Work: A Story of Experience Short Guide

Work: A Story of Experience by Louisa May Alcott

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Contents

Characters

Work has one central character, Christie Devon. She is the orphaned child of a "gentleman" father and a "farmer's daughter" mother, indebted for her upbringing to a maternal uncle whom she refuses to burden further. At age twentyone, she is strong, moral, eager to be on her own and to engage in satisfying work.

At the outset Christie is cheerful and outgoing, and she has many appealing traits, among them a willingness to learn, be useful, and improve herself. Christie's soul-searchings and spiritual crises, her longings for security, are very human.

Christie is a remarkable fictional character because she is anchored in realism, yet designed by her creator for a didactic role. She is an introspective moralist, a social critic whose views are not immune to shifts. Through her twenties and thirties she mellows, recognizes and accepts her need for aid, and comes to appreciate domestic values. For marriage, she finds a man with whom to balance dependence with independence through equal partnership. As a widow rebuilding her life, Christie is an admirable figure. She has remained the strong, self-assertive woman who resolved after her first attempts at work that she would not "be a slave to anybody." She has also changed, grown as a woman.

Christie demonstrates both the difficulties and the possibilities for women, first in the antebellum and then the postbellum era. By the time she is forty, her experience enables her to mediate between working women who need reformed social conditions, and the rich women who want to help but are hampered by a communication gap. She also blends by birth the genteel "fine instincts" and "gracious manners" with the working-class "practical virtues" and "sturdy love of independence." Christie is a sort of "everywoman," journeying through encounters, usually brief, with characters who are largely types, and mostly women.

Among other important female characters is Hepsey Johnson, a fugitive slave at the time she and Christie first meet. Hepsey is the motherly cook who softens young Christie's disgust at the snobbish Mr. and Mrs. Stuart, for whom Christie works as a maid. Hepsey is a racial stereotype, depicted as having "melancholy eyes" and a penchant for showing humble gratitude for kindnesses, but she is intended to evoke abolitionist sympathy.

Her sufferings cause Christie to feel "a sense of obligation so forcibly" that she begins "at once to pay a little part of the great debt which the white race owes the black."

Bella Carrol, met later, exemplifies a daughter victimized by her mother's selfish ambitions. Mrs. Carrol had married a man for his money, heedless of his family's strain of inherited insanity. The young Christie's paid companionship to Bella's afflicted sister, Helen, cannot avert her suicide. The mature Bella is a sane, serious spinster of wealth and position, qualified to aid in the mature Christie's special task of reform. Bella can encourage women in her social circle not only to "dress with taste, but talk with sense."

Gender relations will then improve, since "the lords of creation will be glad to drop mere twaddle and converse as with their equals."

Rachel, the "fallen" but reformed coworker whom Christie encounters as a seamstress, illustrates a most dire situation that could befall a woman. Women seduced and betrayed by men are universally shunned in polite nineteenth-century society, with no chance of regaining respectability. Christie's support for Rachel contrasts strikingly with the intolerance of Miss Cotton, the forewoman, and the timidity of Mrs. King, the workshop owner. After both Rachel and Christie are fired, and Christie attempts suicide, Rachel takes her friend to kindly Cynthy Wilkins who helps troubled women.

Later the people Christie is with, the Sterlings, speak of a long-lost family member named Letty. Letty turns out to be Rachel.

Through Cynthy Wilkins, a thoroughly domestic, good-hearted laundress, Christie learns to value domesticity. Cynthy is a broadly drawn, humorous character, homely for her "fuzzy, red hair" and "paucity of teeth," but beautiful for "the attraction of a nature genuine and genial as the sunshine dancing on the kitchen floor." Cynthy provides Christie with a flock of bobbing children to enjoy, a healing piety, and a moral certainty that a happy home, however humble, is far superior to a marriage based on wealth alone.

Cynthy's minister Thomas Power also contributes to healing. As one of the handful of men in this novel, Thomas is a standout because he represents social mercy, compassionate religion, disdain for the worship of money. "I did like the freedom and good-will there," Christie says of his church. Thomas's strength, integrity, and "generous, genial spirit" are "like a tonic" to Christie. Thomas leads her to the next step along her way, the Sterling household, comprised of a kindly Quaker widow and her grown son David.

As Christie's love interest, floriculturist David Sterling is a strong and believable character, not at all the brooding romantic hero but a man admirable for nurturing qualities. David is quiet, frank and friendly, devoted to his flowers. If he is not a man ambitious to "get ahead," it is because he tries to atone for a typical male act that turned out tragically— casting out his sister Letty, the "fallen" Rachel. Thus he has been led to the charitable work with women that he and his mother pursue, which Christie finds "beautiful." David fosters Christie's understanding of wholesome gender relations.

"One should be contented," Christie eventually learns, "with good men, even if they do wear old clothes, lead prosaic lives, and have no accomplishments but gardening, playing the flute, and keeping their temper." David is an outstanding contrast to types like Christie's domineering uncle Enos Devon and Cynthy's dull, insignificant husband Elisha Wilkins.

David is a foil to Philip Fletcher, the wealthy, suave suitor Christie first met as a governess, and who turns up again, briefly threatening to make David seem a poor

choice for marriage. However, David and Christie do wed, and he rekindles her egalitarian, independent spirit.

After David's death, when Christie must gain a needed inner strength, she emerges with a stronger desire for social outreach. She has been left with their child Ruth, nicknamed Pansy, who becomes the youngest among Christie's "loving league of sisters." Pansy represents the new woman, "the promise that the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty."

Social Concerns

In Work, Louisa May Alcott explores a number of social issues, particularly in relation to women, through the character Christie Devon. At the age of twentyone, Christie leaves the rural home she has shared with her aunt and uncle since the death of her parents. She seeks satisfying work outside the bounds of docile domesticity. "I'm willing to work, but I want work that I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no matter how hard it is." Christie objects to work with "no object but money," because it will not make her "a useful, happy woman." She moves to the city and seeks a way to earn a living, but finds that for a woman—especially a "poor gentle woman"— the options are few.

Christie undertakes a number of jobs in turn, leaving each in short order because it is either underpaid, demeaning, or morally corrosive. Nevertheless, each job provides encounters that heighten her social sensitivity. In the course of the novel, which takes Christie through the age of forty, she espouses the causes of antebellum abolitionism and of justice for all women who are out on their own, regardless of race or morally "fallen" background. By the time Christie reaches a crisis of unemployment and desperation, Alcott has delivered the message that women are hurt by a social and economic system dominated by men in pursuit of material wealth.

Christie's recovery process treats issues of social reform, domesticity, and gender relations. Christie is taken in and encouraged by a working wife who provides temporary shelter to homeless women. A socially minded minister places Christie in the position of aide to a home-based greenhouse business run by a socially nurturing man, David Sterling, and his mother who take in needy women. Christie and David relate on the basis of equality and mutuality of interests, and the two marry. When David becomes a Union soldier, she volunteers as a Civil War nurse. When he is killed helping an escaping slave woman, Christie takes over his business and shares the profits with her female helpers. Last, when she finds that reform-minded wealthy women do not know how to communicate with their impoverished, working counterparts, Christie becomes an "interpreter between the two classes" so that all women together might work for the social good.

Techniques

Work is devised to convey stages in a spiritual journey, and is marked by rather distinct sections. The first six chapters, perhaps worked on by the author as early as 1861, are episodic and simple, with one type of employment after another explored. Each work experience ends in a crisis or realization which leads to the next step in spiritual progress. A shift in narrative structure occurs after Chapter 6, which—critics have surmised—may be a result of a more skilled author taking up the novel again after a lapse of eleven or so years. By Chapter 7, when Christie is led to the brink of suicide, a more complex section begins in which meetings occur with characters devised to inculcate deeper perspectives on self and work.

Another shift seems to occur with the outbreak of the Civil War, when Christie's domestic idyll is disrupted.

The use of one dominant character, Christie, traced through twenty years of varied experiences, provides a focus for interrelated and complex themes. Christie's journey demonstrates Alcott's remarkable gift for translating real occurrences, including her own life experiences, into meaningful fiction. The novel is based on actual antebellum and postbellum options for women. Critics especially tie Christie's work experiences to Alcott's own. At age nineteen Alcott spent seven humiliating weeks as a badly underpaid domestic servant, evading unwanted attentions from her employer.

She also worked in her twenties as a governess and companion, and tried acting. Even the episode when Christie considered suicide has a parallel in Alcott's actual life.

Although Christie is said to possess an "intelligent" face and is "pretty," physical descriptions of her stand mostly in reference to the high moral character that increasingly marks her features as years go by. Because she is crafted to be part realistic character, part social statement, part moral ideal, Christie is known more through her introspective musings, escapes from temptation, and social critiques tied to her relationships with others. These relationships are deftly interwoven to stress moral ideals, interracial harmony, and a community-oriented feminist spirit. Again, however, the characters involved are realistically anchored.

The minister Thomas Power is a milder version of reformer Theodore Parker, an acquaintance of the Alcott family who preached vehemently against slavery and money-worship. David Sterling is reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau, whose reflections on nature and the goodness of the simple life strongly impressed Alcott.

Enriching imagery is used throughout the novel, some of the most noteworthy encompassed in quaint remarks by characters of humble status. "Folks is very like clothes, a sight has to be done to keep 'em clean and whole," the laundress Cynthy Wilkins tells Christie. "All on us has to lend a hand in this dreadful mixed-up wash, and each do our part." Cynthy's ways of speech, and those of Christie's Uncle Enos and

Hepsey Johnson the former slave, illustrate Alcott's use of dialect, sometimes unfortunately stereotypical, more often humorously effective.

Themes

Christie Devon is on a quest for selffulfillment through meaningful work. Her quest involves themes of feminist independence and the search for moral and communal values. Strikingly, in the novel's first sentence Christie announces to her aunt "a new Declaration of Independence." Her personal independence seems to Christie a primary goal when she is an inexperienced young adult, but even then she possesses a budding feeling of outreach to others. She says that she will be satisfied if she can earn her living "honestly and happily," and leave a beautiful example behind" that will at least "help one other woman." The spirit of community is implicit at the outset of Christie's search. A "useful, happy woman" cannot exist alone.

Christie's various work experiences teach moral lessons along with social duties. The first job, as a maid, introduces Christie to demeaning conditions and bad pay. She also learns humility and abolitionist sympathy from a fellow servant.

When Christie moves on to become an actress, she finds the financial benefits do not compensate for the vanity the work insidiously fosters. Next, as a governess, Christie learns the emptiness of idle wealth and rejects a condescending proposal from her employer's indolent brother. The next job, companion to a mentally unbalanced young woman, teaches Christie the tragedy that can befall a family in which a mother's materialistic ambition reigns.

Then, as a seamstress, Christie opposes the firing of a "fallen" woman on account of her past, even though the woman was trying to rebuild her life through honest work. When support of her co-worker gets her fired too, the loss of a steady income plunges Christie, now near thirty, into suicidal despair. The episode powerfully crowns the developing theme of women frustrated by a society that prevents them from taking care of themselves, no matter how willing they are or how hard they try. Christie's healing through life with the Sterlings illustrates the theme that domesticity is needed, good and fulfilling, so long as it is carried on in a spirit of equality, among friends.

The central feminist theme, which ties equality and community service to happiness and usefulness for women, is carried forward after Christie marries. Both partners participate in the Union cause until David is fatally wounded. "You will do my part," David tells Christie on his deathbed, "and do it better than I could."

Christie does succeed with his greenhouse business, operating it on a socially conscious, collective basis. A woman can replace a man, and excel in his role. The novel ends with Christie and other women touching hands, forming "a loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end." For Christie, interdependence has replaced independence.

Key Questions

Like many of the novels and stories of Alcott, Work should encourage provocative discussions of the feminist and social issues that were her concerns. Important aspects of the novel involve links among women, moral values and social leadership. The novel also reflects Alcott's views on domesticity and gender relations. One good avenue to pursue is whether Alcott portrays an effective marriage in that of David and Christie.

Another is whether a "loving league of sisters," as Christie and her friends exemplified, is a possibility for women in today's feminist climate.

In general, Alcott drew upon her life experiences for her fiction. Discussion groups interested in history should find in Alcott's depictions of nineteenth-century life some useful keys to understanding.

The novel should prove particularly enlightening on social attitudes, various reform movements of the day and the means by which society's poor and needy received aid. Groups might consider whether current social programs are an improvement.

1. The novel's first six chapters were written in the early 1860s, and conceived by Alcott as a novel to be entitled Success.

Based upon the chapters from 7 on, what could be the reason Alcott retitled the manuscript?

2. Are the shifts in narrative structure a weakness of the novel? Why or why not?

3. What does the concept of "work" involve for Christie?

4. Domestic values are an important feature of the novel. Do they contradict the feminism with which Christie starts out?

5. Christie was modeled on the allegorical "everyman" concept of the hero Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, but realistically speaking, what are her human quali nature cease, and her ideal nature as "everywoman" begin? Does she become more or less the ideal woman as the novel proceeds?

6. A number of women of more than passing interest appear in the novel, including Hepsey Johnson, Rachel/Letty Sterling, Helen and Bella Carrol, Mrs. Sterling, Cynthy Wilkins. Which are most outstanding characters? What do they represent?

7. What purpose is served by the very brief encounters with the characters Miss Cotton and Mrs. King? Do their names, especially when juxtaposed, have any significance for theme?

8. Why are male characters very few in this novel? Compare and contrast the types who are depicted. You may emphasize David Sterling, Philip Fletcher, and Thomas Power,

but do not neglect Uncle Enos and Elisha Wilkins. Be sure to consider why David is not a "hero" type.

9. Is there a thematic reason for Christie's being married for so short a time?

10. Do you agree with the authorial comment in Chapter 4, when Christie considers marriage to Philip Fletcher, that "three of the strongest foibles in most women's nature" are "vanity, ambition, and the love of pleasure?" What do you make also of the authorial comment toward the end of Chapter 7, when Christie settles down in Cynthy's house, that "a woman's three best comforters" are "kind words, a baby, and a cup of tea?"

11. Does the novel adequately convey a realistic sense of time and place? Or does it seem to involve a mythic quality?

Literary Precedents

The most immediately recognizable influence upon the novel's structure and theme of spiritual self-fulfillment is John Bunyan's allegorical Pilgrim's Progress, finalized in 1684, which traces the moral journey of a hero named Christian to a heavenly Celestial City. Alcott's heroine has a similar name and, particularly in early chapters, shows steps of progress made through moral lessons. Alcott's indebtedness to Bunyan's allegory is reflected in numerous depictions of temptations overcome and resting-spots along Christie's spiritual way, and in such prose as "God was very patient with her, sending much help, and letting her climb up to Him by all the tender ways in which aspiring souls can lead unhappy hearts."

A painting of a scene from Pilgrim's Progress figures in Work, showing Christie's relationship to Bunyan's hero. Hepsey, Mrs. Sterling, and Rachel /Letty behold the painting and marvel at resemblances to David and little Pansy. Nevertheless, a crucial difference exists between Alcott's novel and Bunyan's allegory. In spite of references to God and religious inspiration in Work, Alcott focuses on an individual's progress toward secular ends.

Work falls within the nineteenth-century literary tradition of women's fiction.

Also, insofar as Alcott, in Work, called for abolition and women's rights and a spiritual rather than material view of success, her novel falls within the scope of the era's wide-ranging reform literature. Harriet Beecher Stowe addressed the question of women and careers in her 1871 novels Pink and White Tyranny and My Wife and I. In her Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in book form in 1852, Stowe provided the model for Alcott's depictions of Hepsey Johnson's suffering and abolitionism.

Alcott was influenced also by the novels of Charles Dickens. Cynthy Wilkins in Work is reminiscent of the character Pegotty in David Copperfield (1850). Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847; see separate entry), inspires a scene of Christie reading that novel as the looming shadow of Philip Fletcher appears. Christie's speculations about David as a brooding, suffering hero, which his actual behavior does not confirm, also play upon the romantic male characters from the novels of Charlotte and Emily Bronte.

Related Titles

Christie's nursing career in Chapters 17 ("The Colonel") and 18 ("Sunrise") in Work recall Hospital Sketches, first serialized in The Commonwealth and later published in book form in 1863. For this work Alcott drew upon her experiences in 1862-1863 as a wartime nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital, Georgetown. The seriocomic narrator, spinster Tribulation Periwinkle who is added for the book version, courageously endures the emotional trauma of caring for wounded and dying men in shabby conditions. The story "My Contraband," published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1863, unites an abolitionist theme with wartime nursing in the characters of the spinster Nurse Dane, and Bob, a freed mulatto assigned to her as aide. Chapter 5 ("Companion") in Work recalls "A Nurse's Story," a thriller serialized in Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner in 1865-1866. The feminist narrator, nurse Kate Snow, has dealings with a girl plagued by inherited insanity.

Christie's experiences as a maid in Chapter 2 ("Servant") are reflected in the lighthearted short essay "How I Went Out to Service" published in the Independent, 1874. Feminist and work-related themes appear in other Alcott works, one of them the unfinished novel Diana and Penis of 1879. Little Women (1868-1869) treats feminist and career interests, moral development, and domestic values with an indebtedness to Pilgrim's Progress. In Little Women the themes are most notably dealt with through the creative aspirations of artist Amy and writer Jo March. The coziness that prevails in the March home relates to that longed for by Christie in Work. The strong ties among women epitomized as the "loving league of sisters" in the last chapter of Work recall the passionate bonds among the four sisters and their mother in Little Women.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994