Louisa May Alcott and *Little Women*

The publication of *Little Women* in 1868 immediately brought Louisa May Alcott fame and financial security. Alcott achieved this success despite her own uncertainty about writing a book for young women. While she had already written a great deal, publishing two books, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), based on her experience as a Civil War nurse, and *Moods* (1864), along with a variety of stories, novellas, and poems in the periodical press, Alcott had not yet been able to support herself and her impoverished family with her writing. Largely based on her own life, *Little Women* quickly garnered Alcott the financial security she had longed for, with its sequels further ensuring her family’s well-being. While literary critics in the past have admired and discounted *Little Women* as a children’s book, more recent critical trends have begun to emphasize the importance of reading Alcott’s most famous novel within the context of her longer writing career and its relationship to mid-nineteenth-century American gender ideals and religious culture.

Louisa May Alcott was the second daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and Abba May Alcott. Bronson Alcott was a leading transcendentalist, and Louisa grew up in the company of Emerson, Thoreau, and others within the transcendentalist and Boston literary circles. Her father would prove to be an enduring and ambivalent influence on Louisa, through his intellectual connections and example, his economic failures, and his strong personality. When Louisa was young, her father established the famous Temple School in Boston, where he put into practice what were at the time radical pedagogical theories—that all children had the potential to learn; that education should take account of the body, spirit, and mind; and that the best learning was achieved through active and engaged questioning rather than rote memorization. His pedagogy directly related to his transcendentalist thinking, with an emphasis on the organic development of the child and his faith in the innate moral goodness of children. After some success, however, the Temple School failed, and for the rest of Louisa’s youth, her family was on the verge of poverty if not outright starvation. Most famously, Bronson helped to establish the utopian community Fruitlands in 1842, an experience Louisa would parody in “Transcendental Wild Oats.” With its strict austerity and its attempt to withdraw completely from an American economy based on the exploitation of animals and humans, the community quickly failed. Bronson, who was often seen as the most idealistic and least realistic of the transcendentalists—a group frequently dismissed as dreamy—never resigned himself to maintaining himself and his family by conventional means. By most accounts, Abba May became the primary breadwinner in the years that followed.

Louisa took on that role as she grew older, first through sewing and then teaching, but as time went on, increasingly through her writing. By 1855, when she was 23, her writing was beginning to supply her with almost as much income as teaching and sewing. This role—providing for her family through her writing—becomes fictionalized in Jo in *Little Women*. In many ways, in fact, the novel is autobiographical, with its depiction of the four sisters matching with Louisa and her sisters, the strong mother figure and the largely absent—but deeply influential—father taken from her own life. Alcott’s novel of the spiritual and emotional trials and triumphs of four sisters...
quickly became a best-seller and has remained among the most popular young adult works every written. With its success, Alcott gave her family the financial stability they had never had in her life. After quickly following Little Women with a sequel (which is often published with the first volume as one novel), she would add two more novels to the series—Little Men (1871) and Jo’s Boys (1886)—that would make her fame and fortune.

For most of the time since her death in 1888, Alcott has been known primarily for her children’s fiction, but with the recovery efforts energized by the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s a more complex and variegated understanding of her writing career has emerged. Most notably, perhaps, Madeleine Stern recovered a series of sensational, sometimes lurid tales that Alcott published in the early 1860s under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard. While scholars knew that, like her fictional character Jo in Little Women, Alcott had published such tales, they had largely dismissed them as improper or immature attempts at garnering an income. At the same time, critics also began to reconsider Alcott’s other works written for adults, most notably the semi-autobiographical Moods and Work (1873). Much of the critical conversation that has followed has centered on the question of how best to understand these works in relation to one another and within the context of domestic ideology and its proscriptions concerning women’s roles in society.

Little Women, in many respects, seems to follow earlier, incredibly popular works of domestic sentimentalism such as Susan Warner’s Wide, Wide World (1850) and Maria Cummins’ The Lamplighter (1854), novels in which orphaned girls must survive in the world by submitting to God and learning to control their tempers and passions, before happily concluding with a traditional marriage. Like these and similar works, Little Women uses an explicitly Christian frame for understanding the heroines’ struggles and, in the second volume, titled Good Wives, concludes with all of the living sisters getting married. In this respect, Alcott’s novel seems to embrace the dominant, conventional ideas associated with domesticity—that the woman should be the angel of the house who provides a moral center to the family through her self-sacrifice, innate morality, and devout Christianity. Repeatedly alluding to one of her father’s favorite books, John Bunyan’s Protestant allegory Pilgrim’s Progress, a book the March sisters’ mother gives them at the beginning of the novel, Alcott builds on a template of spiritual overcoming of worldly shortcomings and temptations through her depictions of Beth and “The Place Beautiful,” “Amy’s Valley of Humiliation,” Jo’s encounter with “Apollyon,” and Meg’s journey to “Vanity Fair.” The March sisters are led through their trials—culminating with Beth’s death in the second volume—by their mother, but their father’s patriarchal authority, according to some readings, suffuses the home even though he is largely absent while serving in the Civil War. The novel’s idealized, fictionalized depiction of Alcott’s own girlhood, in which her sisters’ flaws are downplayed, her father’s failures omitted, and the family’s poverty largely erased, may further speak to its commitment to the mid-century ideal of middle-class family life.

Alcott’s other works, however, suggest that we should examine Little Women’s engagement with domesticity and its limitations on women’s activity with more care. In her earlier sensational work, such as Behind a Mask, Alcott critiques the class and gender structures and expectations that disempower young women such as herself,
exploring how women can use their sexuality in morally ambiguous ways to achieve the domestic security they were supposedly guaranteed by the cult of domesticity. Underlying this depiction—and many of her other works from this period—is an emphasis on conventional femininity as a performance, as many of her female characters either are or have been actresses, a career at the time still associated with immorality, or partake in playacting. Alcott’s own interest in the theatre, including writing a number of unpublished plays, along with the March sisters many theatrical entertainments, echo this emphasis on gender conventions as less natural than performed. For some contemporary readers, in fact, the March girls’ playacting was scandalous; however, given Alcott’s repeated attention to gender performance in her oeuvre, it may serve as a key figure for the girls’ trying on the different roles they might inhabit as adult women. Christie Devon, Alcott’s heroine in *Work*, also becomes an actress for a time, as her multiple attempts at economically supporting herself draw on Alcott’s similar efforts. What is most striking about Christie’s story is her insistence on being economically independent for most of the novel. Christie, like the heroines of domestic sentimentalism, marries, but her husband soon dies in the Civil War, leaving her a widowed mother. The novel concludes not with a domestic unit constructed around patriarchal authority but with an extended feminine group of family and friends providing community and support.

Alcott herself was an early and steady advocate for women’s rights (and abolition) who claimed to be the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts. Alcott never married—being devoted to her parents and her sisters—and she seemed to have only had her fictional self in *Little Women*, Jo, marry under pressure from readers and editors. The novel’s power, according to many accounts, derives, in fact, from the way the sisters’ never fully fit with the idealization of girlhood and womanhood that supposedly defined domestic sentimentalism. Against genre expectations, Jo and Laurie do not marry, and when Jo does marry, her relationship with Dr. Bhaer seems to be a true partnership largely based in their educational efforts rather than a relationship of submission paralleling the young woman’s submission to God’s authority. Throughout the novel, in fact, the emphasis is on the girls negotiating their world together, with the guiding hand of their mother, and, until the second volume at least, little to no paternal or masculine influence. The novel’s continuing success with a wide-variety of readers—many adults, both men and women, were among its most leading champions in the late-nineteenth century—thus evidences its ability to present a picture of girlhood and early womanhood that confirmed accepted notions of womanly devotion, Christianity, and morality while offering a realistic depiction of the sacrifices such ideals entailed and the disparate ways women might modify those ideals to fit their own lives, their talents, ambitions, and social condition. As such, it remains a powerful reflection on the place of women in mid-nineteenth-century United States.