

Jo March of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*,

According to Adler, Horney, and Rogers

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Jo March, one of the four sisters featured in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, is often recognized as an extraordinary literary heroine. She is portrayed as the most independent and boyish of the girls. Jo is also characterized by her hot temper, impatience with etiquette, and dismissal of being fashionable or "proper" by the standards of her society in New England at the time of the Civil War. However, she is also recognized often for her creativity and ambition, particularly in the plays and stories that she often writes.

As a literary figure, Jo stands out among her contemporaries yet remains loveable and admirable to the other characters in the book as well as to the reader. However, were Jo to exist in the actual world, some psychologists may have been interested as to how her personality developed so contrarily to the public mindset and social mores of her time. Three personality theorists who might be particularly attracted to the case of Jo March are Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, and Carl Rogers.

If Alfred Adler were to be introduced to the fictional character of Jo, he would have found her to be an interesting case. Adler's theory of personality was one based on individual psychology, which views each person as an organized entity of his or her experiences and behavior. How would Adler view Jo, the individual? Adler saw the ultimate goal of one's life as achieving superiority. As such, each person develops a unique style of life, which guides the way he or she lives in order to gain this goal (Ryckman 114). Jo, as an ambitious and creative young woman, seeks to be superior by using her greatest strength: writing. Throughout the

novel, Jo is found reading great literary works and writing plays and little stories for the local newspaper, her efforts culminating in the acceptance of her manuscript.

Adler would have viewed Jo's rejection of femininity as an example of organ inferiority. Adler's concept of organ inferiority was that people born with ailing bodies, or conditions that put them at a disadvantage in society, would have feelings of inferiority, which would guide the way that they chose to strive for superiority (Ryckman 117). Adler even used the term "masculine protest" to refer to behaviors of aggressiveness, assertiveness, and dominance, which he believed were used to compensate for this organ inferiority (Ryckman 117). Although Jo March was a healthy young woman, she noticeably resented that her sex put her at a disadvantage in the society of her era. Therefore, Adler would deduce, Jo's rejection of the socially acceptable behaviors of a lady was her attempt to compensate for the inferiority she felt.

The reader can see some support for this approach at the very beginning of the novel, when the sisters are sitting together and discussing the upcoming holidays. Her older sister, Meg, is reprimanding Jo once again for being unladylike, especially now that she is old enough to be nearly an adult. Jo retorts:

"It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (Alcott 5)

From this miniature tirade, the reader can deduce that Jo feels stifled and helpless by her gender and longs to be able to achieve other things than caring for her home and family. Adler would find that this attitude would complement his theory of masculine protest very well and theorize that Jo was indeed experiencing organ inferiority.

Adler might also find Jo's role in relation to her sisters to be of interest in analyzing Jo. The sisters in the March family are very close, and their daily, intimate interaction with each other perhaps contributes to the formation of their characters. Adler believed that the first born, being the "de-throned monarch" after the birth of the other children, would respect authority the most and adopt a role of responsibility. The second child would try to distinguish him or herself from the oldest and view the other as a competitor, whereas the youngest would be most apt to be spoiled and look to others to solve his or her problems (Ryckman 120). Jo, for her part, is certainly distinguishing herself as much as possible from her elder sister, Meg, who is a bit vain and struggles with not having nice or expensive things like her friends. Meg is well suited to be a wife, a mother, and a lady in every way by society's standards. Jo, in her diametrically opposite way, cares little if at all about her appearance and strives for more than "nice" ladies in that era could accomplish.

Regarding Jo's family life, Adler would also be interested in the specific manner in which she and her sisters interact. Because Jo grew up in a supportive family environment, in which every family member tried to be helpful to the others, Jo is likely to develop into a socially useful type. As opposed to the ruling type, who is prone to act aggressively to attain what he or she wants, the getting type, who is prone to expect others to solve his or her problems, or the avoiding type, who is prone to running away from problems entirely, the socially useful type deals with life's struggles confidently and cooperatively, in line with the greater interest of society (Ryckman 121). As such, Jo will be psychologically healthy and a viable and contributing member of society.

Karen Horney would view Jo March differently. Horney's theory of personality viewed the primary motivation for an individual's behavior as hyper-competitiveness. She believed that

the social and cultural standards by which a person was raised also had a great influence on how likely that person was to be psychologically unhealthy and how likely he or she would be to deal with personal issues in an unhealthy way (Ryckman 141).

Horney believed that the beginnings of neuroses and basic anxiety took place in the family, specifically in the roles of the parents. The parents are basically responsible for instilling the values of society in their children and may use their role to be abusive, dominating, indifferent, or otherwise to undermine their children's development as healthy human beings (Ryckman 142). In Jo's case, fortunately, her parents were very supportive and loving, and while both were firm with their daughters, it was always quite obvious that each daughter was loved, supported, and encouraged in all of her endeavors. In this way, Jo's real self is allowed to develop according to Horney's humanistic view of development. Horney believed that each person was unique, and that the sort of parenting Jo's parents provided emphasized encouragement of the natural talents each child was born with--the real self (Ryckman 142). For example, when Jo nears twenty-five and has lost her younger sister Beth as well as her best friend Teddy Laurence in her rejection of his love, she is nearly inconsolable. Her mother suggests, "'Why don't you write? That always used to make you happy,'" and as a result, Jo writes stories so truthfully and well that they are accepted by popular magazines (Alcott 499). In this simple illustration, Jo's mother has encouraged one of her daughter's innate talents and thus provided an outlet for some of Jo's emotions in a way that is more suited to her than a society-induced role.

However, no matter how excellent her parents may be, Jo will have some basic anxiety because, in her culture, women are not seen in a role equal to that of men. While Jo is able to cope with this anxiety in a more healthy way than neurosis due to the support of her family, she

will require some outlet for the frustration she feels at the contradiction of her true talents, desires, and abilities and the role she is expected to play in society. This frustration may be summed in part by Horney's view of penis envy.

Horney took issue with Freud's concept of penis envy: rather than agreeing that women were inferior and expressed their resentment of their inferiority in their desire to possess a penis, Horney suggested that the more important sources of this feeling of inferiority resulted from a consciousness of the privilege that men have in society. For example, even from the time that they are little boys, males can see and hold their genitalia in order to urinate, thereby making masturbation more acceptable and satisfying sexual curiosity (Ryckman 153). Jo, unable to experience this privilege or power, is understandably frustrated at being a superior person limited to an inferior role. Thus, she adopts a direct attack on her femininity by acting as boyishly as possible and openly admits her wish that she had not been born a girl.

Carl Rogers would have viewed Jo March in a slightly different fashion. He would have found her to be an excellent illustration of an emerging person. The characteristics of such persons include being honest and open, being indifferent to material comforts and rewards, caring for other people, having a deep distrust of science that could harm people, and holding trust in their own experience above that of external authority (Ryckman 452). Jo exhibits some of these qualities throughout the novel, namely, honesty, indifference to material things, and her caring nature. Jo, as we have seen, is frank nearly to a fault and does not indulge in coquettish games that were perhaps characteristic of the young ladies of her time. However, she is also deeply caring, as we see when she is the loyal nurse to her younger sister Beth:

Jo never left her for an hour since Beth said: 'I feel stronger when you are here.' She slept on a couch in the room, waking often to renew the fire, to feed, lift, or wait upon [Beth]. (Alcott 476)

Not without relation to Jo's boyish ways, she also appears to have little thought for the things of the material world. In the very beginning of the novel, as Jo and the oldest sister Meg prepare for a dance, Jo's gown has a large burn on the back from where she stood too close to the fire, and her gloves are stained and stretched. However, Jo is untroubled by either of these facts and must be convinced to have her hair put up and to wear a flower for decoration (Alcott 30).

Rogers would also be favorably impressed by Jo's family environment. Jo, her three sisters, and her parents all give each other unconditional positive regard, caring deeply without allowing judgments or fights to color their feelings (Ryckman 455). Although Jo, who is by nature temperamental, gets into squabbles with those that she loves, in the end she always realizes how very much she cares for them. For example, after her youngest sister, Amy, burned the notebook Jo had written her stories in, Jo was furious and acted spitefully into the next day. However, when Amy then fell through the thin ice while skating towards Jo with another apology, Jo is distraught with worry that Amy might truly be hurt (Alcott 89). This unconditional positive regard which Jo enjoys and displays with her family will allow her to have congruence between her true self and her experience, thereby being psychologically healthy (Ryckman 455).

Through the lens of three different perspectives, we see the development of Jo's personality as a healthy yet definite struggle between her socially acceptable role and her unique talents and preferences. The reader and personality theorist may both be delighted at the end of *Little Women*, when Jo simultaneously achieves a life that suits both of these: she does marry a

man, named Professor Baehr, and has a son, thereby fulfilling the roles of wife and mother accorded her by society. However, she also comes into the inheritance of her aunt's estate and turns the house into a home and school for young boys (Alcott 552). In this way, she is also able to use her creativity, her love for play and mischief, and her love of literature in her daily life. This success also allows her to resolve the organ inferiority and penis envy that Adler and Horney would see in her, as well as continuing to fit the title of an emerging person in Rogers' theory. Each theory, however, may credit Jo's superior family life and home environment with the development of her personality and credit Jo herself with the mature and socially helpful approach that enables her to learn to use her skills in a way that does justice to her true nature.

#### Works Cited

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Ryckman, Richard. *Theories of Personality*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004.