

COGNITIVE MAPPING AND SPACE IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S LITTLE WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BETH AND JO MARCH

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Abstract:

This paper explores how cognitive mapping and spatial consciousness shape character development in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" (1868). Focusing on Beth March and Jo March, the study analyzes how they mentally and physically map space, particularly home, external environments, and imaginative landscapes. Drawing from cognitive literary theory (Freeman, 2002), spatial narrative theory (Tally, 2013), and feminist spatial studies (Massey, 1994), the paper argues that Beth's inward, home-centered mapping reflects a moral and relational worldview anchored in domestic stability, while Jo's expansive and mobile cognitive maps illustrate ambition, independence, and imaginative self-construction. Through close reading and theoretical engagement, the study demonstrates how the sisters' contrasting spatial orientations reveal broader 19th-century tensions surrounding gender, agency, space, and female authorship. Ultimately, Alcott uses space not merely as setting but as psychological architecture, mapping divergent pathways of womanhood.

Keywords: Little Women, Louisa May Alcott, cognitive mapping, space, Beth March, Jo March, domesticity, literary cognition, feminist spatial theory.

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" remains one of the most influential American novels about girlhood, family, and female ambition. Yet beyond its emotional and moral lessons, the novel is rich in spatial symbolism and cognitive terrain. Space — rooms, attics, gardens, streets, parlors — becomes a silent but powerful agent shaping emotional life and identity. As Tally (2013) argues, literature often functions as a "mapping device of lived and imagined worlds," allowing readers to trace psychological landscapes through physical ones. This study applies "cognitive mapping theory" (Freeman, 2002; Tolman, 1948) and "spatial narrative theory" (Massey, 1994; Ryan, 2012) to analyze Beth and Jo March through the spaces they inhabit, avoid, and imagine. Cognitive mapping refers to how one mentally organizes and interprets

physical and symbolic space. In fiction, characters' movements and attachments to spaces reveal internal cognition and values [3, 2].

Beth and Jo present two contrasting spatial and cognitive orientations. These differences reflect more than personality; they embody social negotiations of 19th-century feminine identity. Through space, Alcott explores who a girl may become — or who she is expected to remain.

Main part

Cognitive mapping originated in psychology as mental representation of spatial environments [7,3]. Freeman (2002) extended this to literature, arguing cognitive mapping “structures the imaginative geography of narrative worlds and characters' relations within them.” In literary texts, mapping reveals identity formation, values, and emotional logic.

Space is never neutral. Massey (1994) emphasizes that gendered expectations shape access to space — mobility belongs to men; domesticity confines women. Feminist literary scholars (Kolodny, 1984) note that spaces like parlors or attics construct emotional and ideological limits.

In “Little Women”:

“Home” - duty, virtue, femininity

“Public/world beyond” - ambition, authorship, masculine freedom

“Imaginative space” - alternative identity construction

This dual lens allows us to see Beth and Jo not simply as “shy and bold” but as representing competing spatial ideologies of womanhood.

Beth March's world is small, but rich. Her cognitive map is not defined by movement but by emotional constancy. She finds meaning in familiar rooms, quiet corners, and relational space. Early in the novel, Beth gravitates to the piano and hearth:

“Beth... quietly went to the little piano and began to play” [1,67].

The “little piano” situated in the parlor, becomes an axis of meaning. It is not simply an object; it is a “mental landmark”, a space where she feels safe, virtuous, and useful. As Freeman (2002) notes, characters anchor identity to “cognitive nodes of emotional significance”. Beth's map is not impoverished, it is deep. She perceives “relational coordinates” rather than geographical ones. Home for Beth is not confinement but sanctuary. When she tends dolls or comforts family, she performs what Slade (2009) calls “moral domestic cartography,” mapping virtue onto familiar space.

Beth rarely leaves home. Her anxiety when visiting the Hummels reflects cognitive boundaries: “Beth could not help thinking the poor rooms were very mean and bare” [1,89]

She sees beyond poverty into fear — disorder, unfamiliarity, illness. Her cognitive map is not external but “empathetic and protective”, yet fragile when overstretched.

During her illness, space contracts around her sick-room:

“There was no place like home... and Beth felt it deeply” [1,323]

What could be tragic becomes transcendent. Beth transforms limitation into meaning, embodying what Ryan (2012) calls “inward geographies of ethical selfhood.”

Beth's map is circular, intimate, spiritual — a still point in a world of movement.

Jo March's cognitive map is centrifugal: expansive, daring, always pushing outward.

The attic is Jo's first "room of one's own":

"The old sofa was Jo's favorite retreat... where she could read and write" [1,45] Unlike Beth's parlor, Jo's attic is messy, flexible, creative — what Tally (2013) terms an "experimental geography of imagination." It is transitional space: part of home, but elevated, liminal, open to possibility.

Jo famously rejects static life:

"I want to do something splendid... something heroic" [1,60]

Her verbs — "do, go, be" — reveal active mapping. Beth "dwells"; Jo "traverses". Jo's journeys to Aunt March's house, to New York, and her publishing world mark actual spatial expansion: "Jo was delighted with her new life" [1,189]

Movement equals becoming. As Massey (1994) argues, mobility is power. Jo does not merely move through space; she "re-authors it". When staging plays in the attic, she "turned the humble room into a stage" [1,52]. This aligns with Herman's (2003) idea of literature as "mental simulation worlds." Jo maps "fiction onto reality", transforming limits into platforms. Her boundary-crossing also challenges gender norms — sword-fighting, roaming the city, publishing. Her spatial imagination rewrites womanhood.

Conclusion

Cognitive-mapping theory illuminates how "Little Women" constructs character not only through morality or dialogue but through "spatial imagination". Beth and Jo map the world with different compasses:

Beth - charts the geography of care, duty, and sacred domestic stillness.

Jo - maps ambition, independence, and the creative frontier of womanhood.

Their spatial consciousness reflects broader historical negotiations between Victorian domesticity and emerging female autonomy. Alcott allows both maps dignity — inviting readers to feel the pull of safety and the thrill of becoming. In the end, the novel shows that "space is not backdrop but destiny-shaping terrain", where imagination redraws walls and doors into horizons.

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