

ENG 684

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Paper #1

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The Truth of the Angel in the House

The nineteenth century was a time that saw a resurgence of beliefs that would keep the modern family together. Domesticity and the role that women played during that time influenced not only people's lives but drastically influenced the literature that came out at this time. Louisa May Alcott's, *Little Women*, seeks not only to illuminate this ideal but also to intervene into many of the misconceptions surrounding the much-lauded "angel in the house." Through her use of characters such as Jo and, more importantly, Beth, Alcott begins to explain this domestic phenomenon and that it is, in fact, not a healthy ideology and could lead to the destruction of the woman in order to maintain the visage.

The angel in the house was a domestic goddess of sorts. During the nineteenth century there was a "cult-like worship of 'True Womanhood' [that] entrapped women in the domestic sphere, where they were to dispense love and morality" (Cutter 383). These women were to be domestic geniuses, well versed in the art of cleanliness and culinary arts. By sacrificing themselves in the home, these women were characterized by devotedness and submissiveness, meeting the needs of those within the house before even their own. They were also meek, pious, the epitome of grace and charm, and, of course, pure. Because they were "circumscribed by the bounds of the nursery and the home, women were expected to be the guardians of morality, the uncorrupted force in a corrupted and corrupting world" (Cutter 384). In the novel *Little Women* the third born

child, Beth, is the only one able to embody this visage. We are made aware of this early on in the novel in a description of Beth:

Beth was too bashful to go to school; it had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up, and she did her lessons at home with her father. Even when he went away, and her mother was called to devote her skill and energy to Soldiers' Aid Societies, Beth went faithfully on by herself and did the best she could. She was house-wifely little creature, and helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable for the workers, never thinking of any reward but to be loved. Long, quiet days she spent, not lonely nor idle, for her little world was peopled with imaginary friends, and she was by nature a busy bee (Alcott 45).

Beth is the obvious angel in the house because all of the other girls, especially Jo, given her anger issues, is unable to fulfill the demands of the position. Jo's anger issues are seen and addressed by her mother after the incident when Amy burned Jo's manuscript. She tells Jo to "remember this day, and resolve with all your soul that you will never know another like it. Jo, dear, we all have our temptations, some far greater than yours, and it often takes us all our lives to conquer them. You think your temper is the worst in the world, but mine used to be just like that" (Alcott 82). With this revelation we now understand why neither would ever be able to conform to the strict ideals of the angel in the house. The March Mother is more closely aligned with her daughter Jo, who does not conform to the normal parameters for women of her time. This juxtaposition of Jo and Beth would further help with Alcott's destruction of this patriarchal ideal.

It is the combination of Beth's dedication to the "predominant image for women of the early and middle nineteenth century...the Domestic saint, an image which focused on women's attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Cutter 384), and Jo's perceived selfishness and self-determination that would lead to Beth's destruction. For it is Jo's fault that Beth went to the Hummel's to care for their sick infant. Jo pushes her to go, saying "I *have* been every day, but the baby is sick, and i don't know what to do for it. Mrs. Hummel goes away to work, and Lottchen takes care of it; but it gets sicker and sicker, and I think you or Hannah ought to go" (Alcott 175). It is this one act that would lead to Beth contracting scarlet fever and dying later on in the novel, not before becoming sickly and frail, but still maintaining her positive angelic spirit. Jo feels the weight of her mistake and frequently feels the pain of her selfishness and "she could not speak, but she did 'hold on,' and the warm grasp of the friendly human hand comforted her sore heart, and seemed to lead her nearer to the Divine arm which alone could uphold her in her trouble" (Alcott 183). However, Jo's character changes very little, unwilling to change her beliefs and demeanor. She could subconsciously be actively avoiding that which was Beth's undoing, submissiveness and purity. Beth's death is an example of the belief that the angel in the house is "too good to grow up into a sexualized, married, woman. Beth's idealization is accomplished, and defined by, her removal from the reproductive chain" (Barnes 321). She is not allowed to live her life and that is all Jo wants, to live her life and do anything that she wants, including rebuffing Laurie's proposal of marriage and, instead, starting her own school with the man she loves, even if he is older than she is.

The Angel in the House is a character that was crafted for the Romantic era and was a mold for women of the time. In her article entitled "Drowning (in) Kittens," Elizabeth

Barnes argues that “Beth March is representative of a character and narrative type—she represents the Victorian ideal of the sacrificial, self-obliterating female. Yet characters such as Beth perfect this otherwise metaphorical concept through a literal death that suspends innocence in time” (321). This description of “suspending her innocence in time” is not one to be lauded or to used as a good example of how a woman should live her life. Beth has been sequestered within the house, allowed by an absent father and ill-equipped mother, self-involved sisters, and even by her own idea of what she is capable of. Only able to live instead in her own little world of meekness and solitude. She hasn't been given the chance to socialize in a normal way and perhaps that is why she was never able to envision a life where she would fall in love, get married and have children. Her kittens, and being at the beck and call of her sisters, is the only reality she knows and therefore has been stunted in her emotional growth. This is not a preservation of innocence but rather a life cut short so as to avoid a fall from grace. The only way to be perfect, by this logic, is in death. Her innocence cannot be maintained in life and by trying to maintain that position on her pedestal would lead to her contracting scarlet fever, suffering for months, and then finally, death. As she is near to death, with little strength left in her frail frame for so long, she sings one last song, which seems to encapsulate her beliefs and point out, perhaps, what is wrong with what she has been taught since she was young:

He that is down need dear no fall,
He that is low no pride;
He that is humble ever shall
Have God to be his guide.

I am content with what I have,
Little be it or much;
And, Lord! contentment still I crave,
Because Thou savest such.
Fulness to them a burden is,

That go on pilgrimage;
Here little, and hereafter bliss,
Is best from age to age!

Fundamentally, there is nothing wrong with what Beth has learned from her religious teachings but, unlike Jo, she is unable to see anything other than those teachings and her angelic visage.

Beth serves as a lesson for Jo. The reader knows that Jo has erred in her judgment and must lay claim to the mistakes she makes and, further, make an effort within the society. While she isn't perfect, and certainly doesn't fit the mold of the nineteenth century woman and never would, perhaps that is what Alcott is attempting to discredit, that archaic ideal. Many of her readers wanted Jo to end up marrying Laurie but she flies in the face of criticism and sends Jo to New York where she would meet the man she would one day marry.

Alcott's novel, whether consciously or not, works against the patriarchal Angel in the House and establishes the danger that adhering to this destructive paradigm with the death of Beth. Jo serves as a healthier alternative to the narrow-minded, small world of the domestic sphere. She possesses anger, determination, strength, and ambition, everything that Beth could never see for herself. Jo chooses to follow the unconventional model her mother set forth for their future. Marmee tells them, "My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world—marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting...I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace" (Alcott 99-100). Quite unconventional for the time but one that Jo took to heart and one Beth would never be able to see through to fruition. Alcott

proposes that there is a big wide world for women, not just a small domestic sphere, a pet for the household.

Works Cited

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