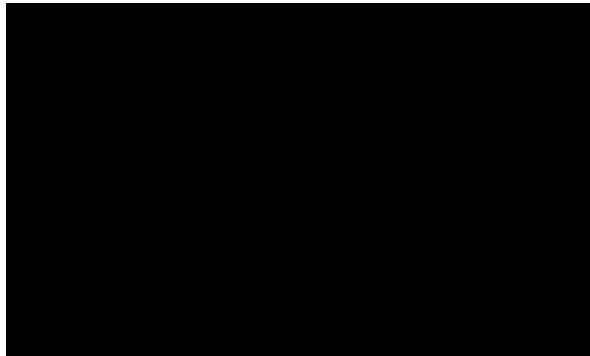


**Just Jo:**

**Jo March by Three Personality Theories**



### **Just Jo: Jo March by Three Personality Theories**

Josephine March is an enduring literary figure that has seen various reincarnations since her first appearance in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Written in 1868, its leading heroine was an era-defying character modeled in part after its author. The semi-autobiographical tale follows the lives of the March family over a period of a few years, focusing on the four March daughters and their growth into young women. Over the course of the story, Josephine, nicknamed *Jo*, experienced various trials, from the difficulties of poverty, conflict between herself and the world of the nineteenth century, and the many bouts of hardship that come naturally through life. The tale does not condemn her, building a dynamic, interesting person that was ahead of her time, creating a longstanding character in literature and film. The endurance of her character prompts one to study the way in which she developed into the cherished and thought-provoking figure she remains to this day. The following examines Jo March's development over the events of the novel, utilizing three personality theories to further observe the ways in which the character developed.

### **Just Jo**

#### **Life in 19th Century America**

Jo March began life during the middle nineteenth-century, an era commonly defined by rigorous work, technological advancements in industry and transportation, and civil turmoil. Many things were changing during the 1800s, political and social shifts leading to internal war among the nation. Many other changes in society were beginning during this era of history, such as a religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening during which thousands believed in creating a better world. "Those drawn to the message of the Second Great Awakening yearned

for stability, decency, and goodness in the new and turbulent American republic” (Corbett, et al., 2014, ch. 13, sect. 1). Interest and support of women’s rights continued to increase over the 1800s, featuring the first women’s political convention in 1848. This was sparked by the restrictive standards placed on women of the time. There were many rights barred to women during the 1800s, such as voting, financial independence, and the right to pursue a life outside the domestic sphere. “Women also had very limited rights regarding property ownership and legal authority” (Corbett, et al., 2014, ch. 13, sect. 5). The novel allows the echoes of the period’s history to ring throughout its story. As this was the time the author herself lived and worked in, it is vividly encapsulated in the pages where the protagonist’s tale unfolds.

### **The Story Begins**

While the novel opens at Christmas of Jo’s fifteenth year, there is enough of her personality and life within the length of the story to make inferences about her earlier years. Josephine March was a girl quickly growing into womanhood, and she was struggling to find her place among a society that felt restrictive to her. Jo was “rough and wild” (Alcott, 1868, p. 11), and a “wilful child” (Alcott, 1868, p. 385), enjoying activities that her time period believed were only for men. She was able to find companionship for her unconventional nature in her neighbor, Laurie. Between the unconditional love of her cherished family and her lifelong friendship with Laurie, Jo was able to openly explore and understand herself by pursuing her ambitions, eventually achieving them with the support of those she loved most. Jo’s life was characterized by her frustrations with the limitations society placed on women. In her day, Jo was defined by rigid standards that made regular characteristics possible in all people mean she was not correctly fitting her role. Struggling with outside expectations, Jo tried to find a long-term, sustainable

solution to her aimless pursuits, nurturing her dreams of becoming a famous writer. She was fond of children and took up work as a governess, eventually opening a boarding school for boys and starting her own family. Jo, despite her intense passions, was a girl who knew herself and what she wanted. When Laurie proposed to her, she was unyielding in her answer of no, even if it meant hurting her dear friend badly. Jo did not let others influence her, adhering to her values regardless of the consequences. Jo's independent personality was challenged by the loss of her sister, Beth, softening her demeanor with bereavement. Taking her sister's place as homemaker further repressed Jo, causing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Eventually, Jo reunited with the dear friend she made in New York, realized she was in love, and pursued him before he could leave without knowing how she felt. Jo had a bold streak that people of that time only accepted in men, and yet she found another who loved and appreciated her nature.

### **Jo March by Three Personality Theories**

#### **The Five Factor Model**

The Big Five was first introduced as a concept by Lewis Goldberg and later expanded by Robert McCrae and Paul Costa, creating the Five Factor Model (FFM) to define personality. As shown in later explanations of the personality theories, there are recurring ideas that appear in studies on human personality development. The FFM is evaluated by administering a questionnaire called the International Personality Item Pool, testing in areas of five overall personality concepts. These areas are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. "Each of these has been analyzed by experts and defined based on the behaviors and attitudes they most commonly embody" (Dziak, 2020, para. 10). The assessment can be self-reported, as it is based on a variety of statements used to describe the five

facets, where people answer if they agree or disagree with how well the statement describes them. Although the Five Factor Model has some shortcomings, it continues to be used by experts in psychology.

### ***Openness to experience***

Examining Jo's openness to experience leads one to believe she would score incredibly high in this area. "Those who score high on openness to experience are perceived as creative and artistic. They prefer variety and value independence. They are curious about their surroundings and enjoy traveling and learning new things" (Lim, 2023, para. 35). She was an adventurous type through and through, always up for an interesting challenge or task, and reveled in the outdoors and sports. Striving for independence, she lived through a time that demanded subservience of women, leading to an unconventional journey through life, the exact way she would like it. Those high in openness to experience also "engage in imaginative and intellectual activities" (Lim, 2023, para. 32). She was a ravenous reader as she was infatuated with her great-aunt's library, valuing the academic attributes of others like Frederick Bhaer, and yearned to travel abroad throughout the story. In adulthood, she jumped feet first into an unknown venture by opening a boarding school after inheriting her great-aunt's estate. She was also a creative, writing all sorts of grand tales based on her imagination and her favorite stories and experiences.

### ***Conscientiousness***

Conscientiousness is defined by a thorough, disciplined nature, ruling life with structure and organization. Those who score low in conscientiousness can be considered careless and avoid rigid arrangements. Jo displayed characteristics of preferring freedom and less restrictive environments where creativity and fun can abound. Jo, as a fun-loving person, could be careless

at times due to oversight, like when making fun of May Chester and causing a rift between her and Amy. While she was energetic in her pursuits once she had set them, she had shown to be aimless in the kind of system she lived in, having a sense of uncertainty as she came into womanhood. Her goal of becoming a writer was ultimately halted by the end of the story as she redirected her efforts into the boys' school and her own family, admitting things must be put on hold for now. Despite this, conscientiousness also refers to a person's competence and dutifulness. "They often plan and make goals that they follow with energy and enthusiasm" (Dziak, 2020, para. 12). Jo had proven her competence in order to achieve her goals, and through her sister's death, she learned to accept her life's duties with contentment and commitment.

### ***Extraversion***

Extraversion refers to a person's aptitude and enjoyment in social interactions, displaying a comfort in such situations as well as asserting oneself in them. It is also how people draw energy from their environment. "Extraverted people are likely to be friendly and talkative in social situations, and derive interest and energy from being involved with other people" (Dziak, 2020, para. 13). Jo would score high in extraversion, as she was an active person who enjoyed interacting with interesting people and took regular outings with her family and friends. She traveled to unfamiliar parts of the country on her own as those high in extraversion are also thought to be excitement-seeking (Lim, 2023, para. 24). Even in her work, this energetic behavior would present itself as described in the novel. She would "shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex', as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul" (Alcott, 1868, p. 218). Along with her enjoyment of outdoor activities, Jo March exhibited high levels of extraversion.

### *Agreeableness*

Agreeableness is the affinity to get along well with others, easily feeling and expressing affection, kindness, empathy and love. It is an area that Jo would also score high in, as she was a caring, affectionate person through most of the story. Despite her temper at times, Jo was sympathetic, caring deeply about the people around her and striving to do good. Those with extreme agreeableness “try to find positive methods of dealing with problems” (Dziak, 2020, para. 11). She did have some asocial qualities, such as having a dislike for making formal calls to neighbors and certain company she did not approve of, making fun of her sister’s friend, and mocking the two girls studying with Frederick Bhaer. These moments can be indicative of an independent, defiant nature that constitutes her character through the duration of the story. As stated before, this temperament can be attributed to the repressive culture of the time. Otherwise, she learned through her family an amiable kindness and goodwill that outweighs the bursts of willfulness and dissatisfaction. She displayed her altruism by, along with her sisters, gifting a nearby struggling family their Christmas breakfast. She opened the boarding school, wanting to help children in need receive an education. She also regularly cared for her ill sister, Beth, dedicating herself to Beth’s well-being up until her death.

### *Neuroticism*

Neuroticism is defined by a person’s proneness to experiencing negative emotions, such as sorrow, anger, stress, and insecurity (Lim, 2023, para. 33). In essence, it is a person’s emotional stability. Throughout the majority of the novel, Jo remained relatively stable in her emotions, even following Beth’s death. She exhibited bursts of anger throughout her adolescence, though it can be attributed to her frustration at her limitations in nineteenth-century

society (Smith, 2021, p. 1). Her independent, strong-willed nature was seen to come at odds with others who conformed to standards that barred her ambitions. As she grew older, however, the outbursts and recklessness subsided as she channeled her energy into education and gained sustainable agency in her future. Otherwise, she lived secure in herself, resilient through every harrowing experience. Teachings from her parents and her sister, Beth, instilled values of perseverance and discipline, which helped her manage to find sustainable work in an area that satisfied her aspiration.

### **The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator**

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a multiple question assessment with sixteen different personality outcomes. These outcomes are meant to define a common, recurring personality type based on the teachings of Carl Jung (Jenkins, et al., 2020, p. 382). “Jung believed that human behavior was predictable and therefore could be classified. He viewed differences in behavior to be the result of innate preferences that remained fairly consistent throughout life” (Breckenridge, 2023, para. 2). Developed by the mother-daughter team Isabel Myers and Katharine Briggs, the personality outcomes are divided into four major areas that focus on aspects of attitude, perception, orientation, and evaluation. These areas are extraversion or introversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, and lastly judging or perceiving. When being assessed, an individual is placed into one category or the other. Similarly to the Five Factor Model, the Myers-Briggs Test features levels of extraversion. Unlike the former theory, the MBTI does not lend to the idea of a spectrum and focuses more on polarized results. Like the Big Five, however, it reveals that the way people interact and respond to their environment has a relevant influence on personality. Sensing and intuition refers to the way in which people acquire



and process information, where those with stronger sensing prefer the five senses to perceive factual details, while those who are more intuitive perform more abstract thinking. Thinking or feeling refers to the way in which people make decisions, considering either logic or emotion when assessing a choice. Lastly, judging or perceiving involves how a person operates in the world. Where judging types are more structured and methodical, perceiving types are less restrictive and more adaptable.

### ***Extraversion/Intuitive***

Based on the Myers-Briggs Personality Test, Jo March could be considered an ENFP. Breaking the acronym down, it stands for extraversion, intuitive, feeling, and perceiving. “These individuals are enthusiastic, creative, energetic, and highly imaginative” (Simkus, 2023, para. 22). As discussed earlier, Jo was a highly extraverted person who ended the story living in a boarding house full of people. Her characteristics of high energy, an active lifestyle, and enjoyment of socialization, described prior, further support this idea. Her dependence on the state of her environment aligns with the contrasting nature of her demeanor. “Intuition-dominant types are more abstract in their thinking, focusing on patterns, impressions, and future possibilities” (Simkus, 2023, para. 10). As for her intuitive trait, abstract thinking was a strength of Jo’s seen in her writing and creativity. Through her plays and stories, she exercised her understanding of applying symbolism and meaning, weaving many complex, abstract ideas together in ways that saw published work. These same techniques were applied to her life. She often came up with imaginative ideas in other aspects of life, meeting challenges in constructive, compelling ways that supported her sense of purpose. Jo was invested in formulating future ideas, consistently focused on her writing career.

### ***Feeling***

The feeling aspect “describes how people make decisions and use judgments” (Simkus, 2023, para. 9). In regards to feeling, it is clear how guided by emotion Jo was throughout the novel. This can be considered to be due to her young age and the circumstances of her life, however, it was regularly depicted that Jo relied on mood to direct and motivate her, particularly her temper. Emotion at times made her reckless, like when ignoring her youngest sister, indirectly contributing to her fall in an icy lake. Or when she spoke boldly during a visit to her great-aunt’s and missed out on a trip to Europe. While compassionate like her mother, she also harbored her mother’s temper, as revealed in a scene between her and Marmee following Amy’s incident at the lake. In it, Jo cried in despair over her intense temperament to Marmee, saying: “It seems as if I could do anything when I’m in a passion. I get so savage...”. While comforting her, her mother admitted, “I am angry nearly every day of my life” (Alcott, 1868, p. 67). This depicts either a possible genetic link for her anger or a moment of understanding between two women aware of their positions in society. Both are also possible. As she aged in the story, there is a lessening of these bold outbursts, however, which may be an indication of her following Marmee’s example of restraint.

### ***Perceiving***

The last concept is perceiving, which indicates a person’s preference for openness and spontaneity in their life. Those with strong perceiving “are more adaptable and flexible and tend to be good at multitasking” (Simkus, 2023, para. 11). The opposing idea, judging, defines a person who lives in a more structured manner. Judging types prefer finality and perform tasks in methodical ways, whereas perceiving individuals take things as they come, allowing

open-endedness in their way of handling things. Jo displayed many signs of perceiving traits, such as the spontaneous, mood-driven way in which she carried on through girlhood. As she grew older, she continued to exhibit characteristics of being fun-loving, free-spirited, and open-minded.

### **The Psychosocial Theory of Development**

Erik Homburger Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development is an eight stage process that explains how people develop certain personality traits. Unlike other developmental theories, the eight stages begin in infancy and continue over the entirety of a person's life. This unique look at human development expands upon previously believed notions and emphasizes a person's role within society as well as focusing on the crucial value of a person's agency in development. "It posits eight sequential stages of individual human development influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors throughout the lifespan" (Lewis & Orenstein, 2022, para. 1). The theory also defines what healthy attributes one should be striving for at various points in life, encouraging a more positive perspective by offering objectives obtainable by introspection and balancing a connection with the world outside the self. At each stage, two vital qualities are opposed against the other. "Properly resolving the tension between these forces bestows one with an important virtue" (Owen, 2019, para. 5). While criticisms do exist, including its strict duality model, the Theory of Psychosocial Development has been influential in many areas of study.

### ***Birth through Adolescence***

In its initial stages, crucial characteristics of the self are ingrained dependent on the behavior and actions of the caregiver. The first four stages start at birth and continue through to

twelve years of age. During the first year of life, trust is established with a nurturing caregiver able to meet the infant's needs with sensitivity and responsiveness. The next stage occurs over the following three year period during the toddler years. During this time, a child must establish autonomy through exploration and independence. Failure to do so results in shame and self-doubt. The third stage happens in the next three year period, from age three to six years old, and focuses on *initiative versus guilt*, where a child needs to develop a sense of purpose through learning to plan and achieve tasks while interacting with others. The fourth stage helps a child develop competence through its *industry versus inferiority* perspective. This stage takes place over the next six years, from six to twelve years old, where children compare themselves to their peers. This results in either feelings of pride or inferiority due to commonly expected standards of the time.

### ***Jo's Earliest Years***

Because the novel begins when Jo is fifteen, speculation is the only tool available to examine her early life. Seeing how attentive and compassionate Marmee was and how good-natured her father was, it is reasonable to assume that Jo had a safe, loving upbringing in her earliest years. Her strong sense of independence and active demeanor portray a child properly nurtured and encouraged in her agency. Jo's adventurous, lively behavior leads one to believe she was correctly directed through the first several stages. She displayed strong trust in her family, gaining a solid sense of self and direction with the purpose of pursuing the unconventional dream of becoming a famous writer. Her creativity and imagination was encouraged, which can be seen in the plays the girls would put on, the creation of their family newspaper, and her dedication to writing.

### ***Teenage Years***

When the novel starts, Jo is in the Psychosocial Model's fifth stage. In this stage, a person is trying to establish a sense of identity between their inner being and the greater world around them. This is called the *identity versus role confusion* stage. During this time, "the ego identity crystallizes in stage five, during adolescence" (Lewis & Orenstein, 2022, para. 3). As mentioned prior, Jo lived during a time that limited what women were permitted to do. While she was nurtured at home, she would constantly encounter the repressive system of the nineteenth century. "Due to Jo's limited exposure to so few types of womanhood and femininity, she realizes that she does not fit these ideals and begins to despise them" (Smith, 2021, p. 4). Finding difficulty establishing her identity due to the expectations put on her, she could not help but defy the rules, garnering a negative reputation with some, including the disapproval of her great-aunt. During the fourth stage, issues are possible with inferiority due to their poverty, as well as potential negative experiences from acting too boyish around certain company. To cope with this stifling environment, she doubled down and adapted this into her identity as defiance.

### ***Adulthood***

The only other stage observable in the novel is the next stage, *intimacy versus isolation*. This sixth stage centers on connection with others versus emotional isolation and loneliness. "After we have developed a sense of self in adolescence, we are ready to share our life with others" (Jenkins, et al., 2020, p. 296). Despite her non-traditional behavior, Jo was a woman who was loved and capable of loving wholeheartedly. The end of the novel saw her operating a large school with her own family, promising many years of connection to multiple other people, able to watch her family and the children of the school grow and help them along. In the final two

stages of Erikson's model of development, a resilient sense of self is required to healthily navigate the remaining years. In middle adulthood, these years are characterized by a sense of enriching other generations. "Generativity involves finding your life's work and contributing to the development of others, through activities such as volunteering, mentoring, and raising children" (Jenkins, et al., 2020, p. 296). This penultimate stage is one Jo would excel through. As previously mentioned, her family and large school would allow constant opportunity to guide and nurture the younger generations, which seemed a part of her goal with starting the school. The final stage is *integrity versus despair*, where people feel either satisfaction or despair over their life. Due to Jo's strength of character and the faith she carried throughout the novel, it is reasonable to expect that she would do well throughout this last stage, finding peace and satisfaction in her accomplishments with her family, the school, and whatever writing she was able to do in those remaining years.

### **Conclusion**

*Little Women* continues to capture the imaginations and hearts of countless generations, striking an emotional harmony with readers who can see themselves in the characters of the book, particularly its protagonist, Jo. While being an unusual figure of her time, Jo's personality appeals to people regardless of gendered expectations of any society. She carried an assured willfulness, joined with being stubborn, enduring, wild, ambitious, and yearning to drink up the world. Jo lived and struggled through the turbulent world of nineteenth century America to find her own satisfaction and contentment. Application of the three personality theories demonstrates the traits readers have empathized with for over a century. The two trait theories, the MBTI and FFM, define her character through her most outstanding characteristics, while the Psychosocial

Theory of Development elaborates how these attributes evolved. Further examining her personality growth helps deepen the meaning of the text as well as promote deeper psychological understanding, connecting with the universal human element of the story and character.

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