

A personal tragedy assignment

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Elisabeth Stuart Phelps captures the essence of time when " young ladies had not begun to have ' opinions' upon the doctrine of evolution, and before feminine friendships and estrangements were founded on the distinctions between protoplasm and bioplasm" (Phelps 8). She writes a kunstlerroman novel of young woman who has the ability to go far with her artistic talent and loses her inspiration after being married. Another author who tackles similar issues is Louisa May Alcott and her novel " Little Women". Alcott conveys different perceptions for women and conventions what they must adhere to.

Conventions in this retrospect deals with ideology that at a certain age young women give up their what is determined, a ' childhood passion' to assume the role of a wife. Both Phelps's novel " The Story of Avis" and Alcott's " Little Women" brings forth the idea that women through marriage were being suppressed and abused by the social constraints that has been set for them. Also, the role of mother, wife and then a person conflicts with any aspirations for being financially independent and/ or a woman seeking a creative lifestyle.

A more contemporary type thinking might question this by asking why cant women have the best of worlds, a family and a career? However, Phelps and Alcott works speaks for them by giving us a realistic and creative outlook on domestic life for women who want both. In " The Story of Avis" we are introduced to young lady named Avis Dobell. She is educated, strong-willed and a talented artist. Avis who has studied abroad has been educated far beyond her years. She is adamant about not getting married. Phelps creates a character with strong feministic ideals.

Avis would rather pursue a career in arts, then marry. However, her womanly urges draw her close to Phillip Ostrander. At first Avis tries to suppress her feeling for him but in the end gives in because he promises not to not intervene with her career. Avis having feeling for man comes almost natural to her and she cannot put her feeling off. She describes her need for him, as “ the coffee wouldn’t be right. ” (Phelps 108). The irony is how quick the coffee turns sour after she married him. Avis can be compared to Josephine March in Alcott’s “ Little Women”.

Just like in Phelps’s novel, the book is loosely based on Louisa May Alcott herself. Jo enjoys not being like girl, she is a tomboy. She likes to write and is very opinionated. Her bold nature often gets her into trouble. One of the most heartfelt moments in the book is when Jo cuts off her long, chestnut brown hair ??? “ her one beauty”(Alcott 97), and sells it so that her mother can go see her father . Jo, like Avis refuses marriage proposals, she moves to New York, later meets and marries Professor Friedrich “ Fritz” Bhaer.

Phelps, character Phillip Ostrander is a sweet talker. He makes empty promises of not wanting to make Avis sacrifice her talent for marriage. Phillip professes to Avis that he would not interfere with her work he says, “ I do not want your work, or your individuality. I refuse to accept any such sacrifice from the woman I love. You are perfectly right. A man ought to be above it. Let me be that man. ” (Phelps 107), Phillip lures Avis with the very same thing that keeps her wanting to be apart from him. Phillip portrays himself as someone who is secure with his manhood.

Phillip's luck changes when he loses his position at the university and begins to be more of a liability than an asset to Avis. Phillip's false promises intervene with their marriage when he begins to cheat. Avis because of Phillip has to suffer by paying his debts. Phillip's own personal problems constitute as emotional abuse and suppression for Avis. She has to assume the role of both male and female because he cannot provide for the family as she remains to spend her money. Avis is stressed with domestic life and has no time to dedicate for her art. Avis has to tend to be a mother, rather than an artist.

She best describes how her marriage is dissolving and the love is fading, more importantly her need for Phillip is fading, Avis states this when she expresses that, "The cream is sour, the steak is cold, and the coffee causes a bilious headache" (Phelps 150) describing her relationship with Phillip after marriage. Although the father, in "Little Women" wasn't a womanizer, much like Phillip. The role of manhood is imperative to touch upon. While away the March girls are to abide by the rules of lady-hood and pray, do chores and be well behaved. The Father Mr. March is clear representation of what a man is supposed to be like in puritan time.

Much of the book Mr. March is not mentioned but his influence is used as an undertone throughout the novel. It is understood that the father is the provider and trying to make a living to keep the daughters living comfortable. To add to his persona, Mr. March is away serving the country in the Civil War. In "Little Women" the daughters are allowed to choose whether they want to marry or not, their parents expressed that they hope they would make the right choices, Mrs. March best conveys this by stating, <https://assignbuster.com/a-personal-tragedy-assignment/>

“ both of us (mother and father) trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives. (Alcott 97) however if they choose someone, he should be someone who can provide financially and make wise decisions, in other words nothing like Phillip Ostrander. Jo’s aunt adds to the perception of a man being able to make money and make the right decisions, she expresses to Jo that John is a perfect match, she proclaims, “ John is good and wise; he’s got heaps of talent; he’s willing to work,” (Alcott 223). Domestic life throughout both novels effects its main characters. Avis assumes the role of wife, mother and then a person. She tends to the children when they need her and tries to be a good wife.

Avis is self-less and thoughtful about the priorities in he life, Phelps perpetuates this notion when she expresses how much she has to sacrifice to be a good mother, she states , “ Women understand-only women altogether-what a dreary will-o-the-wisp is this old, common, I had almost said commonplace, experience, “ When the fall sewing is done,” “ When the baby can walk,” “ When house-cleaning is over,” “ When the company has gone,” “ When we have got through with the whooping-cough,” “ When I am a little stronger,” then I will write the poem, or learn the language, or study great charity, or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become. ” (Phelps 149) In this instance, Avis character shows true growth about the importance for the people in her lives. Avis the budding artist has become more nurturing and submissive to the social constraints for women. The idea of domestic life in “ Little Women” is most prominent, the March sisters make an effort to uncover happiness within their day.

When they are not completing chores, they feel guilty, as if they did not do the right things. The only way they find meaningful happiness is when they are working, either for a living or for the benefit of their families. The parents in this book bestow values that working is productive but also it works for conditioning them for the ‘little women’ they must be as oppose to ‘little girls’. Jo’s character best supports this thought by saying “I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, “a little woman,” and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else” (Alcott 8). Alcott and Phelps contrast is there approaches in marriage. Alcott, although supporting women rights, rites of marriage as ‘rite of passage’ for the women in “Little Women”. She makes her character seem more refined after marriage. Alcott writes that Meg has grown a lot through marriage, “As they sat sewing together, Jo discovered how much improved her sister Meg was, how well she could talk, how much she knew about good, womanly impulses, thoughts, and feelings, how happy she was in husband and children, and how much they were all doing for each other.” (Alcott 112) She describes Meg’s speech and temperament different and how much she has changed since being married. However Phelps paints a different picture about marriage and children. Avis after being married and having children has become worn and tired.

Her passion for art is diminishing and marriage is not as glamorous for her. She uses a more realistic approach about how women really felt, which was out of the norm in writing literature for her time. Phelps advocates this though when she writes, “Their vague ideas of the main characteristics of infancy were drawn as, I think I may safely say, those of most young men

and women are at the time of marriage chiefly from novels and romances, in which parentage is represented as a blindly deifying privilege, which it were an irreverence to associate with teething, the midnight colic, or an insufficient income". (Phelps 151) Phelps describes that marriage is nothing like what other authors glamorizes it to be.

She emulates the real experience of working women with a lot of responsibilities to deal with. Both Phelps and Alcott demonstrate two main characters that lost their inspirations of arts for marriage. Jo who use to cut hair like a boy and didn't fancy to be feminine, eventually got Married. Had Alcott not made Jo marry a man of good status, such as Bhaer , she might of ended up being a spinster. Jo gave up her writing to assume her role as wife. Avis although in the beginning put her stand on not getting married and eventually had to endure aspects of marriage she didn't want. One can view " The Story of Avis" and " Little Women" as personal tragedies. Avis loses her artist ability and unhappy marriage.

Her aspirations are with her children, especially her daughter Wait, which one can infer that Phelps gives her a name to do describe a time that Avis is envisioning. She hopes her daughter would make the right decisions for her. The irony is that Avis proves that there was a time when a women couldn't have both, a career and family. Avis took a risk from leaving her passion of art for her passion with a man. Avis thought she found a happy medium of both, however her life spiraled in different directions, which she states it was the plan god had for her and that " It is nature"(Phelps 458). Perhaps nature in this retrospect refers to the biological laws for women.

Avis demonstrates a life being no more than a wife, and mother. In “ Little Women” Alcott approach was a happy ending. She made all the March sisters married and happy. Alcott supports this notion in her closing paragraph, when Mrs. March expresses how happy she is with her daughters,” O, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this! “(Alcott 530). Alcott and Phelps write what they know. They wrote on issues of women being suppressed, taken advantage of and not having a voice. All there characters emulate a society in which a woman was not equal to man. Also, that a woman’s is at home as oppose to the work force.

Both authors took a risk writing of women giving up dreams for marriage, which through literature was an attempt to expose the truths and struggle women had to endure. Phelps and Alcott challenge social conventions and norms by showing the reader that marriage was hard, and life doesn’t have a story book ending. They also showed the sacrifices made by women to live a life not frown upon. Work Cited Alcott, Louisa M. “ Little women: or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy -. ” Little Women. Google Books. 04 Dec. 2009 . Phelps, Elisabeth, “ The Story Of Avis. ” [Http://books.google.com/books?id=-8EVp8Xm9F4C&pg=RA3-PA456&dq=The+story+of+avis&output=text](http://books.google.com/books?id=-8EVp8Xm9F4C&pg=RA3-PA456&dq=The+story+of+avis&output=text). Google Books. Web. Nov. & dec. 2009.