

The "Greater Happiness":

A domestic feminist view of *Little Women*

By: Chelsea Miles

## Table of Contents

1. Preface.....	3
2. The Lifetime of Louisa May Alcott.....	4-6
3. Japanese and Latter-day Saint Women.....	7
4. Bits and Pieces of <i>Little Women</i> .....	8-9
5. T-analysis.....	10
6. Why the characters of <i>Little Women</i> aren't "little women" .....	11-12
7. More Critical Applications.....	13
8. Works Cited.....	14

## Preface

I have always enjoyed the movie version of *Little Women* from the 90's. I remember seeing the movie when I was younger with my mother and falling in love with the story. However, it never occurred to me to read the novel from which this film was based until this semester. I was interested to see how Louisa May Alcott incorporated her own life into a story that has been loved by millions for over a hundred years.

As I read *Little Women*, I couldn't help but realize how the March sisters reminded me of my experiences with my three sisters. I felt as though Jo had been created from my image. I had always been the precocious and bright sister, my head constantly swimming with stories. As each of my sisters was married, I felt as though our family was ripped apart by each marriage, just as Jo does when Meg marries Mr. Brooke.

The connection that I made with the characters of *Little Women* helped me to realize the main idea of the novel: Nothing can tear apart the bond of family. Although the March family faces many hardships and changes, poverty, marriage and death among many, they are always able to find comfort with one another; they always know where they can turn to when they are in need and they are always able to help one another find the silver lining of a gloomy situation, laughing in the face of trial. As Marmee says in the end of the novel, the greatest happiness comes from being surrounded by your family (2007, 529).

This life lesson is one that many young people should learn during their youth, as many forget their family during this crucial time in their lives when they need their family the most. *Little Women* is a must read for young women, to remind them of the importance of family, and the potential they have for a "greater happiness."

## The Lifetime of Louisa May Alcott

- 1832, November 29: Louisa May Alcott is born, the second daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail "Abba" May, is born in Germantown, Pennsylvania.
- 1834-40: The Alcott family moves to Boston, Massachusetts. Elizabeth and May, the Alcott's youngest daughters are born. The Alcotts move to Concord, Massachusetts.
- 1843-1844: The Alcotts move into "Fruitlands," which was a Transcendentalist colony. Some of the important guests were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. After the failure of "Fruitlands, the Alcotts move to Still River, Massachusetts.
- 1850: Louisa's first story is published for five dollars.
- 1854: *Flower Fables*, Louisa's first book is published for \$32.00.
- 1856-58: Louisa's sister Elizabeth becomes sick with scarlet fever. The Alcotts move back to Concord, and in March 1858, Elizabeth dies.
- 1868-77: Louisa writes *Little Women*. As well as 7 other novels.
- 1879: After Louisa's sister May dies after childbirth, Louisa takes in her sister's daughter.
- 1888, March 6: Louisa May Alcott dies.

### Japanese and Latter-day Saint Women

Kazuko Watanabe, a college professor from Japan, makes the argument in her essay "Reading *Little Women*, Reading Motherhood in Japan" that *Little Women* is a good representation of the roles of women in Japanese culture. Some of her students praise the novel for this representation, while others critique it, arguing that the novel is just another example of women conforming to a male-dominated society.

Watanabe gives examples of the differing opinions of her students. She begins by giving the positive opinions, that the characters of *Little Women* are admirable women who find joy in motherhood and the divine role of women. She says that Japanese readers "aspire to an idealized concept of motherhood in which a woman's role is to motivate, support, and create 'family'" (704). This part of the essay reminded me of "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" and the statement that "Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children (Hinckley). Both of these arguments are made within the text of *Little Women* and contribute to the major theme of family ties in the novel.

The second part of the essay is examples of the negative opinions of Watanabe's students. The general consensus of these opinions is that *Little Women* is an indication of "the trivialization and entrapment of women" (706). To me, this was a representation of the world's view of women and motherhood: that it is reprehensible to be a wife and mother, and that a woman has to suppress her individuality. I do not think that *Little Women* represents this at all because of Jo's life after she is married. Jo is still able to have a life that she wanted. She opens a school with her husband for little boys, to nourish, raise, and teach them. Just because Jo falls into the role of a mother, this does not mean that she has conformed as she has achieved a goal and has found happiness in her life.

### **Bits and Pieces of *Little Women***

*Little Women* is set in New England during the late 1800's. The novel opens up during the Civil War. The March family is a lower-middle class family. They are able to live comfortably by choosing their needs over their wants, although some of those in society feel as though the March family is a charity case.

This novel does not have exactly one major character, as the story is written in omniscient third person point of view. The March sisters are all round, dynamic characters. They each have traits that help distinguish their character. Meg is kind hearted, but at some times envious of the things which she cannot have. Jo is a tom boy and always looking for some sort of adventure. Beth has "a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed (6), and Amy "was a most important person—in her own opinion at least" (6). These descriptions are given at the beginning of the story, but as it progresses, each of these characters goes through a change, and these traits change as well. Meg learns to "put her pride in her pocket" (305). Jo finds happiness in love and settles down, something she never thought she would do. Beth, near the end of her life, learns to shed her shyness and speak from her heart, and Amy starts "growing sweeter, deeper and more tender" (528).

The plot of this novel involves many different little stories about each sister, as well as major plot lines that affect all of the family. The background of the story is given within the first couple of chapters. The March family is considered to be living in poverty. Mr. March is fighting in the Civil War, while Mrs. March provides her family, as do Meg and Jo. The family meets their well-off neighbors, Mr. Laurence, and his grandson Theodore Laurence, or Laurie as he becomes know. The friendship between Laurie and the sisters, especially Jo, is set up, as is Mr. Laurence's devotion to the poor family.

The plot starts to thicken when Mr. March becomes sick and Marmee leaves for Washington with Laurie's tutor, Mr. Brooke, to nurse her husband. While she is away, Beth becomes ill with

scarlet fever, and comes very close to death. Marmee returns to take care of her, and Mr. March soon returns as well. Meg and Mr. Brooke fall in love, get married, and have children. Jo writes stories and has them published. Amy goes to Europe with her aunt. Jo goes to New York and meets Mr. Bhaer, a German professor, and they become close friends. Upon her arrival home, Laurie tells her that he loves her, but she does not love him back, and he goes to wallow in Europe. All of these events lead up to the climax of the story, Beth's death.

After this event, the family tries to return to their everyday lives and find comfort. Jo begins to write again, but she stops writing for others, and finds that the truest stories come from her heart. Amy and Laurie find comfort with each other and end up falling in love and elope. Jo realizes that she is in love with the Professor and they marry. The story is resolved in the very end, when we see a glimpse into the future of the March sisters and see how they have each started their own families, but are still able to keep close with one another.

Probably one of the major conflicts of the story is the unrequited love of Laurie for Jo. It is quite clear throughout the story that Laurie has these feelings, and Jo is either not aware of these feelings, or more than likely, chooses to ignore these feelings. After Laurie's graduation from university, he finally makes his feelings known by telling Jo that he has loved her "ever since I've known you" (390). However, since Jo does not return the feelings, Laurie rushes off to Europe to lick his wounds. This trip brings to pass the resolution of the conflict, as he is able to find companionship from Amy and sees that his love for Jo could only ever be brotherly.

## T-Analysis

Question: Are the gender roles represented in *Little Women* the typical constructed roles? Are there any reversals of roles? What does the novel say about the role of women in society?

-“Do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that...I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women” (11).

This passage is how Mr. March, the patriarch, wants his daughters to be raised, and fit the societal view of women.

-“the two oldest girls begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support” (40).

This passage shows that Meg and Jo were helping to provide for the family, even if it was to provide for themselves, as it relived some of the financial burdens on the rest of the family.

-“You have only to wait, I am to do the work” (250)

This comment made by John Brooke to Meg is a good representation of how men were seen as the bread winners of the family.

-“A prouder young woman was seldom seen than she...appearing before them [her family] with the letter in one hand, the check in the other (288).

Jo is seen here as providing for the family by her ability to write stories.

-“they [young matrons] are virtually put upon the shelf as soon as the wedding excitement is over” (418).

This is almost a cynical view of being a wife and motherhood, that women are basically forgotten when they marry.

-“Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it?” (468)

This passage shows that Jo has never really “tried” to be a typical woman and fall in love and get married. That she never could see marriage as being “excellent.”

-“you must come and teach ‘the children’ to keep house...and let us pet you, and all be blissfully happy and friendly together” (480).

This passage shows what was the role of women that never married: to be live-in governesses and to be taken care of by family.

-“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” (517).

This passage shows the change that Jo undergoes, stating that although she may be different than the average woman, she can still do the same things that women are expected to do.

Observation: The roles of men and women, as represented in Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Little Women*, are not always black and white, and that women are not always the stereotypical housewife.



### **Why the characters of *Little Women* aren't "little women"**

It is no surprise, to most of the population of the earth that the views of women's roles are changing. However, there is no agreeing opinion as "there is no common feminist voice about how to study and accomplish what is 'good for women'" (Thompson and Walker, 848). This could not be that the area between gender roles is not actually black and white. In Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, the roles of men and women are not always the constructed roles that we are familiar with, but there is a distinction between what was socially acceptable of each gender, especially women.

Both genders have certain characteristics that are expected of them and that make that gender unique. Some of the common traits for women are to be caring, compassionate, and tender. These are the same traits that Mr. March expects of his "little women" that they "do their duty faithfully...conquer themselves so beautifully" (11). The phrase "little women" isn't used to demean the role of women, but to describe that at this time in their lives, the March sisters are "small models for what might be the women of the future" (Armstrong 454).

Although these characteristics may seem weak and "little," they are part of the constructed traits of a woman. That does not mean that a woman does not have power. Meg and Jo use these characteristics to help with the financial burdens of the family. Meg becomes a governess for a family and Jo is a helper for her Aunt March, because they "begged to be allowed to do something toward their own support" (40). During the nineteenth century, it was more common that the man was the breadwinner of the family. However, since the March family faced financial troubles, the older woman in the family had to help support the family. Jo is also able to help support through her writing, and finds it enjoyable to help out, as "a prouder young woman was seldom seen" (288). These representations show that it isn't just the man of the family that is able to support a family, but that a woman can as well.

Although a woman could help provide for her family, it wasn't always necessary that she do. This is shown through the relationship of Meg and Mr. Brooke. They have a very "constructed" marriage as John works to support the family, and Meg tends to the housework and takes care of their children. However, this isn't to keep Meg "in her place," so to speak, or "put upon the shelf" (418). Meg had always wanted a home and family of her own. It was her "castle in the air" to have a "good husband and some angelic little children" (152). Therefore, Meg's role as a housewife is not the stereotypical role that feminists fear, but a goal that she accomplished that was socially acceptable.

Even those that she did not marry had a certain role that could be filled. When Jo starts to think that she may never marry, Laurie tells her that she can live with him and Amy and "teach the 'children,' to keep the house...and let us pet you" (480). Although Jo is strong minded, she agrees to this suggestion as it "would be very pleasant" (480), as it would give her a comfortable home and would keep her busy. However, even Jo marries. She still retains her unique traits and works with the expected traits and roles of a woman, as she states "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" (517).

*Little Women* is not the conforming housewife tale that some critics make it out to be. Although constructed roles of men and women are presented, there are instances within the novel where that construction is dissolved and the "little women" use their especial strengths to help provide for their family while tending to their regular roles as women.

### More Critical Approaches

#### -Historical/Biographical

What major plot lines and characters of *Little Women* did Louisa May Alcott take from the events that happened to her and the people she associated with during her life?

#### -Formalism

How does Louisa May Alcott use imagery to depict the differences between the March's sisters?

#### -Psychoanalytic

What character would represent the Id? The Superego? The Ego? Do any of the characters undergo a change?

#### -Reader Response Criticism:

How does this story relate to your life? Do you resemble any of the March sisters, or different traits of each sister?

#### -Mythic and Archetypal:

What is Jo March's shadow? What is her anima and persona?

#### -Feminism:

What instances of motherhood are present within *Little Women*? Are they essential roles of women or constructed roles?

#### -New Historicism:

How was Jo's character an anomaly among women of the nineteenth century? How popular were women writers at the time?

#### -Multicultural Criticism:

What does the lack of different cultures represented say about the time period in which the novel was written? Are there any comments made about a certain culture?

## Works Cited

Alcott, Louisa M. *Little Women*. New York: Bantam Dell. 2007. Print.

Armstrong, Frances. "'Here, Little, and Hereafter Bliss': *Little Women* and the Deferral of Greatness."

*American Literature* 64 (1992): 453-474. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 December 2009.

Cheney, Ednah D. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. Boston: Roberts Brothers. 1889.

Print.

"The Family: A Proclamation to the World." (1995). *Mormon.org*. Web. 14 December 2009.

Thompson, Linda and Alexis J. Walker. "The Place of Feminism in Family Studies." *Journal of Marriage*

*and the Family* 57 (1995): 847-865. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 December 2009.

Watanabe, Kazuko. "Reading *Little Women*, Reading Motherhood in Japan." *Feminist Studies* 25 (1999):

699-709. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 December 2009.

Worthington, Marjorie. *Miss Alcott of Concord: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday and Company. 1958.

Print.