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“Becoming ‘Juno-esque’: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Visual Culture in Amy March's Performance of (White) Womanhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69)”

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Table of Contents

Abstract

English Version	1
Deutsche Fassung	2

Acknowledgements	3
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Introduction	4
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Chapter 1: Contextualisation

1.1. Literature Review	10
1.2. An Interdisciplinary Approach	14

Chapter 2: Meeting Amy March

2.1. Lessons in Gender, Class & Race	24
2.2. Amy's Artistic Ambition: 'Little Raphael' and the (White) Male-Dominated Nineteenth Century Art Canon	35

Chapter 3: From 'Little Raphael' to 'Junoeseque' Amy

3.1. Amy's Grand Tour of Europe: Learning the Boundaries of America's 'True' (White) Womanhood	48
3.2. Becoming 'Junoeseque': Amy's Transition From 'Artist' to Patriarchy's Marble ' <i>Objet d'Art</i> '	59

Conclusion	75
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Bibliography	82
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Abstract

English version

This thesis aims to demonstrate how a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1868-69) can make a valuable contribution to discourse surrounding the literary representation of women in mid-nineteenth century America. My analysis focuses specifically on Amy March and her desire to become a successful artist, following her coming-of-age journey as she transitions from girlhood to womanhood. I argue that Amy's development into a 'true' woman coincides with her transition from the role of 'artist / observer' to 'artwork / observed', as she ultimately abandons her creative career to position herself as an object of the male gaze. My thesis suggests that Amy mimics the visual language of nineteenth century neoclassical sculpture to encode an idealised femininity that is recognisable and attractive to the (male) art audience - thus, enabling her to secure both a marriage proposal and a financially viable future. Here, I refer to the field of critical race art history to explore the whiteness inherent to neoclassical sculpture and, likewise, the 'ideal' femininity that Amy performs. This is particularly important to investigate, as Alcott's novel is set during America's Civil War period. An intertextual approach is crucial in identifying the novel's (otherwise ambiguous) references to slavery which, as I emphasise, silently shape the version of white femininity that Alcott presents. Relying on the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of literary and gender studies as well as visual culture, my thesis seeks to highlight the ways in which Amy is privileged based on her whiteness and illustrate how her experience of womanhood is vastly different to the harsh reality that black women faced in contemporary American society.

Deutsche Fassung

Diese Arbeit soll zeigen, wie eine zeitgenössische, interdisziplinäre Herangehensweise an Louisa May Alcotts Roman *Little Women* (1868-69) einen wertvollen Beitrag zum Diskurs über die literarische Darstellung von Frauen im Amerika der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts leisten kann. Im Fokus meiner Betrachtung steht Amy March und ihr Traum, einer erfolgreichen Künstlerkarriere sowie ihre Entwicklung, wie sie vom jungen Mädchen zur Frau heranwächst. Dabei erläutere ich den Zusammenhang zwischen Amys Entwicklung in eine „wahre“ Frau und dem Wechsel ihrer Rolle, von der „Künstlerin/Beobachterin“, zu einem „Kunstwerk/Beobachteten“, wodurch sie schließlich ihre kreative Karriere aufgibt, um sich der männlichen Erwartungshaltung anzupassen. Meine These stützt sich dabei auf der Annahme, dass sich Amy der visuellen Sprache der neoklassizistischen Skulptur des 19. Jahrhunderts bedient, um das weibliche Idealbild darzustellen, dass auf das (männliche) Kunstpublikum attraktiv wirkt - mit der Absicht zukünftig einen Heiratsantrag zu erhalten, als auch ihre finanzielle Grundlage zu sichern. Dabei gehe ich auf die kritische Rassen-Kunstgeschichte ein, um das „Weißsein“ zu untersuchen, das der neoklassischen Skulptur entspringt und ebenso das „ideale“ weibliche Rollenbild darstellt, das Amy im Roman einnimmt. Dieser Aspekt ist entscheidend /von besonderer Bedeutung, da Alcotts Roman während der Zeit des amerikanischen Bürgerkriegs spielt. Eine intertextuelle Betrachtung ist maßgeblich, für die Identifikation der im Roman (ansonsten mehrdeutigen) Verweise auf die Sklaverei, die meiner Ansicht nach, die Darstellung von der weißen Weiblichkeit prägen, die Alcott präsentiert. Anhand der Methoden und theoretischen Grundlagen der Literatur- und Geschlechterforschung sowie der visuellen Kultur, zeige ich in meiner Arbeit die Privilegien von Amy auf, die sie aufgrund ihrer weißen Hautfarbe genießt. Zudem soll veranschaulicht werden, wie sehr sich ihre Erfahrungen als weiße Frau von der harten Realität schwarzer Frauen in der damaligen amerikanischen Gesellschaft unterscheidet.

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Introduction

A return to Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical novel *Little Women* (1868-69) reveals the opportunity for a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to expand on discourse surrounding the literary representation of women in mid-nineteenth century America. The novel details the domestic life of the March family, situated in Massachusetts during the Civil War, following four young daughters as they grapple with societal expectations of what it means to become 'little women'. Alcott's novel consists of two parts that were originally published as separate volumes (*Little Women* and *Good Wives*) in 1868 and 1869, respectively, but in 1880 the volumes were combined and subsequently published under one title. To clarify, my thesis refers to the novel in its entirety and analyses both volumes.¹ Received primarily as a children's book, it was only a century after the novel's publication that critical studies began to investigate possible subtexts, usually relying on the historical context of Alcott's private life and her involvement with feminist initiatives to substantiate alternative interpretations of the novel. There has yet to be, however, an aesthetic analysis of the text, which considers the role of imagery, genre, symbolism and intertextuality in the novel's subversion of conservative (white) gender norms. My analysis focuses specifically on Amy March and her desire to become "the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott 166), following her coming-of-age journey as she transitions from girlhood to womanhood. This thesis will analyse the novel's recurring references to artists, artworks, artistic practices and ancient Roman mythology, specifically in relation to Amy as a character and her unconventional ambition. I have chosen to focus on Amy because because she is the only visual artist in the March family and, because I am particularly interested in art historical studies, I aim to investigate the central research question: What role does nineteenth century visual culture - specifically neoclassical sculpture - play in the formation of Amy March's identity as a (white) woman in mid-nineteenth century American society? In this thesis, I argue that Amy's development into a 'true' woman coincides with her transition from the role of 'artist / observer' to 'artwork / observed', as she ultimately abandons her creative career to position herself as an object of the male gaze. I suggest that Amy mimics the visual language of nineteenth century neoclassical sculpture to encode an idealised femininity that is recognisable and attractive to the (male) art audience - thus, enabling her to secure both a

¹Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. 1868-69. London: Penguin Books, 2018. Print.

marriage proposal and a viable future. I will explore how neoclassical sculpture functions in Alcott's novel to provide Amy with a model of 'true' (white) womanhood and, in doing so, perpetuates the gender and race ideologies of mid-nineteenth century society.

An awareness of the female *bildungsroman* genre is valuable to my analysis of Amy because it provides a broader context for understanding not only her personal defeat as an aspiring artist but, more generally, the defeat of female creativity in nineteenth century America. *Little Women* traces the lives of the March sisters within an intimate household setting - a sort of matriarchal, domestic utopia run by their mother - and details the girls' efforts to navigate their sense of self as they are confronted with the cultural beliefs and ideologies of larger society. According to Susan Jackson & Eve Kornfeld, it is only within this kind of utopia that the young female protagonists can envision their ambitious future because "the nature of this utopia was in part derived from the things denied to women in the real world" (151). Like other contemporary novels belonging to the genre, *Little Women* explores the anxiety that young women face as they are surrounded by the demands of domesticity but, at the same time, imagine the possibility of a professional career or financial freedom. Often, however, the heroine realises that the social rise, economic stability and support that an appropriate husband could provide for her is more powerful than her own independence, which prompts her to accept the safer option of marriage and subordination to her husband (Voloshin 286 & 299). This becomes apparent in *Little Women* when Amy abandons her ambition as she grows older in order to meet the requirements of 'true' womanhood prescribed by society: finding a husband; becoming a mother; and choosing a more acceptable occupation as an art teacher (Alcott 497, 530, 564 & 565). Interestingly, Amy does not express disappointment about this and her reconfigured future is presented in a romanticised and idealised way - as if to convince the reader that this really is the right path for her and that her earlier hopes were just part of a 'childish' or 'foolish' dream that she has, by now, outgrown (Alcott 467). Alcott does not overtly criticise marriage because, as Jackson and Kornfeld suggest, "she is bound by the constraints of domestic fiction and the need to create a credible facsimile of life" (74). In other words, Amy's inner conflict can only be resolved by her decision to accept her role as a 'true' woman because any other choice would simply be too unrealistic for the novel's nineteenth century audience. Unlike the traditionally male coming-of-age genre, the female *bildungsroman* genre exemplifies "how society provides

women with models for ‘growing down’ instead of ‘growing up,’ as is the case in the male model” (Pratt cited in Lazzaro-Weis 17). The novel’s title ‘Little Women’ seems to allude to this precise ‘growing down’ process, as Amy and her sisters are taught to constrain or ‘diminish’ themselves as they reach maturity and have to meet society’s expectations of womanhood.

To begin my thesis, I will provide the relevant theoretical and methodological contextualisation. Chapter 1.1 will present an overview of existing literature and highlight a number of valuable and fundamental feminist analyses of *Little Women*, while also making apparent the opportunity for further expansion specifically in terms of the novel’s aesthetics. As I will discuss in my literature review, critics (Fetterly 1979; May 1994; Mohler 2009) have explored a number of key themes in *Little Women* but there is potential for further exploration of the role of art and mythology in the novel, specifically in relation to its representation of gender, class and race. Chapter 1.2 will introduce the interdisciplinary approach that my study will employ using concepts and methodologies from the fields of literary, gender and art historical studies. I will discuss how Julia Kristeva’s (1969) concept of ‘intertextuality’ is useful for my analysis of Alcott’s novel as it enables me to reveal a deeper meaning of the text that is otherwise overlooked. To identify the significance of Amy’s “statuesque” (Alcott 439) appearance and her performance of “Junoesque” (Alcott 440) femininity, for example, an investigation into neoclassical sculpture and its reliance on mythological subject matter is particularly enriching. By understanding the social ideologies inherent to neoclassical sculpture - ranging from its idealisation of classical bodies to its preference for white marble - I can reveal the ideological underpinnings of Amy’s enactment of ‘true’ womanhood. Here, Judith Butler’s (1988) theory of gender ‘performativity’ and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of ‘intersectionality’ are important for analysing the identity that Amy constructs for herself, specifically as it relates to her varying degrees of privilege and oppression within the context of nineteenth century America. Charmaine Nelson’s (2007) approach to neoclassical art from a critical race perspective is particularly valuable as it addresses the whiteness inherent to the production and consumption of neoclassical sculpture, and this enables me to, likewise, explore the whiteness inherent to Amy’s identity as a ‘statuesque’ woman. Using these theories and methodologies, I will be able to identify the novel’s (otherwise ambiguous)

references to blackness and slavery which, as I emphasise, silently shape the version of white femininity that Alcott presents.

In Chapters 2 & 3, I will discuss in detail the expectations that patriarchal society projects onto Amy and how these, in turn, shape her identity as a white, middle class woman and influence the future she imagines for herself. I will investigate how these expectations are made clear to her within the domestic environment (both at home and at school) and how they are further reaffirmed to her when she enters the public sphere as a participant in the Grand Tour. These chapters are structured according to Amy March's progression from childhood to adulthood, which coincides with her transatlantic movements from America to Europe, and finally back to Massachusetts. Chapter 2.1 will begin with an introduction to Amy, as an individual and in relation to her mother and sisters, and subsequently explore her (anticipated) role in the domestic sphere. According to Nancy M. Theriot, "the mother-daughter relationship was the core experience of nineteenth-century feminine acculturation" (64) which makes it necessary to analyse the type of femininity that Amy's mother (referred to as 'Marmee') demonstrates to her daughter. My thesis will identify the ways in which Marmee - like most middle class mothers in the nineteenth century - indoctrinates Amy and her sisters with the belief that self-sacrifice, physical suffering and submission are integral to the female gender role (Theriot 62). It is unusual, however, that in parallel to these expectations Marmee permits Amy's ambition to become a great artist, as mid-century mothers generally discouraged their daughters' non-domestic pursuits and dismissed art and music as ornamental subjects (Theriot 70; Beatty 15). A reason for Marmee's indulgence could be that some mothers in Victorian society intentionally allowed their daughters a carefree adolescence knowing that womanhood will bring enough sacrifice (Theriot 74). Perhaps Mrs. March allows her daughters their creative freedom as children because she knows firsthand the boundaries that adulthood will bring.

Chapter 2.2 will analyse Amy's creative ambition in detail, paying particular attention to the ways in which the sociocultural practices and expectations of the mid-nineteenth century shape her identity as an artist. Here an art historical approach will be particularly useful, as research into the social history of art production, consumption and canonisation will provide the necessary context for Amy's ambition. It will be interesting to interrogate, for example, the novel's distinct references to famous (male) artists including Michelangelo,

Rubens, Turner and Rembrandt, as well as the concepts of ‘artistic genius’ and ‘high art’ which both have histories of male gender associations (Agazarian 392; Delistraty n.p.). With these references, the novel depicts the art world as distinctly male and distinctly Western. This prompts the question, why does Amy idolise these specific artists and how did she become acquainted with them? According to Bess Beatty, nineteenth century education focused predominantly on European culture, history, literature, mythology and geography, with students having to pay extra for lessons in music or painting as these were considered ‘ornamental’ (8, 12, 15, & 16). This historical context is valuable for understanding the Eurocentric and male-centric education that a girl like Amy would have received at the time, influencing her conception of what it means to be an artist and the type of art she should produce. This thesis will explore Amy’s artistic ambition and what it means for her sense of self when the role models she admires are male as, instead of inspiring her, they perhaps have the adverse effect of reasserting difference and inadequacy. Here, I will identify a number of (white) female artists (including Rosalba Carriera, Artemisia Gentileschi and Angelica Kauffman) who could have been appropriate role models for Amy, had they been included in the fine art canon. I will also explore society’s attitudes towards some of Amy’s contemporaries who were working as artists in nineteenth century Massachusetts (including Margaret Foley, Harriet Hosmer, Louisa Lander and Mary Edmonia Lewis), taking into consideration the factors that may have contributed to their success in the otherwise male-dominated art world.

In Chapter 3.1, I will explore Amy’s transformation as she departs from the domestic sphere to embark on a journey to Europe, focusing on the ways in which her travels influence her understanding of her own identity and womanhood. Beatty’s *Traveling Beyond Her Sphere: American Women on the Grand Tour, 1814-1914* (2016) will form an integral part of this section as the book outlines the key sociocultural factors of nineteenth century society that motivated American women to travel to Europe and embark on the ‘Grand Tour’ - a term that has come to refer to “the ritualized trips young British males made beginning in the mid-seventeenth century as an aristocratic rite of passage” (2). This chapter will investigate the significance of Amy embarking on a historically male journey and will consider how this influences her coming-of-age process in the novel; does her journey to Europe challenge the domestic expectations she faces as a woman or, in some way, does her exposure to the public

sphere reaffirm her domestic position in American society? Amy's Grand Tour provides her with an opportunity to see for herself the works of the Great Masters that have inspired her for so long but, instead of being inspired further, her ambition diminishes. I will suggest that Amy's confrontation with the public sphere and European society triggers her despair as she realises the limitations that she faces as a young woman in America. While Amy is able to see the different opportunities that exist for women in Europe, she is reminded of the social expectations for her to be a 'proper' American woman with 'proper' American values (becoming a wife and mother instead of focusing on her own desires). Chapter 3.1 will also discuss the reality that Amy faces in contemporary American society, specifically in terms of her (in)access to formal artistic training and the limited career opportunities that are available to her. I will suggest that Amy's encounter with the 'real' world causes her to reflect on her own position in society and recognise the impossibility of the life she imagined for herself.

Although I discuss the difficulties that (white) women artists faced in the nineteenth century, I will also discuss the ways in which they were privileged based on their whiteness. Focusing specifically on Amy's experience, I will highlight how the unconventional future she imagines for herself as well as the opportunity for her to embark on the Grand Tour are predicated on whiteness. Here, I will draw attention to the realities that black girls and women faced at the time, highlighting how even fewer black women were able to pursue careers in art. The aim of this is to emphasise the intersecting ways in which gender and race can result in different levels of privilege and oppression within society and how, for example, the type of oppression that Amy faces as a white woman is vastly different to the type of oppression that women of other races in contemporary society faced.

In Chapter 3.2, I will analyse Amy's transition from 'artist' to 'artwork' as she abandons her dream of a professional career to fulfil the duties of 'true' (white) womanhood. After visiting Rome, the young artist becomes discouraged and redirects her creative skill towards turning herself into a desirable object of the male gaze. Ultimately, she attracts the attention of childhood friend, Theodore 'Laurie' Laurence and, following their marriage, she returns home to Massachusetts where she gives birth to their first child. It is important to interrogate why Alcott allows the young woman to explore a number of exciting, unconventional opportunities throughout the book only to end with a traditional girl-marries-boy plot. It seems that Alcott purposefully denies the March sisters the alternative endings

that were, in reality, denied to women in nineteenth century America. On a covert level, however, I argue that the author empowers Amy and gives her a sense of agency as she learns to subvert the male gaze in order to succeed as a ‘true’ woman. Although Amy appears to adhere to society’s expectation for her to be a passive and ornamental art object, Alcott alludes to the constructedness of the young woman’s identity and reveals how Amy purposefully mimics the “statuesque” (Alcott 439) behaviours, postures and mannerisms associated with ‘true’ femininity (as disseminated through contemporary visual culture) in order to get what she needs to survive in patriarchal society: a wealthy (white) husband and a financially secure future. In this chapter, I will also emphasise the whiteness inherent to Amy’s performance of femininity, which the young woman learns is a necessary part of her identity as a middle class gentlewoman. My research aims to reiterate the importance of *Little Women*’s inclusion in the American literary canon and demonstrate how an interdisciplinary approach can add a valuable dimension to the study of classic literature today.

Chapter 1: Contextualisation

1.1. Literature Review

Over the years since the publication of *Little Women*, there have been a number of feminist analyses focusing on the novel’s depiction of artistic ambition in relation to mid-nineteenth century gender norms and, more broadly, the public / private sphere dichotomy that Alcott presents. However, most of these analyses ignore the aspect of race in their discussions of the ‘true’ womanhood that Alcott depicts, accepting without question the whiteness upon which the ‘ideal’ American femininity depends. Similarly, previous literature seems to neglect the art historical context of the novel which, in light of the references to art and mythology that Alcott makes throughout the text, leaves a potentially rich layer of meaning unexplored - especially as it relates to the ways in which white women (like Amy) were both oppressed and privileged within American society at the time. In this chapter, I aim to provide an overview of the existing literature surrounding *Little Women* while also highlighting the opportunities that remain for further research - specifically within the fields of racial, cultural and gender studies.

Received primarily as a work of children's literature, *Little Women* has mostly been read mostly for its nostalgic or moralistic value, while its commentary on contemporary gender norms remains largely overlooked by young audiences. Jill P. May's "Feminism and Children's Literature: Fitting 'Little Women' into the American Literary Canon" (1994) highlights that - for readers without the skills for critical analysis - children's books "are not considered for their subtexts and implicit contradiction to traditional values..." (26) and, in this way, *Little Women* is perhaps not as valued in the American literary canon as it should be. According to May, the book is as important to women's history as it is to children's literature (22). May also emphasises the complexity of the female characters that Alcott created, suggesting that the book was prophetic in the way that it presented women who defied the gender norms and conventions typical of the mid-nineteenth century period (21). May suggests that this tension between career and domesticity "is what makes Alcott's view of female adolescence archetypal" (23) as her characters portray "the realities of female existence" (23). While this may be true and Alcott's characters do indeed confront the expectations that nineteenth century American society placed on young women, it is important to acknowledge that these 'realities of female existence' are more accurately the realities of white female existence. Although May recognises the way in which the March girls challenge gender norms, her analysis does not recognise the ways in which their whiteness affords them more privilege than young girls and women of colour.

One of the few discussions of race in Alcott's novel is brought forward by Courtney Mohler in "Little (White) Women: Locating Whiteness in (De)constructions of the American Female from Alcott to Split Britches" (2009). In her analysis, Mohler deconstructs the type of 'universal' womanhood that Alcott presents, arguing that it is based on morality, heterosexuality and whiteness (60). While the novel centres around the lessons that Marmee teaches her daughters within the confines of the domestic sphere, *Little Women* does not acknowledge the privileged nature of the domestic environment as a space of privacy and leisure that is only available to white women (Mohler 63). It is striking that the novel provides such an intimate account of the March household and their "bourgeois obsession with morality" (Mohler 63) while the greater sociohistorical context - that was, in reality, fraught with racial tension - is entirely ignored (Mohler 62). While the March girls grapple with what it means to be a 'true' American woman, there is no mention of their female African American

contemporaries who are struggling to survive the horrors of slavery (Mohler 61). In this way, the construct of ‘true’ womanhood that Alcott represents is more specifically white womanhood, as black women did not have access to the safety, education or various cultural practices that Alcott attributes to ‘ideal’ womanhood (Mohler 62). It is therefore necessary for new analyses of *Little Women* to acknowledge the privileges afforded to the March family based on their whiteness. This will be particularly interesting to investigate in relation to the character of Amy March because the European art world with which she engages is historically male and historically white - meaning that she is allowed more privilege as a white female artist than, for example, a black female artist (to explore this argument, I will juxtapose Amy’s fictional experience with the lived experience of contemporary artist, Mary Edmonia Lewis, who is recognised today as the first African American sculptor). Even the transatlantic journey to Europe that Amy undertakes via ship - for the purpose of leisure and cultural enrichment - presents a reality that is only accessible due to her cultural privilege, and is vastly different to the slave ships travelling across the same oceans (in the opposite direction) during the nineteenth century.

There have also been interesting observations regarding vision and visual culture in Alcott’s writing. In *Vision, Gender, and Power in Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing, 1860-1900* (2008), Birgit Spengler interrogates the power and gender dynamics associated with vision and visual practices as reflected in nineteenth century women’s writing. Although Spengler does not focus on *Little Women* specifically, she does provide an insightful, detailed analysis of *Behind a Mask: or, A Woman’s Power* (1866) - a novella written by Alcott and published two years before *Little Women* - which, as I will demonstrate here, provides a useful foundation for my study of Amy March in relation to contemporary visual culture. Spengler argues that nineteenth century artists and authors were influenced by a paradigm shift that “[encompassed] a reorganization of social and scientific spaces, of power and knowledge, and of the visual practices connected to them” (7). This shift led to increasing interest in the issue of vision, and a number of female writers began to explore the implications of visual practices and investigate the relationship between gender, surveillance and power (Spengler 3 - 4). With particular reference to Jean Muir, the female protagonist in Alcott’s novella, Spengler emphasises that a ‘true’ woman in Victorian society knew how to control herself and her visibility, enabling her to secure a prosperous husband (223 & 226). In

order to do this, a woman needed to perform the feminine role that was prescribed to her by society - through photography, print media, advertisements, fashion magazines etc. - and present herself to the male gaze using the same, recognisable visual language (Spengler 225 & 228). While Spengler's analysis focuses on Jean and the way in which she "perpetually fashions herself for the male gaze" (224) by enacting various scenes and poses, my thesis will suggest that Amy March also "exploits the cultural analogy between visual objectification and female gender to her own benefit" (224) by adopting a very particular type of visual language. When Amy decides to no longer pursue an artistic career, she appears to transition from the role of the 'artist / observer' to the 'artwork / observed' and, in doing so, secures a marriage proposal from Laurie. By adopting a "stately and Junoesque" (Alcott 440) demeanour and presenting herself "as [effectively] as a well-placed statue" (Alcott 440), Amy presents an image of femininity that the (male) Grand Tour audience - including Laurie - has been trained to interpret through the study of classical sculpture. In addition to these observations, my thesis will explore how the visual language that Amy adopts relies on cultural traditions, practices and symbols that have distinctly European / white origins, i.e. the production and consumption of classical sculpture, the study of art history and connoisseurship, the Grand Tour, Roman mythology etc. By relying on an inherently white cultural repertoire to prove her worth as a woman, Amy expresses a femininity that is as much about race as it is about gender.

In " 'Little Women': Alcott's Civil War" (1979), Judith Fetterly draws attention to the sociohistorical context of *Little Women* by focusing on the constraints that (white) women faced in contemporary society. Like May, Fetterly identifies the tension between artistic and domestic ambition in the novel, making an important observation that Amy's artistic ability is only approved later in the plot when it aligns with her maternal (or domestic) duty as she gives up trying to be a 'great artist' and settles on modelling sculptures after her child (Alcott 565; Fetterly 373). While Alcott never provides a clear solution to the tension between artistic / domestic ambition and the public / private sphere, it is important that she identifies and represents these complex dynamics as they reveal the social constraints that many women faced. As Fetterly aptly concludes, "[the covert messages of *Little Women*] suggest that women's acceptance of the domestic sphere as the best and happiest place may be less a matter of wise choice than a matter of necessity" (376). Even though the March sisters are

ambitious, exercise their agency and imagine their ideal futures, they ultimately do not deviate from the domestic lives that await them because, in reality, society does not afford them any other opportunity. While this does highlight the limitations that Amy and her sisters face, my thesis will also explore the privilege that comes with the domestic sphere, specifically in comparison to the experiences of young black women in contemporary society who, notably, are never mentioned in Alcott's novel.

Despite the varied approaches and observations previous literature has contributed towards the discourse surrounding *Little Women*, there remains room to explore in more detail the novel's aesthetic devices and intertextual references. There is a clear opportunity for further investigation into the role that art and mythology plays in Amy March's conception of 'ideal' femininity, including the whiteness that is inherent to her gender performance. In the next chapter, I will outline the theoretical frameworks and concepts that I will be using from the fields of art history, literature and gender to make clear the scope of my thesis and the angle from which I will approach Alcott's novel.

1.2. An Interdisciplinary Approach: Literary, Gender and Art Historical Studies

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the theories, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of my interdisciplinary analysis. While my research aims to uncover Amy's role as a young female artist in the mid-nineteenth century context and explore the oppression she faces in a male-dominated society, I also focus on illuminating the ways in which her whiteness affords her distinct privilege in comparison to her black female contemporaries. The feminist approach I employ relies heavily on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, referring specifically to Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality' (1989) to assess the complex ways in which Amy is simultaneously privileged and oppressed based on factors that include her gender, race and class. A thorough examination of the literary 'whiteness' and 'Americanness' upon which Amy's character is built also demands an exploration of the literary 'blackness' that both influences her identity and remains obscured (if not entirely silenced) throughout *Little Women*. Here, I will refer to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and her criticism of the widely-held assumption that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and

then African-Americans in the United States” (22 - 23). My thesis will investigate, then, the ways in which the formation of Amy’s identity - as a woman and as an artist - does not only depend upon her whiteness, but also “a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (Morrison 23). Here, a social art history approach will facilitate a deeper understanding of Amy and her identity as initially an ‘artist’ and, subsequently, an ‘artwork’ by exploring her inextricable connections to the social and ideological context of her time, paying particular attention to the dynamics between race, gender and class in the production and consumption of visual culture. Inspired by the innovative work of Shawn Michelle Smith (1999) and Charmaine Nelson (2007), my thesis argues that mid-nineteenth century art - specifically neoclassical sculpture - functions in Alcott’s novel to reflect and perpetuate society’s gendered and racialized ideals. Central to this discussion is the idealised femininity that Amy emulates to secure her position as a white woman in society, which I will analyse from the framework of Judith Butler’s theory of ‘performativity’ (1988).

Amy’s identity is complex and throughout my thesis, I aim to illustrate the ways in which her whiteness facilitates a privileged type of womanhood. According to Crenshaw, individuals can be “multiply burdened” (140) and discriminated against based on the intersection of multiple categories and not solely on their race, for example, or sex. In her paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), Crenshaw argues that women, although united by the category of sex, can experience vastly different realities and levels of discrimination based on how they are categorised according to race (154). Black women in patriarchal American society, for example, may not only face discrimination based on their femaleness but, in addition, based on their blackness. Here and throughout this thesis, I refer to “ ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (117) as theorised by Toril Moi. Because women can have vastly different experiences of oppression, sex discrimination cannot be understood as a one dimensional concept that affects all women equally; white women have very different experiences to black or brown women based on the privilege that their whiteness affords them (Crenshaw 149). An intersectional approach is crucial to my analysis of Alcott’s novel, because scholars thus far have mainly focused on the ways in which *Little Women* does or does not challenge the nineteenth century ideal of ‘true womanhood’ without explicitly

acknowledging that the version of womanhood that Alcott depicts is more accurately white womanhood.

To provide a clear understanding of gender and its representation in *Little Women*, there are a few key terms that need to be clarified. It is important to delineate what is meant by 'gender' and emphasise that, when I refer to it in this thesis, I refer to the culturally-determined set of characteristics (including dress, behaviour, social roles, sexuality, appearance etc.) that are believed to constitute being a 'man' or 'woman' within the context of mid-nineteenth century America (Butler 519 & 522). While contemporary gender studies acknowledge that an individual's gender identity and sexuality can be independent from their biological sex, and that those categories are expanding beyond the binary of man / woman, nineteenth century society did not distinguish between sex and gender (Smith 4). In line with essentialist thought, a woman had to enact a culturally acceptable form of femininity in order to be perceived and accepted as a woman. Any deviance from this type of femininity implied a deviance from being a woman, and would have resulted in social exclusion. Here, the work of Butler and her theory of performativity is crucial to my interpretation of *Little Women*, as I argue that the feminine role that Amy grows into is best understood as the performance of a culturally-constructed ideal, rather than the expression of an interior female 'essence' that happens to become clearer with maturity (528). By referring to Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman" (cited in Butler 519), Butler explains that:

[...] to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (522)

In other words, gender can be understood as a repetitive, performative process during which the body assumes - through bodily gestures, movements and enactments - meaning and cultural significance within a specific historical context (Butler 519 & 522). Furthermore, Butler describes gender performance as a "strategy for survival" (Butler 522), as an individual needs to conform to culturally-determined norms of what it means to be a 'man' or 'woman' in order to survive in society and avoid punishment. As seen in *Little Women*, Amy March is expected to become a specific type of (white, heterosexual, middle class) woman in order to

be perceived as attractive and desirable, thus ensuring her survival in America's patriarchal society (as a suitable wife and mother).

When discussing Amy's performance of 'true' womanhood in *Little Women* - and nineteenth century femininity in general - it is also important to interrogate how age functions as an intersectional category. Gilbert & Gubar point out that 'female angels' are often depicted as "childlike, docile, submissive" (39), while 'older' women are often depicted as monstrous, mad or unattractive (17). An 'ideal' woman needed to appear young in order for her to be considered attractive by men in her society and so, to have the best chance at finding a husband, she needed to present herself as 'womanly' (and eligible for marriage) by the end of her teenage years. It is interesting that, although Alcott's novel focuses predominantly on the childhood and adolescence of the March sisters, the book is not called 'Girls' or 'Little Girls' but, specifically, 'Little Women'. It seems that the girls, even at such a young age (ranging from twelve to sixteen years old), are more readily envisioned as women or soon-to-be women than children or teenagers. Arguably, Amy is "always mature for her age" (Alcott 438) because she has been indoctrinated with the patriarchal expectations that she needs to behave and appear 'old enough' (for marriage and childbearing) while still having the advantage of youth (and the sexual 'purity' it was imagined to represent) which was most attractive to men. As the novel reaffirms, an unmarried woman at the age of twenty five is considered an 'old maid' and, by the age of fifty, she is no longer considered any 'use' to society (Alcott 507). Arguably, an 'older' woman was no longer considered attractive or 'useful' because she was less likely to produce multiple healthy children in comparison to younger women. In this way, younger women had more power and privilege because of their age; their level of fertility was more valuable to men as reproduction could ensure the survival of the dominant (white) middle class.

An interdisciplinary approach is particularly useful as it enables me to further analyse the gender ideology depicted in *Little Women* by exploring its interconnectedness with nineteenth century visual culture and racial discourse. A fitting example of the interdisciplinary approach I aim to employ can be found in Shawn Michelle Smith's thought-provoking *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (1999) which "examines how nineteenth-century middle class Americans utilised visual conceptions of identity to claim a gendered and racialized cultural privilege" (4). According to Smith,

nineteenth century visual culture and practices (e.g. daguerreotypy) provided society with new ways of constructing and interpreting identities which relied on the codification of external appearances to reflect (idealised) interior essences (4). The rise of commercial photography, for example, enabled individuals to mutually affirm their places in society as they represented themselves and others according to recognisable visual codes - including dress, props and poses - to make their imagined interiorities knowable to others (Smith 4 - 5). As Smith points out, these imagined interior depths were gendered, racialized and also revealing of one's class; "[linking] one to a specific position in a social hierarchy" (4). Individuals could create the illusion of belonging to a certain class or social category by manipulating the image that they portrayed, simultaneously adopting and perpetuating the visual language associated with 'true' middle class masculinity or femininity. It is interesting to consider how some of Smith's key arguments might apply to other forms of visual culture, specifically the neoclassical sculpture that is referenced in *Little Women*. My thesis will discuss whether Amy's enactment of statuesque femininity can be read as a symbolic act by which she demonstrates her social ascent because, not only does she use a visual language reserved for the viewing practices of a 'cultivated' audience (thereby alluding to her own refinement) but, in addition, she uses this display to secure a marriage to a (white) man of a higher social standing.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I am also interested in the role that whiteness plays in Amy's identity and how, like 'true' womanhood, her cultural survival depends upon it. One of the key arguments that Smith makes, which I wish to highlight, is the shift that took place over the course of the nineteenth century whereby "antebellum middle classes posed interior essence primarily in terms of gender" (6) while "postbellum middle classes reinscribed that essence with racialized significance" (6). The ideological concerns about gender and class that existed in society (and were disseminated through its visual culture) at the beginning of the nineteenth century came to include explicit concerns about race towards the end of the century. This is because the abolition of slavery led to increasing anxiety amongst the white middle class, as the possibility of interracial reproduction could 'weaken' white superiority (Smith 127). Although Smith's analysis focuses predominantly on daguerreotypy, I will explore how similar conclusions can be made about the visual culture represented in *Little Women*, looking specifically at the art that Amy March not only replicates but eventually tries to emulate. While the novel is set during the Civil War, it was published

during America's postbellum period which makes it interesting to investigate how the gender ideology that is reflected in the novel involves race. Using Smith's approach, I aim to answer the key questions: Does Alcott's mid-nineteenth century representation of art and visual culture also reveal an ideological preoccupation with gender and race? How does this relate to the larger nineteenth century context within which Amy is situated, specifically in terms of slavery and racial discourse? Because Alcott does not explicitly discuss race, Kristeva's concept of 'intertextuality' (1966) is crucial for recognising and interpreting the subtle allusions to blackness and slavery.

Using an intertextual approach, I will identify the ways in which *Little Women* engages with other contemporary texts - specifically relating to race and racial differences - and explore how these texts can enrich new interpretations of the novel. This enables me to investigate the social issues that have, in many ways, been silenced in Alcott's text and thus, I will be able to interrogate the politics of those 'silent gaps'. As Kristeva explains, intertextuality is based on the assumption that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). In order to effectively assess the way in which Amy's femininity is racialized, an awareness of the novel's sociohistorical context and the various external texts with which it engages is crucial in identifying, for example, the weighted meaning behind Amy's "rather flat" (Alcott 47) nose being "the greatest trial of her life" (Alcott 47). It is as though Amy's nose - described as "not big, nor red" (Alcott 47) but specifically 'flat' - signifies a deeper meaning that causes her anxiety, so much so that she emphatically wishes that she could have an "aristocratic" (Alcott 47), "classical" (Alcott 440) or "Grecian" (Alcott 48) nose instead. Elsewhere in the text, Alcott describes "a large-nosed Jew" (441), clearly associating particular nose shapes and sizes with particular races, ethnicities and classes - reminiscent of the nineteenth century debates and illustrations about racial categories and their correlating physical features (what would now be called 'scientific racism').

As a novel published in the mid-nineteenth century, *Little Women* appears to reflect - however subtly - contemporary discourse surrounding race and racial differences. Influenced by social Darwinism, Francis Galton presented his study of 'eugenics' in the latter half of the century, defining race as "an essential, biological characteristic rooted in heritable physical, moral, and intellectual capacities" (Smith 115). In addition, Galton proposes that genius is

hereditary and can be attained through selective breeding, based on the assumption “that physical features indexed the intellectual and creative potential of races [...]” (Smith 162) and that “[...] corporeal signs could legitimately demarcate an individual’s appropriate position in hierarchical society” (Smith 43 & 162). Galton began his work on the ‘science of race’ in 1865 and published *Hereditary Genius* in Britain in 1869. In 1892, when the book was reprinted, Galton’s work became popular in the United States (Smith 42 & 129). While *Little Women* was published between 1868-69, before Galton’s work became popular in America, discourse surrounding biological racism was already established as late-eighteenth century and early nineteenth century phrenologists, physiognomists and craniologists had already started providing ‘scientific evidence’ to suggest that a person’s interior character is signalled by specific physical markers (Smith 31, 48 - 49). As Smith discusses, races were organised along a hierarchical scale, with classical (white) bodies at the top and black bodies below - indicating their ‘inferior’ intellect and social position (127). As seen in fig. 1, George Robins Gliddon and Josiah Clark Nott published *Types of Mankind* (1854) in which they outline a number of racial ‘types’, arguing that black populations are permanently and innately inferior to white populations and that, as such, white people are responsible for protecting their supremacy and furthering the progress of civilisation (405; Smith 33). It is worth noting that the ancient Greeks were looked to as the paradigm of Western civilisation and were idolised as “the unreachable apex of racial genius” (Smith 127) because, in the context of *Little Women*, Amy wishes she could have a specifically “aristocratic” (Alcott 47) or “Grecian” (Alcott 48) nose. My thesis argues that Amy’s anxiety about her flat nose has very little to do with how it affects her appearance, but rather how it affects her position in society as it contradicts both her whiteness and her class, potentially also indexing an inferior level of creativity and intelligence. Amy’s preoccupation with genius also takes on a new layer of meaning as a potentially gendered and racialized term, making it interesting to dissect in the chapters to come. Biological racism and eugenics came to dominate science and popular culture towards the end of the nineteenth century, so it is a logical step to explore the extent to which *Little Women* is an “absorption and transformation” (Kristeva 37) of these texts (Hirschman 392 - 393). While Alcott does not explicitly mention slavery or contemporary concerns about race, I argue that it is the racial anxiety of middle class America that requires Amy to display her whiteness as much as her ‘true’ femininity because the survival of white

patriarchal society depended upon the ‘racial purity’ of white women (Smith 122 & 149). Amy, in other words, must enhance her whiteness if she is to be perceived as a desirable woman by middle- and upper class, white men.

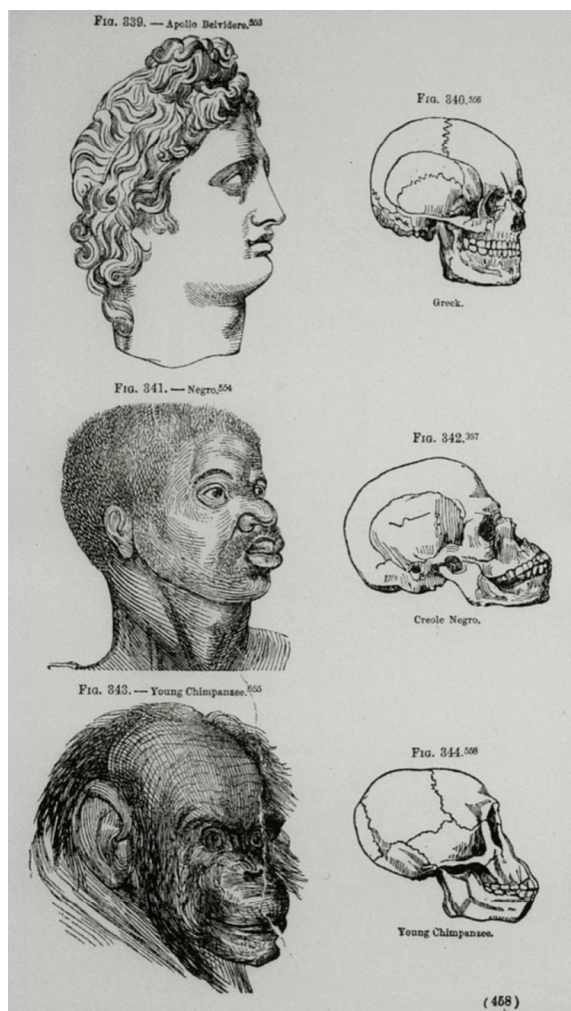


Fig. 1. Nineteenth century illustration of racial types by George Robins Gliddon and Josiah Clark Nott. *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological and Biblical History*. Philadelphia: Lippencott & Co., 1854. 458. *Münchener Digitalisierung Zentrum*. Web. 4 April 2022. <www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/details/bsb10220820>.

To understand fully the ideological influence that visual culture has on Amy, it is important to examine the effect it has on the construction of her own self-image. Here, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is paramount to my analysis of Amy's manner of self-representation. Although written in relation to art and the study of art history, Berger's text

provides a fundamental exploration of the ways in which women present themselves (and are represented by others) to satisfy an inherently male gaze. According to Berger, every woman in Western society is taught from childhood to survey herself continually “because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life” (46). A woman’s identity depends on her ability to be both the ‘surveyor’ and the ‘surveyed’, as she surveys the image she presents to the world and is aware that, at the same time, she is being surveyed by men (Berger 46 - 47). In this way, a woman must turn herself into “an object of vision: a sight” (Berger 47) if she is to succeed in patriarchal society. By positioning herself as an art object, it seems that Amy is hoping to elicit the same desiring gaze that she has seen her male peers direct towards the marble female figures. While it appears that Amy relinquishes her role as ‘the artist’ in order to become ‘the artwork’, she still exercises her creative skill as the artist of her own appearance. Indeed, Amy “[surveys] herself with a critical eye” (Alcott 440) and it brings her pleasure to see the look of satisfaction on Laurie’s face when his eyes rest on her (Alcott 440). As such, her identity is largely shaped (and validated) by the satisfaction it brings others to see her. Berger summarises this aptly when he writes “[a woman’s] own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another” (46). It is significant that Amy enacts a “Junoesque” (Alcott 440) appearance and that, when Laurie sees her, he refers to her as “Diana” (Alcott 440) because at once, the goddess-like femininity that she wants him to perceive is validated, and her identity as a socially acceptable / desirable woman is confirmed. Of course, there is another ideological tenet embedded in Amy’s performance of ‘statuesque’ femininity that needs to be explored, as neoclassical sculpture reinforced contemporary ideals about not only femininity but, more specifically, white femininity.

To explore the role that visual culture - specifically neoclassical sculpture - plays in shaping Amy March’s conception of ‘true’ (white) womanhood, I refer to discourse from the emerging field of critical race art history. My approach to analysing Alcott’s references to sculpture is largely based on Nelson’s *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007) which, as a model, will guide my investigation into the role that sculpture plays in reflecting and perpetuating nineteenth century Western ideals in *Little Women*. According to Nelson, America’s preferred choice of (white) marble for

neoclassical sculpture stemmed partly from the desire to use the same ancient materials as the Greeks in their works of classical sculpture but, in addition to that, stemmed from the desire to locate and appropriate ancient knowledge and culture to assist in the formation of a new (racialized) national cultural identity (58). Because this idealised American identity depended so much on the preservation of whiteness - especially in the postbellum period, when the possibility of miscegenation threatened white superiority - the marble used in neoclassical sculpture has a characteristic lack of colour (resulting in a white appearance), while classical sculptures were in fact polychromatic (Nelson 59 & 67). Nelson argues that nineteenth century sculptors would have known that their ancient predecessors used coloured pigments on their marble works but, because of contemporary discourse surrounding slavery and colonialism, the choice to remain “almost exclusively faithful to the medium’s natural whiteness, was a conscious ideological choice rather than a casual, random happenstance” (59). Indeed, the idea that classical sculpture was white only emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The neoclassical preoccupation with the marble’s whiteness is often dated back to the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an eighteenth century German art historian and archaeologist. Winckelmann praised the ancient Greek body as the paradigm of beauty and believed that classical sculpture was the most beautiful form of art (381; Gurewitsch 2; Nelson 59). Despite his fascination with classical Greek art, Winckelmann never went to Greece; instead, he based his observations on the Roman copies of classical Greek statues (the copies were made using white marble, while the original statues were made using bronze and various pigments) (Hodne 192; Painter 84). It is because of this that the art historian, according to Nell Irvin Painter, “did not know - or glossed over the knowledge - that the Greeks routinely painted their sculpture” (84). Colour in sculpture came to be seen as barbaric and primitive, so much so “that experts often suppressed and removed color when they found it in [Greek sculpture]” (Painter 86). The popularity of Winckelmann’s work contributed to society’s fetishisation of classical Greek beauty and resulted in the widespread misconception that colour was not used in classical sculpture (whether due to ignorance, or a conscious preference for whiteness) (Gurewitsch 2; Nelson 59; Painter 84). The ‘untainted’ whiteness of marble rendered neoclassical sculpture ‘pure’, sacred and moral (which is interesting, considering that almost all of the sculptures that male artists produced were of nude or semi-

nude female figures), while flesh tones made the sculptures ‘too realistic’ and immoral (Nelson 60). In *Little Women*, when Laurie sees Amy as the epitome of feminine beauty - an object of ‘high art’ - I argue that she attracts his attention by enacting a virtuous ‘Junoesque’ femininity that is also inextricably white.

It is also necessary to discuss class here, as the abilities to fully appreciate and understand ‘high’ art - including neoclassical sculpture - were signifiers of middle and upper class status. The exclusivity of ‘high’ art for the middle and upper classes meant that, in turn, artists’ material choices and representational strategies were largely influenced by the ideology of their audience (Nelson 65). Which is why, for example, the majority of neoclassical sculptures were of (white) women because America’s middle class idealised ‘virtuous’, ‘pure’ women who could reinforce family values; produce their husband’s (white) offspring; and, in doing so, help maintain the social and cultural dominance of the (white) middle class. It is for this reason that “the white female body represented the absolute paradigm of aesthetic beauty” (Nelson 69), as it was inscribed with the racist ideology of nineteenth century Western society. Nelson’s approach to art history is absolutely necessary for my analysis of *Little Women* because it helps to reveal the ways in which the production and consumption of nineteenth century art were gendered and racialized performative practices. More specifically, Nelson’s approach helps me to dissect Amy’s aesthetic choices when she wants to attract Laurie’s gaze and be perceived as a desirable woman and, on a larger scale, it assists my investigation into why white femininity was presented as the most attractive and most prized in contemporary society. In the chapters to come, I emphasise that Amy’s identity as a white woman is indeed shaped by slavery and “the dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (Morrison 23) as postbellum America constructed gender and race ideologies to challenge the threat that black populations could pose against a society dominated by the white, middle class.

Chapter 2: Meeting Amy March

2.1. Lessons in Gender, Class & Race

One of [Amy’s] weaknesses was a desire to move in ‘our *best* society’, without being quite sure what the best really was. Money, position, fashionable accomplishments,

and elegant manners, were most desirable things in her eyes, and she liked to associate with those who possessed them; often mistaking the false for the true, and admiring what was not admirable. Never forgetting that by birth she was a gentlewoman, she cultivated her aristocratic tastes and feelings, so that when the opportunity came, she might be ready to take the place from which poverty now excluded her. (Alcott 298)

In order to analyse the ‘true’ woman that Amy March becomes, it is important to first discuss her childhood in order to identify the ways in which she is indoctrinated with conceptions of gender, class and race from a young age. Although Amy appears to come-of-age whilst in Europe, this chapter will argue that she is already familiar with the demands of her white, middle class femininity even as a pre-adolescent. Interactions with her mother, sisters, classmates and teacher reveal a number of social and cultural influences that shape Amy’s understanding of how she should look and behave. By referring to the epigraph above, this chapter aims to highlight the ways in which Amy mimics and reenacts certain cultural practices and characteristics to demonstrate her identity as a gentlewoman - a position that she inherited through birth as an imagined biological trait - even in childhood. At such a young age, it appears that Amy has yet to realise the potential for deception or play when it comes to identity performance and, as I will argue in the chapters to come, this is something that she learns with maturation - when ‘the opportunity comes’ for her to secure a propitious marriage to Laurie and escape poverty.

In the first description that the reader receives of Amy, Alcott presents her in a way that makes clear her archetypal ‘girl-next-door’ appearance and, at the same time, introduces the key, intersecting categories of identity that form the basis of my analysis. By portraying Amy as “a regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders; pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners” (9), Alcott reveals culturally recognisable traits that reaffirm Amy’s class, gender and race: her middle class identity is made clear as she focuses on cultivating her behaviour and manners; her performance of gender adheres to middle class ideology surrounding femininity; and lastly, her visible whiteness is integral to her ‘classic’ American beauty. It is also interesting that Amy is described as a ‘lady’ in the quote above and not as a ‘girl’, even though she is just twelve years old. Her life appears to already be measured in terms of her becoming a socially acceptable type of ‘woman’, instead of her being allowed to explore and experiment with her own identity as a child. As I will argue throughout this chapter, Amy has been conditioned to

believe that her outer appearance is a reflection of an imagined interiority and, as such, she continually relies on clothing, language, gestures and expressions of taste to fulfil her position as a (white) ‘young lady’ in society. As Butler maintains, “interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body” (136). In other words, Amy’s body and appearance are regulated to reflect and perpetuate an idealised, culturally-constructed inner identity. Amy also participates in the regulation of other girls’ behaviours as she projects similar societal expectations onto them, exclaiming that she “[detests] rude and unlady-like girls” (Alcott 7). This reveals how, at such a young age, girls are required to be pleasant, mature and ‘lady-like’, or else they risk being deemed ‘detestable’.

While Alcott depicts a middle class society preoccupied with outer appearances and the interiorities they are imagined to reflect, the author appears to simultaneously distance herself from essentialist beliefs through the use of narrative irony. When the reader is first introduced to the March sisters, Alcott writes “as young readers like to know ‘how people look’, we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters [...] What the characters of the four sisters were, we will leave to be found out” (8 - 9). Although Alcott proceeds to introduce the girls primarily in terms of their appearance, the author also critiques society’s obsession with ‘how people look’ by alluding to a disconnect between outer appearance and inner character. In this way, Alcott makes room for the possibility that the idealised white femininity that Amy later performs is a construction of gender rather than a consequence of her femaleness. The narrator also reveals that Amy “sincerely desired to be a genuine lady [...] but had yet to learn that money cannot buy refinement of nature, that rank does not always confer nobility, and that true breeding makes itself felt in spite of external drawbacks” (Alcott 299). This highlights that, in Amy’s mind, demonstrating class and possessing certain (gendered and racialized) external markers of ‘true breeding’ are necessary for being perceived as a ‘genuine lady’. In this chapter’s epigraph, narrative irony is also used to critique contemporary ideas of what constitutes ‘best society’, as well as to critique Amy’s willingness to follow these demands without being able to judge for herself what is true or admirable. By framing the narrative voice in such a way that creates a sense of unity with the reader (‘our’ best society) and positioning ‘us’ as more knowledgeable than Amy, it is as though the girl should be pitied for not knowing better, or for her lack of experience at such a

young age. Furthermore, the narrative irony highlights the potential for illusion and deception when it comes to judging others based on specific external markers, making it plausible to suggest that Amy ultimately uses this to her advantage as she carefully manipulates the way that others perceive her as an adult.

Amy's sexuality is also important to discuss as it forms a necessary part of her identity as a 'true' woman, and she is indoctrinated with heteronormative ideals from a young age. According to Butler, heterosexually-based systems of marriage and sexual reproduction are often instated to ensure the survival of a given culture and its kinship system (524). In other words, the idealisation of a particular type of heterosexual, white womanhood in Amy March's sociohistorical context meant that the middle class could ensure its survival and continued cultural dominance by requiring heterosexual couples to marry and reproduce (white) middle class offspring. In *Little Women*, there is a moment when Amy - at twelve years old - asks for her mother's opinion of Laurie, as though trying to gauge whether or not he would be a suitable match for marriage. Alcott writes, "When [Laurie] was gone, Amy, who had been pensive all the evening, said, suddenly, as if busy over some new idea, - 'Is Laurie an accomplished boy?' " (84). I argue that the 'new idea' with which Amy is preoccupied is the sudden realisation that Laurie could be a suitable husband and, as such, she needs a strategy to secure his attention. Amy's mother replies to her "yes; he has had an excellent education, and has much talent; he will make a fine man, if not spoiled by petting" (84). Following this, Amy asks her mother to confirm that Laurie is not conceited, to which her mother responds "not in the least; that is why he is so charming and we all like him so much" (Alcott 84). From these excerpts, it becomes clear that Amy has learned to measure the quality of a young man according to his accomplishments or achievements; instead of asking her mother if Laurie is a 'nice' or 'kind' boy, for example, her interest is only in whether or not he possess qualities or achievements that society would deem valuable or appealing. Amy's use of the word 'accomplished' is also significant because it reveals that, as a young girl, she has been taught the importance of possessing "polite accomplishments" (Efland 133) but does not yet realise that society's expectations for boys / men and girls / women are different. In other words, she judges Laurie according to a 'female-oriented' criteria because she thinks that she can gauge his worth in the same way that her own is measured. I will discuss these 'feminine accomplishments' in more detail in the next subchapter, specifically in

relation to the type of art education that Amy receives. As seen in her response above, Marmee emphasises to her daughter that a ‘fine man’ should have an excellent education and creative talent, without being too proud or “spoilt by petting” (Alcott 84). This is an interesting comment by Amy’s mother which may, at first, be interpreted as a sort of anxiety that Laurie may become too ‘soft’ or sensitive if he is pampered with too many upper class luxuries. There is, however, another possible interpretation based on Marmee’s use of the word ‘petting’ - which, in the nineteenth century, was used to refer to sexual touching - perhaps implying that indulgence in sexual activity would spoil Laurie’s self-control and sense of Christian morality, both of which were admirable qualities of mid-nineteenth century manhood (“Petting” n.p.; Rotundo 26). Furthermore, Marmee could be using this opportunity to reinforce the importance of (heterosexual) marriage and monogamy, as this facilitates the “true breeding” (Alcott 299) upon which the survival of the middle class depends. Through her interaction with her mother, Amy is taught the admirable traits to look for in a potential partner and, with her mother’s approval, she now identifies Laurie as a desirable match for herself. Just as Amy learns how to identify a desirable man, she is also taught how to present herself as a desirable woman by ensuring the visibility of a number of external signifiers.

In keeping with the popular beliefs of mid-nineteenth century American society, young Amy March assumes that her (middle class, feminine) interiority can be made knowable to others through a series of external markers - including particular types of dress, speech and other demonstrations of ‘taste’. Bodies, in other words, “were mapped as the vehicles of gendered and racialized interior essences [...] that linked one to a specific position in social hierarchy” (Smith 4). Knowing that she is a gentlewoman by birth, Amy “[cultivates] her aristocratic tastes and feelings” (Alcott 298) to reaffirm her position in society, acting “particular and prim” (Alcott 8) when it comes to her clothing and manner of self-representation. Amy will have “nothing old or ugly” (Alcott 46) and, when she is forced to borrow her cousin’s clothes because her family cannot afford to buy new gowns, Amy’s “artistic eyes [are] much afflicted” (Alcott 48) as the clothing does not match the colour or style that she wants (even though the clothes are well made and in good condition). Amy’s privilege is striking as she is said to “[suffer] deeply at having to wear a red instead of a blue bonnet” (Alcott 48) when, in reality, children of other classes and races were suffering in deplorable conditions as victims of extreme poverty, slavery, servitude or orphanhood.

Without these types of challenges in her life, Amy's 'suffering' should more accurately be described as 'inconvenience' as she is prevented from exhibiting her middle class taste in the way that she desires. Without real hardships or endangerment to her life or well-being, Amy's recurring claim to suffering should also be understood as a learned characteristic of middle class femininity, as part of her mother's duty is to prepare her daughter for initiation into womanhood, or the "guild of suffering" (Terhune cited in Theriot 62; Theriot 65). This is an important theme that I will return to later in this chapter, specifically in relation to the suffering that Amy is said to face as a result of her nose.

In a manner often criticised as too obvious, Amy tries to convey to others that she is cultured and educated through her use of elaborate language. Remarking that "it's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabulary* [sic]" (Alcott 6), Amy tries to impress others by using 'advanced' language that reveals her level of education. At the beginning of the book, Meg confronts her little sister about using "absurd words" (Alcott 8), saying: "I like your nice manners, and refined ways of speaking, when you don't try to be elegant [...]" (8). This is a particularly interesting comment, as Amy's sister approves of her 'nice manners' and 'refined' way of speaking, but at the same time criticises her for visibly trying to achieve those things - as though such qualities should come naturally to a gentlewoman. Amy is expected to become the perfect model of middle class femininity without letting people see the effort she has to make, or else she will "grow up an affected little goose" (Alcott 9). Meg's warning to Amy can be read as society's warning to women; an 'affected' woman is unattractive and undesirable because, ultimately, she could "[expose] the 'true woman' as a role to be put on at will" (Spengler 224). Thus, the innate privilege and exclusivity of the culturally dominant middle class could be threatened by potential usurpers (Smith 55). In the context of *Little Women*, society could perceive Amy as 'fake' if she visibly 'tries too much', as though she is trying to claim a social position that is not 'naturally' hers. Furthermore, this type of effort would involve having a level of agency and self-awareness, which middle class women were not supposed to possess (Fetterly 7). Amy must become an object of vision without showing any awareness of - or desire to attract - the male gaze, because she must appear entirely passive and submissive (Berger 47; Fetterly 7). As the girl's use of language exemplifies, her education and social environment make clear the (impossible) demands of womanhood while she is simultaneously chastised for 'trying' too much.

Amy is also taught morality as a characteristic trait of virtuous middle class womanhood, specifically through her mother's charity work. When the March girls wake up on Christmas morning to find their mother missing, their Irish housekeeper says "some poor creeter come a-beggin', and your ma went straight off to see what was needed" (Alcott 18). It transpires that Mrs. March has gone to visit a German immigrant mother who is struggling to support her six children, and she soon returns home to ask her own daughters if they would sacrifice their Christmas breakfast so that the Hummel family can have something to eat (Alcott 20 - 21). The March girls willingly oblige and, according to Meg, they are pleased to demonstrate that they are capable of "loving [their] neighbor better than [themselves]" (Alcott 21). To express their gratitude, the Hummel family calls the March girls "Der angel-kinder!" (Alcott 21) and communicates with them in "funny broken English" (Alcott 21). There are two important points to highlight here; namely the connection between the March girls as 'angel children' and the 'angels in the house' they are expected to become, as well as the use of language to mark class differences. As 'little women' in nineteenth century America, the March sisters have been "trained in 'the sweetness of self-denial' " (Mohler 62) and are taught to "[master] the art of physical and emotional caretaking [...] so as to practice being of service to others" (Theriot 68). Referring to Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854), a poem that provided a sort of model to which Victorian women could aspire, Gilbert & Gubar emphasise that nineteenth century women were expected to be submissive, modest, selfless, 'pure' and angelic (23). When the girls are able to put their domestic training into practice, they are happy and proud - not only because they have done a good deed to help other people, but because their morality and class position have been reaffirmed by having outsiders praise them as 'angels'. It is also pertinent to discuss how language is used to denote characters of different classes, as Alcott contrasts the March girls' use of 'proper' English with the imperfect and sometimes broken use of English by Hannah (the servant of the March household) and Mrs. Hummel (the poverty-stricken immigrant mother). Alcott uses incorrect spelling to indicate the Irish accent with which Hannah speaks, and an English-German hybrid - or 'code switching' - to convey Mrs. Hummel's difficulty with the English language; emphasising the foreignness of both women and, with it, their poverty and lack of education. The juxtaposition of the young March girls with these characters reaffirms their position as privileged and educated middle class children and, although Hannah and Mrs. Hummel are

white Europeans, they are differentiated from the March family on the basis of their class and do not fit the criteria of idealised (middle class) American identity.

Critical discussions of race are important here, as Alcott's use of language reaffirms the March girls' privilege and morality and, at the same time, their whiteness. Mohler argues that, while the nineteenth century bourgeois obsession with morality may "[seem] racially unmarked, [*Little Women*] describes a type of womanhood that was only accessible to middle-class white women" (63). In other words, only middle class white women had the opportunity to carry out charity work and exercise their morality as they were privileged enough to have the time and resources to do so (Mohler 63). While Alcott uses variations of spelling to indicate the dialects, accents and 'foreignness' of different characters, I argue that this technique is also used to indicate blackness and, in doing so, reaffirm the whiteness of the March family. After Marmee shares a parable with her daughters to teach them "to stop complaining, to enjoy the blessings they already [possess], and try to deserve them [...]" (Alcott 53), Alcott writes:

"We needed that lesson, and we won't forget it. If we do, you just say to us as Old Chloe did in Uncle Tom, - 'Tink ob yer marcies, chillen, tink ob yer marcies,' " added Jo, who could not for the life of her help getting a morsel of fun out of the little sermon, though she took it to heart as much as any of them. (54)

The reference that Jo makes here is to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), an anti-slavery novel set in Kentucky that raises awareness of the violence and lack of humanity shown towards slaves in antebellum America. The text details the devastation and hardship experienced by black families as they are separated and sold to white slave masters. Notably, the book was popular amongst Northern abolitionists - with whom the March family can be associated as residents of Massachusetts - while it was banned in the antebellum South. In the particular reference above, Jo inaccurately assigns the quote to Old Chloe when, in the original text by Stowe, it was Uncle Tom who encouraged his children to 'think on their mercies' moments before he was taken from his family and sold to a new slave master (Stowe ch. X). Even though Jo demonstrates that her and her sisters are readers of abolitionist literature, the narrative details of *Uncle Tom* appear inconsequential to her - as though it is not important to know which slave said the words, but rather that she is able to apply the sentiment to her own domestic trials. As Mohler points out, "the privileged position Alcott's characters occupy, as educated, moral, abolitionist American women, depends on the poverty

and racial oppression of others” (62 - 63). It appears, then, that the intertextual reference to slavery functions in the novel to reaffirm and emphasise the moral, (white) middle class identities of the March girls.

Alcott’s reference to the Southern slave dialect also enhances racial difference in the novel, creating a contrast between ‘Africanist idiom’ / blackness and ‘proper’ English / whiteness. Mimicking the Southern slave dialect, Jo recites the *Uncle Tom* quote above as she tells Marmee to remind her and her sisters - as Uncle Tom does his children - of everything they should be thankful for, should they ever forget. It is quite striking that, although Jo takes Marmee’s lesson “to heart” (Alcott 54), she turns the situation into an opportunity for entertainment as she performs the slave dialect and cannot “help getting a morsel of fun out of the little sermon” (Alcott 54). It appears that the dialect is a source of entertainment to Jo and her sisters, perhaps also ‘funny’ sounding compared to the type of English they are used to hearing in their middle class community. As Morrison points out, ‘Africanist idiom’ is often used in texts to emphasise difference and to construe the dialogue of black characters as alien, unintelligible and unfamiliar (62). Furthermore, the exaggeration of this type of dialect often functions “to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power [...]” (Morrison 62). It is a sign of privilege that the March girls - all together, at home - can giggle at the misfortune of black families and make fun of their way of speaking, once again reaffirming their higher position in society and, at the same time, their whiteness.

Even at a young age, Amy’s identity as a ‘young lady’ is dependant upon visible markers of her whiteness. Although Amy is a ‘snow maiden’ with “pale” (Alcott 9) skin, she seems to develop an anxiety about some of her physical features that are less typically ‘white traits’ and are, according to popular beliefs at the time, more typically ‘black traits’ (as shown in fig. 1). Early in the novel, Alcott writes:

If anybody had asked Amy what the greatest trial of her life was, she would have answered at once, ‘My nose.’ When she was a baby, Jo had accidentally dropped her into a coal-hod, and Amy insisted that the fall had ruined her nose forever. It was not big, nor red, like poor ‘Petrea’s’; it was only rather flat, and all the pinching in the world could not give it an aristocratic point. (47)

Here, Alcott elicits an image of Amy as a baby which, interestingly, opposes the marble white figure she eventually embodies in adulthood (440). Amy is said to have been dropped into a coal-hod as a baby, resulting in the flattening of her nose and, arguably, the symbolic

blackening of her skin as she is likely to have been covered in black coal dust. Perhaps the real horror of this incident is not the superficial damage that the fall caused to Amy's nose but, rather, the symbolic threat that it made - and continues to make - to her visible whiteness. The incident also seems to destabilise the contemporary belief that skin colour correlates to an individual's 'true' essence, as Amy's interiority does not and cannot change when her skin colour is altered - it is only society's perception of her that changes, and this is what fuels her anxiety. Similarly, the argument can be made that Amy, by assuming a symbolic blackness, reveals that all babies are worthy of the same treatment and acceptance in society - regardless of skin colour - and that race, like gender, is a cultural construct that is learned and enacted (Hirschman 394). In *Little Women*, Amy begins as a baby with a flat nose and coal-black skin, and later enters adulthood as a marble white, Grecian figure; revealing that her coming-of-age is as dependent on her performance of race as it is on her performance of gender and class.

One of the ways in which Amy is indoctrinated with ideologies surrounding race (as well as gender and class) is through her school environment. Amy complains that her classmates plague her when she does not know her lessons; laugh at her if she does not have a specific style of dress; tease her because her father is not rich; and insult her because her nose "isn't nice" (Alcott 6). In the extract above, Amy's nose is described as specifically 'flat' and Alcott clarifies that it is not, for example, big nor red (47). This means that Amy's peers perceive her nose as 'not nice' precisely because of its flatness, and because it lacks a more admirable "aristocratic point" (Alcott 47). This is an important observation because it shows the imagined correlation between external markers and (racialized) class. For Amy to become a 'true' woman - a construct of the culturally dominant bourgeoisie - she has to visibly reaffirm her class and, at the same time, the whiteness upon which it depends. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, nineteenth century discourse surrounding racial differences and typologies purported that certain physical features functioned as racial signifiers - including skin colour, head shapes and noses. The most idealised nose shape was narrow and pointed, associated with ancient Greek and Roman figures, while broad or flat noses came to be associated with the opposite: blackness, inferiority and 'Otherness' (Gliddon & Nott 458). I argue that Amy's nose is the "external drawback" (299) to which Alcott refers - as the girl imagines it to compromise her display of "true breeding" (299) or innate whiteness - and because of which, she develops an anxiety so severe that she claims nobody suffers as much

as she does (6). It is also significant that her classmates recognise the shape of her nose and judge her based on what it potentially signifies, ultimately monitoring and reinforcing the boundaries of their cultural identity.

Returning to the theme of Amy's suffering, it is important to highlight the striking difference between what constitutes suffering for children of different races in nineteenth century America. The reiteration of Amy's suffering throughout the book appears hyperbolic in relation to the lived experiences of black children, reaffirming the privilege that the young girl's whiteness secures for her. The type of humiliation that Amy and her classmates face in *Little Women* does not equal the type (or frequency) of abuse that was inflicted upon African American children in the school environment and, even when slavery was abolished in the North, many young black children were still bound to work by contracts as "they were indentured or apprenticed for an extended period, sometimes to their former enslavers" (Webster 4). Black children who were able to attend school in the antebellum North were often the targets of daily physical, verbal or sexual abuse (Webster 90). This is not to hierarchise pain or to say that white children were never abused, but I aim to analyse Alcott's depiction of suffering within a larger, sociohistorical context to emphasise that, like experiences of womanhood, experiences of oppression are not one-dimensional (Crenshaw 140). For example, Amy remarks that a classmate's mother 'tucks in' her daughter's dress whenever she is naughty, so much so that the girl's dress is eventually raised up to her knees and she can no longer attend school (Alcott 48 - 49). To Amy, this is a level of "deggerredation [sic]" (Alcott 49) to which she is happy to not be subjected. While the mere sight of a white pupil's exposed legs was considered utterly shameful to Amy and her peers, in reality, it was not uncommon for black pupils to be physically and/or sexually assaulted at school (Webster 89 - 90). The 'suffering' of Amy and her peers is marked with privilege when considered alongside the lived experiences of contemporary African American women and children.

In this subchapter, I have aimed to highlight the ways in which Amy's middle class identity - and with it, her femininity and whiteness - have been shaped and reinforced by her domestic environment and social relationships. Through the adoption and enactment of various external markers, Amy fashions the "surface politics" (Butler 136) of her body to reflect the imagined interiority of a gentlewoman, and she is simultaneously taught how to

recognise these markers in other girls. Amy projects gender and class expectations onto her peers and judges them harshly when society's impossible demands of femininity are not met, even at such a young age. From her mother, Amy also learns morality and the heteronormative ideals of marriage and monogamy; preparing her for life's role as a virtuous wife and mother. In the next chapter, I will explore Amy's childhood in more depth, specifically in relation to her artistic ambition and the future she envisions for herself, as I set out to explore the racial and social privileges that allow her to challenge, however briefly, conventional nineteenth century (white) gender norms.

2.2. Amy's Artistic Ambition: 'Little Raphael' and the (White) Male-Dominated Nineteenth Century Art Canon

In this chapter, I will approach Amy's identity as 'Little Raphael' and her ambition to become a successful artist using a sociohistorical perspective, paying particular attention to the nineteenth century American art canon and its interconnectedness with gender and race ideologies. I aim to explore the social conditions in which Amy's artistic passion develops, investigating how class, gender and race ideals - disseminated through educational systems and social attitudes - impact not only the formation of her childhood dream to become a great artist but also her very specific notions of what it means to be successful and to possess genius. From a young age, Amy expresses her desire to "go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott 166), insisting that she wants to "be great, or nothing" (Alcott 467). Owing to her creative pursuits, her mother and sisters call her "Little Raphael" (Alcott 48) and Laurie calls her "Raphaella" (Alcott 466) - diminutive and feminized versions of Raffaello 'Raphael' Sanzio da Urbino (1483 - 1520), the famous Renaissance painter. It is interesting that, throughout *Little Women*, Amy and her artistic ability are repeatedly measured and described in relation to her male predecessors, as though there are no female role models with whom she can identify. While this is not true, as a number of female artists did exist, it reaffirms the obstacles that women faced in the nineteenth century which, for the most part, prevented them from receiving adequate training and from being recognised as successful artists. The lack of awareness of successful female artists - as exhibited by Amy and her family - is likely a result of society's determination to

exclude them from history and the male-dominated Fine Art canon, which makes it difficult for people to learn about them or to become acquainted with their work. Although these obstacles are not made explicit in Alcott's novel, Amy's anxiety and self-doubt manifest in her 'talent versus genius' dilemma; a concern that reveals and perpetuates society's distinction between inferior (female) talent and superior (male) genius. Craig Wright points out that, "until recently, the history of the genius in the West was populated by 'great men' (meaning white men), with women and people of color largely marginalised" (4 - 5). The talent / genius distinction is one that, as I will argue, predestines Amy's artistic attempts for insignificance or failure. Interestingly, Amy's creativity is also depicted as frightening and dangerous: her art-making transforms her into a mysterious monster that scares and "[alarms]" (Alcott 297) those around her. This imagery reveals the way in which female artists were generally viewed by nineteenth century society and reiterates how creativity, agency and individuality were not congruent to the idealised image of a desirable, 'true' woman. In addition to this, I will argue that Amy's 'monstrous' creativity is further 'Othered' by her symbolic blackness - which makes her creativity more palatable by distancing it from ('pure' white) womanhood. At the same time, however, I will suggest that it is because of Amy's whiteness that she is able to imagine an unconventional future for herself. While her femaleness prevents her from becoming "the best artist" (Alcott 166), I suggest that it is Amy's privilege as a white, middle class girl that enables her to conceive of such a possibility. Here, I will mention a number of successful female artists who, for a number of years, remained excluded from the fine art canon based on their gender and/or race, and who could have provided more relatable role models for young girls (like Amy) had they been valued by society as much as their male contemporaries.

In *Little Women*, the class and gender ideologies of America's patriarchal society are made evident through the types of art education and visual culture that Amy is exposed to as a young girl. Ultimately, Amy is taught that artistic genius is inherently male and that, to be successful, she would have to meet the impossible standards determined by the Western art canon. A closer look at the work that Amy herself produces reveals insight into the type of art education and visual culture she has been influenced by and this, in turn, reveals the gender and race ideologies that prioritise (white) male artistic achievement. Working with oil paints, pencil, crayon, clay and charcoal, Amy preoccupies herself with reproducing the styles and

techniques attributed to a number of famous white male artists, including the emotive, abstract landscapes reminiscent of Turner; shadowy faces in the style of Rembrandt; as well as the “buxom ladies” (Alcott 297) and plump infants often depicted by Rubens (Alcott 296 - 297). It appears that Amy has been taught to revere Italian Renaissance painters as the creators of culture, and to accept the positioning of ‘buxom ladies’ as the sexualised objects of interest or “passive creations” (Gubar 253) of white male artists. Arthur D. Efland discusses the ideological underpinnings of nineteenth century American curricula that was centred around the art, music and literature of the European aristocracy, explaining that the elite society of America’s East Coast adopted these cultural interests to reaffirm their own social status and dominance (136). Typically, antebellum schools taught Latin, Greek, literature, history and foreign languages, with elocution, music and drawing as the so-called “polite accomplishments” (Efland 133) that equipped women for marriage to middle- and upper class gentlemen and, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, for a teaching profession (Efland 133 & 136). In many ways, the production and consumption of art was treated as more of a social marker than a serious career path that could be followed - unless, of course, the artist was a male who possessed artistic genius. A demonstrable knowledge of- and appreciation for art became a performative tool for encoding and deciphering one’s refinement, thereby ensuring its exclusivity for the (white) upper classes; and the reservation of art / culture production for ‘gifted’ men ensured that women’s abilities remained ‘inferior’ and better suited to the passive role of art / culture consumption (Gubar 253). When Alcott writes that Amy “[attempts] every branch of art with youthful audacity” (296), it appears that Amy - still young and learning social norms - has yet to realise the limits of her interest in art. Amy believes that if she is to be successful like her (male) predecessors, she has to possess genius and “do something to prove it” (Alcott 358). What Amy does not realise is that her attempts are destined to fail because, as a female, society will condition her to believe that she is not good enough (Alcott 467). Linda Nochlin highlights the role that education and institutions have historically played in shaping (gendered and racialized) conceptions of what it means to be a ‘great artist’, arguing that they have oppressed and discouraged “all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and above all, male” (23). As Amy grows up and completes both her art and social education, it is not

surprising that she comes to realise that she will only ever be ‘talented’ (and not a ‘genius’) according to society’s standards.

While Alcott attributes a degree of merit to Amy March’s art, the author also presents the young girl’s works as products of childish fantasy rather than products of genius. It seems that the gendered distinction between genius and talent is alluded to in *Little Women* when Alcott writes “it takes people a long time to learn the difference between talent and genius, especially ambitious young men and women” (296). Alcott’s choice of wording is interesting, as she parallels the concepts of talent and genius with ‘man’ and ‘woman’ - as though underscoring the gendered distinction between both sets of terms. Even the way in which Amy’s ambition is introduced to the reader makes it seem more like a childish fantasy than a valid goal, as she experiments with pen and ink drawings that reinforce the childish nature of her art. Alcott writes that the girl is “never so happy as when copying flowers, designing fairies, or illustrating stories with queer specimens of art” (48). It is interesting that Amy still manages to demonstrate “such taste and skill, that her graceful handwork [proves] both pleasant and profitable” (Alcott 296) which suggests that there is actually merit to her work despite the condescension with which it is treated. Alcott also indicates (with subtlety) the difficulties that Amy faces as the young artist is often commended for her energy and talent, as well as her perseverance “in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements” (Alcott 298 & 467). While there is no further elaboration on the obstacles or discouragements that Amy faces, I suggest that these are exemplified in the disapproval that is shown towards Amy and her art by her school teachers. They complain, for example, when Amy does various drawings of maps, caricatures and animals instead of doing her sums (Alcott 48). While it is understandable that a teacher may reprimand a student for not completing a specific task, this dissatisfaction may also reveal, in broader terms, the social attitudes toward female creativity in school and professional settings - that art is not a ‘serious’ pursuit for women and it is less important than other subjects or social roles. Here, some historical insight into America’s art institutions and education systems is necessary for understanding the context of Amy’s talent and ambition.

American art institutions and education systems have historically denied women access to valuable resources, thereby ensuring that female artists remain disadvantaged compared to their male contemporaries and excluded from the Western art canon. As Wright explains, a deeply embedded cultural bias has “killed the creative careers of many gifted

women” (40) for centuries. In the nineteenth century context, this cultural bias - that values the achievements of white men and disregards the skills of everyone else (i.e. women or people of different races) - permeated school environments and professional contexts. As Beatty explains, female academies in nineteenth century America often taught European history, literature, music, art and geography, focusing on a classical curriculum dedicated to self-culture (12). For the most part, however, drawing and painting were considered “ornamental subjects” (Beatty 16) and the majority of the works produced were copies of European artists - indicating that women were taught to imitate and not experiment with their own styles or abilities. Furthermore, women had limited opportunity to formally pursue their interest in European culture after they had finished their academy education, and it was only after the Civil War that colleges and universities began to permit women and (to a lesser degree) people of colour (Beatty 24). In the antebellum period, women were generally forbidden to participate in life drawing sessions as “conventional wisdom at the time deemed women’s emotions so unpredictable that contact with a live model would prove aesthetic disinterest impossible. Some believed that women’s reproductive capacities would fail with excessive mental stimulation” (Dabakis 22). While some museums allowed artists to study their collections of plaster casts, this type of access was usually reserved for men (Dabakis 26). It is not impossible to imagine someone like Amy - a young, aspiring artist in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts - having difficulty gaining access to the type of professional training and resources that were more readily offered to men.

In reality, there were a few contemporary female artists who were able to pursue their careers professionally and have their works exhibited publicly in Massachusetts. Around mid-century, Louisa Lander (1826-1923), Margaret Foley (1827-1877) and Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908) all had work exhibited in Boston (Dabakis 26). It is worth noting that these artists had little opportunity for sculptural training, with Lander and Foley teaching themselves basic carving skills at home (Dabakis 23). Hosmer was privileged enough to receive anatomical training from her father - a physician - and, later, learn from others including another doctor and a male artist (Dabakis 22 - 23). Lander, too, came from a privileged background with access to carving materials and opportunities to see expensive works of art from a young age (Dabakis 25 - 26). Foley was the only one of the three artist who came from a working class background but, despite this, was able to achieve success as a

cameo carver due to her liberal education and the experience she gained as an employee at a literary magazine (Dabakis 24). There are two important points to highlight here, including the fact that these women were white (which, as I will argue below, provided them the privilege and opportunity to challenge society's gender norms) and, secondly, the fact that "creative women, like Foley, were often relegated to careers in the decorative arts" (Dabakis 24). In other words, even in the rare instances when women were able to overcome their circumstances to further their artistic abilities and gain recognition for their work, it was often condoned only when it formed part of the 'feminine' realm of crafts or decorative arts. Similarly, it was acceptable and more conventional for women to become art teachers (Buick 1). In *Little Women*, it makes sense then that Amy decides not to pursue a professional career in Rome, choosing instead to return to America and start - with the aid of Laurie's wealth - an "institution, for the express benefit of young women with artistic tendencies" (Alcott 530). Presumably, Amy will teach art to the students. Additionally, Amy continues working as a sculptor when she returns home which, notably, confines her art to the domestic setting and domestic subject matter (Fetterly 373). The new mother models a figure of her baby which is praised as "the best thing [she has] ever done" (Alcott 565), further emphasising the type of art that women were encouraged to produce in contrast to the type of 'high art' and neoclassical subject matter (produced by men) that, in reality, dominated American institutions and galleries. It is also worth considering the possibility that the figure of Amy's baby is considered her 'best' artwork precisely because it represents her prized (biological) creation; her greatest success is creating life and becoming a mother. In this way, a woman's ability to create something 'impressive' was best understood within the domestic sphere, and not within the professional art world.

Even in the decades and centuries before Amy imagines her art career, there existed a number of (white) female predecessors who defied convention and worked as professional artists. According to Nochlin, there is a striking commonality to be found amongst successful female artists - including Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757) and Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) - which reveals that, almost without exception, they had artist fathers or a close connection to "a stronger or more dominant male artistic personality" (46). As with the artists discussed in the paragraph above, Gentileschi, Carriera and Kauffman were white. Arguably, their family or social relations (as well as their whiteness) gave them

access to valuable training as well as networks of exhibitors and patrons - an advantage that their black female contemporaries did not have. Still, recognition was often difficult to achieve and in the case of Gentileschi - who is now considered “an artistic genius of the highest order” (Wright 43) - her artworks were attributed to male artists, including her father, for centuries (Wright 42). Rather than being honoured in the same way as her male contemporaries, Gentileschi was viewed during her time “mostly as a curiosity - a rare female painter in a man’s world and a cautionary tale about the dangers lurking therein” (Wright 43 - 44). The danger to which Wright refers is Gentileschi’s loss of virtue, as she was sexually assaulted by her teacher and mentor, Agostino Tassi (43). Although the artist’s abuser was convicted, he did not serve a sentence and Gentileschi came to represent a warning to other women who hoped to follow the same artistic path - suggesting that it is safer to remain within the domestic sphere (Wright 43). Perhaps this is why Amy is not called, for example, ‘Little Artemisia’. In addition, it would have been exceptionally difficult for Amy to become a successful artist as she does not have an artist father, nor does she have an explicit connection to an established male artist. It must be noted, however, that “an artist friend fitted [Amy] out with his cast-off palettes, brushes, and colors [...]” (Alcott 296) which is interesting because, although quite ambiguous, the possessive pronoun ‘his’ confirms that it is indeed a male friend who provides her with the necessary resources to explore her artistic urges. This raises the question whether she would have had access to the materials she needed if it were not for the generosity of her (male) artist friend? It is more likely that a young middle class woman, like Amy, would have been too preoccupied with meeting the demands of her social role than dedicating enough time to furthering her skill (Nochlin 31). Additionally, the financial difficulties that the March family faces in the novel would have, in reality, presented a significant obstacle to a young girl wanting to become an artist. It is only because of Amy’s wealthy Aunt and her (white) middle class connections that she is able to overcome monetary hindrances and obtain art materials; undergo a Grand Tour of Europe; and, ultimately, start an art school for girls.

Although Alcott creates characters who imagine unconventional futures for themselves, Amy’s passion for art is also depicted as violating and self-destructive. While Amy’s ambition is presented as a sort of fantasy, made evident through her drawings of fairies, caricatures and the animals that capture her imagination, there is a recurring use of

imagery that relates her acts of art-making to acts of self-destruction or physical deformation. Amy's "mysterious doings caused [her] to be regarded in the light of a young ogress" (Alcott 297) and, in one particular instance - when the artist attempts to make a plaster cast of her own foot and gets stuck in the process - the March family is alarmed by the "unearthly bumping and screaming" (Alcott 297) they hear coming from the shed. In addition, Amy develops a "mania for sketching" (Alcott 297) and creates "ghostly casts of her acquaintances [that] haunt the corners of the house" (Alcott 297); and, to her own detriment, she alternately "[sacrifices] her complexion" (Alcott 298) and "[catches] endless colds" (Alcott 297) when she sits outside to do observational drawings. It is as though Amy's creativity threatens her physical and psychological state, which alarms those around her. Arguably, getting sick may impact her ability to attract a husband and this is what concerns those around her; she must appear healthy (and capable of producing children) if she is to secure a marriage proposal and succeed in her 'women's career'. The comment about Amy's complexion is particularly interesting because the biggest threat that the sun poses to the young girl's skin is not the possibility of getting burnt but, specifically, the change of colour it causes. Why is the tanning of her fair skin envisioned as a sacrifice? What does she potentially lose as a result of her darkened complexion? It appears that the artist's creativity threatens her whiteness; another trait that is necessary for her to attract a wealthy (white) man and become a 'true' woman. Because she cannot express her creativity outwardly and be socially accepted as a gentlewoman, Amy must learn to channel her creativity inward and turn her own body into the work of art (Gubar 254 - 255). In this way, she can fulfil the inanimate role that patriarchy demands (Gubar 256; Gilbert & Gubar 40). I argue that, during childhood, Amy is introduced to the fear and repulsion that society has towards female artists and, as a result, she learns the necessity of turning herself into the artwork in order for her creativity to be condoned.

While Gilbert & Gubar provide an important foundation for analysing Amy March and her art production, it is also important to investigate the role that race plays in nineteenth century conceptions of female creativity. The patriarchal standards that 'true' women were expected to live up to were inherently white and, because it was mainly privileged white women who could afford to pursue careers in the arts and use their wealth or social standing to overcome gender bias, how can black female creatives in the nineteenth century be conceptualised? It is also interesting to consider the role that blackness plays in the depiction

of white female creativity: What is the relevance of, for example, Amy's symbolic blackness - as signified by her nose and darkened complexion - to her portrayal as an artist? As *Little Women* reveals, a creative woman in nineteenth century society was often perceived and depicted as an 'Other' in terms of her physical appearance (as a monster or 'ogress'); mental state (as mad or a 'maniac'); or, as I will discuss below, in terms of racial identity. Arguably, Amy March's symbolic blackness can be interpreted as a literary tool to further 'Other' her creativity and identity as an artist from the norms and expectations of her contemporary society. Susan Meyer identifies this technique in a number of nineteenth century texts, whereby white women are metaphorically linked or likened to people of "lower, inferior, or dark races" (2) to evoke associations with moral corruption, exoticism, decadence; or to explore issues of gender and highlight shared feelings of limitation, frustration and subordination (7). While this interpretation could apply to Amy March in *Little Women*, thereby creating a symbolic connection between her and women of colour, I suggest that the linking of Amy with blackness could also be a technique used to emphasise her 'Otherness' and make her creativity more palatable; if her whiteness is not compromised it would be even more difficult for her to deviate from the norms of 'true' (white) womanhood.

While Amy's ambition may be read as a challenge to contemporary gender norms, the artist still makes certain that her dress and behaviour adhere to the socially acceptable image of a 'true' woman. As Melissa Dabakis points out, because professional careers in literature, art and theatre were generally reserved for men, women who pursued careers in these fields often felt the need to adopt a "masculinized persona" (29) that served as "a visual code for feminine independence from social convention" (29). In *Little Women*, this appears to be true for Jo March who, as an aspiring writer, is described as "boyish" (Alcott 7) with "big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it" (Alcott 7 - 8). Perhaps Jo resists becoming a 'woman' or identifying as 'feminine' because of all the societal expectations she would be subjected to. If she was to express her femininity in a more conventional way (and in doing so become a more conventional type of female, because her outward expression of gender was believed to correlate to her biological sex) she would have to dedicate her time and energy to fulfilling her domestic duties rather than becoming a famous author (Nochlin 31). In today's society, a person's femaleness is not doubted if they behave or dress in a way

that has been historically coded as ‘masculine’ but, for Jo, her resistance of ‘true’ femininity and the role it demands of her can only be understood as a sort of denial of her femaleness. She is not comfortable with the cultural practice of ‘true’ femininity, just as she is uncomfortable with her female body and the physical changes that occur as she grows older. Jo “[likes] boy’s games, and work, and manners” (Alcott 7) and she “can’t get over [her] disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott 7) because, arguably, it would be more conducive to her becoming a professional writer. It is interesting, however, that Amy does not adopt a ‘boyish’ appearance and, quite oppositely, embraces her identity as a young lady. Indeed, society prescribed knowledge of art as beneficial to becoming a ‘true’ woman as it was thought to indicate a high level of taste and morality, which would make Amy’s interest in art complementary to her performance of femininity (Efland 139). The problem arises, however, when Amy takes her personal interests too far - beyond the domestic realm - posing a challenge to the idealised femininity she strives to embody. Alcott ensures, however, that another option remains viable for Amy despite her “youthful audacity” (Alcott 296). Alongside her artistic endeavours, Amy “was learning, doing, and enjoying other things, meanwhile, for she had resolved to be an attractive and accomplished woman, even if she never became a great artist. Here she succeeded better [...]” (298). It appears, then, that the young artist intentionally retains her distinctly feminine characteristics as a sort of ‘back up’ should her career fail because, as long as she is ‘an attractive and accomplished woman’ she is eligible for marriage and a secure future. When Jo asks Amy what she will do if she goes to Rome only to discover that she does not possess genius, Jo (rather accurately) guesses that her sister is likely to “marry some rich man, and come home to sit in the lap of luxury all [her] days” (Alcott 358). While gender oppression means that Amy’s efforts are destined to fail, or at least remain within the boundaries of suitable ‘feminine accomplishments’, I argue that it is because of her class and her whiteness - which she visibly demonstrates - that she is still able to procure a safe and comfortable future for herself as a wife and mother.

Unlike Amy, women who were not of a ‘desirable’ class or race had, in reality, had little opportunity to choose or imagine alternative futures for themselves. In the nineteenth century, women of colour and lower classes had to work for a living or were enslaved without choice, leaving the possibility of an impressive career or a marriage based on personal preference almost entirely unimaginable. While Amy is able to explore her personal interests

as a child; travel abroad to attempt a professional career; and, when that fails, marry a man whom she chooses and enjoy the comforts of his mansion, black women in the antebellum South were bound to lives of slavery and were often raped or forced into intimate relationships with their white masters (Farrington 5). In many cases, this resulted in the birth of mixed race children who, according to law at the time, became the ‘property’ of their fathers and increased their wealth (Farrington 5). Enslaved women mostly worked in the fields, with a smaller number working as domestic servants in and around the plantation household (Lewis & Lewis xviii). As Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis explain, “all slaves were subject to abuse and violence, but women suffered additionally from rape and sexual coercion, often at an early age” (xviii). Slave marriages were largely controlled by whites and, in some instances, were forced upon the enslaved as a way to increase the slave population (Lewis & Lewis xix). In an effort to better their treatment or gain freedom, some women offered sexual favours to their masters; acts that perpetuated the “stereotype that whites, in the North and the South, held about black women as lascivious Jezebels” (Lewis & Lewis xviii - xix). The sexualised image of black women was positioned as the antithesis of virtuous white womanhood, ensuring that black women could ‘justifiably’ remain the victims of sexual abuse at the hands of white men and, at the same time, be subordinated to white women on the basis of the perceived ‘immorality’ and ‘deviance’ that comes with the black race. For previously enslaved women who managed to gain freedom, earning a living, establishing families and buying their own property became a reality (Lewis & Lewis xx). However, as Lewis & Lewis point out, “some found it so difficult to survive in a racist society that constantly chipped away at their freedom that they even requested to be returned to slavery” (xx). This sociohistorical insight emphasises that, while the options and choices available to Amy in *Little Women* were unconventional for her gender, they were almost entirely inconceivable for women of different races and classes.

Despite the varying degrees of oppression they faced, either in the slave-holding South or abolitionist North, a small number of African Americans were able to pursue careers in art. The first of these artists to achieve success and recognition, as Lisa E. Farrington explains, were mixed race men (10 - 11). This is because mixed race children - with one half, one quarter, or one eighth African blood - received privileges that ranged from better treatment as slaves or access to education, to elevated social status and inherited wealth from their fathers

(Farrington 6). These privileges facilitated the subsequent emergence of an elite group of African-American visual artists in the nineteenth century who, “both despite and because of their racial origins, gained entrée into art schools, access to clients, and financial advantages for which so many others of African descent could never hope” (Farrington 11). Based on their ability to ‘blend in’, these men - including Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1872), Eugène Warburg (1825-1859) and Joshua Johnston (1763-1832) - were able to cross social boundaries that were still enforced for their black contemporaries (Farrington 5). As Amy’s art education reveals in *Little Women*, genius was a concept historically credited (exclusively) to white men as she is taught about the long-standing achievements of white male artists - from the Classical Artists of ancient Greece and Rome, to the Great Masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - while the man who would come to be recognised as the first black painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), had only just been born. Even less common than (male) African American artists, were female African American artists.

Born in the mid-nineteenth century, Mary Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) is recognised today as the first African American sculptor to achieve international success. Lewis, who identified as black-Native, was born and educated in America before moving to Rome to pursue a professional career (Buick 20 & 31). Unlike many white female artists who “were often able to use class privilege to circumvent sexist institutional exclusion by arranging professional private tutoring from within the social sphere of their familial contacts” (Nelson 24), Lewis did not have formal anatomical training and had fewer institutional options than her white male or female colleagues (Nelson 24). However, she was able to attend some of the progressive schools and colleges in the North that had begun to accept women and students of colour by mid-century; an opportunity made possible only with the financial aid of her brother and the assistance offered to her by abolitionists (Buick 4, 5 & 7). Although she was welcomed into a biracial school environment, Lewis was still subjected to society’s racial prejudices as she was publicly accused of poisoning two (white) classmates and, later, stealing art materials from one of her professors - crimes for which she was never actually convicted (Buick 8 - 10). As a result of the prior incident, Lewis was kidnapped, beaten and left for dead (Buick 9). A few years later, at the age of twenty-two, the aspiring artist moved to Rome to pursue a professional career because “the land of liberty had no room for a colored sculptor” (Lewis cited in Buick 18). Interestingly, Lewis generated enough income to pay for her

journey by making and selling marble busts of abolitionist leaders and Civil War heroes, which were appealing to wealthy (white) abolitionist patrons (Buick 14). As Kirsten Buick points out, Lewis pursued “a path virtually uncharted by African Americans” (1) and, in the North where African American women had more freedom, there were very few employment opportunities to choose from as either a domestic servant; an operator of small businesses; or, as a teacher (6). Although Lewis found a more inclusive and accepting society in Rome, she was still considered “a symbolic and social anomaly within a dominantly white bourgeois and aristocratic community [...]” (Nelson 26 & 63). In addition, Lewis noticed that (white) male artists did not visit her which, as Nelson suggests, could have been the result of “the general bias against women artists” (21) and / or a bias against Lewis’s race. This demonstrates just one of the ways in which the oppression that Lewis faced as a black woman was more complex than the prejudice that white women artists faced.

With the insight that this type of critical race art history provides, the extent of Amy’s privilege in *Little Women* becomes easier to discern and, even though she does face (covert) limitations on the basis of her gender, it is her whiteness and class that allow her to transgress society’s gender norms. More so, she is able to attempt an unconventional future without the ramifications of, for example, the type of emotional or physical violence frequently inflicted upon black women. As demonstrated by Lewis’s experiences, contemporary black women artists were often ‘multiply-burdened’ as a result of their gender as well as their race (Crenshaw 140). As emphasised above, Lewis’s career path was certainly not common for African American women and, arguably, it was her access to financial assistance - from a male family member as well as the wealthy, white abolitionists who used her work to ‘promote’ their cause - that provided her with the means to accomplish the level of success that she did (Buick 3). For black women without the funding and social network that Lewis had, a career in the arts would have been almost entirely unimaginable (Nelson 6). In the next chapter, I will explore the intersection of race, gender and class in the novel more thoroughly, specifically in relation to Amy’s Grand Tour of Europe and the visual culture she encounters (and learns to re-enact) there. In the nineteenth century, a number of white American women artists ventured to Rome to pursue professional careers, making it interesting to explore both the city’s imagined significance for these women as well as the reality that awaited them there. This will enable a deeper analysis of Amy’s expectations of Rome and the ideological

boundaries that the city reinforces for her. I will argue that even though Amy leaves America, the limitations of ‘ideal’ American womanhood are reaffirmed to her through the visual culture she encounters there, forcing her to alter the future she had envisioned for herself as a child.

Chapter 3: From ‘Little Raphael’ to ‘Junoesque’ Amy

3.1. Amy’s Grand Tour of Europe: Learning the Boundaries of America’s ‘True’ (White) Womanhood

In this chapter, I will discuss the role that the Grand Tour of Europe - a coming-of-age journey that was historically reserved for wealthy (white) men - plays in Amy March’s development into a ‘true’ American woman. While Amy travels to many European cities including London, Paris, Heidelberg, Luxembourg and Berne, she seems to place the most importance on Rome (Alcott 367). The significance that this Italian city has for Amy is particularly interesting, as she claims that “it will decide [her] career” (Alcott 358) and that, if she has any genius, “[she] shall find it out in Rome” (Alcott 358). Amy imagines Rome to be the birthplace of her art career, making it important to question why, for example, she cannot pursue her career at home in America. Here, insight into the nineteenth century sociohistorical context is valuable for understanding the cultural ideologies attached to each place, as well as to ascertain what was common practice for female artists and, more broadly, for women at the time. Not forgetting, of course, the roles that race, class and sexuality play in these limitations or possibilities. Although mid-century American artists were expected to undergo training in Rome (Nelson 3), it is worth investigating how (un)conventional it was for women artists to do this and if there were, in general, many women making the transatlantic journey to participate in the Grand Tour. Beatty explains that, by the mid-nineteenth century, it was acceptable for (wealthy, white) women to embark on the Grand Tour - usually with their family, their husband, or with a chaperone (4 & 9). Notably, a woman embarking on the Grand Tour had to have above-average wealth, or know someone willing to pay for her (Beatty 5). When it comes to the motivation for undertaking such a trip, Beatty emphasises that by mid-century, while many wealthy American women (who were exempt from strict

domesticity) travelled to Europe for the status it provided them, “education inspired far more women to travel there than did acquiring status or the pursuit of marriages and titles” (5). This is particularly interesting in relation to *Little Women* because, as I will argue, it appears that Amy envisions her trip to Rome as an opportunity for furthering her artistic training, while the older women in her family - specifically Aunt Carrol (who invites Amy to accompany her to Europe), Aunt March (who pays for the journey) and Marmee - have more conventional values and, likewise, more conventional intentions. To them, providing Amy with the opportunity to go abroad means providing her with the best possible opportunity to find a (preferably wealthy and white) husband. I suggest that the young artist’s trip to Europe is specifically gifted to her (and not Jo) as a final and necessary step towards her identity as a ‘true’ woman, as a sort of “finishing gloss of gentility for the [...] future matriarch of the home” (Beatty 4). In other words, while Amy envisions the Grand Tour as a way for her to enter the ‘real’ art world and create an identity for herself as an artist, the journey actually functions in the novel to reaffirm the expectations and limitations of (white) American womanhood. Through this process, Amy learns, by seeing for herself, that sacrificing her artistic endeavours to become a ‘true’ gentlewoman is her only real chance at a stable and viable future.

While class and wealth were deciding factors in a woman’s ability to embark on a Grand Tour of Europe, gender and sexuality also played integral roles. The Grand Tour was envisioned as an advantageous opportunity for self-improvement and self-culture and, for some women, “their trip was an opportunity to display their father or husband’s success or even to find a titled husband” (Beatty 26). What is important to highlight here is the interconnectivity of this transatlantic rite of passage with performances of (white middle class) femininity and (hetero)sexuality; even though the geographical borders of America were being crossed, women were still expected to conform to the boundaries of society’s gender and sexuality norms. The protection of a woman’s modesty and virtue was still important and ship companies, for example, “always concerned about their reputation, made sporadic efforts to minimize unfamiliar intimacy by designating a ladies’ cabin and a gentlemen’s cabin for daytime socializing” (Beatty 58). While this highlights the importance of preserving female virtue, it also reveals contemporary ideology surrounding sexuality; that by separating men and women, sexual intimacy will be prevented because passengers are

assumed to be heterosexual. Added to this is the idea that the trip would help young women find husbands, thereby aligning performances of ideal femininity with heterosexuality. These insights are valuable to my analysis of *Little Women* as they lead to an interesting discussion surrounding Aunt March and Aunt Carrol's unexpected decision to snub Jo - the second oldest (and unmarried) March daughter - and invite Amy to join the tour instead.

Although an initial interpretation may be that Amy is invited to travel to Europe with Aunt Carrol because she is the niece with a keen interest in art, I argue that Amy is invited because she is the most 'ladylike' and therefore the most 'marketable' to bachelors abroad. The decision to invite Amy instead of Jo comes after the two girls visit Aunt March and Aunt Carrol one afternoon, an encounter during which Amy impresses her aunts with "a most angelic frame of mind" (Alcott 344) while Jo is overtly opinionated and speaks 'too freely', having yet to learn the "timely lesson in the art of holding her tongue" (Alcott 345). While Amy is depicted as the 'angel-woman' who knows how to present herself amiably (and silently), Jo is depicted as problematic for having opinions and for voicing them. Upon receiving the news that Amy is to accompany Aunt Carrol to Europe instead of Jo, Marmee tries to appease her older daughter's disappointment by giving a justifiable explanation as to why she cannot go, revealing that it is because Aunt March and Aunt Carrol disapprove of her "blunt manners and too independent spirit" (Alcott 357). The aunts feel that Amy, by contrast, "is more docile, will make a good companion for Flo, and receive more gratefully any help the trip may give her" (Alcott 357). The type of 'help' to which Aunt Carrol refers remains ambiguous and, while it could relate to the exposure or access to resources that the young artist needs in order to get her professional career started, I argue that Amy's family is more concerned with helping her fulfil her more conventional desire to become "a true gentlewoman in mind and manners" (Alcott 356). The most effective way that they can assist the young woman with this is by, ultimately, finding her a husband. When Aunt March asks Amy if she is strong and well enough for travel, she specifically enquires about the young girl's eyesight which, arguably, is because visual culture (and Amy's ability to see and learn from it) plays a crucial part in her being able to become a 'true' gentlewoman (Alcott 345). It is Amy's ambition "to be a lady" (Alcott 356) that is accepted and encouraged, not her ambition to become a great artist. Likewise, Jo has a creative goal of her own and wants to become a "rich and famous" (Alcott 165) writer but, because she does not conform to the type

of behaviour and dress that is deemed appropriately ‘feminine’, Amy gains the advantage over her sister. When the girls are bidding their aunts farewell after their visit, Alcott writes that “[Jo] shook hands in a gentlemanly manner, but Amy kissed both the aunts, and the girls departed, leaving behind them the impression of shadow and sunshine [...]” (346). This raises the question whether Jo’s ‘manliness’ is what the aunts are afraid of society seeing (as the Grand Tour is such a public excursion) or, because contemporary society believed that gender corresponded to one’s sex and sexuality, the aunts are afraid that Jo is not appealing enough to the heterosexual (male) eye. Alternatively, they are concerned that Jo is not heterosexual. As Butler maintains, gender - as a strategy for survival in a given society - “is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (522). I argue that, because she does not perform the ideal type of femininity that society demands, Jo is punished; she is deemed less attractive to the male audience and, therefore, less deserving of trip to Europe.

There is also the possibility that the overseas journey is not ‘rewarded’ to Jo because her level of morality does not match Amy’s, which Alcott makes apparent through the girls’ subtle references to slavery. Although abolitionist literature for children was not uncommon in the antebellum period, Karen Sands-O’Connor argues that Alcott’s novel came at a time (between 1865 - 1871) when the publishing industry almost entirely avoided distributing controversial texts and wanted to give the country time to ‘heal’ (34). While Alcott avoids overt references to slavery and abolitionism in *Little Women*, there are a few covert references that the author uses to indicate virtue (Sands-O’Connor 36). In an earlier chapter of my thesis, I argued that the novel’s reference to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is used to emphasise the morality of Alcott’s white characters. Here, Sands-O’Connor identifies the relationships between Jo, Amy and Laurie as particularly significant in terms of their views toward slavery and how, in turn, these characters receive different ‘rewards’ (36 - 37). In the same scene mentioned above, when Amy and Jo visit Aunt Carrol and Aunt March, Amy is commended for her willingness to work at the Chesters’ charity fair which, as she explains to her sister, is “for the Freedmen” (Alcott 344). Jo, by contrast, voices her unwillingness to help and says that she does not like favours because “they oppress and make [her] feel like a slave; [she’d] rather do everything for [herself], and be perfectly independent” (Alcott 345). Following this remark, Aunt March gives “a decided nod” (Alcott 345) to Aunt Carrol and says, “I told you so” (Alcott 345). While Amy demonstrates her concern for the Freedmen (black men freed

from slavery in the North), Jo makes an offensive and inappropriate statement that compares her volunteering at a charity fair to her being oppressed and controlled, like a slave - a comment that demonstrates her incomprehension about the reality of slavery and the consequences it has for people. Amy's willingness to help the antislavery cause is an important factor in the aunts' decision to invite her to Europe, while Jo's comment appears to confirm their pre-existing suspicions that her morality is questionable and, as such, she is unfit to go. When Amy's invitation to Europe arrives, Alcott explicitly phrases the invitation as a "reward" (Alcott 356) for Amy's increasing efforts to behave like a 'true' gentlewoman. Although *Little Women* may appear to encourage or reward abolitionist attitudes, my thesis maintains that the novel's subtle allusions to slavery and blackness are rather superficial as they function primarily in terms of reaffirming white morality which, in turn, is used to construct the identity of the 'ideal' white woman.

Alcott depicts Amy's voyage to Europe in a romanticised, fairytale-like manner that reaffirms the young artist's privilege and whiteness, thereby functioning as a sort of anti-Middle Passage that carries the young gentlewoman in the opposition direction to the African slaves bound for America. As Amy's ship departs from the Massachusetts coastline, she waves her hand to her loved ones ashore until she "could see nothing but the summer sunshine dazzling on the sea" (Alcott 359). Although she recalls later that her travel companions suffered from sea-sickness, Amy enjoys her time onboard and reminisces in a letter sent back to her family: "Such walks on deck, such sunsets, such splendid air and waves! [...] It was all heavenly [...]" (Alcott 360 - 361). From Amy's description of her time aboard the ship, it is clear that she is able to move around freely and engage with fellow passengers, she enjoys the attention she receives from the officers and has "plenty of pleasant people to amuse [her]" (Alcott 360). In reality, this type of freedom of movement and acceptance amongst fellow passengers were experiences almost entirely reserved for wealthy white people. As Beatty points out, "few women from racial or ethnic minorities had the financial means for tourist travel" (6) and it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of professional tour companies, that the tour to Europe became financially accessible to more women (5). It is important to add here that, even with the financial means, "extreme class and racial segregation of nineteenth-century ship travel imposed material and physical hardships on black travelers" (Nelson 32). Nelson emphasises

that, aside from the physical sickness and discomfort that also affected white passengers, black travellers experienced “acute and dangerous segregation practices and explicit mistreatment” (32) aboard passenger ships. Amy’s pleasant and comfortable journey to Europe provides a stark contrast to the experiences that many black people faced going the opposite direction, to America, as slaves in the nineteenth century. While the ban on the importation of slaves came into effect in 1808, a number of ships still transported slaves from Africa illegally, right up until the Civil War period (Harris n.p.). For the few Freeman and Freewomen of the abolitionist North who had the financial means to travel to Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, time aboard the ships did not offer respite from racism and restrictions. As Nelson notes, “the enforced racial immobility of the black subject [onboard the ship] corresponded to his or her immobility within the geographical boundaries of America” (32). Furthermore, African Americans making this trip were generally doing so out of desperation - to find racial equality - and not for the (privileged) purpose of cultural tourism (Nelson 7). The opportunity that Amy has to travel - in comfort - for the sake of self-improvement and furthering her education, in reality, remained exclusive to the wealthy upper classes of American society.

For many reasons, Rome became a popular destination for (white) American women artists, cultural practitioners and tourists. By the mid-nineteenth century, a number of Anglo-American artists, writers and musicians formed a ‘Roman colony’ which made the city an even more popular destination for cultural tourists visiting Europe (Nelson 3). Nelson explains that, for neoclassicists, Rome provided access to the historical artworks and artefacts that inspired their work; cheap and skilled manual labour required for the sculpture-making process; established European sculptors who could train and mentor aspiring artists; and, additionally, access to important networks of buyers as a result of the city’s appeal to tourists (3). For white female sculptors especially, Rome provided an escape from the gender norms of America’s bourgeois society which would have limited their physical activity, social mobility and vision “in ways that effectively prohibited the professional pursuit of the cultural knowledge necessary to produce the most exalted and canonized forms of art” (Nelson 7). Along with the possibility of professional recognition, American women living in Rome were able to be more independent, have more control over their finances and living environment and, in some cases, reject heterosexuality (Nelson 7). These possibilities “were simply not

possible to the same degree in mid-nineteenth-century America” (Nelson 7) and resulted in a mythicised image of Italy for many American women (Nelson 6; Dabakis 28). Dabakis highlights that Rome was envisioned as “an enlightened center of female creative activity” (28) as some Roman institutions facilitated (elite, educated) women’s participation in artistic endeavours and “allowed women unprecedented creative authority in the literary and visual arts” (27). Perhaps the mythic image of Italy that came to occupy the minds and imaginations of many American women is reflected in Amy’s romanticised expectations of Rome and the journey on which she embarks (Alcott 358). It is important to note, however, that although Rome became an appealing location for American women artists, it was only around the 1850’s that the first women arrived to live and work there as artists - including Harriet Hosmer, Louisa Lander and Margaret Foley (Dabakis 27, 28 & 67). Furthermore, the freedom that was associated with Rome was not always as easily accessible as imagined and white women artists still faced biased judgements and attitudes as a result of their gender and sexuality (Dabakis 63). In *Little Women*, Amy makes her journey to Italy in the early 1860’s which means that, in reality, it was still rather unconventional for women to dedicate themselves to artistic careers.

In many ways, the experience of Rome was even more complex for Mary Edmonia Lewis. Having moved there in 1865, Lewis became the first black-Native to join the otherwise “white, marmorean flock” (James cited in Nelson 10) of American women artists. Nelson also emphasises that while mythic representations of Rome allowed white women the possibility to imagine new futures and opportunities for themselves as artists, “no such imaginary possibility of the black-Native female artist predated Edmonia Lewis” (6). During this time, there were “no measurable Native American communities at the time, and the few blacks present would have been mainly slaves or employees serving white households” (Nelson 8) and, because many of the American individuals living in Rome were of the middle and upper classes, blackness was often imagined “through the colonial logic of their own slaveholding and racially segregated country” (Nelson 8). This links back to Winckelmann’s (1764) earlier idealisation of whiteness and his ‘distaste’ for colour which, in many ways, laid the foundation for neoclassicism and society’s positioning of whiteness as a ‘pure’ non-colour and blackness as ‘impure’ and primitive (Nelson 62). Perhaps Rome, envisioned as the birthplace of Western civilisation, came to be closely associated with the whiteness that was

imagined to define classical sculpture (and classical bodies). The background context that social art history provides is valuable to my analysis of *Little Women* because it reveals insight into the type of cultural environment that would have, in reality, been awaiting Amy in Rome. Furthermore, it helps to illuminate the potential reasons for the artist to abandon her dream career.

Confronted with a European art world still saturated with the ‘wonders’ of male artists, Amy is led to believe that her ambition cannot exist in accordance with her identity as a ‘true’ gentlewoman. In a series of letters to her family, Amy recalls her visits to the Louvre, Kensington Museum and Hampton Court where she sees “Raphael’s Cartoons, and [...] rooms full of pictures by Turner, Lawrence, Reynolds, Hogarth, and the other great creatures” (Alcott 365). Notably, all of the ‘great creatures’ she mentions are male. In contrast to the descriptions that Amy gives of these European cities and the artworks they are home to, not much is shared about her time in Rome - even though she makes known her excitement about going there specifically, both before she leaves America and after she begins her Grand Tour. The most Amy says about Italy is when she tells Laurie later on that “Rome took all the vanity out of [her], for after seeing the wonders there, [she] felt too insignificant to live, and gave up all [her] foolish hopes in despair” (Alcott 467). It remains unknown what the aspiring artist encountered in Rome; arguably, she was confronted with- and intimidated by an art world still dominated by men, causing her to develop an ‘anxiety of authorship’. As Gilbert & Gubar explain, this refers to “an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex” (51). In other words, when Amy sees all of the famous artworks by revered (male) artists, she doubts her own abilities and realises, perhaps not even consciously, the supposed incompatibility of creative genius with her own femaleness.

Even if Amy remained committed to becoming a successful artist, she would have difficulty finding female-led artistic traditions to which she could look for guidance. As Virginia Woolf emphasises in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), it would be useless for female writers (or artists, in this context) to turn to their male contemporaries or predecessors for help because “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (91). In other words, young women need histories and legacies with which they can identify and relate, enabling them to express themselves in ways that are not determined by men. Had her art education allowed it,

Amy could have been inspired by Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757), for example, a well-known miniature portraitist who achieved success and international recognition during the 18th century. Despite her impressive career, however, Carriera has remained largely excluded from art history and the fine art canon, an omission that some scholars attribute to her preference for pastel; a technique that was not considered 'high art' in comparison to the drawings, oil paintings and sculptures produced by the (male) old masters (Oberer 14). Without the celebration of female-led artistic practices or techniques in the Western art canon, how could future generations of women envision their work or the contribution their art could make? Although it is clear by now, in the twenty-first century, that 'mothers' in the art world did exist, it seems unlikely within the nineteenth century context that Amy would have had much knowledge of them (as her male-centred art education reveals). Without 'mothers' to turn to, and very few contemporary 'sisters' pursuing professional art careers, Amy probably realises how lonely and isolating her future would be. I suggest that this is one of the reasons why the artist rather abruptly dismisses her hopes of a career - which she embraces with such seriousness and perseverance before departing for Europe - as 'foolish' and 'vain' (Alcott 298 & 358). This is a striking choice of words and I suggest that, rather than these words being her own, Amy is simply repeating the condemning phrases she has heard spoken by others (perhaps Aunt Carrol, or society at large) when they see a woman attempting to create art.

It is also possible that Amy sees firsthand the way in which women artists living and working abroad are treated as spectacles by American society, prompting her to channel her creative energy into an endeavour that is more acceptable: becoming an 'art object'. In reality, female art production was still perceived as something transgressive by Americans coming from a more traditional context; while male artists were believed to possess genius, female artists were treated more as spectacles. According to Dabakis, the Roman studios of male American sculptors were treated as sacred spaces where their genius was revealed while, by contrast, female American sculptors often noticed that "visitors to their studios examined their work environment, dress, and hairstyles more carefully than the sculpture they hoped to market" (Dabakis 63). These women continuously faced scrutiny within the expatriate community regarding their gender (judged according to their 'masculine' clothing preferences, hairstyles and behaviours); their sexuality, whether it was 'improper' (hetero)sexual conduct or homosexuality; and, in some instances, regarding the

authorship of their work (Dabakis 31, 32, 65, 67 & 78). For Amy, who wants to be a true gentlewoman and “[hopes] in time to be what [her] mother is” (Alcott 356), having her femininity and morality compromised is simply not an option. The observation that female sculptors were sometimes given as much attention as their sculptural works also reveals contemporary society’s need to read women in the same way that they read art objects (Berger 46 - 47; Dabakis 63). Perhaps Amy senses the difficulties that she would face as an artist and wishes to avoid being viewed by (male) society as, in the words of Hosmer, “an object of peculiar odium” (cited in Dabakis 84). Rather than following her dream path as an artist, it is better for Amy to assume an identity that society is more familiar with and, as a result, she chooses to embody the role of the passive art object to complement her performance of ‘ideal’ femininity (Spengler 227 - 228). By doing so, she is able to channel her creativity toward a sanctioned and desirable outcome. Amy makes a striking comment when she recalls that Rome made her feel “too insignificant to live” (Alcott 467), as though she is not deserving of (male) vitality and agency. It seems that the only option is for the young artist to ‘kill’ herself into an art object, thereby becoming the entirely selfless angel women that society expects (Gilbert & Gubar 25 & 34). This transformative process will be the core focus of my next chapter, in which I trace the shift in Amy’s identity from ‘Little Raphael’ to a ‘Junoesque’ woman.

It is also important to consider why women artists - and the female artistic gaze - were excluded from ‘male’ studio spaces, specifically in terms of the threat that they would have posed to hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal society. Just as it was acceptable for male artists and audiences to observe nude female bodies within the studio space under the pretence that nudity was not vulgar or ‘sexualised’ within the ethereal realm of art, it was also acceptable for them to look at nude male bodies without any connotation of homosexuality (Nelson 60). Homosexuality was a threat to nineteenth century patriarchal society, which relied on heteronormativity to sustain white, male privilege. It seems that the male art studio, then, functioned as a space where men could bond with other men and form relationships that were not distinctly homosexual; behaviour that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms ‘homosocial’ (Sedgwick 1). According to Sedgwick, male homosocial desire and male homosexual desire are best understood as part of a continuum - with an underlying ‘force’ or eroticism that shapes these male-to-male relationships - but, because of the homophobia

rooted in patriarchal society (since the end of the seventeenth century), the visibility of this continuum “is radically disrupted” (1, 2 & 83). Often, male homosocial relationships are built on a mutual hatred or disapproval of homosexuality, but there is the possibility that some of these outward expressions of homophobia are used to mask underlying homoerotic desires (Hammarén & Johansson 2; Sedgwick 1). Sedgwick maintains that the inclusion of a woman in a male-male bond can result in an ‘erotic triangle’, in which the woman functions as a conduit for male homoerotic desire (21; Hammarén & Johansson 4). In other words, because homosexual desire cannot be openly expressed in patriarchal society, the rivalry between the two men competing for a woman can also be understood as a covert attraction between those two men, for which the woman becomes the medium. In the context of the nineteenth century art studio, it makes sense that male artists and audiences treated female artists as spectacles - objects of fascination and sexual peculiarity - because they became the outlet for the otherwise homosocial desire between male artists / models / connoisseurs.

Ultimately, Amy’s Grand Tour reaffirms to her the limitations and exclusion that women face in the public sphere. Instead of discovering the abundance of possibilities and inspiration that she imagined to be in Rome, Amy’s time abroad reaffirms the boundaries of ‘true’ American (white) womanhood. Still, she has the opportunity to reconfigure herself and her future by following a more conventional and desirable path - a privilege available to her because of her middle class position, and her whiteness. For Amy’s black female contemporaries, overseas travel for the purpose of cultural tourism or to pursue a dream was virtually inconceivable, and simply too far-removed from the daily struggles they faced in trying to secure basic rights to freedom, education and equality in America. Unlike Amy, black women did not have the privileged opportunity to attempt different futures for themselves, or the whiteness necessary to push the boundaries of American gender norms. When Laurie asks Amy what she will do if she no longer intends to be an artist, she replies that she will “polish up [her] other talents, and be an ornament to society, if [she gets] the chance” (Alcott 467). It appears that Amy intends to exchange her proactive role as ‘artist’ for the passive, ornamental role of ‘art object’ to be displayed and admired by her future husband - and by patriarchal society in general. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this transition enables Amy to perfect her performance of femininity (and whiteness) and secure a marriage

proposal from a wealthy gentleman, thereby launching her ‘womanly’ career as a wife and, later, as a mother.

3.2. Becoming ‘Junoesque’: Amy’s Transition From ‘Artist’ to Patriarchy’s Marble ‘Objet d’Art’

In *Little Women*, the Grand Tour forms the final phase of Amy March’s feminine education, marking her transition from girlhood into ‘true’ womanhood. Through her exposure to the ‘real’ world - a public sphere dominated by (white) men - Amy is confronted with the boundaries of her own social role and gender, forcing her to reimagine herself and her future if she is to maintain her privilege in American society. In this chapter, I will argue that Amy learns everything she needs to know about society from the visual culture it produces - which the Grand Tour gives her opportunity to experience firsthand. From her travels abroad and her interest in pursuing her art career, Amy is faced with the reality that men are the producers of culture, while women are merely the products of that culture (Gubar 253). While men can be the artists, women can only be the art objects (Gubar 250). The maleness of the art world overwhelms her in Rome, and she decides to channel her creativity inwards, turning herself into something ‘ornamental’ instead (Alcott 467). In order to become an attractive and desirable object - that the (wealthy, male) Grand Tour audience will be able to read and interpret - the young woman learns to mimic the type of art that is most revered by nineteenth century society: neoclassical sculpture. I suggest that Amy appropriates a number of symbols associated with the mythological, goddess-like femininity that dominated neoclassical subject matter in order to (re-)create recognisable scenes or *tableaux vivants* for the gaze of a potential male suitor. These *tableaux*, created for Laurie specifically, position Amy as the heroine: the epitome of beauty, virtue, femininity and desirability. The two scenes that I will analyse take place while Amy is in Europe, when she encounters Laurie for the first time in Nice and, later that evening, when she accompanies him to a Christmas party (Alcott 435 & 440). I will explore the symbols that Amy uses and the visual images she constructs, identifying the ways in which she not only references, but becomes, Juno. To analyse these processes of encoding and deciphering identity, specifically in relation to gender, race and visual culture, I will return to the work of Nelson (2007), Smith (2014) and Spengler (2008). Adding to this, I will refer to Butler (1988) to discuss how Amy’s performance of femininity

is a series of imitative, repetitive acts that she has learned from society and repeats as a strategy for survival (519 & 526). While Butler argues that these constitutive acts are not intentionally performed by an individual as the result of some sort of “radical will” (522), I will argue that Amy is aware of the ‘feminine’ role that is required of her and she knowingly behaves in a way that will ensure her survival in patriarchal society. Here it will be necessary to explore the politics of the gaze and consider the extent to which Amy internalises society’s constant surveillance, regulating her identity to conform to specific norms and ideals. I will refer to Spengler’s analysis of Jean Muir, the protagonist in Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*, to support my argument that Amy does not fully internalise the male gaze but, rather, subverts and manipulates it to suit her own needs (236). Integral to Amy’s display of femininity is her display of whiteness, which she uses to attract the (heterosexual, white) male gaze of the social elite. Here, my analysis aims to contribute to Morrison’s theory that ‘Americanness’ and American literature - despite being “the preserve of white male views, genius, and power” (23) - are inherently connected to the (often silenced) presence of black people in America. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate how Amy March’s conception of identity is largely shaped by a visual culture that reflects and perpetuates the patriarchal gender and race ideologies of contemporary society.

Amy’s outward identity is not only dependent on her ability to see (and mimic) ideal ‘feminine’ behaviour, but it is also shaped by her own visibility and the effect that society’s constant surveillance has on her. Here, Michel Foucault’s (1975) work on power and the gaze is valuable for understanding how nineteenth century society became a ‘society of surveillance’, in which women were constantly watched and judged by men (as well as by other women, who reinforced patriarchal norms and expectations) (Spengler 4). Vision and surveillance became a way for Victorian society to control and regulate itself - reinforcing gender, race and class ideologies - without direct punishment or overt coercion. Instead, people regulated themselves and their own behaviour because of the constant threat that they are being watched by a powerful or authoritative gaze. According to Foucault:

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (170)

Power and control, then, are allocated to those in the position of ‘seeing’, while those ‘being seen’ experience the effects of that power by self-policing in order to avoid the possibility of punishment. In the context of *Little Women*, Amy learns that ‘true’ womanhood involves becoming “an ornament to society” (Alcott 467) - notably, something to be looked at - which requires her to internalise the demands and desires of the male gaze and self-manage her behaviour and appearance accordingly.

While Amy does position herself as the object of Laurie’s gaze, she does not cede all the power and agency to him as she intentionally manipulates what the young man sees. An example of such a scenario is when Amy, having met Laurie by chance in Nice, invites him to accompany her on a carriage ride to Castle Hill - where ruins of an old fort remain - to feed the peacocks (Alcott 435 - 438). When the young pair arrive at their destination, the scene proceeds as follows:

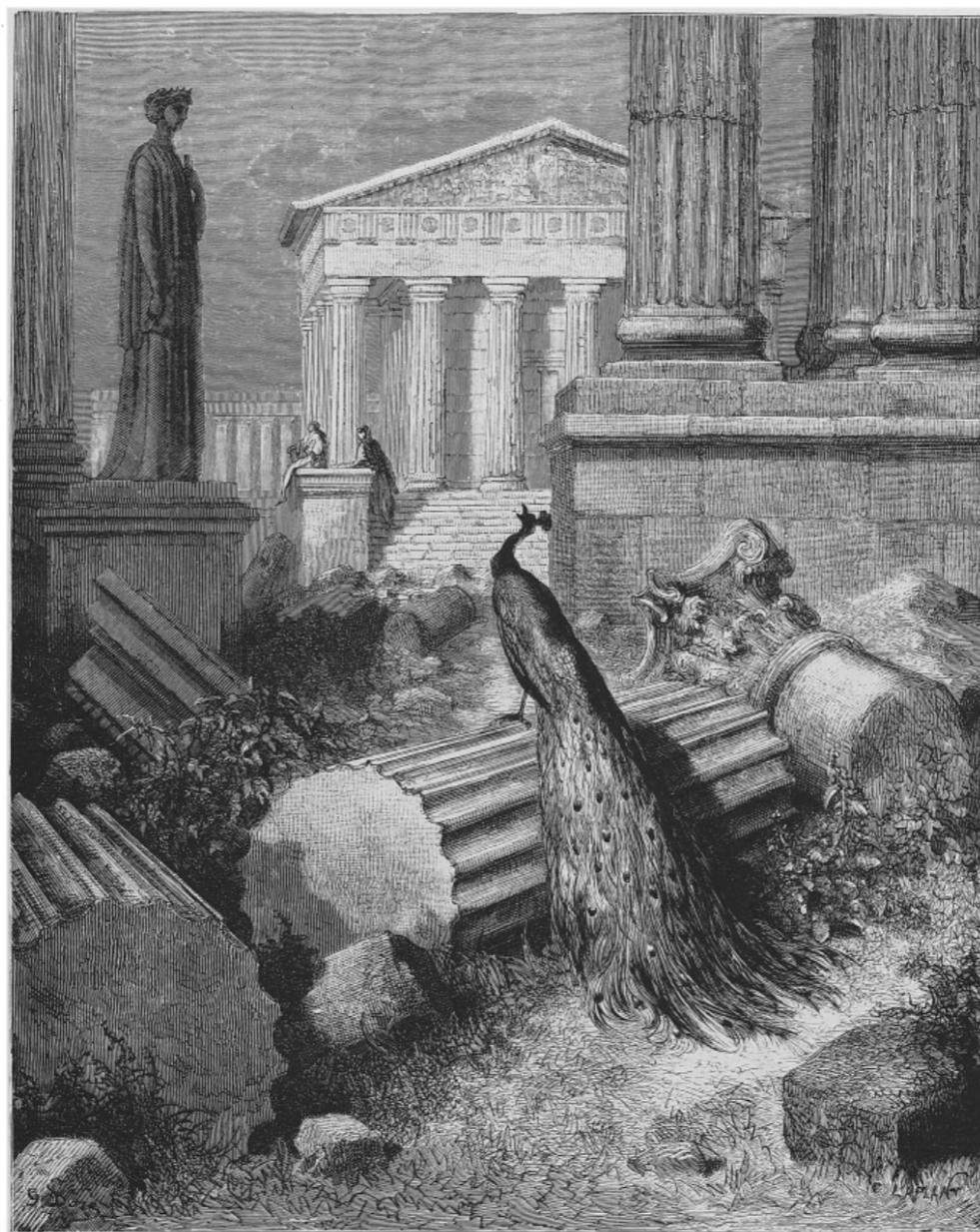
[Laurie and Amy] alighted among the ruins of the old fort and a flock of splendid peacocks came trooping about them, tamely waiting to be fed. While Amy stood laughing on the bank above him as she scattered crumbs to the brilliant birds, Laurie looked at her as she looked at him, with a natural curiosity to see what changes time and absence had wrought. He found nothing to perplex or disappoint, much to admire and approve; [...] he saw enough to satisfy and interest him, and carried away a pretty little picture of a bright-faced girl standing in the sunshine, which brought out the soft hue of her dress, the fresh color of her cheeks, the golden gloss of her hair, and made her a prominent figure in the pleasant scene. (Alcott 438)

It is interesting that Alcott includes the detail that it is not only Laurie doing the observing, but both him and Amy are caught looking at one another in the same moment. The wording “Laurie looked at her as she looked at him” (Alcott 438) is ambiguous and lends itself to two interpretations: that Amy and Laurie look at each other simultaneously; or, in the same way that Laurie desires Amy and his gaze objectifies her, Amy’s gaze directed at Laurie is potentially doing the same thing. In this way, Alcott places both Amy and Laurie in a position of power, creating an equality that, in reality, did not exist between men and women in contemporary society. It is also important to highlight that the narrative’s focalisation in the excerpt above reveals Laurie’s thoughts in the moment that he and Amy are looking at one another, leaving her thoughts unknown to the reader. What is she thinking when she sees Laurie? Does she also look at him and see ‘enough to satisfy and interest’ her and, if so, why is this kept hidden from the reader? Perhaps Amy’s thoughts are not disclosed because they would reveal a level of intention and desire that women were not supposed to have. In

addition, if the reader was made aware of Amy's plan to attract Laurie's gaze and manipulate him into falling in love with her, it would "[expose] the 'true woman' as a role to be put on at will" (Spengler 224). It would highlight the potential for women to have a 'hidden agenda' that goes beyond fulfilling the needs and desires of men which, in reality, would have caused them to be rejected by society and labelled as 'deceptive' or 'selfish'. Although Amy succeeds in appearing non-desiring and oblivious to Laurie's interest, Alcott does subvert the male gaze by alluding to the possibility that Amy has a level of power and agency as she intentionally controls how others see her. The young woman uses this power to her own benefit, attracting a wealthy (white) husband (and thus, ensuring a comfortable and financially secure future).

One of the ways in which Amy manipulates Laurie into perceiving her as a desirable woman is by adopting a visual code associated with depictions of Juno, the Roman goddess of love and marriage. By imitating the neoclassical sculptures that society idolises as the epitomes of beauty, virtue and femininity, Amy ensures that the poses and visual image she presents form a recognisable and readable 'cultural script' to the (elite) audience trained in art appreciation (Spengler 227). What is striking about the visual image that Alcott presents in the excerpt above, when Amy and Laurie visit Castle Hill, is the collection of symbols and actions that mimic the iconography that is traditionally used to depict Juno. The "pleasant scene" (Alcott 438) - which includes Amy, specifically, driving a carriage; a backdrop of hills, classical ruins and an old city in the distance; as well as a group of peacocks that attend the young maiden - makes such an impression on Laurie that he "[carries] away a pretty little picture" (Alcott 438) of it in his mind's eye. I argue, however, that the picture evoked in his mind is not a new one and that, instead of this being the formation of a new memory, it is an old, familiar image that has simply resurfaced - except now it is Amy, instead of Juno, who is the "prominent figure" (Alcott 438). Images of Juno that used this type of iconography were certainly familiar to the educated classes of America's nineteenth century society, as they were featured in literary publications (see fig. 2) and artworks (see fig. 3). Fig. 2 is an engraving by Gustave Doré, which appeared in an issue of the nineteenth century American art journal, *The Aldine* (1873), illustrating the well-known Æsop's Fable (6 BC) about Juno and the Peacock. Fig. 3 is an engraving by an anonymous artist, believed to be a copy of a work by Raphael ("Allegory of Love and Marriage" n.p.). It is important to note that the engraving is in the style of Raphael because it indicates the likelihood that Amy is familiar

with this type of mythological imagery, given the focus that her art education places on the Great Masters and their influence (Alcott 365). Amy is arguably well-aware of the visual language used to depict Roman goddesses and the iconography used to signify their virtuous traits.



THE PEACOCK COMPLAINING TO JUNO. — DORÉ.

Fig. 2. Illustration of Juno in a nineteenth century literary publication. Gustave Doré. *The Peacock Complaining to Juno*. 1873. Engraving. *The Aldine* 6.4 (1873): 83. New York: Sutton Browne & Company. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 April 2022. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/20636521>>.



Fig. 3. Juno in visual culture. Anonymous. *Allegory of Marriage and Love; Juno in a chariot drawn by peacocks at right, Venus in a chariot drawn by three doves at the left* (ca. 1540 - 60). Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *The Met. Web*. 4 April 2022. <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/396177>>.

Besides making visible the connection between herself and the social ideals of beauty and marriage, Amy's reference to Juno can also be read as an allegory of 'true' femininity. Often valued for their moral lessons, Æsop's Fables - a famous collection of stories dating back to ancient Greece, written by the eponymous storyteller - includes a story centred around an interaction between Juno and her favourite bird, the peacock. In this story, the peacock complains to the goddess that the nightingale has a superior voice and that, despite its beautiful appearance, the peacock is laughed at whenever it makes a sound (Æsop 83). To this, Juno responds by saying that each creature is given its gift by fate, and this should not be questioned (Æsop 83). Every person, in other words, should be happy with the qualities that they already possess and it is absurd "to see people tormenting themselves for that which it is impossible ever to obtain" (Æsop 83). Because Amy March seems to 'become' Juno in *Little*

Women, she too must heed the advice that the goddess gives to the peacock. Just as the colourful creature desires to possess the voice of the nightingale in addition to his beauty, Amy desires to possess artistic talent which, because she was not born a male, she is not destined to have. Instead, Amy must be content with being an object of vision - like the peacock - and she must accept that her physical beauty, and how she appears to others, is what will determine her worth in society. In fig. 2, the statue of Juno is elevated above the peacock with the bird looking up at her, conveying her position of power and authority in relation to the animal. In this elevated position however, Juno's visibility is also increased and she can be seen from many different angles; an object of vision to be admired by spectators. In many ways, nineteenth century society placed 'ideal' women on "a pedestal that did not only signify veneration, but also a heightened degree of visibility and social demands" (Spengler 4). Alcott seems to use the didactic nature of the fable to support the teachings of her own novel which, at least on a surface level, aims to educate young girls about becoming (visibly) 'proper' women.

Amy learns that, in order to secure a comfortable and financially stable future, she must use her artistic skills to make herself visible and desirable to the male gaze. When Amy is getting ready to attend a Christmas ball - to which she will be escorted by Laurie - she becomes aware of "a very natural desire to find favor in his sight" (Alcott 439) and proceeds to make the most of her good features "with the taste and skill which is a fortune to a poor and pretty woman" (Alcott 439). It is interesting that, even though Amy presumably wants Laurie, her desire and sexuality can only be described in passive terms; she cannot appear to desire him, she can only want to appear desirable to him. It is only Laurie who - as a male - is granted the active role of the 'desiring'. In addition, Amy's 'natural' desire for Laurie assumes that female desire is naturally directed towards men which, by extension, assumes that heterosexuality is 'natural' while homosexuality or bisexuality is 'unnatural'. This is because, as discussed in Chapter 2.1, patriarchal society relies on heterosexually-based systems of marriage and sexual reproduction to ensure its survival (Butler 524). From the quotes above, it also becomes apparent that Amy uses her artistic taste and skill to emphasise her good looks and make herself desirable to men, which Alcott describes as a 'fortune' for poor women. This means that Amy is 'lucky' enough to be able to use her beauty to her advantage (by attracting a marriage proposal from a wealthy man), while 'less attractive' women do not have this

opportunity. In the same scene mentioned above, when Amy is getting ready for the Christmas ball, Alcott writes:

It must be confessed that the artist sometimes got possession of the woman, and indulged in antique *coiffures*, statuesque attitudes, and classic draperies. [...] ‘I do want [Laurie] to think I look well, and tell them so at home,’ said Amy to herself, as she put on Flo’s old white silk ball dress, and covered it with a cloud of fresh illusion, out of which her white shoulders and golden head emerged with a most artistic effect. (439)

What is particularly interesting here is the type of ‘statuesque’ appearance - including hairstyle, clothing and comportment - that Amy purposefully chooses to create for herself. Why does the young woman, in an effort to make herself attractive to a contemporary audience, style herself with “antique coiffures” (Alcott 439) and “classic draperies” (Alcott 439) even though “it’s not the fashion” (Alcott 440)? What is the image that she is trying to (re-)create with “artistic effect” (Alcott 439)? My analysis of Amy’s second *tableau* will answer these questions, arguing that she models her appearance according to the ideals that are perpetuated through society’s visual culture - more specifically, the neoclassical sculpture that she is surrounded by in Europe.

In the second *tableau* that she constructs, Amy encodes the type of idealised femininity depicted in neoclassical sculpture to make her identity as a ‘true’ woman recognisable and desirable to the Grand Tour audience. Once Amy has draped herself in a white silk dress; styled her hair into “a Hebe-like knot” (Alcott 440); and framed her “white shoulders in delicate green vines” (Alcott 440), she goes to the saloon to wait for Laurie’s arrival. Although she is pleased with the way that she looks, Amy “[surveys] herself with a critical eye” (Alcott 440) and concludes that she would be entirely content if only she could have “a classical nose and mouth” (Alcott 440). Here, it is important to note Amy’s assumption that classical facial features would make her more desirable and, conversely, that the absence of these features constitutes an “affliction” (Alcott 440) for her. I will return to this theme later on in this chapter, specifically in relation to the use of racial signifiers to emphasise (or compromise) whiteness. Another important point to highlight is the way in which the young woman takes on the role of both the ‘surveyor’ (of herself) and the soon-to-be ‘surveyed’. I argue that, because Amy wants Laurie to perceive her as desirable, she constructs a particular type of visual scene in the saloon to help her achieve this purpose. Alcott writes:

In spite of this affliction, [Amy] looked unusually gay and graceful as she glided away; she seldom ran, - it did not suit her style, she thought, - for, being tall, the stately and Junoesque was more appropriate than the sportive or piquant. She walked up and down the long saloon while waiting for Laurie, and once arranged herself under the chandelier, which had a good effect upon her hair; then she thought better of it, and went away to the other end of the room, - as if ashamed of the girlish desire to have the first view a propitious one. It so happened that she could not have done a better thing, for Laurie came in so quietly she did not hear him; and, as she stood at the distant window with her head half turned, and one hand gathering up her dress, the slender, white figure against the red curtains was as effective as a well-placed statue. (440)

What is particularly interesting here is that the comparison of Amy to Juno is not expressed in abstract terms but, rather, it manifests in a distinctly physical and visual way - as though Amy quite literally becomes the 'Junoesque' marble figure often depicted by (neo)classical artists. The young woman controls her movement and body posture to mimic "a well-placed statue" (Alcott 440), even going so far as to position herself in the best possible lighting with red curtains as a complimentary backdrop - as though she, too, is on display in a museum or gallery. By embodying a specifically sculptural version of Juno, Amy ensures that her performance of goddess-like femininity is visible, readable and familiar to Laurie - an educated, upper class gentleman trained in appreciating art and culture. An example of one of these statues can be seen in fig. 4, a neoclassical sculpture by Joseph Nollekens (1770 - 1844) entitled *Juno* (1776). By comparing the young woman specifically to Juno, Alcott creates a connection between Amy and the traits usually associated with the goddess: fertility and marriage. Perhaps Alcott does not compare Amy to Venus (the Roman goddess of love and pleasure), for example, because love and pleasure require a level of agency that 'true' women were not permitted to possess. A woman could get married and have children without having to fall in love or experience any sort of pleasure; it was within a man's power to choose the wife that he wanted, and her role was to sexually please him (and thereby conceive his child). By creating this *tableau* of a gallery scene, Amy invites Laurie to look at her and she communicates with him, on a visual level, that she is an exemplary 'true' woman and, likewise, that she would make an exemplary wife and mother.

In Amy's second *tableau* performance, there emerges a subtle but significant power dynamic between her and Laurie. Although Amy is presented as the innocent and unknowing object of Laurie's secret gaze, her agency cannot be doubted as she purposefully positions

herself - with meticulous attention to detail - in such a way that gives him the perfect vantage point for looking at her (Alcott 440). By turning herself into the visibly passive and inanimate “*objet d’art* patriarchal aesthetics want a girl to be” (Gilbert & Gubar 40), Amy transfers the agency to Laurie - giving him a sense of power and control over the scene (and her) by facilitating his role as the voyeur. By giving the impression that she is unaware of Laurie’s arrival, with her head half turned as she presumably stares out the distant window, Amy also makes sure that her passivity and morality are not compromised. What would Laurie think of her if, for example, he walked into the room to find her watching the door expectantly? Perhaps an overt display of excitement on her part would make him doubt her morality and virtue, because ‘true’ women are not meant to actively desire men.

Additionally, as with many representations of women in art, there could be a sexual undertone to this scene that contributes to Laurie’s empowered spectator position. Referring to the average European oil painting of the female nude, John Berger writes “[...] the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of him being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity” (54). This is relevant to my analysis of Amy’s *tableau* because she is the only participating figure in the scene while Laurie remains removed from it, specifically as the subject of the gaze. It is also true that Amy’s display - her appearance, her pose, her very presence - is a result of her knowing that Laurie will be there, looking at her. While Amy’s dress is described, implying that she is fully clothed, it is interesting that the neoclassical sculptures that she imitates often feature nude or partially exposed female bodies. While it would be detrimental to a woman’s reputation to expose herself to a man, there is the argument that a woman’s ‘indecenty’ becomes acceptable when it is presented within the realm of art, especially in the form of white marble (Nelson 65). As Nelson explains, it is the whiteness and ‘purity’ of marble sculpture that transforms the female nude into something spiritual, aesthetic and allegorical, while flesh tones would make the body too ‘real’ and immoral to be seen by viewers (65). It is intriguing that Amy does not just imitate an ‘ideal’ woman (a living queen, for example) but she, specifically, imitates a marble representation of a woman. Perhaps by translating herself into a sculptural art form, Amy is allowed to reveal parts of herself (and her body) that would otherwise be forbidden. Indeed, in the excerpt above, Amy is said to have “one hand gathering up her

dress” (Alcott 440) while she is ‘unaware’ that Laurie is watching her. Is she exposing her leg for him to see? How much of herself does she reveal to him? As seen in fig. 4, Nolleken’s Juno stands in the same type of pose, as though caught in the moment of covering herself up, but there is also the possibility that she is about to drop the fabric she is holding and reveal part of her body. In a way, this very possibility creates a moment of erotic suspense for the viewer, even without the female body being fully exposed. Rather it is the possibility of exposure that could be alluring, which is perhaps what Laurie experiences when looking at Amy’s ‘statuesque’ pose. The “red curtains” (Alcott 440) contribute to the scene’s sense of intimacy, as though Amy is unveiling herself exclusively to Laurie whilst remaining shielded from the outside world (and the gazes of other men). The red colour also contrasts the ‘purity’ and whiteness of Amy’s skin and dress, creating a visual energy or tension between her vulnerability (or virginity) and Laurie’s desire.



Fig. 4. Neoclassical sculpture of Juno. Joseph Nollekens. *Juno*. 1776. Marble sculpture. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. *Getty Museum*. Web. 4 April 2022. <<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/1159/joseph-nollekens-juno-english-1776/>>.

Because he is able to interpret the *tableaux* successfully, Laurie understands Amy's performance of 'true' femininity and recognises her as an ideal choice for marriage. When Laurie sees Amy in the saloon, he looks at her with satisfaction and greets her by saying "Good evening, Diana!" (Alcott 440). Amy returns Laurie's greeting by calling him "Apollo" (Alcott 440), thereby giving him god-like status and reaffirming his position as her divine counterpart. While he does not call her Juno, he does recognise the goddess-type appearance that she has constructed for herself and, in this way, he has successfully read her performance. There is the possibility that Laurie refers to Amy as 'Diana' because there is some overlap in the divine responsibilities that Juno (specifically as Juno Lucina) and Diana have over childbirth (Glinister 47; Varro cited in Glinister 49; White 62 & 88). It is specifically Diana, however, who symbolises chastity and so perhaps this interchanging of names takes place to allude to Amy's virginity (which the imagery relating to Juno might otherwise leave ambiguous) (Glinister 47). It is also significant that it is specifically Laurie who refers to Amy as 'Diana', because it reveals his assumption or expectation that she is a virgin (and therefore suitable for marriage). There is also the interpretation that it is not relevant for Laurie to know the exact goddess that Amy is imitating because all that matters is that she embodies the mythological femininity that is generic to neoclassical sculpture (and is deemed most desirable to society). Arguably, the same can be said about the identities of women in general - they are not admired as individuals or for their unique personalities but, rather, for their ability to conform to a homogenised ideal of 'true' woman and to be entirely selfless. What is important to emphasise here is this need for imitation and repetition in the construction of a gendered identity, which Butler aptly calls "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (519). The visual elements that Amy uses to construct her identity as a woman adhere to a predetermined cultural script that Laurie is able to recognise precisely because it is not original, and because he is skilled in studying its depictions in visual culture (Butler 526; Spengler 227). By re-enacting an artistic scene that is already familiar to Laurie, Amy ensures that, whenever he tries to imagine a heroine or a muse, his memory will produce her own image "with the most obliging readiness" (Alcott 485 - 486). It is no surprise, then, that Laurie later returns to Nice to propose to Amy, the 'goddess' who remains immortalised in his mind. It must be added that, with this mental image, there is also an element of lifelessness as Amy is 'frozen' in Laurie's mind as the epitome of a 'true' woman.

By using her visual appearance to manipulate the way in which others perceive her, Amy's performance of femininity is more accurately read as an 'illusion' than 'natural' or 'god-given'. There is a moment in *Little Women* when Laurie points to Amy's dress and asks what the fabric is called, following which Amy replies that it is "illusion" (Alcott 445). There seems to be some word play at work here because, while tulle is also known as 'illusion', the word could imply that Amy is using her appearance to 'trick' Laurie into perceiving her in a certain way. The young man continues the discussion about Amy's dress and asks her if it is new, to which she replies "it's as old as the hills; you have seen it on dozens of girls, and you never found out that it was pretty until now - *stupid!*" (Alcott 445). Is Amy still talking about the dress here, or is she talking about the illusion of femininity that girls have been forced, for generations, to adopt and re-create? When Laurie nervously asks her where she learnt "this sort of thing" (Alcott 445) - referring to "the general air, the style, the self- possession, the - the - illusion" (Alcott 445) - Amy replies that "foreign life polishes one in spite of one's self; [she studies] as well as [plays] [...]" (Alcott 445). In other words, Amy's trip abroad has allowed her the opportunity to study her social role and learn what is expected of 'true' gentlewomen. By saying that she 'plays' as well as studies, she also seems to hint to the agency that she has in playing with her image, allowing her to construct the illusion of "an abiding gendered self" (Butler 519) that society expects to see. Because these changes happen "in spite of [herself]" (Alcott 445), it is revealed that Amy's 'polished' appearance does not align with her own sense of self and that, more so, she has had to make sacrifices to her own wants and needs in order to assume this new identity.

Amy learns, from a young age, that her identity as a 'true' woman will also depend on her display of whiteness. In the scenes mentioned above, it is striking how many times whiteness is mentioned in the text with regard to Amy's skin as well as her clothing and surroundings. When Amy becomes 'Juno-esque' and presents herself to Laurie as the epitome of heavenly beauty and femininity, she wears white silk slippers and white gloves, which match her white shoulders and "slender white figure" (Alcott 440 & 445). It appears that more than just encoding her gender, Amy makes a conscious effort to encode her race. With reference to nineteenth century visual culture, Smith explains that "antebellum images of middle-class gender were transformed into representations of white middle-class racial superiority over the course of the late nineteenth century" (9). Influenced by the growing

contemporary discourses surrounding biological racism and the threat of miscegenation, middle class privilege came to depend upon the preservation of whiteness (Smith 9). In many ways, Amy's maturation into womanhood is marked by her shift from a socially transgressive, ambitious (and symbolically black) child into an archetypal, conforming (stereotypically white) gentlewoman. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Alcott presents an image of Amy as a symbolically black baby, having been dropped into a coal-hod which, according to her, flattened her nose forever (Alcott 47). It is as though Amy learns, from childhood, that her growth into (middle class) womanhood necessitates the cultivation of not only a visibly gendered self, but also an emphatically white self.

By imitating neoclassical sculpture, Amy inscribes onto her body the same racial ideology that white marble came to symbolise in the nineteenth century. As discussed in previous chapters, Nelson argues that white marble - which became the preferred medium for neoclassical artists - "was a conscious ideological choice rather than a casual, random happenstance" (59). Furthermore, Nelson suggests that the "insistence on the whiteness of marble in sculptural practice is also a colonial insistence on the universality of the white body and skin as the aesthetic paradigm of beauty and morality in art" (62). These observations add an important layer to my analysis of Amy March's identity as a grown woman because they help me to pinpoint the ways in her imitation of neoclassical sculpture encodes race into her performance of gender. It is worth noting that Amy attracts a "propitious" (Alcott 440) (white) male gaze only when she transforms into the 'statuesque' art object, suggesting that she is most beautiful when her whiteness is on display and that her performance of white femininity is what allows her to attract the attention of wealthy (white) men. In this way, it is also made clear who Amy is (or is not) available to, as contemporary society asserted that interracial marriage and reproduction would weaken the cultural power of the middle- and upper (white) classes (Smith 160). As exemplified in neoclassical sculpture, white women were viewed as the most desirable and the most moral, suiting the ideology of patriarchal society which "depended on the purity of white women as bearers of bloodlines and distributors of [...] racial character" (Smith 148). This 'purity' relates not only to race but also to sexual purity, as a 'true' woman was expected to remain a virgin until marriage and, once married to a (white) gentleman, she was expected to bear his (and only his) children, thereby helping to preserve white superiority (which was seen to be at risk following the abolition of slavery).

In some ways, Amy's display of- and attraction to whiteness is subverted in *Little Women*. Although the young woman is presented as the epitome of beauty and morality - the perfect object to be possessed by a white gentleman - her 'pristine' whiteness is arguably subverted by her symbolic blackness, as signalled by her nose and mouth. Amy wishes that she could have a classical mouth and nose - because her own is "rather flat" (Alcott 47) - which, conversely, implies that her features are distinctly 'non-classical' or, as I argue, 'non-white'. I draw this conclusion because, as Nelson points out, "the term *classical* is not neutral. It does not refer merely to examples of Greek and Roman antiquities. Rather, *classical* is a colonial term that privileged a white racial corporeal ideal" (xxxix). As discussed in an earlier chapter, Amy's facial features function as racial signifiers that symbolically associate Amy with blackness - an imagined meaning that she anxiously wishes to conceal (Alcott 47 & 440). Interestingly, these features do not explicitly pose a problem for anyone but herself in the novel, and Amy proceeds to become a beautiful (and visibly white) woman who marries an 'ideal' white husband. Does this mean that Amy is able to deceive those around her by veiling her symbolic blackness with an overt display of whiteness? If so, how does this destabilise society's imagined connection between racialized and gendered interiorities and external appearances? Arguably, Amy uses her artistic skill and agency to perform a desirable type of femininity that suits society's expectations, but her outward appearance does not correlate to her inner self. In order to survive and maintain her privilege, Amy knows what kind of image she needs to portray and she "exploits the cultural analogy between visual objectification and female gender to her own benefit" (Spengler 224). Ultimately, the young artist manipulates her outer appearance to mask an inner self that would otherwise be considered too transgressive for society.

Another way in which Amy subtly challenges her role as an 'ideal' (white) woman is through her ambiguous preference for 'darker' men. When Amy writes a letter to her family and mentions Fred Vaughn - a young Englishman who potentially has a romantic interest in her - she says that "[she wishes] Fred was dark, for [she doesn't] fancy light men" (Alcott 367). She goes on to say that, because the Vaughns are rich and come from an excellent family, she will try to ignore Fred's fair skin and yellow hair (Alcott 367). From this, it seems that Amy is willing to set aside her own personal tastes and preferences for the sake of the wealth and status that someone like Fred could provide her through marriage. Furthermore, in

reality, it would not have been possible for someone like Amy to marry a ‘dark’ man and remain an accepted member of society because the dominance of the middle class depended upon its preservation of whiteness. If Amy goes against this, there is no doubt that she would be ostracised from society. It is interesting, however, that she expresses her preference for ‘dark’ men because, early in the novel, Alcott describes Laurie as distinctly dark. Even though Laurie is white (with Italian-American lineage) and Amy comments on his “soft and white hands” (Alcott 470) as well as the satisfaction she gets from his “well-cut” (Alcott 528) nose, he is first depicted as having “curly black hair, brown skin, big black eyes [...]” (Alcott 35). Perhaps, like Amy, Laurie’s whiteness becomes more visible as he gets older, as part of his performance of upper class masculinity. Despite being presented as the archetypes of (white) masculinity and femininity, Laurie and Amy seem to have a sort of symbolic blackness that Alcott reveals but also cloaks in whiteness, as if to make the characters and their relationship more palatable and acceptable to contemporary readers. Perhaps by presenting Laurie and Amy as ‘ideal’ and moral characters, alongside their affinities with blackness, Alcott is reaffirming abolitionism and the viability of a multiracial and multicultural society.

A few times in *Little Women*, Alcott subtly hints to the possibility of a racially integrated American society. Towards the end of the novel, Jo marries Friedrich ‘Fritz’ Bhaer - a German professor - with whom she opens “a school for little lads - a good, happy, home-like school, with [her] to take care of them, and Fritz to teach them” (Alcott 556). Jo makes a point of saying that she will admit rich children to her school, as well as “a ragamuffin or two, just for a relish” (Alcott 557). While she does seem sympathetic to poor children and she wants to do what she can to help them, it is important to question why it would be ‘a relish’ to admit poor boys, and for whom would this be entertaining. While it comes across as condescending, as though Jo does not take poor children as seriously as she does rich children, a more likely interpretation is that Jo would enjoy the reaction that she gets from outsiders when they discover that her school is not exclusive to any particular class and, as I will discuss next, any particular race. With this brief comment, Alcott seems to reveal that Jo’s attitudes are quite progressive in comparison to the dominant views of society. Alcott writes that Jo and Professor Bhaer’s school had “slow boys and bashful boys, feeble boys and riotous boys, boys that lisped and boys that stuttered, one or two lame ones” (Alcott 560) as well as “a merry little quadron, who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was welcome to the ‘Bhaer-

garten', though some people predicted that his admission would ruin the school" (Alcott 560). In addition to accepting students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Jo's school accepts mixed race children as well as those with physical or mobility disabilities. It is striking that even the admission of a 'quadroon' (an out-dated and racist term that refers to a child with one black grandparent) is almost unimaginable, with the potential to 'ruin the school'. What would happen to Jo and her school if she accepted a black student? Even though Alcott depicts a happy, progressive school environment that includes a diverse group of students, this type of environment did not actually exist. As Sands-O'Connor emphasises, the fictional school that Alcott describes in *Little Women* was certainly not based on reality because, "when Alcott's father really admitted African-American Susan Robinson to his Temple School in the 1830's, the other pupils left. The Alcotts were forced to close the school and leave Boston" (37). Although the author indirectly alludes to the importance of abolitionism and inclusivity in her novel, Alcott is by no means direct with her critique of racism because "her publisher disapproved of novels containing abolitionist and reformist sentiment" (Sands-O'Connor 37). The subtle references that Alcott does make appear most frequently in the second half of the novel and, as Sands-O'Connor explains, this is because the author became more brazen and confident following the financial success of the first half of the novel - which was published earlier (37). In many ways, Alcott's characters reflect and perpetuate the ideological underpinnings of nineteenth century society but, at the same time, the author subverts these attitudes and behaviours by revealing the constructedness of identity and by hinting to new ways of imagining gender, race and class.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to some of the key theories and methodologies in the fields of gender, visual culture and literary studies to demonstrate how the 'true' womanhood that Louisa May Alcott presents in *Little Women* (1868-69) is more accurately described as a type of middle class, white American womanhood. An intertextual approach has enabled me to analyse the novel in relation to other contemporary texts, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852); popular discourse surrounding biological racism; neoclassical sculpture as well as other forms of visual culture. This has, in many ways,

enriched my discussion of the gender, race and class ideals embedded in Alcott's novel and has allowed me to interrogate the almost entirely silent presence of blackness in *Little Women*, which is striking given that the novel is set during the Civil War period when racial tension pervaded American society. Some of the central questions that my thesis has aimed to answer are: How is Amy March's identity as a 'true' (white) woman influenced by the (silent) presence of blackness? What roles do the novel's references to nineteenth century visual culture play in reflecting and perpetuating these gender and race ideals? As mentioned in the first chapter, the scope of this investigation was largely inspired by Toni Morrison and her critique of the widely-held assumption that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States" (22 - 23). My goal, then, has been to reveal how Amy's identity and, more broadly, the (white) middle class femininity that she performs is inherently influenced by the presence of blackness and slavery in mid-nineteenth century American society. With this, I have sought to underscore the oppression that Amy faces based on her femaleness, while highlighting the ways in which she is privileged as a result of her whiteness and how this contributes to an experience of womanhood that, in many ways, Alcott presents as universal.

As my thesis has outlined, Amy is indoctrinated with beliefs regarding how a 'true' woman should look and behave as part of her domestic education, both at home and at school. Marmee instils in her daughters principles and boundaries regarding sexuality, heteronormativity, and femininity; ultimately teaching Amy and her sisters what is expected of a (white) gentlewoman in society. At the same time, Marmee teaches her daughters about masculinity and the type of qualities that a 'good' (white) man should have, equipping Amy with the knowledge needed to find a 'good' husband and subsequently bear his children (as this is what her identity as a 'true' woman depends upon). To visibly reaffirm her gender and social position, and thereby align herself with the privileged middle class, Amy learns to use specific external markers that include "refined ways of speaking" (Alcott 8); "elegant manners" (Alcott 298), "stately" (Alcott 440) comportment and other demonstrations of 'taste'. In addition to these performative signifiers of femininity and class, I have argued that Amy also strives to visibly emphasise her whiteness when she wants to attract the attention of

a wealthy (white) male suitor, which she does by imitating the appearance and posture of neoclassical sculpture.

To interrogate fully the recurring imagery and symbolism that Alcott uses relating to classical mythology and whiteness, insight into contemporary visual culture and its ideological underpinnings has been paramount. Amy's enactment of neoclassical sculpture is also significant because, as Charmaine Nelson (2007) argues, the neoclassical artists' preference for white marble "was a conscious ideological choice" (59) that presented the white body as the most beautiful, moral and 'pure' (62). Aided by the work of these authors, as well as the work of Courtney Mohler (2009), Birgit Spengler (2008) and Shawn Michelle Smith (1999), my thesis has explored how various gender, race and class ideals of the nineteenth century are embedded in the novel's representations of visual culture, ranging from the high art that Amy idolises to the everyday clothes and objects that she uses. A preoccupation with whiteness arose in the nineteenth century society when a number of factors contributed to racial tension in America, including the abolition of slavery and the perceived threat that miscegenation or 'mixed breeding' would pose to the dominant (white) middle and upper classes (Heneghan 10; Smith 9). While black men and women were marked as racialised 'Others' in contemporary society, "whiteness was not accorded the value of a color but was situated as a universal category, a starting point that could be departed from" (Nelson 62). Because of this, the outward appearance of a privileged individual depended as much upon their reassertion of whiteness as it did their performance of ideal femininity or masculinity. I have suggested that, in *Little Women*, Amy develops ongoing anxiety as she believes that a childhood accident caused her whiteness to be compromised. Using intertextual and sociohistorical approaches, I referred to the work of George Robins Gliddon & Josiah Clark Nott (1854) and Francis Galton (1869) to show how Amy's particularly 'flat' nose - which apparently only became flat when Jo dropped her into a coal-hod - can be interpreted as a signifier of blackness. It is this racial signifier that causes Amy to believe that her outward appearance potentially contradicts her identity as a 'true' (white) woman and, because she is worried that it will affect the way that others will view her as well as her ability to attract a desirable husband, she repeatedly expresses discontent about her nose. In this way, the exaggeration of Amy's whiteness in Alcott's text is inherently influenced by the threat of blackness, or the "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (23) to which Morrison refers.

The young woman learns how to emphasise her whiteness, often looking to contemporary visual culture and its representations of classical women for inspiration.

My thesis has also explored how Amy's transition from 'girl' to 'woman' coincides with her transition from the role of 'artist' to 'artwork'. One of my key arguments is that the young artist's determination and agency, which she possesses as a child, diminishes as she grows older and she ultimately becomes a passive and restrained adult woman. There are many possible reasons for Amy's loss of ambition, including her 'anxiety of authorship' - an anxiety caused by the supposed lack of female predecessors with whom she can identify - as well as the realisation of the type of life that awaits her (and the sacrifices she would have to make) if she commits to becoming a professional artist (Gilbert & Gubar 51). In my thesis, I have identified a number of nineteenth century American women artists - including Margaret Foley, Harriet Hosmer, Louise Lander and Mary Edmonia Lewis - who, despite being recognised today, remained excluded from- and largely unacknowledged by art curricula and the male-dominated 'high art' canon during their time. I also highlighted the difficulties that these women faced in terms of not being taken seriously as artists; being treated as spectacles; having assumptions made about their sexuality and gender as they pursued careers in the 'male' work sphere; and, in the case of Lewis, also facing racist discrimination (Dabakis 31, 32, 63 - 67 & 78; Nelson 17). Amy learns that the most effective way to secure a financially stable future and maintain her position as a 'true' woman in society is to direct her artistic skill inward and craft her appearance into a desirable object of the male gaze (Gubar 255 & 256). To do this, she relies on the imagery of women that contemporary visual culture prescribes as most 'beautiful' and attractive: the female figures of ancient Roman mythology, because nineteenth century society looked to classical civilisation as the paradigm of genius and beauty (Smith 127; Winckelmann 381). By re-enacting visual scenes that are familiar to the educated classes and by adopting the appearance of a (white) marble neoclassical sculpture, Amy attempts to become the epitome of beauty, virtue and femininity that her society idolises; ultimately turning herself into "an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy's marble 'opus' " (Gilbert & Gubar 41). As she gets older, Amy's sense of purpose shifts from creating works of art that will be admired, to becoming the work of art that patriarchal society will admire.

To maintain her cultural privilege, Amy performs a ‘Juno-esque’ femininity that is recognisable to the Grand Tour audience and, in doing so, she is able to attract the gaze of an educated and cultivated man. By indexing herself as Juno, the Roman goddess of love and marriage, Amy ensures that the (male) art audience trained in interpreting neoclassical sculpture will recognise her as an ‘ideal’ female figure and perceive her as an object of desire. Amy ‘finds her match’ and attracts the attention of Laurie, an upper class young man whom she interprets as ‘Apollo-esque’, and, once she receives a marriage proposal from him, she is able to complete her journey into ‘true’ womanhood (Alcott 440). Through her marriage to Laurie, the young woman secures her privileged position in society. By referring to Butler, I underscored the performativity of Amy’s identity and emphasised the various ways in which her “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519). The Grand Tour forms such an important part of the girl’s initiation into womanhood because it is in Europe (the ‘source’ of classical femininity) that she learns and perfects the idealised gestures, movements and enactments that disseminate through Western visual culture and allow her to succeed in her ‘feminine’ duties.

While Amy envisions her trip to Europe as an opportunity to further her training and refine her talent as an artist, the journey does not go as she had imagined: the young woman returns to America as a wife, and without the intention of pursuing a professional career. The older women in the March family, including Marmee, Aunt March and Aunt Carrol, are more accurate in their estimations of what the Grand Tour will provide for Amy and, based on the experience that age has brought them, they understand the trip to be a sort of “finishing gloss for the [...] future matriarch of the home” (Beatty 4). Ultimately, the expectation is for Amy to return home as an engaged or married woman, prepared for the domestic life that lies ahead of her.

My thesis also suggested that Amy is given the opportunity to go to Europe because Jo is not ‘ladylike’ enough, making the youngest sister the most ‘marketable’ to the wealthy bachelors abroad. With Meg already married, the only other sister who could possibly take Amy’s place is Beth but it seems that this type of departure from the domestic sphere would be too transgressive for her. In many ways, Beth is the quintessential ‘angel of the home’; she is saint-like, fragile and selfless - so much so that she succumbs to a fatal illness and, never leaving the domestic sphere, she “surrenders herself to heaven” (Gilbert and Gubar 25). As

Gilbert and Gubar point out, “to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (25). While both Amy and Beth are exemplary ‘true’ women, perhaps it is only the younger sister who is able to survive the role precisely because she challenges it (however briefly) and finds a way to empower herself. It appears that Alcott ‘rewards’ the girl who pushes the boundaries of ‘ideal’ womanhood and departs from the domestic sphere, hinting towards the possibility of an adapted and redefined ‘ideal’ femininity which indeed emerged towards the end of the century (Theriot 114). Even though the novel alludes to this possibility, it still reaffirms the limitations that remain for (white, middle class) women in the ‘real world’.

The transatlantic journey to Europe plays a significant role in educating Amy about her role as a ‘woman’ and the boundaries associated with ‘true’ femininity because, while she is abroad, she witnesses firsthand the way that society treats women who transgress society’s expectations. Although there were a few American women artists living and working in Rome where it was imagined to be more liberal and welcoming to female professionals, the realities they faced were very different to the romanticised stories that circulated back home in America and, furthermore, they were only able to challenge traditional gender norms because of the privileged positions they held in society as middle class white women (Lewis was the only exception). As Linda Nochlin argues, the women who were able to become working artists needed to have the financial means to do so, with either artist fathers or a male artist friend who could help them and introduce them to valuable networks of buyers and patrons (46). Although women did not have the same access to artistic training and education as men did, some privileged (white) women were fortunate enough to obtain their own materials and resources, and develop their skills (either themselves or with a mentor) (Dabakis 22 - 26). This was not as feasible for black women in America as many were still enslaved, working as indentured servants, subjected to institutional racism, or lacked the financial means to further their education (Webster 17). Even for Mary Edmonia Lewis, the opportunity to live and work in Rome depended upon the financial support of her brother and abolitionist patrons (Buick 4, 5 & 7). The transatlantic passage that Amy makes also remained, in reality, exclusive to wealthy, white passengers. Black passengers who could afford the trip still faced racial segregation on board and were subjected to poor conditions and maltreatment (Nelson 32). In many ways, Alcott presents Amy’s journey as sort of anti-Middle-Passage; a romanticised, idyllic journey that was actually only available to women of her race and class. While

enslaved black women were forcibly being shipped across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas, privileged women were traveling in luxury from America to Europe for the sake of leisure and cultural refinement - reaffirming their class and whiteness. Although Amy returns home and assumes the 'womanly' role that is expected of her, the fact that she is able to imagine an alternative future for herself and travel across the globe for the purpose of her own enrichment is indeed a privilege that Alcott's novel seems to present as 'normal'.

The aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate how canonical texts can be approached differently using innovative interdisciplinary and intersectional perspectives. By combining the theories and methodologies from multiple fields of study, I have sought to reveal a number of covert meanings in *Little Women* that contribute to new understandings of the novel as well as the cultural context in which it was born. An analysis that focuses on the relationship between race, gender, class and visual culture in Alcott's text reveals how 'ideal' women in nineteenth century America needed to adapt to a number of societal expectations in order to ensure their own cultural survival. Beyond meeting the patriarchal requirements relating to gender and sexuality (including heteronormativity, monogamy, marriage and motherhood), women needed to behave in a distinctly middle- or upper class manner in order to be considered desirable to wealthy (white) men and succeed in their 'feminine' duties. They also needed to assert their whiteness to show that they are able to produce 'pure' white children, thereby ensuring the survival of the culturally dominant white middle class. While Alcott does, at times, seem to critique these assumptions about a gentlewoman's identity and hint to a disconnect between outer appearance and inner self, the author does not supply an alternative model of femininity as all of the March girls ultimately conform to the expectations society places on them. With regard to race, for example, Alcott hints to the moralistic value of abolitionism and racial inclusion, but does not provide any insight into the realities that contemporary black girls or women were facing. This raises the question whether the author's subversive comments function as a critique of white superiority or if they merely serve to reaffirm the whiteness and privilege of the novel's characters. My intention with this thesis has been to identify the silent 'gaps' in Alcott's novel and interrogate the politics of those silences, emphasising the realities that existed beyond the 'normative' experience of privileged, white womanhood in nineteenth century America.

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