

Emily Anne Dagleish

## 7.1 Little Women

### Morality and Feminism: Themes in Little Women

Alcott sets up the characters and themes in her novel *Little Women* to demonstrate her opinions on morality, feminism, and cultural expectations. The characters in the beginning enjoy hearing their mother's stories because they have moral value and yet do not "feel like sermons". This is Alcott's vehicle for asserting her life lessons not only to her characters, but also to her readers. In the same manner, her views on women come through in her characters' speech and actions. Similar to modern feminist ideals, Jo craves independence and self-sufficiency. Through multiple examples of Jo filling traditionally male roles and bucking traditional feminine roles, one gets a very strong sense for Alcott's leanings. Finally, and very similar to her illustrations through Jo's character, there are other characters and symbols throughout the novel which reflect notions contra to traditional cultural expectations for women at the time the novel was written. These ideas of morality, feminism, and cultural expectations present themselves as themes threaded throughout Alcott's novel. These themes, due to their timeless nature and modern relevance, make this novel easily accessible to a modern reader.

Alcott's theme of morality begins with the preface in an excerpt from *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is clear from the outset that this novel will hold spiritual truths and guidance for young women readers. The characters discuss this within the opening chapters as the girls question what their mother means by "burdens: "Really, Mother? Where are our bundles?" asked Amy, who was a very literal young lady. Each of you has told what your burden was just now... 'Let us do it,' said Meg thoughtfully. 'It is only another name for trying to be good, and the story may help us; for though we do want to be good, it's hard work and we forget and we don't do our best.'" This is not the only instance in the novel that the reader may note the characters striving towards personal piety. Their actions of generosity toward those less fortunate also provide lessons to the reader on what a life of piety may look like. The girls, ready to celebrate Christmas with their mother and share a breakfast together, are asked by their mother to give up their feast for a poor family with no food. The girls, after considering only a moment, gladly make their sacrifice: "*I shall take the cream and the muffins,*" added Amy, heroically giving up the articles she most liked... 'I thought you'd do it,' said Mrs. March, smiling as if satisfied." Then, as though to reassure her reader that a life of sacrifice is not without its benefits, Alcott sees to it that the characters are rewarded for their good deeds. Later, Mr. Lawrence, their wealthy neighbor, hears of their generosity and sends over ice cream and flowers.

The theme of morality may also be seen in the characters' shortcomings as well as their generosity and good deeds. Alcott uses Jo's fiery temper and Marmee's prudent advice to illustrate an additional lesson of morality to the reader. Marmee confesses to Jo her own struggles with her temper and yet advises her daughter to,

“not let the sun go down upon [her] anger”. In finding that her seemingly even-tempered mother struggles with her temper as well, Jo, and perhaps the reader as well, are given hope.

Though it may not seem so at first, but this theme is relevant to modern readers. Those reading a classic such as *Little Women*, authored in puritan America, may expect moral teachings to be found in such writing. Furthermore, one would argue that selfish lifestyles or embracing one’s temper are not desirable qualities. Thus the teaching Alcott gives her readers may be acceptable to even sought by the reader. This relevance lends the novel, for lack of a better term, “credibility” with the reader. Here is a point of connection and relevance, making this novel accessible to modern readers.

Alcott’s second theme, feminism, also begins right at the outset of her novel. The mere title suggests partiality towards women. Jo, the novel’s central character, does not fit the feminine archetype (neither past nor present), from her physically and socially awkward nature to her out right indignance to those constraints placed on women. Early in the novel the two oldest girls, Meg and Jo, are invited to a New Year’s party. Meg, the much more traditional sister, is thrilled and convinces Jo to attend setting up a system by which she will inform Jo if she is behaving appropriately (an eye brow raise for a blunder, a nod for approval). Jo’s attitude towards the affair and dress are both indicative of her nonconventional feminine roll. Her dress is burned from standing too close the fire and her gloves are stained. These are representative of her attitude towards social obligations. Furthermore, as she aids Meg in her preparations for the party, she burns her hair. Now not only is Jo ruined, but she has also rubbed off on her very socially conscious sister. The burns may represent Jo’s passion as well as her negative feelings towards theses constraints.

Jo, as well as her sisters, demonstrate a curiosity in the masculine world through their Pickwick club. Here they explore the feelings of freedom and independence in a masculine world. They publish their own work, freely expressing their thoughts and ideas, and even dress as men.

Some of the masculine roles Jo individually fills include her passion for writing and providing for the family through this and other means. Jo’s writing is a vehicle for her to seek independence when she leaves the family to go to Boston. It was at that time a traditionally male occupation and so here she bucks the cultural expectation and dives into a male dominated world. Using her writing as a means to provide for the family financially, Jo yet again fills a traditionally male role. Another means by which Jo fills this masculine role of providing for the family is through selling her hair. This example is rich with symbolism. Her hair, her “one beauty” as Amy calls it represents her femininity. Furthermore, the way in which she presents herself to the family after the fact has a distinctly masculine air—very rational and practical: “Jo assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a particle, and said, ‘it doesn’t affect the state of the nation, so don’t wail, Beth. It will be good for my vanity, I was getting too proud of my wig. It will do my brains good to have

that mop taken off; my head feels deliciously light and cool and boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order. I'm satisfied, so please take the money and let's have supper." Jo's response is quite practical in that she seeks to curb her vanity, her new style will be light and easy to care for, and she offers the money and seeks to get on to the next thing. Much like a father coming home from work, she offers her wages and requests her supper.

Jo reflects masculine rolls in her romantic life as well. Though the reader may have hoped that she and Laurie would wed, Jo avoids his proposal and goes to "make her way in the world". Here, again, a stereotypically masculine pursuit. She will not succumb to marriage on someone else's terms. When she does eventually bow to this cultural expectation, she symbolically seeks it out, and she is on "equal footing" with her beau. Jo's leaving the house to run errands where she runs into professor Bhear symbolizes her active engagement in, one might even go so far as to say her pursuit of, marriage. When the professor does ask her hand, he is prevented from kneeling in the mud and the two are on equal ground.

Alcott's second theme of feminism is relevant and relatable to modern readers as women still are at a disadvantage. Many women today seek to fit in in a masculine world. One current example of this is the recent presidential elections. For the first time in history, a woman ran for president. Women today are still breaking new ground as they were in Alcott's time.

Alcott's final theme, cultural expectations, is similar in many ways to the theme of feminism. The ways in which the characters go against the cultural expectations of their time much of the time are simultaneously promoting feminist ideals. One such example, which also ties into the theme of morality is the girls' choices in whom to marry. The cultural expectation at that time was for women to marry for money. A woman should marry someone who could take care of her. The March girls instead opt to marry for love. Meg marries Mr. Brooke and thus sets herself up for a life of poverty. In this decision she not only shirks the cultural expectations but her moral sensibilities also triumph. By opting for a life of poverty she dies to her fault of vanity and desiring to fit in socially. This not only reinforces her overcoming cultural expectations but it also demonstrates her moral sense. Jo, refusing to marry Laurie due to their incompatibility, instead marries the professor for love. This also demonstrates not only a refusal for wealth, but also reinforces her independence, and dedication to other more admirable pursuits such as education. Amy, likewise, refuses a marriage proposal that would grant her a comfortable lifestyle and instead marries for love. Although Laurie will certainly be able to provide for her, her initial refusal of her first proposal would have been surprising to those operating under the usual cultural expectations. These choices, bucking traditional cultural expectations, also reflect the girls' moral sensibilities. Marrying for love and dying to vanity and a desire for wealth, one would argue even today, is the more admirable decision.

In the same way that feminism is a timeless theme, relatable to modern readers, not bowing to cultural expectations is also desirable and relatable theme. A

modern equivalent to the March girls' situation is what would now be called a "gold digger", that is someone who marries for money. This is not a desirable trait. Marrying for love is seen as the most desirable pursuit. Another aspect of Alcott's portrayal of marriage that is relatable is that it is not a "happily ever after" portrayal. Instead she shows that married persons still have difficulties. This touch of reality makes the novel more life like and thus more relatable to readers.

As one may see, Alcott set up the characters and themes in her novel *Little Women* to demonstrate her opinions on morality, feminism, and cultural expectations. As seen through many of the examples in each of these areas, morality is a very strong and pervasive theme throughout the novel. It provides a means for Alcott to "teach" her readers while they are entertained. Alcott's views on women come through in her characters' speech and actions. Similar to modern feminist ideals, Jo craves independence and self-sufficiency. Through multiple examples of Jo filling traditionally male roles and bucking traditional feminine roles, one gets a very strong sense for Alcott's leanings. Finally, and very similar to her illustrations through Jo's character,

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