Working Against Closure:
Sexuality and the Narrative Endings of Little Women and Jacob Have I Loved

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April 10, 2003
The issue of sexuality is traditionally considered risqué in children’s literature. It has been avoided to such an extent that authors tend to shy away from featuring adolescent protagonists in their novels so that they do not have to handle the topic of sexuality, since adolescence is normally the time in a child’s life when a sexual awareness begins to emerge. Adolescence represents a difficult time period, both socially and literarily, because although sexual feelings begin to emerge in young adults, they cannot yet be confined in the socially acceptable bond of marriage. Critic Leslie Fiedler makes a clear link between the age of the main character and the expression of sexuality in literature. Barbara A. White paraphrases him by saying that in the early nineteenth century, “the emphasis on pre-pubescent heroines can be traced to the expurgation of the seduction theme from American literature,” implying that protagonists could not be adolescents because that would entail addressing sexuality (23). More recently, Katherine Paterson, author of *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), explains, “I’m aware of how reluctant I’ve been to have adolescents as central characters. To write convincingly about adolescence, sexuality has to be a huge part of what you’re describing, and I just don’t know if I want to spend that much time on it” (Lehr 25). Clearly, featuring an adolescent protagonist entails grappling with the topic of sexuality, and this challenge becomes even more difficult when the protagonist is female, due to the social and cultural restrictions placed upon a woman’s expression of her sexuality.

Traditionally, adult novels of the nineteenth century that featured a female protagonist centered on the idea of courtship and culminated in the ultimate socially acceptable expression of sexuality for a woman—marriage—and oftentimes children’s literature followed suit. The emergence of children’s literature followed on the heels of the immense popularity of domestic
fiction and, culturally, “helped perpetuate an ethos no longer new to adults” (Brodhead 92). However, while children’s literature greatly resembled domestic fiction in its focus on propriety and eventual marriage, the key difference of the protagonist’s age gave authors new flexibility in what their texts could represent. Richard Brodhead writes that while Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* “is always moving toward a quite conventional character ideal at its end . . . Alcott makes new allowance for, and takes a new pleasure in, the phase where such goals are not yet achieved” (92). The playfulness allowed by adolescence translates into the ability to—however subtly—portray alternative expressions of sexuality for female protagonists without dire social consequences.

Nevertheless, adolescent novels ultimately attempted to restrict their female protagonist’s freedom of sexuality by eventually confining her to socially acceptable expressions of sexuality (i.e. marriage) at the novel’s closure, thus confining her to a conventional novelistic ending. In *Little Women*, written in 1868, Jo March enjoys a great deal of independence and freedom to express her sexuality throughout the narrative, particularly through her career as an author, and her marriage at the end of the novel attempts to repress these qualities. More recently, Katherine Paterson’s adolescent novel, *Jacob Have I Loved* (1981), allows its female protagonist, Sara Louise Bradshaw, the freedom to express her sexuality through working in a typically masculine profession, only to end the novel with her renouncing her ambition to be a doctor, another traditionally masculine profession, when faced with adversity. The closures of both of these novels pointedly seem to strip the female protagonist of her independence, individuality, and freedom of sexual expression. However, the very conventionality of their endings, and readers’ negative responses to them, enable the subversive nature of the novels to shine through and
indicate that the meaning of the novel does not need to be encompassed by its closure. In giving
the novels conventional endings, the ways that the protagonists then resist the confinement of the
endings take on great importance as methods of subverting the purported goals of such narrative
conventions. Both texts accomplish this subversion by leaving the protagonists with possibilities
for expressing their sexuality despite these closures that attempt to confine it.

The idea that marriage was the most appropriate outlet for a person’s sexuality impacted
the form of the traditional adult novel of the nineteenth century, and, by extension, the children’s
novel. Thus, the predominant form the adult novel took was the courtship, or marriage-plot,
novel whose plot revolved around courtship practices and culminated in a long-awaited and
socially acceptable marriage, as, for instance, in the novels of Jane Austen. These types of
novels “uphold the concept of romantic wedlock as their symbolic center and ideal end” (Boone
9). The marital focus of these novels helped to maintain social order and uphold social
ideologies of the time related to class and gender. At the same time, it also helped to order the
Love and the Form of Fiction, writes, “. . . the power of the fictional marriage tradition owes
much of its idealizing appeal to its manipulation of form to evoke an illusion of order and
resolution that . . . glosses over the contradictions, the inequities, concealed in the institution of
marriage itself” (9). Any novel that openly rejected the focus of romantic wedlock could be seen
as trying to subvert the social order and create chaos. Therefore, expressions of sexuality that
occurred outside of wedlock constituted threats to narrative order, which consequently signified
threats to ideological, or social, order, giving authors ample reason to try to repress them.
To make a marriage the closing event of a novel suggests a natural orderliness and stability to wedlock, both socially and textually. The formal element of closure is perhaps most affected by the text’s drive toward marriage, since the final event of a domestic novel is often a wedding. Closing a novel with marriage suggests to a reader that the marriage equates with the meaning of the text and that all narrative events prior to the closure have been preparing for the marriage. In addition, as Joseph Boone notes, “All these strategies for achieving traditional closure attempt to limit the inherent possibilities of fictional narrative and of human desire by imposing a ‘center’ that governs the subsequent circulation of textual meanings and values” (80). One can see how expressions of sexuality that lie outside of marriage constitute a threat to textual stability because they stray away from the “center,” or goal of the novel.

Assuming that the closure of a novel constitutes its meaning threatens to discount the meaning the rest of the narrative holds. This theory is particularly limiting when considering novels that feature the maturation of a young female protagonist because it implies that all of her efforts at maturation are pointless if they do not culminate in a marriage or in a similar socially acceptable conclusion. To counter this argument, D.A. Miller, in the preface to his book, Narrative and Its Discontents, suggests that the closure of a novel does not necessarily constitute the entire novel’s meaning. Instead he writes that a text is “never fully or finally governed” by its closure (xiv). Opening up an analysis of the text that does not rely upon the ending allows a reader to detect “possible discontinuities between closure and the narrative movement preceding it, not to mention possible contradictions and ambiguities within closure itself” (Miller xiii).

Miller’s argument is valuable for bringing into focus the feminist valences inscribed in Little Women and Jacob Have I Loved, and the alternative expressions of sexuality these feminist
valences give rise to. In fact, Miller maintains that, ironically, it is within books that seem to most neatly close with a marriage where threats to the orderliness of marriage run rampant: “The nineteenth-century novel seems to be the best ground for such an argument, precisely because it is a text of abundant restrictions and regulations. For the regulations would be unnecessary if nothing resisted them, and the restrictions come into force for a reason” (xiv). He then goes on to note that problems of closure within a text constitute the “most visible symptom” of “the uneasiness raised in the novel text by its need for controls” (xiv). In *Little Women* and *Jacob Have I Loved*, the “uneasiness” the books are trying to contain is the female characters’ sexuality, and the closures of the novels attempt, but ultimately fail, to regulate this tension.

**Little Women**

Using Miller’s theory, it becomes possible to view *Little Women* as a text with varied expressions of sexuality despite its conventional ending in a marriage. Since its publication in 1868, readers have been dissatisfied with Jo’s refusal of Laurie’s proposal and disillusioned by her subsequent marriage to the much older Professor Bhaer. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser comments on readers’ disappointed reactions to the novel’s ending when she writes, “But just this sense of disappointment, even outrage, this reluctance to accept the traditional happy ending as a happy one, attests to the subversive power of Alcott’s design” (95). Readers sense tensions in the novel that are not ultimately resolved by its ending, and they do not necessarily view Jo’s marriage as the book’s natural conclusion. Readers often have this type of reaction to feminist novels: “The feminist novels with positive endings tend to be the same novels which are plagued with narrative inconsistencies. Not only do the endings often seem ‘tacked on,’ but the heroines’
consciousness may be too modern for the era in which the action is set” (White 182). The inconsistencies within *Little Women* between the narrative and its closure make its ending seem extraneous and “tacked on,” a reaction that results from Jo’s independent nature throughout the novel, which refuses to be squelched by a conventional marriage.

*Little Women* revolts against the idea of marriage having a natural and textual orderliness by its depiction of Meg’s marriage and how that marriage obstructs the natural progression of her maturation. Because the marriage occurs midway through the novel as opposed to at the end, it can explore some of the difficulties of marriage and resembles a wedlock book, in which Boone notes that “the narrative of wedded life lacks the teleological finality of courtship and seduction movements” and it offers “a deconstruction of its [marriage’s] ideality” (114). Meg’s domestic scenes depict a more realistic portrayal of marital life and reveal how marriage can stunt a woman’s maturation. After her marriage to John, Meg is only portrayed as a submissive housewife who continues to make the same errors of pride and vanity that she made in the beginning of the novel. Unlike Jo and Amy, who are acknowledged to have matured past many of their adolescent weaknesses before marriage, Meg shows little maturation even after marriage, indicating the novel’s refusal to portray marriage as the culminating maturation event of a woman’s life.

Jo’s reaction to Meg’s marriage reveals how marriage can obliterate a woman’s creative, independent mind, and shows the reader Jo’s general mindset on wedlock. Meg’s marriage is the first to take place in the novel, and it therefore breaks up the happy female community the March women create. Roberta Seelinger Trites notes that “Meg’s emotional desertion of her sister is another narrative event that pushes Jo toward a stifling heterosexual relationship” (150). Not
only does Jo feel that “it can never be the same again,” but Meg’s amorous behavior toward John causes her to lose Jo’s respect (Alcott 268). The narrator describes Jo’s reaction upon seeing Meg and John together immediately after they become engaged:

Going in to exult over a fallen enemy and to praise a strong-minded sister for the banishment of an objectionable lover, it certainly was a shock to behold the aforesaid enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strong-minded sister enthroned upon his knee and wearing an expression of the most abject submission. Jo gave a sort of gasp, as if a cold shower bath had suddenly fallen upon her—for such an unexpected turning of the tables actually took her breath away. (265-6).

In Jo’s eyes, marriage defeats her sister’s strong will and makes her submissive, an act both Jo and Alcott seem to view as unforgivable (Trites 152). Jo and Meg’s formerly close bond disintegrates once Jo loses respect for Meg. After her marriage, Meg and Jo have only one interaction together until the last chapter of the book, and this interaction occurs immediately after Beth’s death, the other major narrative event that drives Jo into a heterosexual marriage. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that their conversation involves the topic of marriage, the only subject the author and Jo seem to believe Meg can knowledgeably speak about anymore, as evidenced by the fact that the only scenes she remains involved in are rooted in domestic life. Even when she attempts to speak with John about topics outside of the domestic sphere, she must concertedly try “to look deeply interested, to ask intelligent questions, and keep her thoughts from wandering from the state of the nation to the state of her bonnet” (455).

The idea of marriage completing a woman’s maturation was common in marriage-plot books and is a significant point to consider when examining children’s literature. Jean E. Kennard has theorized a specific form of the marriage plot that, on the surface, accurately describes the narrative of Little Women. She frames the theory of the “two-suitor plot,” in which the female protagonist first rejects the wrong suitor, who “embodies the qualities she must
reject,“ and then accepts the right suitor, who embodies the morals the woman ought to possess (11). This process of rejecting the wrong man and accepting the correct suitor symbolizes the protagonist’s maturation. Kennard writes, “Maturity is seen to consist of adjusting oneself to the real world which is synonymous with becoming like the right suitor. The attainment of maturity wins the great reward, marriage to the right suitor, which provides a conclusion to the novel” (12). On the surface, *Little Women* appears to correspond to this conventional form through Jo’s marriage to the “morally superior” Professor Bhaer. Accordingly, Jo’s rejection of Laurie could be viewed as a rejection of the wrong suitor whose morals would prevent her development as a woman because they keep her in “a view of the world based on fantasy” (Kennerd 11). Laurie represents bad habits, like anger and mischievousness, which Jo attempts to overcome. The similarities in faults between the two characters would prevent Jo from ever growing into an adult woman with proper morals, according to the two-suitors plot. Jo recognizes this reality when she rejects Laurie’s proposal: “I agree with Mother that you and I are not suited to each other, because our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable . . .” (417). She sees no potential for growth for either herself or Laurie if they were to get married.

Professor Bhaer, on the other hand, succeeds in guiding some of Jo’s misguided morals, as when his subtle chastising makes her reexamine her own sensational stories with “the Professor’s mental or moral spectacles” (408). Through her marriage to Professor Bhaer, Jo becomes the proper wife and mother that society would expect her to become, and the Professor’s guidance of her continues throughout their marriage. Referring to life at Plumfield, the narrator says, “Of course it was uphill work at first, and Jo made queer mistakes; but the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters, and the most rampant ragamuffin was conquered
in the end” (555). Describing Jo as a “ragamuffin” that the Professor “conquers” seems to indicate that he has a hand in her maturation into an adult woman and that her independent spirit, which supposedly runs counter to maturation, has been tamed.

The basic plot structure of Jo’s refusal of Laurie and her subsequent acceptance of Professor Bhaer roughly fits the mold of the two-suitors plot. While Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer could be viewed as enabling the completion of her maturation because he helps to tame her wild ways, his method of “conquering” her clearly poses a problem to the concept of a natural progression of maturation. The very use of the word “conquered” implies negative connotations and denotes a kind of physical, forced maturation rather than a natural progression of development that a *bildungsroman*, or novel of development, would be aiming to depict. In addition, giving the Professor influence over Jo’s maturation “leaves the heroine in the position of imitator, an obvious conflict with the quality of independence we have been invited to admire in her” (Kennerd 15). An antidote to this dilemma is provided by the fact that even in the moments when Professor Bhaer appears to be guiding Jo’s maturation, the narrative indicates that it is the upbringing of her parents, and in particular Beth’s moral example, that help Jo grow into a morally conscious woman. Locating Jo’s maturation in various moments throughout the text relating to her family rejects the idea of a marriage that completes the protagonist’s maturation because it reveals that Jo did not need the specific guidance of Professor Bhaer in order to become a mature woman.

Perhaps the most significant moments of Jo’s maturation occur while tending to Beth on her deathbed. The last days that she spends with Beth are “precious and helpful hours for Jo, for now her heart received the teaching that it needed: lessons in patience were so sweetly taught
her that she could not fail to learn them” (476). These lessons, taught by her maiden sister, are ones that will serve her well in her eventual position as Mother Bhaer, overseer of Plumfield. Beth’s style of teaching Jo also differs markedly from the “conquering” that Professor Bhaer uses. Jo profits more from Beth’s physical presence, and she learns lessons of patience naturally, just by watching Beth’s example, rather than by receiving lectures. The differing styles of teaching between men and women in the novel serve as a parallel to the process of reading that the novel supports, where the closure of the novel does not determine the entire text’s meaning. Jo naturally learns lessons from Beth because of her sweet nature and takes meaning from the little moments they share together, allowing her to reflect upon these experiences and take them to heart, willingly incorporating them into her life and allowing them to affect her character. The Professor’s “conquering” technique, on the other hand, suggests an abrupt ending to a process of development and indicates Jo’s resistance to being guided in such a violent way. His teaching technique seems unnatural, much like the way Miller portrays the effects of closure on a novel.

Even in the moments of the text where it seems as though Professor Bhaer’s morality is guiding Jo, she remains guided by the morality of her family. In the same scene in which the Professor criticizes the sensational stories Jo has been secretly writing, Jo reflects on her own conscience, which she credits her parents with instilling in her: “I almost wish I hadn’t any conscience, it’s so inconvenient. If I didn’t care about doing right, and didn’t feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I should get on capitally, I can’t help wishing sometimes, that Father and Mother hadn’t been so particular about such things” (409). Although it is Professor Bhaer who indicates that her stories are immoral, the conscience instilled in her by her parents truly forces
her to stop writing them. Therefore, the Professor’s moral guides are mere supplements to the lessons already taught to Jo by her family.

Specifically, in the moment when the Professor has proposed to her and has supposedly “conquered” her heart, Jo displays many of the same qualities that made her a rambunctious, improper girl, showing that marriage could not completely quell her wild spirit and that perhaps this spirit does not need to be stifled in order for her to mature. After the Professor tells her that he has nothing to give her in marriage but his heart and his “empty hands,” the narrator says that “Jo never, never would learn to be proper, for when he said that . . . she just put both hands into his, whispering tenderly, ‘Not empty now,’ and, stooping down, kissed her Friedrich under the umbrella” (550). Jo forgets all sense of propriety even in the same moment that she chooses the right suitor, an act that supposedly completes her maturation. In addition, Jo “stoops down” to kiss the Professor and is the one who initiates physical contact between the two of them, putting her in the role of aggressor, typically the role of the man. In these acts, she establishes her own independence and agency in the marriage and resists subordination to her husband, instead showing signs of authority. These acts also constitute an inherent contradiction in what marriage typically means as the closure of a marriage-plot novel. The dénouement marriage aims to tame a woman’s individuality and power and subsume her in a partnership with a more authoritative man. In Little Women, however, the great contradiction contained in this moment of closure is that it is Jo, not the Professor, who exhibits the most authority and initiative. The narrator even makes the point of saying that Jo would “never, never learn to be proper,” and the repetition of the word “never” lets the reader know that this same authority would continue for her throughout their marriage, even past the novel’s ending.
The extraneousness of Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer in her process of maturation indicates that the book’s ending revolts against the idea of the closing marriage being the center of the novel’s action. Jo’s life, and in turn the narrative, does not revolve around the hope and expectation of marriage, like the lives of the female protagonists of domestic novels. In fact, the narrator does not even hint at Jo getting married until after Beth’s death, which occurs three-quarters of the way through the novel, and even then it is viewed as an event that takes place after her maturation is complete: “a little more sunshine to ripen the nut, then, not a boy’s impatient shake, but a man’s hand reach up to pick it gently from the burr, and find the kernel sweet and sound” (498). Until then, there is no serious indication that Jo would ever get married and the narrative does not prepare the reader for this event. Even when it appears as though Laurie will propose to her, her reaction of running away indicates how little she seriously considers the prospect of marriage for herself. Consequently, Jo’s marriage to the Professor feels like an afterthought, something she focuses on only because of her own feelings of loneliness after Beth’s death. As critic Roberta Seelinger Trites points out, “. . . Jo marries Professor Bhaer more out of desperate loneliness than anything else. Her first romantic expression of desire for Professor Bhaer is rooted much more solidly in this loneliness than in any declaration of heterosexual desire” (153-4). Jo desires a partner in life, a position formerly filled by Beth. Jo mourns Beth as she would a lover and only after her death does she feel incomplete and lonely, indicating that had Beth lived, Jo may never have felt the need to marry.

Another indication that Jo’s marriage at the end of *Little Women* is unnecessary is the fact that Jo could have lived very nearly the same lifestyle without marrying Professor Bhaer. Jo confesses that “Before my Fritz came, I used to think how, when I’d made my fortune, and no on
needed me at home, I’d hire a big house, and pick up some poor, forlorn little lads who hadn’t any mothers, and take care of them, and make life jolly for them before it was too late” (552).

Jo’s dream exists before marriage to Professor Bhaer even enters her mind, and it is not marrying him that makes the dream a reality. Aunt March, the spinster of the novel, enables Jo’s dream by bequeathing her Plumfield, an act that occurs before she marries the Professor and which grants Jo financial power. Consequently, one can imagine that the same basic ending of the novel could have been possible without a marriage at all. The reality of this alternative works against the “fictional idealization of the married state as the individual’s one true source of earthly happiness” (Boone 9). It is the Professor, more than Jo, who profits from their marriage. Having previously encountered difficulty in finding work, the prospect of opening up a boys’ school at Plumfield offers him a permanent job, and the text seems to indicate that Jo commands their life together. She provides the idea and the means to open up a boys’ school, and far from needing marriage in order to live a productive life, Jo instead helps provide a productive life for her husband.

In lieu of a stifling marriage that strips Jo of her independence, the text offers Jo alternative outlets for her emerging sexual feelings at the critical time of adolescence. These other forms of sexual expression offer a glimpse of how Jo could remain independent and live a fulfilling sexual life without men. One of the outlets Jo discovers for her sexuality is the homosocial community of her mother and sisters. The all-female community Alcott offers Jo provides her with “a homosocial female world wherein women could gain power denied them by the patriarchy” (Trites 145). In the early absence of Mr. March, Jo can legitimately and usefully live out her fantasy of exerting masculine authority and being the “man of the house.” During
this time in the novel, she gets her first stories published, which, although they do not earn her money yet, are the first crucial step in her ability to publish for pay: “... and I shall write more, and he’s going to get the next paid for, and I am so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girls” (179). Jo desires not only to be financially independent, but also to support her family as a man would. It is the exclusively female community that allows Jo to exercise these expressions of power, which for her relate to expressions of sexuality as they grant her the opportunity to adopt masculine traits.

Roberta Seelinger Trites notices an even more significant sexual dynamic to the female community depicted in Little Women. Trites detects a strong undercurrent of lesbianism running throughout the text, and identifies this as the primary expression of sexuality in the novel: “Since overt sexuality was generally taboo in nineteenth-century Anglo-American children’s texts, lesbian sexuality was perhaps doubly repressed. On the other hand, if lesbianism was not suspect in early Victorian culture, it might actually have provided an acceptable way for early Victorian writers to explore sexuality in children’s books” (143-4). Trites pays particular attention to Jo’s relationship with Beth and finds the book’s strongest evidence of lesbianism in their partnership. The narrator of the novel pairs Beth with Jo from the very beginning: “Meg was Amy’s confidante and monitor, and by some strange attraction of opposites Jo was gentle Beth’s. To Jo alone did the shy child tell her thoughts; and over her big, harum-scarum sister, Beth unconsciously exercised more influence than anyone in the family” (47). Additionally, Beth understands and supports Jo’s desire to perform masculine roles, showing that their relationship offers Jo a great deal of freedom in her gender identity and sexual expression (Trites 148). Trites cites Terry Castle’s argument that lesbian characters are often portrayed as ghosts in
order to strengthen the idea of Jo and Beth’s relationship containing a lesbian element: “‘One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized’” (Trites 149). Indeed, following this theory of lesbianism being manifested in spectral scenes, Beth’s deathbed scenes provide the most ample evidence of a sexual dynamic in the sisters’ relationship, and the impact Beth’s death has on Jo further strengthens this claim.

Erotic imagery permeates the deathbed scenes between Beth and Jo. During Beth’s illness, Jo attends to her more than any other family member, and the narrator describes her as showing a “passionate affection” for Beth as, with a kiss, she “dedicated herself soul and body to Beth” (428, 430). While nursing her sister, Jo often reacts as a lover would, being “jealous of any other nurse, and prouder of being chosen then than of any honor her life ever brought her,” and she also dedicates a poem to Beth’s honor, much the same as a love-sick poet might (476). The two sisters want only to be together during these last days, and Beth’s final request of Jo shows her to be somewhat jealous of the prospect of Jo living a life different from the one they lead together: “You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I’m gone . . . if it’s hard work alone, remember that I don’t forget you, and that you’ll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy” (479). Beth seeks to stifle any other expressions of sexuality Jo may wish to pleasurably utilize, particularly writing. Instead, her request of Jo attempts to trap Jo into a domestic life she would abhor, out of a kind of lover’s jealousy. Beth rightly identifies these other activities, instead of marriage, as ones that would fulfill Jo’s need for sexual expression. While this scene could be read as Beth’s sisterly concern
for Jo and her desire to see her settled into a safe, domestic life, it could also be taken as an indication that settling Jo into a heterosexual marriage would not be a fulfilling enough sexual expression to cause any threat to Beth, the true object of Jo’s desire.

Understanding Beth as Jo’s true partner makes it possible to fit her into the form of Kennerd’s two-suitors plot because she represents one of Jo’s possible mates. Beth’s incredible goodness guides Jo and helps her mature into a woman with proper morals, the exact same influence the “right suitor” exerts over the female protagonist. Beth’s death could even be viewed as a transfiguration of the typical closure moment of marriage-plot books because her death is the event that serves as the culmination of Jo’s maturation. Viewing Beth as Jo’s “right suitor,” and focusing on their intimate partnership while Beth is alive, offers the possibility of Jo living a sexually fulfilled life without heterosexual marriage, again dismissing her marriage to Professor Bhaer as the primary goal of the novel’s progression. However, Beth’s desire to keep Jo from writing embodies the confining aspects of the “right suitor” because she seeks to inhibit Jo’s independence and prevent Jo from expressing her sexuality in any way other than marriage after Beth’s death; Beth wants Jo’s life to progress toward a conventional ending. Therefore, because of the restrictions Beth attempts to place upon it, writing emerges as the most potent form of Jo’s sexual expression, and the fact that Jo never fully renounces writing, despite even gentle Beth’s attempt to stop her, allows her to retain her independence throughout the entire novel even with the book’s conventional ending.

Beth’s request for Jo to take care of their parents instead of being an author places writing in direct opposition to domestic life. Beth describes a scenario in which Jo could either live a domestic life, where she would be happy and fulfilled with love, or she could pursue her desire
to be an author. Beth’s philosophy echoes the way marriage plot books view marriage as providing a natural orderliness to society and the text itself, while anything lying outside of wedlock becomes a threat to this order. Therefore, Jo’s writing becomes an activity that threatens societal order because it is a sexual expression that can exist outside of wedlock. In addition, writing threatens to replace marriage as the center of the novel because it is writing a masterpiece, not getting married, that Jo focuses on throughout the novel, even at the closure, and it is the lens through which Jo views her own gender identity.

Artistic expression, as Shirley Foster and Judy Simmons note, arises as a central theme of the novel: “Creativity, whether perceived as a conventionally feminine or as a transgressive act, is a central ingredient in the text’s conceptualization of female autonomy” (93). Although each March sister takes up some form of artistic expression as a way to express her individuality, it is Jo who most aggressively pursues her art as a profession, allowing her to become independent and financially self-sufficient, qualities aligned with her identification with the male gender. She views her authorship as a means by which she can become the “man of the house,” supporting herself and her family, particularly Beth: “She saw that money conferred power: money and power, therefore, she resolved to have, not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than self. The dream of filling home with comforts, giving Beth everything she wanted . . .” (396). Art equals work for Jo, and having the ability to earn money places her in a position of authority normally granted to men. Therefore, authorship allows her the same type of power that living in an exclusively female community did—she can express her masculine side freely and usefully.
The type of writing Jo does throughout the novel goes through drastic transformations. Her writing career includes two phases: the sensational and the domestic. Foster and Simons observe, “Like Alcott, Jo’s first literary inclination is toward the Gothic, the sensational genre that liberates her fantasies of violence, aggression and cross-dressing” (91). For the majority of the novel, Jo produces sensational stories because they are the only types of stories that newspapers would accept for pay. As a result, Jo writes these stories because they fulfill her desire to adopt a masculine role and help her to express her sexuality. The process of writing is also very physically draining for Jo, again hinting at the sexual component of her work: “when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather . . . The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from her ‘vortex,’ hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent” (307). This language gives an erotic overtone to Jo’s process of writing, showing that it not only fulfills her desire to be financially independent like a man, but it also actualizes her need to express her sexuality physically.

Her sensation stories are further eroticized in the description of her visit to the publisher of Weekly Volcano, but this meeting also compromises Jo’s independence because it evokes in Jo the same kind of behavior typical of a woman being courted—the kind of behavior she mocks in the scene where she and Amy make calls on their neighbors. She “dressed herself in her best,” and “blushed and blundered” throughout the meeting with Mr. Dashwood (397). For the first time in the novel, Jo takes a markedly subservient attitude toward a man, working in conjunction with Foster and Simons’ view that “the sexually transgressive implications of their [sensational stories] context and the latent subversion they encode are, however, not allowed to flourish in the
world that is dominated by a patriarchy which represses the unacceptable female text” (91). Jo even concedes to deleting the moral reflections she inserted into her book, allowing a man to have control over her writing content. Jo’s sensation stories are eventually repressed in the text, but not necessarily because they allow Jo too much freedom of sexual expression, as is often asserted by critics. On the contrary, one of the reasons Jo stops writing sensational stories is because they ultimately stifle her independent nature by forcing her into the subservient feminine role she works throughout the novel to resist, which in turn grants greater validity to the domestic fiction she eventually writes.

While Jo’s turn to domestic fiction seems to be a renunciation of the kind of writing that lets her express the daring side of her sexuality, domestic writing actually continues to allow her to express her sexuality while providing her with the independence sensational writing denied her. Both Beth and Professor Bhaer attempt to put an end to Jo’s writing career, and the fact that both of Jo’s “suitors” try to suppress her desire to write points strongly to writing being a potent expression of sexuality; her partners show jealousy at her ability to fulfill her need for sexual expression outside of her relationships with them. Therefore, Jo’s continuing to write at all—whether she writes sensational or domestic fiction—becomes an act of defiance, an exertion of female independence, and the primary mode of sexual expression she falls back upon. Jo quickly breaks the promise she makes to Beth to give up writing and, at the urging of Marmee, once again picks up her pen and, with the same “absorbed expression” that enveloped her when she wrote sensational stories, pens a successful piece of domestic fiction (499). The last story Jo writes in the book becomes her greatest success and, importantly, reverses the power structure set up between her and publishers that existed when she wrote sensational stories. Instead of
needing to solicit her manuscript, this work “was not only paid for, but others requested” (499).

Writing domestic fiction helps her regain her independence, both financial and emotional, which the publisher, Mr. Dashwood, had taken from her. Finally, domestic fiction allows her to continue to utilize writing as an expression of her sexuality even after her marriage to Professor Bhaer. She notes, “I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these” (560).

Instead of marriage, writing a “good book” becomes the ultimate expression of Jo’s sexuality, and she continues to strive toward this goal even after she has supposedly achieved the one sexual expression women strive toward, according to marriage-plot books. Because Jo’s freedom and desire to write continue into the closure of the novel, it is impossible to view marriage as the one, all-encompassing drive of the narrative of Little Women.

**Little Women** reveals how working can provide an adolescent girl with an outlet for sexual expression that lies outside of wedlock. The narrative form of Little Women continually resists viewing Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer as the culminating event of both the novel and Jo’s maturation, and the fact that she marries does not strip her of the independence she enjoys throughout the novel. Not only does Jo’s work as an author allow her to acquire the qualities of masculinity that she admires, but it also provides physical pleasure for her. The strong association of her work with power and pleasure, and the way writing helps take the place of her desire for Beth once she dies, shows how work is a fulfilling and useful expression of her sexuality. Its continued presence at the closure of the novel indicates the inability of the book’s ending to suppress Jo’s independence and confine her sexuality, and it also shows how the
closing marriage does not act as the one main goal of the narrative and cannot subscribe total meaning to the text.

*Jacob Have I Loved*

Viewing work as a powerful expression of a young woman’s sexuality carries over into twentieth-century children’s literature in Katherine Paterson’s novel, *Jacob Have I Loved*. In a similar way to Jo, Sara Louise “Wheeze” Bradshaw utilizes her work as an expression of her emerging sexuality. Working on the crab boats with her father gives her a sense of power and independence and, similarly to Jo, allows her to take on masculine qualities and enjoy the physical pleasure her work gives her. Throughout the text, there are strong indications of how Sara Louise gleans power, independence, and pleasure through her work. It is therefore surprising that the ending of *Jacob Have I Loved* appears to confine Sara Louise’s independence in that it restricts her career choice by having her settle for a career as a midwife instead of a doctor, just as marriage attempts to limit Jo and stifle her independence. But, much as the narrative of *Little Women* resists the idea of marriage completely governing the text’s meaning, the text of *Jacob Have I Loved* refuses to allow Louise’s final career path to stifle either her independence or her sexuality.

Just as readers expressed displeasure with Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer, critics of *Jacob Have I Loved* remain disappointed with the ending of the novel, which sees Louise renounce her ambition to be a doctor and settle for a career as a midwife. Critic Wendy Michaels notes: “What Katherine Paterson does is simply to reinforce the traditional Judeo-Christian image of the female gender role in terms of servitude, sublimation and sacrifice” (91).
She further goes on to denounce how Louise “settles for a nursing career, specializing in midwifery, and condemns herself to a life of service in a remote mountain village where she eventually marries a widower, and takes on the additional service role of mother to his children” (92). In Michaels’ view, not only does Louise settle for a career where she serves others, but by marrying, she also reconciles herself to a life of subservience to a man. However, although her final choice of a career in midwifery seems inferior to her desire to be a doctor, this ending of the novel does not ultimately restrict the individuality Louise expresses throughout the novel because it also relocates her in a setting that allows her greater freedom of sexual expression than Rass Island did.

On the surface, Sara Louise’s eventual career as a midwife seems to give the text an antifeminist message because she originally went to school to become a doctor. Indeed, the scene where she speaks with the professor about becoming a doctor appears incredibly antifeminist: “He wished it were different, he said, but with all the returning veterans, the chances of a girl, ‘even a bright girl like you’ getting into medical school were practically nonexistent” (Paterson 231). When viewed in relation to the life she lived on Rass Island, where she worked on the crabbing boats with her father despite crabbing being a man’s profession, her relative acquiescence to this setback seems contradictory to her previous disregard of the gender role expected of her by society, a quality the reader has been encouraged to admire in her. In addition, given the importance of work throughout the text as a form of Louise’s sexual expression, her willingness to settle for a job that is less than what she desired—and that is typically regarded as feminine work—further complicates the ending in regard to its coherence with the rest of the text’s characterization of Louise. The way that the ending revolts against the
reader’s expectations of Louise indicates the rest of the narrative’s failure to follow the narrative convention that would lead to a satisfying and natural conclusion.

Louise partakes in traditionally masculine work throughout the novel, without much concern for how society views her as a result. In fact, performing typically masculine work provides her with emotional pleasure: “I suppose if I were to try to stick a pin through that most elusive spot ‘the happiest days of my life,’ that strange winter on the Portia Sue with my father would have to be indicated. I was not happy in any way that would make sense to most people, but I was, for the first time in my life, deeply content with what life was giving me” (187). This quote reveals Louise’s disregard for how others may view her enjoyment of working in a masculine profession. Even in her fantasies, she dreams of becoming a spy, a traditionally masculine profession that, in her mind, would preclude a typically female life consisting of marriage and children. She imagines herself saying to the President, “Do you think, Mr. President, with the life I lead, that I will live long enough to have children?” (61). Clearly, Louise is comfortable with the idea of having a traditionally masculine profession and foresees few obstructions to her having such an occupation. Her fantasy also shows that she views her career as being a more significant part of her future than marriage and children. Her attitude throughout the book toward typically masculine professions makes the ending particularly incoherent with the rest of the novel, because the narrative never indicates any problem with Louise holding a traditionally masculine job. In fact, her ability to work places her in a position of authority and respect in her family and is the one aspect of her life where she feels superior to Caroline: “We had always lived so close to the edge of being poor. It made me feel proud to be able to present the family with a little something extra to hold onto . . . I was a contributing
member of the household in which she [Grandma] and Caroline were little more than parasites” (81). In withholding her saved money from Caroline, Louise is able to prevent Caroline from continuing her music lessons on the mainland, giving Louise power over her sister and satisfaction in her own ability to provide for herself.

Louise also derives an intense physical pleasure from her work, indicating it as an outlet for her physical sexuality. Like Jo, Louise feels physically drained after performing her work, but finds this sensation pleasurable. She attributes her eventual deep sense of happiness on Rass Island to this corporeal pleasure that work gives her: “It was work that did this for me. I had never had work before that sucked from me every breath, every thought, every trace of energy” (188). In addition, Louise regards working as the means by which she can pursue other expressions of her sexuality. Her saved money allows her to buy hand cream, which she utilizes in order to make her hands more feminine and attractive because she views hands as “the most revealing part of the human body” (147). Importantly, Louise also views working as the primary way she will be able to get herself off of the island, an act that equates with the freedom of sexual expression. The money she earns by working on the crab boats is originally set aside so that she can attend boarding school at Crisfield, offering the potential for her to leave the island and explore her sexuality on the mainland, as Caroline does. The importance that work has for Louise throughout the novel in terms of her sense of independence and her sexuality makes her decision to settle for a career as a midwife both surprising and disappointing for the reader, who has been led to understand Louise as a character who enjoys the challenge of having a profession that is atypical for a woman.
However, Louise’s final career choice at the end of the novel—the major event that appears to take away her agency in her own life and that the ending centers around—does not ultimately strip Louise of her independence or confine her sexual expression. Instead, because of the narrative preceding it, the closure contains a strong sense of possibility for Louise because it portrays her away from Rass Island, a setting that continually restricted her ability to express her sexuality throughout the text. Miller, in his critique of closure, notes that “the tendency of a narrative would therefore be to keep going, and a narrative closure would be, in Mallarmé’s phrase, a ‘faire semblant’” (xi). Louise’s escape from the island helps to reject the confining closure that her career choice seems to bestow upon her in that it offers the idea of new expressions of her sexuality that she was unable to explore throughout the rest of the text because of her confinement on the island. Positioning Louise off the island with the possibility for new expressions of her sexuality breaks away from any confinement that even the anticipated ending of her becoming a doctor would have given because it creates the possibility of a new conception of her identity for both her and the reader. By straying from the reader’s previous understanding of Louise, the ending almost acts as a totally new beginning for her in which she could accomplish anything.

In examining what Louise says about her life goals throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that leaving the island is an important idea for her. When the Captain asks her what it is she would want to do if she got off the island, the first thing she says is, “I—this sounds silly—but I would like to go see the mountains” (217). This dream remains consistent throughout the novel. About midway through the novel, Sara Louise declares, “I had never seen a mountain, except in a geography text. I was fourteen, and I had never even seen a real mountain. I was
going to, though. I was not going to end up like my Grandma, fearful and shriveled” (125). It is the dream of seeing the mountains, not being a doctor, that she expresses consistently throughout the novel and this dream symbolizes freedom and independence. In fact, when the Captain asks what she wants to do with her life and she responds by saying a doctor, she also says, “the ambition began to form along with the sentence” (217). The desire to be a doctor is more of a whim than a lifelong dream of hers, so settling for a career in midwifery is not a renunciation of her ambitions. Instead, the desire to get off the island, which remains an important part of the narrative, is fulfilled in settling down in the mountain town of Truitt.

The island severely limits Louise’s freedom of sexual expression, and even the pleasure Louise derives from work gets restricted in the space of the island. Although her work on the crab boats gives her independence and a feeling of physical pleasure, it also inhibits her from feeling like a feminine, sexual woman. When Call returns home and she begins to feel attracted to him, she attempts to feminize her look but finds it difficult because of how work has affected her body:

When I put on my Sunday dress, which I hadn’t worn for almost two years, it strained across my breasts and shoulders. I could hardly bring myself to look in the mirror, first at my brown face and then at my sun-scorched hair. I dampened it with water and tried to coax it into a few waves about my forehead. I slopped hand lotion all over my hands and then on my face and legs, even my arms and elbows. It had a cheap fragrance, which I tried to fool myself would cover the essence of crab. (204)

Louise feels the need to express her sexuality in conventional ways, as well as through her work on the crab boats. However, both the physical conditions of the island and the effect the work on the crab boats has on her body impede her capacity to express her sexuality in more conventional ways, such as dressing in a feminine way. In this way, the setting of the island even taints the
primary expression of sexuality she enjoys throughout the text because it precludes other expressions of sexuality for her.

Leaving the island becomes a symbolic act of sexuality in the novel, so that Louise’s eventual success at escaping Rass is an empowering move and enables her to more fully and openly express her sexuality. Almost all expressions of sexuality somehow occur off the island. The Captain and Auntie Braxton are married off the island, Louise’s parents return from New York feeling more loving toward each other, Call and Caroline get married off the island, and eventually, after leaving Rass, Louise finds a husband. Caroline, as the character that most often leaves the island, is also the character that displays the most overt expressions of sexuality. Caroline regularly travels to the mainland for singing lessons and is the first of the three child characters to leave the island for good. Throughout the novel, she is very open with signs of physical affection: “She kissed our father on his cheek, a gesture that never failed to embarrass me. Caroline was the only person I knew who kissed in public. It was simply not done on our island” (48). Caroline’s exposure to life off the island allows her to openly express her sexuality, and she feels comfortable talking about sexual matters, unlike Louise. Caroline R. Goforth notes, “As Rass Island can not touch another land mass, neither can Louise touch others physically or emotionally. Caroline, however, has no trouble expressing affection. It is no surprise that she moves freely back and forth from island to mainland” (177). It is Caroline who suggests that the Captain should marry Auntie Braxton so he could have somewhere to live, and she shows herself to be comfortable talking about sexual matters, albeit in a very adolescent manner: “It’s not as if they’d want to do anything. My gosh, they’re both too old to bother with that” (153). Louise, on the other hand, hates talking about such issues: “Will you shut up about
doing things? You have got the filthiest mind. All you can think about is doing things” (154). Although Louise’s frustration may partly derive from Caroline’s euphemistic language, it is significant that Louise cannot even bring herself to talk about sexual matters in age-appropriate language. Living a sheltered life on the island has impeded Louise’s ability to discuss sexuality or show any signs of affection to anyone on the island, but regularly leaving the island has enabled Caroline to comfortably express her sexuality.

In her life on Rass, Louise is attracted to two men—the Captain and Call—but significantly, neither of these attractions enables her to fully express her sexuality because neither attraction is actualized in the novel. However, they both offer her a sense of power and independence from the life she leads on Rass, foreshadowing the kind of qualities she will be looking for in a sexual relationship—the kind she eventually finds once she leaves the island. The captain’s age, along with social conventions, hinders any enactment of the sexual attraction she feels for the Captain. However, her attraction to him indicates how she wants her sexuality to be viewed. Louise becomes attracted to the Captain because he treats her like an individual and helps her to exercise power. She notes that the Captain uses her full name, not the nickname “Wheeze” that Caroline gives her: “No one bothered, not even my mother, to call me Sara Louise, but he had done it without thinking. Strange how much that meant to me” (100). The Captain is the first person to view Louise as an individual apart from the influence of Caroline, and apart from her island identity. In the moment when Louise first feels a physical attraction toward the Captain, he is in a vulnerable state that allows her to be the one in authority. Having just lost his house in the storm, “he looked like a little boy trying not to cry” (131). This vulnerability moves Louise to physically comfort him and she briefly becomes the stronger of
the two, despite their large age gap. This feeling of strength over a man translates into sexual feelings for Louise, and she is able, for the first time in the novel, to show physical affection.

Likewise, Louise exercises authority in her relationship with Call, where she is clearly portrayed as the cleverer and more assertive of the two. Their physical descriptions immediately cast Louise in the masculine role and Call in the feminine one: “At thirteen I was tall and large boned, with delusions of beauty and romance. He, at fourteen, was pudgy, bespectacled, and totally unsentimental” (5). Throughout their friendship, Louise continually takes the lead while Call lags behind. She enters the Captain’s house first when they believe he is a spy, she drinks tea with the Captain instead of drinking milk, and she makes jokes that Call cannot understand. Her spy fantasy illustrates how she views her relationship with Call. In imagining the moment when she accepts a Medal of Honor for capturing the Captain as a spy, she comments, “In my dreams I always went in alone, but in real life it seemed selfish. Besides, I was used to doing things with Call” (61). In this fantasy, Louise pictures herself very definitively in the masculine role with Call following her. She remains concerned about losing Call, both to Caroline and to the Captain, because losing Call would mean losing the one relationship in which she can consistently exercise authority. When Louise’s feelings toward Call finally turn sexual, it is only after he has been away for two years in the Navy and she has missed having that authority over someone. However, her feelings quickly begin to change for him when he asserts, “You haven’t changed, you know” (201). After that statement, she says, “He was beginning to annoy me as much as he had when he was a chubby boy” (203). When she realizes that a life with Call would continue to trap her in her island identity, she loses any sexual feelings she began to have toward him. Although he provides her with a relationship in which she has superior authority, he
ultimately stifles her ability for sexual expression because he continues to envision her as an islander.

Once Louise finally leaves the island, she can enter into a relationship that fully expresses her sexuality. Her marriage with Joseph allows her to exercise the authority and independence she sought in her relationships with the Captain and Call. When they first meet, Louise is in a position of authority over Joseph, being the one with the knowledge to treat his son’s illness. She also eventually empowers his knowledge by teaching him midwifery so that he can deliver their child. Louise’s education puts her in this position of authority over Joseph, making their marriage resemble the power structure existent in her friendship with Call. Significantly, like the Captain, Joseph also recognizes Louise’s individuality and strength: “I knew there was something different about you. I kept wondering ever since you came. Why would a woman like you, who could have anything she wanted, come to a place like this?” (236). Therefore, her marriage with Joseph is one in which she can retain her individuality and exercise power, and she finds this ideal combination only once she leaves Rass Island.

Although the ending of *Jacob Have I Loved* is often read as being antifeminist, with Louise complacently settling for a job that is not her ideal because a man tells her she will not succeed, the fact that Louise’s mother enables her to finally leave Rass Island becomes important in working against the conclusion’s attempt to prescribe an antifeminist message to the novel. Throughout most of the novel, Louise feels displaced by the female homosocial community of her family and lacks their support, particularly in sexual matters. Her grandmother torments her about her attraction toward the Captain, Caroline makes the situation worse by proposing the idea that the Captain and Auntie Braxton marry, and Louise feels unable to share her confusing
emotions with her mother: “How could I share with my mother the wildness of my body or the desperation of my mind?” (142). Unlike Jo, who gleans strength and power from the women in her family, Louise’s female community hinders rather than supports her emerging sexuality, further confining Louise’s ability to express her sexuality in the space of the island.

Therefore, the moment when Louise’s mother tells her that they will miss her more than Caroline is not only significant because it finally motivates Louise to leave the island, but it also makes her feel included in the female community. James Holt McGavran asserts that it is the Captain who makes Louise realize she can leave the island: “But she still feels tied to the island—until the Captain, having criticized her unwomanly activity with the oysters, gets her to see that she is free to leave Rass anytime and pursue a career” (11). While her conversation with the Captain is the first time she voices the desire to leave the island and begin a medical career, it is not enough to give her the strength to leave the island because she still feels obligated toward her parents. Instead, immediately after her mother tells her that her parents will miss her more than they do Caroline, Louise says, “I did not press her to explain. I was too grateful for that one word that allowed me at last to leave the island and begin to build myself as a soul, separate from the long, long shadow of my twin” (228). With this feeling of freedom, and acceptance and support from a woman, Louise can finally motivate herself to leave the island and have the possibility of exploring more ways to express her sexuality.

Since the island works as a restrictive space for Louise’s sexuality, the fact that the closure occurs off of the island indicates the possibility of Louise continuing to find more expressions of her sexuality. Just as the ending of *Little Women* retains Jo’s writing career as a way of refusing to let her marriage give a total, confining meaning to the text, Louise’s
relocation away from Rass Island offers the possibility of further exploration of her sexuality despite the closure’s attempt to restrict work, her primary outlet for sexuality. Both books illustrate ways that their narratives could continue going and, therefore, resist closure, as Miller suggests narratives would naturally do. As *Little Women* does, *Jacob Have I Loved* uses an ending that is conventional and seemingly non-radical in its traditional gender portrayals only to then subvert the desired effect of such a closure by using the reader’s expectations of Louise, set up by her independent nature throughout the novel, to make this ending seem unnatural and dissatisfying.

*Little Women* and *Jacob Have I Loved* are novels that work in tandem with D.A. Miller’s argument that the closure of a text need not determine the entire text’s message. Instead, in each piece, the seemingly conventional and confining ending is prevented from determining all meaning for the text through the alternative expressions of sexuality, and the continued possibility of new expressions of sexuality, that continue through the novel’s conclusion. In each piece, the protagonist derives pleasure and power from work, and her work becomes the primary outlet of her emerging sexuality. In *Little Women*, Jo’s marriage, and even her relationship with Beth, attempts to suppress her ability to write as an expression of her sexuality. Therefore, the fact that she continues to write and retains the dream of writing a great masterpiece into the novel’s closure indicates that the marriage ending was not able to suppress her sexuality. In *Jacob Have I Loved*, the traditionally masculine work Louise performs on the crab boats is similarly positioned as an outlet for her sexuality, making her final relegation to a career in midwifery seem like a suppression of her sexuality and independence. However, since the novel portrays the space of the island as a restrictive area for Louise’s sexual expression, the fact that
Louise is off the island at the closure indicates the possibility for her to have greater freedom to express her sexuality despite the confinement of her career.

The contradictions between the narratives and their closures, and readers’ strong negative responses to the endings of both books, point to the subversive power of both of these texts. The endings of both books come as such a disappointing surprise to readers and critics because they are so inconsistent with the individuality and disregard for social ideologies that these female protagonists exhibited throughout the novel. Therefore, these novels are most radically subversive in how they treat their closures in a self-conscious manner. They use the conventionality of the socially acceptable closures to ultimately show how the heroines cannot be confined by these methods. Although Jo’s marriage and Louise’s career as a midwife threaten to strip them of their independence and ability to express their sexuality in a variety of ways, the endings ultimately fail to suppress these qualities. Instead, both characters are left with the possibilities of unconventional sexual expressions that lie outside of the socially acceptable states of marriage and traditionally female professions.
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