

Romance in Little Women and The Handmaid's Tale: An Investigation of Alcott and Atwood's Subversive Use of the Romance Plot

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Romance in *Little Women* and *The Handmaid's Tale*:
An Investigation of Alcott and Atwood's Subversive use of the Romance Plot

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the subversive potential of the romance plot by critically comparing both the domestic coming-of-age novel *Little Women* with the dystopic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Though pertaining to very different genres, Alcott and Atwood's heroines are made to deal simultaneously with their respective love interests and their main storyline. Both authors play with the romantic plot and idealized tropes to utilize its familiarity in their favor. For Jo, her marriage to the unconventional Professor Bhaer is more intellectually fulfilling, but ultimately is representative of the compromise that Alcott had to make to satisfy her publishers and readers alike. While for Offred, the addition of a romantic storyline undermines the novel's critique of the patriarchy. In each case, Alcott and Atwood both use a familiar narrative plot precisely to disrupt normative narrative expectations. The heroines of *Little Women* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are, in this way, not dissimilar to Trojan horses: outfitted by their authors as relatively unassuming women on the outside, yet ultimately disruptive to the status quo of the plot on the inside.

Dedication

To my mom, Chiara and Sami.

Acknowledgements

Dear Professor Grego,

I am truly grateful for all your help and support in the past few years. You haven't only helped me become a better writer, but also a better, more critical thinker and more engaged student.

You've had a big impact on how I see the world.

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1. Introduction

The romance plot is a familiar story that we have all encountered in its many forms and variations. Driven by the incessant search for Mr. Right and the picture-perfect ending, it is presented as a timeless tale that has continuously attracted many readers—primarily female—book after book. Marked by popularity, the romance plot has not only evolved into a mass-market fiction genre but has also spawned across many literary genres.

Certainly, in popular entertainment, the romantic storyline has become a requirement to satisfy the expectations of readers and producers. The stereotypical Hollywood studio mogul asks the screenwriter “where’s the love interest?” regardless of whether it is relevant to the original idea of the film. The pressure to satisfy predictable, formulaic plot conventions is stronger in film and popular entertainment than in literary fiction. The romance narrative relies on a storyline that has been retold and reworked into many different and unexpected variations. The fascination with this common enough storyline mainly lies in how it functions within a narrative and its cultural context.

Because romance is a powerful narrative that allows people to vicariously live a perfect love story, it is not surprising that its readers continuously go back to it for its repetitive aspect and promise of a happy ending. Yet beyond its formulaic quality, there is also a transgressive nature that this plot line brings to novels. While very much determined by patriarchal expectations such as the trope of the damsel in distress, the romance novel exposes a world prejudiced against women. Even in the Bible, the scriptures contend that, “Your desire shall be

for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). And in a way, the romance story operates like a religion: it is a behavioral paradigm in a male dominated world.

In this thesis, I seek to explore the fictional representations of romance and the way the romance plot works to reinforce or challenge the narrative of novels that usually belong to very different genres. To this end, and with reference to feminist theory and reception theory, I will deconstruct the romantic relationships of two very different novels: *Little Women* (1868) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).

Little Women appears to be a traditional Victorian coming-of-age novel by Luisa May Alcott, whereas Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian novel which investigates gender roles in society. Both novels include a love story, but where Atwood adheres to a star-crossed lover model with Offred and Nick, Alcott challenges the friends-to-lovers model with Jo and Laurie’s relationship.

This is curious because in *The Handmaid’s Tale*—a scathing satire set in a dystopian world where women are reduced to their bodily functions—one might expect a progressive, feminist storyline but instead finds a traditional romance. More curious still, in *Little Women* where one might expect to deal with all things traditional, the reader is instead presented with a disruption to the traditional model of romance and the social necessity of marriage. When these two novels are given a closer look, the ways in which Atwood and Alcott both use romance tropes as a subversive parody of sorts is thought-provoking. Each book uses romance plots as means by which to critique the general public’s reliance on a picture-perfect love story.

2. Chapter One: The Formulaic and Subversive use of Romance

A Definition of The Romance Plot

In *Happily Ever After*, Catherine Roach describes a romance novel as having a female protagonist and telling “a story of an intimate relationship with an optimistic ending” (Roach 92). She writes that “the majority of the genre’s offerings will follow the common-enough life path of heterosexual mother-hood” (Roach 92). These are novels that follow the basic trajectory of the Cinderella plot, which typically involves the story of a deserving heroine who overcomes a series of obstacles only to ultimately arrive at “marriage, love, children, home, and security” (Roach 92). This “life path of heterosexual mother-hood” then fuels the cliché of finding one’s “true love” and living “happily ever after” (Roach 3).

Remarkably, there is actually a trade organization called *Romance Writers of America* that regularizes best practices of the genre for its members. Speaking on behalf of the group Jennifer Crusie defines the key points of the romance novel plot—falling in love, resolving love problems, and ending happily—as adhering to the following criteria:

The story part was easy: it has to be a love story. (...) It has to be a book in which the main plot concerns two people falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. (...) The conflict in the book should center on the love story. The protagonists in the book should be the protagonists in the love story. The climax in the book should resolve the love story and in a happy way at that. Thus the definition they came up with,

finally, was: "A romance is a love story that has an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending." (qtd. in Percec 15)

Crusie may be reductive, but the basic plots of this genre are predictable, even in the hands of superb and innovative authors like Austen and Bronte: it is foreseeable that Elizabeth Bennet will marry Darcy, Jane Eyre will marry Mr. Rochester, Pamela will marry Mr. B, and so on. But to focus on the perfect ending is to miss the point that the plot is not the end in itself, but a means by which to develop character and context.

Plot may be the backbone upon which romance novels are built, but the value of the novel isn't likely to depend on the basic structure of the plot. Pamela Regis's study, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, shows that both the most admired romance novels in the canon, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and the least distinguished popular novels, such as Kathleen Gilles Seidel's *Again*, share the same blueprint for getting the romance heroine from *donée* to denouement. Regis breaks the romance plot down to eight narrative events that take the generic heroine through her journey to marriage: 1) Society Defined, 2) The Meeting, 3) The Barrier, 4) The Attraction, 5) The Declaration, 6) The Point of Ritual Death, 7) The Recognition, and 8) The Betrothal.

All in all, this breakdown identifies the narrative process by which the courtship between hero and heroine succeeds. By means of these scenes, the romantic storyline is supposed to take the heroine from a state of restraint to freedom—that is if all goes well, and one is optimistic about the prospects of married life. Moreover, the meanings of restraint and freedom are contingent upon the historical period and the focus of the author. Also, depending on the tendencies and abilities of the novelist, the plot line can be simpler or more complicated,

characters left thin or given great depth. Then again, the definition of freedom is relative to such factors as time, place, and simply who is holding the pen.

Evidently, the romance novel is an umbrella term for a type of genre fiction that appeals to readers already familiar with it. Expectedness is a crucial element of Romance, and formulaic consistency pleasurable to the devoted reader. Though novels comply with this underlying formulaic structure, they also create interest by creating variations upon it. Thus, romance novels expand into many subgenres and plot variants. According to the *Romance Writers Association* there is a whole distribution of romance plots across a variety of genres, from the historical, to the Inspirational, from the Paranormal to the Regency, from the Young Adult to the Suspense (qtd. Percec 16).

This breakdown is to show that the romance plot is widely distributed across sub-genres. Due to the adaptability of romance to any genre, the insertion of a romantic storyline into a narrative has become an imperative regardless of the narrative's original genre where readers expect to see it develop along the main plot. If a romance is inescapably incorporated into any kind of novel, it can easily feel forced and devoid of chemistry especially due to this formulaic quality. So, forcing the romantic storyline into a story where it is not organic or naturally fit risks distorting and lessening the credibility of characters, plot, and setting.

The formulaic nature of the love story risks affecting the quality of the text: the characters are transported into what can be considered a pre-packaged structure (like Regis' eight narrative events) and they are made to behave in a way that does not fit or seems inconsistent with their character. What potentially arises from the formulaic structure is the perception of the main character as empty if they are thrown into an underdeveloped romance at the expense of their personality. Ergo, for any use of a romantic plot to be compelling—similarly to a

meaningful friendship—the characters must have to have a significant connection that cements their relationship. In short, because the romance plot is so recognizable and so ubiquitous, it is now perceived as lazy plot making and associated to cheap quality.

The Evolution of the Romance Plot

In *Romance: The History of a Genre*, Dana Percec traces the evolution of the romance plot and its influence on "artistic taste, reader response and cultural feedback, authorship and Weltanschauung" (1). She points out that it wasn't until the 18th and 19th centuries that romance gained prominence in novels, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, that highlighted feminine and masculine ideals of the time, as well as the heroine triumphing over the obstacles on her way to marriage.

It was in these texts that the authors started using romance as a trope used to challenge certain ingrained notions or stereotypes. That is to say that these novels simultaneously validate the romance trope and challenge it. Taking Jane Austen as an example, she did not write novels of sentimentality or sensational fictions. Rather, Austen used the ideals of knights and courtly love in a more symbolic way to go beyond the traditional boy meets girl plot. In her text *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen does not simply create a romantic storyline, but she also uses her words as a social commentary and critique allowing her fiction to become one that speaks about inequality. Claudia Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* outlines how these inequalities in her fiction allowed her

to retain the same preoccupations as her more conspicuously political contemporaries, without, however alluding as they did to the topical considerations which had originally animated them, Austen was able not to depoliticize her work—for the political

implication of her work is implicit in the subject matter itself—but rather to depolemize it (Johnson xxv)

In other words, critics and readers have tended to think of Austen's contemporary, Walter Scott, as a political novelist, and of Austen as a mere writer of love stories. Claudia Johnson suggests, rather, that it is a prejudice to think that romance novels exclude serious political thinking.

Austen's novels, Johnson suggests, contain the serious political concerns of their context, though she wears her politics less polemically than Scott. Johnson's point is that the romance plot can serve as the catalyst or spotlight that sheds light on any number of political issues, economics, imperialism, class structures, land ownership, and the like.

It is also during the 19th Century and following the publication of these novels that fiction starts to divide into low-brow and highbrow, or popular and serious fiction. This division also corresponds to how authors use the romance plot. Generally speaking, popular novelists write the romance plot formulaically, naively, and earnestly. Serious novelists challenge and subvert it, write it self-consciously, critically, sometimes self-mockingly. It may seem somewhat reductive, but nevertheless true that popular romance plots are largely earnest and naive, while serious literary romance plots are ironic.

One example was the popular Victorian adventure romance of Bram Stoker that was already "the perfect equivalent of the modern-day bestseller" (Percec 6). Therefore, with the rise of these more "popular" novels, the late 19th century marked the divide between "the 'serious' literature of modernism on the one hand and lower brow fiction, catering for the tastes of the general public, on the other" (Percec 5). In other words, it is at this point when romance started being associated with the popular literary market, and like every other genre, it came in both "high" and "low" versions. This divide is what set the separation between those novels who

transcend the genre, by using this romantic plot as a way to subvert certain ingrained notions and stereotypes about the subject, from those who happily take place within it.

However, this divide is not clear in the eyes of many, including critics such as Regis who, as previously mentioned, equates Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with Kathleen Gilles Seidel's *Again* when it comes to incorporating her eight narrative elements. This is a rather alarming comparison, since Regis' definition is so broad that it can encourage a vast category error. By mainly referring to popular romance novels that have become what Percec calls the modern day "consumerist equivalent of the fairy-tale," Regis runs the risk of making an umbrella term out of the romance plot (Percec 6).

In in her chapter defining the romance novel, Regis states:

Seidel incorporates the eight essential elements of romance, and two of the three incidental ones, in a manner so masterful that it leaves no doubt as to the vitality of the form in contemporary hands. (Regis 39)

Here, "masterful", becomes an interesting word choice as Regis is comparing two novels that, even though they can be said to pertain broadly to the same genre, they still approach it in very distinct ways. In terms of literary quality, technique, innovation and influence, this comparison is rather shocking—especially if based exclusively on the use of romance elements.

Evidently, the duality of this plot places romance authors at a risk of having their texts relegated to popular literature, or, as in the case of Jane Austen, to be classified as too focused on feminine concerns to have a wide appeal. With this in mind, Luisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as exemplary novels to show this atypical use of romance. Therefore, these two novels can be classified as epigones of Jane

Austen and Richardson: using romance as subversion to trigger certain ideas and complicate meaning where we do and don't find it.

3. Chapter Two: Jo's Love Story

Alcott's Divagation from the Expected Groom

At the heart of *Little Women* is Alcott's literary autobiography: the story of a young writer with serious ambitions who is contemplating the kind of book she might write in order to take her place among celebrated authors like George Eliot. *Little Women* did not begin as the kind of book that Alcott wanted to write, but rather the kind of book that she must write in order to make writing a feasible living. In 1868 Alcott writes in her Journal:

Mr. N. [her publisher] wants a girls' story, and I begin "Little Women." Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it. (98)

Evidently, her challenge with writing this domestic novel was in the assertion of her serious literary ambitions that were altogether different from the then burgeoning field of stories focused on moral instruction for young women.

Alcott started writing *Little Women* at the request of the Robert Brothers publishing firm who had read a story of hers in the children's magazine the *Merry's Museum* in 1867. Impressed by Alcott's story "about sisters who give up their New Year's breakfast to a poor German family," Robert Brothers asked Alcott to write a book for girls (Eiselein & Phillips 6). Alcott was initially uninterested. In fact, she hoped "to pass in time from fairies and fables to [write about] men and realities," but finding herself as a young authoress in *The Golden Age of Children's*

*Literature*¹, she had to comply with her public's demand (Alcott 25). Hence, it is no surprise that Alcott's literary classic *Little Women* centers on the March sisters' coming-of-age story: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy.

Volume One is indeed very focused on Jo and her sisters struggling "with internal demons, such as vanity, anger, shyness, and selfishness as well as external pressures created by peer groups, illness, worries, and separations created by the [Civil] war," the *Pilgrim's Progress* plot of the instruction novel (Eiselein & Phillips 9). Volume One was immediately popular and puts Alcott in contact with many of her young, female readers who start writing to her. While the second volume released after the success of the first in 1869, is more focused on the tempering of the characters' ambitions and dreams with societal expectations.

In the second volume, Jo's literary struggles come to the fore, her desire to write serious books, and finding herself thwarted by skeptical editors who want her to conform to the bland and predictable kinds of fables and fantasies considered suitable for young women. This was indeed part of the history of how *Little Women* was written, and Alcott's solution to this struggle in the novel is to subvert the romantic plot. Jo will not marry the handsome and charming swain, Laurie, that her girl readers wanted Jo to marry. Instead, she will marry the peculiar, foreign professor who encourages her to pursue a serious literary career, to find her voice, and be true to her non-narratable ambitions. She marries, in a sense, her own seriousness, and with Professor Bhaer at her side, she takes her career out of the purely female domain of her family into masculine world represented by a school for boys.

¹ *The Golden Age of Children's Literature* refers to the late nineteenth century when the perception of the child underwent a reconfiguration and this literature was "designed more for moral instruction or education than entertainment," focused on the moral instruction and social responsibility a child must learn (Shealy 29).

It would seem that between Volumes One and Two Alcott became frustrated with the reader's obsession with Jo's romantic storyline channeled by the feedback and letters from admirers she received. In fact, when it comes to the character Josephine March the author felt forced to employ a romantic subplot, because this is ultimately what her readers made very clear they wanted to see. In her Journal, the editor Ednah D. Cheney adds:

The excitement of the children was intense; they claimed the author as their own property, and felt as if she were interpreting their very lives and thoughts. The second series was anticipated with the eagerness of a bulletin from the war and the stock market. But unlike Miss Alcott herself, the children took especial interest in the love-story, and when poor Laurie was so obstinately refused by Jo, "they wept aloud, and refused to be comforted," and in some instances were actually made ill by grief and excitement. (Alcott 94)

Then again, Alcott did this in an unexpected way. The obvious choice as Jo's husband would have been "the boy next door" and close friend Laurie, but Alcott decides to challenge and reject these traditional models of romance.

Despite the apparent picture-perfect nature of their romantic relationship, Jo ultimately rejects Laurie's marriage proposal because Jo's main aspiration (and by effect, the main plot) has to do with writing and being an author rather than finding a man to marry and settle down with. And when Jo finally marries, it is to Professor Bhaer, who Alcott calls her "funny match" (qtd. in Barker 190). The unconventional German man is not attractive and not what the reader would expect a perfect match to look or act like. In fact, Alcott is here showing how the romantic subplot isn't the main point of the narrative but rather a means to an end that further complicates and adds depth to the main plot. Relying on the expectedness of the romance plot, Alcott

manages to covertly share her controversial belief that “liberty is a better husband than love to many of us” (Alcott 98).

Little Women: Jo, Writing & the Disappointment in not Being a Boy

Under Alcott’s pen, Jo is presented as a hot-tempered emotional center of the novel who “can’t get over [her] disappointment in not being a boy” and is “dying to go fight [in the Civil war] with papa” (6). Living vicariously through her clumsy and unladylike demeanor—which is a form of protest against femininity—the reader follows Jo as she stains her gloves, burns her dress by the fire, and even sells her hair, “which will be boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order” (191).

Her favorite spot is the in attic. She uses this space to hide away crouched next to a tiny kitchen occupied by her many manuscripts, books and a colony of rats. To compliment her tomboyish nature—and a subversion of a stereotypically feminine practice—the sentiments Jo expresses are typical of the male adventure. However, she does not limit herself to one genre, but gives a go to many books she is not a fan of—romance, history, biography, etc.—something that will later on resonate with her literary career.

Hence, Jo’s plotline focuses on the perusing of her literary passion, as she spends most of the novel trying to become an authoress and finding her “true style.” In the chapter “Castle in The Air” she states:

I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream. (168)

Her passion for writing is initially inspired by a desire to help her family financially during her father's absence. However, writing pieces such as plays for her sisters to perform also becomes a way for the young Jo to escape and retreat into a world where she can freeze time and not grow up.

In a way Jo's writing journey is foil of her journey into womanhood and having to find a balance between passion and societal expectations. For instance, when Amy angrily throws Jo's manuscript in the fireplace—as a means of retaliation when she is not allowed to go to the theatre with her sisters—the episode quickly becomes an important learning experience for the hot-tempered Jo. In fact, deeply enraged by Amy's actions, Jo watches the manuscript and cries, feeling like her own soul burn along with her pages because, in a way, it does. The next day, Jo and Laurie go skating, and Amy tries to join them. Fueled by her anger, when Laurie warns Jo that the ice “isn't safe in the middle,” she decides not to pass the information along to Amy, who falls through the ice and is saved by Laurie (89).

After this episode, Jo laments not forgiving Amy and tells her mother:

You don't know, you can't guess how bad it is! It seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion. I get so savage, I could hurt anyone and enjoy it. I'm afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me. Oh,

Mother, help me, do help me! (91).

These episodes relate to Jo's initial lesson—sustaining the *Pilgrim's Progress* reference—that exist and allow to further Jo's growth. In fact, Alcott labels this chapter “Jo meets Apollyon,” a Biblical reference to Satan or destroyer. Recalling the initial chapter “Playing Pilgrims,” where the girls talk about their burdens, Jo mentions that hers is her temper. Therefore, Jo's reaction to

the burning of her manuscripts, allow her to grow and learn this lesson. In a way, the burning of her “precious little book,” is a symbol for her fiery temper slowly fizzling out (88).

Jo’s writing career follows a turbulent path. In fact, as a child she starts off experimenting with writing plays and fairytales and even moves onto “very mild romances” (316). Typically female, these are the novels and stories that Mary Anne Evans—under her pseudonym George Eliot—considers in her text *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. She calls these publications silly—in terms of characterization, predictable plotlines, and subject-matter—that are published for vanity, only to bring down the reputation of women as writers. She states:

To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions. Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: Take a woman’s head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English when not required (Eliot 13).

Eliot claims that men praise this kind of silly writing by women because it keeps women in their place by feeding them with unreal scenarios and tales.

In a way, Alcott is doing the same when Jo gets involved in writing these stories. When she comes across a newspaper announcing a one “hundred-dollar prize [...] for a sensational story,” she is enthralled by the reward, and decides to partake in the contest which she ends up winning (316). Therefore, it becomes ironic when Jo ends up using this literary trope that Alcott is hoping to depart from: a formulaic romance story. But Alcott makes Jo aware of this, as she says:

Jo was satisfied with the investment of her prize money, and fell to work with a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the house, for by the magic of a pen, her “rubbish” turned into comforts for them all. The “Duke’s Daughter” paid the butcher’s bill, “A Phantom Hand” put down a new carpet, and the “Curse of the Coventrys” proved the blessing of the Marches in the way of groceries and gowns. (317).

Having some financial security, Jo “resolved to make a bold stroke for fame and fortune,” and started writing her own novel (317-318). The genre of the novel is never fully revealed, only hinted at: it had “metaphysical streak” according to Mr. March, “a trifle too much description” in Marmee’s opinion, was admired as a “tragedy” by Meg and disliked by Amy for being a “fun” novel (319). However, the publication process was not smooth sailing as she notes in “Literary Lessons”:

Having copied her novel for the fourth time, read it to all her confidential friends, and submitted it with fear and trembling to three publishers, she at last disposed of it, on condition that she would cut it down one third, and omit all the parts which she particularly admired. (318)

Unfortunately, Jo had to make major concessions in order for her book to be accepted, and for the sake of publication she heartbrokenly gives in. Alcott describes Jo’s editing process as follows:

So, with Spartan firmness, the young authoress laid her first-born on her table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre. In the hope of pleasing everyone, she took everyone’s advice, and like the old man and his donkey in the fable suited nobody (319).

Therefore, just like Alcott, Jo molds her story to appeal to her publisher and audience to create what Amy called a “popular book” (318). Curiously, Jo also notes that “the parts that were taken straight out of real life are denounced as impossible and absurd,” while “the scenes that I made up out of my own silly head are pronounced ‘charmingly natural, tender, and true’”—something that Eliot also critiqued (320). To a similar end, “Literary Lessons” becomes a part of her growth as a writer, where her “poor little book” now symbolizes the compromises and hardships an authoress faces (320). In other words, her mysterious novel that was supposed to be her happy ending, it is not a happy ending after all, but a compromise, possibly like her marriage to Professor Bhaer.

After “the novel disaster,” Jo’s literary career is on hold, since her reader’s response “quenched her courage for a time, for public opinion is a giant which has frightened stouter-hearted Jacks on bigger beanstalks than hers” (Alcott 441). Then again, she now knew her readers and publishers and after moving to New York to work as a governess, Jo takes on again “to writing sensation stories [for the *Weekly Volcano*], for in those dark ages, even all-perfect America read rubbish” (Alcott 421). Driven by “money and power,” she wasn’t proud of her stories, but it was a means to an end to allow her family to afford some luxury (411). There she meets Professor Bhaer, a poor instructor, who strongly discourages her to write these silly stories, but to find a truer and simpler writing style.

After being confronted with this reality, Jo shifts “to the other extreme, as is the way with people of her stamp” and once again changes genre to write sermons (424). And when this doesn’t work out, she tries writing children’s literature, “which she could easily have disposed of if she had not been mercenary enough to demand filthy lucre for it”—some women didn’t get paid for their work (424). Facing all of these trials and tribulations in the search for her own

uncompromising style and authenticity, Jo eventually decides to put her writing on hold again since “nothing came of these trials” (424).

Besides her writing career, Jo’s happiness lies with her family. When she goes back home from New York to find Beth on her deathbed, it strikes her that “love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy” and even writes a poem about all her dear sister meant to her (496). Therefore, when Beth dies, Jo’s renounces her “castle in the air” and searches for consolation outside of writing, where her fantasy world isn’t her only escape. Alcott does something quite interesting here, by making Jo adopt Beth’s identity covertly making a critique on how women’s practice of nurture prevents them from being creative. Jo performs her new role as *angel in the house* by taking care of her parents and domestic duties. Then again, even though she takes this role with great determination—something that allows her to stand out—Jo also feels constrained by it because all in all, only Beth could fill Beth’s place. And it is only when she and her parents realize this, that they are able to grieve and reconnect as a family. It is at this point, that Jo reclaims her own identity, and she starts to write in her own and “true style,” which was initially fairy tales and adventure stories for the tomboy Jo, and later on evolved into reflecting on her private and domestic life.

In fact, her father even sends one of her pieces to be published:

Jo never knew how it happened, but something got into that story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it, for when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it, much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and to her utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested. (517)

With a little glimpse of fame, she starts writing once again for her friends and family, but still her writing mainly remains limited to the domestic realm. As Judith Fetterly writes,

Good writing for women is not the product of ambition or even enthusiasm, nor does it seek worldly recognition. Rather it is the product of a mind seeking solace for private pain, that scarcely knows what it is doing and that seeks only to please others and, more specifically, those few others who constitute the immediate family. Jo has gone from burning genius to a state where what she writes isn't even hers. (Fetterly 374)

In other words, Jo's writing finally becomes restricted to the private space of her own home as she is made to find a balance between the ambitions and restraints placed on 19th century women. But Alcott does not leave her heroine empty handed. In fact, Jo's final career is to open a boarding school for boys bringing together her youth as a tomboy and passion for literature. While becoming a teacher is not necessarily revolutionary for a 19th century woman, Alcott nevertheless attempts to subvert gender roles by making Jo the headmaster.

Jo's Multiple Romances

Jo's writing becomes cause for concern when the question of love arises. Unlike her sisters who all romanticize their future, Jo expresses no desire in romance. Therefore, for the reader the question of who Jo's perfect match will be, quickly becomes the most controversial issue, as advocated by Elise Baker who suggests that "the debate concerning Jo's marriage may be a source of *Little Women's* persistent popularity" (Barker 189). Thereby this debate is not a recent one, but has been looked upon by many readers and critics who look at the Jo's romance plot as quite ambiguous, such as Marlowe Daly-Galeano who coins two enduring questions about the heroine's love story: "Why, if Jo loves writing so much, does she seem to give it up? and Why does Jo marry Professor Bhaer?" (Daly-Galeano 114).

In an attempt to answer these questions, from the beginning of this first volume, Jo is driven by her ambition to become an independent writer. She has no desire to fall in love and even when her mother expresses her wish for her girls "to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful pleasant lives," Jo responds that "then we'll be old maids" as marriage would signify her reclusion in the domestic realm and an early end to her dreams (111). However, these strong feelings towards marriage are not only limited to herself and she also expresses concern for her sister Meg's suitor John, who she refers to as a "little villain"—the reason being that he would eventually tear her family apart (243). In no unclear terms, Jo regards marriage with such disdain to the extent that she even wishes that she "could marry Meg [her] self and keep her safe in the family" (237).

Taking into consideration Jo's consistent and very vocal rejection of marriage, it can be assumed that Alcott's initial intent was to allow Jo to grow as a writer and become a "literary spinster" (Barker 190). This end, however, would not satisfy the readers' need to see Jo fulfill her destiny of following "the common-enough life path of heterosexual mother-hood" (Roach 92). As a result, it seems that Alcott felt caught between her publishers and her readers to answer this pivotal question. In a letter to the Vassar College instructor Elizabeth Powell, Alcott writes:

"Jo" should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn't dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect.

(qtd. Barker 190).

Alcott came to learn—just like Jo—that the reception and success of her novel "depends not just on her talent or the variables of the economy, but also on the approval of her readers" (Daly-

Galeano 115). And even though she wanted to remain faithful to Jo's "castle in the air," she felt pressured, just like Jo, to give up her own style. Yet she didn't comply completely with the reader's demand for a fairytale ending by Jo marrying Laurie, but instead took an alternative approach and found a compromise through the surprising and non-romanticized introduction of Jo's "funny match:" Professor Bhaer.

To this end, Alcott bases Jo's pairing on a character who can truly support her authentic writing style and maturity, but which doesn't excite the reader's emotions instead of a fantasy that she enabled through the romanticization of Laurie's Byronic and immature character. Therefore, Professor Bhaer too becomes a bit of a joke, just like she expressed in her *Journal*, as he is a poor German Professor with a bit of an accent, and something she devises just to shut up the readers, while taking pride in the fact that it is a "funny match."

Laurie: The Boy Next Door

Jo and Laurie's relationship starts in the second chapter when they accidentally bump into each other at a New Year's party and decide to watch the ball unravel from the sidelines. The pair immediately complement each other: Jo is the girl with the boy's name who possesses the "gentlemanly demeanor" (33), and Laurie is the boy with the girl's name who has "pretty manners" (65).

From this initial instance there is an intimate and unspoken love between the two characters. They have a connection like no other two characters in the novel that is tested and confirmed on several occasions. From acting in plays together, to writing a paper, to when Beth contracts scarlet fever, Laurie is always there by Jo's side and "as the tears streamed fast down

poor Jo's cheeks, she stretched out her hand in a helpless sort of way, as if groping in the dark, and Laurie took it in his" (216).

Most importantly, his celebration of Jo's writing is crucial in the perceived perfection of his compatibility with Jo. Laurie pushes Jo to reach her "castle in the air," openly sharing his support for the female author. He is proud of his friend, and the reader can quickly grow fond of Laurie and his devotion to Jo and her writing. However, his unconditional support is arguably blinded by his love for Jo, which soon devolves into an immature form of love devoid of respect. At a certain point, Laurie even goes as far as to say that he would encourage any form of "trash" this aspiring writer (Jo) would produce.

In the chapter "Heartache," Laurie declares himself to Jo, who "had not the heart to refuse her splendid, successful boy anything" (429). However, when she feels her liberty is threatened "for any mortal man" she cannot but refuse his proposal, even if it means rejecting her dear Teddy (434). However, when formulating his feelings, it is as if Laurie seems to expect Jo to accept his proposal, knowing full well that she doesn't reciprocate his feelings. As a matter of fact, when Jo moves to New York it is also a means for her to escape from Laurie's growing love. She even hopes that her sister Beth would "make quite an angel of him," or could swoop him off his feet during her absence (383). Yet this didn't work, and Laurie himself had even preemptively stated when Jo announced her departure that "My eye is on you, so mind what you do, or I'll come and bring you home" (319).

When the moment comes and Jo rejects him, thinking he would understand her position, Laurie's answer is rather ambiguous: "The girls are so queer you never know what they mean. They say no when they mean yes and drive a man out of his wits just for the fun of it" (431). Here, Alcott does not make Jo feel sorry for Laurie at the expense of her own happiness, but

instead she implicitly critiques the age old and very dangerous idea that a man's love for a woman gives him some sort of right over her and that her "no" is not to be trusted.

Ultimately, even though Laurie resists many patriarchal expectations, he nevertheless falls prey to the "nineteenth-century expectations regarding girls on the women's lives" (71 Doyle). Laurie also feels pressured by other males in his life to convince Jo to be his wife simply because "everyone expects it. Grandpa has set his heart upon it, your people like it, and I can't get on without you" (434). In this way, it becomes apparent that Laurie's love for Jo is possessive and aggressive and is more so driven by the expectation of romantic love and by the need to be mothered and taken care of.

Thus, just as the progression of Jo's character arc includes controlling her hot temper, the young Laurence also has to face the same trial. This chapter reveals his Byronic nature—as a literary trope—since he attempts to step into the role of husband without understanding the importance of the reciprocity of love. So, in Jo and Laurie's case, it was expected for one of the two to fall for the other, since "the demise of the friendship is on both sides, [and] its ultimate destruction has to lie in a proposal of marriage" (Turk 86). Laurie loves Jo, but Jo loves Laurie as a brother, effectively limiting their relationship to a romantic friendship and nothing more. In short, Jo values her personal liberty far more than her friendship with Laurie, and by rejecting what appeared to be her perfect match "is a statement of her commitment to writing" – her aspiration (and by effect, the main plot) has to do with writing and being an author rather than finding a man to marry and settle down with (Daly-Galeano 117).

Professor Bhaer: The “Funny Match”

The reader is first introduced to Jo’s “funny match” the less romanticized character Professor Friedrich Bhaer. Professor Bhaer is one of the enabling male characters in the novel, like Jo’s father who submitted her last poem for publication. He is mature (forty), unattractive, poor, has appalling table manners and is an immigrant of German descent. He is introduced early on in the second volume as the man with “the foreign accent” who catches Jo’s attention:

As I went downstairs soon after, I saw something I liked. [...] I saw a gentleman come along behind her, take the heavy hod of coal out of her hand, carry it all the way up, put it down at a door near by, and walk away, saying, with a kind nod and a foreign accent, "It goes better so. The little back is too young to haf such heaviness. Wasn't it good of him? I like such things, for as Father says, trifles show character. (394)

Thereby, Professor Bhaer is being chivalrous, but in a practical way, in an instance involving coal. Similarly, she is not only softened by his goodness, but when she later discovers his respectability “she felt proud to know that he was an honored Professor in Berlin, though only a poor language-master in America, and his homely, hard-working life was much beautified by the spice of romance which this discovery gave it” (418). Jo is fascinated by his eccentric-ism, intellect and classical education, and this respect and fascination slowly evolves into romance. As Sarah Wadsworth suggests, he is not only a parodic twist for Alcott, but Professor Bhaer is also a character that has been carefully tailored to be a better match for her heroine:

By unsettling the conventional coordinates that positioned the heroine as inferior in power and authority by virtue of her age, gender, and social position, Alcott presents Jo’s courtship as that of an emotionally independent woman who is on an equal footing with her “match” in terms of maturity, class, and gender expectations. (Wadsworth 186)

Clearly, he is a questionable love-interest when it comes to pleasing readers—he is unattractive, odd and old—and an intentional “funny match” that is not supposed to be taken seriously, but rather as a comic relief to what can be read as Jo’s unhappy ending.

However, the Professor, has been blamed by many readers for putting a “damper on Jo’s literary ambitions” as suggested by Elise Barker (Barker 194). It was, in fact, the professor who commented on Jo’s sensational stories, questioning her morals for writing them. He tells her that “they haf no right to put poison in the sugarplum, and let the small ones eat it” (422). The comment can be read in two ways: on one hand as an attempt of a controlling male to crush a young authoress’ dreams, and on the other side of the same coin a friend who is pushing the young authoress in question to find her true and more mature style and stop publishing work that would ultimately make her feel ashamed of her writing. In other words, with this statement Bhaer and Alcott are awakening Jo, and even if his words might sound harsh, he is attempting to awaken her integrity for writing—something that Alcott herself had to compromise by adding the Professor in her story.

At the end of the novel, Jo is finally able to find her “true style” and allows herself to grieve Beth’s death. What’s more, it is with Professor Bhaer that she finds a compromise between her dream—and Alcott’s—and the readers demands. In fact, after Jo is able to regain her passion and her identity and learns that her sister Amy and Laurie are engaged, she is genuinely happy for them, but can’t help feeling lonely. When she steps into her room,

she came to a little message written in the Professor’s hand, her lips began to tremble, the books slid out of her lap, and she sat looking at the friendly words, as they took a new meaning, and touched a tender spot in her heart. (520).

Here, Jo realizes she loves Bhaer and later on in the Chapter “Surprises” the “tall bearded gentleman, beaming on her from the darkness like a midnight sun” knocks at the door of the March household taking her breath away (534). It is only a matter of time before the couple get engaged, in the chapter “Under the Umbrella,” and Bhaer’s proposal is quite the opposite of Laurie’s. He gives Jo full control and asks her if she could love him, which “Jo thought was splendid, and [she] resolved to be worthy of her knight, though he did not come prancing on a charger in gorgeous array” (570). Furthermore, her “funny match” also brings her the poem her father sent to be published: “The Garret”. A poem about her sisters and how they all represented different chests that held their “castle[s] in the air.” Even though Jo considers it “very bad poetry,” she also maintains that “[she] felt it when [she] wrote it” (569). Bhaer’s choice of poem—a meaningful and heartfelt poem that Jo wrote—can be read as a symbol of his understanding and cherishing her true style, which means writing from her heart that for Jo is her family.

Still, even though the novel wraps up in a nostalgic chapter titled “Haverst Time,” the reader never feels quite fulfilled by the ending of *Little Women*, perhaps wishing it was Laurie under the umbrella with Jo. The feeling of dissatisfaction is mainly caused by Laurie’s overly romanticized character as well as the incomplete characterization and comical presentation of Professor Bhaer. All in all, it is fair to say that Alcott’s intentional insertion of Professor Bhaer is a “not-very-subtle reluctance to construct a romance for Jo” (Barker 193). Jo’s romance with Bhaer does not follow any specific romantic trope that the reader is so used to, but despite Laurie’s emotional bullying and despite the greater suitability of the professor, they still want a romantic ending. But Alcott’s choices insist that Jo has only one perfect match: her writing.

4. Chapter Three: Offred's Love Story

What if? The Possibilities in Atwood's Romance Plot

Around the year 1984 alongside the celebration of George Orwell's famous novel, critics had begun to analyze the rise of totalitarian and capitalistic empires around the world. Fittingly, at this same time, the celebrated Canadian author Margaret Atwood started writing her sixth novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Published in 1985, her novel became a response to the cultural issues of "religious fundamentalism, feminism, consumerism, environmental decline, and rampant technology" focused on the markedly conservative climate of Ronald Reagan's Northern America (Jadwin 21). The novel imagines a dystopian United States taken over by the Christian fundamentalist theocratic regime that arose as a response to a fertility crisis.

The story centers around the main character Offred, who is forced to live in the patriarchal Republic of Gilead that maintains its power by means of reeducation, surveillance, and violence. In Gilead, women are given limited functions and are divided into six strict categories; the "Wives", who are married to powerful elite men, the "Handmaids", who serve as breeders for the wives, the "Marthas", who are domestic servants, the Aunts, who re-educate the "Handmaids" into their new role, and finally the "Unwomen", who were former feminists, lesbians, or other non-conformists, and the "Ecowives"—the most ironic category—who marry less powerful men and can bear their own children. Offred's function is that of a Handmaid, to the Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy—hence her name "Of Fred". She lacks freedom to such an extent that the door to her room does not shut, she can only leave the house for shopping

trips, and she is always under the watch of Gilead's secret police called the Eyes. Despite living in this society of oppression, Offred tells her story and through this act, she regains her own silenced voice.

The Handmaid's Tale became widely popular and highly praised by critics and scholars for its strong commentary on gender relations and power politics. However, Offred's tale also received negative feedback when the novel's concerns were interpreted as more *feminine* than *feminist*, especially in regard to Atwood's treatment of the romance plot. But as Mario Klarer explains, Atwood "picks the topos of a ban on literature and adapts it, according to the trend of the 1980s, for feminine and feminist purposes" (Klarer 131). In other words, she uses elements that are typically associated with the female gender to expose the extent to which the society is a patriarchy.

Main character Offred struggles with being active in a repressive male society. For example, she initially uses secondary character Nick to conceive a child for the Commander—in other words, the relationship was intended to be void of emotional connection. This character dynamic, however, suddenly turns into the star-crossed-lover trope where their relationship is forbidden, and Offred quickly falls into the passive damsel in distress type with the prince (Nick) ready to save her. Or at least, that is what the end of the novel alludes to. That is to say that Offred's love interest, originally a matter that was beside the point—which involves Offred trying to escape from and hold-out in an oppressive state—eventually becomes a main point itself which distracts from the original plot. Despite Offred's best attempts to be subversive, she is still ultimately subject to the function of the romance plot. And, this is exactly what Atwood is trying to critique, by creating a dystopic novel that ultimately mocks the idea of the fairytale. Therefore, this inherent duality of the romantic plot, allowing this best-seller to negotiate a space

in literature as both "canonized as a feminist classic" and as a "global feminist fable for the twenty-first century" (Bouson 3).

The Handmaid's Tale: Offred's (Of Fred) & Storytelling

In the same way that Jo's writing is a form of personal resistance, Atwood makes storytelling Offred's way of resisting the patriarchal society in a totalitarian regime of domestic tyranny and repression. This tool, narrative, becomes her survival technique in a society where she is essentially reduced to "a two-legged womb" in a red coat (136). Finding herself confined to the traditionally feminine and private domestic spaces, Offred's only way to retain her identity is to remember her past and to relive the core memories she holds on to.

In the dystopian Gilead, the mere act of telling her story is inherently subversive. In a society where women are prohibited from reading, writing or even speaking, storytelling becomes a gesture of rebellion where a character like Offred is able to not only reconstruct herself as an individual, but she also becomes the voice of the women of Gilead. Thus, by claiming her private spaces—"my own time" (37), "my room" (49), and even "my name" (84)—Offred refuses to let go of her past and to be silenced.

Therefore, "inside the room," Offred is outside of the constraints of time and can finally escape the Gileadean regime by using her imagination to finally go "somewhere good" (37). However, even though she shares her experience and memories, the decision not to share her name with the reader ultimately establishes Offred as a distanced narrator. Indeed, her dissident tale, is what Howells calls a "mosaic of alternative female worlds which undermine Gilead's patriarchal myth of women's subversiveness and silence" (Howells 100). Her story is "in fragments, like a body caught in a crossfire or pulled apart by force" (267).

For instance, through Offred Atwood tells the stories of Ofglen, of Offred's predecessor, and even of the commander's wife Serena, and of Moira, the lesbian rebel who escapes from the Red Center, only to then become the representation of the male fantasy by working in a brothel. As scholar Jennifer E. Dunn suggests, "Offred wants to think of Moira as retaining her former agency and assertiveness, [...], but Moira has had to accept the passive role on the other side of this binary opposition" (Dunn 81). Atwood uses the rebellious Moira as a foil of the narrator's hopes of escaping the system, and when Offred finally sees Moira in compliance with the living situation at Jezebel she is frightened by her friend's "lack of volition" (249). By seeing Moira accepting this position, the feminist and gender equality activist is erased, and replaced by an apathetic prostitute who has resigned to her fate. Therefore, after being Offred's guide for resisting this totalitarian regime, Moira's independent spirit is finally crushed exemplifying the way Gilead was able to crush her independent spirit and turn her into an object to satisfy men.

In a way, Atwood catapults all the women in her novel in Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* (1944), where all power is taken away from them and they are all trapped in a Hellish environment defined by men. In this environment, Offred tells her story out of desperation, willing a different reality into existence: "Because I'm telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (268). In fact, rather than taking concrete action to enact real change in her experience (whether it would be successful or not), Offred opts to imagine a way out, so to speak. In this way, she comes across as a somewhat bland character, who decides not to partake in the Mayday—a secret resistance group that aims to take Gilead down from the inside—not to adopt Moira's recklessness, and not to participate in any substantial way. In fact, Atwood characterizes Offred with the conventional feminine tone:

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. Maybe it is about those things, in a way; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way, so much whispering, so much speculation about others, so much gossip that cannot be verified, so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy (267).

These words paint Offred as a traditional non-confrontational and romantic woman who addresses her listeners and sentimentally apologizes for the story she is telling. And even though her voice is her form of resistance, as previously mentioned, Offred nevertheless comes across as a traditionally feminine character who “remembers the delights of heterosexual love” (Howells 102). Offred's text becomes an extension and a composite of the other women's experience by constructing narratives that are ultimately about herself: “I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.” (68)

In short, Offred is ultimately what can be described as a Gothic heroine, who adopts different voices of the women in her life. In fact, Chinmoy Banerjee describes her voice as having a “doubling aspect”:

That of a passive and suffering victim who remembers the life she has lost, mourns the loss of love and sensuousness, longs for these, and feels oppressed and suicidal; and that of a defiant survivor who refuses to assent through a continuous sarcastic reduction and hatred for her oppressors. (Banerjee 167)

Therefore, this dialogue between these distinct voices ends rather obscurely, since Offred eventually falls in love with the chauffeur Nick and with this abandoning any trace of resistance and defiance in her voice.

Furthermore, the reliability of the whole novel is put into question by the “Historical Note” where Atwood inserts a pseudo-chapter that the reader may or may not read. Here, she asserts that the male Professor Pieixoto has found the transcribed tape of Offred’s experiences, in the year 2195, redefining the narrative just read and thereby threatening Offred’s narrative authority, subjectivity and perception of Gilead. His final words are:

Voices may reach us from [the world of the dead]; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as they may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (320)

Thus, we are made to question everything just read and the arbitrary construction behind it—just like the fairytale romance plot that Offred constructs (or is made to construct). To this end, Atwood’s choice to include such a chapter is very interesting. After the heroine is possibly saved by forces outside her control or her knight in shining armor, she is yet again under the control of a man. But more importantly, he is not only taking ownership of her story, but also of the story of the many Gileadean women that patched together Offred’s story.

The parody academic conference is also a means to an end for Atwood’s to question the ethic and morality among academics. All in all, through the novel Atwood allowed the reader to sympathize with Offred, and picture Gilead as evil and tyrannical. But, with Pieixoto’s appeal to reconsider such a society—followed by an applause—it immediately erases and invalidates not only Offred’s experience, but also all the harm Gilead had imposed on women, calling attention on the future evil that still persists. Sarah R. Morrison notes that

What is revealed finally is not merely the false promise of a female fantasy as the core of so many novels written by and for women, but, more positively, the self-sufficiency of a heroine not in need of validation. It is finally the voice of the woman standing behind the reconstructed narrative, more shadowy now, less surely no, that matters. The delusory romance plot itself gains by the contrast. We were brought to question the validity and significance of the heroine's attachment to an unfulfilled—and perhaps empty—fantasy. But Atwood is counting on, even encouraging our attachment to the form. She does not require us to relinquish the romance plot; rather, in denying closure and minimizing the significance of the hero, she suggests that validity lies elsewhere. (Morrison 323)

In other words, this dismissal of women's suffering holds seeds of patriarchal oppression and the danger that resides in it.

Offred's Multiple Romances

Just like in *Little Women*, love is also central when it needn't be. Thus, with Atwood's introduction of a love story, the dystopian novel and canonized feminist classic, assumes a parodic interpretation. In other words, it is bizarre that in a world where women are defined as men's appendages, Offred describes stages of her life with reference to the men she is with at that time—the novel is parodying itself. By doing this, Offred is made to come across as a heroine of a romance novel, who even in the dystopic Gilead regime, is able to fall in love following the traditional romance plot and abandon her goal to escape. However, whether for love or not, there are three different characters with whom Offred engages in a relationship: The Commander, Nick and Luke.

Each man in her life, as looked upon by Madonne Miner is imagined in a different and unique way:

Luke as her ‘real love,’ husband, and father [of] her child; the Commander as her Gileadean ‘sugar-daddy’—powerful, distant, in control of her future; Nick as her illicit love, companion in crime” (Miner 153).

Offred does not feel that she has betrayed her husband by having sex with the Commander because that sexual act is compulsory, entirely forced upon her, and enacted through a sacred ceremony. With Nick, however, she desires him and seeks him out, and only then feels that she may have possibly betrayed her husband. However, in a society like Gilead that has betrayed women as a whole, the value of betrayal cannot hold. In this case and in Offred’s current circumstances, it is as if she exists in a different and distanced world from her husband—who possibly fled to Canada—where betrayal has completely lost its value. She states: “Day by day, night by night he recedes, and I become more faithless” (269).

As a woman who has placed her life in the hands of men, without their guidance Offred seems to be lost. In her past, she relied on Luke, in her present on the Commander and she places her hopes for the future on Nick. Offred places love and romance as a driving force in her life and Atwood uses her reliance not only on men, but more importantly on the romance plot, to criticize it. This idea is played up by the novel’s inconclusive ending that leaves the reader uncertain as to whether or not Offred manages to escape Gilead, and whether or not Nick is really a member of the Mayday resistance or a spy for the Eyes secret police. That being said, her romance with Nick functions primarily within the conventions of romance, whereby the novel “does not provide an alternative version of love’s enactment,” but instead saves the “portrait of love’s typical realization” (Miner 166). However, characterization is weak in *The Handmaid’s*

Tale, blurring the lines between the personality distinctions that are attributed to each man. Therefore, it places them in separate categories that are either situational or personal.

To this possible ironic end, when Offred enters the black van, Atwood expresses a real ambivalence when it comes to love, or any connection in the novel, by probing their nature and meaning. Therefore, the novel seems to remain hesitant in its representations of love as the storyteller herself appears to subvert her own destiny for an established plot where the idea of being wooed by a knight in shining armor and the ideal fairytale has become the predominant and expected narrative.

By doing this, Atwood reveals the structural power of the romance plot and the power this holds even on Offred especially by likening her, to myths and fairytales. For instance, in Chapter two, she becomes “some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger” (9). While in Chapter 17, she pictures herself wondering “in the woods at midnight” searching for “a magic flower” (98). Then again in Chapter 39 she states: “I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I’ll turn into a pumpkin” (253). This is to show that Atwood uses fairytales to emphasize Offred’s romantic side and reliance on romantic clichés, which ultimately blindside her: “Because Offred so much wants to believe in fairy tales, she closes off other plot options” (Miner 166). But fairytales are fabricated stories and just like the romance plot, they cannot be relied on.

Luke: The Good Guy

When Offred’s tale begins, Luke is already a memory. He is part of her past and she only thinks about him at night when her imagination allows her to wonder off. Like the Commander,

Luke is in a relative position of power over Offred. He has a passion for old languages and becomes the “word authority” in their marriage (Miner 155). In their marriage, his obsession with old things can be seen as serving to uphold certain traditional values concerning the difference between sexes. For instance, on their routine trip to the supermarket, Offred remembers:

He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and it wasn't a superstition as he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't. (63)

Luke's comments might be read as being humorous and mere jokes, but as the novel progresses the pervasiveness of these comments question their lightheartedness. Indeed, just like the Commander, Luke jokes about women being unable to think critically or abstractly in an attempt to pretend “to be macho” (121). In other words, he embodies the gender bias of someone who is essentially decent but feels threatened in his identity by society and so is eager to reassert differences and prerogatives in simple ways.

Luke repeats these questionable comments many times—especially in the presence of Offred's mother. He liked to poke fun at her for having a low opinion of men, and as an activist and second-wave feminist who viewed men as “just a woman's strategy for making other women” (121). Her anti-men ideas are ironically the idea of a reverse-Gilead: a matriarchy that uses men for the sole scope of procreation. Therefore, Offred's mother's critical position becomes a symbolic character that Atwood uses to represent the misleading nature of feminism. In fact, the mother's radical societal critiques are brought out by Luke, who purposely provokes her remarks about men. However, as she is antagonized by him, she also gets caught up in her

feeling, freewheeling generalizations about the male gender to only then get lost in her own rhetoric. For instance, referring to Luke's hobby of cooking she states: "Once upon a time you wouldn't have been allowed to have such a hobby, they'd have called you queer" (121). This assumption only based on gender, reveals her to be a hypocrite, as her approach to feminism is one of aggression and blame towards the opposite gender. However, Luke's responds to her comments by making fun of her, also reflect his own hypocrisy he lacks to see and acknowledge that equality and liberty should not be taken for granted.

For instance, when Offred loses her job in the early stages of a gender coup, she is positioned in a place of dependance since she doesn't express her thoughts on whether she denies or agrees with her husband. Offred, devastated and terrified, goes to her husband for comfort and all the man can say is: "It's only a job" (179). Thus, like the commander he is also somewhat naïve of the hardships Offred faces as a woman, since he doesn't see what the problem is, since he doesn't think of himself as someone who would disrespect her, if she is dependent on him.

The most climactic part in their relationship comes to their attempted escape to Canada: Then Luke got back into the car, too fast, and turned the key and reversed. He was picking up the phone, he said. And then he began to drive very quickly, and after that there was the dirt road and the woods and we jumped out of the car and began to run. A cottage, to hide in, a boat, I don't know what we thought. He said the passports were foolproof, and we had so little time to plan. Maybe he had a plan, a map of some kind in his head. As for me, I was only running: away, away. I don't want to be telling this story. (225)

Luke's plan fails, and even though Offred initially suggests that Luke decides to do this for love, she also blames him for not succeeding, since he was the one who had decided to take control. If

he is going to be the patriarch, she should not be in danger. The repeated use of the pronoun “he” is accusatory and the use of “maybe” comes to suggest that she feels betrayed by her husband and his successful and her unsuccessful escape.

However, betrayal seems to be a constant theme tied to Luke that surfaces when in relation his first wife—not Offred. Even though Offred latched onto the traditional idea of romance, it is also put into question when it is discovered that she was initially Luke’s mistress. The reader finds out about this early on in the novel, when Offred shares a flashback of her anxiously waiting for him in a hotel room. This is not the only time she talks about the affair, but also describes her wearing some clothes in their first apartment that she believed to belong to his ex-wife:

Maybe they’re clothes belonging to Luke’s wife, whom I’ve also never seen; only pictures and a voice on the phone, late at night, when she was calling us, before the divorce. [...] Luke, I say. He doesn’t answer. Maybe he doesn’t hear me. It occurs to me that he may not be alive. (74)

Ultimately the wife only becomes a voice on the phone, but she still symbolizes the complex reality of love and not the happily ever after story that Offred made herself believe. Moira also voices her disapproval with Offred’s actions:

She said I was poaching, on another woman’s ground. I said Luke wasn’t a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions. She said I was rationalizing. I said I was in love. She said that was no excuse. Moira was always more logical than I am. (171)

Offred is made to sound like a dreamer who places love above anything and anyone. Yet, as she tells her story and consistently remembers her husband Luke, she slowly disseminates hints

revealing her dismissive nature. Therefore, Luke is initially pictured as a disguised ideal husband and romantic hero, but then progressively comes to fit the role of the oppressor putting into question his idea of love and relationship with Offred in general.

The Commander: The Abuser who Starves for Affection

After being trained in the Red Center, Offred is sent to the Commander's and Serena's house where she is secluded. Originally, her relationship with him was purely clinical where, once a month, the Commander and Offred had to have sex, with Serena present, with the prospect of conceiving a child in a performance called the Ceremony. Her strict role as a Handmaid is stated in the epigraph quoting a passage from Genesis 30:1-3:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Epigraph)

In the discussion and between Rachel and Jacob, his postulated adultery is kind of sanctioned as long as the final product is a child. However, romance with the maid is erased from the equation because it is not seen as a means to an end. Therefore, this premise acts as key for Atwood's text, especially in her relationship with the Commander.

When the Commander invites Offred to his office to play Scrabble, their relationship evolves beyond being strictly focused on conception. For Offred the game is an intellectual stimulus—as he later on lures her with reading material—and something desirable that connected

her to her old life. In this way the Commander mimics the figure of a savior, who allows her to step out of her role as a breeder. Yet, this is very hard to digest as Offred is essentially raped once a month by this same man and her life and death depends on her role as a Handmaid.

Therefore, their relationship becomes an ironic courtship where Offred knows that the Commander is in a position of power and she has to comply with his requests and demands. Similar to Luke, he also places Offred in an inferior intellectual position. For instance, he comments on how for women “one and one and one and one don’t make four,” latching onto the belief that, again, something as simple as abstract thought is way beyond women (186). During their encounters, the Commander is presented as a somewhat naïve older man who doesn’t understand the true living conditions of the handmaids, and she is forced to play a role with him in exchange of little gifts and her own survival—such as hand lotion and a Vogue magazine.

As their relationship progresses, it becomes clearer that Offred slowly starts to feel sympathy towards him, justifying and excusing his behavior, recognizing he is also imprisoned in the Gileadean system. However, she also hints towards this ambiguity the first time the reader witnesses the Ceremony.

The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story. The Commander sits down and crosses his legs, watched by us. The bookmarks are in place. He opens the book. He clears his throat a little, as if embarrassed. “Could I have a drink of water?” he says to the air. “Please,” he adds. [...] The Commander sighs, takes out a pair of reading glasses from his inside jacket pocket, gold rims, slips them on. Now he looks like a

shoemaker in an old fairy-tale book. Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence? We watch him: every inch, every flicker. (87)

Offred feels deep hatred for the Commander, and later on even imagines slipping a lever “out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs” (140). However, her more romantic side cannot help but seeing him as a reluctant and flickering shoemaker that belongs in a fairytale. She feels for him, as she knows what it feels to be controlled and alone because, even though he is still in a position of power, “still it must be hell, to be a man, like that. It must be just fine. It must be hell. It must be very silent” (88).

Every time they performed the Ceremony, Offred “would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh,” something that she affirms the Commander also did, since “the sexual act, although he performed it in a perfunctory way, must have been largely unconscious, for him, like scratching himself” (160). However, she notices a difference after they started secretly meeting. In the next ceremony, she realizes that:

This act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower, had become for me indecorous, an embarrassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before (161).

She felt shy and self-conscious, but above all she felt she as “an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers [Serena's]” (161). Even though she hates Serena Joy, and she can't help feeling like his mistress and feel guilty because of this, becoming another very typical narrative of rivalry between women with the man in the “innocent” man in the middle, who doesn't feel loved by his wife, seeking consolation in the arms of another woman.

Hence it is fair to say that Offred also felt empowered by this illicit relationship, not because she felt grateful to have to Commander's attention or gifts, but because she now held

some power over Serena. Similarly, her monotonous life also takes a turn as she is able to step outside of her bare and private room of isolation:

But even so, and stupidly enough, I'm happier than I was before. It's something to do, for one thing. Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. It's something else to think about. I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow. And I for him. To him I'm no longer merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven—to be crude—minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty (163).

Offred does not love the Commander, but he becomes of interest to her. And even though she felt like she was taking something away from Serena, there was also some pleasure to it fed by the hatred towards her. Here, Miner draws a parallel between the Commander and Luke, stating that “*The Handmaid's Tale* provides us with two male characters who mirror one another; structurally, these two are twins” (Miner 160). Even though male parties hold some sort of power over Offred, her actions are also driven by emotions—love or hate. However, what Miner draws attention to, is the lack of repentance in both men from their extramarital affairs, a connection that—amongst others—“encourages us to read the future in light of the past, and the past in light of the future” (Miner 161). A connection that is quite disturbing since it puts into question not only “the narrator's story of Luke's love, but also upon love stories in general” (Miner 166).

This is true especially since as the Commander's performative interaction with Offred, slowly becomes more physical. Initially, they start kissing at the end of their dates—which Offred has to comply to—and he even takes her to Jezebels where he forces himself upon her, treating her like a prostitute, and once again, she has to perform and act like she is enjoying it.

Therefore, even though she admits feeling happier and even powerful in this performative relationship—and she characterizes the Commander to be somewhat likeable or considerate—his role in the creation of the oppressive state of Gilead and insensitivity towards knowing the conditions that the women in the state endure, mand that he is frankly a monster. Hence, for Offred, the relationship is essentially a survival technique that satirically sometimes obscures the lines of a romantic relationships, to only reveal the dangers of Gilead's system.

Nick: The Crush

Offred's illicit (secret) relationship with Nick is the most romantic part of Atwood's novel. In their case, there is a constant repetition of cliches and romance tropes where Nick takes the role of the knight in shining armor, the fairytale prince, who comes to save Offred, the damsel in distress.

At first Offred and Nick are required to have sex by the Commander's wife in an attempt to get Offred pregnant. Once again, the end goal is a pregnancy, but clearly this desperate attempt from Serena Joy, reveals that Gilead is based on false premises. As Angela Laflen puts it: "This appearance of control and stability is ultimately designed to maintain the status quo and to disguise the fact that the ruling body of men, the Commanders, are sterile" (Laflen 105). This idea is brought up also by Offred's gynecologist, who offers her to get her pregnant as "most of those old guys can't make it anymore [...] or they're sterile" (Laflen 105).

So, when Serena suggests that her husband might be sterile, is in itself an act of defiance establishing a brief moment of complicity between the two rivaling women. This short-lived moment is then interrupted when Serena offers to help Offred, which is ultimately a selfish act as

she will be the one who will raise the baby. Serena then reaffirms this when she offers to give Offred a picture of her daughter if she accepts, revealing she knew the location of Offred's little girl and her refusal to help Offred from the get-go:

She's known all along. Something chokes in my throat. The bitch, not to tell me, bring me news, any news at all. Not even to let on. She's made of wood, or iron, she can't imagine (206).

Filled with hatred, Offred is made to accept her Offer since her "time's running out"—meaning she will become an Unwoman (204). However, her offer reveals that the cruelty between women, is just as bad than the one inflected by men on women. With Offred in the palm of her hand, Serena organizes everything and picks Nick for his loyalty towards her and the Commander.

However, casting aside Serena's scheme for Offred to conceive a child, this ultimately allows the couple to indulge in a forbidden relationship. In fact, Offred scatters glances and episodes that write the two as the typical star-crossed lovers. Offred states:

He stops, looks up at this window, and I can see the white oblong of his face. Nick. We look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger. Which I can't indulge. I pull the left-hand curtain so that it falls between us, across my face, and after a moment he walks on, into the invisibility around the corner (191-192).

Therefore, it comes to no surprise when the relationship slowly evolves into more than a means to conceive a child:

Outside, like punctuation, there's a flash of lightning; almost no pause and then the thunder. He's undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can't see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so

long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once. (261)

Invoking the typical female fantasy this passage shows her reliance on the romance plot, even though she then quickly changes her mind saying that she “made it up” (262). By taking back what she said, Offred shows that she knows what she sounds like a typical romance heroine. Her fantasies are fed not only by romance novels, but also by romantic movies—showing that the romance plots extend through different genres and media and can be even more conventional in film—which is exemplified in a reenactment with Nick:

“You come here often?”

“And what’s a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this,” I reply. We both smile: this is better. This is acknowledgement that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup?

“Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.” We’re quoting from late movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that: this sort of talk dates back to an era well before our own. (262)

As a character who alludes to fairytales and heterosexual romances, to process her dystopian reality and rationalize her surroundings, Offred quickly transforms her relationship with Nick into a mock fairytale itself. Therefore, as Sarah R. Morrison describes it, the romantic story falls into the trope of “a female protagonist whose expectations are shaped by the conventions of romance,” where Nick “is presented as the heroine's potential protector” and she does nothing to challenge this idea (Morrison 320). But surely if this performance is ironic, she is challenging the rules of romance as an act, one that covers the aggression and violence of patriarchy.

In this way, Offred in her past life fell in love with Luke, and now falls again for Nick, surrendering any more subversive plot options—What if she joined the Mayday? —to remain with her newfound love. However, Atwood scatters hints suggesting that Nick’s intentions are not as clear as Offred makes them look like. After the reawakening of her sexual desire, she slowly comes to trust Nick more and more, and even tells him (but not the reader) her secret name. Yet Nick’s desire appears to be mainly carnal:

He on the other hand talks little: no more hedging or jokes. He barely asks questions. He seems indifferent to most of what I have to say, alive only to the possibilities of my body, though he watches me while I’m speaking. He watches my face. (270)

Ironically, she achieves what Gilead wanted for her when she gets pregnant, and she starts to rely on Nick for her destiny, just like she did with Luke. She doesn’t want to escape anymore, but “to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (271). This romance plot also comes to an ambivalent end when Nick and the Eyes lead Offred into the Black Van taking her to an uncertain future: “Trust me, [Nick] says, which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee” (294). However, Offred seems reluctant as she finally states:

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (296).

Not providing an ending to the novel, Atwood leaves the reader once again with the question of “what if?”—has Nick betrayed her and reported their illicit affair or has he saved her life?

5. Conclusions

Despite being two very different novels, both *Little Women* and *The Handmaid's Tale* share this insisted use of the romance plot. Both Alcott and Atwood's heroines are required to juggle romantic conflicts while struggling with the main conflict at hand. But what is of interest about these two female authors (who are writing more than a century apart) is how they both put to use and simultaneously discredit the romance plot and its relevant tropes.

In *Little Women*, Alcott intended for the tomboyish Jo to be a literary spinster as underlined by Baker—certainly not any man's *angel in the house*. In Alcott's perfect world, Jo successfully rejects the very idea of marriage since she is destined to only have one true love: writing. However, Alcott's 19th century readers had another plan in mind for the young heroine, and it involved a picture-perfect wedding to a certain "Laurence boy" (27). In other words, the girl with the boy's name and the boy with the girl's name, as Joey from the 90's sitcom *Friends* once astutely pointed out, were a match made in heaven. Yet despite Alcott's intentions, as Daly-Galeano highlights, she was circumstantially pressured by her readers and publishers alike to give up her idea of the heroine's happy ending—which would have been holding a pen and paper—and ultimately marry Jo off.

Alcott gave in to the publishing demands of the time but still managed to get a last word in by disrupting the cut-and-dry romance plot and introducing a twist. She baked her cake and ate it too. In other words, Alcott knew that she didn't want Jo to marry Laurie, and so she evolved their relationship into something possessive, aggressive, and one-side which ultimately forced not only Jo, but also the reader to understand that, after all, they might not be such a perfect match.

Thus, Alcott pulls out the rug from under the feet of the romance brewing between Jo and Laurie, revealing that it wouldn't have been successful—much to the dismay of many readers. By doing so, she's introduced an alternative twist to Jo's compromised happy ending in the form of the “funny match,” Professor Bhaer. Compared to Laurie, Professor Bhaer is a somewhat unattractive consolation prize, but what he develops with Jo is an intellectual romance that allows for her creativity to potentially flourish. He is a bit of a joke for Alcott and the reader since he is lacking in-depth characterization, but it is precisely these unconventional characteristics as looked upon by Wadsworth—gender, class, nationality, age—that arguably make him a more realistic and equal match for Jo. Furthermore, this questionable love-interest is also the one who pushes Jo to stop writing sensational stories, and arguably also the one who blocks Jo's own sensational story with Laurie.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses the traditional form of storytelling, from Offred's perspective, to frame the entire novel. Though this old-fashioned method Offred is not only able to tell her own tale by virtue of her own memory, but, like Howells looks upon, she is also able to tell the stories of many other Gileadean women whose voices would otherwise have been silenced. However, her strength lies neither in her ability to tell stories nor in her potential to fight the very powers that oppress her, but rather in her reliance on romance. For Offred, the main conflict she is up against has to do with survival and with escaping the Gileadean regime, yet a lot “screen time” (so-to-speak) has to do with her romantic or sexual encounters with men.

The romance plot for Atwood is not a compromise, but an intentional addition that only pokes fun at the reliance that readers place on the idealized love story and fairytales. In fact, Atwood's novel assumes a duality that Banerjee distinguishes, when she describes Offred as, on one hand, a rebel who wants to escape Gilead, and while on the other hand, a hopeless romantic

and traditional heroine. However, Offred's reliance on the idea of love ultimately takes over as she slowly abandons her desire to leave Gilead simply because she falls in love with Nick. In fact, through each man that Offred has a relationship with, Atwood presents a stereotype: Luke is the good guy, the Commander is the abuser who starves from affection, and Nick is the crush.

In other words, Luke serves to embody the stereotype of the decent guy who feels that his masculinity is threatened and therefore has to highlight any difference between the female and male sex. With the Commander, Offred finds herself in an abusive, degrading relationship but she ironically also finds herself feeling bad for him from time to time. And in Nick, her knight in shining armor, Offred sees the potential to be saved. Each relationship brings out the ambivalence between being romantic and being oppressed, as Miner suggests, ultimately questioning not only how we have molded and twisted the romance plot, but how we have allowed the romance plot to mold and twist us.

Just like the construction of the romance plot that Atwood challenges, with her insertion of the *Historical Notes* she brings into question the reliability of the whole novel. Offred's story is now under the ownership of Professor Pieixoto, who is the final stereotype that Atwood uses as a shrewd critique of academic culture. Therefore, a man is always defining Offred's life—in the past Luke, in the present the Commander and in the future Nick—and even emotionlessly appropriating a story that the heroine had told as her own survival technique. Therefore, it is no surprise that Atwood writes Offred as a bland character, who ultimately serves the purpose to tell other woman's experiences and stories, because, like Morrison suggests, she gives up her own for an illusion that she has been made to believe in.

When looking at these two novels together, Jo and Offred are evidently polar opposites. Jo wants nothing to do with romance, but Offred can't wait to be swept off her feet and saved by

a man on a white horse—or a man in a black van. Their form of escapism from a frightening reality is through their own stories—telling or writing them—but the content of what they tell is ultimately controlled by the reader remaining in a private and domestic setting.

In understanding that romance would have to play a part in the plot, Alcott and Atwood both utilized the familiarity of the plot device to their advantage. *Little Women* and *The Handmaid's Tale* use these expected, idealized tropes precisely to mock the use of the romance plot as an imperative, and both Jo's and Offred's storylines became less effective for it. Atwood adds a traditional romance plot in a dystopian novel that reduces women to their potential to conceive a child, and Alcott marries Jo off to an unattractive and bizarre German Professor that is only introduced at the end of the novel. Evidently, the heroines of these novels are not given Roach's happy ending, but rather tragic finales that exemplify the danger and the subversive power of the romantic plot.

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