Little Women Study Guide

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Introduction

Without a doubt, *Little Women* remains Louisa May Alcott's best-known work. Its charm and innocence continue to engage readers, despite the fact that the social and familial reality depicted is very different from contemporary domestic life. Jo March is regarded as one of the most complete, self-possessed, and best-loved characters in children's literature. In fact, many boys find that they can relate to her almost as easily as girls can. While some present-day readers find Jo and her sisters too good to be realistic, according to the standards of Alcott's society, the March girls are flawed and vulnerable. The author dared to give her characters faults such as selfishness, vanity, temper, and bashfulness □qualities never seen before in such young characters.

Alcott wrote the book for girls with the sole aim of making money with its publication. After part one was published as a complete work, readers demanded to know more about the fates of the Marches. Alcott wrote *Good Wives* which is now published with part one as a complete work. Although the author wrote the books reluctantly, she earned the money she sought and found that her subsequent titles of all kinds were widely read. She never imagined, however, that *Little Women* would enchant generations of readers and become a classic of children's fiction. Critics often note that the book's particular appeal lies in its illustration of a uniquely American household and its individual members. Almost any reader can identify with at least one of the four girls. Readers are also drawn into the story by the colorful minor characters, the development of the March girls, and the attention to detail. The intricacies of education, housework, speech patterns, and manners are depicted with remarkable clarity, which better enables modern readers to envision and understand the world of the Marches.

Overview

Little Women is a well-told story that features suspense, humor, and engaging characters, as well as lessons about the importance of honesty, hard work, true love, and family unity. Brilliant in its portrayal of nineteenth-century American family life, the novel depicts a secure, placid world in which the home serves as the center for children's religious and moral education.

In Alcott's novel, the family—as the most important of social units—gives its members strength to overcome life's obstacles and teaches them the value of selflessness. Mrs. March, in particular, exemplifies the courage and perseverance necessary to hold the family together through war and death. Although the novel ends happily, it in many ways marks a departure from simplistic, romantic nineteenthcentury fiction for young adults. Alcott's characters change in response to serious life-events; their positive but realistic attitudes inspire readers to identify their own strengths in the face of pain and adversity.

Author Biography

Born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Louisa May Alcott is best remembered for her books about the March family, especially her children's masterpiece, *Little Women.* From the 1840s into the late 1860s, Alcott (under the pseudonyms A. M. Barnard and Flora Fairchild) also wrote sensational novels and thrillers for adults, most of which are no longer in print. Ironically, Alcott preferred her adult novels to the children's novels that account for her lasting fame.

The Alcotts lived in Concord, Massachusetts, with friends and neighbors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Alcott's youth was shaped by both the philosophical climate and the poverty in which she lived. Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, was a transcendentalist thinker and writer who refused to take work that was not related to education or philosophy. (Transcendentalism is a philosophy that holds that there is an ideal spiritual reality beyond material reality.) Unemployed, he committed to educating his four daughters, Anna (Meg in *Little Women*), Louisa (Jo), Elizabeth (Beth), and May (Amy). A radical pioneer in education, his experiments yielded an erratic but thorough education for his daughters. In 1843, he initiated a large-scale experiment known as Fruitlands, an effort to create a utopian society. Within a year, it failed, and while Alcott seemed flippant about the failure, this experience showed that Bronson could not be relied upon to support the family. Responsibility fell on Alcott's mother, Abba, who came from a respected Boston family. For thirty years, she did the housework and supported the family as a social worker.

Recognizing their daughter's talent, Bronson and Abba placed heavy expectations on her. She was a creative, difficult, and willful girl who was both moody and loyal. As a child, Alcott doted on Emerson and accompanied Thoreau on nature walks in the area of Walden Pond. Although surrounded by transcendentalists, she eventually rejected the philosophy as too abstract, using fiction to give voice to her objections. Still, Alcott's writing demonstrates her acceptance of the transcendentalist emphasis on self-reliance and independence.

Little Women contains many autobiographical elements, and critics are quick to note that the stormy character Jo is modeled after Alcott herself. This novel, along with the seven others featuring the March family, is cherished for its cheerful depiction of domestic life, its wholesomeness, and its ability to teach life lessons without the preachy quality found in other children's novels.

Alcott began *Little Women* in 1868, after the Civil War, in which she had served as a nurse during the winter of 1862-1863. She completed part one in only six weeks, and did not revise it as she was in the habit of doing for her adult fiction. It was published as a complete novel. When her public demanded to know more about the Marches, she wrote part two the following year. The novel alludes to the war, but does not include lengthy passages about its disastrous effects on American families and the country as a whole. Her contemporaries, after all, did not need such explanations. In her introduction to the novel, Ann Douglas observes, "*Little Women,* like its avowed model, *Pilgrim's*

Progress, is in part an allegory. Alcott was writing about a house in conflict but not divided, a family that offered an analogy and possibly a corrective to America."

By the time *Little Women* was published, Alcott had already become fiercely private. She dreaded interacting with her readers, preferring instead to stay home with her family. Her brief stint as a nurse left her health permanently weakened, a condition that got worse with age. She never married, and, as she grew older, she took very seriously her role as the provider and caretaker of her family. In the end, she was unhappy and unsatisfied with her life. She believed, as do many critics, that her talent was greater than the children's books for which she is so fondly remembered. Alcott died on March 6, 1888, in Boston.

About the Author

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where her father, Bronson Alcott—a transcendentalist philosopher and an educator—directed a school for small children. Bronson later founded the Temple School in Boston, but public opposition to his radical methods and a declining enrollment forced him to close the school and incur a large debt. Suffering financially, the Alcotts eventually moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where Bronson tried to support the family by farming a small piece of land. This endeavor, too, failed.

When Bronson became ill and suffered a nervous breakdown, Alcott assumed various domestic jobs, took in sewing, and ran a small school to provide financial support for her mother, Abigail, and the rest of the family. An advocate of women's rights, Alcott remained unmarried in an age when marriage and motherhood were considered the central events of a woman's life, and achieved such a degree of literary success that she was able to pay off the family's huge debt with royalties from her writing.

Her first book, Flower Fables, was a collection of fairy tales that Alcott originally narrated for a young neighbor:

Ralph Waldo Emerson's daughter, Ellen. Into these stories of fairies, elves, and small animals, Alcott wove observations about patience, duty, honor, and the power of love—themes that would recur in her subsequent writings.

During the 1860s Louisa wrote both sentimental stories and lurid, sensational thrillers, the latter genre proving particularly successful.

In 1867 Thomas Niles, an editor at the Roberts Brothers publishing house, suggested that Alcott write a novel for girls. With her father's encouragement, she began to write Little Women the following year. Part I of the novel, first published on October 1, 1868, portrays a year in the life of the March family but is essentially the story of Alcott's own family and its domestic adventures. Meg in the novel is Louisa's older sister Anna; Jo is Louisa herself; Beth and Amy are her younger sisters Elizabeth and May; Marmee is Louisa's mother, Abigail May; and Mr. March is Louisa's father, Bronson. She also memorializes her friend Ralph Waldo Emerson as the kind and beneficent Mr. Laurence.

The book was so popular that readers demanded more. Alcott began writing Part II of Little Women at the beginning of November, delivered the completed manuscript to her publishers on January 1, 1869, and saw it published on April 14, 1869. Entirely fictional, Part II relates the girls' experiences as they attend college, go abroad, and—with the exception of Beth, who dies—get married. Later published together in one volume, the two parts are read today as one continuous novel.

Alcott published several collections of short stories and two sequels to Little Women during the 1870s and 1880s.

When she died in Boston on March 6, 1888, two days after her father's death, she left behind a rich legacy for generations of readers to enjoy.

Plot Summary

Part One, Chapters 1-12

The March girls□Meg, 17, Jo, 16, Beth, 14, and Amy, 12□bemoan the fact that Christmas will be lacking because their poverty prevents them from having gifts and their father is away in the Civil War. Resolving to be better people, they decide to play Pilgrim's Progress, an ongoing makebelieve in which they follow the allegorical travels of Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* On Christmas day, the girls take their breakfast to the Hummels, a needy family nearby. Later, they discover that their wealthy neighbor Mr. Laurence has rewarded their kindness with flowers and treats.

Jo and Meg attend a dance at a neighbor's house, and while Meg dances, Jo hides behind a curtain. She finds Mr. Laurence's grandson, Theodore ("Laurie"), also hiding. They become quick friends, and when Meg twists her ankle, Laurie gives the girls a ride home.

With the holidays over, the girls resume their routines. Meg is a governess, Jo is the companion of feisty Aunt March (Mr. March's aunt), Beth studies at home, and Amy goes to school. Each girl has an artistic talent: Beth loves music, Jo writes stories and plays, Meg acts in Jo's plays, and Amy draws and sculpts clay.

The girls readily befriend Laurie and his grandfather and visit their luxurious house, enjoying the conservatory, the library, and the piano. The March girls even allow Laurie into their secret club. They set up a post office between the houses in which they can exchange letters, books, flowers, and packages.

Amy buys pickled limes for her friends at school, as this is the fashionable thing to do. When the teacher, who has forbidden students to bring limes to school, catches her with them, she is scolded, her hands are swatted, and she is made to stand in front of the class until recess. Humiliated, she goes home, where Mrs. March tells her she can study at home with Beth rather than return to school.

In a tantrum because Jo and Meg will not let her accompany them to the theater with Laurie, Amy burns the book Jo has been writing. Jo is furious and unforgiving until Amy follows her to ice skate with Laurie and falls through the ice because Jo did not caution her. Jo is ashamed and forgives her sister while resolving to control her anger.

Meg visits her wealthy friend, Annie Moffat, and feels uncomfortable in her shabby clothes. Her friends dress her up for a dance and she soon feels foolish for being treated like a doll.

While Aunt March and Meg's employers are away, the girls say how much they would like to do nothing but play. To teach them a lesson, Marmee agrees to free them of all chores for one week. One disaster after another ensues, and the girls learn the value of work.

Laurie hosts a picnic across the river and invites the girls to join him and his friends. They eat, talk, and play games, and it becomes apparent that Mr. Brooke, Laurie's tutor, has eyes for Meg.

Part One, Chapters 13-23

Jo submits stories to a local newspaper, and the family is ecstatic when they are published. Marmee receives a telegram with the news that her husband is ill and she should come right away. Mr. Laurence sends Mr. Brooke to accompany her on the trip, and the girls worry and promise to write often. Because Marmee is faced with borrowing money, Jo sells her beautiful hair for twenty-five dollars. While Marmee is away, Beth tries to get the other girls to visit the Hummels. When Beth contracts scarlet fever from the sick Hummel baby, the other March girls are ashamed of their selfishness. To protect her from the disease, Amy is sent to live with Aunt March until Beth recovers, and the old woman is quite taken with the young girl. When Beth's condition worsens, they send for Marmee, but the fever breaks just before she arrives. All are relieved and happy to be reunited.

Jo tells Marmee that Mr. Brooke is in love with Meg. Marmee explains that on the trip, Mr. Brooke told her and Mr. March that he loved Meg and hoped to marry her. They said he could make plans, but that Meg was too young to be engaged. When Laurie suspects that Jo knows something about the couple that she will not tell, he plays a cruel joke. He sends Meg letters signed with Mr. Brooke's name. When he is caught, he is regretful and Meg is embarrassed.

Christmas arrives again and Laurie surprises the Marches by bringing Mr. March home.

Mr. Brooke visits Meg and tells her that he loves her and hopes she can learn to feel the same way. Playing games, she acts very cruelly toward him until Aunt March interrupts and Mr. Brooke leaves. Aunt March tells Meg that Meg can do better than Mr. Brooke, and that if she marries him, she will be out of her aunt's will. Indignant, Meg says she can marry whomever she pleases and that Mr. Brooke is a fine man. Aunt March leaves, and Mr. Brooke returns, having overheard everything. The couple agrees to marry, although they will have to wait three years for Meg to grow older and Mr. Brooke to make living arrangements.

Part Two, Chapters 24-35

Three years have passed, and Meg prepares for her wedding. The war is over, and Mr. March is a minister. Aunt March has released Jo from her duty and instead employs Amy to be her companion, paying her with expensive art lessons. Beth is still a homebody, and her health is frail since her fever. Jo sells stories and enjoys life as a writer, feeling quite independent. She enters a contest and wins $100, and the family is very impressed with the sensational story. Papa commends his daughter, adding that he thinks she can do even better. When Jo finishes her novel, she submits it for publication but is advised that it requires major revisions. Torn between her commitment to the

novel as it is and wanting to get it published, she decides to go ahead and "chop it up." Reviews are mixed, and Jo regrets her compromise, but she learns about the rigors and trials of being a novelist.

Resigned to the upcoming marriage, Aunt March's stance has softened, and she purchases beautiful linens for the couple's new home. Laurie tells Jo she will be the next to marry, but she responds that she has no interest in such things. On the day of the wedding, family and a few friends gather at the March home for a lovely, simple wedding.

Meg soon finds that married life is satisfying, if not a fairy tale. She has twins, a boy and a girl named Demi and Daisy.

Aunt Carrol plans a trip to Europe, and Aunt March pays for Amy to go along so she can study art. Jo decides to go to New York, where she will teach at a boarding house. There, she meets Professor Bhaer, a charming, poor, German man. When Jo returns home in the summer, Laurie tells her he loves her and wants to marry her. She turns down his proposal, which devastates him. A few weeks later, Mr. Laurence leaves for Europe and Laurie decides to accompany him.

Part Two, Chapters 36-47

Beth's health has been declining steadily over the years, and now she dies peacefully.

In Europe, Laurie makes a last effort to change Jo's mind by correspondence. When she again declines, he begins to correspond with Amy, whom he has seen in his travels. The news of Beth's death sends Laurie to find Amy at once, and romance blooms.

Amy and Laurie return from Europe married, and Jo is surprised but delighted for the union of her little sister and best friend. Professor Bhaer becomes a regular visitor to the March home. One day, he tells Jo he loves her and she kisses him. Aunt March has died and left a country home, Plumfield, to Jo. When she and Bhaer marry, they open a boys' school there.

The family has expanded with husbands and children, but the girls find it as happy as when it was just the four of them, Marmee, and Papa.

Part 1: Chapter 1

Part 1: Chapter 1 Summary

Louisa May Alcott's best-known book opens with the four main characters feeling somewhat sorry for themselves. Sisters Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March sit around the fireplace in their small but comfortable home discussing how bleak Christmas will seem with no presents and their father away at war. The sisters discuss how they ought to spend their own dollars to buy small presents for themselves. The idea that they deserve Christmas presents leads to each girl complaining about the hardships of her daily life.

Alcott briefly describes the physical attributes of each sister:

¬ Meg is a pretty sixteen year old with fair skin and soft brown hair.

¬ Jo, fifteen, is tall with large hands and feet. She is somewhat gangly and clumsy. Alcott describes her as a colt. Jo has long, thick brown hair.

¬ Beth, who is thirteen, is shy and quiet. She has rosy cheeks and smooth hair.

¬ Amy is the youngest and most beautiful sister. She has blond curls and striking blue eyes.

The mood in the room changes as the clock strikes six in the evening and signals the arrival of Marmee, the girl's beloved mother. As the sisters prepare for Marmee, a gentle Beth says she will spend her dollar to buy new slippers for her mother. The sisters agree to buy their mother Christmas gifts rather than spend their money on themselves.

Marmee has a letter from Mr. March, who is a chaplain with the Union Army during the Civil War. The girls gather around their mother as she reads the message to his daughters:

"Give them all my dear love and a kiss…A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that when I come back home I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

The letter touches the little family, and the girls recall lessons they have learned from acting out scenes from their favorite book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The sisters vow to live out these lessons in real life and make their father proud.

Part 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

Little Women is a semi-autobiographical story. Jo, the protagonist, is based on author Louisa May Alcott, though Alcott incorporates parts of her own life in to each of the

March girls. The March home is modeled after Orchard House, the Alcott family home in Concord, Massachusetts.

On the first page, Alcott begins the discussion of poverty, which will be one of the story's main themes. A second theme, the role of women, is also introduced as we see the March sisters' concern with the appropriate speech, behavior and even posture of women.

When Alcott wrote Part I of Little Women in 1868, didactic books that taught a moral lesson where popular, particularly in Puritan New England. Alcott's moral lessons are not stated overtly, but are taught through the lives and interactions of her four heroines. Two lessons that emerge in Chapter 1 are generosity and the value of hard work. In his letter home, Mr. March exhorts his daughters to be industrious and to become little women he can be proud of.

Throughout the book, the March sisters refer often to *The Pilgrim's Progress,* an allegory by John Bunyan that describes the life journey of a Christian. Alcott uses these references to provide context for the reader to understand the motivations and values of the characters.

Part 1: Chapter 2

Part 1: Chapter 2 Summary

Christmas morning arrives, and each March girl finds a small book under her pillow. Each book's cover is a different color. When the sisters go downstairs for Christmas breakfast, they discover that Marmee has left to assist a beggar. The reader then meets Hannah, the March's long-time domestic servant.

Marmee returns home and tells her daughters about the Hummels, a poor family with six children and no food. The girls agree to give their Christmas breakfast to the family, then gamely load up their holiday food and carry it down the road. Later in the day, the sisters present Marmee with the small gifts they've purchased for her.

On Christmas evening, the March girls perform a play, followed by an extravagant Christmas dinner. The dinner is a surprise gift from the March's wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence, who was touched when he heard that his young neighbor girls had given their Christmas breakfast away to a family in need.

Part 1: Chapter 2 Analysis

The theme of poverty is explored more deeply in Chapter 2. Though the March girls lamented their poverty in Chapter 1, they quickly discover that there are those who live in far worse conditions.

The Christian virtue of loving your neighbor as yourself is played out as the March girls share with the Hummels and later, when wealthy Mr. Laurence shares with the March family. Another lesson that can be garnered from the action in Chapter 2 is, "give and it will be given to you."

The book that each sister finds under her pillow on Christmas morning is presumably a copy of *The Pilgrims Progress*, though it could be a small Bible. The girls will use these small books throughout their lives.

The creativity of the March sisters is revealed as they not only perform a play, but also create a lovely Christmas table and gifts for Marmee despite their humble means.

The mention of Mr. Laurence's grandson foreshadows the introduction of one of the book's main characters.

Part 1: Chapter 3

Part 1: Chapter 3 Summary

The March home is filled with excitement, as Meg and Jo have been invited to a New Year's Eve dance at the Gardiner's. All four girls become involved with helping Jo and Meg dress in the best of their shabby gowns and too-tight shoes.

When the girls arrive at the party, Jo is clearly ill at ease. She stands stiffly on the sidelines longing to join a group of young men in a conversation about skating. She eventually retreats into an alcove to avoid being asked to dance and exposing a burn on the back of her dress. In the alcove she finds Mr. Laurence's grandson, who is also avoiding the crowd.

At first the interactions are stiff and formal, but soon Jo and Laurie (Theodore Laurence's nickname) find themselves absorbed in easy conversation. Jo wants to hear all about Laurie's experiences studying abroad. When Laurie asks Jo to dance a polka, she confides in him about the burn on her dress. Laurie shows her a vacant hall where they can dance without exposing Jo to ridicule.

After Meg twists her ankle dancing, Jo introduces her to Laurie. The three share refreshments and laughter as Meg rests her foot in a side room. At the end of the evening, Laurie gives his neighbors a ride home in his carriage.

Part 1: Chapter 3 Analysis

We begin to see some of the differences in the March sisters. Meg is more concerned with social standing and appearance than Jo. She coaches Jo in etiquette and begs her not to do anything embarrassing. Not having pretty gloves and silk gowns is painful for Meg, whose friends Sallie Gardiner and Annie Moffat both come from wealthier families.

Class and gender differences seem of little consequence to Jo and her new friend Laurie. They are able to talk easily and enjoy each other's company. We begin to see that Jo often defies conventional female stereotypes. She is a tomboy who prefers the conversations and company of boys to more feminine pursuits. Both sisters will face their own struggles as they discover who they are and how to fit into society while remaining true to themselves.

The introduction of Laurie is a key point in the story. Much of the rest of the book will revolve around the relationship between the Laurence boy and Jo March.

Part 1: Chapter 4

Part 1: Chapter 4 Summary

The holidays are over, and it's back to the drudgery of everyday life. Both Meg and Jo work to contribute to the upkeep of the household. Meg is a governess and Jo is a companion and helper for her elderly Aunt March. Beth, who is too timid to attend school, helps Hannah and Marmee at home while Amy attends school.

Though the sisters find their daily activities to be somewhat of a burden, they try to cheer each other with stories at dinnertime. Beth tells about seeing Mr. Laurence buy a large fish for a poor woman at the market. Marmee tells a tale of a man she met who had sent four boys off to the war. Two had been killed, one was a prisoner and one was ill, yet the man was glad to sacrifice for his country.

Part 1: Chapter 4 Analysis

Tales of the generosity of others give the girls perspective on their own lives and again instruct the reader on the virtue of unselfishness. One reason Alcott's characters have remained popular is that readers can easily relate to the character's struggles with envy and pride.

More of the personality of each sister is revealed as we see her daily life. Meg envies the wealth of the family she works for and Jo, an avid reader, enjoys the library at Aunt March's. Amy, with eye for beauty, longs for beautiful clothes and sketches the beauty she sees around her.

Part 1: Chapter 5

Part 1: Chapter 5 Summary

Jo has not seen her new friend Laurie since the dance. On a snowy afternoon after she sees Mr. Laurence leave his home, Jo shovels a patch through the hedge and tosses a snowball up to Laurie's window. He looks out and invites her in.

Having been confined inside with a cold, Laurie confesses that he is bored and lonely in the big house. Jo convinces him to visit the March home soon. Laurie gives Jo a tour of the Laurence house. He leaves her alone in the library for a few moments. In the meantime, she studies a portrait of Mr. Laurence and says aloud, "…he's got kind eyes though his mouth is grim, and he looks as if he has a tremendous will. He isn't as handsome as my grandfather, but I like him."

She is embarrassed when she realizes that Mr. Laurence has entered the room and had heard her comments. The gentleman is impressed with Jo's spunk and honesty and he likes the spark of life she brings to Laurie. Before returning home, Jo listens to Laurie play the grand piano. She notices that something about the music upsets the elder Mr. Laurence.

Part 1: Chapter 5 Analysis

Jo's courageous nature is revealed as she ventures next door to see the Laurence boy. Though Mr. Laurence apparently knew Mrs. March's father, the two neighbors have never been on visiting terms. Jo sets out to rectify this situation.

Jo is the sister least bothered by class differences or social mores. She finds the Laurence home beautiful and filled with wonderful things, but not intimidating. The fact that Laurie is rich and she is poor never seems to stand in the way of their friendship.

We also see Jo's honest nature. When Mr. Laurence overhears her straightforward critique, she does not attempt to deny or alter her words. Her honesty endears her to the older gentleman.

Alcott gives us a clue into Laurie's past at the end of the chapter when Mr. Laurence seems uncomfortable when his grandson plays the piano.

Part 1: Chapter 6

Part 1: Chapter 6 Summary

Jo's act of neighborliness opens a new relationship between the March and Laurence families. The girls overcome their pride and fear and become frequent guests in the Laurence home and on its grounds.

It takes shy Beth longer than the others to feel comfortable at her neighbor's. Mr. Laurence learns of Beth's fears and devises a way to make her feel welcome. He visits the March home and tells the girls he wishes someone would come and play the grand piano, which has been neglected. Beth cannot refuse the invitation and begins to make daily forays to the Laurence parlor.

To thank Mr. Laurence for his kindness, Beth makes him a pair of slippers. In return, Mr. Laurence gives her a baby piano that belonged to his granddaughter before she died. Beth immediately goes next door to thank him. His gift and her expression of gratitude give the pair a special bond.

Part 1: Chapter 6 Analysis

The chapter begins with imagery from *The Pilgrim's Progress.* The March sisters call the Laurence home "the palace beautiful," and Alcott talks about the lions, or obstacles, that girls must face in order to go there.

Both Mr. Laurence and Beth must make a deliberate effort to become friends. Mr. Laurence must look past the pain of remembering his young granddaughter and make room for a new little girl in his life. Beth must overcome her timidity in general, and fear of Mr. Laurence in particular. In the end, the reward is worth the risk. This is another of the lessons taught through *Little Women.*

Part 1: Chapter 7

Part 1: Chapter 7 Summary

Amy's pride takes a severe blow when she literally has her hand slapped at school. It is popular among Amy's friends to share pickled limes. The girls take turns bringing the banned treats to school and surreptitiously share them with friends.

Amy feels she owes a "debt of honor" because she had received many limes but never given any. Meg gives Amy a quarter to buy limes. When word spreads that Amy has limes in her desk, girls begin to treat her with special kindness. One girl, Jenny Snow, offers to help Amy with her math. Amy remembers that Jenny has often teased her about not bringing limes. Amy makes it clear to Jenny that she doesn't need to be nice to her because she won't be getting any of Amy's treats.

The scorned Jenny tattles on Amy. The schoolmaster, who had promised to publicly discipline anyone who brings limes to school, calls Amy to his desk. He makes her throw the limes out the window. He then spanks her hands and makes her stand before the class. Though Amy remains stoic throughout the punishment, as soon as recess arrives she leaves school.

Later that day, Jo delivers a note from Mrs. March to the schoolmaster. Mrs. March does not approve of corporal punishment (punishment inflicted on a person's body), especially for girls. She allows Amy to do her lessons at home with Beth.

Though Mrs. March is upset with the schoolteacher, she makes it clear to Amy that she deserved punishment and that she needs to address her pride and conceit. "The great charm of all power is modesty," she tells Amy.

Part 1: Chapter 7 Analysis

"Pride goes before the fall" could sum up the lesson of Chapter 7. Amy learns a painful but powerful lesson about humility. Though Marmee does not condone of the way the lesson was taught, she does not attempt to protect her daughter from the consequences of her actions. Near the end of the chapter, Amy's pride is contrasted with both Beth and Laurie's humility to further bring home the moral lesson of the chapter.

It is telling that Amy went to Meg about her lime debt. Amy knew that her eldest sister would understand her need to fit in and retain her place in her small society.

Part 1: Chapter 8

Part 1: Chapter 8 Summary

The chapter opens with Meg and Jo preparing to attend a play with Laurie. Amy begs to go along. Meg is willing but Jo resolutely refuses to include her younger sister. As the older girls leave, Amy ominously tells Jo that she will be sorry.

Indeed she is. To get back at her sister, Amy burns a manuscript Jo has been working on for several years. Jo hoped to publish the collection of fairy tales. When Jo discovers what her sister has done, she seethes with anger and vows never to forgive Amy. She doesn't soften even when Marmee reminds her not to let the sun go down on her anger.

The next day, Laurie and Jo head to the nearby river to skate. Amy follows them, intending to talk to Jo when she is in a better mood. Laurie tests the ice and calls back to Jo that the middle of the river isn't safe, but Amy doesn't hear the warning. Just as Jo is about to round a bend, she looks back and sees Amy fall through the ice.

Laurie and Jo are able to pull Amy from the ice and get her home, and Jo is shaken by the incident. Once Amy is asleep, Marmee consoles Jo by telling her about her own struggles with anger.

When Amy wakes briefly from her sleep, the sister's embrace in a forgiving hug.

Part 1: Chapter 8 Analysis

This is the most action-packed chapter of Alcott's sentimental novel. Some lessons are harder to learn than others, and the lesson of forgiveness is costly for both Jo and Amy.

Amy chooses a hurtful, irrevocable act to punish Jo for leaving her out of a fun evening. Later, Amy regrets her action. Jo chooses to hold a grudge against Amy. She is so ready to make Amy pay that she doesn't pass on Laurie's warning about thin ice.

Both girls are shocked by their own actions. Alcott explores how dark the human heart can be and how each of us must fight to overcome our natural inclinations toward anger and revenge. Marmee, who confesses that she struggles with anger, is the character who shows us that there is hope of succeeding.

Part 1: Chapter 9

Part 1: Chapter 9 Summary

Meg has been invited to spend two weeks with Annie Moffat. The chapter opens with all of the sisters helping Meg prepare for the occasion. As the days at the Moffat's pass with shopping and social events, Meg becomes increasingly envious of the fine clothes and accessories the other girls have. When flowers arrive from Laurie, the other girls assume that Mrs. March is trying to arrange a match between Meg and the wealthy young Laurence boy.

The other girls feel sorry for Meg and offer to dress her properly for a big party. Mrs. Moffat invites Laurie to attend the party as a compliment to Meg. Laurie barely recognizes Meg in all her "fuss and feathers" and makes it clear he likes the simple Meg much better. He also reminds Meg that her mother would disapprove of her flirting and champagne drinking.

When Meg returns home, she relishes the peacefulness of the March house and says, "Home is a nice place, though it isn't splendid." After Beth and Amy are in bed, Meg confesses to her mother and Jo about her behavior. She also tells them what people were saying about Mrs. March's plans to make a wealthy match for her daughter. Marmee assures Meg and Jo that her only plans are to have her daughters live happy and respectful lives.

Part 1: Chapter 9 Analysis

Meg gets to taste the life she often dreams about and discovers it is not as sweet as she imagined. She enjoys the chance to dress in fine clothes and be made up in the French style, but finds is the scene uncomfortable. She learns important lessons about pride and humility.

At the end of the chapter Marmee summarizes her hopes for her daughters and makes a strong statement on the role of women:

"…better to be happy old maids than unhappy wives. Your father and I both trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives."

When Alcott wrote her novel in the late 1860s, the role of women in society was beginning to evolve. Mrs. March's statement reflects Alcott's view that women need not be defined solely by their role as someone's wife or someone's mother.

Part 1: Chapter 10

Part 1: Chapter 10 Summary

The March girls create their own secret society with members based on characters from Charles Dickens' novel *The Pickwick Papers.* For a year the club meets secretly in the garret, or attic, or the March house. One evening, Jo fools her sisters by hiding Laurie in a closet during a meeting. She proposes that the club elect a new member and the girls agree to add Laurie, who surprises them by stepping out of the closet.

As a gesture of goodwill to the club, the newest member sets up a post office box at the corner of the hedge where their properties meet. This old birdhouse becomes a means of passing messages and packages back and forth between the Laurence and March homes.

Part 1: Chapter 10 Analysis

This short chapter shows the March girls creativity in amusing themselves. They revel in playing the roles of the adventurous male characters from *The Pickwick Papers.*

This also shows their yearning, especially Jo's, for breaking free of traditional gender stereotypes.

The post office box that Laurie sets up becomes an important means of communication between the families. At the end of Chapter 10, Alcott uses a bit of foreshadowing when she says that many love letters would pass through that box in the years ahead.

Part 1: Chapter 11

Part 1: Chapter 11 Summary

Summer arrives, and Jo and Meg have some time off from their jobs. They are ready for a break and decide to sleep in, read and enjoy themselves. Amy and Beth beg for time off from their studies. Mrs. March agrees to a one-week experiment during which the girls may skip their chores and do as they please. The days seem unusually long and the sisters find they are short-tempered with each other. Though the house is messy and the canary has died from neglect, the girls insist to Marmee that the experiment is going well.

At the end of the week, Mrs. March gives Hannah the day off and decides to take a vacation day herself. When the girls wake up, there is no breakfast. Meg and Jo make a breakfast that consists of scorched eggs and bitter tea. Despite the breakfast failure, Jo decides that she will not only cook dinner, but also invite guests to share it. She underestimates the cooking and organizational skills needed to put together a meal and the party is a disaster. Jo does have the grace to laugh at her shortcomings and the party ends on a light note.

When Marmee returns from her one-day holiday and asks the girls if they would like to extend the experiment another week, they all say, "No!"

Part 1: Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter explores the Puritan idea that a productive life is a happy life. Leisure appeals to the March girls, but at the end of one week sans responsibility, they readily agree with Marmee's assessment that life is more pleasant when each girl pitches in to serve the others. Jo says bluntly, "Leisure doesn't pay." Her statement neatly sums up the moral lesson of Chapter 11.

Part 1: Chapter 12

Part 1: Chapter 12 Summary

Jo receives three items in the daily mail from the Laurence-March post office. The first is a large hat that Laurie has sent as a bit of joke. The second is a letter from Marmee praising Jo for her progress in controlling her anger. The third is an invitation to all the March girls to join Laurie and some friends from England for a day of outdoor fun on Longmeadow.

The group of revelers includes Ned Moffat, Sally Gardiner, Mr. Brooke and the four Vaughn siblings from England. During a game of croquet, Fred Vaughn cheats and Jo confronts him about it and he denies his actions. Jo bites her tongue and holds her temper. Later, she is able to win the game for her side.

The young people enjoy a pleasant afternoon of games and reading. Mr. Brooke, Laurie's tutor, helps Meg read from a German novel. During a game of Truth, Fred confesses to his cheating and all is forgiven.

Part 1: Chapter 12 Analysis

In Chapter 12, we are reminded of Jo's resolution to work on her temper. (See Chapter 8.) A note from Marmee praises her progress. At the picnic, both Meg and Laurie praise Jo for keeping her temper in check. Alcott is gently teaching her readers that, with diligence, character flaws can be corrected.

Alcott is laying the groundwork for budding relationships and provides several clues into the future for the reader. First, Meg leaves her gloves at the Laurence house, but only one is returned to her through the post office. Second, we are introduced to two young men who are both interested in Meg, Ned Moffat and Mr. Brooke. She seems unaware of Mr. Brooke's interest, though she enjoys his help with her German.

During a game of Truth, Laurie honestly answers two questions about the girls. He reveals that he believes Meg is the prettiest and Jo is the one he likes best.

Part 1: Chapter 13

Part 1: Chapter 13 Summary

Jo sneaks out of a window to go on a mysterious errand. Laurie happens to see her on a busy street and watches as she quickly enters and exits a building several times. She eventually remains in the building about ten minutes. When she comes back out to the street, Laurie catches up to her. She seems embarrassed to see him.

Laurie offers to tell her a secret if she will tell him what she's been up to. She eventually reveals that she has submitted two short stories to a newspaper editor who is considering them for publication. Laurie applauds her efforts.

Laurie tells Jo he has discovered that Mr. Brooke is carrying Meg's glove around in his pocket. While Laurie finds this gesture romantic, Jo declares it disgusting. In fact, the news unsettles her so much that she is rude to Mr. Brooke and very protective of Meg for the next several days.

Two weeks later, one of Jo's stories, "The Rival Painters," is printed in *The Spread Eagle.* Everyone celebrates Jo's success, and Laurie predicts much more of Jo's writing is to come.

Part 1: Chapter 13 Analysis

In Chapter 13, the reader sees the autobiographical aspect of *Little Women.* The incident of Jo submitting stories to a newspaper editor for publication could be taken from Alcott's own early writing experience.

We see Jo's (and perhaps Alcott's) struggle with gender issues in this chapter. She wants to be independent and make her own way—something new for women in that day. At the same time, she remains fiercely protective of and loyal to her family and resents anything that might take one of the sisters away from the nest. She is suspicious of Mr. Brooke and fears he may woo Meg away from the family.

We also see Jo's inclination to behave more like a boy than a young woman. She races down the hill with Laurie and later chases him around the yard. These actions are considered inappropriate for women in her day. She also expresses the wish that she could be a horse and run free all day long. She is chaffing against the constraints that society places on her as a woman.

Part 1: Chapter 14

Part 1: Chapter 14 Summary

The usual tranquility of the March home is interrupted by the arrival of a telegram stating Mr. March is very ill. Arrangements are quickly made for Mrs. March to travel to the hospital in Washington, D.C. Mr. Laurence offers Mr. Brooke as an escort for the trip. Jo sells her long, beautiful hair to help raise money for the trip. Before bed that night, the March women gather around the piano and sing their father's favorite hymn.

Marmee and Mr. Brooke leave early the next morning for Washington. Jo declares that the motto for those who remain behind shall be, "Hope and keep busy." The initial news from Washington is encouraging. Though Mr. March is very ill, having his wife with him is helping his recovery.

Part 1: Chapter 14 Analysis

The character of the March girls will be tested as the family faces uncertainty and hardship. Mr. March's illness causes the family to draw together and rely on each other's strength. Jo shows both her generosity and her impetuousness by selling her hair. Later that night, she weeps for the loss of her locks and for her own selfishness. Again, Alcott is gently teaching a lesson in a manner that draws the reader in. Like Jo, we are often reluctant to give up what we treasure, even when it will benefit others.

The idea of Mr. March falling ill during the war is drawn from Alcott's own life. She contracted pneumonia and became gravely ill while working as a nurse during the Civil War.

Part 1: Chapter 15

Part 1: Chapter 15 Summary

After the first few days of Marmee's absence, the girls begin to fall back into their old, selfish ways. Beth begs her sisters to help her care for the poor Hummel family, but each sister is too busy or too tired to visit. Beth alone honors her mother's wish that the girls check in on the family. The Hummel baby contracts Scarlet fever and dies in Beth's arms.

When Beth herself becomes ill, the other sisters feel great remorse. Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March. Meg and Jo, who have both had mild cases of Scarlet fever, hover over their ill sister and Hannah summons a doctor.

Beth is much sicker than her sisters realize. Hannah does not allow the girls to mention the illness in letters to Mrs. March. As Beth grows weaker, a letter arrives from Washington saying Mr. March had suffered a relapse. Eventually, the doctor says that Mrs. March should be called home. Laurie, who sensed that things were getting worse, had already sent word to Mr. Brooke that Mrs. March should return at once. She is home before the next morning.

During the long night of waiting, the fever breaks. At first, Meg and Jo fear Beth is dead, for her sleep is now deep and restful. They break down in tears when the doctor confirms that the worst is over.

Part 1: Chapter 15 Analysis

Louisa Mae Alcott's own younger sister, Lizzie, died of Scarlet fever. In Chapter 15, Alcott explores the guilt and regret that family members often feel when faced with illness and death.

Part 1: Chapter 16

Part 1: Chapter 16 Summary

Amy has been exiled to Aunt March's so she will not contract illness. The elderly woman tries to teach her young niece proper etiquette. She keeps Amy busy by polishing silver, dusting furniture, caring for her pets and doing lessons. Amy feels very sorry for herself.

Aunt March's maid, Esther, takes a liking to Amy. When the older woman is resting, Esther allows the girl to look at the beautiful things in the house as well as at Aunt March's jewelry. Amy covets the pretty things. When she learns that she and her sisters will inherit the jewelry after Aunt March dies, Amy decides she likes the old woman after all.

Esther encourages Amy to spend time in meditation and prayer each day and even helps Amy set up a small alter in a closet. She offers Amy a rosary, which Amy hangs on the wall but does not use for prayers.

As Amy reflects on her life, she decides she ought to write a will. Esther helps her write a document disposing of her earthly possessions. Amy shows the will to Laurie, who visits her daily. He keeps a straight face as he reads the document that contains numerous misspellings. He dutifully signs his name as a witness.

After Laurie tells Amy that Beth's life truly is in danger, she realizes that even a thousand pieces of jewelry could never replace her sister.

Part 1: Chapter 16 Analysis

Amy's greatest struggles have to do with her desire for material things. She takes a much greater liking to Aunt March when she realizes the elderly woman will leave her jewelry to the March girls. She also devotes a great deal of time to thinking through her possessions and what will happen to them if she dies. All of her thoughts of material things are put into perspective, however, when she realizes she might lose her sister.

The lesson that Alcott teaches here is that material things, no matter how valuable, cannot replace relationships.

Laurie's visits to Amy and their earnest discussions foreshadow developments in Part II.

Part 1: Chapter 17

Part 1: Chapter 17 Summary

A few days later, Mrs. March visits Beth, who shows her mother the little closet chapel. Marmee is pleased that Amy is learning to seek help daily from God. Amy is wearing a turquoise ring, which Aunt March has recently given her. At first, Marmee objects, saying Amy is too young to wear the ring. Amy says she wishes to wear the ring to remind her not to be vain or selfish.

Jo tells Marmee about the glove of Meg's that Mr. Brooke carries in his pocket. During their time in Washington, Mr. and Mrs. March have grown fond of Mr. Brooke, or John as they call him. They are aware that he loves Meg and would like to court her. Jo is extremely upset by the prospect and begs her mother to forbid it. Mrs. March says that while Meg is very young (only 17), if she and John truly care for each other they will be willing to wait to marry until Meg is 20. Mrs. March asks Jo not to tell Meg of John's intentions.

Part 1: Chapter 17 Analysis

Like Alcott's own mother, Mrs. March shows great trust in her daughters and encourages their individuality. She is willing to let Amy wear her ring, though she does not put much hope in the idea that it will keep Amy from becoming vain.

Mrs. March is also willing to let her daughters grow up and choose their own paths. As she and Jo discuss Meg's future, Marmee is clear that she wants her daughters to be old enough to make their own decisions before they commit themselves to a man. This is quite a progressive attitude for the 1860s.

Many of Alcott's own feelings regarding family may be expressed through Jo. Alcott never married, and was very close to her mother and her sisters throughout her life.

Part 1: Chapter 18

Part 1: Chapter 18 Summary

It doesn't take long for Laurie to realize that Jo has a secret of some sort, and he is desperate to drag it out of her. He is able to learn that the secret involves Meg and Mr. Brooke, and decides to play a prank to get back at Jo for not sharing her secret.

Laurie writes a note allegedly from Mr. Brooke to Meg. Meg responds and Laurie sends another in the name of Mr. Brooke. When this note arrives, Meg recognizes the prank and is deeply embarrassed. Mrs. March seeks to sort the whole mess out and confronts Laurie, who apologizes sincerely to both girls. Because of the prank, Meg learns of Mr. Brooke's intentions.

Part 1: Chapter 18 Analysis

This chapter reminds us again of the differences in the sisters. Meg is very concerned with social status and the perceptions of other people. She is gravely concerned that she has perhaps made a terrible blunder with Mr. Brooke. When she discovers the whole thing is a prank, it is not easy for her to forgive and forget.

Part 1: Chapter 19

Part 1: Chapter 19 Summary

The action of the story rises as the March family prepares to celebrate Christmas. The family is so grateful for the recoveries of Beth and Mr. March that the holiday is void of the self-pity of the previous Christmas. The girls happily plan ways to surprise each other on Christmas Day.

The girls receive many of the gifts they have longed for. Jo receives the book she had thought to buy herself a year ago, Meg gets her first silk dress and Amy receives a picture like the one she had in her prayer closet at Aunt March's. The best gift of all is the surprise arrival of their father.

Mr. Brooke and Mr. March enter to such excitement that John "accidentally" kisses Meg in the confusion. After a wonderful Christmas dinner, Mr. March details the progress he sees in each of his little pilgrims. The wonderful day ends with Beth singing a song she has composed for father.

Part 1: Chapter 19 Analysis

Alcott compares and contrasts the approaching Christmas with the one before. The March girls are much more mature and selfless in their thoughts and preparations, and the hardships of the year have honed their character.

The value of virtue is extolled. Not only do the girls advance in their pilgrimage, they also gain some of the material things they so desired.

In the climax of Part I, Mr. March returns and finds that his wishes from Chapter 1 have been fulfilled. He is "fonder and prouder than ever" of his little women.

Part 1: Chapter 20

Part 1: Chapter 20 Summary

In the declining action of Part I, Alcott settles the question of what will become of Meg and Mr. Brooke. As the chapter opens, everyone seems to be waiting for something to happen. Jo is on edge, Mr. and Mrs. March seem anxious and Meg is absentminded.

Jo encourages her sister to quickly reject Mr. Brooke's proposal, when and if it comes. Meg assures her she plans to tell Mr. Brooke that she is too young to make any plans and wishes to remain friends.

When Mr. Brooke comes to the March house to retrieve his umbrella, he takes the opportunity to speak to Meg. She does not make the speech she planned, but finds herself rather taken in – until she detects a hint of smugness. The idea that Mr. Brooke believes her affection for him is a foregone conclusion irks Meg. Just as she is about to send John away, Aunt March arrives.

Aunt March realizes that she has interrupted an important conversation. With Mr. Brooke out of the room but within earshot, Aunt March forbids Meg from making such a poor match. Meg rises to Mr. Brooke's defense and declares her devotion to him and her intention to marry whomever she pleases, even if it means losing out on Aunt March's money.

When Aunt March realizes she cannot change Meg's mind, she leaves in a huff. John reappears and thanks Meg for defending him and for giving him the chance to win her love.

When Jo returns to the parlor, she expects to find her sister alone after having rejected Mr. Brooke. Instead, she is stunned to find Meg sitting on Mr. Brooke's knee. Part I ends with the family and their neighbors gathered in the parlor celebrating Meg and John's plans. Despite her initial misgivings, Jo feels a deep satisfaction as she looks around the room at her family and friends.

Part 1: Chapter 20 Analysis

In this final chapter of Part I, Jo wrestles with competing desires for her sister. She is bothered by the thought of Meg becoming engaged to Mr. Brooke. The umbrella is symbolic of the traditional covering and protection men provided for women. Jo is not anxious for her sister to quickly bind herself to a man, nor does she want her sister to leave their home. In short, Jo is not sure what she wishes for Meg, but in the end, she finds her sister's choice satisfactory.

As more opportunities were becoming available to women, Alcott seems to say in the final paragraph that traditional roles are still satisfactory options for those who choose them.

Part 2: Chapter 21

Part 2: Chapter 21 Summary

Three years have elapsed since we last saw the March family gathered in the parlor. The war is over and Mr. March is again pastor of a small parish. Amy now cares for Aunt March and Jo spends her time writing romances for *The Spread Eagle*. Amy, who has never regained her strength after the Scarlet fever, remains at home.

Mr. Brooke served in the war until he was wounded. He then worked to provide a small home for Meg. The Dovecote, as the small house is called, is now ready and Meg and her mother and sisters are inspecting every detail. The linen closet is filled with items that Aunt March directed another aunt to buy for Meg. Aunt March could never publicly go back on her vow not to give Meg anything if she married Mr. Brooke.

Laurie is in college, but visits his grandfather and the March family each week. On this visit, Jo chides Laurie for spending so much of his grandfather's money and wearing his hair short. As they talk, Laurie tells Jo that one of his college pals is smitten with Amy. Jo tells him to hush such talk because she wants no more weddings. Laurie looks at Jo earnestly and tells her she will be the next to wed.

Part 2: Chapter 21 Analysis

Part I of Little Women was published separately. In the period before Part II was finished, Louise Mae Alcott received many letters from readers who wanted Jo and Laurie to marry. Chapter 21 hints at Laurie's growing interest in Jo. When Jo quickly denies the notion that she will be the next to marry, he tells her she never gives anyone a chance to see her softer side. "If a fellow gets a peep at it by accident and can't help showing that he likes it," Laurie says, "you throw cold water over him and get so thorny that no one dares touch or look at you."

Jo and Laurie's conversation foreshadows later events in Part II, as does the mention of Amy's still frail condition.

Part 2: Chapter 22

Part 2: Chapter 22 Summary

Meg's wedding, a simple affair, is held in the March home. Meg insists that everything be as natural as possible. She proclaims to Aunt March that she is not a show and has no interest in impressing people with her gown or with the cost of her bridal luncheon.

Despite the simplicity, the young bride is radiant. Mr. March marries the couple and the guests share cake and fruit. Laurie starts an impromptu dance in the garden. The highlight of the dance comes when Mr. Laurence sweeps Aunt March into the festivities.

At the end of the day, Mr. and Mrs. Brooke walk arm in arm to their new home. Mr. Laurence tells his grandson that he would be delighted if Laurie would ever choose marry one of the March girls.

Part 2: Chapter 22 Analysis

The Meg is Chapter 22 is quite a contrast to the young Meg in Chapter 9. The young girl who coveted fancy dresses is now a radiant young woman content in her homemade bridal gown. Meg, who once concerned herself with social status and proper behavior, now marries for love in a simple ceremony that offends her proper aunt's sensibility.

We see more foreshadowing in Chapter 22 as Laurie watches Jo during the wedding and Mr. Laurence expresses his wish to see Laurie capture one of his neighbors' hearts.

Part 2: Chapter 23

Part 2: Chapter 23 Summary

One of the rewards Amy receives for serving Aunt March is art lessons. Amy's fancy moves from drawing to painting to sculpture and back again. She has made many friends at art school and wants to entertain them at the March home.

Amy asks Marmee if she might host a luncheon for her classmates, followed by a drive by the river and a discussion of art. Amy describes the event as "an artistic fete." Mrs. March is concerned that Amy's plans are too ambitious but she allows her youngest daughter to proceed.

Amy enlists the help of her sisters, Marmee and Hannah, and Jo and Hannah are the least enthusiastic participants. Amy insists on a fancy luncheon (she is paying for the event herself). When the day arrives, it rains and the fete must be postponed. The March family enjoys eating the ice cream and other perishable food.

The next day is sunny. Amy must make a trip to the market for additional food. By now, the event has cost her more than she planned. When it comes time for the party only one guest attends. Amy's family is gracious and treats their guest like a queen.

For the second day in a row, the March women enjoy a fine lunch at Amy's expense. When Amy returns home from taking her classmate on the drive, the family is gracious and tries not to mention the disappointment. Finally, Amy breaks the tension by asking the family to give the leftovers away and not mention the event again.

Part 2: Chapter 23 Analysis

There are some lessons in life that no one can teach us; we must learn them for ourselves. Such is the case with Amy March in Chapter 23. Despite the misgivings of her family, she moves ahead with plans to fete her art school classmates. The other girls are all rich, and Amy intends to host the kind of event they are accustomed to.

Jo challenges Amy about her plans saying, "Why in the world should you spend your money, worry your family, and turn the house upside down for a parcel of girls who don't care a sixpence for you? I thought you had too much pride."

Pride really is the issue here. The young woman who wants to fit in with her classmates is the same girl who once took pickled limes to school. Amy desperately wants to be accepted in fine society.

When her plans fall flat and she has been humbled, she consoles herself by saying that she sat out to do what she intended and therefore the event is not a complete failure. We learn something of grace as Amy's family gives her room to fail without scorn.

Part 2: Chapter 24

Part 2: Chapter 24 Summary

Since Jo is no longer responsible for Aunt March, she can devote herself to writing and has been working on a novel. While attending a lecture, she learns of a newspaper offering a $100 prize for a sensationlistic story. Jo submits a vivid tale and six weeks later learns that she has won the prize.

The family applauds her success, though Mr. March tells her she can do better than writing such popular tales. Jo uses the money to send Beth and Marmee on a month-long vacation on the coast.

Jo continues to experience commercial success by selling similar stories. After brutal editing, she also sells her first novel for $300.

Part 2: Chapter 24 Analysis

This autobiographical chapter describes much of Alcott's own experience as a writer. Alcott wrote many sensationalistic adult stories and novels. In fact, she preferred this type of writing. She wrote *Little Women* and some of her children's tales at the request of her publisher.

Part 2: Chapter 25

Part 2: Chapter 25 Summary

Chapter 25 brings us up to current as to life at the Dovecote. John and Meg have moved beyond the idealism of the first weeks of marriage. They have their first major disagreement over an incident involving jam that Meg tries to make unsuccessfully and an unexpected dinner guest. Both must choose to forgive and to move toward each other rather than retreat into their own corners.

After a year of marriage, the Brookes are blessed not once, but twice when Meg gives birth to twins. The boy and girl are called Demi and Daisy.

Part 2: Chapter 25 Analysis

Once again, Alcott touches on the theme of gender roles. We see John and Meg trying to excel as an excellent husband/provider and wife/caretaker. They quickly fall short of the ideal, but have the grace to be gentle and flexible with each other. They practice the virtues that Meg has so long been learning from *The Pilgrim's Progress*: patience, humility and forgiveness.

Meg finds great joy and contentment in the traditional role of wife and mother. Her family, even Jo, is able to share her happiness.

Part 2: Chapter 26

Part 2: Chapter 26 Summary

Amy imposes on Jo to make formal calls with her. Jo hates this social obligation and decides at the outset to be contrary. When Amy reminds her to be "calm, cool and quiet" at the first visit, Jo is quiet to the point of being rude.

She promises to do better at the second home and embarrasses Amy by telling stories of how the March girls must practice riding on a saddle placed in a tree and paint their own hats. Whenever anyone compliments Jo's writing, she becomes especially brusque.

At their third stop, Amy enjoys visiting with Mr. Tudor, whose family is related to British royalty. Amy is quiet impressed with the Tudor family and is horrified when Jo fails to show Mr. Tudor the proper respect. Jo makes it clear that she neither likes nor respects the man, regardless of his family connections.

The final stop is a call on Aunt March. Aunt Carrol is also present. Jo has had enough of formalities and is even more terse that usual. She speaks against both the idea of patronage and of learning other languages. Little does she know that as she speaks, her aunts are deciding her future.

Part 2: Chapter 26 Analysis

Up to this point in the story, Amy's desire to fit in with society has been seen as a negative and Jo's disdain for such things almost as a virtue. Chapter 26 explores the other side. Jo has never learned diplomacy or tact. She does not know how to put herself in someone else's shoes and help them feel at ease.

Her lack of concern to fit is a form of willful independence — a form of pride that can be every bit as dark as Amy's longing for social status. We learn in the next chapter that a lack of concern for being part of the larger community can have grave consequences.

Part 2: Chapter 27

Part 2: Chapter 27 Summary

Amy accepts an offer to have a table at a charity event. It is an honor, in her eyes, to be asked and she uses her artistic skills to make an array of objects to sell. Unfortunately, May Chester, whose mother is in charge of the event, is jealous of Amy.

On the night before the event, Mrs. Chester rescinds her invitation for Amy to host the art table and asks that she move to the less desirable flower table. Amy is embarrassed and angry but chooses to graciously turn the art table over to May.

Jo enlists Laurie and his college friends to help make sure that Amy's flower table is the hit of the fair. All of Amy's flowers as well as her artwork sell and she always has a crowd around her table. Amy graciously sends Laurie and his friends off to the other tables and encourages them to buy vases from May Chester.

A week later, a letter arrives from Aunt Carrol. She plans to travel abroad and wants Amy to accompany her. Jo is devastated, as she had expected to be asked. Mrs. March explains to Jo that Aunt Carrol had intended to take her until she learned during the girls' recent call that Jo "hates French" and doesn't like to be burdened by favors. Jo realizes her sharp tongue and ill manners have cost her the opportunity.

Part 2: Chapter 27 Analysis

Actions have consequences, and Jo must face some unpleasant ones. Her afternoon of making social calls with Amy has a negative impact on both girls. Mrs. Chester heard that Jo had mocked her daughter during a later call and takes revenge on Amy by moving her table. Jo's careless words to her aunts cost her a trip aboard. Both girls struggle with disappointment and anger and both win the battle, though Amy does so a bit more gracefully than Jo.

Alcott employs foreshadowing twice near the end of the chapter. Beth confesses that she is glad that Jo is not going away because she "can't spare her." As Laurie sees Amy off on her journey he promises to come and comfort her if anything should happen to her family while she's away.

Part 2: Chapter 28

Part 2: Chapter 28 Summary

Since her bout with Scarlet fever, Beth has remained frail and now her spirits seem as weak as her body. Mrs. March confides in Jo that she is worried. Jo tries to find out what is troubling Beth. One day while she is observing her, Jo thinks she has figured out the problem.

Beth grows sad and even sheds a tear as she watches Laurie goes by outside the window. Jo is convinced that Beth has fallen in love with their neighbor. She decides at once that Beth and Laurie would make a good match and becomes determined to get herself out of their way.

Jo makes plans to go to New York for the winter and take a job as tutor. She tells her mother she wants to experience new things and to move away from Laurie, who is growing too fond of her.

Mrs. March agrees that a separation would be good. She is relieved to learn that Jo is not interested in Laurie romantically. Mrs. March thinks their strong wills and mutual love of freedom would make marriage difficult. Mrs. March does not agree with Jo's assessment that Beth has an eye for Laurie.

The plans are made and Jo prepares to leave.

Part 2: Chapter 28 Analysis

Though Alcott's readers had begged her to put Jo and Laurie together in Part II, the author has had little to say on the relationship during the first seven chapters. Laurie has dropped a hint here and there that his interest in Jo is changing. Jo remains somewhere between oblivious and disinterested.

Finally, the action rises and Laurie expresses more direct interest in Jo. At the same time, Jo has decided that Beth is in love with Laurie and decides to leave for New York. Mrs. March assesses the situation accurately when she says Jo must enjoy her liberty until she grows tired of it.

Before she leaves, Jo asks Beth to watch after "her boy" and Laurie tells Jo his eye is on her. The story now how has a conflict which must be resolved.

Part 2: Chapter 29

Part 2: Chapter 29 Summary

In New York, Jo records her daily thoughts and activities and sends them home to her family. She writes often (very often) of a new friend who lives in the boarding house. Professor Bhaer is from Berlin and is caring for his two orphaned nephews. Jo writes of how much she respects this poor but intelligent man.

Professor Bhaer begins to give Jo German lessons. In return, Jo mends his clothes and darns his socks. They exchange small Christmas gifts and both seem to enjoy the budding friendship.

Part 2: Chapter 29 Analysis

While Jo is away forging a new friendship with the German professor, Laurie is making changes. He lets his hair grow and he stops smoking, two things Jo had asked him to do in the past.

The introduction of Professor Bhaer adds a twist to the plot. Will Jo be drawn to the older professor or the newly improved Laurie? Or will she, like Alcott, continue to pursue her own interests independent of any man?

Part 2: Chapter 30

Part 2: Chapter 30 Summary

Jo longs to have money and power enough to take care of those she loves. She begins writing sensationalistic stories for a newspaper called *The Weekly Volcano.* After revising her first submission, the editor tells her to leave any moral lessons out of her stories. "Morals don't sell nowdays," he says.

Jo takes his advice and churns out tales designed solely to entertain the reader. These pay well and she has a steady source of income. Meanwhile, she is beginning to greatly admire Professor Bhaer. She values his intellect but learns it is his character and integrity she respects most.

In a discussion with well-known philosophers who look down on religion, Professor Bhaer boldly defends his faith. Jo finds that his friendship gives her both a sense of security and the desire to become a better person herself.

In a later scene, Jo learns that the professor intensely dislikes sensationalistic stories. He believes they are rubbish that poison young minds. Though the two never speak directly about Jo's writing, she is ashamed to think that she might disappoint him. She burns her stories and instead tries writing children's stories.

June arrives, and Jo prepares to return home. Professor Bhaer says that he may visit her, until he listens to Jo talk more about Laurie and realizes that this neighbor boy might be more than a friend. The professor goes to the train station to see Jo off with a bouquet of violets. As she leaves she thinks, "I've made a friend worth having and I'll try to keep him all my life."

Part 2: Chapter 30 Analysis

Professor Bhaer is the opposite of Laurie. Laurie is young, wealthy and given to worldly pursuits. The professor is older, poor and very wise. What begins as a friendship with the professor grows into deep admiration. Jo begins to care what the professor thinks of her and she wants to please him. Observers catch on more quickly than Jo herself that she is beginning to have feelings for this man.

Perhaps because Jo has not trained herself for or thought of herself in the traditional role as someone's wife, she seems unaware of the interest men have in her. She misses many of the cues (or chooses to ignore them) from both Laurie and Professor Bhaer. She is obviously not seeking a man, which is an expression of the newfound freedoms women were just beginning to experience in the late 1860s.

Part 2: Chapter 31

Part 2: Chapter 31 Summary

Laurie devotes himself to his final year of study and graduates with honors. When he returns home, the moment Jo has been dreading arrives. Laurie insists that they talk about their future together. He declares his love for her and says he has worked hard to win her love by giving up things she didn't like. Jo does not love Laurie romantically. She wishes she could but she refuses to be dishonest. When Laurie asks Jo if she loves the professor, she says, "I haven't the least idea of loving him or anybody else."

Laurie takes Jo's refusal hard and tells her he will never be able to love anyone else. As he and Mr. Laurence are leaving to travel abroad, Laurie makes one last appeal to Jo, who once again declines.

Part 2: Chapter 31 Analysis

One of the major story lines reaches a climax in Chapter 31 when Jo refuses Laurie. Unlike women before her time, Jo chooses to be independent. Because her heart is not involved, Jo is able to coolly assess their relationship. She does not wish to change to accommodate Laurie, and she does not want him to change to accommodate her. Jo recognizes that in the long run they will not be able to be true to themselves if they marry.

Part 2: Chapter 32

Part 2: Chapter 32 Summary

When Jo returns home, she discovers that Beth's health is failing. Her fears are confirmed with Beth declines to go on a trip to the mountains. She asks Jo if they can stay closer to home and go the seashore instead.

At the seashore, Beth tells Jo the secret she alluded to in Chapter 28, as she is dying and has come to accept it. Her tears when she saw Laurie from the window came because she saw in him a vitality she knew she was slowly losing.

The girls return home and the March family begins to prepare for Amy's inevitable death.

Part 2: Chapter 32 Analysis

Another storyline moves toward a climax as Alcott makes it clear that Amy is dying. Jo now takes the role of caregiver to Amy and provider of comfort to her mother and father.

Alcott uses some foreshadowing to give us hints as to what is ahead not only for Beth, but also for Amy and Laurie. Jo remarks near the end of the chapter that Amy and Laurie "would suit each other excellently."

Part 2: Chapter 33

Part 2: Chapter 33 Summary

Laurie and Amy do meet in Europe. It is Christmastime and Laurie visits Amy in Nice, France. They attend a holiday party together and begin to form new impressions of each other.

Laurie admires Amy's beauty and style and he enjoys being seen with her. Amy begins to view Laurie less as a brother and more as a handsome, eligible young man.

Part 2: Chapter 33 Analysis

This short chapter marks a turning point in Laurie and Amy's relationship. They are beginning to realize that they do perhaps "suit each other nicely," as Jo noted in Chapter 32.

Part 2: Chapter 34

Part 2: Chapter 34 Summary

Laurie extends his stay in Nice and enjoys Amy's company. She, however, grows weary of his lack of ambition and direction. She hints that he should rejoin his grandfather and get on with his business.

Laurie questions Amy about Fred Vaughn, who was courting her before he was called back to the States. Amy confides that she will probably agree to marry Fred because he is rich. She then turns the tables and questions Laurie about why he seems to have lost his sense of purpose. He tells her about Jo, a story Amy suspected but had not been told. Amy challenges him not to waste his life simply because Jo broke his heart. She shows Laurie two sketches she made of him. The first was made several years earlier and shows a boy full of life. The second she made as they talked and shows a listless young man. The sketches have their intended effect, and Laurie leaves Nice the next day.

Part 2: Chapter 34 Analysis

Amy and Laurie help each other recognize the truth about themselves. Amy is not trying to get rid of Laurie so much as she is trying to inspire him. She does miss parts of the old boy she knew. She wants him to recapture his spirit and quite bluntly tells him it is time to get over Jo and get on with his life. Laurie accepts her rebuke and even calls her his "mentor."

Earlier in their conversation, Laurie helps Amy see the truth about her relationship with Fred Vaughn. Marrying him simply because he is rich will go against the values her mother attempted to instill in her. The lessons Amy and Laurie are learning hearken back to the stories read and morals absorbed by the March girls from *The Pilgrim's Progress.*

Part 2: Chapter 35

Part 2: Chapter 35 Summary

Beth faces death in much the same way she has lived her life. She remains busy "doing unto others" as long as she can. She does not complain about the pain and she tries to be a comfort to those around her.

Jo devotes herself to caring for Beth. In the end, Beth slips away during the night. Only when she is finally at rest does Jo leave her side.

Part 2: Chapter 35 Analysis

As the little family faces tragedy, they lean heavily on the lessons learned from the little book. Jo and Beth draw strength from each other.

Alcott weaves her own experience into each sister. Alcott's sister Lizzie died at age twenty-two from Scarlet fever, so Alcott writes of her own loss through Jo's eyes. Alcott herself spent many years weak and in pain from mercury poisoning. She writes of that experience through Beth.

Part 2: Chapter 36

Part 2: Chapter 36 Summary

The action now switches back to Europe, where Laurie is trying to forget Jo. Amy's scolding stung him and he is now trying to resolve his feelings for Jo by writing music and stories about her. Though he is beginning to think about other things, he decides to write Jo and give her one more chance to return his love. She respectfully declines once again.

Amy, meanwhile, declines Fred Vaughn's proposal. She had not forgotten her conversation with Laurie and comes to realize that she wants more than just money and social position in her life partner.

Amy and Laurie correspond, though each is too proud to be the first to ask for a visit. When news reaches them that Beth has died, Laurie comes from Germany to be with Amy. As they mourn together, they fall in love and decide one day on a lake to row together from now on.

Part 2: Chapter 36 Analysis

Laurie fulfills a promise he made in Chapter 27 when he goes to Amy to comfort her after Beth's death. Both Amy and Laurie have independently given up other romantic ideas (he about Jo and she about Fred Vaughn) and are now free to recognize the love growing between them.

Though Alcott disappointed her readers who wanted a match between Jo and Laurie, Alcott makes the match that best fits her characters. Amy and Laurie are better together than they are apart.

Part 2: Chapter 37

Part 2: Chapter 37 Summary

Jo now finds herself alone and lost. She misses not only caring for Beth, but Beth's inspiration and encouragement. Mrs. March suggests that Jo try writing again. Jo does eventually write a short story that is published and praised.

When Jo learns that Amy and Laurie are engaged, she is reflective and then happy for the couple. She does begin to experience a new emotion, however. She finds herself longing for a soul mate to share her life with. As she is going through items in her trunk, she finds a note from Professor Bhaer that reads, "Wait for me, my friend. I may be a little late, but I shall surely come."

Part 2: Chapter 37 Analysis

For the first time we see Jo wishing for a companion. She is recognizing the importance of relationships and especially of family. Without Beth to take care of, she has no one to think about other than herself. In Chapter 11, the March girls discovered that joy comes from being productive and serving other. In this Chapter, Jo begins to learn that joy comes from living life in the context of family and she longs for more intimate relationships of her own.

Part 2: Chapter 38

Part 2: Chapter 38 Summary

Amy, Laurie and Mr. Laurence return home. Amy and Laurie surprise everyone with the announcement that they were married six weeks earlier. There is much rejoicing as well as some adjusting of thinking and roles.

Laurie tells Jo that she and Amy have traded places in his heart and he will always love her as a sister and Amy as a wife. As the March family celebrates the homecoming, another visitor arrives. Professor Bhaer is warmly welcomed into the festivities. As the evening goes along, Jo begins to realize he may have come to woo her, and she likes the idea.

Part 2: Chapter 38 Analysis

Alcott is beginning to resolve the action in her story. Laurie and Jo have a final conversation about their relationship and agree that all is as it should be. Amy is thriving in her role as Mrs. Laurence.

The arrival of Professor Bhaer signals a pending answer to one of the few remaining questions in the book. As the evening ends with singing, the March family represents triumph through perseverance.

Part 2: Chapter 39

Part 2: Chapter 39 Summary

Amy and Laurie begin to unpack and settle into the Laurence family home. Laurie announces that he intends to go into business to "prove he is not spoiled." Amy's first intention is to be a good wife to Laurie. Amy and Laurie dream together or how they might use their wealth to help others.

Amy and Laurie realize that Professor Bhaer is intending to ask Jo to marry him. When Laurie assures Amy that he would be very happy to see Jo marry the professor, Amy puts to rest her last insecurities about her husband's affection.

Part 2: Chapter 39 Analysis

The ongoing theme of poverty is explored from a slightly different angle. Amy, who once had little, now has much. As she and Laurie discuss Jo's impending match, Amy ironically finds herself saying that a woman should never marry for money. She believes Jo and Professor Bhaer will be happy, even if they are poor, and she speaks from experience. Laurie expresses his desire to help "poor gentlefolk," much in the same way his grandfather helped the March family through the years.

Part 2: Chapter 40

Part 2: Chapter 40 Summary

For two weeks, Jo and the professor meet each evening for walks. Jo tries to hide her feelings, especially since she has so highly valued her independence. She is distraught when the professor does not visit her for three days. While she is in town running errands, it begins to rain. As she walks along with her head down, the professor covers her with his umbrella and walks beside her.

As they walk and talk in the rain, each is trying to read the other. They almost convince themselves that the other has no feelings of love. Finally, in despair, Jo breaks into tears. Those tears give the professor what he has been waiting for — a clear sign of Jo's affection for him. He quickly declares his intentions and they begin making plans.

The professor has stayed away from Jo until he could secure a position and be able to provide for her. A line he read in one her published poems drew him back. He now has a teaching position, but must first take care of his nephews. Jo assures him she is afraid of neither poverty nor waiting.

Part 2: Chapter 40 Analysis

At last, Jo's choice is made. Throughout the book, she has searched for her place and that place has changed through the seasons of her life. For a time, her place was a dutiful daughter, then as a young businesswoman and author. In one season of her life she was a caregiver and comforter. Now, she is a lover. Through Jo's life, Alcott shows that women can thrive in many different roles and choosing one particular role doesn't necessarily mean excluding others for all time.

He is Jo's match in many ways. He stimulates her thinking, shares her values and strengthens her faith. He cares for her without restraining her. The umbrella symbolic shows that he will be a covering, or shelter, for Jo. Jo, at this season in her life, is ready to welcome this protection.

Part 2: Chapter 41

Part 2: Chapter 41 Summary

The waiting and the wooing end at last when Aunt March dies. She leaves Jo her house, Plumfield. With the gift of the house, Jo and the professor are able to start a boy's school.

Jo has another new role to play, that of mother. At first she is mother to the boys who live and study at the school. Later, she and the professor have two sons of their own, Rob and Teddy. Plumfield is a happy place and Jo is a content woman.

The story ends at an apple harvest festival, which has become an annual celebration for the extended March family. The girls, their husbands and children celebrate Mrs. March's sixtieth birthday with songs and simple gifts. The celebration is reminiscent of the Christmas that opened the book.

In the twilight, each of the little women recounts how her life has turned out. Meg says that her dream of a simple home and family life has been realized and she is completely satisfied. Amy says her life is different from what she planned, but she would not change it. She still keeps her artistic dreams alive and hopes one day to sculpt or paint. For now, she is content to be Laurie's wife and little Beth's mother.

Jo looks back on her life and realizes her initial dreams now seem selfish and lonely. She still hopes to someday write a great book, but for the moment she declares that she is "happier than she deserves."

Part 2: Chapter 41 Analysis

In the end, it is not poverty or wealth that matter to the March girls, it is family. All the girls have discovered happiness in the context of relationships. Amy and Jo have learned that they can share life with others without completely giving up their own dreams.

In telling the story of the March women, Alcott seems to be saying that women can find happiness in a variety of roles, but happiness always involves others.

The values the little women set out to learn and apply in Chapter 1 have carried them through and are being passed on to a new generation. The apple harvest in the end of the book is symbolic of the riches reaped through a well-lived, productive life. This didactic novel has taught its final lesson.

Characters

Professor Friedrich ("Fritz") Bhaer

On her trip to New York, Jo meets Professor Bhaer, a German man with a thick accent. He is a stout, educated, older man who takes care of his two orphaned nephews, Franz and Emil. Because he is a bachelor, he undertakes such domestic tasks as cleaning and darning his own socks.

When Jo returns home, Bhaer makes frequent visits, and he and Jo eventually marry. He encourages her to keep writing, but to challenge her talent by writing good fiction rather than the sensationalistic pieces she usually writes. He and Jo open a boys' school at Plumfield.

Mr. John Brooke

Mr. Brooke is Laurie's tutor. As he gets to know Meg, he falls in love with her. In accordance with her parents' request, he waits to marry Meg until she turns twenty. This period gives him an opportunity to establish himself and buy a house. Although Mr. Laurence offers to help Mr. Brooke, the young man refuses, preferring to make his own way without incurring any debt.

Mr. Brooke takes a job as a clerk and earns a modest living for himself and his new bride.

Hannah

Hannah is the March family's housekeeper. She is colorful and energetic, and she loves the family dearly. She has been with the family since Mr. and Mrs. March married, and she gave Mrs. March her first cooking lessons.

Mr. Laurence

Mr. Laurence is Laurie's grandfather. Until the March sisters meet him, they imagine him to be a daunting man who is distant and stern. Once they get to know him, however, they find him to be generous and warm. He takes a special liking to Jo for her audacity, and he feels special warmth toward Beth.

Theodore Laurence

See Laurie

Laurie

Laurie is the next-door neighbor and is the same age as Jo, his best friend. Although Laurie is wealthy, the economic difference between himself and the Marches does not factor into their relationships. Laurie is instructed at home by a tutor, Mr. Brooke, and later attends college. Laurie is a handsome, friendly, intelligent, witty, and dashing young man who delights in the capers of his neighbors.

Laurie lives with his grandfather, Mr. Laurence, because both of his parents have died. Mr. Laurence was very displeased when his son married Laurie's mother, an Italian woman who was accomplished in music. Living with only his grandfather, Laurie is lonely and therefore treasures his friendships with the March girls and Marmee.

After graduating from college, Laurie proposes to Jo, who rejects him. Devastated, he accompanies his grandfather to Europe, where he and Amy fall in love and marry.

Amy March

Amy is the youngest of the March girls and is twelve at the beginning of the novel. She is spoiled and throws tantrums, and her family strives to correct her behavior before she gets older. Like Meg, Amy loves luxuries and takes an interest in her appearance that is unusual for someone so young. She is also concerned with behaving properly and being popular among her peers. Her pride is her beautiful hair, which falls into golden ringlets. Amy is the artist of the family and spends time drawing and sculpting animals out of clay.

When Beth becomes ill, Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March, who likes the little girl very much. Aunt March releases Jo from her duty as a companion and instead employs Amy, for whom she provides expensive art lessons. Amy travels with another family member to Europe (at Aunt March's expense). While Amy is in Europe, Beth dies and Laurie (also traveling in Europe) finds Amy to comfort her. The two fall in love and marry.

Amy's marriage is comfortable because she marries a man she cares for who happens to be wealthy. Unlike the other sisters, Amy never has to worry about work and has all the fine things she always desired.

Aunt March

Mr. March's aunt, Aunt March is a wealthy widow whose views represent the typical opinions of the time. She believes that Meg, with her beauty, should set her sights on marrying a rich man to provide for her and her family. When Meg considers Mr. Brooke's offer of marriage, Aunt March threatens Meg, saying that if she marries him, she will never get any of Aunt March's money. However, she eventually softens and makes a lovely gift of linens for the couple.

In the beginning of the story, Aunt March pays Jo to be her companion but later hires Amy instead. She is taken with Amy's lively, yet prim nature and hopes to mold her.

When Aunt March dies, she leaves her country home, called Plumfield, to Jo.

Beth March

Beth is the second youngest of the March girls. She is fourteen as the story opens, and she is painfully shy and withdrawn. Although she loves her family and is comfortable with them, she is fearful of strangers and relies on Jo to watch over her. Too shy to attend public school, she studies at home. Beth never makes plans for the future and never talks about having any dreams; she seems perfectly content with her life as it is and expects it to stay the same.

Beth's disposition is sweet, selfless, and warm. She never asks for anything for herself and seeks only to make those around her happy. Her talent is for music, and she makes do on an old worn-out keyboard until Mr. Laurence allows her to play the beautiful piano at his house. She and Mr. Laurence develop a grandfather-granddaughter relationship that fulfills them both.

While caring for a poor family, Beth contracts scarlet fever and becomes extremely ill. Her fever breaks before it claims her life, but her health is permanently compromised by the ordeal. Years later, her health finally gives out, and Beth dies as a young woman.

Josephine March

The second eldest of the four March sisters, Jo is independent, tempestuous, vivacious, clever, and self-confident. She struggles throughout the story to learn to control her temper and her tendency to hold a grudge. She is a tomboy who is more interested in reading and playing games than in primping or gossiping with girls her age. She is sixteen when the story opens, and she has no desire to get married, preferring the happy and satisfying life she enjoys with her family. In fact, when Meg prepares for marriage, Jo is very upset at the prospect of the family breaking up. No longer in school, Jo is the paid companion of Aunt March, a duty she fulfills out of obligation.

Jo has a special relationship with Beth, the next youngest sister. While all of the girls look to Marmee for guidance and advice, Jo watches over Beth and provides additional sisterly support. Jo's relationship with Beth reveals a soft, maternal side of Jo that is rarely seen.

Besides reading, Jo loves to write plays and short stories. The girls enjoy performing Jo's plays, in which she always plays the men's roles. After having two of her stories accepted for publication by a local newspaper, Jo takes her writing more seriously, falling into whirlwind "fits" of writing. Writing brings her success and allows her to earn money doing something she loves. As she observes other young women, Jo is proud of herself because she is able to earn her own money and feel independent. Jo writes a

novel, which is accepted for publication only after substantial revision. Jo agrees to the overhaul because she is anxious to get the book published.

Jo's best friend is the wealthy young man next door, Laurie. Jo appeals to him because he can relate to her almost as if she were a boy. Their friendship is characterized by equality, love of books, and a sense of adventure. After graduating from college, Laurie proposes to Jo, but she rejects his proposal, despite knowing that their friendship will be forever changed. Most critics agree that she turns him down because he will never take seriously her career as a writer and because she loves him in a sisterly way, not as a lover. When Laurie marries Amy, Jo is genuinely happy for them. Eventually, Jo marries Professor Bhaer, an older man who is poor, educated, and supportive of her career. Together, they start a school for boys at Plumfield and later have two boys of their own.

Marmee March

Marmee is the girls' mother. She is a strong, confident, reliable woman who provides moral instruction, guidance, and support for her daughters at every stage of their lives. While her husband is away at war, Marmee must care for the house and the four girls on her own. She never appears to struggle, however. She makes certain demands on the girls so that they will learn valuable lessons about life.

Marmee encourages her girls to think for themselves and to pursue true happiness, which, she believes, does not necessarily come from having money. If her daughters never marry, Marmee will be satisfied as long as they are wise, respectable, and accomplished women. She tells Meg that the secret to a good marriage is mutual understanding. She and Mr. March each have their gender-specific duties, but they cooperate with each other and have their own identities.

Meg March

Meg is the eldest of the four girls. Seventeen as the book opens, she is drawn to domestic affairs and feels rewarded when she is able to please those around her. Being old enough to remember times before her family lost its money, she longs for many of the luxuries she can no longer enjoy. She works as a governess for the Kings, who have two children.

Meg has a special relationship with Amy, and acts as her advisor and protector. Meg and Amy have some superficial qualities in common, such as vanity and love of finery, but Meg's temperament is much gentler than Amy's is.

Meg is regarded as beautiful and, as a result, she struggles with her own vanity. She adores wearing fine dresses and having nice things, but such items remain out of reach. When Laurie's tutor, Mr. Brooke, proposes to her, she accepts despite the fact that he is a poor clerk. She sees that he is a good and honest man, and overcomes her disappointment that they are not a well-to-do couple.

Meg delights in domestic activities such as cooking, sewing, and keeping the house in order. Her marriage to Mr. Brooke is happy, but she has difficulty with the initial transition because she wants so badly to be the perfect wife to him. They have twins, a boy named Demi and a girl named Daisy. Meg and Mr. Brooke's gender roles are traditional □he works and disciplines the children, and she does all household work.

Mr. March

The March girls' father, "Papa" (or "Father"), is away serving as a chaplain in the Civil War. He writes loving letters home to his family, and when he is stricken with illness, Marmee leaves the girls to take care of him.

After the war, Mr. March returns and takes a position as a minister in a local church. His days are filled with ministering to his parishioners and interacting with an interesting and diverse group of people. Just as the sisters are based on Alcott's own sisters, Mr. March is based on Alcott's father. Although Mr. March is an important figure in the family's life, he is seen very little in the action of the novel.

Annie Moffat

A wealthy friend of Meg's, Annie invites Meg to stay with her for two weeks, and they dress up for a dance.

Teddy

See Laurie

Setting

Little Women is set in the 1860s in a New England town modeled on Concord, Massachusetts. Most of the action in Part I revolves around the March family home. With Father away, serving as a clergyman for soldiers fighting in the Civil War, the four daughters and their mother remain at home, struggling to live as comfortably as possible under the circumstances. Because Father lost most of his income helping an "unfortunate friend," the March girls—none of whom had expected to pursue careers—work feverishly to support the family and, in the process, confront conflicts between domestic duties and independence. The setting broadens in Part II as Alcott describes the girls' travels away from home and their eventual marriages.

Social Concerns

Little Women, Alcott is concerned Inwith the maturation and socialization of girls. She treats the issues through the experiences of the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, who range in age from twelve to sixteen when the novel begins. The ages of the characters at the novel's outset suggests that late adolescence launches a particularly important stage in the developmental process. From the outset it is clear also that strong parental guidance and a sheltered, domestic setting are essential elements. Additionally, as the earliest chapters suggest, the inculcation of cheerful and unselfish qualities will help young people endure war and shifting social and economic times.

The narrative begins with the four March girls seated before the hearth waiting for their mother to arrive, and grumbling about the lack of money to buy themselves gifts. "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," Jo says. "It's so dreadful to be poor!" Meg says. "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things," Amy says, "and other girls nothing at all." Only Beth takes an unselfish approach. She suggests that they buy a gift for their mother "Marmee" instead of for themselves. When Mrs. March arrives, she reads aloud a letter from Father, who is serving as a Union chaplain in the Civil War. In the letter, Mr.

March ratifies the approach of selfdenial. He expresses his hope that his girls will "conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."

As the chapter continues, Marmee reminds the girls of the way they used to play "pilgrim's progress." She suggests that they "play" again in a figurative sense, by taking up the "burdens" of their faults, their selfish qualities, and conquering them. As the girls try, Marmee guides by exemplifying the cheerful self-suppression her daughters are to learn, and by constructing situations that teach domesticity. She persists as the narrative takes the four young Marches through fifteen years and into marriage. Mr.

March too, once returned from wartime service, lends his sustaining presence and support. On another level, Mr.

March's ministry and Mrs. March's philanthropic work suggest methods of community outreach that preserve stability in the absence of social programs.

As the response to her publisher's request for a girls' book, Alcott devised Little Women to reflect the manners of her nineteenth-century era as prescribed in family advice manuals. Feminist critics since the 1970s, however, have raised concerns about the depiction of values of domesticity and selfdenial for women. Many of these critics, crediting Alcott with a feminism in advance of her day, see in the novel warnings against pernicious patriarchal values. They also find elements which actually subvert the positive picture of a docile role for women, Jo's efforts to develop a nondomestic career, for example. The novel, then, can be read on several levels, and from one point of view

it reflects the tensions between women's creative individuality and socially acceptable domesticity.

Social Sensitivity

Although Alcott herself was politically active and cared deeply about the social and ethical issues of her time, she preferred to keep Little Women on a happy, domestic level. She includes only the subtlest of references to women's suffrage, abolition of slavery, the temperance movement, educational reform, and social welfare programs. There is relatively little violence in the novel and there are no "evil" characters. Compared with modern young adult literature, Little Women portrays a safe world, seemingly free of sexual relations, drug abuse, or divorce. Alcott emphasizes good behavior and honest hard work as solutions to personal and societal problems. Modern critics, however, have questioned traditional interpretations of Little Women, noting Alcott's anger at the subjugation of women to domestic roles.

Jo, Alcott's strongest character, forges through life determined to be independent, and in Alcott's later novels, Jo counsels young women to seek careers rather than matrimony.

Techniques

In Little Women, Alcott blends the children's moral tale of her day with the domestic novel, a popular form of nineteenth-century women's fiction.

The narrative structure is episodic, with alternating chapters focused on either each girl in turn, or on the group, in order to convey lessons on right behavior. Alcott lightened the moralistic tone found in other children's fiction by stressing family approval and social rewards rather than personal religious salvation. Reinforcement of the domestic theme also lightens the tone. Episodes are often festive, constructed around reunions, reconciliations, events when family life is celebrated. Moments of moral realization often revolve around conversations, which demonstrate Alcott's capacity for artfully crafted dialogue. The novel also is lighter on sentimentality than other tales.

An important aspect of Alcott's technique is realism. In Little Women, Alcott drew heavily upon her own life experiences. She built her characters around people she knew. Meg is modeled after Alcott's older sister Anna, Jo after Alcott herself, Beth after a younger sister Elizabeth, and Amy after the youngest sister, artist May. Marmee strongly resembles Alcott's mother.

Critics identify scholarly Mr. March with Alcott's father, the philosopher Bronson Alcott, and some also link Bronson with Friedrich, seen as the type he might have been. Mr. Laurence was modeled on Alcott's grandfather, Joseph May. Critics identify Laurie as a composite of Ladislas Wisniewski, a Polish exile Alcott met on her trip to Europe in 1865, and her young friend Alfred Whitman, a student in Boston.

The knowledge that Alcott relied heavily upon her life's experiences when she created the character Jo was an assist to the rediscovery by critics, a century later, of the thrillers she published in newspapers of the 1860s.

Chapters 14, 17, and 34 on Jo's writing, respectively entitled "Secrets," "Literary Lessons," and "A Friend," provided clues. The tale entitled "The Rival Painters," which Jo succeeds in placing in the Spread Eagle, recalls Alcott's first published story of similar title in 1852. The mention of a hundred-dollar prize offered by the Blarneystone Banner for a sensational story recalls the prize Alcott won for her story entitled "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," published in 1863.

Jo's Blarneystone Banner and Weekly Volcano are now identified with the actual publications Flag of Our Union and Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, in which Alcott's thrillers appeared.

Many critics cite Jo's writing vocation as an illustration of Alcott's remarkable technical ability to weave subtle feminist elements into a tale overtly about domesticity for girls coming of age in nineteenth-century America. Critics tie Jo's production of sensational stories to the expression of covert anger at woman's docile role.

The periodicals in which the stories appear carry titles that suggest this.

The Weekly Volcano connotes anger, and the Blarneystone Banner hints at the nonsense in feminine piety and selfsuppression. Critics also suggest that the technique of employing the game of "pilgrim's progress" in plot structure subtly conveys the idea that women are play-acting their domestic roles.

Critics note, too, that a sensational home theatrical the girls present is used in covert contrast to the overt moral play. The technique is found in Chapter 2, "A Merry Christmas." The girls have given away their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels, evidence of piety and self-sacrifice, but the same day they perform a play Jo has written, "The Witch's Curse," which is filled with revenge and violence. The scene is based upon one of Alcott's own plays written years before Little Women and the performances put on by the Alcott sisters. The title of the play suggests a woman's anger, and the fact that Jo assumes the dual roles of hero and villain hints at a two-sided message in the novel and a longing for the freedom men enjoy.

Literary Qualities

In writing Little Women, Alcott broke much new ground while adhering, structurally, to many conventions of mid-nineteenth-century young adult literature. The novel is an unusual example of young adult literature of the time because Alcott endows her characters with both faults and virtues; avoids preaching to the reader; writes in a simple but accurate style; employs simple and often humorous dialogue; and demonstrates great skill as a local colorist. Little Women is typical of young adult books of the time in that it is episodic in structure, with chapters often devoted to individual sisters. Each sister's quest to overcome her "burden" in life, to become a "little woman," and to find true love serves as the unifying theme of the novel.

Alcott's application of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress reflects both the traditional and the innovative strains in her work. By structuring the moral development of her characters around the story of the pilgrim who travels from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City— facing internal and external demons en route to his destination—Alcott combines allegorical tradition with nineteenth-century literary techniques.

Alcott fleshes out Bunyan's one-dimensional Christian in the forms of her protagonists. Her characterization of Jo in particular offers a portrait of a complex young woman who struggles to reconcile the goals of her own "pilgrim's progress" with the expectations of her society.

In her preface to Little Women, Alcott restates a portion of Bunyan's allegorical work; the novel's first chapter also makes explicit reference to Bunyan's text, as Mrs. March reminds her daughters of their childhood game of "Pilgrim's Progress." Mrs. March later urges the girls to take up the game again, "not in play, but in earnest." Alcott suggests that the quest for a morally fulfilling life can be achieved through a conscious effort to overcome individual faults. "We never are too old for this, my dear," she says, "because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City." Just as Mrs. March presents each of her daughters with an individual copy of Pilgrim's Progress, so too does Alcott intend her novel to be a handbook for her young readers. The last chapter of Little Women shows the sisters gathered at Jo's school to assess their progress as pilgrims; by concluding the book with this scene, Alcott lends structural unity to her novel.

Thematic Overview

Each March girl is on a "pilgrimage," a journey of moral transformation that will mark her coming of age. The point of embarkation is Father's letter.

Each girl responds to it with a vow to "be better" and do her duty to the household. The novel depicts progress made as the girls undergo, separately or together, a series of trials by which selfish temptations are overcome. A persistent theme is that selfless, spiritual values bring happiness and comfort. When the several sisters first voice discontent, Beth recalls how Meg had said that "we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money."

In the narrative the Golden Rule is invoked, but the goal is family approval rather than religious salvation.

Amy, who at first kept back a little money for herself at Christmas, gains her sisters' blessing when she spends it all for Marmee's gift. In the novel, the theme of moral self-development is inseparable from the preservation of family values and domesticity as woman's role. "Make this home happy," Marmee tells her daughters, "so that you may be fit for homes of your own." While Marmee indicates that it is better to "be happy old maids than unhappy wives," she still hopes her daughters will marry. "To be loved and chosen by a good man," she says, "is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman."

Correlative to Marmee's claim is the idea that a woman's creative self-expression is unfulfilling, or is incompatible with marriage. The narrative can be read along these lines. Jo is spirited and independent, and develops a successful writing career until the man who becomes her husband turns her from it. Amy, too, is a budding artist, but finally subordinates her talent to domestic ends. Many feminist critics object to the overt message they see in the novel that women must stifle their hopes for careers outside the home.

Some critics see a theme of patriarchal oppression incipient in the influence of Mr. March, whose letter steers the girls toward self-denying virtues, and who upon his return judges and praises the girls insofar as they display feminine piety and submissiveness.

Another line of criticism, however, points out a theme that marriage can be compatible with feminist ideals.

Marmee advises the grown-up Meg to let her husband help at home, and claims that her own "home happiness" with Father is based on such sharing.

Meg eventually does find "treasuries" of "mutual helpfulness." Amy too, and her suitor Laurie, who while out rowing agree to marry, pledge that when they do they will "pull in the same boat." Jo's marriage especially supports the theme. Jo and her husband,

Professor Friedrich Bhaer, share responsibilities of home and work by managing a boarding-school for homeless boys.

"I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home," Jo says. Her happy experience shows that domesticity can merge with a career and bless both spouses, as well as foster social stability through unselfish outreach.

Thus the linked themes of domesticity and morals reinforce a larger one of community support. A related theme is self-fulfillment through love and work, rather than the struggle for material wealth which fragments society. Work has spiritual value, according to Marmee. It is "good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion." The novel always shows marital happiness based upon love, not wealth, and indicates, in fact, that poverty builds character. The family warms to Friedrich "at once, feeling even the more friendly because he was poor, for poverty enriches those who live above it." Also, Meg loves her husband "better for his poverty, because it seems to have made a man of him."

Although Amy marries a wealthy man, she marries for love. He in turn loves her for her display of grace in poverty, and forgoes his idleness for work and philanthropy. "Rich people have no right to sit down and enjoy themselves," the newlyweds decide, "or let their money accumulate for others to waste." Amy and her husband agree to financially assist Jo's boarding school project, knowing that such an outreach will make their own home happier. Family values, if joined to a democratic approach and a community spirit, can only bless.

Themes

Gender Roles

Little Women challenged assumptions about women in nineteenth-century America. Marmee tells her daughters that they should not feel obligated to find husbands, but should seek fulfillment on their own. In chapter 9, she tells Meg and Jo:

> My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world□marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting. . . . [B]etter be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to have husbands. . . . Leave these things to time; make this home happy, so that you may be fit for homes of your own, if they are offered you, and contented here if they are not.

Through her example, Marmee shows that a home can be run successfully without a man supporting it, as hers is while Mr. March is away at war. While many women, like Aunt March, expected young women to pursue wealthy men, Marmee sees the value of marriage differently.

Jo is fascinating as a study of female independence in early American society. She is a tomboy who is scolded by her sisters for whistling, using slang, and behaving in "unmaidenly" ways. In chapter 1, Jo tells Meg:

> I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!

Jo is brash, outspoken, lively, and clever. She proclaims, "I am not afraid of anything," voicing an attitude altogether different from that of the stereotypical prim and proper young lady. As she matures, she takes more care with her appearance and adopts more ladylike mannerisms, but she does not sacrifice the sense that she is equal to any man.

Adolescence and Identity

Although Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy grow up in the same household, they develop very distinct identities. Marmee encourages them to be confident in themselves and to mature in wisdom and self-knowledge. Adolescence is a difficult period for anyone, so the girls' struggles are universal. Throughout the novel, the girls' basic identities remain consistent, but as they grow up, they come to understand their faults and work to improve themselves.

Meg's identity is anchored in pleasing her family, be it her mother and sisters or her husband. She is domestic and thrives on homemaking. Jo is stormy and independent, but eventually learns to control her temper. Even as an adult, the self-reliance she values is important in her decision-making. Jo is an unconventional person, so it is no surprise that she ultimately lives an unconventional life. Beth is harmonious and selfless. Were it not for her untimely death, she would likely have continued to grow as a warm and giving person who stays close to home. As the youngest, Amy is somewhat spoiled and acquires a taste for the finer things. This identity is fed by her marriage to Laurie, a wealthy husband who will dote on her and give her everything she desires.

Wealth and Poverty

The Marches are poor, although not so poor that they cannot help others. There is never any danger of the March family starving or losing their home, but they all know that they have little money to spare and must economize. Alcott teaches that everyone, even those who have little, has something to offer the world. Marmee and Beth's dedication to the poor German family, the Hummels, is evidence that for all their complaints, the Marches are quite fortunate. Laurie, who comes from a wealthy family, lives right next door to the Marches, and the contrast between the two houses is striking. In chapter 5, Alcott writes, "A low hedge parted the two estates. On one side was an old, brown house, looking rather bare and shabby. . . . On the other side was a stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury."

The economic inequality between the families, however, has no effect on their relationships. The girls enjoy visiting the Laurences' home to browse the library, admire the art, or stroll among the flowers in the conservatory. Yet there is no bitterness or deep envy. In fact, when the Laurences offer gifts, the Marches feel compelled to return the kindness, and do so without feeling that their offerings are any less valued. The affection between the families neutralizes economic differences that would taint weaker relationships.

Alcott shows, too, that the Marches are rich in ways that the Laurences are not. The Marches, after all, have a house full of lively girls who love one another and have fun together. There is a mother and a father, neither of which Laurie has, and a strong family foundation. Laurie admits to Jo that he watches the activities of the March house, and she understands his loneliness. Once they are friends, the girls make an effort to include Laurie in their fun, including initiating him into their secret club. By presenting

the disparities between the two families as she does, Alcott clearly shows her young readers that there are many kinds of wealth and poverty.

The "Good Match"

Although Aunt March attempts to exert her influence to see that Meg is married to an appropriately rich young man, Marmee knows better. Mr. Brooke accompanies Marmee to visit her sick husband and is forthright about his feelings for Meg. Marmee and Mr. March see that he is an honorable man who is a good match for their daughter. Still, the decision is Meg's□if she could not love Mr. Brooke, her parents would in no way force the union. This difference of opinion about what constitutes a "good match" shows the social views of the time, as expressed by Aunt March, in contrast to Alcott's own views, as expressed by Marmee.

Readers are often surprised and disappointed that Jo rejects Laurie's proposal of marriage. They are great friends, and he is charming, handsome, and passionate. Jo knows, however, that Laurie regards her writing as just another "lark" and would never fully support her efforts to make a career of writing. Further, it is clear that Jo's feelings for Laurie are friendly, even sisterly, and she cannot love him romantically. Her decision not to marry him is respectful of herself and of Laurie, as she wants him to have a wife who will love him as a wife should. By marrying Professor Bhaer, Jo can be herself, an independent woman who enjoys writing and teaching. Bhaer does not discourage her writing, but encourages her to try to do better than the sensational stories that come so easily to her. Sarah Elbert in *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and "Little Women,"* concluded, "Jo's journey is the only fully complete one in *Little Women* and it involves her learning to tell true love from romantic fancy." Elbert added that while the girls are ultimately paired up with men they truly love, Jo's marriage comes closest to Alcott's ideal, largely because Jo is closest to Alcott's ideal woman.

At first, the marriage of Laurie to Amy seems odd, but Alcott shows how well-matched they are for each other. They both have fine tastes and prefer a lifestyle of luxury to hard work. Further, Amy likes to be taken care of, something Jo would never allow Laurie to do for her.

Style

Point of View

Little Women is written from a third-person omniscient perspective. The narrator knows the girls' personalities, thoughts, and feelings intimately. This allows the reader to see happenings that the family often does not, such as when Jo cries because she is secretly disappointed that Amy is the one going to Europe.

The narrator also knows the girls' futures, as there are occasional references to what will happen at a future time. Alcott uses both subtle foreshadowing and explicit references to future events. When the Marches and the Laurences set up their makeshift post office, the Laurence's gardener sends a secret love letter to Hannah, the March's housekeeper. Alcott comments, "How they laughed when the secret came out, never dreaming how many love letters that little post office would hold in the years to come!" This statement not only intrigues adolescent readers, but also foreshadows future pleasant letters as well as the cruel joke Laurie plays on Meg by sending forged love letters.

The omniscient narrator does not abuse her power by censoring the characters' faults and mishaps. On the contrary, flaws and bad judgment are included in the story to add a dimension of realism and make the characters believable. Laurie's cruel joke on Meg, Meg's silly domestic dramas as a wife, Jo's intentionally not telling Amy to be careful on the ice□all of these show the characters as human beings with faults.

Structure

The structure of *Little Women* is episodic, alternating stories of each of the sisters. Each chapter focuses primarily on an incident in one of the girls' lives. This structure accomplishes two things. First, it requires a relatively short attention span that is appropriate for Alcott's young audience. Second, this structure makes it easier to see the girls' growth as young women. Rather than charting subtle cues, as an author might in an adult novel, Alcott allows the reader to see changes in the characters each time they are revisited. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Jo is unconcerned with her appearance and keeps her hair down, her clothes crumpled, and her boots untied. In subsequent scenes, Jo is seen tying her boots and putting her hair up, so that the reader notices the changes easily. Readers become aware that while they were watching Meg, Beth, and Amy, Jo grew up a little. The same is true for the other sisters, too.

Domestic-Centered Settings

Given the novel's time period and cast of characters, it is no surprise that the book is filled with domestic concerns and activities. Alcott takes this focus further, however, with

her attention to detail and her settings. She is frequently commended for the amount of detail in the story with regard to clothing, manners, appearance, sewing, and entertaining. The critic Madeleine B. Stern commented that Alcott's accomplishment is in presenting universal themes brought to life by domestic details and "local flavor." She adds, "By its documentary value alone, *Little Women,* as an index of New England manners in the mid-century, would be accorded a place in literary history."

Most of the action in the story takes place in the March home. When family members travel, as when Amy goes to Europe, news of the trip is related through letters sent home. When scenes unfold somewhere other than the March home, they are generally in a nearby house (such as Laurie's or Annie Moffat's) or some other domestic setting like the outdoor picnic Laurie hosts. Confining the settings in this way serves to keep the reader's attention on the household as the girls' lives unfold in familiar surroundings.

Foreshadowing

Throughout the novel, Alcott uses foreshadowing to suggest to her readers what lies ahead. Foreshadowing is a technique that establishes the narrator's credibility and creates an air of suspense that compels the reader to keep reading. At the end of part one, Jo bemoans the fact that Meg will marry Mr. Brooke and leave home. Laurie tries to console her by saying that they will have great fun after Meg is gone, and that they will go on a trip abroad to lift Jo's spirits. Jo only responds that Laurie's plan is nice, but "there's no knowing what may happen in three years." Three years later, Meg marries, and, shortly after, Laurie graduates from college and proposes to Jo. When she rejects him, he is devastated and goes abroad without her.

Beth's death is foreshadowed on at least three occasions. Early in the novel, in chapter 4, Alcott writes:

> There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind.

This passage foreshadows Beth's untimely death and the deep grief felt by her family at her passing. Later, as Jo considers whether or not to overhaul her novel manuscript for publication, Beth says only that she wants to see the book printed soon, and there is something in the way Beth says "soon" that propels Jo into action. Finally, as Amy prepares to leave for Europe, she tearfully hugs Laurie good-bye as she asks him to look after the family. He promises to do so and says that if anything should happen, he will come and comfort her. Alcott adds that he promises this "little dreaming that he would be called upon to keep his word." In fact, Beth dies shortly thereafter. She is able to see Jo's book in print, and her death comes while both Laurie and Amy are in Europe. He finds her and comforts her, after which they fall in love and marry.

Historical Context

The Role of Women in Nineteenth-Century America

In the nineteenth century, women were responsible for creating warm, happy homes for their husbands and children. While some families hired servants, most could not afford to hire help. The duties of running a household were staggering. A woman prepared three rather elaborate meals every day. Housecleaning, laundry, mending, and ironing were all done with painstaking care. Daughters were expected to help with housework to expedite chores and also to learn skills for their own future households.

Women were also accountable for the actions of the family outside the home. If a man took up excessive drinking or gambling, for example, his wife was blamed for not creating a suitable home environment. To create an ideal home, the wife handled all housework in addition to being polite, selfless, virtuous, and loving.

Despite the heavy domestic demands placed on a woman, it was sometimes necessary for her to seek additional work for economic reasons. While many tried to take work they could perform at home, such as laundry or sewing, others worked as governesses, teachers, or companions to the elderly. In some cases, women were able to make a living in the creative arts, such as writing. This was quite challenging because women were assumed to be inferior to men, and proper women were not expected to know very much about the outside world.

Philosophical and Social Reforms

Little Women opens during the Civil War, which took place from 1861 to 1865. Prior to that event, New England experienced a rise in philosophical interest and the spread of reform-mindedness. The Transcendental Movement was underway, especially in Massachusetts, where Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau lived. Transcendentalism rejected Puritanism, religious dogma, and strict adherence to rituals. Instead, it embraced individualism and naturalism, maintaining that there is a deep connection between the universe and the human soul. American transcendentalism officially began in 1836 in Boston, with the formation of the Transcendental Club, whose members included Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott.

Early in the nineteenth century, middle-class women began joining evangelical societies that promoted social and moral reform. As conflict mounted over the issue of slavery, women became involved, and by 1850 most members of abolitionist groups were women. From these beginnings sprang the women's rights movement, which would steadily gain momentum well into the twentieth century.

Education

Nineteenth-century formal education in America was limited, as evidenced by the fact that in 1860 there were only a hundred public high schools. Although there were more elementary schools, only about half of all children attended, and then only for forty-five days per year. Children were taught reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic, and sometimes history, geography, and grammar. Learning took the form of memorization and recitation, as opposed to critical thinking or creativity. This approach contrasts to Bronson Alcott's teaching methods, which were designed to encourage his daughters to think for themselves and learn facts instead of memorizing them for the short term.

Louisa certainly understood the distinction between her educational experience and that of many of her peers. Many families who were dissatisfied with public schooling opted to teach their children at home. Those who could afford it hired tutors for their children, as represented in the novel by Laurie's tutor, John Brooke. Formal education generally ended when a student turned fourteen or fifteen, especially when the student was female.

Discipline in public school was often harsh and humiliating. Corporal punishment, such as spanking or swatting, was common, although not all parents agreed with these methods. In *Little Women,* Amy is subjected to this sort of treatment by her teacher when she is caught with limes at school. Her teacher swats her hands and forces her to stand in front of the class until recess. Mrs. March agrees not to send Amy back to school, so she pursues her studies at home with Beth.

The Civil War

When the Civil War ended, more than 600,000 men had lost their lives and others were disabled. More Americans died in the Civil War than in all other American wars combined from the colonial period through the Vietnam War. It is unknown how many civilians were killed by guerrillas, deserters, and soldiers.

Because so many men were killed or seriously wounded in the war, American families were faced with the difficult task of supporting themselves without the help of the man of the house. Meager pensions to widows and veterans were not enough to restore financial stability. To make matters worse, most men were forever changed by the experience. Most had never traveled beyond their home towns, and serving in the military took them far away where they faced loneliness, fear, and daily confrontation with death and suffering. As veterans, they assembled in organizations and fostered a sense of patriotism for their sacrifices. For African Americans, serving in the military was beneficial in its own way because they could then make strong cases for citizenship.

During the war, women assumed larger roles in the social structure. They became temporary nurses, clerks, and factory workers. A few hundred women even disguised themselves as soldiers and fought on the battlefields. Once the war was over, however, traditional roles were resumed.

The economic consequences of the war were formidable. Consider that in 1860, the federal budget was $63 million, and by 1879, the total expenditures for the war were calculated at over $6 billion. This created extreme debt and limited the government's ability to function as it had prior to the war. In the South, economic hardship became the norm. Railroads, industrial operations, mechanical equipment, and livestock had been spent or destroyed. In contrast, the economy in the North thrived during and after the war. Statistics show that between 1860 and 1870, Northern wealth increased by 50 percent, while Southern wealth decreased by 60 percent. The Reconstruction Period, which represented efforts to reunite the country in political, economic, and social terms, would last twelve years□triple the length of the war.

Critical Overview

Although Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women* in 1868 for the sole purpose of making money, the novel is without question her most notable and enduring work. In fact, the book as it is read today contains the original text and its sequel, *Good Wives,* which was written a year after the first part. The second part was written in response to the demands of Alcott's young female readers, who were drawn to the individuality displayed by the novel's characters and wanted to know what would become of them. Upon the April 14 release of part two, Alcott's publisher was shocked by its sales. By the end of May, more than 13,000 copies had sold an incredible number at the time, and especially surprising because the book was written for young girls, not the general public. Critical response in 1868 and 1869 was as favorable as the readers' response, and Alcott was among the first children's authors to be taken seriously by literary critics. A review in *Nation* declared *Little Women* an "agreeable" story that appeals to juvenile and adult readers alike. The critic wrote that the March girls were "drawn with a certain cleverness."

When the second part of the novel was published, a critic wrote in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* that it was perhaps too mature for adolescent girls, but that it rings true by not resorting to the "false sentiment" so common in children's literature. In fact, Alcott's contemporaries as well as modern-day critics agree that the novel is remarkable for its reality and depth, standing in stark contrast to the too-sweet, overly didactic stories available to children at the time. Children were generally depicted as perfect and innocent, but Alcott gave her characters flaws and made no effort to conceal them. They remain virtuous, however, because they are aware of their weaknesses and strive to correct them. In modern terms, the characters in *Little Women* seem a bit too perfect, as many critics argue, but in the context of the mid-nineteenth century, they were characters whose likeness had never been seen. Not all critics praise the novel, however. Biographer Martha Saxton viewed *Little Women* as a sell-out for Alcott, who, according to Saxton, had great talent, yet squandered it on a book that was preachy and sentimental. Jane Gabin in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* on the other hand, deemed *Little Women* "markedly superior to other books of its genre" because of its unobtrusive "sermonizing" and its well-rounded characters. She added that in other books of the time, the villains and the heroes were clearly identified, but in Alcott's book, even the heroes have flaws and make mistakes. Lavinia Russ of *Horn Book* had a different view on the appeal of the book, arguing that the story teaches that life does not always provide neatly bundled happy endings, but that girls should still strive to be good people.

Alcott's sense of the challenges and joys of adolescence continues to impress readers. Since its publication, *Little Women* has never gone out of print, and some scholars attribute its staggering success to the universal themes of growing up and to Alcott's honest portrayal of the feelings, thoughts, worries, and delights that accompany it. In *New England Quarterly,* Madeleine Stern observed:

> The author's knowledge of adolescent psychology reveals itself in twofold form throughout the work, for it consisted first of an appeal to adolescents, the skill of making them laugh or cry, and secondly of an ability to describe adolescents, to catch and transfix the varied emotions and thoughts of the young.

Feminist critics are divided about the portrayal of females in *Little Women.* While some criticize the heavily domestic depiction of womanhood, others praise Jo as a breakout figure who blazes her own path and is able to have both love and a career. The fact that, in part two, Jo marries a man who is older and lacks passion seems too great a compromise to some critics who admired Jo's steadfast adherence to her principles in part one. Further, they interpret her working at Plumfield with her husband as sacrificing her writing after marriage.

Although the book is filled with submissive women who are content with domestic life (such as Meg), a great deal of feminist attention concentrates on Jo. Brigid Brophy of *New York Times Book Review* agreed that while the book is heavily sentimental, it still works because of the extraordinary character of Jo. Less taken with the novel, Elizabeth Janeway in *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature,* described it as "dated and sentimental and full of preaching and moralizing," but admitted that Jo makes the book worth reading nonetheless. She wrote that "Jo is . . . the one young woman in nineteenth-century fiction who maintains her individual independence, who gives up no part of her autonomy as payment for being a woman." Alison Lurie of *New York Review of Books* seems to agree with this notion, as she commented:

> From a mid-nineteenth century perspective, *Little Women* is both a conservative and a radical novel. . . . In contemporary terms, [Jo] has it all: Not only a household and children but two careers and she doesn't have to do her own housework and cooking.

Critics continue to debate the lasting qualities of *Little Women.* Whether it is the novel's touching presentation of growing pains, the triumphant female figure Jo, or the overall "human truth," as British author and critic G. K. Chesterton claims, there is no doubt that the novel as a whole has an enduring appeal. Despite its setting in a time and place unfamiliar to modern readers, the novel continues to speak to children and adults in a way that transcends mere nostalgia.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses autobiographical elements in Alcott's novel in contrast to the fictional decisions the author made. Factors such as Alcott's duty to her readership and wish fulfillment are considered.

That Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women* is heavily autobiographical is well known among literary scholars. Perhaps because she wrote the book merely for money, she found it economical to lift people and events out of her own life to create the story. Part one was written in 1868 and was intended to be the only story about the March family. Readers, however, were captivated by the girls and demanded to know more about their lives. The following year, Alcott wrote *Good Wives,* which now appears as part two in *Little Women.* Readers were thrilled with the continuing story of the Marches, although Alcott's intentions were not merely to appease her readers by writing a naive and romantic story. In part two, fiction overshadows fact, which leaves readers and scholars to wonder how Alcott made decisions about the fates of the sisters. While it is clear that certain aspects of part two are designed to satisfy her readership, others clearly are not. Was Alcott compromising with her readers (between what she knew they would want and what she thought was realistic), or was she exercising a bit of wish fulfillment in her novel?

Part one of *Little Women* is brimming with autobiographical elements, from important plot developments to minor details. Some scholars suggest that Alcott's initial reluctance to write the book, her quick completion of the manuscript in six weeks, and her minimal editing all indicate that she undertook writing the novel as a task to finish as quickly as possible. Using her life as a template allowed her to make shortcuts without sacrificing realism, characterization, or interesting story developments.

Each of the four sisters was modeled after one of Alcott's own sisters. Meg is the literary counterpart to Anna, Jo is Alcott's alter ego, Beth is the book's version of Elizabeth, and the letters of Amy's name can be rearranged to spell out her reallife inspiration, May. Most of the events in part one are based on actual events in Alcott's life, such as Meg's marriage and Jo's profound disappointment at having the family separated. Also, the Alcott girls donated their Christmas breakfast to a needy family one year, Alcott won a hundred dollars in a writing contest, and the girls often performed plays for neighborhood girls. Growing up, Alcott loved spending time with her sisters as much as Jo does, and she resolved early in life to be responsible for taking care of the family. After the failure of Fruitlands (Alcott's father's attempt to establish a utopian society), Alcott realized that her father could not be relied upon to support his wife and daughters. Alcott's mother realized this, too, and, like Marmee, worked diligently to be sure the family's needs were met. Mr. March is physically or emotionally absent throughout *Little Women,* and Alcott's father was not a reliable breadwinner or confidant.

Part one is more character driven than part two, presumably because Alcott is simply telling about the people in her life. It is unsatisfying as a selfcontained story, as it only introduces the girls, describes some of their scrapes, and tells how Meg comes to be engaged. Many scholars regard it as plotless, concluding that its success came from its detailed setting, quick pace, and delightful characters with whom young readers could readily identify. Because most characters in children's books at the time were too perfect, readers were less interested in what eventually became of them. In *Little Women,* however, readers saw themselves in the pages of the story and longed to know how things turned out for the March girls. Thus, being character driven is part one's strength.

In addition, part one reveals a great deal about Alcott's perceptions of her family life. Mr. March's absence reflects Alcott's inability to create a believable, involved father in an autobiographical work. Because her father was not an ideal paternal figure, she would have had difficulty imagining the familiar setting with a wonderful, warm, and connected father. Alcott's solution is to have Mr. March away at war, and then busy with his own affairs when he returns. Unlike the father, the sisters are all drawn with loving detail. Each sister has a unique personality, rather than a generic childlike temperament. Alcott's presentation of young girls who are flawed and struggling with growing up was revolutionary at the time. Her multidimensional characters reveal her closeness to her sisters and perhaps her belief that readers would love them even with their flaws, as she did.

In the character of Jo, Alcott reveals much about her perception of herself. Jo, like Alcott, is more interested in writing and in seeing her family happy than in finding a husband or in being proper. Jo is a coltish young woman who has far to go before she matures into her own brand of womanhood. Alcott never quite fit into the social circles around her, and she was never much interested in making friends or marrying. In fact, by the time *Little Women* was released, Alcott had become rather private and withdrawn. While her adoring readers wanted to know all about the woman who wrote such a lovely book, she preferred to keep to herself. Neither Jo nor Alcott can be described as a misfit, but their priorities are themselves and their families.

The novel's Laurie does not have a direct counterpart in real life, as Alcott never had such a friend as Laurie. He is a composite of many young men Alcott knew, and her inclusion of him in Jo's small circle indicates that Alcott felt more at ease with young men her age than with young women. The things Jo and Laurie have in common are the things that interested Alcott, and things she did not observe as being important to women in her peer group.

Not having planned a part two, Alcott had a difficult task before her as she set about writing it. In part one, she relied on her own immediate surroundings for material and inspiration, but with part two, she created characters and events. Alcott had important decisions to make about the paths her characters' lives would take. She was writing in response to her readership, so she made some effort to appease them, but some of the plot developments are unexpected and disappointing to readers. Despite her desire for luxurious things, Meg marries a poor clerk and learns to be happy with a simple lifestyle.

(Alcott's sister Anna also hoped for wealth yet married a poor man, so, here again, the author draws from her own life for material.) Most readers want Jo and Laurie to marry, but Jo rejects Laurie's proposal, only to marry an unlikely husband. Students of Alcott are curious about her reasons for these plot developments.

While it is tempting to imagine that Alcott wrote for Jo a fate she had hoped for herself, the author's correspondence proves otherwise. She knew that readers desperately wanted to see Jo marry, but Alcott was unwilling to make the obvious choice of Laurie as a husband. Alcott understands Jo so completely that she cannot allow her to marry Laurie, even though it disappoints most readers. Jo loves Laurie as a brother, not as a husband, and she knows that he does not fully appreciate how important her writing is to her. As his wife, she would be expected to socialize in high society and behave like a lady. Knowing herself well enough to know that the marriage would not be fulfilling, Jo refuses his proposal. When Laurie eventually meets up with Amy in Europe and they fall in love, Jo is truly happy for them both. She understands that her sister will love Laurie as he deserves to be loved and that she will be able to enjoy the wealthy life she so desires. Amy will let Laurie take care of her, something with which Jo would never be comfortable, even though it makes Laurie feel manly and needed. For Laurie, the union is ideal because he can be loved and he has someone interested in fashion, society, and entertaining. In other words, Amy thrives in the lifestyle that Laurie loves. (The union between Amy and Laurie is completely the product of Alcott's imagination, as May never married in real life.)

To provide a fitting husband for Jo, Alcott created Professor Bhaer, not because he is the type of man Alcott herself dreamed of meeting, but because he is almost comical as a romantic figure. While unusual, he is a good match for Jo, but Alcott's decision to direct Jo's life in this way was, in a sense, her way of snubbing her nose at traditional, predictable, sentimental romance. Professor Bhaer, then, seems to be a literary compromise between readers' desires and writer's attitudes. It is reasonable to believe that Alcott hoped to demonstrate to her readers the importance of keeping one's mind open in matters of love. After all, other passages in the book advise against marrying for any other reason than true love and happiness, a view that was not widespread at the time.

Professor Bhaer is not the dashing romantic figure Laurie is. Like Laurie, Bhaer is also a composite, but seems to be largely modeled after the Alcotts' friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom the author admired very much. Jo respects Bhaer because he is poor but happy, thoughtful, self-sufficient, and good-hearted. Further, he takes her writing seriously, encouraging her to give up working on the sensational stories she is accustomed to writing and instead to concentrate on writing quality fiction. He supports her talent and admires her lively independence. Jo's marriage to him allows her to be herself and to have both a career and love.

Alcott never married, but instead fulfilled her commitment to care for her family. She lived at home her entire life, writing and earning a considerable income for the household. Scholars speculate that in the novel, if Beth had not died, Jo would probably never have married. Beth's passing, however, left Jo free of family obligations. Yet in

Alcott's life, Elizabeth died and the author still stayed home. Perhaps this was because her father did not contribute to the family's finances much, or perhaps it was because Alcott never met her unusualbut- fitting match, as Jo did. She once commented that writing seemed to be her destined lifelong companion.

Perhaps the most disappointing event in the book is Beth's passing. Alcott's sister Elizabeth died at the age of twenty-three, so writing about Beth's death in the novel was undoubtedly very painful for Alcott. Here there is neither compromise nor wish fulfillment. Like Jo, Alcott was upset by the loss of her older sister to marriage and then devastated by the loss of her younger sister to illness. In Alcott's characterization of Beth as a saintly and frail child, the reader has a sense of Alcott's feelings about her own sister. It is common for people to exalt those who have died, especially those who have died young. Throughout the novel, Beth is regarded as a dear and selfless child whose example the sisters try to follow.

Undoubtedly, the life of Alcott's fictional counterpart Jo turned out happier than the author's did. Jo's life with Professor Bhaer was one Alcott did not want for herself, but one that did please her readers. While Jo had a devoted husband and a school for boys, and maintained her zest for life, Alcott had only her writing. She did not even particularly care for the children's books that brought her such fame and success; she preferred her adult thrillers, which garnered little attention. Unfortunately, Alcott could not foresee that, regardless of her own opinions of her work and her solitary life, she would be remembered fondly for generations and regarded as an American literary treasure.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *Little Women,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Murphy surveys critical approaches to Little Women, *finding "the novel does not permit rigid answers" to attempts to analyze its meaning and significance. Comparison is made with Mark Twain's* Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Twenty years of scholarship about Louisa May Alcott's most famous and enduring work, *Little Women,* testifies to the complicated process of reexamining a novel widely recognized as a classic in American children's literature. This critical reevaluation of Alcott has been complicated by the publication of her previously uncollected and largely unavailable gothic thrillers, which reveal a new dimension to the familiar author, both enriching our reactions to *Little Women* (especially to the silencing of Jo March's own anxious authorship of pseudonymous thrillers) and confirming our sense of the subversion in that sentimental text.

Biographies exploring the darker side of Alcott and reinterpreting her complicated family, as well as ongoing feminist work retrieving, recuperating, and reenvisioning American literature and cultural history, have all contributed to the scholarship on Alcott during the past two decades. Yet the text of *Little Women* remains something of a tarbaby, a sticky, sentimental, entrapping experience or place rather than a knowable object□and thus a fitting emblem of its own subversive content, which resists women's objectification and seeks a new vision of women's subjectivity and space. Some critics begin by directly recognizing the extraordinary power this work had for them and others in childhood. Others approach the novel with more apparent detachment, focusing on its repressive domesticity. For most of us, however, *Little Women* is a troubling text, a childhood icon that still resonates with images of positive female community, ideal and loving motherhood, and girlhood dreams of artistic achievement. Our reactions to the incarceration of Meg in claustrophobic domesticity, the mysterious, sacrificial death of good little Beth, the trivialization of Amy in objectifying narcissism, and the foreclosure of Jo's erotic and literary expression, are inextricably connected to our memories of our own struggles against these fates.

Not surprisingly, then, there is remarkable disunity in the contemporary reappraisals of the meaning and significance of Alcott's novel. Indeed, the disagreement is so pervasive and individual opinions so frequently contradictory, within and between essays, as to suggest both the abiding and seductive power of this text for many female readers, and the rich plenitude of its still unexplored critical possibilities Is *Little Women* adolescent, sentimental, and repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become "little," domesticated, and silent? Is the novel subversive, matriarchal, and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female domesticity it purports to admire?

The novel does not permit rigid answers to these questions. To account for its enduring power, *Little Women* must instead be seen as a multifaceted novel, a children's book regarded (or at least defined) as "moral pap" by its author. It preaches domestic containment and Bunyanesque self-denial while it explores the infinity of inward female

space and suggests unending rage against the cultural limitations imposed on female development. Like the patchwork quilts of her predecessors and contemporaries, Alcott's novel assembles "fragments into an intricate and ingenious design" containing both messages of "female patience, perseverance, good nature and industry" and "an alternative model of female power and creativity." Its power derives from its contradictions rather than prevailing despite them.

At the same time, the terms of critical debate over *Little Women* are themselves instructive because they point obsessively to crucial episodes and characters, and to the book's uneasy closure. Thus Carolyn Heilbrun finds in Jo March "the single female model continuously available after 1868 to girls dreaming beyond the confines of a constricted family destiny to the possibility of autonomy and experience initiated by one's self," but she concludes that "Alcott betrayed Jo" and suggests that Jo is a positive model only if we overlook her marriage. Patricia Spacks places the emphasis differently, finding that *Little Women* enforces repressive lessons in female docility, passivity, and silence, while its "glorification of altruism as feminine activity . . . reaches extraordinary heights." For Spacks, Jo's marriage is not ambiguous but punitive, not a betrayal but the logical culmination of the novel's didactic and regressive intent.

By contrast, Nina Auerbach concludes that the novel's portrayal of female materiality and selfsufficiency subverts ideals of domesticated womanhood, and that the matriarch, Mrs. March, allows her daughters "the freedom to remain children and, for a woman, the more precious freedom *not* to fall in love." Including the entire March trilogy in her appraisal, rather than the single novel, Auerbach claims that by the end Jo "has attained the position of Marmee, but her title is more formidable than that comfortable, clinging name." Rather than a betrayal or punishment, then, Alcott's treatment of Jo, and the implications of her marriage, are eventually affirmative, even triumphant.

Elizabeth Langland and Madelon Bedell both incorporate these tensions within their analyses, positing a multilayered text with ambivalent, even contradictory messages. "The narrative surface of *Little Women* asserts that marriage is woman's fulfillment. Underneath this principal narrative, however, lies a possibility closer to Alcott's experience," Langland claims, finding that covert text primarily embodied in Jo, who resists the book's lessons in "disengagement from the active world and its strife and a retreat from self-assertion into marriage." Similarly, Bedell finds that beneath the surface narrative lies "the legend, which the story masks. The theme of the legend is also concerned with the sisters' struggles against the inevitability of growing up, of leaving the delightful state of childhood for the restricted, narrow, and burdened condition of womanhood."

Again and again, as this brief review suggests, feminist critics collide against the sticky, protean implications of this ostensibly childish text: the absent, passive, feminized father who yet ruthlessly diminishes his "little" women; the radically present, loving, self-sacrificing□and perpetually angry □mother who makes girlhood so literally seductive and adulthood so utterly deadly; the erotic, rich, musical, half-Italian brother-lover, Laurie, whom Jo eventually rejects for the elderly, patriarchal German professor; and above all Jo March, with whom we all so passionately identified: gawky, loving, intense,

funny, furious, creative, and incredibly active. It is through Jo that we are compelled to question the painfully limited choices available to women artists. It is through Jo that we are forced to acknowledge acute discontent with Bunyan's model of Pilgrim's Progress□and the nineteenth-century model of active girls dwindling into docile little women. It is through Jo that we experience the complicated intersections and overlappings of eroticism, anger, and creativity□and mourn the apparent effacing of all three by the novel's end, without truly believing they are indeed gone.

Whether we see *Little Women* as "a perfectly disgusting, banal, and craven service to male supremacy" or "a gratifying taste of [Alcott's] simple, stable vision of feminine completeness," we cannot evade the textured ambiguity and quiltlike complexity of its image of female development, the deep uncertainty with which Alcott struggles to portray female loss of freedom through acculturation and adolescence as somehow enhancing and morally sustaining. In fact, these tensions and ambivalences contribute to the power of *Little Women,* focusing attention on the insidious as well as sustaining elements of the myth of female moral superiority and on the disjunctions between male and female stories of maturation. . . .

An initial focus on caring for the self in order to ensure
survival is followed by a transitional phase in
which this judgment is criticized as selfish. The criticism
signals a new understanding of the connection
between self and others . . . the concept of responsibility.
. . . This concept . . . and its fusion with a maternal
morality . . . characterizes the second perspective.
. . . However . . . the exclusion of herself
gives rise to problems in relationships, creating a disequilibrium
that initiates the second transition . . . a
reconsideration of relationships . . . to sort out the
confusion between self-sacrifice and care. . . . The
third perspective focuses on the dynamics of relationships
and dissipates the tension between selfishness
and responsibility through a new understanding
of the interconnection between other and self.

While the surface narrative or pattern of *Little Women* may well be the standard sentimental "moral pap" produced in the nineteenth century to show girls their proper sphere, at least one of its many subtexts or pieces follows quite closely the outline of female ethical development suggested by Carol Gilligan. It does so, too, with the clearly subversive suggestion that such an alternative model of maturation is morally superior to (warring, money-hungry) male development. The novel opens on Christmas Eve, and the first words we hear are complaints about a lack of presents□of material presence. Quickly, however, the March sisters come to see their complaints as selfish: "I *am* a selfish girl!" Amy exclaims, "but I'll truly try to be better." During the course of book 1, the sisters struggle heroically against such selfishness, moving toward understanding themselves in relation to others.

During these pilgrimages, Meg learns about the venality of high society, and by implication American capitalism, accepting in its place the alternate model of female adulthood Marmee offers: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives." Amy, the least likeable and most narcissistic and ambitious of the four, learns□with Marmee's help□that "there is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long; even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one." Beth, whose selfishness is less immediately obvious, learns□without help from Marmee□that her debilitating shyness may in fact be an unkindness to others. Jo, of course, battles the ferocity of her selfish anger. In the process of her arduous journey, Jo learns "not only the bitterness of remorse and despair, but the sweetness of self-denial and self-control"□again instructed by Marmee.

By the end of book 1, these struggles produce significant changes that are named and approved by their father upon his return. The initial sacrifice of material goods□Christmas breakfast□has been so internalized that Meg abandons her vanity and materialism and becomes submissive to her comparatively impoverished future husband. Amy makes a will renouncing all her worldly goods. Beth nearly dies in sacrificial service to others, and Jo renounces not only her beautiful hair but her beloved sister, Meg, and the illusions of safety and childhood as well.

Book 2 marks their more painful attempts to negotiate a reconciliation between a notion of goodness equated with extreme self-sacrifice and the needs of their own authentic characters. Meg struggles to be both a nurturing mother and a fully sexual adult woman in her marriage, and she seems to achieve some kind of balance, moving beyond her initial self-immersion in the nursery and learning to share child care responsibilities with her husband. Amy devises a socially appropriate balance between narcissism and selfishness, becoming her own most triumphant art object: "Everything about her mutely suggested love and sorrow□the blotted letters in her lap, the black ribbon that tied up her hair, the womanly pain and patience in her face; even the little ebony cross at her throat seemed pathetic to Laurie."

Beth, of course, dies from a mysterious disease arising from terminal goodness□from her inability to distinguish between nurturing others and the radical self-denial expected of femininity. Jo, after rejecting erotic love and renouncing a literary career, acknowledges her own vulnerability and need: "A sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon." Her marriage to Professor Bhaer offers her a way to balance personal need and cultural expectations: "I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now," she tells her fiance, "for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that."

Yet while this heroic pattern certainly exists and provides some of the book's insidious power□ a message of consolation to young girls for the loss of childhood freedom□it is mitigated and contradicted by its own terms, as well as by other, seriously conflicting,

messages. Most notably, the journeys toward selflessness in book 1 and interconnection in book 2 are undercut both by an obsessive diminution of their context and by the incessant imagery of patriarchal observation that renders nearly every ethical achievement artificial, theatrical—an objectivized scene. Meg's domestic battles in book 2, for example, take place in a home so minuscule it is hard to imagine adult human beings living in it: "The little brown house . . . was a tiny house, with a little garden behind and a lawn about as big as a pocket handkerchief." The last vision we have of Meg, before she disappears completely from sight in the text, describes her as "on the shelf": "Safe from the restless fret and fever of the world . . . learning . . . that a woman's happiest kingdom is her home, her highest honor the art of ruling it not as a queen, but as a wise wife and mother."

More ambiguously, Amy's artistic efforts are consistently described as comical or insignificant, their only permanent memorial being a suggestively oedipal gouged foot. Her work is either trivial (mudpies) or dangerous (burning, cutting, immobilizing). Although she apparently continues her lethal artistic activity after her marriage—turning her frail daughter into yet another aesthetic object —she decides after only one trip to Rome that "talent isn't genius" and gives up all her "foolish hopes," as if possessing the genius of Michelangelo were a woman's only excuse for pursuing artistic activity, as if she had no responsibility to nurture mere talent. Beth, of course, is rendered literally angelic and eventually nonexistent rather than simply tiny: like Meg she is safely removed from the trials of life, and her death is the clearest message in the novel about the ominous dangers of selflessness.

Still, it is Jo's struggle that most directly reveals Alcott's ambivalence about female morality and betrays the rage beneath the obsessive diminution. When Amy burns Jo's much-cherished manuscript, Jo is quite naturally furious—and thus guilty of being quick-tempered. Yet even Jo refers to the manuscript as her "little book," while the narrator explains that "it was only half a dozen little fairy tales . . . [and] it seemed a small loss to others." Later, Meg advises Amy on how to make up with Jo, telling her "You *were* very naughty, and it *is* hard to forgive the loss of her precious little book," suggesting by her emphasis that Amy was not very naughty and that the little book was not so precious. While the cause of Jo's impermissable anger is ruthlessly minimized, the consequences are nonetheless enormous—and deadly: Amy falls through the ice and nearly drowns.

The narrative emphasis on the triviality of these tribulations (especially in bk. 1), so ominously shadowed by images of death, suggests Alcott's own ambivalence about the cult of feminine altruism and its domestic context. Furthermore, she portrays the entire pilgrimage itself as an act, a game; the progression of the girls' roles is objectivized, viewed, and judged by a benevolent, absent patriarch. The sisters are learning not simply to be selfless, but to be objects, viewed by patriarchal subjects. Amy's original sense of selfishness, for example, originates in a desire to be seen differently by her father, while Marmee's image of ideal womanhood is explicitly of an Other, a thirdperson object: "beautiful, accomplished, good, admired, loved, respected." Her sermon on anger reinforces this objectification, for she conveys her own laborious process of learning to control her anger specifically as an experience of being watched, observed, and judged by her passionless husband.

Alcott's penchant for the theatrical is well known, and numerous critics have noticed the degree to which the role of the little woman is a (painfully) learned one: "Indeed, discovering the real self of the woman playing the little woman is an impossible task, in part because the essence of the role is that it appears to be the 'real' self." The March sisters' pilgrimage is a game in a way that Huck's river voyage most emphatically is not. Yet the game is as life-threatening and dangerous as anything Huck experiences, precisely because it excludes as hostile the entire outside world (defined by distant, deadly warfare, diseased and demanding poor families, and venal, trivial society) while imposing an ostensibly empowering role of female altruism which offers moral superiority as compensation for domestic bondage, gouged artistic aspirations, deadly self-sacrifice, and the immolation of voice.

The terms in which Alcott depicts this voyage of female ethical development suggest the impossibility of either freely choosing or fully rendering in fiction a new understanding of the woman-self in relation to others, if that understanding must be achieved within a culture that defines women as powerless and marginal, and confines all new understandings to the old, safe, and imprisoning domestic sphere. Yet the female pilgrimage Alcott traces is strikingly close to the shape of female ethical development Gilligan has described, and however impossible Alcott found it to move this pilgrimage fully beyond the confines of her own culture, the radically assertive image of female selfworth, struggle, and heroism she portrays in *Little Women* surely accounts for some of the book's insidious hold over its readers.

Carol Gilligan's theories of female ethical development begin to explain the power of *Little Women* by suggesting an underlying shape and direction for a reading of its characters' pilgrimage and an interpretation of its narrative failure, as located in its collapse against the borders of patriarchal culture. The feminist psychoanalytical theories of Nancy Chodorow, Jessica Benjamin, and Jane Flax□among many others□offer insights in their explorations of the site of collapse, the precise place where female narrative collides against patriarchal boundaries□the problem of desire. Indeed, the pattern of the female infant's differentiation, as traced by these theorists, strikingly prefigures the pattern of conflict, and apparent impossibility of resolution, that the adult female experiences and that Alcott's novel so vividly demonstrates in Jo's struggle for love and voice.

Feminist theorists have begun to deconstruct and problematize the classical Freudian model of infant development, with its patriarchal assumptions about the nature of individuality, eroticism, and female otherness, and to reveal its implicit contradictions, while suggesting an alternative, less oppressive model of subjectivity, according to which "differentiation happens *in relation to* the mother. . . . Separateness is defined relationally; . . . adequate separation, or differentiation, involves not merely perceiving the separateness, or otherness, of the other. It involves perceiving the person's subjectivity and selfhood as well." Central to much feminist theory is the return of the mother, not as scapegoat or savior, but as the primary, if inadvertent, enforcer of patriarchal values as well as their victim, and thus as fulcrum of the private and public. Such a perspective leads to a radically new understanding of the way a child's development is culturally determined, especially by the effect on the individuation of

female□and male□infants. The institution of motherhood in a patriarchal culture achieves not only the reproduction of mothering but the perpetuation of patriarchy. . . .

Much of *Little Women's* power derives from its exploration of the previously repressed, complex mother-daughter relationship, without portraying that bond as either idealized perfection or pernicious destruction. Marmee loves and socializes, nurtures and stifles her daughters, offering them a vision of perfect love and oneness that heterosexuality cannot hope to duplicate, and an alternate model of identity through community, domesticity, and altruism that their culture can only tolerate by subsuming it in the archetype of female goodness that kills Beth. Thus the dream of reconciliation □of expressing subjectivity in/through community□is, like the quest for ethical development, subverted by the limitations of a patriarchal culture that consistently trivializes the female's narrative and objectivizes her subjectivity. The vision of community, altruism, and caring for others that Marmee expresses is either ambiguous (as in her request that they give their Christmas breakfast for the poor), or destructive (as in the painful, diseased effect of Beth's extreme selflessness), or trivialized (as in the girls' foolish, domesticated experiences spending one week pleasing only themselves).

Even more profoundly, however, Marmee's active presence in this text raises the dangerous possibility of nonphallic eroticism, a different focus of desire. Once again, the contrast with Huck Finn is instructive. Huck's journey downriver, away from the Widow Brown and civilization, conforms with remarkable precision to the young boy's patriarchally enforced and approved development:

"The salient feature of male individuality is that it grows out of the repudiation of the primary identification with and dependency on the mother . . . [leading] to an individuality that stresses . . . difference as denial of commonality, separation as denial of connection; . . . where independence seems to exclude all dependency rather than be characterized by a balance of separation and connection." In moving downriver, Huck moves consistently away from dependency and connection, separating completely from the trappings of civilization in his quest for absolute independence. Jo March, of course, neither seeks nor achieves such a selfhood. Rather, her intensely loving connection with her mother has fostered "a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for agency and relatedness." Her crisis occurs not so much from a need to resist dependency or assert autonomy as from a need to express desire. However, this quest is deeply complicated by the same powerful maternal figure who offers hope of a more balanced vision of identity.

For Marmee's seductive, loving presence, which creates a profound and inescapable homoerotic undercurrent throughout the novel, eventually subverts the appeal of heterosexual eroticism entirely, while the text utterly refuses to imagine or tolerate any other kind of desire. Thus while homoeroticism is never permitted direct expression, it dominates the actions and feelings of the female characters. Even Meg's first thought, after being married, is of her mother: "The minute she was fairly married, Meg cried, 'The first kiss for Marmee!' and turning, gave it with her heart on her lips." More significantly, when Jo confesses her loneliness and desire for love after Beth's death, she rejects her mother's characterization of heterosexual love as "the best love of all,"

claiming "Mothers are the *best* lovers in the world, but I don't mind whispering to Marmee that I'd like to try all kinds."

Yet the distorting compromises enforced by patriarchal culture require that a girl repress her primal, homoerotic love for her mother, shifting instead to a learned, differentiating heteroerotic love for her father. Just as the patriarchal context of their pilgrimage prevents the sisters from fully exploring the potential of a new understanding of the self in relation to others, or a new vision of separateness defined relationally, the imperatives of phallocentric culture demand that women resist "our earliest carnal interaction" with mothers, thus producing "women [who] are encouraged to behave narcissistically as sex objects or masochistically as mothers, either position being a defense against the female body's resonance with primitive fears and needs." Both reactions are distinctly evident in *Little Women,* from Amy's narcissistic objectification of herself to Meg's domestic retreat into invisibility and Beth's deadly masochism.

Jo most vividly acts out the painful implications of this culturally distorted psychic and erotic development. Jo is the most passionate in her resistance to adulthood, and especially to heterosexuality, wanting to marry Meg herself to keep the childhood family intact and wishing that "wearing flat-irons on our heads would keep us from growing up." Jo is also the most tormented about her own gender, presenting herself constantly in masculine images. Her cross-dressing language and behavior reflect very real conflict: as a boy, Jo would be socially independent, able to go off to war with her father, or to "run away [with Laurie] and have a capital time." More importantly, she would also be compensated for the price of that independence□ the loss of her pre-oedipal oneness with Marmee by the "promise of another mommy as a reward for the renunciation" of her maternally directed desires. Thus her desire to be a boy reveals her erotic attachment toward her mother, while her culture denies Jo both the possibility of independence and the promise of sexual gratification that patriarchy offers boys. At the same time, the nurturing female community of her family, rather than providing an alternative world, is eroded by death and marriage and shadowed by suggestions of triviality and patriarchal observation and objectification.

Jo's terror of heterosexuality is the most obvious result of her passionate attachment to Marmee, while her sense of her own "sexuality is muted by the fact that the woman she must identify with, her mother, is so profoundly desexualized." Numerous critics have noted, for example, how foolish and unconvincing are the stated terms of her rejection of Laurie. "Our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable. . . . I'm homely and awkward and odd and old, and you'd be ashamed of me . . . and I shouldn't like elegant society and you would, and you'd hate my scribbling." Jo and Laurie get along so well precisely because of their passions (quick tempers and strong wills), while Laurie has always been the most devoted advocate of Jo's literary endeavors (unlike her eventual husband, Professor Bhaer, who oversees the burning of all her writing). Furthermore, our initial image of Laurie is of a moody, passionate Italian musician, and hence of someone equally bored by the triviality of elegant society, the Romantic ideal brother-lover, not the wealthy Indian tea merchant he somewhat implausibly becomes.

Beneath the superficial absurdity of these claims is Jo's bitterly negative self-image, a wounded selfesteem entirely consistent with her vehement maternal identification in a patriarchal culture. However, Jo's refusal of Laurie is essentially and explicitly an absolute rejection of heterosexual passion: "I don't see why I can't love you as you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't." Her most intense attachment is to Marmee; she wants to mother Laurie, not marry him. The ambiguity of Jo's rejection of him derives not from her repudiation of romantic love and the conventional "happy ending" but from the fact that she cannot, within the confines of this text and of heterosexuality, find any way to act out her own desires.

When Jo does finally marry, she turns to the elderly and impoverished scholar, Professor Bhaer, and she does so not in passion but in need, companionability, and loss. Moreover, she turns finally to a man identical to her own father, a weak yet punitive figure who reinforces that cruelly negative self-image which Laurie so consistently challenged. Jo's husband is both suggestively feminine (poor, alien, and powerless) and explicitly patriarchal (scholarly, repressive, and authoritarian). Her marriage suggests a capitulation to the conventional Freudian narrative of female development in which a woman marries her father. If she cannot marry Marmee, or love another woman erotically, she can follow the dictates of her culture by becoming her mother and marrying her father. In doing so, she confirms the elusive authority of Mr. March, who, despite his physical absence from the text, is the primary agent of trivialization and objectification. Moreover, Jo confirms the inadvertent authority of her mother as a socializing force, a woman who produces daughters adept in sacrifice and suffering but unequipped to express desire of any kind.

In portraying the maternal figure as radically present and vocal, Alcott reveals the enormous difficulties daughters experience in finding their own identity under such a powerful shadow□especially in a patriarchal context that refuses to tolerate a vision of active, communal subjectivity and that cannot tolerate any challenge to phallocentric eroticism. Yet Marmee's subversive presence also violates the usual narrative of female development. Jo remains inescapably the subject of her own story, and her eventual marriage is enormously complicated, rejecting conventional heterosexual romantic models of erotic love, while reconciling her with her father (or with patriarchy) and offering her a place of her own. As comrade, teacher, and mother in the school she inherits from her aunt and manages with her husband, she creates a life that combines intimacy and community with agency and independence. The conclusion of her oedipal narrative moves tentatively, ambiguously, toward a new statement of desire, "a relationship to desire in the *freedom to:* freedom to be both with and distinct from the other."

The power of *Little Women* derives in large measure from the contradictions and tensions it exposes and from the pattern it establishes of subversive, feminist exploration colliding repeatedly against patriarchal repression. Like the log cabin quilt pattern Elaine Showalter uses to explore the underlying structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Little Women,* too, is constructed on a "compositional principle . . . [of] contrast between light and dark," between exploration and entrapment, desire and denial, expression and

repression. What Showalter terms the "symbolic relationship to boundaries" in the quilting pattern perfectly expresses the narrative pattern in *Little Women,* which consistently moves us to the outer boundaries of representational fiction in its effort to depict a resolution beyond the either/or constraints of the author's culture.

The text is constructed of contrasting pieces that depict both the female narrative of ethical development and its dark, insidious alternative of static female saintliness; both the passionate quest for a reconciliation of desire with separation and its darker suggestions about maternal eroticism, coercion, and socialization, both the artist's search for authentic female voice and its painful shadowing image of the failure of existing forms to express that voice. In each voyage or pilgrimage□each pattern of female quest□Alcott moves the narrative simultaneously to the borders of possibility in patriarchal culture and to the deep core of yearning for maternal oneness. This book is passionately memorable for young girls because it warns of the dangers that lie ahead□domestic incarceration, narcissistic objectification, sacrificial goodness, and the enforced silencing of voice, eroticism, and anger□and partly because it offers an alternative vision of adulthood-in-community, of female subjectivity, and above all of female oedipal narrative, restoring the lost, maternal presence in our lives.

The sites where Alcott's narrative flounders, where the shape of her textual pattern crashes against the absolute nature of her culture's borders, are the sites we are still exploring today. If her novel fails fully to sustain an image of resolution that transcends either/or choices, her failure suggests much that remains real and enduring in our own experience.

Source: Ann B. Murphy, "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women,*" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* Vol. 15, No. 3, Spring 1990, pp. 562-85.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Elbert discusses the major themes in Little Women: *"domesticity, the achievement of individual identity through work, and true love."*

I may be strong minded, but no one can say I'm out
of my sphere now, for woman's special mission is>
supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm
to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the
home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go.

"Jo March,*" Little Women,* Chapter 46

The title of Louisa May Alcott's most famous book is taken from a commonplace nineteenth-century term. In the opening chapter, Marmee reads a Christmas letter from her absent husband to his daughters, which tenderly admonishes them to "conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder of my little women." This sentimental diminutive is puzzling in a feminist who was concerned with augmenting, rather than diminishing, woman's status. Such belittlement was part of the woman problem, as Alcott knew. The title appears even more puzzling when we consider that *Little Women* deals with the problems common to girls growing into womanhood.

Alcott had no intention of sentimentalizing the struggles of young women, so we must look elsewhere for an explanation of the title. We find one in the works of Charles Dickens, which Alcott read and took with her to the Union Hotel during the Civil War. For several decades Dickens had moved English and American readers to tears with his tender depictions, imitated but never equalled, of childhood woe. Dickens cared most deeply for the misery of exploited children, abused strangers in a venal adult world, but often remarkably capable of fending for themselves. Dickensian girls are particularly self-reliant, able to care for their siblings by the time they are "over thirteen, sir," as the girl "Charley" says to Mr. Jarndyce in *Bleak House.* In *Bleak House,* in fact, the term "little women" makes a prominent appearance. Esther, ward of the generous, sweethearted Mr. Jarndyce, has the distinction of becoming the first well-known "little woman" in literature. Her guardian says to her, "You have wrought changes in me, little woman," indicating that she has widened and deepened his sensibilities and hence his philanthropy.

Esther saves many people during the course of the novel, including the girl "Charley" whom she takes in and nurses through a bout of smallpox. Charley herself had contracted the disease from Jo, another pathetic Dickensian orphan. Inevitably, Esther comes down with smallpox, which leaves her face scarred and sets her musing about the meaning of "little woman."

Although only twenty-one years old, Esther has been close to death and realizes how short time is for "little women." No longer a child, yet not an adult, she finds life fleeting

and precious. Dreadfully confused, she talks about the stages of her life, feeling herself at once "a child, an elder girl, and the little woman I had been so happy as." The problem, she thinks, is that the stages are not so distinct as she had once innocently supposed. Rather, they seem joined together and weighted down by similar "cares and difficulties," which are hard to reconcile or understand.

When Louisa May Alcott employed the term "little women," she infused it with this Dickensian meaning. *Little Women* portrays just such a complex overlapping of stages from childhood to elder child, little woman to young woman, that appears in *Bleak House.* Like Esther in that novel, each of Alcott's heroines has a scarring experience that jars her into painful awareness of vanished childhood innocence and the woman problem.

Esther's job as part-time narrator in *Bleak House* is given to Jo in *Little Women,* but there the resemblance between the two characters ends. Jo comes close to bounding off the pages of her book; an American heroine, she has fits of exuberance alternating with sighs of half-chastened humility. Unlike Esther, and very much like her creator, Jo writes a story that succeeds miraculously even though she "never knew how it happened." "Something," Jo declares, "got into that story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it." She put "humor and pathos into it," says saintly Mr. March, sure that his daughter had "no thought of fame or money in writing" her story.

In fact, of course, Louisa May Alcott, unlike Jo, produced the story of *Little Women* in record time for money. As she reviewed the first page proofs, she found that "it reads better than I expected; we really lived most of it and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it." Five succeeding generations have laughed and cried over *Little Women.* It may well be that each generation has its own favorite incidents and lessons. What remains indisputable is that every generation's critics and fans love Jo. What appeals to readers across time may therefore be Alcott's depiction of the woman problem, the conflict between domesticity and individuality that first presents itself at just the moment when little women move from girlhood to womanhood.

Critical Essay #4

The novel develops three major themes: domesticity, the achievement of individual identity through work, and true love. The same motifs appear in *Little Men, Jo's Boys, Eight Cousins, Rose in Bloom* and *An Old Fashioned Girl.* None has been out of print since first written. Together they comprise a fictional record of liberal feminist ideology, process, and programs from 1867 through 1886 in America.

From the outset Alcott established the centrality of household democracy, underscoring the importance of "natural" cooperation and mutual selfsacrifice within family life. The March cottage shelters the four sisters and their parents, all of whom love and depend upon one another. Even the family poverty, so reminiscent of Louisa's own, serves to reinforce democratic practice in the family. With the help of Hannah, who worked as a maid for Mrs. March in better days and now considers herself a "member of the family," all the women work together to accomplish household chores, making the most of meager means by sharing everything.

The virtues of mutual self-sacrifice and domestic cooperation, however, must be proven to the March girls before they can recognize how important such virtues are to their self-realization. Independent- minded and childishly selfish, the girls must learn how to shape their individualities in harmony with the interests of the family. In an important episode Alcott describes the tactics used by Mrs. March to win her daughters to a higher social standard.

After listening to Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy pine for the "vacations" enjoyed by wealthier friends, Marmee agrees to release them from domestic duties for one week. She allows them to structure their time in any way they please. On the first morning, the neat inviting cottage is suddenly a different place. Meg, coming down to a solitary breakfast, finds the parlor "lonely and untidy," because "Jo had not filled the vases, Beth had not dusted, and Amy's books lay about scattered." Before long, selfishness produces more domestic disasters, which increase alarmingly as the week progresses. Jo gets sunburnt boating too long with Laurie, and headachy from spending hours devouring her cherished novels. "Giving out" her ordinary sewing chores, Meg falls to "snipping and spoiling" her clothes in an attempt to be fashionable. Amy sketches lazily under a hedge and getting drenched by a summer rain, ruins her best white frock. Beth makes a mess out of her doll's closet, leaves the mess, and goes off to practice some new music. By the end of the day, she is left with "the confusion of her closet" and, "the difficulty of learning three of four songs at once." All these small troubles make the girls grumpy and ill-tempered.

The experiment, however, is far from over. Excessive attention to self-pleasure produces a scarcity of necessities, including food. Emulating the little red hen, Mrs. March decides that those who do not work shall not eat. She gives Hannah a holiday, and the maid leaves with these parting words: "Housekeeping ain't no joke." Unable to rely on the experience and counsel of Hannah and their mother, the girls produce a breakfast featuring "boiled tea, very bitter, scorched omelette, and biscuits speckled with

saleratus." Jo caters a luncheon for friends, only to discover that she can't make anything "fit to eat" except "gingerbread and molasses candy." So she sails off to purchase "a very young lobster, some very old asparagus, and two boxes of acid strawberries." She boils the asparagus for an hour until the heads are "cooked off" and the stalks "harder than ever." She undercooks the lobster and the potatoes, and sprinkles salt instead of sugar on the strawberries. . . .

Returning home to find her daughters miserable over the death of Pip and their failures as homekeepers, Mrs. March easily persuades them to admit that "it is better to have a few duties, and live for others." This experiment, she says, was designed to show you "what happens when everyone thinks only for herself. Now you know that in order to make a home comfortable and happy," everyone in it must contribute to the family welfare. Marmee has also proven to the girls that domestic work is real work, giving women a "sense of power and independence better than money or fashion." She has shown them that home life becomes a "beautiful success" only if work alternates with leisure, independence with cooperation and mutual concern.

Although this episode deals almost exclusively with girls, Alcott integrated men into her vision of cooperative family life. Men too should benefit from and participate in this family experience, but only on the grounds that they respect the independence and equal authority of women within the home.

Accepting, even glorifying the importance of women's domestic work, Alcott emphasizes that men are homeless without women. Since the ability to create a home and sustain a family supercedes fame and money as evidence of success and civilization, it follows that women have already proved themselves in the world; thus their ability to extend their sphere is unquestioned in *Little Women.* Homeless men, despite wealth, wages and worldly experience, are motherless children. Meg's suitor, John Brooke, is attracted to the March cottage in large part because he is a lonely young man who has recently lost his mother. Laurie is motherless, which excuses most of his faults, and Mr. Laurence, his grandfather, has neither wife, daughter, or granddaughter. Mr. March alone has a proper home and knows his place in it, returning from the war to augment, but not supercede, Marmee's authority. He wholly accepts the female abundance around him, tending the flock of his tiny parish and leaving domestic arrangements to his womenfolk. . . .

Alcott advances ideas about the place of men in the family that emerged out of her domestic experiences with her parents, despite her belief in universal laws of progress and democracy. On the whole, she does not paint a compelling picture of marital equality in *Little Women.* Instead she presents the possibility of educating and parenting a new generation of little men and little women. In the second part of *Little Women* Alcott describes the married life of John and Meg Brooke. Theirs is no ideal egalitarian marriage, but then John Brooke was not raised by Marmee. The single wage-earner for his family, John provides a domestic servant but does not share domestic chores himself, except for disciplining his son in the evening. Meg is totally dependent upon his income both for household and personal expenses. Careful of her household accounting, she nevertheless often behaves like an impulsive child. On one occasion,

she is tempted by a length of lovely violet silk while shopping with an old friend, Sallie Moffet. The silk costs fifty dollars, an enormous sum to the young couple. When Meg tells John that she has bought the silk, he responds only that "twenty-five yards of silk seems a good deal to cover one small woman, but I've no doubt my wife will look as fine as Ned Moffet's when she gets it on." Meg is overwhelmed with remorse at her own selfishness. Sallie generously buys the silk, whereupon Meg uses the fifty dollars to buy a new overcoat for her husband.

In a chapter called "On the Shelf," Meg's docility appears as her greatest virtue and her most serious domestic flaw. Docility is a fine quality in a daughter, even a sister, Alcott admits, but dangerous in a wife. Meg becomes dowdy and dependent, isolated in her little cottage with two small children. John spends more time away from home, provoking Marmee to confront Meg, but not her son-in-law, reminding her that "it's mother who blames as well as mother who sympathizes."

Mother shares her domestic secret: a good marriage is based on mutuality of interests and responsibilities. Marmee herself learned this as a young wife, when after a hard time caring for her children, she welcomed father's help. Now, she says, he does not let business distract him from domestic details, and she remembers to interest herself in his pursuits. "We each do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always." Marmee's advice is heeded; Meg pays more attention to the niceties of her dress, tries to talk about current affairs, and cedes to her husband some measure of child management.

According to Alcott, the reform of domestic life required restoration of a mutuality that had vanished with the separation of home and work. Yet of all the domestic advice presented in *Little Women,* this lesson carries the least conviction. Mr. March is the minister of a small parish and presumably home a great deal. John Brooke, on the other hand, is a clerk, far removed from his home and children. As we shall see, Alcott can only offer model domesticity in utopian settings where cooperative communities reappear in feminist forms.

Critical Essay #5

When Louisa finished writing part two of *Little Women,* she suggested "Wedding marches" as a possible title. She changed it, however go "Birds Leaving the Nest," or "Little Women Grow Up," because she did not wish to suggest that marriage should be the focal event for growing girls. Instead she argues that girls who take trial flights from secure homes will find their own paths to domestic happiness. They might choose independent spinsterhood or some form of marital bonds that range from partial to complete "household democracy." For Alcott, sisterhood and marriage, though often contradictory, are equally valuable possibilities for women. Fully realized sisterhood becomes a model for marriage, not simply an alternative to it. Together, marriage and sisterhood guarantee that individual identity and domesticity will be harmonious.

Meg, the eldest and most "docile daughter," does not attain Alcott's ideal womanhood. Democratic domesticity requires maturity, strength, and above all a secure identity that Meg lacks. Her identity consists of being Marmee's daughter and then John's wife. Yet she and John are well matched. Neither really wants sexual equality in the dovecote. When Meg leaves home to work as a governess she accepts a three-year engagement period, dreaming that she will have much to learn while she waits. But John says, "You have only to wait; I am to do the work." Alcott accepts the limitations of temperament and circumstance in Meg, as she does in all her characters. In *Little Men,* however, Meg's widowhood grants her the circumstances to develop a stronger side of her character.

Fashion provides a counterpoint to feminism in *Little Women.* Jo's strong sense of self is established in part by her rejection of fashion, which she perceives as a sign of dependency and sexual stereotyping. Amy, on the other hand, struggles against her burden of vanity, which has its positive side in her "nice manners and refined way of speaking." Amy must learn that appearances can be deceiving, whereas Jo must learn that appearances do count in the larger world. Meg's vanity may be one reason she is linked to Amy in the game of "playing mother," wherein Meg and Jo watch over their sisters "in the places of discarded dolls." Jo obviously rejects Amy early in their lives. Amy's flat nose, her chief "trial," as she says, is supposedly the result of careless Jo's dropping her baby sister onto a coal-hod.

Jo's lack of vanity about clothes at first conceals her pride both in her writing talent and in her exclusive relationship to Laurie. Laurie enjoys Jo's vivid imagination; it gives color and vivacity to his own lonely childhood. Keeping Amy out of pleasurable excursions with Laurie is one of Jo's main "faults." Left at home once too often, Amy burns a collection of Jo's painstakingly written fairy tales as revenge. Furious, Jo leaves her behind again when she and Laurie go skating. Amy follows behind and is almost killed by falling through the thin ice. Penitent, Jo vows to curb her temper and cherish Amy. Accepting the fact that she is not the only independent and talented member of the family is part of Jo's growing up.

Her notion that she is "the man of the family" is a more serious problem in the story. In a strange way this too plays itself out around fashion. Jo has her first serious encounter with Laurie at a neighborhood dance, where she is uncomfortably dressed up to accompany Meg on their first "grown up" social expedition. Meg's woes arise from her desire for fashionable frippery; she dances in overly tight high-heeled slippers that cripple her before the dance is over. Jo wears sensible shoes, but cannot dance because "in maroon, with a stiff gentlemanly linen collar and a white chrysanthemeum or two for her only ornament," she is pledged to hide the scorched back of her "poplin" gown. Therefore she must stand quietly or hide in a corner in penance for her habit of standing too near the fire. The Laurence boy is shy, a stranger to the neighborhood who has spent much of his childhood in a Swiss boarding school. He wears two "nice pearl colored gloves" and dances well, volunteering to polka with Jo in the privacy of a hall. Jo is suddenly aware that the gentility she rejects as too "lady-like" can be quite acceptable when it is "gentlemanly," or in other words, gender-free. Her regret at having only one good glove (the other is stained with lemonade) signals her growth from tomboyhood to womanhood in the feminist sense of the term. Jo is somewhat confused, having made a cause celebré out of being a sloppy, rough boy who clumps about in unlaced boots. Now she finds herself attracted by Laurie's "curly black hair, brown skin, big black eyes, handsome nose, fine teeth, small hands and feet." She observes her new model closely: "Taller than I am," says Jo, and "very polite for a boy, altogether jolly." Finding her sartorial model in the opposite sex, Jo decides she can grow up to be a splendid woman with neatly laced boots and clean linen. She does not want Laurie as a sweetheart; she wants to adopt both him and his air of freedom and elegant comfort.

Meg can easily sympathize with Amy. Both love pretty things and are well regarded by wealthy relatives who appreciate their social graces and attention to niceties of dress. Mr. Laurence buys Meg her first silvery silk dress, a seemingly harmless and generous act. But because she is always dependent upon someone else's generosity, poor Meg must forego her next silk gown five years later. Meg elicits the reader's sympathy, however, while Amy's tastes seem symptoms of a selfish, superficial character.

First of all, Amy is too young to care about jewelry or fashionable frocks in the first half of *Little Women.* Nevertheless, she cares a great deal for them; she covets a schoolmate's carnelian ring, and preens and postures in front of her friends while exaggerating her family's lost wealth and status. Amy's pretensions lead her into trouble in the famous incident of the "Pickled limes." Fashionable little school-girls have allowances, but Amy has none. As a result she has gone in debt to chums who treat her to the current delicacy□pickled limes. Meg then gives Amy a quarter, and the delighted girl purchases a bag of limes.

Mr. Davis, the school master, has forbidden treats in his classroom. Discovering that Amy has hidden limes in her desk, he calls her to the front of the room and humiliates her with "several tingling blows on her little palm." The author suggests that this incident might mark the beginning of Amy's maturation. Instead, Marmee and Jo rescue Amy by giving her a vacation from school. A small lecture by Marmee on the "power of modesty" does not alter the fact that Amy has had her burden lightened.

Later, at a charity fair, Amy is unfairly treated by rich and envious girls. This time she tries to "love her neighbor" and modestly allows her trinkets to be sold by a rival. Once again, this time augmented by Laurie and his friends (who have been commandeered by Jo) the family sails to Amy's rescue. They buy back Amy's trinkets and all the bouquets (provided by the Laurences' gardener) on sale at Amy's unfashionable booth. If this were not enough, Amy's Aunt Carrol, hearing of her niece's delicate manners, talented fancy work, and Christian forbearance at the charity fair, rewards her with a trip to Europe as her companion. Poor Jo, who engineered the rescue, is left behind, too unfashionable and forth-right to be patronized. On one occasion Jo tells Amy, "Its easier for me to risk my life for a person than to be pleasant to him when I don't feel like it." Amy replies that "women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones; for they have no other way of repaying kindnesses they receive. If you'd remember that, and practice it, you'd be better liked than I am because there is more of you." It is precisely because Jo is indeed more substantial that the author grants Amy a free holiday in Europe and eventually a wealthy indulgent husband.

Amy and Laurie grow up together in Europe. Both are fashionable, inclined to indolence and coquetry. Both have talent, Amy for painting and Laurie for music, but only enough to please friends in polite salons. Neither is put to the test of earning a living. Both are also inclined toward "illusion" in dressing themselves and appreciating each other's refined taste. Their growing up, however, does require a degree of honesty: they admit that "talent isn't genius and you can't make it so."

Despite the sniping and competition for parental love, social approval, and material rewards, Amy and Jo share one great loss that matures them both. The central tragedy of *Little Women,* one that generations of readers remember, is Beth's death in the final part of the book. Loving home the best, gentle Beth never wants to leave it; perhaps she would never have done so. She grows more fragile each year, and in her last months confides to Jo feeling that she was never intended to live long. Her short speech is also her longest in the novel:

'I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans
about what I'd do when I grew up; I never thought>
of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to
imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting
about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I
never wanted to go away and the hard part now is
the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems as if
I should be homesick for you even in heaven.'

Jo's maturation is sealed by her grief over Beth's decline. The chapter entitled "Valley of the Shadow" sketches a household that revolves around Beth's room for one year. Everyone, including Beth, knows she is dying. Jo writes a long poem to her sister in which she acknowledges that true sisterhood is born in shared domestic experiences, and that such loving ties cannot be severed:

Henceforth, safe across the river,
I shall see forevermore
Waiting for me on the shore.
Hope and faith, born of my sorrow,
Guardian angels shall become,
And the sister gone before me
By their hands shall lead me home.

Wasted away, suffering with "pathetic patience," Beth's death releases her parents and sisters to "thank God that Beth was well at last." Beth's self-sacrifice is ultimately the greatest in the novel. She gives up her life knowing that it has had only private, domestic meaning. Only the March family knows and loves her sweet "household spirit."

Nobody mourns Beth more than Jo, her opposite in temperament as well as her partner in the bonds of sisterhood. Beth is shy and Jo is as frank and fearless as her fictional heroes. Beth never has any plans, and Jo is full of plots and dreams. Their commonality lies in the simple fact that both of them value their sororal relationship above any other unions.

When Meg becomes engaged and Jo feels she is about to lose her "best friend," Laurie declares that he will stand by Jo forever. Jo gratefully shakes his hand, saying "I know you will, and I'm ever so much obliged; you are always a great comfort to me, Teddy." But Laurie turns out to be a boy, not Jo's sister after all. Jo's rejection of Laurie's suit is her first grown-up act, and her trip to New York to become a writer is her first flight into the world. Beth's death, through which she escapes the awful problem of growing up, triggers Jo's maturation. She does leave home to go "across the river." Jo's journey is the only fully complete one in *Little Women* and it revolves her learning to tell true love from romantic fancy. She must do so in order to reproduce her lost sisterhood in a new, feminist domestic union.

Critical Essay #6

The ability to distinguish true love from romantic fancy is a prerequisite for a woman's growing up in *Little Women.* True love involves mutual self-sacrifice and self-control, and requires the kind of man who can make the household the center of his life and work. Romance, on the other hand, is inherently selfish, passionate, and unequal.

Ultimately all the surviving heroines are paired off in true love. Jo, however, proves closest to Alcott's ideal because she rejects Laurie Laurence. At one point Jo tells Laurie that they are unsuited to one another because both have strong wills and quick tempers. Unpersuaded and unreasonable, the spoiled young man presses his suit, forcing her to tell him a harder truth: she does not love him as a woman loves a man, and never did, but simply feels motherly toward him.

Jo does not want to be an adoring adornment to a fashionable man's home. Nor will she give up her "scribbling" to satisfy Laurie. She knows he would hate her writing, and that she "couldn't get on without it." Laurie shared the secret of Jo's pseudononymous stories in the past, but he really views her writing as just another glorious lark. Laurie's proposal reveals just how much "scribbling" really means to Jo. If merely saving her "pathetic family" from poverty were her only motivation, she might marry Laurie and enrich them all. She might even produce leisured, graceful literature under his partronage. But she won't be patronized and she won't concede. "I don't believe I shall every marry," she declares. "I am happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man."

Laurie stubbornly refuses to believe her, even though she has made perfectly clear that, like Louisa Alcott, she prefers "paddling her own canoe." Laurie insists that Jo has some unknown romantic rival in mind who will induce her to give up her foolish notions of independence and "live and die for him." Exasperated, her limited patience turns to defiance. "Yes, I will live and die for him," she declared, "if he ever comes and makes me love him in spite of myself, and you must do the best you can." We do not know if Jo really means that she would yield to a "great romance," or is merely angry enough to tell Laurie that his worst "envious" fantasy is what he deserves. Possibly, Jo also recognizes passions in herself, however hard she struggles to keep them under control. She certainly experiences more than "moods;" she has genuine emotional depth and active fantasies, which she usually transforms into tragi-comic family operas or melodramatic stories.

In the nineteenth-century world of *Little Women,* there are only two alternatives following the sexual equality of childhood: romantic love or rational affection. With considerable regret Jo chooses the latter, because she must forego forever the equality she once knew with Laurie, her exuberant companion in childhood. Jo's decision, as Alcott knew, presents the reader with a bitter pill, for nearly everyone wants Laurie to win Jo. Yet the author has her heroine firmly reject any "silliness" from the start. She enjoys being Laurie's chum, plays at being his mother, but is never tempted to be his domestic companion.

It is precisely because Alcott makes Laurie such an irresistable boy-man that the reader must take Jo's refusal seriously. The youthful sweet surrogate sister develops into a handsome, passionate suitor. Moreover, Jo is physically attracted to Laurie, and frequently observes his handsome face, curly hair, and fine eyes. She hates it when he briefly ruins his romantic looks with a collegiate pose. The reader as well as Jo feels the power of Laurie's sexuality and the power he tries to exert over her. Yet if he calls her "my girl," meaning his sweetheart, she calls him "my boy," meaning her son.

Jo's refusal is not prompted by love for a rival suitor. In New York she works as a governess to children in her boardinghouse and scribbles away for the penny-dreadful newspapers. Soon she encounters Friedrick Bhaer helping a serving maid. Bhaer's life, unlike Laurie's, is not the stuff of romance. Forty-years old, "learned and good," he is domestic by nature and darns his own socks. He loves flowers and children and reads good literature. Moreover, he insists that Jo give up writing blood-and-thunder tales and learn to write good fiction. He gives her his own copy of Shakespeare as a Christmas present. "A regular German," Jo says,

> rather stout with brown hair tumbled all over his
> head, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I
> ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's
> ears good, after our rusty, or slipshod American gabble.
> His clothes were rusty, his hands were large, and
> he hadn't a really handsome feature in his face, except
> his beautiful teeth; yet I liked him, for he had a
> fine head, his linen was very nice, and he looked like
> a gentleman, though two buttons were off his coat,
> and there was a patch on one shoe.

Bhaer is a man Jo can love and marry.

A mature adult capable of raising his two orphaned nephews, he does not need Jo to mother him, although she is drawn to do so. Bhaer is more attracted to her youth and independent spirit. Nevertheless, he bestows his affection upon her by appreciating both her Old World "gemutlichkeit" and her American self-reliance. In a way he is Santa Claus, giving gifts despite his poverty to friends and servants alike. In one scene Bhaer buys oranges and figs for small children while holding a dilapidated blue umbrella aloft for Jo in the rain. Unlike Father March, who is a fragile invalid, Father Bhaer is a strapping, generous man.

There is no end to his domesticity or his capacity for cooperative self-sacrifice. Matching his paternal benevolence to Jo's maternal abundance, Bhaer does the shopping for both himself and Jo. As Alcott describes him, he "finished the marketing by buying several pounds of grapes, a pot of rosy daisies, and a pretty jar of honey, to be regarded in the light of a demijohn. Then, distorting his pockets with the knobby bundles, and giving her the flowers to hold, he put up the old umbrella and they travelled on again." Contrast this fulgent account of a man who understands the "household spirit" with Laurie, who cannot even direct the maids to plump his pillows

properly, or with John Brooke, who magisterially sends the meat and vegetables home to Meg (no knobby bundles in his pockets!).

Meanwhile, Laurie has returned from Europe with Amy, and they tell the story of their Swiss romance. Laurie has found a perfect mate in Amy, who will be very good at giving orders to their servants, having practised in her imagination for years. Theirs will also be an equal marital partnership, though somewhat different from that of Jo and Fritz, and very different from the frugal conventions of Meg and John.

Jo, the last sister to leave home, might never have accepted Professor Bhaer's proposal were it not for Beth's death. Fritz has found a poem of Jo's expressing the deep love and devotion she feels for Meg, Amy, and Beth. We are "parted only for an hour, none lost," she writes, "one only gone before." Tenderly Bhaer declares: "I read that, and I think to myself, she has a sorrow, she is lonely, she would find comfort in true love. I haf a heart full for her."

Bhaer has all the qualities Bronson Alcott lacked: warmth, intimacy, and a tender capacity for expressing his affection□the feminine attributes Louisa admired and hoped men could acquire in a rational, feminist world. As Marmee says, he is "a dear man." He touches everyone, hugs and carries children about on his back. Bronson, despite all his genuine idealism and devotion to humanity, was emotionally reserved and distant. Fritz Bhaer loves material reality, is eminently approachable, and values all the things that Bronson Alcott rejects, such as good food, warm rooms, and appealing domestic disorder, even though he is a "bacheldore" when Jo meets him.

Bhaer's love for Jo gives him courage to conquer the barriers between them, including his poverty and age, his foreignness and his babbling, unromantic self. They decide to share life's burdens just as they shared the load of bundles on their shopping expedition. Jo hopes to fulfill "woman's special mission" of which is "drying tears and bearing burdens," so that nobody will ever again call her unwomanly. She resolutely adds the feminist postscript: "I'm to carry my share Friedrich and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go." She has her family duty and her work to keep her busy, while Fritz goes west to support his nephews before he can marry. The marriage contract they arrange is very different from that of Meg and John at the end of *Little Women,* part one.

Source: Sarah Elbert, "Reading *Little Women,*" in *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and "Little Women,"* Temple University Press, 1984, pp. 151-65.

Adaptations

Little Women has been adapted for the screen on numerous occasions. The first was a silent movie produced by G. B. Samuelson in 1917. In 1918, William A. Brady Picture Plays produced another silent version, adapted by Anne Maxwell. One of the best-known adaptations was produced in 1933 by RKO Radio Pictures, adapted for film by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman, starring Katharine Hepburn as Jo. In 1949, an adaptation by Mason, Heerman, and Andrew Solt was produced by MGM, starring June Allyson as Jo, Elizabeth Taylor as Amy, Janet Leigh as Meg, and Peter Lawford as Laurie. In 1994, Columbia Pictures produced a film adaptation by Robin Swicord, starring Winona Ryder as Jo, Kirsten Dunst as Amy, Claire Danes as Beth, Eric Stoltz as Mr. Brooke, and Susan Sarandon as Marmee.

Little Women was adapted for television in 1958 in a production by CBS Television. Another television production was released in 1970, directed by Paddy Russell. In 1978, an adaptation for television by Susan Clauser was produced by Universal TV, starring Meredith Baxter as Meg, Susan Dey as Jo, Eve Plumb as Beth, Greer Garson as Aunt March, and William Shatner as Professor Bhaer.

Numerous audio adaptations have been made for listeners to enjoy the story on tape. These include releases by Books in Motion, 1982; Audio Book Contractors, 1987; Harper Audio, 1991; DH Audio, 1992; Dove Entertainment, 1995; Soundelux Audio Publishing, 1995; Sterling Audio Books, 1995; Penguin, 1996; Blackstone Audio Books, 1997; Random House Audio Books, 1997; Trafalgar Square, 1997; Bantam Books, 1998; Books on Tape, 1998; Brilliance Audio, 1998; Monterey Soundworks, 1998; and Naxos Audio Books, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Imagine you are assigned to create a soundtrack for *Little Women.* Think about each of the four March girls, Laurie, and Marmee. Choose a song or musical composition that best reflects each character's personality, dreams, and emotional landscape. What are the songs that you choose?

Research birth-order theories and consider how the dynamics among the sisters support or refute such theories. Report on your findings.

Although modern wars have important roles for women, the Civil War was much more of a man's war. See what you can learn about women during the time of the Civil War. In what ways did they contribute to the war effort both on the front (in hospitals, for example) and at home?

Examine the lives of other prominent American women writers to see if there are parallels between their life experiences and Louisa May Alcott's. Do you find that they are vastly different, or that there are significant similarities? Also, did most women use their given names, or did they take pseudonyms, perhaps even male pseudonyms (such as British author George Eliot)? How do you account for the decision to reveal female gender (or not) as a writer in the nineteenth century?

Compare and Contrast

1860s: Children's books generally depict innocent, flawless children in innocent stories. Characters are one-dimensional and stories are strongly oriented toward teaching virtue.

Today: The Newbery Medal is awarded to Christopher Paul Curtis' *Bud, Not Buddy,* a story about a ten-year-old boy who runs away from his foster home in search of his father. One of the Caldecott Honor Books is Audrey Couloumbis' *Getting Near to Baby,* which tells the story of two sisters dealing with the death of their baby sister. Another Caldecott Honor Book is Molly Bang's *When Sophie Gets Angry Really, Really Angry,* a story about a little girl's temper tantrum.

1860s: Scarlet fever, which typically afflicts children between the ages of two and ten, is often fatal, as treatments are terribly inadequate. Even when children survive, they often suffer poor health for years.

Today: Since the discovery of penicillin, scarlet fever rarely claims lives. In fact, patients treated for the disease rarely even suffer lingering problems. In addition, scarlet fever is not as severe as it once was, either because the strain has weakened or because people have become more resistant to the disease.

Early 1860s: The best-selling fiction books are Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit,* Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White,* Mrs. Henry Woods' *East Lynne,* and Mary E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret.* They are stories of crime with plots featuring bigamy, incest, and apparitions.

Today: The best-selling fiction books include J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, John Grisham's *The Testament* and *The Brethren,* Seamus Heaney's translation of the classic *Beowulf,* Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune,* and Arthur S. Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha.* These wide-ranging stories feature wizard apprenticeship, deception in a federal prison, adventure and romance, and coming of age in pre-World War II Japan.

1860s: Young women are expected to learn cooking, sewing, laundering, and parenting. In addition, proper young ladies are wellmannered, graceful, polite, and soft-spoken. Although many women work in "men's" jobs during the Civil War, they return to their places at home once the men return from war.

Today: Women occupy virtually every career field available. They are doctors, judges, astronauts, scientists, writers, legislators, engineers, and more. At the same time, they have the option of choosing to stay home and take care of the home and rear children. Although there are lingering social norms about what constitutes ladylike behavior, millions of women have little regard for such social restrictions.

What Do I Read Next?

Little Men (1871) is the sequel to *Little Women,* and tells of Jo's life at Plumfield, where she runs a school for boys. Although the boys are often rowdy, Jo and her husband enjoy teaching them, along with their own two sons.

In *Jo's Boys* (1886), Alcott continues the adventures of the boys from Jo's school at Plumfield. Now that the boys have grown into men, they follow very different paths in life.

Nina Baym's *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978) provides a useful overview of trends in women's literature in the mid-nineteenth century. Baym considers 130 novels by forty-eight authors.

Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden* (1911) is the story of Mary, Colin, and Dickon, whose moody dispositions are lightened by the discovery of a secret garden that inspires their imaginations. As they restore the little paradise, they learn about life and personal growth.

Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) is the story of a lively, mischievous orphan sent to a family who was expecting a boy. As she and her new parents learn about each other, they learn that their finding each other was lucky after all.

Louisa May Alcott: A Reference Guide is Alma J. Payne's 1980 guide to the work of one of America's most beloved children's authors. It is a handy reference for any serious student of Alcott's work.

Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott is Madeleine B. Stern's 1984 collection of original criticism on Alcott's work. Stern is regarded as an expert on Alcott, and these essays cover a wide range of issues and considerations of the author's work.

Key Questions

Little Women cannot fail to provide ample opportunity for lively discussion. Groups should enjoy comparing current standards of behavior, especially as they are publicized in the media or in literature, to the nineteenth-century moral life which Alcott depicts. Discussion groups interested particularly in women's issues should find Little Women an intriguing novel to consider. A good line to pursue is the extent to which readers believe, as many critics do, that subversive feminist elements are detectable in the novel's depictions of domestic values and women's self-denying vir tues. The novel might be discussed in light of a reading of Behind a Mask (1866), or another of Alcott's thrillers.

Little Women draws considerably on Alcott's personal experiences and can be seen as a resource for historical information about children's play, child-rearing practices, household activities, family entertainment, fashion, work outside the home, patriotic and social attitudes, and treatment of the needy. In conjunction with its sequels, the novel can be used as a springboard to information about the era following the Civil War. Groups might wish to read Little Men or Jo's Boys to determine whether or how much Alcott developed her approach to feminism after Little Women, or what she thought about education.

1. Do you find Alcott's choice of title suggestive? Is a belittling of women implied, as some critics believe?

2. There is general agreement that reader identification lies with the character Jo. Do you relate most to her? If so, explain. If not, defend your choice of Meg, Beth, or Amy.

3. Some critics refer to the universal quality of home conveyed by Alcott's depictions of the March household. Do you believe the depictions represent your home life? The home life of most people?

4. Why does Alcott marry Jo to Professor Bhaer? Is Laurie a better choice for Amy? Compare the two men.

5. What do you think of Marmee's advice to Meg about husband-wife cooperation?

6. What do you think of Alcott's approach to the problem of society's poor? Is there social snobbery in the Marches' approach to the Hummels, or in old Mr. Laurence's gift to a hungry woman of a fish on the end of his cane?

7. Given what many critics see as the novel's overt moralizing and "old-fashioned" values, what could be the reasons for its enduring popularity? Consider both young readers and adults.

8. Little Women has sometimes been criticized for weakness of plot and lack of unity as a result of Alcott's episodic technique. Do you agree with the critics?

9. Is Marmee the ideal mother? Discuss her character in relation to that of Mr. March.

10. Consider the conclusion of the novel in light of Chapter 13, entitled "Castles in the Air." How close did each character involved come to the desired dream? Is each better off the way things turned out?

Topics for Discussion

1. What motivates and shapes the character of each of the March girls? What are some of the lessons the girls learn from their experiences at home and away? What conflicts do they face with others and within themselves?

2. Although Father is absent for most of the novel, his presence is felt in every scene. What influence does he have on the family?

3. What does Little Women suggest about parental authority?

4. What are the sources of delight and adventure in the girls' lives?

5. Each of the sisters is able to overcome her character flaw—or "bosom enemy"—by the end of the novel. What happens to bring about these changes of character, and what new challenges does each sister face in marriage?

6. How does Alcott use John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress to develop the characters and themes of her novel?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What attitudes toward marriage does Alcott present in Little Women, and how do they compare to contemporary attitudes?

2. Why do you think Little Women—in many ways a dated, sentimental, and moralizing work—has endured in popularity for more than one hundred years? What lessons can modern readers learn from the book that would help them to live better lives?

3. Little Women is the first of three March family books. Read either Little Men or Jo's Boys and compare it to Little Women. What new information are you given about the family in the sequel? Do you notice any differences in Alcott's telling of the story?

4. What does Alcott seem to be saying in her novels about the conflict between women's quest for political, economic, and educational equality and the demands of domestic life?

5. Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott, was a leading figure in the philosophical school known as transcendentalism, as was the Alcotts' neighbor in Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson. What does the term "transcendentalist" mean? Research and report on the history of transcendentalist thought in America.

Literary Precedents

Little Women falls inside and outside a "family novel" tradition traceable to Jane Austen in England, whose Pride and Prejudice for adults, published in 1813, was marked by depictions of manners and sisterly bonds. Novels written by and for women became popular in both England and America in the nineteenth century. In the decades just before Little Women appeared, Susan Warner in the United States and Charlotte Yonge in England wrote in the nineteenth century's most popular fictional form, the sentimental domestic novel. These works, read by both adults and young people, presented morally good characters as role models.

Jo March is seen in Chapter 11 reading The Wide, Wide World, published in 1850 by Warner writing under the pseudonym of Elizabeth Weatherell.

Warner's novel does not portray a happy family unit, but its heroine Ellen Montgomery, age ten at the outset, meets and conquers tribulations to achieve moral maturity. Jo is seen in Chapter 3 reading Yonge's enormously popular The Heir ofRedclyffe, published in 1853. Closer to Little Women is Yonge's novel The Daisy Chain, first serialized in a young people's magazine and published in book form in 1856. It portrays a family of children named May interrelating and maturing, primarily in a home situation.

Little Women, like the novels of Warner and Yonge, reflects the domestic ideology of its day, but it is far more advanced in its stress on realism over sentiment, and secularism over religion. Alcott's heroines also deviate considerably from the role-model ideal.

Alcott's secular, realistic characterizations also constitute an alteration in the children's moral tale tradition, from which Little Women derives. Critical commentary notes a special relationship between Alcott's novel and earlier "Rollo" and "Franconia" tales written by Jacob Abbott, and notably his The Young Christian of 1832. These moral tales drew in turn upon John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, published in two parts in 1678 and 1684, still the guidebook to morals for many nineteenthcentury parents, among them Bronson Alcott.

No literary influence is as obvious in Little Women as Bunyan's religious allegory. It provides the framework within which the March girls, at least overtly, work to become pious, submissive, selfless, and therefore feminine by the day's standards. An epigraph from the allegory precedes the first chapter of Little Women, in which the girls take up the "burdens" of faults that typically trap unwary characters in nineteenth-century domestic fiction: anger, vanity, and sloth. The girls continue to play "pilgrims," sometimes in chapters with titles based on the allegory. Thus Beth enters the home of wealthy Mr.

Laurence in the chapter headed "Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful." Amy learns a lesson in modesty in the chapter headed "Amy's Valley of Humiliation." Jo meets her anger head-on in the chapter headed "Jo Meets Apollyon." Meg, too, learns modesty, in a chapter headed "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair."

Always, though, Alcott's depictions are secular and realistic. Little Women's lively, independent Marches reflect the perspective on characters, sometimes comic, developed by Alcott from the novels of a favorite author, Charles Dickens. Alcott honors Dickens in her Chapter 10 entitled "The P. C. and the P. O.," based on his novel The Pickwick Papers of 1837. The secret club founded by the March girls, admirers of Dickens, is patterned after his Corresponding Society of the Pickwick Club.

Chapter 2 of Little Women, in which the March sisters donate their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels and receive the largesse of rich Mr. Laurence in turn, evokes Dickens's A Christmas Carol of 1843. Amy's schoolteacher Mr.

Davis owes a debt to Dr. Blimber of the 1848 Dickens work Dombey and Son.

Some critics cite a special relation ship between Little Women and Dickens's Bleak House, serialized in 18521853. The self-reliance of the March sisters recalls that of the Dickens teenage character Charley, and the term "little woman" is used by the character Jarndyce. The March sisters, like Jarndyce's ward Esther, undergo experiences that make them aware of a vanished childhood, but Esther's character never displays Jo's abundant exuberance. Little Women is the product of wide-ranging literary interests. Alcott read the works of Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Goldsmith, Goethe, and Shakespeare.

The latter literary figure especially influenced the dramatic scenes Alcott portrays.

Further Study

Cogan, Frances B., *All American Girls: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,* University of Georgia Press, 1989.

Cogan presents a historical perspective on women's roles in mid-nineteenth century America, including their expected educational levels, skills, aspirations, and manners. She suggests that in addition to the traditional view of womanhood, there was a competing view of a more dynamic, independent type of woman emerging in literature.

Fetterley, Judith, "*Little Women:* Alcott's Civil War," in *Feminist Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 369-83.

Fetterley proposes that Alcott's text reflects compromises in style and content that came about as the> result of the demands placed on the author by her publisher and her public.

Jefferson, Margo, "Books of the Times: *Little Women,* Growing Up Then and Now," in *New York Times,* December 21, 1994.

Jefferson describes the March household as being as divided as its author, and relates the classic novel to Gerald Earley's *Daughters: On Family and Fatherhood.*

Meyerson, Joel, and Madeleine B. Stern, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott: A Life of the Creator of "Little Women,"* University of Georgia Press, 1995.

This collection of Alcott's correspondence gives insight into her domestic life, her thoughts, and her personality apart from her success as a children's writer.

Stern, Madeleine B., ed., *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott,* William Morrow, 1997.

These frightening, passionate, and suspenseful tales reveal the other side of Alcott's writing, which she preferred to her better-known children's stories.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

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