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## Front Pew Reflections: Redefining the Role of Women and Solid Theology in the Church

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### Critical Essay

Christmas Eve at the Lazarchuk residence was always a day to remember. Growing up, I was extremely fortunate to have parents who made the holiday extremely spectacular and full of surprises. On the best Christmases, I received things like an electric bike, a Nintendo DS, and a Barbie dreamhouse. On the worst Christmases, I received underwhelming presents like socks, toothbrushes, and of course, books. I distinctly remember one Christmas when I was eleven years old. The iPod Nano was all the rage and I just knew when my mother handed me a small eight by ten package, I was about to be the happiest girl in the world. I was making a mental list of all the songs by Taylor Swift and the Jonas Brothers that I was about to download as I fumbled through the wrapping paper to get to the goodness I just knew was inside. I lifted the glittery snowman paper veil to find... a book.

I tried my best to hide the disappointment in my expression as I managed to release "Wow! Thank you so much, mom. *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Never read this one before." I did what I knew to do. I gave my mother the biggest and most sincere hug I possibly could, and I placed that book on the shelf where it served as a dust collector for months to come. One rainy and particularly dull April afternoon, I decided to give it a chance. To my surprise, I couldn't put the book down until I was finished. As dramatic and cliché as it may sound, that little novel changed my entire perspective on growing up and spurred in me a love for reading and books that I never had before.

When it comes to remembering the works that have molded me as a person, I have to start from the very beginning. I didn't always love to read, and I would often turn to books as a "last resort" to escape boredom. In elementary school, the *Boxcar Kids*, *39 Clues*, and the *Magic Treehouse* series were the solid foundations that I built my reading skills on, but reading never

became personal to me until *Little Women*. Reading about the March girls' struggles, and being immersed in their everyday lives amid the Civil War, transformed the way I saw books. Finally, there were female characters I could relate to, who had substance, who did more than typical girl things, and who had an imperfect yet strong sisterly bond that I still look up to today. In this novel, I met the stubborn and impatient Jo March who altered my perspective on growing up as a young woman and breaking societal rules. From that day I picked up that book, as far as I was concerned, I was going to be Jo March.

Fast-forwarding to my twenty-two-year-old self, I now recognize what exactly drew me to *Little Women* and other books that I read in my tween and teen years. The book is a sentimental classic that focuses on the perspective of female characters who have varying personalities, ambitions, and often drifted outside of the status quo and did things unexpected of them. Jo, the focal character, is a great example of a female character that often gets in trouble for being her tomboy self and disregarding people's opinions of her. She is witty, blunt, honest, and has an unrelenting love for her family and chooses to write to support those she loves financially. I found myself relating to her the most in those specific ways, but I also saw a piece of myself in each of these characters and felt validated in my actions and behaviors because of them.

In all the other books I read before *Little Women*, the female characters were either supplementary or never did anything vitally important to the plot or storyline. In *Little Women*, the girls were the ones who made the rules. They made their own choices according to their own goals, most of the time. More specifically, Jo March was the first female protagonist I had met who was unapologetically herself- strong-willed, rebellious, and completely unladylike in a revolutionary way. The character of Jo immediately struck me when, at the beginning of the

novel, she tells her sisters she has no desire to "stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (Alcott 22) and that she would rather go to war and fight alongside her father. Her rejection of the conventional domesticity of the period is shown most plainly when she says, "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (Alcott 22).

The most impactful moment in *Little Women* is how Louisa May Alcott refuses to allow Jo to marry Laurie, her childhood friend, to appease the audience. Alcott purposefully gives Jo agency to say no to the proposition of marriage, even though she knows it could disappoint the people that matter most to Jo, and it could disappoint the readers of the novel during her period as well. By saying no to Laurie, Jo is an example for girls that do not want to conform to the traditional idea of marriage and children. Jo paves the way for young women, like me, to start seeing life through their own lenses, rather than letting society and tradition decide the outcome of their lives for them. Although Jo does end up marrying another love interest at the end of the novel, it is by her own choice and not solely because of pressure from her family or society.

Another fantastic novel that significantly impacted my relationship with books and writing is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, which I first read for my British Women Writer's course with Dr. Braun. It is no secret that Jane Austen remains a genius writer who was way ahead of her time, especially as a female author in the 1800s, but the personal application that I gained from this book in present times is astounding, given that it was written for an audience that existed two hundred years ago. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist Elizabeth Bennett finds herself stuck in the middle of family drama, financial troubles, and deciding between prospects of marriage. Elizabeth's obnoxious mother Mrs. Bennett expects her and her sisters to marry for the family's financial security, but Elizabeth does not want to get married for money. She wants to get married for love. Much like Jo March, Elizabeth rejects a marriage proposal

even though her mother strongly urges her to marry their ridiculous cousin, Mr. Collins. In this empowering scene, Elizabeth uses her free will to decide the course of her life, and it is a truly inspiring moment of relief for Elizabeth and readers.

Although my upbringing was nothing like Elizabeth's, and I by no means felt the need to support my family through marriage, I still can relate to the pressure that many women feel in getting married earlier rather than later to avoid feeling like a "spinster". Although society has changed drastically, and Westernized culture often celebrates the strong, independent, single woman of today, there is still this underlying notion that women who marry earlier are better off. Being a first-generation American brought up by European immigrant parents, the reality of becoming a "spinster" still felt very real to me, even in the twenty-first century. And because I was raised by parents who felt the realities of their communist past (which included intense poverty) the pressure to marry rich, though not the driving force in my decisions, was still there. Because of their past struggles, my family values the security and safety of finance as a means for survival much like the Bennett family does. In this way, I relate to Elizabeth, and *Pride and Prejudice* served as a comfort to me as well as an enjoyable and page-turning read.

Upon reading, I found myself totally in love with not only the characters in the novel but the dialogue between characters and the complicated relationships that exist between them. What Jane Austen does best, in this novel especially, is she creates a complex web of characters who relate to each other in some way or another. In most books, the thread of characters is hard to follow, but Austen has a way of giving every character depth, making it easy for the reader to distinguish between them and understand those important relationships. One example of this is when Officer Wickham enters the plot. Wickham is a charming officer who steals the attention of many, including the hard-to-please and usually skeptical Elizabeth. Wickham eventually runs

away and elopes with Elizabeth's younger sister, Lydia. Initially, we do not know much about him except that he has a history with Mr. Darcy, but eventually the reader comes to find out that Wickham's past with Darcy's family runs deep, and that he tried to seduce Darcy's underage sister as well. If there's one lesson that *Pride and Prejudice* taught me, it's that people aren't always what they seem to be. Elizabeth learns this hard truth after getting the full scoop about Wickham, and after Darcy reveals his honest intentions. I found that the web of characters and their relation to each other allowed for the fun, gossipy parts of the novel, which contributed to my enjoyment of the novel.

Though Elizabeth ends up happily married by the end of the novel, what distinguishes *Pride and Prejudice* from other tales of "happy ending" stories I have read prior are the twists and turns of the plot and the flaws of the characters. On some days, Darcy seems like a dream, but on others, he is an awkward and pretentious mess. When we first meet Darcy, he comments on how Jane is the only beautiful woman in the room, so he will not bother dancing with anyone else. Yet, by the end of the novel, he ends up head over heels in love with Elizabeth. He and Elizabeth have days where they fight and drive each other up a wall, but they also have days where they flirt and are clearly in love with each other. At one point, another potential love interest known as Miss Bingley enters the equation, and drives a wedge between them, causing more drama and uncertainty to unfold in the plot. There was never a point in the novel where I was absolutely certain that Elizabeth would end up with Darcy because they both had so many kinks to work out. This made reading *Pride and Prejudice* a real joy because I honestly did not know whether Elizabeth will have her happy ending after all and if it will be with Darcy. This uncertainty, with the added element that both Darcy and Elizabeth must grow and learn before they can be together happily, is a profound lesson for both Elizabeth and the reader.

Another difference between this novel and typical fairy tales I was used to reading is that the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are all flawed in some way or another, which allows me to personally feel connected to their humanity. Some characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are so deeply flawed and ridiculous that it is laughable. Enter Mrs. Bennett and Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennett's character is so well written that I, as the reader, often felt secondhand embarrassment for Elizabeth. She is so focused on getting all of her five daughters married that she embarrasses herself and her family beyond repair. As for Mr. Collins, his high self-esteem is both unwarranted and unexplainable. When Elizabeth rejects his marriage proposal with a hard "no" several times, he attributes her rejection to her shyness and her playing "hard to get". The hilarious exchange between him and Elizabeth is truly one of the highlights of the novel and speaks to the genius of Austen's characterization skill. All in all, Austen taught me of the key elements of writing that make reading pleasurable and enticing. Characters with deep histories, flaws, and raw emotions and personalities, coupled with a dramatic yet realistic storyline are the recipe for a fantastically fun read, and I found this to be true of *Pride and Prejudice* and Austen's other works as well.

In considering the ways that I have been impacted by courses and works of literature here at the University of Akron, I have to include Dr. Drew's Women and Film course, and how this course allowed me to view film as literature for the first time. When thinking of film, most people would not consider movies to be a form of literature or something to be studied. Movies are generally a form of entertainment that people enjoy on the weekend- something we see, think about for maybe an hour or two, and then move on from. In Women and Film, I had the opportunity to study productions dating back to the early days of television into modern-day movies. Each film was significant in the way it portrayed women, their relationship to other

women, and men, and what these things ultimately say about how women were seen during the period that the film was created in.

One specific film that I encountered in this course is *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which follows the life of a girl named Chiyo who is sold along with her sister by her impoverished father to a geisha household in Western Japan in the 1920s. The film gives the audience an inside look at what life is like for a woman whose sole purpose is to please and entertain men. Everything about Chiyo's life is controlled by the matriarch named "Mother" who runs the geisha house and seeks to earn a profit above all else. Chiyo is coached by a woman named Auntie and another young geisha-in-training named Pumpkin. As I analyzed this film, I realized that it is not much different from analyzing a piece of written literature. Every single element of a film, whether it's the musical score, the gaze of the camera, the dialogue, the choice of cast, or costume is crucial to understanding the theme and overall message of the story being projected on the screen.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* is a powerful story of female oppression and female rivalry overcome by female mentor relationships. Chiyo is placed in this heartbreaking situation in the geisha house, where friendships are not encouraged and relationships outside of the house are forbidden. Chiyo's hopeless situation gets even worse when she is confronted with Hatsumomo, the experienced "queen" of the geisha house. As Chiyo begins to excel in her geisha abilities and begins to make more money, Hatsumomo resents her and makes her life miserable. The two women fight and argue constantly in the film, and Hatsumomo portrays a perfect image of how female rivalry, sexual competition, and insecurity ultimately leads to the degradation of a woman.

Female mentorship and even slight friendship finally appear in the film when a woman named Mameha assigns herself to be Chiyo's mentor and older "geisha sister". Contrasting to the

nasty rivalrous relationship between Hatsumomo and Chiyo, Mameha acts as an encourager and teacher to Chiyo. She teaches her how to act as a geisha, and tips on how to win over men with seduction and grace. Mameha, though she is Chiyo's superior, allows herself to become vulnerable and share feelings with Chiyo. This ultimately brings them closer together as they develop into a mentor-mentee relationship for the majority of the film. Through treating this film (and the many other films we studied in this course) as literature to be studied as well as enjoyed, I learned that movies can operate as a means of storytelling as well as a reflection of culture. As I studied how women were presented in a film, I learned to be aware and think critically of a film's message that it sends the audience about women and how they are to be viewed. I gleaned an enormous amount of personal growth from changing the way that I view film, and seeing films now as important pieces of literature to be studied, rather than just entertainment to be consumed.

About halfway into my college career, I began to develop a passion for the study of the Bible and sought out resources to help other women of the Christian faith to understand the importance of theological study. The final work of literature is one that connected my passion for raising awareness of the importance of female education to my experience of being raised in the church. I was first introduced to this novel by a friend at the University of Akron, and it has become a book that is near and dear to my heart. In *Stop Calling Me Beautiful*, author Phylicia Masonheimer calls Christian women to start seeking out the deeper truths of their faith, rather than submitting to the image-obsessed and self-help culture. In this book, Masonheimer lays out the exact feelings that I struggled to find words for. It has been my personal experience that sometimes, women in the church settle for a "feel good" theology when they could be gaining so much from a deeper and more accurate study of God's word.

*Stop Calling Me Beautiful* was ultimately the book that propelled me into the world of deep theological study. As a female who was brought up in the modern Evangelical church, I myself have fallen victim to the "pink fluff" theology written by women for other women that contains little to no substance, only reassuring me that God made me and therefore I am beautiful. In reality, the Bible has more to offer than that, which is why I felt like my surface-level studies were not enough to fulfill me. Masonheimer dives deep into the topics of skin-deep theology, female sexuality, overcoming shame, legalism in the church, and other controversial but important subjects that many people in the church are afraid to address.

As a woman of the church, I realize that we have been sold a fluffy theology that only goes skin deep. The quote, "You are beautiful in the sight of God" is something every female churchgoer has heard all her life, but when will we allow ourselves to dive deeper than that? In her book, Masonheimer writes, "Theological education—learning about God, the Bible, and how these truths apply to life—is not just for men or for those called to ministry. Women must be spiritually equipped with the knowledge of God through His Word so they can minister to the people around them" (Masonheimer, 106). This is the call to action that I was missing, and learning this new information gave me something to advocate and strive for. Though I am still in the process of learning, I still encourage the women in the religious circles around me to be involved, be present, and let their voices be heard in their church communities. Women are not only as capable of handling the heavy truths that are contained in the Bible as men, but they are also just as capable of understanding and using those truths to empower themselves. As people of faith who believe that God created and values everyone equally, we need to strive to provide women with resources to learn about what they believe and why they believe it.

*Stop Calling Me Beautiful* is special to me ultimately because it inspired me to tell my own story of being brought up in the Slavic Evangelical Church and my experiences there as a woman. *Pride and Prejudice* taught me to be persistent in the face of rejection and to not allow others to dictate my life. *Little Women* prepared me from a young age to go against the grain, speak my mind, and be myself. My hope is that I can allow myself to be vulnerable through my writing, inspire change, and open up the dialogue for other women's stories to be heard.

### Self-Analysis

Throughout my entire academic career as an English major at the University of Akron, I have written nothing but research papers. I have spent countless hours combing through books, published journals, articles, and other resources in order to form the perfect thesis and support a clear argument. I specifically chose courses that delve deep into the worlds of various types of complicated literature, including British Women Writers, Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, and New Poetry. I have honed in on my critical thinking skills and learned how to interpret a text using close reading. I knew there were courses out there that had to do with creative writing, but for whatever reason, I never showed any interest in them. So, I am sure that when I decided to write a creative nonfiction piece based on my own life experiences, it caught my project sponsor and readers off guard. I know I certainly surprised myself, because when it comes to my academic writing, I am always wary of allowing myself to get personal and deep. The truth is, I never thought of writing as a way of expressing my emotions, reflecting on the way I process things, or sharing *my* story with anyone else. I always marveled at how writers could so easily let the entire world in on their personal experiences. Letting people in is a scary thing, but letting people in on your writing is a whole different ball game.

I cannot recall what exactly first inspired me to decide to share my own story with the world. The Honors Project presented me with an opportunity to write about whatever I wanted, and as I thought about the possibilities, I knew that I wanted to write about something different for a change. I wanted to end my experience with the University of Akron on a good note, and leave behind a creation that really defined me and amplified the things I am passionate about. My faith is something that has hugely shaped me into who I am today, and I immediately considered writing about that aspect of my life. But I didn't just want to write a basic story about

how I came to faith or the things I have learned, I wanted to write about the hardships rarely spoken of growing up in the church and how I processed those struggles. However, I wondered if the world really needed to hear another “church girl’s” story, and whether mine was one worth sharing. I struggled for a long time with these doubts, until one day when I reconnected with some old church girlfriends and realized that they had been struggling with some of the same things too. The more we talked, the more I realized that many young women have been quietly experiencing similar issues in their church settings, and battling with their faith because of it. This gathering, which started as a simple meeting with a few old friends, ended up being the conversation that pushed me to unapologetically write my story.

When sharing with readers about my personal struggles as a woman growing up in the Slavic church, it was really important for me to be sensitive when speaking of the church I grew up in. I know that no organized religion is perfect. No church organization has all its kinks figured out. We live in a flawed world where many experience injustices at the hands of flawed humans, even those in leadership positions. Even church leaders with the holiest intentions often slip up and make mistakes. With this in mind, I wanted the goal of this paper to be about inspiring change, rather than bashing on the old church leadership for allowing unbiblical sermons, not acknowledging the value of women, and failing to invest in women. I wanted my writing to reflect my belief that things can turn around for the better; and change begins simply by starting a conversation, however tough that conversation may be. My hope is that I was able to successfully deliver my personal stories with graceful correction of false teachings in order to show that harmful behavior and teaching in the church *can* be corrected.

Completing this project has been a rewarding process, but it hasn’t been easy. One of my biggest struggles throughout the writing process has been practicing vulnerability in my writing.

Talking about my struggles is something that is very difficult for me, and writing about them is not any easier. Sharing about discouraging events and failures that I experienced in the church and describing the emotions that I felt at that time transported me back to those experiences all over again. While this was beneficial to me in many ways and allowed me to be grateful for the learning experience, recalling the hard times when I questioned my faith was painful and reminded me of a time where I internally struggled in a very real way.

I have learned that vulnerability is essential in writing, especially when retelling a personal story. Revealing that soft underbelly for all to see may seem like a sign of weakness, but it actually is very powerful in the way that it allows the reader to enter into the writer's world. When writers are honest in their writing and reveal their truths plainly, it is an extremely rewarding and liberating experience for both the writer and reader. Even if my personal story is not something all of my readers relate to, I hope that my vulnerability in how I expressed my thoughts, feelings, and experiences can inspire readers to also share their own. I believe the world needs more vulnerable and honest storytellers, whose stories will help connect and unite people regardless of background and upbringing.

Another major challenge I had while writing my story was making the biblical arguments. Everyone interprets the Bible differently, and I in no way claim to understand all the mysteries of the Bible, nor can I say that I am a professional at exegeting scripture. While I was writing about the various passages that were taken out of context to support a false idea or teaching, I experienced a degree of imposter's syndrome. *Who do you think you are, writing about the Bible as if you're some famous theologian?* I found myself asking. The truth is, these doubts that I experienced are somewhat true. I am not trained to exegete scripture and I do not have a degree in biblical studies, but I believe it is my duty as a woman of faith to interpret

biblical text to what I feel is the closest meaning, and correct false teaching to the best of my ability. My aim is not to prove that I am an expert at studying the Bible, but to show how different approaches to studying the Bible can produce wildly different arguments. The younger version of myself wishes that someone had come alongside me and showed me that there is more than one interpretation of the Bible, and that I don't have to take the preacher's word as truth if it makes me feel uncomfortable. In my writing of this project, I became that person my younger self needed, hoping that my story reaches another young woman in need of guidance or encouragement in hard times.

Through this project, I want young women to know they are essential to church function. I also want young women to know that even if they are rejected in the church setting, God doesn't reject them. Poor church leadership is not a reflection of God's character, and while other humans may fail them, God never will. As women, we have the ability to stand in solidarity and use our intellect to question church teaching when it fails to support what the Bible says to be true about us. I am confident that when I decide to publish or distribute my story, that it will accomplish its purpose in bringing light to those who need it. Much of this project is a reflection of what I needed to hear as a young woman questioning my faith, so my hope is that my story frees and empowers other women to equip themselves with the truth written in God's word. "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

### **Works Cited**

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