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There Is Nothing Little about Women, and Nothing Feminine about Vampires: The Comparison of Alcott and Messina’s Ideal Independent Woman

As a new country, the United States of America began forming its own traditions and customs with the living idea of women being the lesser of the sex. The nineteenth-century woman was seen as a helper of men and always as little as her status would let her be contradicting the idea of freedom and higher education. Louisa May Alcott, a daughter of transcendental thinking in America, wrote not only what every oppressed woman was thinking, but also what was oppressing her. Most men considered the desire of independence and equality to be a woman’s “bosom enemy” or the monster within. Alcott considered this judgment to be the obstacle holding a woman back from being fearless, strong, and the better gender (Alcott 84). Influenced by society’s view on women, Alcott wrote how girls honestly behave, think and become in Little Women. She creates a heroine, Jo, based off of her own self-image that deals with the problem of letting her “bosom enemy” control her while learning to live in the patriarchal society around her (84). The “bosom enemy” in the parody, Little Vampire Women by Lynn Messina, is similar in influence, but with a literal metaphor of a vampire (84). Written more than a century apart, both versions of the story concentrate on the emergence of independent women that reflects the slow reform in American history. The parody takes the independent woman idea and combines it with vampires to reveal the nature of women in Little Women: the American woman is more than she seems to be and never a monster. While the parody is exaggerated in petty horror stereotypes, the continual theme of unleashing that independent, strong woman rather than keeping her inside the home appears in Little Vampire Women as a physical change while in Little Women, it is an emotional change.

In the ninth chapter of Little Women, Meg and Jo March learn from their mother a lesson on a woman's worth in society: That a woman is meant to be much more than a trophy wife; she is meant to be “happy, beloved, and contented” (100). Alcott's view on how much women are truly worth explore through her novel from the mother-figure’s lessons and from Jo’s experiences growing up during and after the Civil War. While Little Women became a popular novel with a varied audience, her ideas of women's worth stayed silent: “In the nineteenth century, most Americans assumed that there was a natural order in society which placed men and women in totally different spheres” (Taylor). David Taylor describes the position women had in the 1850's as being “submissive...her job was to be a meek, obedient, loving wife who was totally subservient to the men around her” (Taylor). The philosophy Marmee, the March mother, teaches of love and happiness with raw emotions and strength contradicts with the “ideal” women in that era. And through Marmee, Jo gains the confidence most women lacked in the 1850's. The only obstacle holding her back is her “bosom enemy” blocking the true woman inside (Alcott 84).
Harriet Reisen describes the character Jo March as a “dazzling and original invention: bold, outspoken, brave, daring, loyal, cranky, principled, and real” in comparison to Alcott’s character in history (2). Jo, while being many qualities that a nineteenth-century woman would dream of having, lacks the superficial beauty that her sisters have. In return, she concentrates on being more boyish than lady-like: Jo runs in the fields, plays lurid parts in her and her sisters’ plays and attends to as many male duties around the house as possible. She considers herself a “businessman” when referring to the chore of watching her aunt instead of going to school (Alcott 56). The feeling of protection that Jo holds dear to her heart tests its strength when she decides to cut off her hair, her “one beauty” as described by the youngest sister Amy, to help when the family was in need for money (162). Alcott resembles Jo in her contribution of writing to help the Alcott family. Once Alcott began publishing her works, she felt as if she could become something more than an “submissive woman”: “She liked being the family benefactress and liked even more being independent, but no sooner were her own plans made than the ‘something’ that turned up for the rest of the Alcotts was a house, also in Walpole, rent-free, indefinitely” (Reisen 127). Providing for the family seemed exhausting, but liberating for Alcott, and as it did for other women in the nineteenth-century. Taylor remarks that in a middle-class household, the wife would not, and could not, take up any career other than child-bearer:

She spent her day in genteel pursuits, for example, embroidery and knitting— household chores would be done by servants. Furthermore she had hardly any legal rights. Any property or money she had owned when single, automatically became the possession of her husband on marriage. In law the children of the family were also the property of the husband. (Taylor)

The laws at that time seemed to restrain women, making it hard to do what Alcott, Jo and other women were doing: Supporting themselves or their family. If a woman was working or in the working class, life was comparably hard: Along with the expectancy of bearing children, she had to bring them up to “go out to work” and continue to oppression of keeping men and women working instead of learning (Taylor). Throughout the novel into adulthood, Jo resents the idea of domesticity in women and demand (in her own way) liberty or in some cases deaths of vampire slayers.

In Messina’s interpretation, Jo and her sisters become stereotypical vampires that detest sunlight, lust for blood and inherit supernatural powers. Jo’s character remains the same: bold and loyal as her human counterpart. When she sees Laurie peeping out from his window after they first meet, she announces her family are “not only vampires, we are neighbors, too” (Messina 48). Her generosity appeals to Laurie and their friendship begins only to exploit the separation between vampires and humans. Messina depicts the other vampires in the novel as bloodsucking and uncharitable who do not follow the humanitarian lifestyle as the Marchs do to not drink human blood (48). She molds Jo instead into a vampire with ideals of overcoming her differences in the world: By being a better vampire that defends other humanitarian vampires. In chapter ten, Jo sends off an application to become a vampire defender who slays humans who slay vampires (116). Ironically, the academy accepts Jo as the first woman to join. Even though there is a binary opposition between humans and vampires, there is also an opposition between women and men. The female-male differentiation parallel’s Alcott’s human novel. Another similarity that human Jo and vampire Jo
have is the “bosom enemy” concept of being a woman beyond the stereotypes (Alcott 84).

David DeLeon argues in his article of American womanhood that women possess a sense of duty to their hearts and what they believe is right: “the ‘gender ideology’ of women as naturally moral, religious, and nurturing has activist implications. Perhaps it was the duty of a ‘redemptive womanhood’ to publicly speak and act to uphold and promote virtue” (DeLeon).

Alcott’s Jo strives to promote this “virtue” as best she can with what she perceives is right (DeLeon). Sometimes, she feels anger and rage instead of humility that drives her away from her morality. This obstacle of anger is her “bosom enemy” (Alcott 84).

Jo fights with various characters, but once with her “bosom enemy” coming out to attack (84). Jo and Amy bicker over going to the theatre with Laurie that leaves Amy declaring revenge of her sister for not taking her. For revenge, Amy destroys Jo’s book of vampire defending tactics. Jo learns of the destruction that leads to verbal and emotional abuse to Amy. Jo’s “bosom enemy” takes over her character and fills her with blinded rage. The rage does not last forever, but longer for Amy. The rage affects her to become rash and stupid. When Amy had fallen into water while skating on thin ice, Jo feels guilty as if she had pushed herself down...in a passion of penitent tears...bitterly condemning her hardness of heart, and sobbing out her gratitude for being spared the heavy punishment which might have come upon her” (82). As comfort, Marmee tells Jo that her raw emotions are her “bosom enemy” and to “remember it, and try with heart and soul to master this [enemy], before it brings you greater sorrow and regret than you have known today” (84). Marmee views the “bosom enemy” as weak, as society views women who show emotions (84). However, Marmee believed that a woman can take control of her inner morals and beliefs to use them to her advantage. The “bosom enemy” eventually would be transformed into a bosom friend: A woman’s own self (84).

Messina’s Jo takes the “bosom enemy” as monstrous: “Never before had [Jo] felt so keenly that she had a demon inside her” (Alcott 84; Messina 76). Not only does Jo must deal with upholding the lady persona but the humane vampire persona. She becomes both aspects of what society belittles by being a female vampire in a world run by male humans. She cries to her mother, as did the human Jo, and Marmee responds the same to suppress the “demon” and become better tempered (76). Jo takes this advice as she is threatened by a young human boy she meets while playing croquet. While her fangs “throbbed” and her “bosom enemy [stirred] and [rose] slowly,” she remembered her mother’s words of evolving from anger to be that woman no one sees that “patiently and bravely...[goes] on” (104). This weakness to want to feed on human flesh is what holds Jo back from becoming almost human, even lady-like. If Jo could not control herself with eating humans, then what could hold a woman back from being monstrous metaphorically in reality? To many Americans in the nineteenth century, the status and place of a woman was to play the quiet domestic roles in the household and not the vengeful woman that society hated and feared.

During the Civil War, the country changed dramatically in not only political and economic terms, but socially. In the process of the war, the view of women had changed: “Whether...to work outside the home, to run a farm or business, to work in the once off-limits nursing profession, to take a more vocal and active role in politics, or simply to walk down the street without an escort, her life had changed--and so had her place in American society” (“Her War”).
This change had been met with hope for the future of women’s reform and disgust that women could be equal to men. During the Progressive Era, some women felt empowered to grow cautiously in domesticity but not exceed their realm in the home (Macleod). Out of the empowerment, few women wanted to break out of the realm, and even less succeeded to become equals with men. What may have kept many women beneath the line of equality was the stagnant thinking of trusting women. A spokesman against for any women’s reform considered free women to be dangerous, even “monstrous” (Donnaway). In response to the remark from the spokesman who thought similar to many others, Laura Donnaway argues that the male-driven society in the nineteenth century influenced the old ways to stay:

All I ask our brethren is that they take their feet from off our neck and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God destined for us to occupy. Sarah [Grimke] felt that women should not have to ask for equal rights because they should belong naturally and morally to women…In 1840, the movement split into two factions -- one for and one against women's rights. At last, the question of women's status in society had become an issue upon which much attention was focused. (Donnaway)

Donnaway makes a point that women’s rights are as divine as men’s rights are as indicated in the constitution of this country that both sexes “occupy” (Donnaway). Success followed from pro-women activists which resulted in the Seneca Falls convention in New York. Elizabeth Cady Stanton became one of the main voices of the convention, leading meetings to overturn discrimination against women. Later paired up with Susan B. Anthony, the two women began the New York State Women’s Temperance Society in 1852, and influenced thousands of other women to stand up for equality (Donnaway). It would take about seventy years before women could vote, and many more before women could have the same reputation men did in education, law and society. While the change for women did not happen in Anthony and Stanton’s lifetime, women like them and Alcott fought, and Alcott with words.

Much of the philosophy Alcott had about the strengths and weaknesses women originated from her own experiences. She used her experiences from Civil War nurse to visits in Europe with her cousins. In result, she put in a little of herself into the books: “In everything Louisa Alcott wrote she made use of the outward details and the hidden emotional currents of her” (Reisen 3). The “hidden emotional currents” came from her family and the struggles they had growing up as her father stepped aside from the main-supporter of the Alcotts (3). Similar to the girls in her novel, Alcott gained experiences in the home and from lectures from her mother, Abigail. Abigail participated as an activist for women and wanted to instill the same values she had to her daughters. Similar to Marmee from the novel, Abigail implemented most of her philosophy through life lessons about a woman’s worth. She worried constantly not only about the girls’ chastity but overall innocence of the world:

Unprotected adolescent girls weighed on her mind...Without firm guidance like hers, she believed, they would fall into sin through their own weakness and the wickedness of men. She could hardly have worried more about her own girls, and she used every young woman as the source of a lecture of the evils lasciviousness. [Abigail] transmitted her sexual fears effectively to her daughters, and inexperienced Louisa came to believe in the essential baseness of men. (Saxton 177)

As a result of the lessons Abigail teaches to her daughter, Alcott remembers them, agrees with them and creates the character of Marmee who delivers these moral beliefs in the novel. Marmee worries the same about her daughters. Even though they are surrounded by sensible men at home, she
thinks about the men in the world who might prey on their innocence. As the girls practice sewing one afternoon, Marmee looks at Meg who appeared “very womanly… unconscious of the thought in her mother’s mind” of protecting her innocence: innocence of not knowing female discrimination (Alcott 122). As a vampire mother, Marmee worries of not the chastity of her daughters, but the slayers in the novel who want to kill her daughters literally.

Messina changes the tone of the story when she adds the element of horror to the March family which also changes the Alcott’s philosophy in Marmee’s character. When Marmee is depicted as a vampire mother, she does not carry the same weight of morality as her human counterpart does. Instead, Marmee has predictable reactions and acts like a typical nineteenth-century mother rather than an advocate for women’s suffrage. Being a vampire makes her tacky and flat with no real emotions as does Alcott’s original character. With the exception of Jo who is still bold in both novels, adding the vampire characteristic to Jo fits. Jo explores her violent side as a vampire and is more active which allows for Messina to create vampire-human fight scenes (Messina 106). The fight scenes are refreshing, but resemble low-budget films with cliché scripts in comparison to the light-hearted tales of young girls in the nineteenth century. The adaptation of transforming the girls into vampires overall does not take away from Alcott’s original plot. The monsters are not vampires as would be assumed; it is prejudice and discrimination against another being capable of equality. Even though in Messina’s novel the discrimination is mostly against vampires, it comically distracts from the remembrance of the struggle women had to endure. Whether vampire or human, the girls, specifically Jo, want to be more than dead bodies drinking blood: They want to live their life to the fullest.

Donnaway argues that “until women assume the place in society which good sense and good feeling assign to them, human improvement must advance feebly” (Donnaway). Alcott would agree, seeing that women like her are just as capable of working in the city, managing the farm or writing a book as the men. The struggle for equality was long and hard and successful. The women who helped this reform flourish were “courageous, defying most respectable standards of their time to stand up for what they believed in” (Donnaway). The women in the novels Little Women and Little Vampire Women fit this category of being “courageous” for change (Donnaway). Jo became a role model for girls to respect.

Because of the courageousness, the goals that Jo had fictionally were accomplished by women who took that same boldness into their lives and changed the status of women in society. Alcott is also an example that courageousness, as are Abigail, Anthony and Stanton. The “bosom enemy” for women like the Alcotts, Anthony and Stanton was the doubt of their strengths and not embracing independence from men (Alcott 84). However, they overcame their “bosom enemy” as did Jo when she allows love to rise inside her instead of anger and evolve above her stereotype of weakness (84). The independent woman truly did exist in the nineteenth century. While great change did not happen until early twentieth century, women’s hearts were strong and became stronger as each individual matures from a little woman to an individual with rights to do whatever she wants.
References


