How does the role and expectations for nineteenth century literary heroines change from the time of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë to *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott?

The Independent Woman: The Examination of Changing Gender Roles from Demure Housewives to Independent Workers in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Little Women* by Louis May Alcott

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Abstract

How does the role and expectations for nineteenth century literary heroines change from the time of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë to Little Women by Louisa May Alcott?

Nineteenth century literary heroines were defined by distinct and precise social expectations, including behavior and values. Female leads embodied the expectations of society and were perfect examples of the ideal women. In Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë and Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, the traditional view of women is shattered and replaced by expectations closer to those of the modern era and feminist ideals. Jane Eyre, an independent thinker, follows her heart regardless of her own security and comfort, while Jo March, a spirited tomboy, is mannish physically and emotionally, relinquishing her independence to no one. In Jane Eyre, Jane is free intellectually and her relationships with Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers are defined by her resolve to stay true to her morals and values. Physically, Jane does not adhere to the traditional mold of fictional character development and her convictions further remove her from other nineteenth century heroines. In Little Women, Jo March enhances the transition with her wild independence and boyish enthusiasm. As with Jane, Jo is severed from traditional females in physicality and her choice of career. Mannish in nature, Jo seems to change gender roles, especially with her friend Laurie, a quiet and bashful boy. To further emphasize Jane and Jo’s shift from tradition, the authors incorporate foils in the form of Blanche Ingram and Meg March. In regards to the expectations and views of the tradition fictional females, Jane and Jo can be seen as transitional heroines, creating a new era of female characters with more feminine ideals and independent thought.

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The nineteenth century marked the start of an era of specific expectations for women, fictionally and realistically. The Victorian Era renewed the importance of etiquette and good manners within the home and among women, who were regarded as possessions of the head of the household (“VictoriasPast.com” 1). Nineteenth century women were also expected to keep the home and raise the children (“VictoriasPast.com 1). In literature, the female lead, or heroine, embodies the archetypes of the time period and conforms to society’s representation of the perfect woman (Hume 2). Most heroines of the Victorian Era “were to be quietly heroic and seek none of the laurels typically associated with male heroism” (Hume 3). Heroes had a far vaster range of heroic deeds which they were able to accomplish while women were confined to quietly affirming their place in the home. This typical mold for female leads in literature changes gradually over a twenty year period. From 1847, the publication date of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, to 1868, the publication of Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, the traditional views of women cracks within the frameworks of the characters Jane Eyre and Jo March, building up ideas of independence and free thinking closer to that of the modern feminist movements. Jane Eyre, a poor, plain governess contrasts greatly from the boyish and headstrong Jo March in more ways than just the era in which they occupy. Although Jane does not completely typify the traditional Victorian heroine, she is much less abrupt than Jo, whose boyish tendencies and independent spirit befits the more modern feminists than the glorified family caretakers of her time period. Brontë’s Jane Eyre begins a transformation of ideas and writing styles that brings to fruition the independent women
of Alcott’s *Little Women*. Through physical appearances, mindset, and attitude, Jane and Jo break away from the typical nineteenth century heroine and create a foundation for new generations of fictional heroines.

Jane Eyre, the heroine of Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*, in many ways typifies the traditional female character of nineteenth century writing, but in others, she breaks from the mold abruptly and blatantly. Her physical attributes alone defy all unspoken guidelines used by other authors of the era. While imprisoned in the red room of her Aunt Reed’s manor, Jane gazes into the looking glass and describes herself as a “strange little figure…with a white face and arms speckling the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still” (Brontë 20). In the same passage, she sums up her features as being “half fairy, half imp” (Brontë 20). In nineteenth century fiction, “fairies” were often seen as mischievous, magical creatures of human form that often meddled in human affairs. More often then not, fairies were viewed as harmful to humans, and are therefore often regarded as dangerous and unwelcome. Imps were equally disliked in nineteenth century literature and were often the root of accidents alongside fairies. Jane’s unique metaphorical description as “half fairy, half imp” is very radical for the time in which the book was written. Jane, as a heroine who mirrors the “ideal morals of the community,” would be expected to closely resemble the guidelines set up by society (Hume 1). As women were never expected to work outside of their homes, many heroines are described as angels or goddesses (Heiniger 2). As Abigail Heiniger says in her essay “The Faery and the Beast,” the traditional nineteenth century woman was “an unrealistic male-created ideal” (24). Fairies, carefree and impish little creatures, are far removed from the radiant and pure image evoked by the word angel. The words “fear”
and “gloom,” personifications of darkness, further cast Jane in a darker light than the
typical angelical figure. Almost instantly in the novel, Jane distances herself from her
fellow heroines as a dark and simple girl. Not only do readers sense the tragedy
surrounding Jane’s character, but also her free and mischievous nature, though heavily
suppressed by her aunt and cousins.

Blanche Ingram, a character introduced later within the novel, acts as a foil in
which readers can easily identify the drastic alterations made to the traditional female
role within Jane’s character. Blanche is everything that Jane is not, in both physical
appearance and in views of home and work. The first time Jane glimpses Blanche, she
describes her as a Diana, an ancient goddess who reigns over the hunt. In her essay,
Heiniger confirms that traditional, male-crafted females are described as angels or
goddesses, beautiful and ethereal (Heiniger 2). Physically, Blanche is described as tall,
dark, and noble, with a “graceful neck” and “sloping shoulders” (Brontë 204). She exudes
a grace and beauty that Jane does not and her image creates a more welcoming entrance
for readers to examine her character. However, she is later described as “self conscious”
and proud, two qualities that are not often sought after. Modern readers instantly become
more drawn to the quiet, yet strong Jane, who knows her own mind and stands strongly
behind her convictions.

A virtuous heroine is a commonplace image in nineteenth century novels, but
within Jane Eyre, that virtuousness is shifted on its head as reader are thrust into the mind
and heart of Jane. She harbors a strong sense of self and a strange independence not
often associated or expected of women of her time period. As the novel is a first person
account, readers can glimpse firsthand Jane’s confusion and doubts concerning the social
expectations of her era and the flaws in human nature. Jane is more intellectually aware of her world than was expected of women. Although Janice Hume argues that any “woman deemed worthy of a biographical sketch” should be “described as an intellectual, or a genius,” women were only encouraged to use their intellect for enhancing their own goodness and spirituality, or those of others (Hume 3). Women were expected to be “incapable of making their own decisions” that required them to elevate themselves above their stations as housewives (“Woman's Place in C19th Victorian History” 1). Jane does not fit any of these typical roles as she is a very independent thinker, constantly advocating her own strength as a woman. While residing at Thornfield Hall, Jane reflects that “women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do” (Brontë 131). Here, she echoes sentiments closely resembling those of the more modern women’s movement, where equality between the sexes was wanted both intellectually and within daily life. She acknowledges that women feel and need just as men do and should therefore not be treated differently. She expresses a desire for equality in the work field and within the social arena, where men generally dominated. She asserts her independence with vigor as no heroine would ever have dreamed of doing.

Not only do her thoughts betray her independent spirit, but so too do her actions and words. Her relationship with Mr. Rochester is heavily defined by her brash actions and opinionated answers. Mr. Rochester, a typical Victorian male, exudes superiority even when he professes his love to Jane, sending out subtle hints about how she should act and live while planning the wedding. In many of the conversations between Mr. Rochester and Jane, Jane opens up more than is socially acceptable, proving herself to be
just as fierce in her opinions as her employer. In one conversation, she tells Mr. Rochester, “It is my spirit that addresses your spirit...equal—as we are” (Brontë 296).

She establishes herself as an equal in her relationship with Mr. Rochester before she even accepts his proposal. Similarly, Jane’s relationship with her cousin St. John is riddled with her independent spirit. Jane refuses to marry St. John when his ideas of love clash heavily with her own, verbally scorning his love and his impassionate proposal. She explains to Mr. Rochester that St. John, “is good and great, but severe; and for me, cold as an iceberg. He is not like you, sir; I am not happy at his side” (Brontë 514). Doing so jeopardizes her chances of a good home and financial stability, but she refuses to compromise her own convictions and happiness even for the sake of comfort.

As much as Jane is independent and plain spoken, Blanche clings to traditional views, though she seems independent and willful. She will “suffer no competitor near the throne,” being the sole recipient of devotions (Brontë 213). Brontë’s choice of words may make it seem as if Blanche desires to be an equal within her home, but in reality, she is not. The “throne” which she fights so desperately for is not one of power over her own affairs, but power within the home, the only kind of power a woman of her times could wield. Blanche’s traditional views further emphasize Jane’s independence and nontraditional views in both marriage and power within her home. Jane does not fear to speak her mind and question society even when it comes to securing her safety and income. She is offered two opportunities to live in comfort and relative peace, but does not accept Rochester’s proposal fully until she is needed more than she is wanted, while St. John’s rings too much of convenience and arrogance for Jane’s independent personality. Her traditional role as teacher and servant within Thornfield Hall never stops
her leaving comfort and safety when events and situations do not match her own morals and ethics.

The only area in which Jane conforms to the typical female stereotype is her choice of career as a governess. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was moving her way through the first stages of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution opened up new opportunities for women in the form of factory work, but for middle class women, options were still very limited. Jane found “the one option for respectable employment” for women of her time, work as a governess (Jackson 1). Governesses often moved from place to place on low wages and while claiming an almost servant-like social status. This conformity, however, does not take away from the readers’ understanding of Jane’s character. She remains an independent individual and, as Mark Jackson argues, her role as a governess, “does not seem too appropriate for someone as passionate as Jane” (1). This marks the beginning of a change in female characters, which ultimately ends with Jo March.

Although Jane Eyre is more independent and open-minded than her traditional counterparts, she is closer to the idea of the ideal female when compared to Jo March. Written almost twenty years after the original publication of Jane Eyre, Little Women shifts dramatically from more traditional gender roles, especially within the character Jo March. Jo embodies an image common in modern day literature, a wild and feisty tomboy who dreams of providing for her family through writing. Breaking all the rules, Jo shows a transition in nineteenth century literature from producing well-mannered housewives to independent and forward thinking workers.
As with Jane Eyre, Louisa May Alcott thrusts aside the angelical female image in favor of something more fitting to Jo’s boyish nature. In the opening pages of the book, Jo is described as “a colt” with “round shoulders…big hands and feet,” and “a flyaway look in her clothes” (Alcott 14). Immediately, the image of a supplicant wife and care provider are thrust aside with the imagery Alcott uses in Jo’s physical description alone. The words “colt” and “flyaway” immediately bring to mind spirit and wildness, images most definitely not used to describe the perfect woman. Her “big hands and feet”, as well as her “round shoulders” are features usually associated with men. Even her nickname, Jo, is described by her sisters as “boyish” (Alcott 13). These descriptions set Jo apart from her more traditional sisters and cements her as an oddity within her society. Her boyish characteristics and unfeminine physical features are an oddity in comparison to the angelical standards of the time period. Here, the standard set by Jane Eyre is magnified to the most extreme level, creating a character that was radical for the time period in which she was created.

Just as Blanche is a foil for Jane, Meg March is a foil for her sister. As much as Jo is wild and boyish, Meg is girlish and domestic. At the start of the novel, Meg is described as “very pretty…plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain” (Alcott 14). The image presented to readers is that of the perfect lady. Her hands are dainty and “white”, implying that they have never known hard labor nor have they been overexposed to the sun. It even says that she is rather “vain” about her white hands, a sign that hard labor is something she regards as improper and therefore does not do. Jo, on the other hand,
revels in work and rough play. Her skin is tanned from overexposure to the sun and her very appearance points to a spirit and wildness not found in her proper sister.

Jo asserts her independent nature many times throughout the novel, especially in context to her writing. Unlike Jane, whose employment as a governess stays within the parameters of respectable jobs for females, Jo pursues a career in writing. Although “some women became famous novelists” during the nineteenth century, it was still a job not often regarded as respectable for women to pursue (Lambert 1). She is described often as scribbling away at her work. Although she is extremely self-conscious about her writing, Jo feels a strong desire to see her work published, saying that she “couldn’t rest till [she] had tried [publishing her story], and…said nothing about it because…[she] didn’t want anyone else to be disappointed” (Alcott 153). Unlike Jo, who dreams of becoming a famous author, Meg wishes for “nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money” (Alcott 144). All of these items are closely related to the home and living in comfort. Meg embodies the traditional house wife and care provider, while Jo tries to make her own way in the world.

When her father is away at war, Jo becomes a source of income in the March household, referring to herself as “the man of the family” and thus the provider for her Mother and three sisters (Alcott 14). She again becomes a monetary care provider for her sister Beth when she falls ill. This job is very different from those of other women who were “largely confined to the care of family members and home” (“VictoriasPast,com “ 1). Referring to herself as man is a radical choice of words considering the position of her fictional counterparts. The idea of women providing for their families was an unheard
of concept and further removes Jo from the typical molds of nineteenth century heroines and furthers the progression started in *Jane Eyre*.

Unlike *Jane Eyre* where readers have a chance to look into Jane’s thoughts, *Little Women* is a third person narrative and the readers’ understanding of how Jo’s mind works is largely based on her actions and dialogue. Many of her mannerisms are mannish and her exploits resemble those of a hero’s, not a heroine’s. She proclaims that it is “bad enough to be a girl, anyway, as I like boys’ games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it’s worse then ever now, for I am dying to go and fight with Papa” (Alcott 13). Here, readers can infer that Jo likes to fight her own battles, as she claims she is “dying” to fight in the Civil War along with her father. As a woman, she cannot join the Civil War as a soldier nor can she be as carefree with her manners as a boy. She craves the independence that comes with being a male even though she breaks most rules set for females despite it. Later, she wishes to do “something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after…[she’s] dead” (Alcott 144). For Jo, this means creating a name for herself as a rich and successful author. This desire seems closer to that of a hero than of a heroine. Heroes are described as brave, noble, valiant, fearless, and illustrious (Hume 1). The desire to be famous would fit better under the definition of a hero than that of a heroine. One of the greatest examples of shattering gender expectations is Jo’s relationship with Theodore Laurence. When he and Jo first meet, Laurie is described as bashful, but his “bashfulness soon wore off, Jo’s gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at ease…” (Alcott 36). He also shows a strange aptitude for playing the piano and dreams of becoming a musician, a job as unusual for men during the nineteenth century as writing was for women, though not nearly as frowned
upon. Jo and Laurie seem to trade roles as Jo holds the confident independence of a man while Laurie claims the quiet and insecure position of a typical female. Their relationship is largely focused around Jo’s strong personality and her wild adventures.

More so than Jane, Jo speaks freely about her opinions and places her independence above all else, even in context to marriage. She brashly tells Aunt March that “I’d rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent” (Alcott 291). Although she later regrets her words when she loses her trip to Europe, at the time they seem to embody Jo’s very existence. She does not like to let others do things for her or allow herself to be caught up in favors as she says, “They oppress and make me feel like a slave” (Alcott 291). Twenty years before, the very existence of women revolved around the idea of serving others and becoming a glorified housemaid. This shift in views is the transition point between Jane Eyre and Little Women, as women shift from dependent to independent. Jo makes her own decisions and even has a hand in creating her own income. Although some scholars argue that Jo relinquishes her independence upon marrying Friedrich Bhaer, it is refuted as Jo plays a major role in providing an income for her and her family. She tells Friedrich, “I’m to carry my share…and help to earn the home” (Alcott 462). Her inheritance of Plumfield and her occasional writings help provide an income and a livelihood for her family. Meg similarly marries, but does not share the burden of creating an income. She spends her days “like most other young matrons…with the determination to be a model housekeeper,” which she does by making jams, preparing dinners, and taking care of her rowdy children (Alcott 267). Jo never feels it necessary to keep a home, but to be independent enough to provide for her own family.
The twenty year difference between the publication of *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women* marks a change in the roles of women in nineteenth century literature. Although Jane Eyre resembles the traditional governess and servant of nineteenth century heroines, she represents a transitional phase in which changing ideals and independent thought emerge within female characters. Jo March is an end product of the transition, embodying an extreme example of female independence and changing female roles, projecting a futuristic image of feminism and the status of women within society. She clings to her independence and does not relinquish it even in marriage. Jane is independent in her thinking and openly expresses her opinions in conversations with her employer, Mr. Rochester. Even she does not throw her opinions away when she marries him later in the novel. These changes in traditional expectations for women are further enhanced by the foils Meg March and Blanche Ingram. The two women embody the perfect housewives as much as Jo and Jane embody the independent workers. The contrasts thrust the changes at readers, which helps to effectively express the major shift in guidelines for the fictional heroine in nineteenth century literature.
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