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Literary Representations of Female Experience
and Authorship in *Little Women* by Louisa May
Alcott and *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern.

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ABSTRACT

The literary field has always been a challenging terrain for women, especially in the 19th century, when women started to realize their subjected condition in contrast to men's. This led to the first wave of feminism in which females began to denounce their oppressed situation in society. Many women dared to take part in the writing world and wrote uncountable texts. Fanny Fern and Louisa May Alcott chose to write about their own experiences as female authors and the struggles they had to endure to be published. The aim of this dissertation is to analyze two texts by these authors, *Ruth Hall* (1855) and *Little Women* (1869), in order to discuss the importance of having representative female writers in fiction recounting their experiences on how they accomplished a writing career. This will be done through an analysis of the formal features of the novels which depict the importance of literature in the protagonists' lives. It will be followed by a discussion of the figures of Ruth Hall and Jo March, who encapsulate how it was possible to achieve their purpose of becoming authors. Finally, there will be an examination of their experiences as female writers who attempted to thrive in the literary world and how they achieved to do so. As it will be argued, through their journeys, in which men made it very hard for them to succeed, it is portrayed how it is through this feeling of threat that women's position was starting to change, as it depicted them as fair competitors, suggesting that they jeopardized men's superior status, both in the writing field and in society.

Keywords: First-wave feminism; female authors; Louisa May Alcott; Fenny Fern; Little Women; Ruth Hall.

RESUMEN

El campo literario ha sido siempre un terreno desafiante para las mujeres, especialmente en el siglo XIX cuando se empezaron a dar cuenta de que ocupaban una posición de subordinación respecto al hombre. Esto desató la primera ola de feminismo en la que las mujeres empezaron a reivindicar en contra de su situación de oprimidas en la sociedad. Muchas mujeres apostaron por el mundo de la escritura y escribieron numerosos textos. Fanny Fern y Louisa May Alcott optaron por escribir sobre su propia experiencia como mujeres autoras y las dificultades que tuvieron que superar para ser publicadas. Por lo tanto, el propósito de esta disertación es analizar dos textos de estas autoras, *Ruth Hall* y *Mujercitas*, para razonar la importancia de tener a autoras mujeres en ficción que narran la experiencia de cómo consiguieron lograr una carrera como escritoras. Esto se hará a través de un análisis de los aspectos formales de las novelas los cuales representan la importancia de la literatura en la vida de las protagonistas. Seguido por un estudio de las figuras de Ruth Hall y Jo March, que encapsulan cómo fue posible que lograran el objetivo de convertirse en autoras. Por último, una evaluación de su experiencia como mujeres escritoras que intentaron prosperar en el mundo literario y como consiguieron hacerlo. A través de su trayectoria, en la que los hombres les hicieron imposible poder triunfar, retratan cómo es por medio del sentimiento de amenaza que sufren dichos hombres, la razón por la que la posición de la mujer estaba empezando a cambiar porque se les representa como competidoras equitativas a ellos y cómo pusieron en peligro el estatus de superioridad de los hombres tanto en el campo literario como en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Primera ola del feminismo; autoras; Louisa May Alcott; Fanny Fern; Mujercitas; Ruth Hall.

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	7
3. ANALYSIS	12
3.1. Formal Features	12
3.2. Content: Jo and Ruth.....	16
3.3. Women as Authors	21
4. CONCLUSION	25
5. WORKS CITED.....	27

1. INTRODUCTION

The 19th century in the US was a period marked by change. Many life-changing events were taking place, one of them being the beginning of the first wave of feminism. A significant number of women started to become aware of their oppressed condition and wished to alter it. Some of them decided to pursue independence by becoming writers. Nowadays, many of these women are remembered as celebrated authors, such as Emily Dickinson, who has become a widely known poet from that period. Others established themselves as prose writers. This is the case of Louisa May Alcott and Fanny Fern, who used their writings to narrate their condition as female authors. Alcott is a well-known author whose works are still present in contemporary society. On the other hand, Fern's figure is not as well known in mainstream culture, but she was extremely relevant in her period. Both recounted their experiences in order to depict the unfair conditions women were subjected to in a field that was starting to welcome them. Not only were they able to publish their works despite being women, but they did so by celebrating the importance of being a writer through their characters—something for which they both should be remembered.

The purpose of this dissertation is to compare two works published by these two women in the mid-19th century, *Little Women* (1869) by Louisa May Alcott, and *Ruth Hall* (1855) by Fanny Fern, in an effort to expose the struggles women were subjugated to in order to make a living in the writing field. Both authors pursued the same ambition from different perspectives, providing each unique experience in their writing on how hard it was for a woman to get published, while also highlighting the importance of their writings as they capture their story in a realistic account. Furthermore, they managed to create characters to act as their representatives in their novels—the figures of Jo March and Ruth

Hall respectively, who encapsulate many young women of the time that had the same dream as they did.

Sarah Payton Willis, better known as Fanny Fern, was “the first woman newspaper columnist in the United States” (Willis 104), and she also became a novelist who enjoyed making satiric commentaries on the society of the time. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, she was born in 1811. Her family came from a long journalistic and literary tradition; therefore, she was in contact with literature from an early age. She was educated and decided to write newspapers columns after she divorced her second husband, which left her in need to provide for her children. She was employed in various journals such as *True Flag* or *Mother’s Assistant*, from which her articles were published in two volumes. Her first novel was *Ruth Hall* (1855), followed by another novel and two books for children (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 to a family who cherished intellectual challenge and educational values, like Fern’s. She grew up surrounded by figures such as Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, which kept her in contact with literature from an early age (Clinton and Lunardini 140). During her life she had multiple jobs and even enlisted to be a nurse in the Civil War, where she fell ill and became a semi-invalid for the rest of her life. This circumstance was what made her write her first novel *Hospital Sketches* (1863). It was followed by her most significant work, *Little Women* (1869), for which she is remembered as one of the most beloved writers of domestic literature (Clinton and Lunardini 141).

Both authors were significant writers who belonged to the first wave of feminism of the beginning of the 19th century, in which women were starting to realize and contest their subordinate condition compared to men’s. In their case, Fern and Alcott were able

to take part in the literary field by challenging male dominance in it. However, despite women's persuading presence in literature, their writings were not taken into account until the 1960s and the second wave of feminism. Where it comes to literature, this second stage of feminist activity focused on the recovery of lost women's voices, which had been silenced by male authors' suffocating presence and male literary critics' own agenda. Thanks to the work of second-wave feminist critics, figures such as the ones of Fern and Alcott were recovered and given their rightful place in the history of literature.

The main objective of this dissertation is to compare *Little Women* and *Ruth Hall* in order to discuss the importance of the representation of women who pursued the writing career in the 19th century. This will be done, firstly, by locating the period the writings belong to in order to pinpoint the circumstances they had to deal with in the historical context of the 19th century. This first section will also discuss the theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the novels. The analysis of the two texts will follow, which will be divided into three different parts. The first one will deal with the formal features of both novels, more specifically how the genre they belong to, the type of narrator and the presence of metafiction is significant in the telling of the story of two women who are in constant contact with literature. The second section, will focus on the main characters, Jo and Ruth respectively, and how they are portrayed throughout the stories, specially how their childhood and family relationships influence their identity and their views regarding love and marriage. The last part of the analysis will focus on the relevance of women as authors and how both characters choose to become one, their reasons and circumstances. It will also depict the difficulties men imposed on them in order to get published, showing the obstacles they had to overcome. Ultimately, this dissertation will highlight the importance of having female writers who chose to recount their life stories through characters who also aspired to make a living in the writing field.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first wave of feminism is considered to have its beginning in the 19th century as a reaction to the main ways in which women in the period were marginalized, as Marlene LeGates outlines in her book *A history of Feminism in Western Society* (2001): exclusion from political and cultural authority, and economic and sexual exploitation (13). All these constraints perpetuated the gap that existed among women, as it did not allow them to maintain a tradition of feminist thinking that would enable them to form a conscious collective identity (16). The 19th century is a time of constant changes and developments that influenced everyone in society. As for women, it was a period in which they started to take a leading role in their lives once they started to realize that they lived under severe male dominance. This phase of feminism is characterized by four aspects: 1) it was tied to other movements that were simultaneously taking place at the time; 2) it comprised women from different backgrounds, although some were privileged over others; 3) it embraced a broad range of concerns; and, 4) feminist women were a small minority of women (LeGates 191-192).

As Clinton and Lunardini argue, women influenced and promoted changes in 19th century society (8). They aimed to improve their conditions in a wide range of categories, such as in education or politics. These changes are related to the events that occurred as the century advanced. Women were active participants in numerous historical events. For instance, abolitionism and women's rights came hand in hand, as the former was one of the main triggers of the feminist movement. During The World Anti-Slavery Conference, women were forced to confront their own precarious place in society, which culminated in the Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, signed in 1847 in order to campaign and advocate for women's rights (Clinton and Lunardini 113-114).

The beginnings of the first wave of feminism can be associated with the Industrial Revolution, as there was a shift in the economy, going from home-based to factory-based. This led to the “Separate Spheres Doctrine,” which separated men and women into two different worlds. On the one hand, women were relegated to the private sphere, while, on the other hand, men relished in the public sphere outside of the home due to their working position (Clinton and Lunardini 21).

In the field of economy and labor, women lacked economic independence. Some worked in cotton plantations, mills, factories, and the textile industry. Educated women worked as teachers, as opposed to uneducated women, whose jobs were mainly as domestic servants. According to LeGates, those were considered to be female occupations, and they earned considerably lower wages than men (161). This disadvantage made women precursors of labor protests in order to obtain labor justice, which they were refused.

In this period, female education was starting to acquire support, which as Clinton and Lunardini argue, came from two sides: those who used it as a means to maintain the republican ideal and those who actually believed that women had the ability and the right for education (39). New female seminaries were created, followed by the permission for advanced education. Nevertheless, a new generation of women with college graduations found it extremely complicated to enter what were thought of as “male” professions (law, science, medicine), being segregated to few career paths considered to be “female” professions (teaching, nursing, and social work) (97-98). Additionally, not every woman could be educated; it depended on the privileges of class and race.

Regarding politics, women were in prominent disadvantage, as their legal status was not mentioned in the Constitution. They were considered property and were invisible concerning legal matters. Married women were highly affected, as they had an inferior

status and fought for a change in divorce and custody laws through the Marriage Reform, which would eventually allow them to own property (Clinton and Lunardini 62-63). The rise of new cities and the massive economic growth of the period allowed women to find more opportunities to pursue equality thanks to new work opportunities (Clinton and Lunardini 92).

The birth of the New Woman also came at the end of the century. It resulted from women aiming to gain control over their bodies. They fought for a dress reform and against the portrayal of women as sexual objects, which followed the Victorian stereotype of the female constitution as fragile and different from men's (Clinton and Lunardini 111). This gave rise to the literary construct of the New Woman and to New Woman Fiction, which, according to Ann Heilmann, "was more than a literary response to the social changes brought about by the Victorian women's movement: it constituted, and conceived itself as, an agent of social and political transformation" (4).

At the end of the century, the issue of universal woman suffrage became more prominent and controversial, as it was not supported by every feminist of the time (Clinton and Lunardini 115). Multiple women's rights organizations were founded, culminating in 1890 in the formation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. It brought together two of the main associations which previously supported suffrage from different perspectives (Clinton and Lunardini 125).

As Marlene LeGates remarks, another significant change women in the 19th century tried to achieve was in the field of literature (206). They challenged the male monopoly and its outdated ideas. They did so by founding literary clubs and pursuing careers as authors. Many started because they could intertwine these occupations with their home life. In mid-century US, publishing was daring for women. Yet, they established themselves as the main writers of domestic novels, which "dramatized the

lives of ordinary women and depicted strong female communities” (LeGates 206). They were also prominent writers of autobiographies and were very active in journalism.

Women’s history has been studied for centuries. However, it was not until the 1960s, with the second wave of feminism, that the figure of the female writer started to be taken into account in literary criticism. According to Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, the second wave of feminism focused on “the search for lost women’s voices” (102), and on “the recovery of lost and marginalized traditions of women’s writing” (103). This, as Pam Morris argues, is necessary to understand the ways in which society has worked and still works in disadvantage for women (7).

The movement started by analyzing and studying the literary representation of women from male writers’ perspective, and it sought to challenge the canon and the literary establishment, which in the 60s was controlled by men (Morris 37). Women were misrepresented by men in their writings because, as Simone de Beauvoir explains, they were considered to be the secondary element and the other to the norm which was the man (qtd. in Morris 14). In *Literature and Feminism* (2001), Morris explains how women readers of those literary works had to “resist narrative points of view as they were required to identify against themselves” (27). They were portrayed following basic conventions and stereotypes which simplified them as human beings and made them passive to events (32). Most of the representations of women by men were simplistic. Male writers assumed that the universal reader was male, and their texts were controlled by their aesthetic form which focused on “the singleness of vision and excluded women” (42).

The second phase of the re-evaluation of women in literary criticism was the rediscovery of forgotten and neglected writings by women, which represent women by women and for women, in order to challenge the established male canon (Morris 51). This canon segregated women writers, who were conceded to be special cases and were

seen first as women and second as writers, not as a combination of both (Morris 43). Therefore, a female literary tradition was revealed to have existed.

According to Plain and Sellers, this conveyed new ways of understanding female writers as self-aware of their status, and it also made critics start to consider the period of the writings and the cultural background (109). They discovered a shared female tradition which, as Morris argues, consisted of mutual influence among writers, celebrated women's sexuality and body, used works to protest, and proclaimed the lives and dreams of women as meaningful (59-64). Elaine Showalter coined the term "Gynocriticism" to refer to "the shared 'female-subculture' in which the focus on women enables new methodologies" by asking the simple question "where were the women writers" (Plain and Sellers 108). Thanks to the development of this feminist literary criticism, women were able to reappropriate works and readings using them to understand contemporary dilemmas and issues and, overall, to demonstrate that women's voices and agency, although ignored, have always existed (Plain and Sellers 125).

3. ANALYSIS

Women's role was beginning to change in the mid-19th century. This can be observed through writings from the period, both historical and fictional. The fictional ones represented a new type of woman who started to gain independence and whose main concern was to achieve her goals, leaving behind the submission women were subjected to. In the literature domain, a considerable number of female writers were beginning to take the initiative and decided to write about themselves, about their experiences as women. In both *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern there is an ongoing need to overcome difficulties as a result of the protagonists' gender. *Little Women* tells the story of four sisters and their path from girlhood to adulthood, exploring their dreams and struggles, in particular Jo's journey in becoming an author. As for *Ruth Hall*, it focuses on Ruth's difficult life after her husband dies and she has to find a way to support her children being a widow. As women from that period, they were expected to fulfill a role which at that time was considered to be immutable, but that was progressively changing. Through their unique circumstances, both characters are a representation of the struggles women had to face in a shifting 19th century in order to make a living in the writing field, while still being loyal to themselves and those they loved.

3.1. Formal Features

Jo and Ruth's differences and similarities in character and personality are shown through the books' narratology, that is, the two novels' differences in terms of form. To begin with, *Ruth Hall* follows the structure of a roman à clef, "a French term meaning 'novel with a key,'" and which "refers to fictional works in which actual people or events can be identified by a knowing reader" (Boyde 156). In this case, Fern chose this novel to tell her own story, being *Ruth Hall* an autobiographical narrative of her life. Indeed, as Warren explains, she did not bother to make some of the traits of the characters who wronged her

untraceable (17). Furthermore, just like she chose to be referred to as “Fanny Fern” instead of Sara Payson Willis, she gives Ruth the nom-de-plume “Floy” to hide under and to make people wonder whose identity is behind the writings. Alternatively, *Little Women* is categorized in the sub-genre known as domestic novel, which “transforms domestic incident into plot, centering on the home and family—not only as the sphere that launches the hero, but as the locus of significant narrative action; investing the seeming ‘trifles’ of daily domestic life with profound emotional and cultural value” (Tompkins qtd. in Merish 1). While writing *Little Women*, Alcott found inspiration in moments of her own life as well. She chose the figure of Jo as her representative (Cheney 167), and confessed that some of the experiences and characters were portrayals of her family and friends, such as the figures of Marmee, which is the way in which Alcott referred to her own mother, and stating that her figure “was all true, only not half good enough”, or Laurie, who in reality was not American, but a Polish boy she met in Europe (Alcott qtd. in Cheney 168).

Another aspect worth considering is that both texts are divided into episodes. However, Alcott’s style is more conventional due to her previous experience writing short stories and novels, whereas Fern’s tends to lean towards the one used in journalism, with short chapters that sometimes take up only a page. This is because, as Warren explains, Fern was a journalist for twenty-one years and was remarkably talented in writing short newspaper articles, being that style of writing hard to leave behind (30-31). Nevertheless, she is conscious of the resemblance of her style to the journalistic one, and in the Preface of the novel she states: “I am aware that it is entirely at variance with all set rules for novel-writing,” also manifesting her intention not to indulge much on useless description of plot, character or setting (Fern 1).

As mentioned before, in the two novels traces of autobiography are found, as the authors depict their experiences as writers through their protagonists. This can be seen

through the choice of narrator. Both are intrusive narrators who interrupt the narrative to comment. As Bujak states, the narrator does so because it cares about the characters, especially for those who are considered to be weak and vulnerable by society or other characters (16-17). Additionally, he claims that it is a representation of both the author and the reader's caring about the literary characters, as through the power of writing they are able to feel and identify with the sufferings and joys of the characters (18).

However, the comments made by the narrators of the two novels are different. On the one hand, the ones made by the narrator of *Ruth Hall* are extremely ironic. As Harnett explains, the text masks itself under the appearance of a sentimental novel; nevertheless, there are layers of satire underneath its surface (2). Fern makes use of the narrator to comment all throughout the narrative criticizing attitudes, especially those of Mrs. Hall. In chapter XIV, there are numerous remarks made by the narrator. In the passage where Mrs. Hall is visiting Ruth and Harry's place and incorrectly judges Ruth's disposal of Harry's money implying that she spends too much, the narrator reprimands Mrs. Hall's attitude by advising her to take a close look—"Not so fast, my dear madam. Examine closely"—or to consider her son's opinion—"You should see how Harry's eyes glisten, as they pass from one flower vase to another" (*Fern* 29). The narrator is a representation of the implied author's own views who, apart from pitying Ruth, also feels pride when she succeeds: "And now our heroine had become a regular business woman" (200).

On the other hand, the comments made in *Little Women* are moral, sometimes even didactic. According to Fetterley, Alcott sends a conflicting idea "between its overt messages and its cover messages" (370). The main overt message would be how to become the "ideal womanly character" by "defining a woman's proper sphere and proper work" (372). However, it is through the implied author's attitudes towards some of the character's behaviors, especially Jo's, that it can be seen how Alcott herself does not agree

with the narrator's advice of being solemnly a little woman. For instance, in the following passage she supports Jo's decision of being economically independent: "Jo enjoyed a taste of this satisfaction, and ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny" (253).

Another significant aspect that highlights the author's overt presence in the novels is the use of metafiction, which Klinkowitz defines as "a style of prose narrative in which attention is directed to the process of fictive composition" (1); in other words, techniques that remind the reader that what they are reading is fictional. There are some metafictional devices present in the novels. As mentioned before, the narrator intrusively comments on both narratives to give his/her opinion of the circumstances. However, they also address the readers of the novel directly. In *Ruth Hall* we find examples such as the following: "Those of my readers who are well acquainted with journalism [...]" (Fern 183). The same happens in *Little Women*, in which the author addresses the readers of the text in several occasions: "Such hours are beautiful to live, but very hard to describe, so I will leave it to the imagination of my readers [...]" (Alcott 190).

As has already been established, both Alcott and Fern decided to write about their own experiences. Therefore, each recounts their journey while becoming writers. In *Ruth Hall* there are several references to the articles that the protagonist writes. However, there is not a single one in the novel that illustrates her talent as a columnist. The same happens in *Little Women*, with the texts Jo publishes in magazines. They are praised by the family, but the reader never has an opportunity to read them. Nevertheless, the narrative contains literary passages written by Jo, such as the poem she writes for one of her sisters before her passing, about death waiting to come take Beth away from her: "Hope and faith, born of my sorrow, / Guardian angels shall become, / And the sister gone before me / By their hands shall lead me home" (Alcott 387-389). Furthermore, in both novels, the characters

are constantly sending and receiving correspondence. Ruth does so with Mr. Walter when they first become acquainted, and she also receives numerous letters from fans who wish to ask her for favors or even to marry her. In *Little Women*, letters are important from the very first chapters and continue being so throughout the novel. On occasion, a chapter would be a compilation of letters from one of the sisters, for example when Amy recounts to the family what has been happening with her life in Europe.

Hence, it can be said that the form of both novels is significant for their understanding, as both authors have different experiences they desire to express in their writings. Furthermore, as they focus on characters who are part of the writing field, there is a need to portray that world through the incorporation of literary resources and passages in order to narrate this experience. It is through them that the reader realizes how present literature is in their everyday lives, for both the characters and the authors, and how unique each experience is, making each one count, not only as an example, but as an inspiration. It also depicts how many women, regardless of their occupation, relied on literature for their own benefit although most did not even realize it.

3.2. Content: Jo and Ruth

In the novels, the reader is introduced to the figures of two young women whose lives are narrated. At the beginning, both protagonists, Ruth Hall and Jo March, seem to be complete opposites, as they aspire to follow different paths in life. Nevertheless, as the plots progress, they are shown to be more similar than it may appear at first sight. In the case of Jo, she has three other sisters, being each one of them the encapsulation of a different type of personality. Jo can be considered the most striking one, due to her stubborn desire to become a well-known author. Jo's dream is in clear contrast to Ruth's, as hers is to get married and to find someone who will love her due to her family

neglecting her and not showing any affection towards her. This made her develop a constant desire to be loved and to love as she was not able to do so in her childhood.

As often happens, the image of themselves that they project to the world is not the one they think. Jo considers herself to be someone independent who wishes to have the same opportunities as boys, such as going to university, as she constantly repeats: “How I wish I was going to college! You don’t look as if you liked it” (Alcott 30). However, her insistence on the equality of opportunities for men and women tends to confuse readers and even the characters of the story, who constantly call Jo a “tomboy.” As Janeway argues, Jo is a symbol of the dream of developing into full humanity with all the potential that it offers, rather than into the constrained femininity she rejects (in Quimby 6). In a way, this contrasts the depiction of Ruth, who is said to have had a glow up and to be quite beautiful, and is very kind and naïve at the beginning of the novel. She is not as different from Jo as it may seem, as she is constantly criticized by other characters who despise her desire to be cultivated: “Ruth’s schoolmates wondering the while why she took so much pains to bother her head with those stupid books, when she was every day growing prettier” (Fern 4). However, this changes due to their circumstances. Jo is forced to balance her independence due to Beth’s illness, as she begins to be needed around the household, while Ruth is forced out of her naivety when she becomes a widow after her husband’s passing.

One of the most significant circumstances that shapes one’s character is how they have been raised and in which type of family. How a person has been taught to behave, what to aspire in life and how to be towards others matters profoundly. Regarding this aspect, both protagonists have completely different experiences concerning their family relationships. In Ruth’s case, in the very first chapter the reader discovers that Ruth’s mother passed away when she was still a young girl. This implies Ruth’s lack of female

representation in her life, being left to figure out herself how a woman of the period should behave. Moreover, the most significant memory she has of her mother is about how scared she was of her husband: “Ruth did not remember a great deal about her—only that she always looked uneasy about the time her father was expected home” (Fern 2), which highlights the sort of man he is. For Jo, her family is what matters most in the world. Apart from being surrounded by three sisters who love her unconditionally, her parents play an important role in the shaping of her character. According to Fetterley, “Marmee is the model little woman” (371) and inspires the girls to become the better versions of themselves, encouraging the value of self-control, being her philosophy “conquer oneself and live for others” (372). Contrary to Ruth’s father, Mr. March loves and supports the family’s desires, although absent fighting in the Civil War. They keep in contact through letters in which he constantly reminds them to “conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them, I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women” (Alcott 11).

When both protagonists grow up, their family dynamics follow them into adulthood. Once Ruth becomes a widow her economic situation is not the best. However, instead of being helped by her family, she is deceived by them, especially by her father and her parents-in-law. They reach an agreement in which they would not secure her economically, which will allow Mrs. Hall to have custody of Ruth’s children, as “the law says if the mother can’t support her children, the grand-parents shall do it” (Fern 215). Therefore, Ruth’s relationship with her family is a complicated one, as her parents-in-law, father and brother do not care about her. They think of her as disposable and only start to care when they find out that she has become famous and is starting to become considerably wealthy thanks to her writing. Jo, on the contrary, has always been supported by her family, both economically and emotionally. Furthermore, her father is the one who

helps her discover her true style and Marmee is constantly encouraging her, although secretly “the more energetic Jo is in pursuing her writing and getting it published, the worse it is and the more anxious Marmee gets” (Fetterley 374), as she would be the one to comfort Jo if she failed. Thus, Jo’s character is shaped by her family, who supports her and helps her become a better person.

In the mid-19th century, when the texts were written and are set, marriage played an important role in the lives of women, and who they married determined the rest of a woman’s life. The two protagonists’ views on marriage are totally contrary to one another. For Ruth, getting married is what she has always desired, not necessarily for the implications of what marriage entails but because she wanted to experience love:

She, Ruth, could inspire love! Life became dear to her. There was something worth living for—something to look forward to. She had a motive—an aim; she should someday make somebody’s heart glad,—somebody’s hearth-stone bright; somebody should be proud of her; and oh, how she could love that somebody! (Fern 3-4)

Her dream is fulfilled when she meets Harry, who loves her despite the persecution she endures from her jealous, bitter and condescending mother-in-law. They spend some time happily married until Harry dies from an illness and Ruth becomes a widow. However, she soon realizes that not all marriages, and consequently men, are the same when she meets Mrs. Leon, “a rich and beautiful, but unhappy, woman whose husband maltreats and oppresses her” (Wood 20), bringing Ruth closer to the truth about some men’s cruelty. Jo, on the contrary, considers marriage to be a prison that deprives women of will and freedom. This is why she rejects Laurie’s proposal: “nothing more, except that 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 340). Alcott’s plan all along was to leave Jo unmarried. However, she was forced to create the figure of Professor Bhaer to comply with the demands of the publisher and the public (Cheney 162). Therefore, the

independent Jo, who was planning to be a spinster her whole life, falls in love with the German Professor and suddenly rejects everything she had longed for throughout the rest of the plot:

An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor Johnson, I'm old and can't enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it. (Alcott 408)

Despite being unusual of Jo's character, as Fetterly highlights in *Little Women: Alcott's Civil War* (1975), accepting that she is worth loving, and having found someone who challenges her intellectually neutralizes Jo's regards of superiority. The Professor's "possession of moral and philosophical wisdom" makes her feel like he is an equal intellectually speaking, worth of her love (381-382). However different the two protagonists' initial opinion on marriage might have been, as both novels advance both Ruth and Jo find out that their idealized or demonized view of marriage is not about black or white, since as time goes by one's fixed opinion regarding a given subject might vary due to circumstances.

In short, through their characterization the reader is introduced to the identity of both characters, which evolves as they grow up. They portray different personalities who react differently to circumstances. Being raised in distinct environments, each most desires what the other lacks. For Ruth that is a family who would love her unconditionally, and for Jo it would be Ruth's independence after she becomes a widow. They encapsulate different women who aspire to achieve freedom and who are provided with individuality. They also show that, independently from their background, each woman has her own dreams, and that although at the time they were not able to fulfill them, that was starting to change. Therefore, through the portrayal of female characters who are able to grow and to overcome adverse circumstances from different upbringings and with different

personalities, both authors depict women to whom other women could relate and empathize with, demonstrating that despite their circumstances, when there is a will, there is a way.

3.3. Women as Authors

If there is something both novels and protagonists have in common is that they give visibility to the struggles of women who aspire to make a living out of writing. Each character has her reasons to become a writer and seek the advantages that this profession offers. For Jo, the main motivation for becoming a writer is, as she states, to “write books, and get rich and famous” (137). Nevertheless, this is a superficial reason, while it is easy to see that the real one, as has been already discussed, is the wish to support herself and be a free woman, and the best way she has to do so is by becoming a celebrated author, as she has the talent to achieve it. Fetterley examines Jo’s relationship with writing in response to fear. She argues that Jo’s journey of becoming an author gradually changes as she has this constant fear of “being selfish, losing her womanliness, and becoming insensitive” (Alcott 377). This is one of the reasons why she renounces to her literary ambitions, adding the feeling of loneliness she has to deal with after Beth’s death and Amy and Laurie’s marriage. This is why she decides to leave her literary dreams on standby and marry Professor Bhaer, becoming what she so ardently rejected in her youth—a little woman.

Ruth’s fate goes in reverse from Jo’s. She discovers her path in life after getting married and having become a widow. After Harry’s passing, Ruth’s fortune is returned to her parents-in-law as she does not have a male heir. At first, she decides to ask for help from her family, but as mentioned, they do not care about her well-being and only desire to get rid of her. Desperately, she seeks for employment in other domains such as education, where she tries to become a teacher, but she is not able to because “she had

been educated, (whether fortunately or unfortunately, let the sequel of my story decide,) at a school where ‘Webster’ was used instead of ‘Worcester’” (Fern 122). Therefore, in order to feed and clothe her children and so that they are not taken away by her mother-in-law, she decides to try her luck on the writing field. She already had some experience, as when she was a little girl “an editor of a paper in the same town used often to come in and take down her compositions in short-hand as she read them aloud, and transfer them to the columns of his paper” (Fern 135), something which encourages her. Unlike Jo, Ruth becomes a celebrated columnist and is able to publish a book, fulfilling Jo’s frustrated dream of ‘getting rich and famous’ that has become her own.

In the 19th century, women had to fight twice as hard as men in order to get their writings published, as they were not granted the same opportunities. Both characters have to endure unfair demands they would rather not conform to, which makes their journey a bittersweet one. Jo’s writing development is led by the desire to find her true style, which mirrors Alcott’s own journey. Driven by the dream of becoming a celebrated author, Jo has to give in to the demands of the public and publisher, exactly what Alcott was forced to do when she married Jo off to the Professor. In the case of Jo, she has to write in a genre she does not enjoy and which does not satisfy her: sensational novels. She has to content herself with writing this type of fiction that she herself calls ‘rubbish’ in a fair number of occasions in order to get published: “As long as the spread eagle paid her a dollar a column for her ‘rubbish’, as she called it, Jo felt herself a woman of means, and spun her little romances diligently” (Alcott 226). Additionally, the first time she gets paid for one of her stories is because Laurie acted on her behalf, which is yet another example of men’s influence over women and how they overexert their power meddling in women’s business without being asked to. Jo finally finds her true style as “the impetus to write has been provided by Marmee and the motivation is solace and comfort for the loss of

Beth” (Fetterley 374), which allows her to be truthful to herself. For Ruth, her writing journey is what made her mature and realize her condition as a woman. When she decides to become a writer she sends her sketches to her brother, Hyacinth, as he is the editor of the *Irving Magazine*. However, he rejects them, telling her that she is talentless and should seek for other employment, thus reinforcing the idea of women being a liability when they are not married (Harris 621). This rejection is what gives her the strength to pursue her newfound call in life: “I can do it, I feel it, I will do it” (Fern 137). After days of trying, she finally finds employment in *The Standard*, run by Mr. Lescom, who undermines Ruth in every possible aspect for being a woman. Later on, she starts to write for *The Pilgrim* as well. However, she does not get paid as much as she should, just enough for her to earn a living and to pay rent and feed her children. Ruth continues to publish for those magazines until John Walters appears and denounces Ruth’s condition: “why, you poor, dear little genius! what you write for those two papers is worth, to the proprietors, ten times what they pay you” (Fern 170). Thanks to Mr. Walters’ help she gets paid what she deserves and even publishes a book about her articles, but not without having to suffer to reach her purpose.

All in all, the two novels suggest that it is through works written by women at the time, in which they narrate their own experiences, that the inequalities faced by female writers in the 19th century are best represented. It was then that many women started to seize the opportunity and write. Many male figures did not support their female companions’ desire to take part in the same field as them. A particularly famous example is Nathaniel Hawthorne, who accused women of “corrupting and capturing the literary market” (Wood 3), and referred to them as “a damned mob of scribbling women” (Hawthorne qtd. in Frederick 231). However, as insulting as it is, it can be said that it is thanks to men’s offense that women thrive, as this feeling of threat is what verifies them

to be fair competitors. Therefore, it is the “account, at times sentimentalized, at times bitterly ironic, of the development, difficulties and final success of a woman writer, written by a woman who is clearly drawing heavily on her own experience” (Wood 4) the best medium for women to tell their journey as writers. By creating characters who pursue the same careers as they did in real life, Alcott and Fern were able to portray their personal experience in paper, encapsulating in the characters of Ruth and Jo the incidents of many women in real life whose goal is to become authors and who overcome every obstacle in order to achieve their dreams.

4. CONCLUSION

In the 19th century, women had it extremely difficult to be someone of their own and to shape their own destiny as something other than a housewife. However, their fortune started to change when the first wave of feminism slowly but surely began to take place. Women such as Louisa May Alcott and Fanny Fern demonstrated that the writing field was not exclusively a male terrain and that women could also make a living out of it. To exemplify their stories, they narrated their experiences in *Little Women* and *Ruth Hall* through the portrayal of characters who also desired to become writers themselves and who represented their real persona.

Having analyzed both novels, it can be said that through their works and the characters of Jo and Ruth, Alcott and Fern were able to portray the experience of many women at the time. Regarding the novels' formal features, they made use of several literary resources which help them narrate their stories. As writers who depict characters who are also writers, they employ devices that succeed in creating a sense of literary connection between them and their profession. Moreover, the novels highlight the relevance of literature in women's daily lives and how important it is for them to relate to the literature they consume, as before they were obliged to picture themselves through male figures or through women poorly developed through men's perspective. Through the characterization of the protagonists, they manage to represent different types of women, avoiding generalizations. They portray two characters who are opposites, with different backgrounds and personalities but who aspire to achieve the same goal. This way they are able to prove that every woman's dream can be fulfilled if they work for it and reject passivity. Fern and Alcott provide each female character with individuality, with frustrations and desires of their own, which proves that each experience is unique and that every woman is different. Lastly, their journey in the literary field was a

nightmare as men considered them to be inferior writers just because they were women. By having been imposed hard demands by men that for their own gender would have not been required, the novels show how patriarchal society really viewed women: as the other who had to be subjugated. However, through this demand of conditions who were unattainable, men only proved that women writers were perceived as a threat that would suppose competition in the writing field, in effect demonstrating that women were as capable to publish and to be as successful as any man. Therefore, it is through that offense that women thrived as writers.

In conclusion, it is thanks to writers such as Alcott and Fern who decided to narrate their own experience, that women were given a realistic representation of how they were able to achieve a place in the writing field. Through the retelling of their struggles and joys as women who aspired to be writers, they paved the way for many others that came years later and who shared their same purpose. Without their works and the portrayal of the man-woman inequality in the literary world in their novels, there would not have been accurate descriptions of the situation, as most of the works that have traditionally been taken into consideration favored the male perspective. Therefore, the first wave of feminism was the precursor of many changes women experienced and the reason women started to realize their subordinate position in contrast with the male gender. Despite their hard-earned success, centuries later it is still an ongoing fight with no foreseeable end.

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