jo working on her temper, Meg on her vanity, and Amy on her selfishness.
Fangirl approaches matters differently. Here, nobody is scolded for the way they perform their gender. Reagan is not condemned for the number of boyfriends she has during the course of the book and Levi crying is not judged in any way. The characters in this text seem to have a lot of freedom concerning the ways they are allowed to perform their gender. There are no instances where a certain behaviorism is called unladylike or unmanly. Additionally, the points raised in The Cult of True Womanhood seem to have lost their foothold entirely in the world of Fangirl. None of the points are adhered to by women and previously gendered duties, such as domestic pursuits and caretaking, seem to have been split between the genders and are now shared responsibilities. This is not to say that Rowell’s world is a genderless one. However, matters of gender are approached in more subtle ways, such as men acting as physical protectors to women, or the idea that some vocabulary that is appropriate to use for women is not to be used when talking about men. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that while Cath and her friends still very much live in a gendered world, lines seem to be more blurry than they are in Little Women and it is more permissible to step over them at times.

When it comes to the future plans of the characters, Alcott keeps no silence and Rowell approaches matters in a way that is less clear cut. In Little Women, all the March girls as well as Laurie have a vision of what their future will be like. Marriage and children play into this, as Meg is fully expected to find a husband and bear children, while Jo and Amy both dream of greatness when it comes to their artistic pursuits, which can be seen as not generally feminine. However, the thought of pursuing a higher education does not occur to them, though it is a part of Laurie’s dream. Laurie wants to become an artist as well and it is the occupation he dreams of and not the ambition behind it that can be construed as not stereotypically masculine. In Fangirl, of course, women are expected to work just as much as men are, meaning that any sort of ambition, whether it be artistic or not, would not be seen as atypical for women. However, these characters have less of an idea what they want their future to look like, using college as a way to figure their dreams out in the case of Cath, while Levi and Wren know exactly what they would like to do with their lives. Marriage, though, does not play a factor to any of their immediate plans, making it an idea to be considered later on in their lives.

Much as with general matters, the matter of writing is portrayed in similar and dissimilar ways in these books, too. In both texts the characters that write stories express their gender through their stories one way or another. For Jo, writing poses a possibility to support herself and her family, which is important to a woman that sees herself as the man of the house.
Additionally, in her writing she can upend gender roles and make unusual women the main heroes, standing even above knights of shining armor when it comes to valor and ability. Compared to that, Cath writes to disappear and to overcome the trauma of her mother abandoning her and Wren when they were younger. On top of this, it could be said that she uses fanfiction to apply feminine coded behaviors onto men, thus living out a fantasy and also helping to validate femininities instead of devaluing them the way society often does. As such it can be said, that gender plays a big role when it comes to the reasons why Jo and Cath write stories.

When it comes to family, both mothers and fathers are given the same amount of value, with perhaps the mother being seen as a little more important. The March girls confide in their mother when it comes to everything and she is seen as the major factor when it comes to child rearing and managing their education. Their father is away to defend the country, including his family, thus fulfilling the role of protector and afar benefactor, encouraging his girls to be better and in the end praising them when they comply. Their mother is far more involved in their lives, showing that while both men and women are seen important when it comes to parental figures but making it clear that it is a sector in which women need to be more involved, making it their job along with other domestic matters. In *Fangirl*, the sisters’ mother is absent, relegating their father to their sole parental figure, having to fulfill both his traditional paternal tasks, as well as maternal ones. That Cath and Wren’s mother left them is seen as a great tragedy that still affects both of them in different ways, making it clear what a loss it is to be abandoned by one’s mother and how important she is to a child’s life still. While Art is portrayed as nothing but a loving father who is very much loved by his daughters in return, the gap Laura left behind is glaringly big. However, it is also shown that a family made out of just a male parent can work just as well as a family made out of two parents or just a mother. Art is never regarded as having been lacking when it came to raising his children, no matter his gender. This shows a major shift in what is seen as male and female tasks within a family.

While roles may be different between the books when it comes to parental matters, interactions between female friends and sisters have stayed very much the same. Females close to each other have not changed their rituals much, supporting and loving each other in emotional and physical ways. What is different in *Fangirl* compared to *Little Women*, is the fact that women are allowed to spend copious amounts of unsupervised time with men, without anybody questioning their morality. Since purity has generally become a non-issue in
American culture, Cath and other women in Fangirl are afforded much more freedom in their interactions with men than the March girls are once they reach an age where affairs that have to do with marriage are starting to become appropriate.

This brings us to the matter of what love and romantic relationships look like in these books. In Alcott’s work, love is something chaste that develops through many little interactions. Love interests are pursued in a gentle manner and only a few kisses are exchanged, with not much emphasis being but on such happenstances. Romantic entanglements end in marriage, sexual intercourse is not spoken about. Purity in unmarried women is presupposed so much that the matter is never even discussed. Rowell’s characters are allowed many romances, no matter their gender, and are not judged for them. However, it has to be said, that Cath’s romance also develops slowly and over time, just as Meg’s did. Sex is regarded as something natural that everybody has to decide for themselves when to engage in. Additionally, it is not a taboo topic but freely discussed and, up to a point, even described in the story. Cath’s virginal state is discussed a few times with the idea that losing it is a rite of passage that has little to do with marriage, unless the individual person chooses otherwise. There is no talk of promiscuity or the need to remain pure. When it comes to this, matters are very much different in Rowell’s work when compared to Alcott’s.

This is also true when it comes to the topics of sexual harassment and rape. In Little Women, this topic is surrounded by deafening silence and alluded to only in the ways the men of the book tend to accompany women on longer travels or walk them home. Aside from that, the reader never hears a word about it. Fangirl makes it a poignant topic that is described in a very realistic way. While it is not one of the main topics discussed in the book, it is woven expertly into the plot, making it a point of everyday life instead of an out of the norm matter. Both rape prevention and verbal harassment are shown and talked about. In both cases, women are portrayed as the victims and men as perpetrators and protectors, making forms of harassment mainly a problem women are confronted with, which may be attributed to the higher number of women falling prey to such attacks in general.

All of this makes one statement that has been brought up from the start very true; while these books are different in many ways, some similarities can also be found. Some gender roles and performances have fallen out of favor over the past decades, while others still retain some relevance. Others yet have simply evolved, taken new shape, or have gained a different level of importance, while still carrying weight. Culture is subject to change, but in comparing these two texts, written in very different styles by two different women, we can see that both
books were created by people who are part of the same culture. It shows us how far Americans have come and how far they have yet to go. It would be interesting to see how much of these little women and fangirls can still be found another hundred and fifty years into the future. But for now, we can joyfully conclude this comparison in the knowledge that transformation is an ever ongoing process and American culture is still not finished.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources


Secondary sources


**Internet Sources**


