

## MORAL TEACHINGS AT HOME AS SEEN IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this research is to see the morals taught in the novel Little Women by American white writer Louisa May Alcott. Through these morals, it also aims to study the roots of these morals as part of social values as well as the society of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century mirrored in the novel.*

*Since the emphasis is on the cultural study, the research is done in the perspective of American Studies. In this case, historical, sociological and cultural approaches are, inevitably, used besides literary approach. All the data used in this research are written text, library research methodology is applied. Books, journals, and many written materials, including internet-based materials, are treated as secondary data, while the novel itself is considered as the primary one. There are three steps in this library research, namely, collecting data, selecting data, and analyzing data. The other method used in this research is analytical-descriptive method, by which all the data obtained are analyzed and presented descriptively.*

*The research shows that American socio-cultural situation in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is basic environment and driving force for the characters' love, emotion as well as behavior. Its writer Louisa May Alcott arranges the novel structure and preaches proper morals also in accordance with that. A detailed analysis of the American culture here includes its social reform thinking — transcendentalism, literary traditions, women's social status in the time, and the religious origins behind these values. These cultural heritages reflected in Little Women point out the room for further research on this topic.*

**Keywords:** *American culture, cultural study, Morals.*

Louisa May Alcott, American white woman writer in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is famous for her warmly-received novel *Little Women*. *Little Women* has been long receiving popularity after its publication. Even until today it is regarded as one of popular American literature classics.

Louisa wrote *Little Women* for young girls at the request of her publisher, and upon its great success, worried that she was doing nothing more than writing “moral pap” fit for children. *Little Women* possesses many qualities of the didactic genre, a class of works that have moral lessons. Nevertheless, *Little Women* does not preach directly to the reader, as did many didactic fictions of its time. The narrator refrains from too much explicit moralizing, allowing us to draw our own

lessons from the outcome of the story. Therefore, *Little Women* impresses readers with its moral values.

This 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.

From the purpose of Louisa May Alcott to write this novel, and the contents as well as the characteristics of it, we could obviously see this is a typical children's literature. As for children's literature, it is the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people (Encyclopedia Britannica 2008 CD-ROM). According to this account of outlining children's literature, one of the functions of children's literature is to instruct or to educate young people. *Little Women* is not exceptional, with the teachings of morality so much that it is criticized by some critics that it is wholly filled with didactics. However such moral teachings have never reduced its popularity not only within United States but also worldwide ever since its publishing. We probably ask what attracts people's attention so durably, and what moralities are taught in this novel.

*Little Women* is a dramatized autobiography. Modeled out of Alcott's family life, in the novel, four sisters are exactly Alcott's sisters, Mrs. March is archetypal of her mother, and Mr. March is exactly her father. Daughter of the transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, Louisa spent most of her life in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts, where she grew up in the company of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker and Henry David Thoreau. Her education was largely under the direction of her father. Alcott realized early that her father was too impractical to provide for his wife and four daughters; after the failure of Fruitland, a utopian community that he had founded, Louisa Alcott's lifelong concern for the welfare of her family began. She taught briefly, worked as a domestic governess, and finally began to write. She volunteered as a nurse after the American Civil War began, but she contracted typhoid from unsanitary hospital conditions and was sent home. She was never completely well again. Such unique experience shapes Louisa May Alcott's distinctive values about life and society. She never got married all her life fulfilling lifelong promise to care for her family and parents, as showed by the title of one of her works *The Long Fatal Chase of Love*. Her amazingly long sacrifice best exemplifies moralities as she depicts in *Little Women*. Meanwhile the moralities reflected in the novel also foreshadows Louisa May Alcott's later continual sacrifice to her family for the rest of her life with no regret being a spinster to the end of life. The further study of her life will help trace thoughts of her and find the relation which contributes to her moral views toward girls.

Before exploring further, we will make clear the definition of important relevant keyword—Morality. According to *American Dictionary of Psychology*, morality is defined as a system of beliefs or set of values relating to right conduct, against which behavior is judged to be acceptable or unacceptable. In the analysis, the adjective as well as noun form of morality, which is moral, is also

used alternatively besides the noun “morality”. In this book, moral could also mean: 1, practical lesson that a story, an event or an experience teaches; 2, standards of behavior and principles of right and wrong. 3. The ethical values or principles that people use to guide their behavior (Vandenbos, 2007:590). Based on the above definition, we conclude that moral or moralities are lesson learned by persons as well as principles of good behavior taught in a society. For example:

“Money is a needful and precious thing,—and, when well used, a noble thing,—but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I’d rather see you poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace.”

Mother speaks these words in Chapter 9, after Meg has returned from a two-week stay at the Moffats’ home. Mother tells Meg that she does not want any of her daughters to marry for material comforts, as was suggested by a guest at the Gardiners’. At a moment in history when women’s futures hinged solely on their choice of a husband, Mother’s statement is very compassionate and unusual. After all, the other guests at the party easily assume that Meg must be intending to marry for money. Here moral about marriage is clearly drawn by the kind mother through Meg’s experience.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

All the data used in this research are written text, library research methodology is applied. Books, journals, and many written materials, including internet-based materials, are treated as secondary data, while the novel itself is considered as the primary one. There are three steps in this library research, namely, collecting data, selecting data, and analyzing data. The other method used in this research is analytical-descriptive method, by which all the data obtained are analyzed and presented descriptively. In this case, historical, sociological and cultural approaches are, inevitably, used besides literary approach.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Four Little Women’s Moral Development**

In the logic of morals people are concerned with the system exhibited or implied by moral judgments. The business of the logic of morals is to show the logical structure of the moral system. Different systems can be constructed from different postulates and different definitions (Raphael 8). Since the author and writer have different cultural background, this makes the moral judgment in this thesis more combined of American Christian ideology and writer’s cultural background.

It may be that, in exhibiting the logic of such judgments, one is restricting himself or herself to one particular system of morals, which happens to be used in another particular civilization. Or it may be that more than one moral system is embedded in people’s ordinary moral judgments. Five morals drawn in this

research are right such embodiment of overlapping of moral systems. People might clarify, extend and modify one of these systems, recommending its usage for application to all moral situations. The analysis of morals in this thesis through *Little Women* is the course of moral judgment in literary text.

### ***To Be Dutiful***

*Little Women* opens with girls complaint of poor coming Christmas. While they talk, Mother comes home with a letter from Mr. March, who is serving as a Union chaplain in the Civil War. The letter reminds his little women to be good, which makes them feel ashamed of their earlier complaining. "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman,' and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (Alcott, 1994:10). Jo says after hearing the letter, they resolve to bear their burdens more cheerfully. Meg's burden is her vanity, Jo's is her temper, Beth's is her housework, and Amy's is her selfishness. Mother suggests that the sisters pretend they are playing pilgrims, a game from the girls' childhood in which they act out scenes from John Bunyan's didactic novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In this game, each girl shoulders a burden and tries to make her way to the Celestial City.

Jo struggles throughout the novel because she wants both to lead an adventurous, independent life and to help and please her family. In other words, the struggle for individual success conflicts with the duty and affection she feels for her family and with the domestic sphere that most women of the time accept.

Over the course of the novel, Alcott develops these girls as separate individuals. The obstacles they face are usually a result of their respective traits, and the trouble one sister faces would not have the same effect on another. Many critics have noted that Alcott's four girls are different from each other so that every reader may identify with at least one sister and glean some wisdom from that sister's blunders.

Mr. March's letter inspires the girls to bear their burdens more calmly, illustrating that, from the outset, the March sisters' task is to become more humble, good, and dutiful. Alcott does not consider this project trifling, even though it occurs in a domestic sphere. By making her characters imitate *Pilgrim's Progress*, a novel in which the male character has grand adventures, Alcott elevates women's everyday lives and indicates that the struggles of ordinary women are as important as the struggles of adventuring men.

### ***To Be Selfless***

The March girls start spending time at the Laurences' house. Meg loves to walk in the greenhouse there, and Amy loves to look at the artwork. Beth loves Mr. Laurence's piano, but she is still afraid of him; she will not venture far inside the house. Mr. Laurence learns of Beth's fears and comes over to the Marches' house one night, talking about how no one plays the piano and how no one is around the house during the day. With that assurance, Beth decides to venture into the house during the day and play the piano. Unbeknownst to her, Mr. Laurence sometimes leaves his door open to hear her play. Beth reminds him of his beloved granddaughter who passed away. After a while, Beth makes Mr. Laurence a pair

of slippers to show her gratitude. In return, he sends her the little piano that his granddaughter owned, which thrills Beth. Jo tells Beth that she should go thank him, thinking that her shy sister would never be so bold. To everyone's surprise, Beth marches over to Mr. Laurence's house and kisses his cheek. The two have solidified a friendship.

Mr. Laurence's these benevolences and his earlier rewarding of the Marches' selflessness on Christmas with a feast reinforces the gender stereotype of the perpetually giving, selfless woman who is taken care of by a man.

"It's nice to have accomplishments, and be elegant; but not to show off" (Alcott, 1994:67). Amy said after learning a lesson, who is more vain and selfish than her other sisters. But Alcott characterizes these flaws as partly charming, and certainly as the product of Amy's young age. Alcott suggests that Amy's heart is in the right place, and that she has the capacity to improve.

### ***To Be Hardworking***

After the girls neglect their chores for almost a week, Mother and Hannah take a day off as well. That day, the girls fail miserably in running the household smoothly. They soon discover that Mother has taught them a lesson about the importance of everyone doing at least a little work.

Laurie swings idly on his hammock and spies the March girls walking out to a hill. There, the sisters sit working—knitting, sewing, drawing, and reading. Feeling left out, Laurie asks if he may join them. They admit him under the condition that he contributes something useful, as is consistent with the work ethic of the girls' Busy Bee Society.

Jo finishes the manuscripts for two stories and brings them to a newspaperman in town without telling anyone. Then, one day, she reads a story aloud from a paper and announces in the end that the story was hers. She has not gotten paid, but she says that she will for future stories. She feels wonderfully independent.

In Chapter 11, Alcott stresses the importance of work and suggests that idleness does not lead to happiness. Alcott stresses the importance of work again in Chapter 12, indicating that it is a particularly American value. In this chapter, Kate Vaughn, Laurie's British friend, is set up as a foil, or contrast, to Meg. While both women are intelligent and attractive, Kate, the lady of leisure, is characterized as snobby, insensitive, and unkind. Meg, on the other hand, is unpretentious, sweet-natured, and hardworking.

### ***To Be Self-examining***

During Beth's illness, Amy has a hard time living with Aunt March. Though Aunt March likes Amy, she makes her niece work very hard. For consolation, Amy turns to the servant, Esther, who tells her stories and plays with her among Aunt March's old dresses and jewelry. After a while, Esther tells Amy that she finds solace in prayer. She even tells Amy that she will help set up a small shrine for her. Esther then reveals that Amy is to receive her aunt's turquoise ring. From then on, Amy behaves extremely well so as to be assured of getting the ring. She

and Esther set up a chapel in a dressing closet, and Amy derives comfort from praying there. Amy also decides to make a will, in case she falls ill and dies. She has Esther and Laurie serve as witnesses.

Later, Mother also comes to visit Amy. Amy shows her the chapel, which Mother approves of as a place for quiet reflection. Amy also asks Mother if she may wear the turquoise ring that Aunt March has given her. She wants to wear it to remind herself not to be selfish, and Mother approves of this plan.

In Chapter 18, Amy matures by leaps and bounds at Aunt March's house. She confronts her selfishness, realizing with shame that she is more worried about getting her hands on the turquoise ring than she is about her ill sister. She learns that a place for quiet reflection is often necessary; she even thinks seriously about death, demonstrating that she can overcome material concerns. Meanwhile, she does not lose her aesthetic values, because her chapel, after all, is beautiful and dramatic, and her reminder not to be selfish is her turquoise ring. Her continued appreciation of beautiful objects here suggests that while she is becoming an adult, she is still a child at heart.

### ***To Be True to Heart***

When Mr. Brook professes his love for Meg, she tells him she is too young. Aunt March arrives in the middle of this encounter. Mr. Brooke steps out, and Aunt March lectures Meg, telling her she should marry someone wealthy. Aunt March's tirade makes Meg defend her right to love and marry Mr. Brooke.

Meg does a lot of growing up in the last three chapters; she falls in love and becomes engaged. On the other hand, when Meg agrees to marry Mr. Brooke, she demonstrates that at last she has overcome her own weakness for luxury and riches. John is not a rich man, and he will not provide Meg with the glamorous lifestyle she once coveted, but she loves him nonetheless. Alcott underlines Meg's triumphant victory over materialism by having Aunt March object to Mr. Brooke's poverty, and then letting us hear Meg's passionate defense of him and her insistence that his poverty does not matter because he is a good man and they love each other.

## **Roots of the Moral Teachings and Reflection of Intellectual Tradition and Society of mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century in *Little Women***

### ***Transcendentalism Seen in Little Women***

Domestic Transcendentalism in the Novels of Louisa May Alcott is also one of characteristics the previously overlooked novels of other highly successful popular novelists of the late nineteenth century has. The fiction of Louisa May Alcott, while appealing to a diverse popular audience, also contains strategically placed allusions to the works and philosophy of the leaders of the Transcendentalist movement. Tracing the influence of Emerson, Thoreau, and other transcendental figures in the novel of Alcott, this study demonstrates that the woman writer both honors and tempers the ideas of their literary predecessors. While the novelist retains an Emersonian insistence on individualism and a respect for the relationship between God, Nature, and humanity, they affirm the

necessity of community over solitude. Besides they also depict male and female characters, adults and children, who experience epiphanies and function as poets, thereby suggesting in a realistic setting the practical possibilities of transcendentalism as a way of life.

These authors reinterpret transcendental beliefs in diverse ways. Alcott emphasizes the educational methods advocated by her father, Bronson Alcott, in combination with her own convictions about the redemptive nature of work. Her evolving ideas about education and work are reflected in her characters' transformation from "pilgrims" into "missionaries". Yet Louisa proposes that self-assurance is not merely the end goal for the individual but a vital aspect of a healthy community. These domestic Transcendentalists acknowledge the significance of American Romanticism.

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. ("Transcendentalism" Microsoft Student 2007 DVD Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation 2006.)

### ***Women in Nineteenth-Century America***

During the Civil War, strong and willing, the four sisters (Meg, Amy, Jo, and Beth) stick together through the rough times. Mother works hard to raise the girls while her husband and the girls' father serves as a Union chaplain in the Civil War. Event after event, the girls grow to love each other over their hate and anger. The story ends happy, as one would expect. The four sisters respectively represent different women images.

*Little Women* also represents how people stereotyped gender in the 19th century. Jo often confuses the female stereotype with her "tomboy" actions. This novel shows the dangers of stereotyping a girl and her purpose in life. Another strong point is the struggle between familial duty and personal growth. Another important theme in this novel is the importance of being genuine and expressing who you wish to be in life.

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. Daughters were expected to help with housework to expedite chores and also to learn skills for their own future households.

To create an ideal home, the wife handled all housework in addition to being polite, selfless. However, *Little Women* challenges assumptions about women in nineteenth-century America. Mother tells her daughters that they should not feel obligated to find husbands, but should seek fulfillment on their own.

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. 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.

During the war, women assumed larger roles in the social structure. They became temporary nurses, clerks, and factory workers. Our author Louisa May Alcott's service as a nurse was right during American civil war, and through Jo we could see women's will to bear more social burdens.

### **Literary Tradition Little Women Follows**

The sentimental novel became immensely popular in the United States in the mid-1800's. This type of novel emphasized feelings and such values as religious faith, moral virtue, and family closeness. Its stress on traditional values appealed to many people during a period of rapid social and political change.

Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* was a best-selling sentimental novel. Meanwhile as Stern noted, *Little Women* also marks the postsentimentalism of literature. However, in 1860s Children's books generally depicted innocent, flawless children in innocent stories. Characters were one-dimensional and stories were strongly oriented toward teaching virtue ("American Literature" World Book CD-ROM 2005). Protagonists all in *Little Women* are not perfect; each of them has flaws and manages to overcome.

Sentimentality is not simply a rhetorical mode or literary genre; rather it is a practical consciousness or set of actions. Sentimentalism must be studied within the context of domesticity, and larger ideology and set of practices structuring women's and men's places and roles in the nineteenth century. Although the concept of domesticity shifted throughout the nineteenth century, it fundamentally held a division of labor that assigned women to the privatized realm of the home, which became the site and source of feeling, religion, morality, child rearing, purity, and order. The strength of the domestic ideology was that it redefined women, not as inferior to men (as has been done before), but as different from them. *Little Women* allots four young girls an all-female world to develop their respective characters independently, in which men are less important or even could be ignored. Women are given a separate and, in some ways, morally superior role to that of men. This desperate arrangement in some way mirrors author Alcott's decision to be independence and her resistance to society in the sentimental way.

As moral exemplars of sympathy, women were able to engage with the downtrodden, sinful, and sensational individuals and aspects of society in a "safe" way. Barred traditionally from access to the public realm, women were nevertheless imagined by sentimental culture as being responsible for and best suited to purging society of corruption. Under the banner of sentiment, women marched into the public world to enact humanitarian reform.

### **Religious Origin of Morals Taught**

Culture as general concept includes religion and religious belief. Literature as cultural phenomenon inevitably embraces such value or belief. In *Little Women* it is prefaced by an excerpt from John Bunyan's seventeenth-century novel the *Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegorical, or symbolic, novel about living a Christian life. Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory about a man's struggle to get to heaven. Moreover the structure of *Little Women* is also framed by it. From

both, it is already clear of story's religious origin. Many Christian values could be found inside story.

Hard work in Christianity is called 'asceticism'. The various different dogmatic roots of ascetic morality did no doubt die out after terrible struggles. But the original connection with those dogmas has left behind important traces in the later undogmatic ethics.

People are interested rather in something entirely different; the influence of those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gives a direction to practical conduct and helps the individual to it. These sanctions are to a large extent derived from the peculiarities of the religious ideas behind them. The men of that day were occupied with abstract dogmas to an extent which itself can only be understood when we perceive the connection of these dogmas with practical religious interests (Weber, 1958:95-98).

In Christianity, virtues are simply means to the end of pleasure. Thus both virtues and duties have only instrumental, not intrinsic, value. In moral life, moral laws, especially those of the Old and New Testaments, have an important, though secondary, role in determining people's duties. Jo's self-realization proves their acceptance that duties are necessary for love and hard work is the instrument to fulfill duties. A "duty" is an act which one is under obligation to do. In the moral sense, however, it is an act he ought to do or not do; something due from him though he may refuse to do it. Duty aims at the realization of values, not in the abstract, but in the lives of persons. The ethics of value has often been obsessed with an impersonal conception of values and blind to the fact that values are actually only in and for persons. The primary aim of moral action is to realize not the greatest quantity of values, but the values most appropriate for the persons whose needs one is seeking to serve.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, it is seen that Louisa May Alcott has used her novel to express her thoughts for young adult girls. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* can be considered different at the time. The difference lies in the characters she created as multidimensional, who have problems and flaws, compared with those by Louisa's contemporaries. Many lessons are open for people to draw. Those that could be seen clearly in this novel are to be dutiful, to be selfless, to be hard-working, to be self-examining and to be true to heart based on the events happening in four little women's life.

When taking a closer look at American society of the mid-nineteenth century, many forces through the novel and social origins are clearly reflected. First is transcendentalism. Her evolving ideas about education and work are reflected in her characters' transformation from "pilgrims" into "missionaries". Alcott affirms Emerson's theories on self-reliance and the necessity of self-culture. Second is women's social status in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This novel shows the danger of stereotyping a girl and her purpose in life. In a time, women were responsible for creating warm, happy homes for their husbands and children, and

daughters were expected to help with housework to expedite chores and also to learn skills for their own future households. The third is literary tradition *Little Women* inevitably follows. Louisa's *Little Women* once was the best-selling sentimental novel. This type of novel emphasized feelings and such values as religious faith, moral virtue, and family closeness. Its stress on traditional values appealed to many people during a period of rapid social and political change. Sentimentalism is usually seen as the affective and relational component of domesticity. Within the context of domesticity, larger ideology and set of practices structured women's and men's places and roles in the nineteenth century. The last is religious origin of morals taught in the novel. *Little Women* was framed on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. From the very beginning of the novel, four girls have been encouraged to perform in pilgrim's way and live Christian life. Playing pilgrims are the guide for goodness and happiness. The year-long struggle with the absence of father is right their journey from "destructive city to celestial city". This guide meanwhile becomes the moral basis of being dutiful, hardworking, self-examining and selfless.

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