

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Senior Theses

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS)

2019

Dresses and Dollars: Domesticity and Economy in Little Women and The Morgesons

Tess Walsh

Lesley University, tesswalsh914@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/clas_theses



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walsh, Tess, "Dresses and Dollars: Domesticity and Economy in Little Women and The Morgesons" (2019). *Senior Theses*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/clas_theses/7

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Tess Walsh

Dr. Perez-Villanueva

CLITR 4340

Dresses and Dollars: Domesticity and Economy in *Little Women* and *The Morgesons*

The idea of the public and the private, or the domestic and the commercial, existing as “separate spheres” is not a new one; philosophers, as well as historians and other scholars, have been commenting on it for decades, if not centuries. This dichotomy is popular, especially, when discussing gender roles in nineteenth-century America, a time when men were encouraged to seek fortune while women were encouraged to be modest and nurturing, providing their husbands and fathers a space away from the fierce competition of capitalism. In this framework, “women maintain the status quo,” thereby “preserving class distinctions, transmitting the accepted morality, and insisting on order and decorum” (Weir 427). Although Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* seems to fit this model, as it is popularly thought of as a sentimental, domestic novel due to its cast of female characters, the titular little women cannot seem to stop worrying about their financial situation, and indeed the boyish heroine Jo hardly seems orderly or proper. In Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, too, domesticity and economy seem to be intertwined, and the protagonist, Cassandra, is often referred to as “demonic” or “possessed,” which hardly seems to follow the demure feminine standard (Alaimo 30-1). One scholar suggests that to Stoddard, a woman who “displays the spirituality, the ignorance, and the delicacy” demanded by the separate spheres structure is “a human freak” (Weir 430). This society required “women to be spiritual rather than corporeal, innocent rather than experienced” (Putzi 168-9). Yet both novels feature the maturation arcs of unconventional and outspoken heroines who must balance their individuality and independence with societal and domestic expectations of women;

this development requires them to have multitudes of experience, including incidents with the commercial, economic world they are supposedly excluded from. Ultimately, each text suggests that far from being removed from the outside “masculine” world, the domestic sphere is in fact a reflection of social and economic forces.

The connection between the internal, “feminine” world of the home and the external “masculine” one of finance and labor is made explicit throughout *Little Women* due to the March family’s near-constant preoccupation with money (and their lack of it). Indeed, in the opening line of the novel, Jo grumbles, ““Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents”” (Alcott). This statement demonstrates one of the text’s most pervasive but understated tensions: the family’s desire for money versus their moral opposition to greed and corruption. According to scholar Judith Fetterley, “Fear is one of the several unpleasant emotions simmering just below the sunny surface of Alcott’s story,” and this emotion extends to both losing and gaining money (Fetterley 377). It is briefly acknowledged that the Marches used to be more financially stable; in the same conversation, Amy, the youngest daughter, says, ““Don't you wish we had the money Papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! How happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries!”” (Alcott). It is later revealed that “Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend” and Amy, the only March child still attending school, is teased for wearing hand-me-down dresses and having a father who “isn’t rich” (Alcott). Clearly, despite the fact that the March sisters are female and adolescent, they are keenly aware of their family’s economic state and the challenges it presents to them. Broken dolls must be mended, stained dresses worn, rickety furniture used, and Christmas presents sacrificed. A lack of money means a lack of security; as Jo astutely recognizes later in the novel, when she is attempting to begin her career as a writer: “She saw that money conferred power, money and power, therefore, she resolved to

have, not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than life” (Alcott). The fact that Jo is so eager to earn money (one of the first questions she asks a prospective employer is ““Do you say she makes a good living out of stories like this?””) demonstrates the Marches’ need for it (Alcott). Therefore, despite the fact that as “little” women, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are supposed to be ignorant of finances due to their gender and age, their position inside the household puts them in a unique position to observe and recognize the impact of their father’s finances and employment upon them as his dependents. The family’s lack of money is essential to the domesticity they exist in and create.

Although Cassandra, the imperfect and tempetious narrator and protagonist of *The Morgesons*, admits that she and her sister, Veronica, “grew up ignorant of practical or economical ways” and “never saw money” for most of their childhood, money appears as an influential factor upon domesticity in other, less obvious ways (Stoddard 23). In *Little Women*, the role that socioeconomic status plays in marriage and family formation is understated; the text suggests that love can conquer money. *The Morgesons*, however, demonstrates the realities of the nineteenth-century unions when Cassandra provides a short family history of the Morgesons and their Puritan ancestry, as well as her parents’ marriage. When Mr. Morgeson sought to marry Cassandra’s mother, a “singularly beautiful” tailor’s daughter who was “poor” and “without connection,” the Morgesons “opposed, with great promptness,” the union (Stoddard 9). It is only after an older, wealthier relative promises to “push” Mr. Morgeson “into the world” by helping him establish a career, as well as offers the young couple “half his house to live in,” that the Morgeson clan agrees to support the marriage (Stoddard 9). Thus, Cassandra’s very existence, as well as that of her siblings Veronica and Arthur, were nearly prevented due to socioeconomic disparity, and only came to fruition because of Grandfather’s Locke sponsorship. In the first ten

pages, then, the text explicitly connects the formation of families and households with economic status, suggesting that the latter can act as either a catalyst or an obstacle for the former.

Domesticity is not disconnected from financial matters, but in fact is a result of them.

This idea repeats itself when the Morgeson sisters begin courtships with the Somers brothers, who are of a higher socioeconomic class and possibly distant relatives of the Morgesons. Upon Cassandra's arrival at the Somers's home in Belem, Massachusetts, she notices that Mrs. Somers sits "remote," "inspecting" her with "an eye askance" that "said there could be no tie of blood between us" (Stoddard 164). These actions imply that Mrs. Somers considers herself to be superior to Cassandra and her kin, and the suggestion that the two families could be equal even in blood is preposterous due to the fact that the Somers, in addition to being wealthy, have prominent social and political connections and ancestors, whereas the Morgesons have money but not prestige. Mrs. Somers's dislike for the outspoken Cassandra intensifies when a romance begins between Cassandra and Desmond Somers; upon discovering the two of them in conversation together, Mrs. Somers makes "an insulting gesture" towards the girl, as if to ask, "'is this an adventure of yours?'" (Stoddard 186). Later, when the two women are alone together, Mrs. Somers turns "purple with rage" and pulls Cassandra's sleeve "violently" before saying something so offensive that Cassandra declares, "What she said I will not repeat" (Stoddard 194). After Cassandra and her sister end up marrying Mrs. Somers's sons, Cassandra claims, "Mrs. Somers never forgave me" (Stoddard 252). The idea that Cassandra and Desmond are romantically interested in each other and then marry across socioeconomic class enrages the older woman, who believes that her money is indicative of her, and her progeny's, worth. She attempts to dissuade the marriages, but never attempts to repair the damaged relationships with the sisters that become her daughters-in-law; clearly, financial and social

disparity can pose a strong potential threat to romantic unions, and thus have the power to shape them. By rejecting the pattern of intra-class marriage, “Cassandra develops and defines herself through rejecting powerful ideologies” and it is this “independent stance makes her a compellingly strong heroine” (Alaimo 30). It is interesting to note that the union of Mr. and Mrs. Somers is also one that defied socioeconomic class lines; “Mrs. Somers had a bequested [sic] fortune” and Mr. Somers married her “for her money” (Stoddard 169-70). It appears that money and status only pose a problem when the woman (in these examples, Cassandra’s mother and Cassandra herself) desires to marry above the position of her family of origin.

In addition to playing a role in family formation and behavior, the Marches’s and Morgesons’s financial situations are also domesticated and dramatized through the daughters’s dress and ornamentation; these “feminine items such as ribbons, bridal gowns, baby curls, slippers, flowers, and fans unfold stories of girlhood lives” which are “invested with personal, familial, and cultural meanings” (Blackford 2). When Jo and Meg attend a holiday dance, for example, Jo must stand with her back to the wall for the duration of the night, as there is a large burn in the back of her dress, and the sisters must each carry one glove, instead of wearing two separate pairs, since their gloves have likewise been soiled. Amy paints “her soiled white [boots] the loveliest shade of sky blue you ever saw, and they looked exactly like satin” in order to dress up for a party (Alcott). During Meg’s visit to the Moffats, one of the most revealing passages in the book, dress plays an incredibly important role in status. As Sallie and the others are preparing for a party, Meg notices that her “tarlatan” looks “older, limper, and shabbier than ever beside Sallie’s crisp new [dress]” (Alcott). When her companions “glance at it and then at one another,” Meg’s “cheeks began to burn” and a “hard, bitter feeling” grows inside her while the others flit around the room “like gauzy butterflies” (Alcott). Later, Sallie’s older sister dresses up Meg,

lacing her into “a sky-blue dress, which was so tight she could hardly breathe and so low in the neck that modest Meg blushed at herself in the mirror” (Alcott). The eldest March sister is also adorned with “a set of silver filagree [sic]” of “bracelets, necklace, brooch, and even earrings” and “a pair of high-heeled silk boots” so that she is like “a newly dressed doll” (Alcott). There is a drastic difference between these two outfits; in the first, Meg experiences shame for having a “dowdy” and simple dress when her friends have such lavish ones, a feeling exacerbated by the fact that Sally and the others, the decorated and bejeweled “butterflies,” do not share Meg’s experiences with old, worn clothes. They clearly notice the state of Meg’s dress, and seem to be passing judgement on her through their communicative glances. Their behavior indicates that Meg’s status among the girls becomes lower once they realize she is unable to afford nicer clothes and accessories.

When Meg wears the second outfit, however, Sallie and the others are much more satisfied with her, and exclaim over her beauty as they apply makeup and fix her hair; her status is elevated once she is wearing expensive, fashionable clothing. Ultimately, Meg learns that her family’s finances not only affect their household, but in fact how her peers perceive and interact with her. Meg and her sisters may be young women and therefore excluded from economic world in which males participate, but they face very real repercussions as a result of it.

In a similar vein, clothing and jewelry are mentioned numerous times throughout *The Morgesons*. These references indicate the family’s status, but also demonstrate that the woman’s place in the domestic sphere is a reflection of the commercial one in which her husband or father operates. The family’s materialism is made clear in the novel’s first chapter when the young Cassandra displays an affection for her “new slippers,” trying them on for no other reason than to enjoy them (Stoddard 6). After putting them on, she recalls, “I skipped out by a side

door...admiring my slippers, and wishing that some acquaintance with poor shoes could see me” (Stoddard 7). During other childhood instances, too, Cassandra demonstrates a pleasure in clothing and shopping: while attending Miss Black’s school, Mr. Morgeson takes her to a “jeweler’s” and buys her “an immense mosaic brooch” and “a pretty ring with a gold stone” (Stoddard 39). In the same scene, Cassandra tells her father, “I must have a pink French calico, with a three-cornered white cloud on it; it is the fashion” (Stoddard 39). Even as a young girl, Cassandra displays an awareness that the quality and quantity of her accoutrements is symbolic of the quality of her person, and those with less *are* less. Her comment regarding the pink French calico further demonstrates this point; if such a dress is the fashion, then other girls must be wearing it and Cassandra must also if she is to be considered their equal.

Later, when Cassandra is eighteen and en route to live with relatives in Rosville, Massachusetts, she once again demonstrates her affinity for material goods when she stops in Boston. She writes: “I wanted to shop, and mother gave me money...[I] bought six wide, embroidered belts, a gilt buckle, a variety of ribbons, and a dozen yards of lace” but she “repented” before returning to the inn, because she “saw other articles” she liked better (Stoddard 66). On the same trip, Cassandra tells her mother, “I must have a certain pair of white carnelian ear-rings [sic], set in chased gold, and three inches long, which I had seen in a shop window” (Stoddard 68). She declines to be modest or self-sacrificing, and willingly admits to desires; this aspect of her character seems to “celebrate female self possessed freedom that disrupts repressive social constraints” (Alaimo 31). In addition to demonstrating her rejection of societal standards, this scene also depicts the fact that Cassandra’s focus seems to have shifted from articles of clothing to accessories, such as belts, ribbons, and earrings. This change, coupled with the fact that it is Cassandra, not her father, who is selecting and purchasing the items, subtly

point to Cassandra's maturation. As she grows more complex and sophisticated, so too does her appearance become more complex and sophisticated, which illustrates Cassandra's progression towards womanhood but also her more nuanced understanding of the relationship between possessions and power. In this way, Cassandra appears to have internalized the lesson Meg March learned so explicitly during her time at the Moffats's: to dress well is to be perceived well.

Besides the attention given to clothes in both Alcott's and Stoddard's novels, each text also reveals the interaction between the economic and domestic using other household phenomena. *Little Women*, for example, utilizes food in order to further emphasize the Marchs's socioeconomic status. In the beginning of the novel, after giving away their Christmas Day breakfast to an indigent family down the road, the girls must content themselves with simply "bread and milk," food that is little better than that given to prisoners (Alcott). Though they are rewarded for their charity with a "feast" of "ice cream...and cake and fruit and distracting French bonbons" by their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence, the fact that this type of food has not been seen in the March household "since the departed days of plenty" implies that their current sustenance is not so decadent (Alcott). While it is likely that during the Civil War items such as ice cream and bonbons were expensive and rare, the fact that cake and fruit are so novel to the girls speaks to the idea that they subsist on much simpler and cheaper food. Later on in the novel, when the sisters are older, Amy is mortified when, while talking to one of Laurie's "elegant" English college friends, she upsets her shopping basket and "...oh horror!—the lobster, in all its vulgar size and brilliancy, [is] revealed to the highborn eyes of a Tudor!" (Alcott). Prior to the 1880s, the consumption of lobster was associated with people of very low social class, such as slaves, servants, peasants, and prisoners; an abundance of the crustacean along New England

coastlines made it very inexpensive (Luzer). The fact that the Marches eat lobster indicates that they cannot afford more expensive meat and clearly labels them as lower-class; Amy's shame and "horror" during this incident also demonstrate that she is aware of the social implications of that position. Since food is evidence of class, the domestic domain in which the March sisters spend so much time is therefore not a haven or respite from economic hardship, but in fact a space in which that economic hardship is most apparent.

While *The Morgesons* only mentions food in passing—likely due to the fact that meals are prepared by servants rather than family members—the text is concerned with another facet of domestic materialism: the appearance and items of the home itself. For example, when Cassandra is still a child, she describes her mother's "winter room:" "The walls were hung with white paper, through which ran thread-like stripes of green" and on the floor there is "a square of green and chocolate-colored English carpet" with a "row of straw chairs stood around it" (Stoddard 6). In one corner of the room is a "a huge bed, with a chintz top shaped like an elephant's back" and in the other, "a six-legged mahogany table" (Stoddard 6). Descriptions like these abound in *The Morgesons*; when Cassandra visits her older, distant cousin Charles Morgeson, with whom she becomes romantically involved, special attention is also paid to his home: "The walls were covered with dark red velvet paper, the furniture was dark, the mantel and table tops were black marble, and the vases and candelabra were bronze" (Stoddard 69). During her first meal at the Rosville house, Cassandra thinks, "I had never seen a table so well arranged, so fastidiously neat; it glittered with glass and French china" (Stoddard 68). Not only is the house indicative of its owner, who is dark, sensuous, and occasionally hedonistic, the mentions of marble, velvet, glass, and china serve to suggest that Cousin Charles, as Cassandra calls him, is an elegant, affluent man. In a conversation with Charles's wife, Alice, Cassandra

explicitly connects the house with status: “[My father] is not so very rich; we do not live as handsomely as you do” (Stoddard 86). Here, Cassandra recognizes that the way that her cousins live, including the house they live in, is “handsome” because of their money. The domestic environment is built by the resources of its owners, and therefore cannot exist outside of economic factors, as Cassandra herself notices.

Later, when they are grown women, Cassandra and Veronica begin to partake in this domestic commercialism themselves; Cassandra buys a “blue and white carpet, a piece of blue and white flowered chintz, two stuffed chairs” which are “covered with hair-cloth” and “a long mirror” to furnish her room (Stoddard 136). Upon getting engaged to Ben Somers, Veronica buys “a purple Angola rug, which she put before her arm-chair, and two small silver cups, with covers” (Stoddard 236). Like the shift that takes place in Cassandra’s relationship to clothes and shopping discussed earlier, the change from noticing household items to purchasing them reflects the sisters’ maturation, as well as their understanding that the home, as well as appearances, are representative of their socioeconomic status and must therefore be carefully purchased and curated.

While money is a crucial part of the economic and commercial world that is supposedly separate from the domestic life, so too is labor, upon which money and capitalist society rely. *Little Women’s* portrayal of girls working outside the home, and expressing ambitions that did not include marriage, was revolutionary for 1869. At the beginning of the novel, both Meg and Jo are employed outside the home, albeit in appropriately feminine positions; Meg works as a governess and Jo as Aunt March’s “companion.” After the aforementioned loss of money suffered by their father, “the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support, at least” and their parents “consented,” believing that work would “cultivate

energy, industry, and independence” (Alcott). Thus, “work here is presented as a moral and educational experience” and it is further sanctioned by the fact that “even Marmee, the embodiment of domestic virtue, moves back and forth between the two spheres through her charity work outside the home” (Dawson 115, 127). Jo, however, is unsatisfied with the positions available to her, and frequently mentions her desire for a literary career. She tells her sisters: “I’d have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be...famous” and repeats, “I think I shall write books” (Alcott). Although her prediction is ultimately inaccurate, Jo initially rejects the prospect of a domestic life by telling Laurie, “I don’t believe I shall ever marry. I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man” (Alcott). Furthermore, Jo spends most of her free time in the garret, a place which “ensures Jo’s freedom from domestic burdens and serves as an environment in which her creativity flourishes” (Philips 407). Jo’s unapologetic ambition, as well as her disregard of marriage, make her a truly unconventional heroine for nineteenth-century America. In a time when the ideal woman was submissive, quiet, and modest, Jo is brash, energetic, boyish, and determined. Instead of staying at home within the domestic space, Jo wishes to participate in the larger world that lies beyond the hearth; she wishes to be a full member of America’s capitalist society by earning and spending her own money by performing her own intellectual labor.

In a step towards accomplishing that goal, Jo later moves to New York to work as a governess, partly to escape her increasingly complicated relationship with Laurie, but also to hone her craft. When convincing Marmee to send her, Jo says, “I shall see and hear new things, get new ideas, and even if I haven’t much time there, I shall bring home quantities of material” (Alcott). This experience of leaving home is presented as a positive and healthy change, as “the

teaching would render her independent, and such leisure as she got might be made profitable by writing, while the new scenes and society would be both useful and agreeable” since the “home nest” has become “too narrow for her restless nature and adventurous spirit” (Alcott). While in New York, Jo begins writing “sensation stories” and “she soon became interested in her work, for her emaciated purse grew stout” (Alcott). Far from discouraging Jo’s desire to be a writer, the Alcott family recognizes her aspirations as legitimate and do not attempt to pressure her into pursuing more traditionally feminine pastimes or goals. Beth refers to her as a “regular Shakespeare” and Laurie believes she will become a “celebrated American authoress” (Alcott). One of Jo’s earliest manuscripts, a “collection of fairy tales,” is “regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise” (Alcott). Considering nineteenth-century societal values, this overwhelming support is far from normal; during this time period, “girls and women were warned at every turn against picking up the pen” and “male family members were often ashamed of their sisters or daughters who dared to venture into print” (Rioux 5-6). By encouraging and respecting Jo’s professional goals, the text suggests that women can and should operate outside the home and participate in the American marketplace, especially if they have talents that would be beneficial to non-domestic professions.

However, despite the fact that the majority of *Little Women* embraces Jo’s talent, critics have noted that the novel’s conclusion seems to work against that message of female independence and artistic careers. Particularly, Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer seems to betray her character entirely, especially since Alcott herself expressed resentment that her publishers required Jo to be married: she wrote, “Publishers are very perverse [sic] and won’t let authors have thier [sic] way, so my little women must and be married off in a very stupid style” (Shealy 88). It is, after all, Professor Bhaer who persuades Jo into renouncing her sensation stories

because, it is implied, they are unseemly subject matter for a woman. Bhaer's reaction to her short stories not only causes Jo to lose confidence in herself and her talent, but also prevents Jo from continuing to earn a steady income from writing; in order to be respectable, "she must relinquish her primary source of income as well as her primary mode of self-expression" (Grasso 180). After the two are married and open the school at Plumfield, "Jo made queer mistakes, but the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters," suggesting that Bhaer is the more intelligent and competent one, there to "tame" the quirky Jo (Alcott). Furthermore, Jo claims that the life of fame, excitement, and literary promise she had aspired to seems "selfish, cold, and lonely" compared to the domestic and familial bliss of children and marriage (Alcott). Thus, one of the overt messages of the novel, which seems to directly contradict the one suggested by Jo's unorthodox character, is that the traditional, domestic form of work is the most noble work to which a woman can commit herself. Women may have careers, the text seems to say, but isn't a life with men, babies, and delicate femininity more enriching? While this traditional ending seems ill-fitted for what some consider to be an iconoclastic novel, it is important to note that the text treats domesticity as *labor*, instead of an inherent female talent.

The eleventh chapter of *Little Women*, "Experiments," demonstrates the necessity and the toll of domestic labor. The March girls neglect their chores for a week so that they can "rest and revel" after school and work have ended for the summer (Alcott). Their sabbatical from work, however, produces "a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things" within the March household; Jo gets headaches and sunburns, Meg spends her earnings on clothes, Beth abuses her dolls, and Amy grows desperately bored; their mother and the servant, Hannah, perform the girls' "neglected work, keeping home pleasant and the domestic machinery running smoothly" (Alcott). At the end of the week, however, Marmee and Hannah also neglect the household

duties and leave the girls to their own devices. The March sisters quickly learn that “housekeeping ain't no joke” as they struggle through the day (Alcott). Jo suffers while attempting to prepare a meal for the family and some guests: “Language cannot describe the anxieties, experiences, and exertions which Jo underwent that morning” (Alcott). The rest of the day passes in a rush, for the “tea must be got, errands done, and one or two necessary bits of sewing neglected until the last minute” must be completed (Alcott). This passage of the novel serves to emphasize that domestic labor, such as cooking, cleaning, and keeping an organized household, are far from menial or unimportant tasks, but rather exhausting and demanding ones.

Many critics have noted that the moderation philosophy preached by Marmee at the end of this chapter contrasts the value placed on industriousness in the nineteenth-century, when to be idle was to be immoral, sinful, and unAmerican (Dawson 114). Marmee emphatically states that although “Work is wholesome” and “good for health and spirits,” with its “sense of power and independence,” that is the sisters should not “go to the other extreme and delve like slaves” but “have regular hours for work and play [to] make each day both useful and pleasant” (Alcott). Thus, the chapter establishes the “the necessity of balance between amusing oneself and contributing something to the community’s welfare” (Phillips 412). Furthermore, as the novel progresses, “the girls are most vulnerable when they forget this advice” and “are thus reminded, beyond the experiments in chapter 11, that the most satisfying and happy lives are those that include play as well as work” (Phillips 412-13). Meg, for example, in addition to providing another example of the work required in domestic upkeep during her jelly-making episode, becomes miserable and flustered after she fails to balance her love for her children with love for her husband. However, once she establishes clearer boundaries for herself and spends quality, recreational time with John, peace is restored to the household. Therefore, although

domestic work is seen as a necessity that particularly affects women, it is also viewed as true labor, from which women need to recharge; the concept of domestic work as actual work demonstrates that waged work is not the only form of labor, and to suggest that the spheres of labor and domesticity are separated is to ignore the very real labor that women performed, and continue to perform, within the confines of homes each and every day.

Labor, domestic and otherwise, is much less prominent in *The Morgesons*, largely due to the fact that the family belongs to a higher socioeconomic class and can thus afford hired help. Cassandra, Veronica, and their mother hardly ever labor; the duties of setting the table, making food, and mending clothes mostly belong to Temperance Tinkham and Hepsy Curtis. Throughout the novel, the two women are seen “wiping the dust from the best china,” grating “loaf sugar over a pile of doughnuts,” “steeping...certain aromatic herbs,” “mixing dough,” and making quilts “composed of red, black, and blue bits of silk, (Stoddard 15, 16, 25, 128, 146). Described as “faithful and industrious,” Mrs. Morgeson estimates her maids to be “worth two thousand dollars, at least” (Stoddard 19, page). There are other servants as well, including a young teenager named Fanny, and two men who work in the stables, but it is Temperance and Hepsy who oversee and manage day-to-day operations for the Morgesons for most of the novel. Cassandra’s mother does not adhere to “systematic housekeeping” and has “severe turns of planning,” during which she attempts to reform the household and fail (Stoddard 23). Domestic labor, then, in Cassandra’s experience, is synonymous with waged labor. While there is a clear disparity between Cassandra and the maids, as well as between Cassandra and the March sisters, in the fact that Cassandra has no need to balance labor with recreation, and indeed spends much of her girlhood and adolescent years exploring the seashore, reading, and generally amusing herself, there is an obvious respect and reverence for those who do labor, especially Temperance.

In fact, Temperance and the emotionally unstable Veronica share a special bond; when Veronica suffers from her episodes of insomnia, outrage, and overstimulation, it is Temperance, not Cassandra or her mother, who coaxes her into eating, resting, and taking her medicine (Stoddard 147). The Morgesons themselves may be privileged in the fact that they do not have to perform domestic labor in the same way the Marches do, but it is clear that they could not function without the assistance of women such as Temperance and Hepsy, and that genuine love exists between the sisters and the maids, despite their socioeconomic differences. Temperance is invited to Veronica's wedding, and the sisters are there to comfort Temperance when her husband dies (Stoddard 240, 235). It is clear, then, that the women are valued not only for their domestic labor, but as friends, caretakers, and confidants; the women and the work are both essential to the Morgesons's survival. The text therefore links domestic stability with economic stability, since the function of the former relies on the latter in the case of Cassandra and her family.

While it is true that Cassandra does not perform duties such as cooking and cleaning, she does assume some domestic responsibility after the death of her mother. When her Aunt Mercy complains that the house is in disarray and some of the servants are not fulfilling their duties, Cassandra replies, ““Yes, yes, I will do it; you may depend on me. I will reign, and serve also”” (Stoddard 215). After this declaration, Cassandra notices “the unthought-of result of mother's death—disorganization” has begun to show itself; clothing has not been washed or put away, meals have gone cold, and tables are set improperly (Stoddard 216). She then begins to correct these errors by ordering Fanny, the servant girl, to locate her trunk and other belongings, responding to letters, and making financial suggestions to her father in order to curb the family's expenses. Although this management is certainly less taxing than the labor Temperance, Fanny,

and Hepsy do, it indicates that even wealthy women must participate in domestic labor to some degree if they are to have a functioning household. This, too, reflects that domestic and financial realities are interrelated, as the degree of domestic labor required is dictated by monetary means. No matter the socioeconomic status, it seems, the so-called woman's sphere of the home and the man's sphere of the commercial world beyond it cannot be divorced from each other due to the fact that a home cannot be created or maintained without financial resources and labor.

The Marches may be shabbily genteel and the Morgesons may be fashionably rich, but both texts display an anxiety regarding money and its relationship to women in the nineteenth-century. The Marches desperately need it, but they are simultaneously afraid that wealth will make them selfish, shallow, and unwomanly, while the Morgesons enjoy a lavish lifestyle that highlights their femininity but suffer a fall from grace in the last few chapters of the book when Mr. Morgeson's company goes bankrupt, leaving the Morgeson sisters little choice but to marry. Critics have noted that these tensions are likely the products of Alcott's and Stoddard's own experiences regarding finance, labor, and womanhood. Louisa May Alcott and her sisters, unlike their fictional counterparts, were exposed to "extreme poverty, religious radicalism, marital strife, suicidal thoughts, and possible mental illness" (Rioux 20). Much of their familial and economic conflict stemmed from the fact that Louisa's father, the ascetic and philosophic Amos Bronson Alcott, was incapable of earning a steady income, which caused the family to move approximately thirty times in as many years, constantly ask wealthier friends and relatives for loans, and record every dollar spent and earned (Rioux 19-20; Dawson 112; Lahey 153). Anne Boyd Rioux, author of *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters*, writes that "it is hard to overlook [A.B. Alcott's] refusal to do anything but the few types of work he considered honorable, at which he largely failed, even to support his family" and Sarah Lahey

of Northwestern University agrees that while he “exemplified transcendental ideals by pursuing a vocation without regard for money...he failed miserably in regards to an equally ethical obligation to support his family” (Rioux 23; Lahey 150). Thus, thanks to her family’s need for money as well as their disapproval of it, Alcott questioned the morality of pursuing wealth: “should she appease her father’s philosophy or her mother’s need for bread on the table?” (Lahey 150). *Little Women* vacillates between these two opposing ideologies, but to suggest that because the book is a “domestic drama,” it is therefore disconnected from the economic realities of both its author and its time period is to ignore the obvious mismatch between the book’s “overt messages” of sacrifice as noble and poverty as character-building and its “covert messages” that imply the March family’s suffering is unnecessary, a product of cruel economic equality (Alcott; Fetterley 370). This tension, is, “to a considerable extent” the reason for “the continuing interest and power of *Little Women*” (Fetterley 370). Alcott, a working woman nearly all her life, navigated both the commercial and domestic worlds through labor and writing, demonstrating that not only is it possible to move between the two supposed disconnected spheres, but in fact, it is sometimes necessary to do so.

Elizabeth Stoddard, on the other hand, only experienced financial and emotional hardship after marrying her husband, Richard Stoddard, in 1852 (Zagarell 24). Growing up, the headstrong and volatile Stoddard (nee Barstow), was encouraged to “enjoy the affluence” of her “well-off” and prominent family (Zagarell 22). After secretly marrying Stoddard, a writer as well, the couple had to live off of the generosity of others, including distant relation Nathaniel Hawthorne, who later provided financial aid to the Alcotts as well (Zagarell 26). Although she and her husband shared an incredible bond for the rest of their lives, it is clear from Stoddard’s surviving letters that “the conventional restriction of self to the marriage relationship was

obviously disturbing for her” (Zagarell 24). Stoddard additionally had to contend with professional and personal disappointment; despite being praised by her contemporaries, her books received virtually no public attention and “genuine literary recognition never came to Elizabeth Stoddard during her lifetime” (Zagarell 28). Furthermore, she was predeceased by all three of her children and often sabotaged friendships due to her “jealousy and egotism” (Zagarell 27-8). These domestic and literary struggles are apparent in *The Morgesons*, which scholar Sandra Zagarell believes is reminiscent of Stoddard’s own childhood; in short, Stoddard was a woman attempting to have a family and a career in nineteenth-century America, and, by the standards of that society, failed at both (23). However, it is precisely because both Stoddard and Alcott embraced and took part in the two seemingly disparate fields of family and career that they are able to effectively investigate and illuminate the relationship between the economic and domestic spheres in their fiction.

Despite his warm feelings towards Stoddard and Alcott, in 1855 Nathaniel Hawthorne famously wrote, “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash” (qtd in Frederick 231). It is this attitude that prevented Alcott and Stoddard from literary study for over a century; fiction centered around women, and the domestic lives of women, was (and sometimes still is) not considered to be valuable, relevant, or interesting. Domesticity as long been considered feminine, but in reality it is simply human. It is not simply cooking and cleaning, but the act of creating and caretaking for loved ones to establish an authentic and comfortable space. The home, in fact, is a microcosm for the forces that shape both individuals and society; love, hate, frustration, triumph, creation and destruction all exist within and exert influence upon society, and are found in the home as well. To label this arena as belonging exclusively to

women in order to dismiss it is to not only delegitimize the intensive care and labor women have put into homes, families, and jobs, but also to disregard the fact that domesticity has been, and continues to be, an essential and nearly universal part of the human experience.

Bibliography

- Alaimo, Stacey. "Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*: A Feminist Dialogue of *Bildung* and Descent." *Legacy*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 29-37. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25684411
- Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. 1869. Project Gutenberg, 2010. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/514/514-h/514-h.htm>
- Blackford, Holly. "Vital Signs at Play: Objects as Vessels of Mother-Daughter Discourse in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*." *Children's Literature*, vol. 36, 2006, pp. 1-36. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/chl.2006.0003
- Buell, Laurence, and Sandra A. Zagarell. Biographical and Critical Introduction. *The Morgesons and Other Writings*, by Elizabeth Stoddard, 1862, University of Pennsylvania, 1984, pp. xi-xxv. *ProQuest EBook Central*.
- Dawson, Janice. "Little Women Out to Work: Women and the Marketplace in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women and Work*." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2003, pp. 111-130. *Humanities International Complete*, doi:10838422
- Feldman, Jessica R. "'A Talent for the Disagreeable': Elizabeth Stoddard Writes *The Morgesons*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 58, no. 2, September 2003, pp. 202-229. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2003.58.2.202
- Fetterley, Judith. "'Little Women': Alcott's Civil War." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 369-383. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3177602

Frederick, John T. "Hawthorne's 'Scribbling Women.'" *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, June 1975, pp. 231-240. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/364660>

Grasso, Linda. "Louisa May Alcott's 'Magic Inkstand': Little Women, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1998, pp. 177-192. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3347148

Lahey, Sarah T. "Honeybees and Discontented Workers: A Critique of Labor in Louisa May Alcott." *American Literary Realism*, vol. 44, no. 2, Winter 2012, pp. 133-157. *Literature Resource Center*, doi:10.5406/amerlitereal.44.2.0133

LaPlante, Eve. *Marmee and Louisa: The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.

Luzer, Daniel. "How Lobster Got Fancy." *Pacific Standard*, 7 Jun. 2013, www.psmag.com/economics/how-lobster-got-fancy-59440. Accessed 13 Dec. 2018

Pasquesi, Carina D. "The Morgesons: Elizabeth Stoddard's *Ars Erotica*." *Legacy*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2014, pp. 183-206. *Literature Resource Center*, edsgcl.393795594

Phillips, Anne K. "'Fun Forever'? Toys, Games, and Play in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*." *American Journal of Play*, vol. 2, no. 4, Spring 2010, pp. 401-418. *ERIC*, EJ1069244.

Putzi, Jennifer. "'Tattooed still: The Inscription of Female Agency in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*.'" *Legacy*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2000, pp. 165-173. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25679335

Rioux, Anne Boyd. *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters*. Norton, 2018.

Shealy, Daniel, editor. *Alcott in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn*

from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates.

University of Iowa, 2005.

Stoddard, Elizabeth. *The Morgesons*. 1862. *The Morgesons and Other Writings*, edited by

Laurence Buell and Sandra A. Zagarell, University of Pennsylvania, 1984, 5-258.

ProQuest EBook Central.

Weir, Sybil. "The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman." *The New England*

Quarterly, vol. 49, no. 3, September 1976, pp. 427-439. *JSTOR*,

www.jstor.org/stable/364682

Zagarell, Sandra A. "Biographical Foreword: Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard

(1823-1902)." *American Culture, Canons, and the Case of Elizabeth Stoddard*, edited by

Robert McClure Smith and Ellen Weinauer, University of Alabama, 2003, 21-24.

Proquest EBook Central.