



**REREADING AMY MARCH IN *LITTLE WOMEN*:
NEGOTIATING CONFORMITY, SUBMISSION AND
SUBVERSION**

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Cover image of the character Amy March portrayed by Florence Pugh in the film *LITTLE WOMEN*, directed by Greta Gerwig (2019). Accessed January 6, 2021, <https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/451345193908706936/>.

SUMMARY

In this thesis I study the tension between submission and subversion within the character Amy March in the book *Little Women*. Within academic research on *Little Women* the central question is whether the book is submissive or subversive in relation to patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity. Within the scholarly field, the protagonist of the book, Jo March, is often taken as the main object of analysis in order to answer this question. In this thesis I problematize this centralization of Jo and the consequent marginalization of the other sisters. This thesis addresses this gap from the literature by focusing on the sister Amy. Amy is often positioned as the more submissive sister in comparison to Jo, due to Jo's resistance to social convention and femininity and Amy's conformity to it. In this thesis I move beyond the understanding of Amy as a more submissive sister and propose a rereading of her conforming behavior. Central will be the question how Amy's conformity in *Little Women* can be reread as a position of in-betweenness within the relation of submission and subversion. I base my rereading on a poststructuralist understanding of agency that defines agency as a particular way of inhabiting and re-signifying dominant norms in order to create oppositional spaces. With this conceptualization of agency I argue that the moments of conformity that are often characterized as submission should rather be understood as moments in which conformity becomes an agential practice aimed at freedom. In order to do this, I perform a close reading of four scenes in which Amy speaks about her conforming behavior. I analyze how she verbally frames her own behavior and decisions of conformity and how this positions her within the subversion/submission dichotomy. I show that a closer look at the language with which Amy frames her conforming behavior enables a rereading of Amy's behavior as not submissive, but rather an agential practice that positions her in an in-between position within the relation of submission and subversion.

INTRODUCTION

In 1868 Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women*, the story about the four sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March who are growing up in 19th century America (Alcott [1868] 2019). Since then, *Little Women* has become one of the most influential books in children's literature, beloved by readers from all over the world and transformed into many adaptations (Alberghene and Clark 1999, xix-xxi; Rioux 2018, 5). In the most recent monograph on the book, Anne Boyd Rioux (2018) even calls *Little Women* "the most widely beloved story of girlhood" (5). As the title of Rioux' book, *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters*, suggests, the story has a continuing cultural relevance. Many critics attribute this relevance to the feminist character of the book, which they mainly see represented through Jo who struggles with Victorian ideals of femininity and dreams of becoming a famous writer. (Rioux 2018, 5; Stimpson 1990, 966; Murphy 565-66; Alberghene and Clark 1999, xvii; Fetterley 1979, 397). However, multiple critics have also called attention to a different side of the book. They point out how the four sisters are taught to be "good little women," to be self-sacrificing and graceful, to overcome their shortcomings, and to see family as the highest goal (Murphy 1990; Rioux 2018; Clark 1989; Alberghene and Clark 1999; Stimpson 1990). Because of this duality, the book remains subject of debate in both popular and academic discourses. Central in this debate is the question whether the book is subversive or submissive in relation to patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity. As Ann B. Murphy (1990) writes, the book does not give rigid answers to this question (565). Rather, as a multifaceted book, *Little Women* offers many possibilities for critical reading (565). In this paper I will engage with the ongoing debate on submission and subversion by focusing on the relatively unexplored character Amy.

Amy is often presented as the beautiful, but selfish little sister who is very popular because of her ladylike behavior. In multiple analyses she is positioned in an antithetical relation with protagonist Jo (see Foote 2005; Hollander 1981; Rioux 2018). This antithetical relation centers around Jo's resistance to social convention and norms of femininity and Amy's conformity to it. As such, Amy is often understood as the more submissive sister in comparison to the subversive Jo. In my research I propose a rereading of Amy that moves beyond an understanding of her as the more submissive sister in comparison to Jo. I focus specifically on the theme of conformity and analyze how Amy's conformity relates to and moves between submission and subversion. The central question in my research will thus be: How can Amy's conformity in *Little Women* be reread as a position of in-betweenness within the relation of submission and subversion?

The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter one delineates the debate about subversion and submission in *Little Women* and discusses how Amy is characterized within different analyses of the book. In the second chapter I turn to the notion of agency through the lens of which I reread Amy's conformity as an agential practice. In chapter three the thesis will be situated in the field of feminist literary criticism and I will provide a reflection on my selection of material. Chapter four consists of a close reading of four different scenes through which I reread Amy's behavior as an agential, liberatory practice that places her in an in-between position within the submission/subversion dichotomy.

CHAPTER 1: THE QUESTION OF SUBVERSION OR SUBMISSION

In this chapter I address the first part of the theoretical framework of the thesis. Firstly, I delineate the general debate around the book *Little Women*. Secondly, I discuss the different ways in which Amy has been characterized within this field and problematize the common understanding that Amy's conformity positions her as the more submissive sister in comparison to Jo.

Little Women as subversive, submissive, or ambivalent

In literary analyses of *Little Women*, the central question is whether the book is subversive, submissive, or ambivalent (Clark 1989, 81; Alberghene 1999, 162). Murphy (1990) sums up this central question of the debate when she asks: "Is *Little Women* adolescent, sentimental, and repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become 'little,' domesticated, and silent? [Or] is the novel subversive, matriarchal, and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female domesticity it purports to admire?" (564). Different responses have been given to this central question. On one side of the debate, critics such as Martha Saxton (1978, 8), Beverly Lyon Clark (1989, 93), and Judith Fetterley (1979, 380) argue that the book represents female submission to domesticity and a life dedicated to serving others. On the other side, scholars such as Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (1999) and Angela Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant (1989) see *Little Women* as having a strong subversive dimension. They claim that beneath the surface text that purports the feminine ideals of domesticity and self-sacrifice lies a more complex subtext in which Louisa May Alcott implicitly critiques and resists these ideals (Keyser 1999, 23; Estes and Lant 1989, 103). In a more middle-ground position, scholars such as Catharine Stimpson (1990, 970) and Ann B. Murphy (1990, 584) argue that the book is neither completely repressive nor subversive, but rather ambivalent, precisely because of the repressive and subversive aspects that collide and intertwine within the book.

Regardless of the position that each of these scholars take within the debate, it is noticeable that their positions are mainly based on analyses of the character Jo. Most scholars agree that Jo is the character that represents subversiveness and resistance to patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity (see May 1980; Murphy 1990; Estes and Lant 1989; Stimpson 1990; Foote 2005; Fetterley 1979). The stance they take within this debate is therefore often derived from a reading of how Jo's storyline develops within the book.

The centralization of the character Jo has, however, led to a marginalization of the other March sisters. Oftentimes the other sisters are only mentioned in comparison to Jo, situating

them as more submissive than Jo (May 1980, 17; Estes and Lant 1989, 109-114; Rioux 2019, 183). This research fills this gap by focusing on the sister Amy. Amy has never been the single focus of analysis in any scholarly work on *Little Women*, even when she is discussed in varying degrees of extensiveness. Thereby, I choose to focus on Amy, because, in comparison to the other sisters Meg and Beth, Amy does not fit the model of submissiveness as easily. Yet due to her conformity to feminine ideals and social convention, research has often characterized Amy as such. In the next section I will revisit the ways in which Amy is discussed within the field.

Interpretations of Amy

The analyses that do mention Amy describe her in different ways, varying from submissive and pleasing to least-likeable, narcissistic, and ambitious (Foote 2005, 75; Murphy 1990, 570). In general, she is described as the spoiled, bratty, and selfish little sister who throughout the story gradually develops in a grown, pleasing woman (Hollander 1981, 33; Foote 2005, 75). In her article, Murphy (1990) perhaps most strongly characterizes Amy as “the least likeable and most narcissistic and ambitious of the four” (570). She argues that Amy’s self-objectification derives from a patriarchal culture that demands women to behave narcissistically as sex objects (Murphy 1990, 576-77). As such she places Amy in a relatively submissive position of victimization in relation to patriarchal repression. Estes and Lant (1989) argue that Amy is more concerned with what other people think of her and intends to follow “the way of the world” (111). They interpret this as Amy’s “willing suppression of self-reliant impulses” (111). Similarly, Fetterley (1979) argues that Amy eventually embodies the “little woman,” the character of self-denial, self-control, accommodation, and concern for others. (378-381). In addition, this characterization is contrasted to Jo’s wild spirit and lack of self-control (380-381). These scholars thus all interpret Amy’s behavior as being submissive to the expectations and cultural norms imposed on her by society.

Moving away from such interpretations, some authors interpret Amy’s investment in social behavior and conformity from a different angle. Focusing on the theme of class, Stephanie Foote (2005), for example, argues that Amy uses gender conformity to compensate for an unstable class position (75). By behaving properly and socially acceptable Amy is rewarded with what she wants throughout the book (78). However, Foote does understand this as the internalization of Victorian ideals of femininity that Amy’s mother preaches to her daughters (76). In one of the more extensive analyses of Amy, Anne Hollander (1981) also notes how Amy is rewarded for following her mother’s lessons. She argues that from the beginning of the book Amy is distinguished from the other three sisters as “the Bad Sister”

whose shortcomings of vanity and selfishness are more irritating than those of the other sisters. (32). Similar to Foote, Hollander argues that Amy is continuously rewarded throughout the book because she knows how to overcome her “shortcomings” of vanity and selfishness (32). Although these scholars do not evaluate Amy’s behavior as strongly as “submission,” they do point out how Amy internalizes the appropriate feminine behavior and follows the lessons of her mother.

In an opposing view, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (1999) more radically problematizes the characterization of selfishness that is often attributed to Amy. She argues that what is often characterized as selfishness could also be read as Amy’s ability to mediate between her own desires and the needs of others (39). She argues that “Amy may be a stronger, more interesting, and more complex character than most readers have suspected” (79). Moreover, she argues that Amy is the only sister who escapes from the family’s demands and morality that is put upon the sisters (73). Unlike Jo, Amy’s art does not serve the family, and she is not afraid to speak against her father or marry a man who her mother does not approve of. According to Keyser, this empowers Amy to grow from “a little woman” into a “full grown woman” (73). With this perspective, Keyser clearly distinguishes herself from the aforementioned scholars, and places Amy in a position of empowerment.

All in all, these analyses mostly consist of interpretations of Amy’s behavior as submissive to stipulated norms of femininity. Within these analyses three main tendencies can be discerned. In the first approach, from scholars such as Estes and Lant, Murphy, and Fetterley, Amy is explicitly and negatively characterized as submissive to repressive norms of femininity. In the second approach, from Foote and Hollander, it is pointed out how Amy is rewarded for her conforming behavior on a narratological level. They do not evaluate Amy’s behavior as normatively and negatively as the scholars from the first approach, but they do understand her conforming behavior as an internalization and embodiment of appropriate feminine behavior. In the last approach, from Keyser, Amy is seen as escaping the demands and morality from the family, including the self-sacrificial mode of femininity that Amy’s mother preaches.

In this thesis I oppose the first two approaches in which Amy is characterized as submissive, and side with Keyser’s empowering characterization. Furthermore, I want to broaden this empowering characterization by focusing on precisely those moments in which Amy adheres to conformity and that are usually interpreted as submission. I argue that within these moments, conformity becomes a mode of empowerment for Amy. This intervention will be based on feminist theorizations of agency because this concept provides a useful lens to analyze the tension between conformity and subversion. Drawing from a poststructuralist

perspective, I understand agency not as overt resistance and emancipation, but rather as the ability to re-signify dominant norms from within. I argue that this understanding of agency enables a reading of Amy's conforming behavior that shows the agential and more subversive side of her conformity. In the next chapter I turn to the debate on the concept of agency that constitutes my intervention and rereading of Amy.

CHAPTER 2: AGENCY IN FEMINIST AND LITERARY FIELDS

This chapter addresses the second part of the theoretical framework of the thesis. Firstly, I outline the general feminist debate around agency. Secondly, I argue which understandings of agency permeate literary analyses, and how this view is limiting for understanding the behavior of the character Amy. Then I turn to Judith Butler's poststructuralist definition of agency to argue that such an understanding provides a suitable foundation to reread Amy's conforming behavior as an agential practice aimed at empowerment.

Feminist theorizations of agency

As feminist scholar Lois McNay (2018) writes, the most general definition of agency is "the ability of individuals to have some kind of transforming effect or impact on the world" (39). Agency is often related to concepts such as autonomy, free will, intentionality, choice, and reflexivity and seen as the opposite of unreflective, habitual, and instinctual types of behavior. Thereby, as McNay argues, agency is inseparable from power relations and therefore it is a concept that is used as an instrument to think about broader issues such as freedom, constraint, and emancipation (39). As a tool for thinking about complex power relations and recovering the ways in which women exert power, the concept of agency continues to be a site of feminist debate.

Within this debate McNay identifies two predominant strands of thinking about agency: "procedural agency" and "substantial agency" (43). A first strand of authors addresses the self-reflexive nature of agency, termed as "procedural agency." From a procedural account, agency entails the choices that are made in a fully reflexive manner, meaning that they are "part of a self-conscious commitment to realizing a consistent set of ethical values in one's life whatever they may be" (Friedman qtd. in McNay 2018, 43). From this perspective agency is content-neutral, meaning that any act can constitute agency, whether it is submission to or subversion of norms, as long as the choice is made reflexively. The second strand of authors addresses the normative and prescriptive nature of agency, termed as "substantial agency." In this view, women's choices are evaluated based on a set of prescribed norms (McNay 2018, 43). As such, some actions and ways of living are seen as lacking agency because they are considered to reproduce repressive or stereotypical norms of femininity. Substantive conceptualizations of agency are commonly found in literary analyses that discuss the concept of agency in relation to fictional characters. In the next section I revisit some of these substantial definitions within literary research.

Agency in literary analyses

Substantial conceptualizations of agency permeate in literary analyses of female characters. In her work on feminist heroines in children's novels, Roberta S. Trites (1997), for example, argues that agency relates to the protagonist's ability to assert her own personality while making her own decisions and acting on those decisions (6). She juxtaposes agency with conforming behavior, stating that agency entails that the protagonist "need not squelch her individuality in order to fit into society" (6). According to her, agency is the issue of voice, because claiming one's voice gives control over one's life and decisions (6-7). She uses Jo March as an example of a character that loses her agency. Similarly, Megan McDonough (2017) argues that for fictional heroines "claiming agency means going against society's norms in order for her to do what is best for herself, her family, her friends, or sometimes even society as a whole. Agency involves doing what she believes is right, regardless of society's attitudes and structures" (11). In both these substantial conceptualizations of agency, conformity is seen as the opposite of agency.

What can be discerned in such definitions is that agency is connected to a form of revolt or resistance to norms. Agency is constituted by its substance and that entails changing or fighting against the status quo. In this sense, agency is only afforded to characters that go against norms, whereas characters that conform are seen as submissive and lacking agency. Such an understanding of agency as resistance and subversion can also be discerned in most analyses of *Little Women*. Jo is more often afforded agency and subversion because of her resistance to social convention and feminine norms, while Amy is characterized as submissive because her conformity is understood as a lack of agency. I argue that such conceptualizations of agency are inadequate for analyzing Amy's behavior. For this reason, in the next section I turn to a poststructuralist conceptualization of agency and show how this allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relation between conformity and agency.

Poststructuralist conceptualization of agency

Feminist theorists have critiqued procedural and substantial definitions of agency for the stipulation of an autonomous, free-willed actor. Most important in this regard is the intervention of poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler. From a poststructuralist approach she argues that there is no autonomous or free-willed 'I' that can oppose power as if situated outside that power (Butler [1990] 2002, 182-83). Therefore, agency does not rely on autonomous choice and action, but on the resistance of dominant norms from within these norms. Butler argues that subversion of norms happens through a repetition of actions rather than a one-time action (185).

Agency is located within the chain of repetition at the moment that difference is brought within it, when norms are re-signified from within. In contrast to substantial approaches to agency, Butler's definition indicates that agency does not entail an outright rejection of norms. Rather, agency receives its specific form from these norms and displaces these norms from within (188). Although Butler does locate agency within reiteration and conformity to dominant norms, it is the moment of difference and re-signification that constitutes agency (185).¹ Therefore conformity is identified as the ambiguous site of potential subversion and agency. This definition is useful for my analysis because it emphasizes how agency and subversion take place within dominant norms. It shows that agency does not need to entail outright rejections of those norms. Rather it is "a particular way of inhabiting social structures to create oppositional spaces and "pathways" to empowerment" (McNay 2018, 45). As I will argue in my analysis, it is precisely from within dominant norms and through conformity that Amy creates such pathways to empowerment.

In this chapter I have charted different conceptualizations of agency. Beginning with McNay's distinction between substantial and procedural agency I showed how substantial definitions of agency pervade literary analyses and how they often lead to defining agency as the explicit resistance of dominant norms. Such a conceptualization seems insufficient for analyzing Amy's behavior. Though a procedural approach to agency does not evaluate behavior normatively, it does, similar to substantial agency, presume a free-willed, autonomous subject that can act with or against norms as if outside of them. Following a poststructuralist critique on the presumption of such a completely autonomous subject, in this thesis I adopt Butler's conceptualization of agency as a particular way of inhabiting and re-signifying dominant norms in order to create oppositional spaces. This perspective is adequate for analyzing Amy's behavior because it identifies conformity as the potential site of agency. In the following chapter I proceed to explore the methodological approach with which Amy's behavior can be seen as agential and subversive.

¹ However, Butler's definition of agency has also been critically engaged with by feminists who argue that Butler holds on to a western framework that postulates freedom and emancipation as the goals for agency (see Mahmood 2001). These scholars argue for a conceptualization of agency that considers the ways in which women in non-secular societies create meaningful identities for themselves within, not against, the dominant cultural norms. However, for the purpose of this paper I use Butler's conception because I address a western context, and because it emphasizes how conforming behavior can still be considered as an agential practice that aims for western liberal notions of freedom, choice, and emancipation.

CHAPTER 3: READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

This chapter concerns the methodological framework of the thesis. Firstly, I situate my thesis within the field of feminist literary criticism and the methodology of “reading against the grain.” Secondly, I elaborate on the selection process of my material and the questions that inform my close reading of this material. In the next paragraph I elaborate on the tradition of feminist literary criticism.

As this thesis about *Little Women* is concerned with a literary work about women written by a woman, the thesis is grounded in the field of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism originated in the second feminist wave in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the predominantly male canon within literature and other cultural productions (Greene and Kahn [1985] 2003, 4). As literary theorists Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn ([1985] 2003) argue, one of the focal points of feminist literary criticism is to reconstruct the overlooked narratives of women within literature (6). This includes reconstructing the stories of female writers as well as reconstructing the stories of female characters. Feminist literary criticism opens up many fields of inquiry. This thesis is mainly interested in what Sydney Kaplan ([1985] 2003, 41) calls “the study of themes, images and ideas in the works of women writers,” seeing that it focuses on the theme of conformity, submission, and subversion.

As feminist literary theorist Mary Eagleton (2007) has argued, feminist literary criticism entails a methodology that can be characterized as “reading against the grain” (110). In their influential work within the field of feminist literary criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) propose such a methodology when they read literature as palimpsestic, as “works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning” (73). Another example of this methodology can be found in Ellen Moers’ influential work *Literary Women* (1976), in which she looks for signs of the “heroic structure [of] the female voice in literature” and points to the multiple ways in which women think, act, and exert power (Moers qtd. in Eagleton 2007, 110). In this thesis I follow such readings against the grain by looking for less accessible meaning in Amy’s conforming behavior and by focusing on the power that she exerts with these conforming acts.

Though the field of feminist literary criticism generally follows the methodology of reading against the grain, the field encompasses many different methods. In this thesis a close reading of the text *Little Women* is performed. As literary theorist Celena Kusch (2016) writes, within literary analyses the method of close reading can be defined as “interpreting the detailed use of language” (31). In this thesis a close reading will be made of four specific scenes. The

selection of these four scenes has come into being through two steps. Firstly, I selected all the scenes in which Amy is present and speaks through direct discourse. As literary theorist Brian McHale (2009) writes, direct discourse means that the speech act or the unspoken thought of a character is represented directly through quotation (434). According to him direct discourse is conventionally understood to “replicate exactly what the quoted character is supposed to have said or thought” (435). As such, I have chosen to focus on direct discourse because it is the place where Amy’s thoughts and opinions are presented most directly.

In the second step I selected the scenes in which the topic of conformity is the subject of conversation between Amy and another character. Because the topic “conformity” is not always literally discussed, I took reference to signaling words and phrases such as “do as someone says,” “following the way of the world,” and “to truckle”.² As such I understand conformity mainly as conforming to the expectations placed on someone by society or individuals. This selection process has resulted in four scenes. The first scene concerns Amy and Jo making social calls to friends and family. In the second scene Jo is asked by her publisher to omit a part of her book, and she asks advice from her family whether to do so. In the third scene Amy plans a party for the girls from her drawing class. Lastly, the fourth scene consists of a letter Amy writes home and a conversation she has with her neighbor and good friend Laurie about her potential marriage to the wealthy gentleman Fred Vaughn.

This selection process is inevitably shaped by my personal position as a researcher. As feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1988) claims in her influential work on knowledge production, knowledge is never completely impartial (576). Rather, by being transparent about my selection process I strive for what Haraway calls “a useable, but not innocent, doctrine of objectivity” (582) in which the researcher acknowledges and takes accountability for their role within the process of producing knowledge. As such, in this case it is relevant to acknowledge that my choice to focus on direct discourse has an implication for the selection of my scenes, because it leaves out the scenes in which the theme of conformity might be present on more descriptive levels.

To this selection of the material a certain set of questions must be brought. As Kusch (2016) argues, important questions to ask when doing a close reading are: “Which images, words, sounds, or ideas recur and relate literally, physically, or through their underlying connotations? How do these images or literary figures relate to the general topic? Do they support, contradict, or provide a subtext for the general topic?” (34). Following this approach,

² According to the Collins English Dictionary, in American English “truckling” means: “to be servile; cringe, submit, toady, etc.” (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.).

I focus on the words and ideas that recur and relate to each other within the direct verbal expressions of Amy. In order to preserve and convey the expressive elements of the utterance, my analysis will include the original quotations from the text. The central question I ask is: When Amy is in conversation with someone, how does she verbally frame her own behavior and decisions of conformity, and how does this position her within the subversion/submission dichotomy? As I will argue, a closer look at the language with which Amy frames her conforming behavior enables a rereading of Amy's behavior as an agential practice rather than a submissive one, thus placing her in an in-between position within the subversion/submission dichotomy.

CHAPTER 4: CONFORMITY AS CAPITAL

In this chapter I delve into the analysis part of the thesis. I analyze the four scenes I identified in the previous chapter. I discuss each scene separately, looking at the specific words with which Amy frames her conforming behavior and searching for patterns within these verbal expressions. Consequently, I ask how she positions herself regarding her own conforming behavior. Drawing on Butler's conceptualization of agency as a particular way of inhabiting and re-signifying dominant norms to create oppositional spaces, I argue that Amy's conformity can be understood as an active, agential practice that is neither completely submissive nor completely subversive, but rather a position of in-betweenness.

Scene 1: conforming to the demands of social relations

The first scene concerns Amy and Jo making social calls to friends and family. Jo is unwilling to go, but Amy convinces her to go along. She says to Jo: "It is no pleasure to me to go today, but it is a debt we owe society, and there is no one but you and me to pay it" (Alcott [1868] 2019, 277). Amy then urges Jo to dress nicely and behave properly just as she does. She says that "women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindness they receive" (283). Talking about being agreeable and repaying kindness she tells Jo: "I only know it's the way of the world, and people who set them against it only get laughed at for their pains. I don't like reformers and I hope you never try to be one (284)." With these utterances Amy makes clear that she intends to follow "the way of the world." As such, she conforms to the social rules and norms of pleasantness that she feels are asked from her by society.

Amy calls this enactment of social norms "a debt," something to "pay," and a way of "repaying" for something they "receive." This language associated with an economic exchange reveals that this conformity serves as a mode of payment for something. It is precisely this way of reasoning and framing her own acts of conformity as a mode for payment, that shows how Amy's conformity can be considered as an active agential practice. Conformity to societal norms is namely not the goal in itself, but rather the tool for attaining something else. In this case it attains her the favors and benefits of social contacts. These benefits are most explicitly illustrated by the fact that Amy's pleasantness to Aunt Carrol and Aunt March gains her the opportunity to go to Europe, which has always been a dream of hers. This favor of Aunt March then again opens up access to new opportunities such as following art lessons in Europe and marrying the rich gentlemen Fred Vaughn. As such, conformity to norms is the capital with

which Amy accesses and attains the things that she really wants. By framing her behavior as a tool for attaining opportunities and financial benefits, Amy re-signifies her conforming behavior. This re-signification constitutes her agency because she does not merely submit to the norms but inhabits them in a particular way to create pathways to more freedom and empowerment. A similar approach to conformity as a tool for creating opportunities can be discerned in the second scene.

Scene 2: conforming to the publisher

The second scene revolves around Jo who has sent her book to a publisher. She is told by the publisher that in order for the book to be published she must omit the parts that she particularly likes and thinks are morally important. When Jo asks her family what to do her father and Meg urge Jo to keep the book as it is. Marmee, her mother, advises Jo to get a meeting with the publisher, not for the money but in order to get feedback to do better next time. Amy however says: “Do as he tells you. He knows what will sell, and we don’t. Make a good, popular book, and get as much money as you can. By-and-by, when you’ve got a name, you can afford to digress, and have philosophical and metaphysical people in your novels” (260). Her practical approach entails conforming to the rules and ways of the world and the system of supply and demand which the publisher represents.

Similar to the first scene, the phrasing of Amy’s stance on this subject is associated with an economical exchange: Jo should “get money” so she can “afford” to digress the next time. Complying to the publisher’s demands is thus framed as an act with which Jo could buy herself the freedom to write as she likes the next time. The use of “by-and-by”—as a phrase that points to the medial function of an action—underlines this idea of conformity as a medium that gives access to something else. In Amy’s use of language conformity is framed only as a means to a goal, the goal being the creative freedom that Jo ultimately strives for. Amy’s advise on the matter reveals that she does not resist the demands of the publisher, nor thoughtlessly complies to it. Rather, she advocates for conformity as a means to an end, a pathway to empowerment and freedom. As such, she adopts a position of in-betweenness within this spectrum of subversion and submission. Her re-signification of the meaning of conformity constitutes her agency and places her in this in-between position.

Scene 3: conforming to social expectations

The third scene revolves around Amy’s plan to organize a party for the girls in her drawing class. She gets into a discussion with her mother about the food they will serve, with Marmee

arguing for simple food they can afford, while Amy wants to serve more expensive food. Amy argues: “The girls are used to such things, and I want my lunch to be proper and elegant, though I do work for my living” (249). She later adds: “If I can't have it as I like, I don't care to have it at all ... and I don't see why I can't if I'm willing to pay for it” (249). What can be seen here is how Amy conforms to the social expectations of the girls, which are part of certain cultural norms on what is appropriate in this situation. Later in the discussion Jo accuses Amy of “truckling” to those girls. Amy responds to Jo by saying: “You don't care to make people like you, to go into good society, and cultivate your manners and tastes. I do, and I mean to make the most of every chance that comes. You can go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it independence, if you like. That's not my way” (250). Although the use of language associated with money is not employed here, a similar sense of Amy’s behavior being a means to an end is evoked when she calls this party a “chance” that she has to “make the most of.” She sees it as a chance, a medial moment that gains her new opportunities. Being accepted by the girls of a higher class is her way of creating more opportunities for her artistic dreams as well as securing relationships with wealthy people. Opposed to Jo who goes through the world with “elbows out,” thus resisting the world, Amy inhabits the structure of “the world” and uses the dominant cultural norms from within to create pathways to freedom and empowerment.

Scene 4: conforming to an economical marriage

The last scene is divided in two passages in which Amy discusses her possible marriage to the rich gentleman Fred Vaughn. The first passage concerns a letter that she sends home. She writes: “Now I know Mother will shake her head, and the girls say, “Oh that mercenary little wretch!”, but I’ve made up my mind, and if Fred asks me, I shall accept him, though I’m not madly in love” (304). And she later adds: “I may be mercenary, but I hate poverty, and don’t mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help. One of us *must* [emphasis in original] marry well. Meg didn’t, Jo wouldn’t, Beth can’t yet, so I shall, and make everything cozy all round” (304). The second instant concerns a conversation she has with her neighbor and friend Laurie in which she tells Laurie that she intends to accept Fred’s proposal even though she does not love him. Laurie says: “I understand. Queens of society can’t get on without money, so you mean to make a good match and start in that way? Quite right and proper, as the world goes, but it sounds funny from the lips of one of your mother’s girls,” and Amy responds: “true nevertheless” (388). Those two moments illustrate that Amy’s approach to marriage is in accordance with the cultural norms of marriage, meaning that as a woman she has to marry well

in order to secure financial stability. Though this could be seen as a simplistic submission to such norms and structures of heterosexual marriage as an economic arrangement, her motives for conforming elicit her belief that this conformity ultimately benefits her.

Again, the relation to money is important in how she frames her motivation. In her letter she describes her decision as “mercenary” twice.³ This specific word points to the benefits that motivate one to engage with a certain situation. Framing marriage as a mercenary act makes marriage not the goal in itself. Rather, it frames the act of conforming to an economical marriage as a mediating act from which the rewards are the real goal. Amy gains financial stability for herself and her family, and she gains a certain freedom “to do as she likes.” From this reasoning and framing, her conformity cannot be understood as submission to norms, but rather as an active agential practice in which she uses this system in order to gain the freedom that money can give her, as well as the freedom that Fred will give her to do as she likes. As demonstrated in the other scenes, Amy gives a liberatory meaning to her conforming acts, whereas they are commonly read as a submission to norms. By giving these norms a different meaning she neither submits to nor completely resists these norms. As such, she takes on an in-between position in the subversion/submission dichotomy.

From conformity to agency and in-betweenness

What a close reading of these four scenes shows is that Amy repeatedly conforms to dominant norms of social behavior. These cultural norms are often concerned with an ideal of Victorian femininity that feminist writer Virginia Woolf (1942) has famously labeled “The Angel in the House.” With this term Woolf pointed out the Victorian ideal of the white, middle class woman that was sympathetic, charming, selfless, sacrificial, pure, and beautiful (Woolf [1942] 2008, 141). This model of femininity prescribed domestic roles for women and required women to be self-sacrificing, charming mothers, wives, and daughters.⁴ In the discussed scenes these cultural norms and expectations of appropriate behavior are often presented to Amy through other people such as family, friends, and Jo’s publisher. As the scenes show, Amy diligently strives to fulfill those expectations and in that way her behavior can be characterized as conformity to dominant norms.

³ According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, “mercenary” means: “interested only in the amount of money that you can get from a situation” (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.).

⁴ Notably, this ideal is specific to white middle-class women. As multiple feminist and postcolonial scholars have pointed out, this ideal has often been universalized in a way that excluded black women from the category of women (see hooks 1981; Lorde 1984). Along the same line, some critics have also shown how *Little Women* is believed to represent a universal ideal of femininity and how certain issues of class, race and ethnicity of that historical era are overlooked (see Sicherman 1995; Alberghene 1999).

However, a close reading of the four scenes reveals that this conformity is a mediating act in order to gain something else. Important in this regard is Amy's use of language that is associated with money. This association with money points out how conformity is framed as the capital with which she attains more freedom. I argue that framing conformity as capital is what makes Amy's conformity an agential practice. Here I follow Butler's conceptualization of agency as being constituted from within dominant norms, as a particular way of inhabiting social structures to create oppositional spaces and "pathways" to empowerment. Amy inhabits social structures by conforming to expectations and norms and moves within these dominant norms, but she re-signifies this conforming behavior as a medial practice, a means to attain something else. As such, she inhabits dominant norms in a particular way that allows her to create pathways to empowerment and freedom and to amplify the opportunities and choices available to her.

Seeing conformity as an agential practice aimed at creating opportunities, chances and freedom then places Amy in a position of in-betweenness within the subversion/submission dichotomy. Her behavior is not completely subversive in the sense that she rejects or resists dominant norms. However, her behavior is also not completely submissive, because she re-signifies her acts of conformity, giving them a liberatory meaning. Thus, her position is one of "in-betweenness" in which conformity creates pathways towards freedom and empowerment from within norms. This relation between conformity and empowerment challenges earlier understandings of Amy's conforming behavior. Estes and Lant (1989) call Amy's behavior a "willing suppression of self-reliant impulses" (111), and Murphy (1990) sees Amy's conformity as a subjection to and internalization of the norms of a repressive patriarchal society (576-577). Similarly, Fetterley (1979) sees Amy as the embodiment of the "little woman" morale (381). My analysis opposes such characterizations, because it points out how these acts that are normally understood as submission can better be understood as active agential practices that place Amy in an in-between position within the relation between submission and subversion.

Thereby, with her in-between position, the character of Amy may provide a new way of thinking about the ambivalent status of the book *Little Women* as a whole. Scholars who argue for the ambivalent nature of the book often do so by identifying two different parts within the text, namely the repressive parts and the subversive parts. They argue that those two parts either collide (Murphy 1990, 584), or that the reader can choose which parts to love (Stimpson 1990, 790). In such characterizations a tension between the two polarities of the submission/subversion dichotomy is maintained; the scene is either submissive or subversive.

Though such a model of ambivalence might suit—or originate in—analyses of the character Jo and her parts of the story, the character of Amy shows how the ambivalent nature of the book can be understood in another way. Amy’s “in-betweenness” namely demonstrates how ambivalence also derives from the scenes, moments and actions that are situated somewhere between the polarities of this spectrum of subversion and submission. Thus, Amy’s way of assuming an in-between position within the subversion/submission dichotomy calls attention to this particular ambivalent dimension of the book.

In short, in this chapter I have shown how through language associated with money Amy frames her conforming behavior as the capital with which she gains more freedom and opportunities. With the use of Butler’s conceptualization of agency, I argued that Amy’s conforming behavior can be seen as an agential practice, because she re-signifies the meaning of conformity in a way that creates pathways to empowerment. She neither succumbs to dominant norms nor rejects them completely. Rather, because she inhabits norms and gives a different meaning to them, she takes on a position of in-betweenness within the subversion/submission dichotomy. With this analysis I oppose the common understanding of Amy’s behavior as submission to dominant norms. Thereby, I propose that her position of in-betweenness provides a new way of looking at the ambivalence within the book *Little Women*.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I investigated how the conforming behavior of the character Amy from the book *Little Women* could be reread as a position of in-betweenness within the relation of submission and subversion. In chapter one I revisited the debate on subversion, submission and ambivalence that surrounds the book *Little Women*. I problematized the centralization of Jo within this debate and the characterization of Amy as the more submissive sister in comparison to Jo. In chapter two I turned to the concept of agency and argued that the characterization of submissiveness often derives from substantial approaches of agency that regard conformity as submission. Thereby, I argued that a poststructuralist account of agency enables a rereading of Amy's behavior that locates agency and empowerment within the moments of conformity that are normally interpreted as submission. In chapter three I situated the thesis in the field of feminist literary criticism and the methodological approach of reading against the grain. Thereby, I identified four scenes in which Amy discusses conformity with another character as the material for my analysis. In chapter four I argued that Amy frames her conforming behavior as an economical exchange and thereby re-signifies conformity as a means to create opportunities and gain freedom. I argued that Amy claims agency through this resignification of dominant norms and that this resignification places her in an in-between position within the relation of submission and subversion.

With this research, I opposed scholars such as Murphy (1990), Fetterley (1979), and Estes and Lant (1989), that interpret Amy's behavior as submissive. Rather, in extension of Keyser's (1999) argument that Amy escapes the morality and family demands, I argued that conformity works as a tool for creating opportunities and pathways to freedom outside of her family. Thereby, I proposed that Amy's position of in-betweenness provides a new way of looking at the ambivalence within the book *Little Women* as a whole, because it shows that ambivalence is not only created in the moments that submission and subversion come to collision, but in the moments that show a more middle ground position between these two polarities of subversion and submission. With this research, I aimed to show that Amy's negotiation of submission and subversion is an important dimension of the book; a dimension that needs to be considered in order to more thoroughly understand the question of submissiveness and subversiveness that surrounds the book as a whole. However, there are still many possibilities for critical engagement with *Little Women* that have not been thoroughly explored yet. Therefore, it is relevant to address the limitations of this thesis and to emphasize the contributions that further research and new perspectives could make.

Firstly, I acknowledge that the model of femininity discussed in this thesis is a specific to white, middle-class women. In general, much of the debate on subversion, submission, and repression that surrounds the book *Little Women* is concerned with these concepts from the perspective of white, middle-class women. A perspective that takes into consideration the race and class differences that the novel neglects could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of agency and conforming behavior. Secondly, due to my choice to focus on scenes in which conformity is discussed through direct discourse, this research excludes scenes and moments in which Amy's conformity might show in a different way, for example through her actions throughout the story. Further research on her actions might contribute to a fuller understanding of the way conformity functions within the novel. Lastly, I have focused specifically on Amy because more than Meg and Beth she does not fit the label of submissiveness. However, similar to Amy, Meg and Beth are characters that have not yet been the single focus of analysis. From a feminist investment in diversity and multiplicity, more analyses on these sisters would benefit the scholarship on *Little Women* and give voice to the multiple ways in which women respond to and navigate patriarchal society.

In conclusion, as a book that focusses on these multiple ways in which women find their place in the world, *Little Women* continues to be a site for feminist inquiry and criticism. The book asks what it means to be a woman and how to navigate the boundaries of a patriarchal society, without giving definite answers to such questions. Therefore, it remains relevant for feminist questions about power relations and inquiries into the concepts of submission and subversion. As I argued, Amy's conforming behavior offers a new way of thinking about this debate of subversion and submission and shows the possibility of in-betweenness within this dichotomy. The unheard voice of Amy that I aimed to recover in this thesis is exemplary of the unexplored possibilities of engaging with the text *Little Women*. Further analysis of characters and voices that are not necessarily central within the book may offer new and valuable perspectives on the question of submission and subversion that researchers are still exploring.

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