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The Conscience of Little Women: Beth's epic

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The Conscience of *Little Women*: Beth's Epic

From its conception to countless retellings, there is no debating Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* as an American classic with relevance that has stood the test of time. In particular, Kate Hamill's stage adaptation of Alcott's novel continues this legacy by creating a contemporary feminist approach that defies gender norms and exclusivity in casting and actor approach. At the beginning of her play Hamill says her characters are, "A conscious explosion of those archetypes...They are not always perfectly likable - and that's particularly important for young women, the freedom not to be "likable" at all times" (Hamill 9). Although this note may first be taken to apply to the well-known character of Jo March and her clear external battles, it provided a guideline for my portrayal of the second youngest March sister, Beth. This is because Hamill dedicates her passion for storytelling to even the most historically meek and likeable of characters when most adaptations fail to fully explore the potential of the sister. As someone who struggles with chronic illness myself, playing a young character who has similar experiences in her youth opened my eyes to the way limitations caused by disease can influence the personality and needed breadth of a character. In this adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's famous novel, *Little Women*, Kate Hamill brings a new depth to Beth's role as the element that forces Jo to confront the reality of death as the ultimate truth of life and literature.

Beth is the third March child out of four and is often portrayed as the most reserved of her sisters. She is shy to a paralyzing extent, so she stays home for schooling where she seeks out other hobbies such as gardening and playing piano. In her character description, Hamill labels her as afraid and sweet as well as loving and empathetic, but also brave and capable of "seeing more than anyone realizes" (Hamill 6). In short, Beth is a young human being made up of

complex and sometimes contradicting personality traits. Despite this, Beth is often overlooked as shy and subdued. So, how did this one-dimensional reputation come about?

The original character written by Alcott was based on her real-life sister, Elizabeth or “Lizzie.” According to American author Carmen Maria Machado for *The Paris Review*, Lizzie fell ill with scarlet fever like Beth and although she recovered, her heart was weakened and she died at the young age of twenty-two (Machado). Although Alcott’s literary portrayal of her sister is sweet and accepting of her shortened life, her real sister was not. Louisa May Alcott’s biographer described Lizzie as, “A twenty-two-year-old whose disease had wasted her body so that she looked like a middle-aged woman, she lashed out at her family and her fate with an anger that she had never before expressed” (qtd. in Machado). It is understandable that Alcott would want to portray her sister in a pleasant light for her novel, but this created the foundation for the succession of Beths to come. In the very first chapter of *Little Women*, Beth’s obliging character is swiftly established. In her analysis of the novel, Machado explains that when Louisa May Alcott is doling out archetypes to the siblings, Beth asks, “If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?” Meg responds with, “You’re a dear, and nothing else” (qtd. in Machado). The reader is immediately fed the idea that Beth is one dimensional by establishment of her stereotype and “nothing else” (qtd. in Machado). Machado explores this further discovering that “Alcott gives the tiniest bit of lip service to Beth’s human qualities—that is to say, the normal difficulties that mark everyone—but they do not emerge on the page” (Machado). It seems that somewhere in the adapting of Lizzie’s life to fit her novel, Alcott left out some key elements of her personality that allow her to feel as human in the book as she was in real life. She mentions this saying that Lizzie was, “A woman who lived and had thoughts and made art and was snarky and strange and funny and kind and suffered tremendously and died

angry at the world becomes sweet, soft Beth. A dear, and nothing else” (Machado). For the sake of her own memories, Alcott created the Lizzie she wished had existed in fictional Beth and this edited memory would be the one passed down in literature and films to come. Hamill’s interpretation, however, has matured in a way that pays attention to historical accuracy regarding Lizzie’s actual personality in collaboration with Alcott’s novel version. Her presence and lines throughout the play are not always meant to be likeable or passive because they are vital to her significance to the plot.

From the opening scene of the play, Beth is humanized by Hamill. She is seen asking her sister to tell her a story and when Jo starts to tell her a fictional one about a wizard, Beth pouts saying, “Not that kind of story!...A Real one!” (Hamill 11). Instead of letting her sister do what she wants, Beth pushes back like an actual sibling would which incorporate more realistic layers to her character. When Jo finishes her story about their family with the simple “...and it lasts forever,” Beth reminds Jo that “Nothing lasts forever” (Hamill 12). Her understanding of the impermanence of life becomes a theme throughout and this maturity for her age is established early on for the audience. From there, she momentarily embodies the perfect Beth everyone expects, trying to make peace between her sisters at the breakfast table, but it is not long before Hamill develops her character further. As the sisters complain about Amy getting to stay home from school, Beth reminds them that she got to stay home too. This is the moment her nickname is defined. Jo says, “Yes, Beth but you’re - you’re my conscious is what you are” (Hamill 24). She is the guiding voice in the family that helps each girl to go in the right direction whether they realize it or not. She makes sure to take care of everyone else before herself. Instead of receiving the archetype of “a dear and nothing else,” Hamill gives Beth a new one filled with nuance and

gravity. She becomes the central force that moves the story along and this relevance guides her and the audience through the remainder of her scenes in the play.

Although she is terrified of the outside world, when Laurie's grandfather will not allow him to be in Jo's theatrical, Beth musters up the courage to go to his home and talk to him. This only adds another layer of bravery and selflessness as she cares about the boy, but also the happiness of her family. When she gets there, she discovers that Mr. Laurence is softer than he appears on the outside and lets him know saying, "I think people don't always see exactly what they do, sir" (Hamill 41). With this one line, Hamill is able to convey to the audience that Beth is incredibly observant and empathetic to the world around her. Laurie is then allowed to rejoin the company of the sisters and tells them his grandfather "had a visitation of the conscience!" for which Amy replies, "She couldn't have. She's Beth!" (Hamill 43). Recognition is not something Beth expects when she selflessly utilizes her bravery. She does not care how others see her because she knows what she is capable of despite her anxieties. In a parallel scene with Laurie in Act 2, an older and more confident Beth visits once more after Laurie's failed proposal to Jo. She reminds him that "nothing lasts forever" and slyly implies that Amy is romantically interested in him without being overt about it (Hamill 84). This is yet another example of Hamill giving Beth extreme importance as someone who makes sure that everything in the play works out as it should. She is not only crucial to the context of the script, but Beth is given the chance to also be smart and strategic. She once again risks her fears of the outside world for the people that she loves without telling them she is going to. Her sensitivity and moments of quiet observance of her surroundings allow her to identify solutions before anyone else does which is a gift she does not take for granted.

As conscience, Beth is also granted the responsibility of providing foreshadowing in Hamill's adaptation. Through her mantra of "Nothing lasts forever" that she repeats four separate times throughout the play, she conveys shifts in the plot (Hamill). The meaning slowly evolves from a sweet reminder to Beth's understanding of her own fate. Hamill makes sure it is clear that Beth is aware that her odds of survival are slim, and she does not fear the possibility. Instead, Beth tries to warn everyone she loves of what is to come as they continue to deny her declining health. Another way she predicts the end of the play is with her other mantra of asking Jo to tell the "real stories" pertaining to the life of her family (Hamill). Every chance she gets, Beth tries to tell Jo that she should write what she knows instead of the fantasies she is attached to. Jo denies her at every attempt, but Beth does not give up for the entirety of the play, always asking Jo to tell her the same stories about their family. When it comes to the final scene and Beth is close to passing, Jo finally understands what Beth has been trying to convey. With this, it is as if a prophecy has been fulfilled and what was always meant to happen is able to at the destined time. This allows Beth to let go and finally pass knowing she has done her work.

In the text, when Beth comes down with her illness the second time, she does not accept her identity as the sister who never complains. Instead, Hamill pulls from the story of the original Lizzie and Beth experiences anger and mourns the loss of her future life she never paused to consider. She says, "I'm just...I'm ashamed I've done so little. I'm not like the rest of you. I never made plans about I'd do when I grew up, thought of being married or moving on; I couldn't think of myself as anything but stupid Beth sitting at home" (Hamill 89). She is selfish for a moment in time that allows her to be more than just the conscience of the family. When Jo tells her she has given up on her writing to take over her family duties, Beth becomes furious saying, "That's not growing up that's giving up!" She asks, "So you'd play the new Beth to

them? That's not the part for you. You get the privilege of growing up so use it" (Hamill 90). Beth's patience is strong but not invincible and this fissure in her poise is important in showing the actual pains of dying young and suffering from recurring illness. Everyone refuses to accept reality while that is not an option for her, and her patience finally runs out. Instead of following Alcott's version and giving Beth a beautiful Victorian death where she peacefully succumbs, Hamill alludes to Lizzie in a truthful telling of illness and tragic death. In revisiting Machado's analysis of Alcott's novel version of the death, I found that "Beth becomes faultless, angelic, positively uncomplicated. Her ambitions are not squashed by her infirmity, because she has none" (Machado). Hamill's Beth has ambitions and goals and dreams although they may not be outwardly for her life or future. The health and success of her family is everything that brings Beth peace, and it is what she fights for the entire show. Without Beth, Mr. Laurence would have stayed isolated, Laurie would not be friends with the sisters, Jo would not realize she cannot settle and marry, Amy and Laurie would not have gotten together, and the story of *Little Women* would not be. There is not one stagnant moment from Beth March in this Kate Hamill's adaptation.

There is something extraordinary while also purposeful about the way Hamill ends her version of *Little Women* with Beth's death. It is the reality and permanence of her passing that allows Jo to finally see the importance of writing the "real stories." This gives Beth's character the succession of her needs and purpose, while also allowing for Jo to achieve hers by publishing a successful novel that keeps her sister alive in literature forever. Therefore, Jo says, "In this story, the little girl never dies" (Hamill 93). Beth is a thoroughly paradoxical person with her contradicting personality traits and character arc. The only way she can live on is if she dies. "Nothing lasts forever," but she does through her story (Hamill). Hamill brings an almost biblical

meaning to this as Jesus also had to die to live on through the word of God. The focus of the final scene of the entire play is on Beth as she says her last heartbreaking goodbyes to her family and finds peace knowing they are going to be okay. This gives her character great significance as the finale of the play. In her closing story to Beth, Jo reminds her as well as the audience that she is “the best of them all, the conscience of the family” (Hamill 92). After she dies and Jo talks to the audience about her life and its impact, she hears Beth say one last time, “Jo, tell it again” (Hamill 93). Jo finally listens and writes Beth’s story down in a novel that would be published to keep Beth eternally alive in copies of literature expanding all over the world.

Outside of the text itself, another element to consider in why Hamill takes time to pause on Beth’s character could be due to her feminist approach to writing. On Hamill’s website it reads, “She is deeply passionate about creating new feminist, female-centered classics, both in new plays and in adaptation: stories that center around complicated women” (Hamill). Based off of Alcott herself, Jo is classically seen as the feminist heroine of *Little Women*. It is not unusual for Jo and Beth’s close relationship to carry over from the original novel. In this story, however, Beth has the substantial responsibility of being the motivating factor in Jo’s life that allows her to fulfill her dreams. Their opposite temperaments help to balance one another out and they are always learning from each other. Though contrasting, they are an equal pair. As Jo fights the expectations society has for her, so does Beth. Her wants and needs do not head the suggested norms of finding a husband and raising children just as Jo’s but instead of wanting to chase a career, Beth fights inside her own home for the greater good of her family. She puts others first, but that does not mean she wants nothing for herself. Instead, what she wants is a sense of contentment knowing her family will be okay and will be able to fulfill their needs. This does not make her any less of a heroine or feminist than Jo. It shows that feminism is

intersectional and covers all women no matter their ambitions or limitations. It also highlights how Hamill's production needs Beth and all her complexities to make the story what it is and what it can become beyond the page. There is an importance to seeing heroes of all different types on stage. Beth provides excellent representation of this by being a young woman who suffers from chronic illness and paralyzing social anxiety. Bravery does not always look the same. In an interview with Alicia Menendez for Amanpour & Co PBS, Kate Hamill comments on this saying, "But it's especially important to me to create new feminist classics because you know, again, these stories are things we teach in our schools. They are stories that shape us culturally. They are stories that we refer to again and again" (Kate Hamill on *Little Women*, 00:08:00 – 00:08:17). Pressure from fans of classical literature to stay true to the original is understandable but revising classics with representation of different perspectives, identities, and abilities in mind shapes literature and the world for the better.

From a personal standpoint, it is important to touch on the bond I share with Beth as someone who also has a chronic illness. When I was first cast as Beth, I was nervous that I would not get to explore the depth of her character due to what might have been provided in the script. My anxieties were quickly put to rest as I began to read Hamill's adaptation. Although I do believe and understand that it is easy for people who are sick to look at the world with disdain and anger for their position, I find that the people I meet with similar conditions often sitting next to me in the hospital experience a unique positive perspective on the world. It is no surprise to me that Beth sees the "beauty in the little things of life." I understand how she "sees more than anyone realizes" and that she is both "brave and sensitive" at the same time. I know her empathy and how she finds herself "quick to forgive and heal wounds" because I have been in the same position for most of my life as someone who has experienced what it is like to not have every

day be guaranteed as healthy (Hamill 6). There is a complexity and maturity to people who experience considerable suffering at young ages because we do not have the privilege of taking life for granted. Hamill shows this beautifully through Beth's action and speech. I would consider my own embodiment of Beth to be a healing process I did not know I needed. Through Hamill's writing and character guidance, I was able to see that I can do so much despite my illness in an ableist world. I can be the hero of someone's story while staying true to my naturally quiet self. I may not be as recognized for doing so, but if someone is really willing to listen, as Kate Hamill did for Lizzie and Jo to Beth, they may notice just how capable I am. My story is worth telling.

Kate Hamill's interpretation of Beth in *Little Women* shows the importance of complex characters no matter their historical stereotypes. She works hard to put real life on stage and Beth is just one great example of that. Through her historical research, detailed character building, and intersectional feminist lens, Hamill brings Beth to life in a new light as someone who is fully and beautifully human. Without these traits, her death could not have been impactful enough for Jo to create the story of her family: *Little Women*. In the end, I agree with Jo. Beth's life may not have been a great action filled epic in comparison to her sisters, but that does not make her story any less important. Instead, it makes it more accessible. As Jo March states, "That's why it needs to be told" (Hamill 93).

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