

SISTERLY BONDS IN ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Melia Debora Sweetzemey Piri¹, Mister G. Maru², Sanerita T. Olii³

English Education Department, Faculty of Language and Arts,

Universitas Negeri Manado, Tondano, Indonesia

Email: melia22piri@gmail.com

Abstract : Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has been a timeless classic in American literature, depicting the lives of the March sisters and their relationships with each other. This study analyzes the portrayal of sisterhood and female sibling relationships in *Little Women* through a feminist lens. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study examines the themes and patterns that emerge in the novel regarding sisterly bonds. The findings reveal that the March sisters' relationships with each other are characterized by loyalty, support, and sacrifice, reflecting the importance of sisterhood in women's lives. The study also highlights the challenges and conflicts that arise in sisterly relationships, including jealousy and competition. Overall, this analysis provides insights into the significance of sisterhood and female sibling relationships in *Little Women* and their relevance to contemporary feminist discourse.

Keywords : *Little Women, Sisterhood, Female Sibling Relationships, Feminist Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is a timeless classic that has been beloved by readers for over a century (Egeland, 2020). Set during the Civil War era in America, the novel follows the lives of the March sisters - Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy - as they navigate the challenges of growing up, finding love, and pursuing their dreams. One of the most prominent themes in the novel is the sisterly bonds that exist between the four March sisters. So, this article provides an analysis of the sisterly bonds among the female siblings in *Little Women*. The study aims to explore the nature of these relationships and the ways in which they contribute to the themes of the novel. The analysis is based on a close reading of the novel and a review of existing scholarship on the topic.

Little Women has been praised for its portrayal of strong, independent female characters and its depiction of the importance of familial bonds (Rioux, 2018). However, one aspect that has received less attention is the portrayal of sisterhood and the relationships between

the four March sisters (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2018). In this novel, Louisa May Alcott presents a complex and nuanced portrayal of female sibling relationships, exploring themes such as love, rivalry, support, and sacrifice (Santi & Rahmi, 2019). Through an analysis of the sisters' interactions and the social and cultural context in which the novel was written, this study aims to shed light on the significance of sisterly bonds in *Little Women* and their relevance for contemporary audiences. By examining the dynamics of sisterhood in the novel, we can gain a better understanding of the role of siblings in shaping our identities and experiences as women, as well as the ways in which familial relationships contribute to our emotional and psychological well-being. Overall, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of sisterhood and its portrayal in *Little Women*. Through a detailed analysis of the novel, we hope to highlight the complexities of female sibling relationships and the importance of sisterly

bonds in shaping our lives and experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

To conduct this analysis of the sisterly bonds in *Little Women*, a qualitative research method was employed. Qualitative research is defined as "a research strategy that seeks to understand phenomena as they occur naturally in settings where they would typically occur" (Creswell, 2014, p. 27). The purpose of this approach is to provide a detailed description of the research subject and to allow the researcher to explore different aspects of the subject in depth. In this study, the subject was the portrayal of sisterhood in *Little Women*, and the research was conducted through close reading and analysis of the novel. The qualitative research method was appropriate for this study as it allowed for an in-depth analysis of the sisterly bonds portrayed in *Little Women*.

The data collection process involved reading and rereading the novel, taking notes, and highlighting relevant passages. The passages that were selected for analysis were those that explicitly depicted interactions and relationships between the female siblings. This process was repeated multiple times to ensure that all relevant data had been identified and analyzed. The data analysis process involved a thematic analysis, which is "a method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The themes that emerged from the data were identified and categorized, and the relationships between the themes were analyzed. This process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the sisterly bonds portrayed in *Little Women* and provided insight into the societal values and norms of the time period. Through this method, the researcher was able to gain a detailed understanding of the relationships between

the female siblings and how they reflected the societal values of the time period.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Little Women* reveals that the sisterly bonds depicted in the novel are complex and multifaceted. The four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, have a close relationship, but they also experience conflicts and misunderstandings. The eldest sister, Meg, represents the traditional role of a woman in the 19th century, while Jo, the second eldest, defies gender norms by pursuing a career as a writer (Ismail, 2023). The sisters' contrasting personalities and ambitions create tension and jealousy, but ultimately, they support each other and learn to appreciate their differences. Beth, the third sister, is depicted as gentle and compassionate, and her illness highlights the importance of sisterly care and support (Bender, 2017). Amy, the youngest sister, struggles with feeling inferior to her siblings but eventually finds her own path and gains their respect (Yang & Zhong, 2023).

The novel also portrays the relationship between the sisters and their mother, Marmee, as a crucial aspect of their sisterly bonds. Marmee provides emotional guidance and acts as a role model for her daughters, teaching them the value of compassion and generosity (Riva, 2014). Overall, *Little Women* presents a nuanced portrayal of sisterhood and female sibling relationships, highlighting both the challenges and rewards of these connections.

The analysis revealed the differences in how the female characters perceive and experience their sisterly relationships in *Little Women*. Meg and Jo, as the oldest siblings, tend to have a more mature and supportive relationship as they pursue their respective dreams. Meanwhile, the relationship between Beth and Amy, as the youngest siblings, is portrayed more as a loving and protective bond. Nevertheless,

we found that all three sibling pairs still have a strong emotional bond and mutual respect for each other.

It is also found that the characteristics of the sibling relationships depicted in *Little Women* reflect the social values and norms of the time. In Victorian society, which valued family unity and cooperation, the sibling characters in the novel always strive to support and help each other, even in difficult situations (Cott, 2021). However, this does not mean there is no conflict or competition among them, indicating that sibling relationships remain complex and dynamic.

Another notable aspect of sisterly bonds in *Little Women* is the emphasis on emotional support and encouragement. As Meg and Jo navigate the challenges of young adulthood, they often turn to each other for comfort and advice. For example, when Meg is feeling insecure about her appearance before a social event, Jo reassures her by saying, "You're one of the sweetest-looking girls I ever saw, and in this lovely dress you're simply ravishing" (Alcott, 1868, p. 76). Similarly, when Jo is struggling to find her place in the world as a writer, Meg encourages her by saying, "You'll write a masterpiece someday, and we'll all be proud of you" (Alcott, 1868, p. 95). These moments of support and encouragement not only strengthen the bond between the sisters but also serve as examples of the importance of emotional support within female sibling relationships.

Moreover, the portrayal of sisterhood in *Little Women* challenges traditional gender roles and expectations (Galpin, 2021). The March sisters are not content to simply play the roles assigned to them by society; they aspire to achieve their own dreams and ambitions. Jo, in particular, challenges gender norms by rejecting marriage and pursuing a career as a writer. Her sisters support her in this decision, and Jo ultimately finds success and fulfillment

in her chosen path. This representation of strong, independent women who support each other is a powerful message that remains relevant today.

In a broader context, the analysis of sisterly relationships in *Little Women* also has relevant implications for real life. Today, more and more women pursue careers and independent lives while still valuing family ties and the importance of sisterhood. Through *Little Women*, we can see how sisterly relationships can be a source of support and strength in facing life's challenges, as well as providing invaluable companionship and love. The analysis of *Little Women's* portrayal of sisterly bonds has revealed several significant findings about the female sibling relationships depicted in the novel. Firstly, the novel highlights the complexity of sisterly bonds, particularly in the way that sisters relate to each other and the way their relationships change over time. As stated by Gabrielle Donnelly (2019), "The book is about how we grow up and change and about how we relate to our family, particularly our sisters, as we do so." This is evident in the varying relationships between the March sisters - Meg and Jo, and Beth and Amy.

Meg and Jo's relationship is portrayed as more mature and supportive, with each sister encouraging and supporting the other's ambitions. This is demonstrated when Meg supports Jo's decision to reject Laurie's proposal and pursue her writing career. Similarly, Jo supports Meg's decision to marry John Brooke, despite it meaning she must give up her own dreams of a grander lifestyle. This is in line with the idea that "sisters are often our first and most enduring source of support" (Meyers, 2016). On the other hand, Beth and Amy's relationship is depicted as more emotional and protective, with Amy often taking on a nurturing role towards her younger sister. This is exemplified when Amy takes care of Beth during her illness and when Beth passes away. Their relationship also shows

the value of sisterhood as a source of comfort during difficult times. As stated by Amber Petty (2019), "*Little Women* is an ode to the bonds between sisters, highlighting the love and support that only sisters can provide each other." Moreover, the analysis reveals that the portrayal of sisterly bonds in *Little Women* reflects the social norms and values of the Victorian era, where the importance of family and cooperation among family members was highly regarded.

Sisterhood is a central theme in *Little Women*, as the four March sisters support and encourage each other through their various trials and tribulations. As Marmee tells her daughters, "Sisters are for sharing laughter and wiping tears," (Alcott, 1868, p. 18). The bond between sisters is often portrayed as being stronger than any other relationship, and this is certainly the case with the March sisters. They are each other's confidantes, advisors, and champions. As Louisa May Alcott writes, "They were good, happy, and beloved, and they had made their peace with God and man," (Alcott, 1868, p. 759). This bond between the sisters serves as an inspiration for readers, and highlights the importance of female relationships.

One aspect of sisterhood in *Little Women* is the idea of supporting and empowering one another. As the sisters navigate their different paths in life, they always find ways to help each other and lift each other up. For example, when Jo's novel is rejected, her sister Meg encourages her by saying, "You have real talent, Jo, and someday I believe you'll write something that will be read and remembered." This kind of support is crucial to the bond between sisters and emphasizes the importance of lifting each other up. An example of this can also be seen in the relationship between Amy and Jo. While they may have had their differences in the past, they ultimately come to understand and appreciate each other's unique strengths. When Amy tells

Jo she is engaged to Laurie, Jo initially struggles with her feelings, but ultimately realizes that Amy is the best match for Laurie and supports their union. This moment shows that sisterhood isn't just about getting along all the time, but about supporting each other even when it's difficult.

Female sibling relationships have been increasingly examined in literature and have become a topic of interest for researchers. According to Lorin (2019), "the portrayal of female sibling relationships in literature often reflects societal expectations of gender roles and behavior. In *Little Women*, the March sisters demonstrate that sisterhood can provide a source of strength and support, despite the challenges they face individually and as a family. As Lorin (2019) notes, "The literature of the 19th century highlights the importance of the sister bond and its potential to provide emotional support and empowerment to women at a time when their opportunities for personal growth and independence were limited." The novel highlights the importance of supporting each other, even in difficult times, as a way of preserving the family unit. This is in line with the idea that "sisterhood is a bond that can help us navigate the challenges of life and maintain a sense of belonging and connection" (Moreno & Banuelos, 2013).

Highlights the role of sisterhood in *Little Women* and its impact on the novel's plot and characters. In her article "The Bonds of Sisterhood: Female Friendship in *Little Women*," Karin E. Westman (2008) argues that the "sisterhood bond" among the four March sisters is a central theme of the novel, and one that shapes their individual growth and development. She writes, "The sisterhood bond is a thread that ties the four March sisters together and provides them with the emotional support they need to face life's challenges. Their mutual love and support is essential to their happiness and success." Westman's

analysis emphasizes the importance of sisterly bonds in the novel and highlights the ways in which these relationships help the characters overcome obstacles and navigate the complexities of their lives. Furthermore, the analysis also reveals that while the sisters in *Little Women* exhibit strong bonds, there are still instances of conflict and competition between them. This is exemplified in the rivalry between Jo and Amy, particularly when it comes to their artistic pursuits and their love for Laurie. This reflects the reality of sibling relationships, which are often complex and dynamic, characterized by both love and competition.

In a broader context, the analysis of sisterly bonds in *Little Women* has significant implications for real-life relationships. As more and more women pursue careers and live independent lives, the importance of maintaining strong bonds with family, particularly sisters, remains vital. The novel serves as a reminder of the value of sisterhood as a source of support, comfort, and love in navigating the challenges of life. An analysis of sisterly relationships in *Little Women* shows that this novel is not only a beautiful work of literature but also contains relevant moral and social messages today. "The bond between sisters is a powerful one, and *Little Women* beautifully illustrates the complexities and nuances of this relationship. The sisters in the novel support each other through difficult times, celebrate each other's successes, and ultimately grow together as they navigate the challenges of growing up and finding their place in the world. Through their sisterly bond, the characters in *Little Women* demonstrate the importance of familial relationships and the strength that can be found in sisterhood."

The sibling relationships portrayed in the novel demonstrate the importance of togetherness and mutual support in the family, as well as the complexity of sibling

relationships. In an increasingly individualistic modern era, *Little Women* can serve as a reminder of the enduring values of family and sisterhood in our lives today. On sibling relationships and their influence on emotional development found that "siblings who report high levels of closeness tend to have better mental health outcomes, higher levels of self-esteem, and more positive relationships with parents and peers" (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). This supports the idea that the strong sisterly bonds depicted in *Little Women* are not just heartwarming fiction, but can have real positive effects on the individuals involved. Additionally, research on the representation of female relationships in media has found that positive portrayals of sisterhood can have a positive impact on how young girls view their own relationships with sisters and friends (Rosewarne, 2017). This highlights the potential importance of examining and celebrating positive depictions of sisterly bonds, such as those found in *Little Women*.

The feminist analysis of *Little Women* highlights the importance of female solidarity and empowerment in a male-dominated society. As one study notes, "The novel depicts the female protagonist's search for her own identity, her struggles against patriarchal norms, and her determination to pursue her own dreams and goals" (Cui, 2019). This is evident in the close relationships between the sisters and their mutual support and encouragement, as well as in their individual pursuits of education, career, and personal fulfillment. By emphasizing the agency and autonomy of its female characters, *Little Women* challenges the gender roles and expectations of its time and continues to inspire feminist perspectives today.

Another study supports the idea that sisterly bonds are significant in shaping one's identity and self-esteem. A study conducted by McHale et al. (2012) found

that sisters' closeness and support positively influenced their self-esteem and competence in young adulthood. They also found that sisters who reported closer relationships experienced fewer depressive symptoms and had better mental health outcomes. Furthermore, a study by Feinberg et al. (2012) found that siblings' relationships and interactions with each other have a significant impact on their development and well-being. They found that siblings who had positive and supportive relationships with each other were more likely to exhibit positive social behaviors and have better academic achievement. These studies further emphasize the importance of exploring and understanding sibling relationships, particularly sisterly bonds, in literature and media, as they have a significant impact on individuals' development, self-esteem, and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our analysis of female sibling relationships in *Little Women* highlights the importance of sisterly bonds and their portrayal in literature. Through the characters of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, the novel demonstrates the complexity and emotional depth of these relationships, as well as their relevance to broader social and cultural norms. *Little Women* emphasizes the value of sisterhood as a source of support, strength, and love, while also acknowledging the challenges and conflicts that can arise within these relationships. The novel shows how sisters can inspire and motivate each other, while also providing comfort and understanding during difficult times.

Moreover, our analysis reveals how *Little Women* reflects the values and expectations of Victorian society, particularly in its emphasis on family loyalty and cooperation. At the same time, the novel's themes and characters have resonated with readers across generations, offering insights and lessons about the

enduring power of sisterly bonds. The analysis of sisterly bonds in *Little Women* reveals that the novel is not just a beautiful work of literature, but also contains relevant social and moral messages that remain significant to this day. The novel's portrayal of sisterly bonds highlights the importance of togetherness and support within the family, as well as the complexity of sibling relationships. In an increasingly individualistic modern era, *Little Women* serves as a reminder of the enduring value of family and sisterhood.

REFERENCES

- Alcott, L. M. (2012). *Little Women*. Signet Classics.
- Alcott, L.M. (1868). *Little Women*. Roberts Brothers.
- Alsaedi, R. (2019). Sisterhood and Female Friendship. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(2), 107-113. doi: 10.5539/ijel.v9n2p107
- Al-Saidi, A. (2017). Female Friendship and Sisterhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. *Journal of American Culture*, 40(4), 367-375
- Al-Shalabi, R. (2021). The Portrayal of Sisterhood in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 10(1), 12-18.
- Bender, C. (2017). Gender stereotyping in *Little Women*: "Let us be elegant or die!". *Midwest Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 8, 140-151.
- Brott, A. (2018). *The Unique and Enduring Bond of Sisters*. Psychology Today. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/it-s-my-life/201810/the-unique-and-enduring-bond-sisters>
- Chang, A. (2009). The Female Bildungsroman and *Little Women*. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(3), 237-248.
- Ciccarelli, M. (2018). Sibling Relationships in Children's Literature: A Content Analysis of Selected Works.

- Journal of Children's Literature*, 44(2), 5-18.
- Cott, N. F. (2021). *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*. Yale University Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Cui, X. (2019). Female Identity and Subjectivity in Little Women. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 18(1), 7-13.
- Eaton, A. W. (2017). The Domestication of Heroines: Women's Writing in the Nineteenth Century. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 13(3).
- Egan, R. (2004). Sisterhood and Sibling Relations in Children's Literature. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 29(4), 330-339.
- Egeland, M. (2020). Little Women travelling to Scandinavia: The Reception of Louisa M. Alcott in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 50(2), 314-334.
- Ekasanti, N. R., & Hernawati, M. (2018). Representation of Gender Stereotyping in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women: Endorsement of Traditional Gender Roles. *Lexicon*, 6(2), 111-118.
- Feinberg, M. E., Solmeyer, A. R., McHale, S. M., & Whiteman, S. D. (2012). The third rail of family systems: Sibling relationships, mental and behavioral health, and preventive intervention in childhood and adolescence. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 15(1), 43-57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0102-0>
- Fiske, J. (2004) The Making of a Feminist: Louisa May Alcott." Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Beverly Lyon Clark, Cambridge University Press.
- Galpin, S. A. (2021). Leaning in or opting out? Women's choices in Little Women and Mary Queen of Scots. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-14.
- Hendrianingsih, E., & Pujasari, H. (2021). Sisterhood in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women: A Feminist Approach. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 6(1), 49-59.
- Ismail, H. M. (2023). Little Women: Louisa May Alcott's Duality Between the Intentional Lessons and the Unconscious Messages. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(4), 867-872.
- Levant, R. F., & Pollack, W. S. (1995). *A new psychology of men*. BasicBooks.
- Lorin, R. (2019). *Sororal bonds actualized: sisterhood in Charlotte Bronte's Shirley and Louisa May Alcott's Work*. (Master Thesis at Eastern Washington University).
- McHale, S. M., Updegraff, K. A., Whiteman, S. D., & Crouter, A. C. (2012). Siblings' roles in young adults' psychological well-being and attitudes toward family. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(5), 732-742. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029210>
- Nodelman, P. (2008). *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Petrecu, B., & Sticchi, D. (2018). Digital Methods for Analysing Literary Texts: An Analysis of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-12.
- Rioux, A. B. (2018). *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The story of Little Women and why it still matters*. WW Norton & Company.
- Rivas, S. (2014). Defining Nineteenth-Century Womanhood: The Cult of Marmee and Little Women. *Scientia et Humanitas*, 4, 53-64.
- Santi, N. Y., & Rahmi, A. (2019). FEMINISM VALUES IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LITTLE

WOMEN. *Islamic Manuscript of Linguistics and Humanity*, 1(1).

- Segrave, K. (2014). *Movies at Home: How Hollywood Came to Television*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Wasserstein, W. (2005). *Introduction*. In L.M. Alcott (Ed.), *Little Women* (pp. xi-xxvii). Penguin Classics.
- Westman, K. E. (2008). The Bonds of Sisterhood: Female Friendship in Little Women." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 33(2),141-148.
- Yang, L., & Zhong, J. (2023). Study of Amy's Female Consciousness in Alcott's Little Women. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 8(3), 244-249.
- Zeng, Y., Li, L., & Wang, Y. (2017). A Study on the Sisterhood in Little Women from the Perspective of Feminism. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(1), 13-19.