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The Position of Women in L. M. Alcott's Fiction

Thesis

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyse selected examples of Louisa May Alcott's fiction, especially the novel *Little Women*, considering the historical and cultural context and author's family background.

The thesis concentrates especially on the way Alcott portrays her female characters; and describes to what extent are these heroines pictured in a conventional way, according to the nineteenth century ideals of womanhood, and to what extent is Alcott critical of these ideals.

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je zanalyzovat zvolenou prózu Louisy May Alcottové, především román *Malé ženy* na pozadí historicky-kulturního kontextu a specifik autorčina rodinného zázemí.

Práce je zaměřena především na analýzu způsobu, jakým Alcottová zachycuje své ženské postavy a zkoumá nakolik jsou tyto hrdinky zobrazeny konvenčně, podle ideálů ženství devatenáctého století a nakolik je ve svých názorech Alcottová k těmto ideálům kritická.

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1. Introduction

The novel *Little Women* tells a story of four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March, who are depicted just on the edge of their girlhood, approaching the young womanhood. Meg, the oldest one, most of all desires a nice and happy family. Jo is the tomboy, struggling with her wild temper and boyish behaviour; she wants to become a writer and help to take care of the family. Beth is the angel of the house, quiet and shy. She hopes for the family to stay together, but she is to be the one who leaves it tragically as she dies after a long illness. Amy, the youngest one who wants to be an artist, grows into a real lady.

The novel was written by Louisa May Alcott, and published in 1868, as a simple book for girls; “moral pap for children” as Louisa called it herself.

Its readers very soon realized that Louisa was highly inspired by her own family, when working on *Little Women*, and that she created the characters of the book on her own family background and experiences. The influence of the real American family of Alcotts, especially Louisa’s father, Bronson Alcott, was particularly significant for both Louisa’s life and her writing. As her father was never really satisfied with Louisa’s ways, as they were according to him, and the nineteenth century conventions, not womanly enough, Louisa depicted her struggle against finding her own self through the character of Jo March.

The question that arises is, whether Jo and her sisters, and Louisa’s other heroines, especially woman portrayed in her earlier, pseudonymous, sensational stories, are portrayed in a way that supports the conventional ideas of women’s sphere and proper behaviour, and therefore reinforce the patriarchal establishment of the society, teaching Louisa’s readers about its legitimacy or, whether Louisa breaks those conventions and portrays her women in an unconventional way, showing her female readers the limitations concerning the women’s sphere, which they either have to internalize or struggle against them.

2. The Alcotts and the Marches

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

“We’ve got father and mother and each other, anyhow,” said Beth contentedly, from her corner.

These words are the opening lines of Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Little Women*. In the very first paragraph a reader meets all the March sisters and discovers the first hints of the personalities of the main characters. The reader learns about their poverty and the way the girls are affected by it, Meg’s desire for nice and new dress which will re-appear several times throughout the story, Amy’s longing to level with other girls, to be popular among them, and Beth’s positive thinking and good nature. “One sees at once [Louisa’s] mastery of character. In those first paragraphs, every speech ... is completely in character and never varies from that image throughout the whole of the book. Each ... is strictly the same individual as first presented in the opening scene.” (Meigs, p. 63)

Even though the scene may have a feeling of resentment and injury as the girls complain about their poverty, the picture that the reader experiences is very warm and touching. “For all the realism of the setting, there is a fairy tale quality to the scene depicted here as the story of the four sisters continues.” (Bedell, p.11) Moreover, Beth’s comment shows the reader immediately at the beginning of the novel the importance of family and the safety it provides for the sisters.

Little Women is an American classic; “a treasure, a story whose enduring values of patience, loyalty, and love have kept this extraordinary family close to the hearts of generation after generation of delighted readers.” (*Little Women*, abstract) However, “behind the legend of *Little Women* there was a real family whose dramatic history had inspired its second daughter, Louisa, to write this novel.” (Bedell, p.12)

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, as the second daughter of Amos Bronson and Abigail May Alcott. She was raised in Concord, Massachusetts that was home to many great writers of that time; Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel

Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. “This was the nineteenth-century New England family of Amos Bronson Alcott, the transcendental philosopher and educator, his wife Abby May Alcott, and their four daughters, Anna, Louisa, Lizzie and Abbie May, the “Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy” of the book.” (Bedell, p.12) Inspired by a real family, *Little Women* authentically portrays an American family life in the nineteenth century.

3. Cultural and historical context of Alcott's times

The nineteenth century in America was time of great development and growth, both industrial and cultural, but it was also time of great changes and reforms. On one hand there were the puritan values and beliefs that were still very much ingrained in the American society, on the other hand, there were new ways of thinking, new ideas, needs for reforms and movements.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an enormous growth of American industry started with the invention of a cotton gin, machine made to extract seeds from cotton. It caused the production of cotton, as well as the economic development of the whole country, to grow rapidly. The industrial expansion showed its effect in the improvement of transportation and industrial revolution in the South-east. It also formed the base for factory production which was followed by the growth of cities.

At the end of colonial period most of the American society was rural and agricultural, and manufacturing was mostly realised on the level of home production. Even though the conversion from the home to factory production was quite slow it was very important for the development of industry and it had a major effect on the changes within the American society. At the end of the eighteenth century, it was very homogenous from the point of view of the social differences. The American society, excluding the slaves, was probably the closest to equality in comparison to similar societies in the world. (Shi, Tindall, p. 235) It was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, connected to the development of industry, that was the period of growing social differences and forming of the social layers.

The establishment of modern industry was situated mostly in the area of New England. The number of Americans working in the factories increased more than eight times and number of inhabitants living in the cities doubled. The growth of cities and the development of industry are quite often considered closely connected to the ease of morals and religious values:

The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forebears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt ...But he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage...to all the values which he held so dear and treated so

lightly. Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood ...was the hostage in the home. (Welter, p.21)

This disunity allowed the American society to be on one hand still affected by the Puritan values, with women as its hostages to those values, and on the other hand to start being influenced by the revolutionary ideas of Rationalism and Enlightenment, which stressed the human intellect and the power of men to control the laws of nature by using their brains. The orthodox picture of fair but severe God that rejects the predestined to hell was replaced by a more optimistic religious point of view.

The Enlightenment and Rationalism stressed the inborn kindness of men and it encouraged the trust in development and ability of improvement of individuals. This teaching started to intervene in the American Puritanism, emphasizing the literacy and use of intellect for the exegesis and reading of the Word. Apparently, New England and Boston surroundings were the most affected by both Enlightenment and Rationalism and modern industry. The development of Boston from Puritanism to economic prosperity convinced many of its inhabitants of the legitimacy of more liberal religious theories. (Shi, Tindall, p. 236)

At the end of the eighteenth century, New England and mainly Boston became also a centre for a new religious movement called Unitarianism that believed in the oneness of God, as opposed to traditional Christian belief in the Trinity, and the inborn kindness of men and superiority of one's conscience and reason over the traditional dogmas and verbatim understanding of the Word (Shi, Tindall, p. 237)

The Unitarian movement very soon invoked a reaction. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, American society started to be influenced by another movement. While the Enlightenment stressed the power of reason, people started to realize that there was more to the human life than only reason and things that can be logically explained – emotions, moods, sentiment, affection and the Romantic tendencies of the western world started to quickly spread in America.

Americans adopted the romantic emphasis on freedom of individuals and fascination with the beauty of nature. In New England the Romanticism developed into the Transcendentalism, group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy. It began as a protest against the general state of culture and society at the

time. Among their principal beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that “transcends” the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. (Wikipedia) The followers of transcendentalism formed an informal group called the Transcendental Club that joined New England writers, philosophers and educated women of that time such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, as well as Amos Bronson Alcott.

The Transcendentalists valued their freedom and they did not believe in institutions in general. In the same manner the daughters of Amos Bronson Alcott were brought up without being taught the established dogmas but by employing in long discussions with their father. These dialogs were to make them realise by themselves what is right and what is wrong. “The Alcott sisters were brought up as model Transcendentalists” (Labbe)

The Transcendentalists emphasized the importance of men to behave in agreement with their conscience and they inspired many reformatory movements and whole generation of American writers. The Transcendental ideas affected even those who did not know its philosophical roots and it provided people with the romantic faith in individuals and belief that intuition leads to correct thinking. The new liberal tendencies, concerning the religion and the belief in inborn kindness of men and more importantly the ability of improvement of individuals and therefore society, most likely provoked many reforms in the fields of pacifism, working hours and conditions, poverty, abolishment of slavery, women’s rights and many others. (Shi, Tindall, p. 249)

The new ideas that were to emerge... were as eclectic as they were lively. Many of them came across the sea ...; socialism..., idealism..., radical ideas on education from Rousseau and Pestalozzi, romanticism ...All these [were] blended into the particularly American causes of abolition, reformism, anarchism, and ... transcendentalism. (Bedell, p.37)

4. Position of women in the nineteenth century

The position of women at the beginning of the nineteenth century was very similar to their position at the times of colonisation. Within the rural and agricultural society work of both men and women were connected to their homes. Man worked at the fields and most of the manufacturing was realised in a form of home production as well. However, with the growth of cities and industry, men started to take jobs outside their homes, working long hours while their wives took care of the housework and children.

Prevailing opinion at that time claimed that home is the domain of women, that it is their own, independent sphere where they may fulfil their only duty in life without corrupting the ideas of the cult of True Womanhood; opinion idealising the moral role of woman while taking care of her husband and family. Not all agreed with this mood established in the society. Some argued that home became a cage or prison for many women keeping them away from fulfilling their lives. (Shi, Tindall, p. 253) Susan B. Anthony, a woman particularly active in the sphere of women's rights movement, disagreed with the idea of True Womanhood, arguing that the opinion claiming that women have no intellectual and moral qualities which they could apply outside their homes, was absurd. (Shi, Tindall, p. 254)

Legal status of women in the nineteenth century was similar to a legal status of a minor man; they could not vote, married women could not take any legal action without the permission of their husbands, they did not have any right to decide about their property and children were legally controlled by the father.

John Stuart Mill compared the position of women to the status of slaves and servants; position, where it can be hardly expected from a person to fully develop their abilities and character. Even though John Stuart Mill analysed the legal position and inferior status of women, resulting from the tradition in England, his logical arguments are quite applicable to the situation in America as well.

Traditionally, the women's rights movement in the Anglo-American context can be divided in two waves. Even though the historical development in Great Britain and America varied, it had a number of unifying features. The first wave, beginning probably long before Mary Wollstonecraft (second half of the eighteenth century) and

lasting approximately until the first half of the twentieth century, is mostly concerned about the ideas and prejudices about female body, in both science and society, which identified women as physically and intellectually inferior. (Oats-Indruchová, p. 10) “True Women” were described by virtues such as piety, purity submission and domesticity (Welter, p. 21) but not intellect or independent thinking. “General consensus in America held that woman’s sphere was moral rather than intellectual, domestic rather than worldly, her power was indirect, her contribution to the world was through her husband and children.” (MacLeod, p. 4)

4.1. The Cult of True Womanhood

Barbara Welter in her essay on “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860” described the position of women in the nineteenth century, and defined four virtues that were for women, according to this cult, crucial. These virtues were piety, purity, submission and domesticity.

4.1.1. Piety

Even though the ideas of Enlightenment, Rationalism, Unitarianism, Romanticism or Transcendentalism were becoming more and more significant at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and religion was becoming more liberal, women – True Women – were still expected to live according to the puritan values. It was believed that piety of women could redeem the sins of men; purify the male sinful world: “The Universe might be Enlightened, Improved, and Harmonized by Women!!” (Welter, p. 22) Quite often the magazines and literature for women expressed just this sentiment of: “Woman’s purifying passionless love bringing an erring man back to Christ.” (Welter, p. 22) Piety was also considered proper for women, because it did not encounter with the status the society thought suitable for her: “It did not take a woman away from her “proper sphere,” her home. Unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive, less a True Woman.” (Welter, p. 22) Moreover, the piety did not require independent thinking; women were not expected to employ intellect during exegesis, rather the verbatim understanding of Word was expected from them. It was believed that intellect and thinking led to sin:

Women were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God. Sarah Josepha Hale spoke darkly of those who ... threw away the “One True Book” for others, open to error ... The greater the intellectual force, the greater and more fatal the errors into which women fall. (Welter, p. 23)

Obviously, editors of magazines for women and writers, both male and female, agreed that for women, it is better to pray than to think. As *The Ladies' repository* stated, “religion is exactly what woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence.” (Welter, p.22)

4.1.2. Purity

Very much connected to the piety was the second of the virtues that described a True Woman, and that was purity. While male character was considered naturally predisposed to sin, to yield to a temptation of “low pleasures” of premarital intercourse, female character was expected to be pure. Women were to resist the temptation as the loss of innocence meant the loss of femininity, and the fundamental principle of womanhood. Women were actually considered “responsible” not to allow a man to sin as it is in their nature to be pure and delicate, while it is natural for men to surrender to temptation. As Thomas Branagan claimed in *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*: “His sex would sin and sin again, they could not help it, but woman, stronger and purer, must not give in and let man ‘take the liberties incompatible with her delicacy’.” (Welter, p. 24) However: “Purity, considered as a moral imperative, set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve. Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literary, an end to innocence.” (Welter, p.24)

4.1.3. Submission

The virtue of submission was exclusively connected to women. While man was supposed to be pious and pure but not always succeeded in achieving these virtues, submission was entirely female quality, assigned to her by God. Therefore, a True Woman should have been aware of her inferiority and she should have accepted this position in order to prevent the corruption of the natural establishment of the world. As Mrs. Sandford argued: “A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what

she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support.” (Welter, p.28)

4.1.4. Domesticity

In the nineteenth century, home was considered the “proper sphere” for women. Place, where they could independently fulfil themselves, work on their own terms, employing their creativity and ideas. However, the independence and creativity were mostly restricted to sewing, embroidery, arranging flowers and housework, which was in fact considered an “art” that required a great deal of skills and talent that only a True Woman possessed: “Women were supposed to keep busy in morally uplifting tasks. Fortunately most of housework, if looked at in true womanly fashion, could be regarded as uplifting.” (Welter, p. 33) According to Mrs. Farrar: “Making beds was good exercise, the repetitiveness of routine tasks inculcated patience and perseverance, and proper management of the home was a surprisingly complex art.” (Welter, p. 33)

The activities that would develop female mind and employ their intellect, which were at the same time considered suitable for women, included reading of books, writing letters or keeping journals. Those activities were regarded as highly feminine, since they were connected to feelings and sharing of emotions. Women could also employ in singing or playing the musical instruments; activities that are all connected to women’s homes as home was, additionally to the women’s “proper sphere”, also a place that provided them with security. While at home, women were protected from bad influence of the outside world.

Additionally, even the reading of books was not always agreed with. Women were warned to be particularly careful when choosing a book as an inappropriate book could deprave their character and virtues:

The nineteenth century knew that girls *could* be ruined by a book ... The man without honourable intentions always provides the innocent maiden with such books as a prelude to his assault on her virtue. Books which attacked or seemed to attack women’s accepted place in society were regarded as equally dangerous. (Welter, p. 34)

4.2. Bringing up the True Women

Many critics, writers and intellectuals agreed that the social status of women was significantly determined by their upbringing. Women, being brought up in a society that

believes that women's proper sphere is her home and her only duty is to take care of her husband and children, perceiving the family model provided by her mother; tended to believe, that the order, established within the society, is the only natural. And the nineteenth century girls were brought up to suit this order. It would be incorrect to presume that girls were being taught how to be proper women from their early childhood. Most of the girls were actually allowed to run wild with the boys in the fields and without worrying about their future duties. "Many American families allowed their daughters to live nearly as unfettered and vigorous an outdoor life as their brothers." (MacLeod, p.7) The girls were expected to help around the household; however, it was common for the boys to help with the housework as well, before they reached the age when they could have started to help their fathers. Girls learned how to sew and keep the house quite early during their childhood, however, the time when they were supposed to learn how to be true women was yet to come.

When girls reached the puberty they learned that their childhood, and with it their freedom, was about to end and their lives had to begin to change as women's work required skills and discipline impossible to acquire in the free life they had led so far. (MacLeod, p. 4) Many girls, according to numerous autobiographies, perceived the transition from girlhood to young womanhood as a negative change in their lives, when they were expected to learn how to be true women, while they still felt more like girls and, even though they were familiar with the woman's "proper sphere" from the model provided by their mothers, the transition still appears to be much of a shock.

In a surprising number of memoirs is an account of just such an experience of childhood freedom followed by just the same closing of the doors as the girls reached puberty ... Many American women could and did look back to their childhood years as a period of physical and psychic freedom unmatched by anything in their later life. (MacLeod, p. 6)

Many women perceived this transition in a negative way. Their childhood was closed unexpectedly, and some of them regretted later in their lives that they were not allowed, as well as boys, to develop freely as they believed they would have become even better women. Frances Willard wrote about the time when "the long skirts and clubbed-up hair spiked with hairpins had to be endured" as the hardest experience of her life and she believed that if she had been "left alone and allowed as a woman what [she] had as a

girl, a free life in the country, where a human being might grow, body and soul, ... [she] would have been ten times more of a person in every way.” (MacLeod, p. 13)

As many women perceived this stage of their lives as very difficult to deal with, it is not surprising that a significant number of stories and books for girls is concerned with this exact topic. The typical heroine for the nineteenth century girls’ literature was a girl from twelve to sixteen years of age, “girls who stood just at the end of childhood and on the verge of young womanhood.” (MacLeod, p. 14) Louisa May Alcott was not an exception. In *Little Women* she portrayed mainly herself but also her sisters during this exact stage of their life. Louisa depicted hints of the March sisters’ childhood and continued with the story towards their young womanhood “and their destinies as women. Through Jo’s eyes we see the transition of that passage for Louisa May Alcott.” (MacLeod, p. 15)

Jo struggled with this transition, ladylike behaviour started to be expected from her and running wild in the fields of Concord was becoming unacceptable. Jo pleads: “Let me be a little girl as long as I can,” as “[she] resists and resents the approach of adulthood,” (MacLeod, p. 16) because it meant the loss of freedom and the beginning of limitations inconsistent with Jo’s tomboyish character.

Unlike the twentieth century child, who usually sees adult status as liberation, nineteenth century women more often identified freedom with childhood and clung to it as long as they could ... Adolescence was the beginning of limitations ... where boys’ and girls’ paths diverged. (MacLeod, p. 16)

However, the women’s proper sphere and suitable behaviour were ingrained in the society, and mothers provided this particular model to their daughters, which they adopted, and at the end accepted their role in the society and the loss of freedom. “American girls accepted the view of woman’s proper role. Not only accepted: they absorbed and internalized it and eventually passed it on to a new generation.” (MacLeod, p. 27)

4. 3. Women ’s Rights Movement

The status of True Woman was highly established within the society. Women magazines provided women with advice how to be a True Woman, unconditionally accepting the role they had received from God, seminars were held in order to teach

women how to be decent daughters and sisters but especially wives and mothers: “If any woman asked for greater scope for her gifts the magazines were sharply critical. Such women were tampering with society, undermining civilisation.” (Welter, p. 40) However, as the liberal voices were heard in many other spheres from religion to the abolition of slavery, voices that did not agree with women’s “proper sphere” were heard as well, since many women did not want to accept the status God and society assigned them: “While the women’s magazines and related literature encouraged the ideal of the perfect women, forces were at work in the nineteenth century which impelled woman herself to change, to play more active role in the society.” (Welter, p.40)

Women found a good opportunity to play more active role in the society by employing in prison reform or birth control reform, but especially in the abolitionary movement. In fact, many women considered their position to be in many ways similar to the position of slaves and one was very often compared to the other, as they both were expected to be passive, cooperative, and obedient to their masters-husbands. By working for the abolition women were actually fighting for the change of their social status as well.

The argument of those who supported the idea of the Cult of True Womanhood against the one comparing women to slaves was, that women unlike the slaves employ in this status of dependence upon men voluntarily, or even willingly as this status is natural and received from God. On the other hand, argument of those who supported the parallel between the position of both women and slaves was that the reason why women employ in this status voluntarily is that they are raised in such manner.

Since the girls became adolescents they were taught how to be True Women, following their mothers’ examples. John Stuart Mill claimed that women were taught that their ideal characteristics are the counterparts to the male ones; they are not supposed to have a free will but they should submissively commit themselves to dominant men and that their duty is to live for others and deny their own self for man and family. Mill stressed that as long as women will be raised in this traditional way they will express themselves in this very traditional manner.

Feminism, as an organised movement detached from abolitionism in the early 1830s, progressing from the idea that all human beings were created even. “...every

man is a self owner; that is, every human being has a moral jurisdiction over his or her own body.” (McElroy) Both abolitionism and women’s rights movement stressed this idea because it mentions equality of human beings and not white men because many women, as they started to see parallels between their status and the one of slaves, also started to notice that “white men usually applied the principles of natural rights and the ideology of individualism only to themselves.” (McElroy)

However, the work for abolitionary movement was not without complications. Since married women had a legal status of minor men, without the right to enter legal action without their husbands’ permission, and they had no political rights including the right to vote, it was sometimes quite difficult for them to employ in a movement that was a political subject and therefore considered of no concern to women. As Aileen S. Kraditor, the modern historian, wrote: “A few women in the abolitionist movement in the 1830s ... found their religiously inspired work for the slave impeded by prejudices against public activity by women.” (McElroy)

Nevertheless the difficulties, the first women’s rights convention was held in the Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. Women’s rights were discussed, equitable laws, equal educational and job opportunities and the women’s suffrage resolutions were introduced: “Resolved, that it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.” (McElroy) One of the women who called the Seneca Falls convention was Quaker and abolitionist Lucretia Mott, a good friend of Abby May Alcott, Louisa May’s mother. The Alcotts were not a conservative family, and they were oriented towards the liberal ideas and revolutionary movements. Abby was one of the women active in the abolition, she joined the Seneca Falls convention, and she was an active member of the Women’s Suffrage:

All of her work experiences ... had operated to cement in her mind the convictions she had always held, however sentimentally and privately. One of her first public acts was to organize a petition presented to the Massachusetts State Constitutional Convention on behalf of women’s suffrage. She then began speaking out more forcefully in the cause both publicly and privately. (Bedell, p. 283)

During the nineteenth century, the legal disabilities of women had been changing slowly and the women’s rights movement had undergone several stages; progressing from the abolition, it had passed through the civil war, which had at the end

enfranchised neither blacks nor women, and reached its post-war phase. National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association as the antagonist to the previous were established and they joined in one association twenty years later. Women did achieve number of changes to their social status during the nineteenth century; however, the struggle to win the right to vote was slow and frustrating. While some states granted women with the vote, starting in the year 1869 in Wyoming Territory, the Eastern states resisted and the National American Women Suffrage Association won the right to vote for all American women in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment was finally ratified. (Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia)

5. The Alcotts – family background

Probably the most famous of Louisa May Alcott's novels, the American classic *Little Women*, is considered a semi-autobiographic book. Both characters and numerous incidents were significantly inspired by Louisa May's own family and their life stories. Louisa's family background contributed a great deal to the formation of her personality as "parents are, of course, important factors" (Meigs, p. 12) In Louisa's case, both mother and father figure had a major effect on Louisa's character and therefore her writing, as well as all the family members had a major effect on the characters of her most famous book.

5.1. Amos Bronson and Abby May Alcott

Amos Bronson Alcott was born to a farmer's family. Both of his parents were poorly educated and barely literate. However, Bronson's mother was a highly spirited woman who encouraged his academic attempts: "His mother was the paramount influence in Bronson's life; to her he attributed all the elements in his complex personality that made him so different from the boys and girls he grew up with ... She was always his inspiration." (Bedell, p. 9) Since his early childhood Bronson Alcott was keeping a journal, early in his life he found an inspiration in *Pilgrim's Progress* and even though he did not receive much of a formal education, mostly because he was too different from the other boys and he was bullied and laughed at and for that reason he left the Cheshire Academy after about a month, this experience did not discourage him from intellectual dedication and he fully employed in self-education.

Bronson started to make living by teaching and subsequently conducting schools in Cheshire, Connecticut, Boston, Massachusetts, Philadelphia and others. His educational methods were influenced by educational philosophy introduced by Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. In all the schools that Bronson conducted, he tried to employ his innovative and original methods. Very often these methods met approval of parents and society at the beginning, however, quite soon it became infamous and disapproved with and parents started to withdraw their children from Amos Bronson's experimental schools.

The Cheshire parents who were at first politely interested in the strange new school began to have their doubts. Rumours ... began to spread about the new

schoolmaster. Was he really engaged in teaching? Or, was he preaching some new, vaguely understood, but nonetheless subversive doctrine? (Bedell, p. 18)

Bronson kept moving from one school to another and for most of his life he remained in debt. However, he never corrupted his educational methods and philosophy which he believed in and which he applied when educating his own daughters. “He was strong and faithful in his principles and his affections ... Yet he had the possibly immature habit of holding to an emerging theory even to a perilous point and refusing to be shaken of it.” (Meigs, p. 12)

Unlike Bronson, Louisa May’s mother, Abby May came from established American families that provided the American society with judges and teachers since colonial times. She was educated woman who did not emphasize the traditional order in the society. She was a lively and forward woman and as she described it in a letter to her brother, she was the exact opposite of Bronson: “... he is moderate, I am impetuous – He is prudent and humble – I am forward and arbitrary...” (Bedell, p. 43) In Abby’s own description she depicted the traits of her character that were significantly very much in conflict with the idea of True Womanhood, and even contradictory to the virtues that were expected from nineteenth century women. However, was it not for her forward character the marriage to Bronson might have never happened? Even though it was considered improper for a woman, Abby decided to share her feelings knowing, that “if she waited for him to declare himself, she might wait forever.” (Bedell, 42)

In his journal, Bronson described his wife to be “a woman in whom he could find no fault. Her mind was of ‘no common cast.’ She had the ‘elements of greatness – vigor – independence – discrimination – taste.’ She was ‘intelligent – philanthropic – pious – affectionate – mystic.’” (Bedell, p. 45) Bronson perceived Abby differently from how she saw herself. He identified, and apparently at the same time valued, the traits of her character as independence or intelligence, which did not suit the picture of a perfect nineteenth century wife, but he also described her virtues that were perfectly appropriate; piety, affection, philanthropy. Abby seems to had been a combination of both; the True Woman, caring for her husband and family, devoting her life to their welfare and on the other hand a woman with her own independent thinking, opinions and life approach, who did not agree that her only sphere should be her home, where

only she could be of any benefit to the society. Abby May employed in both spheres, inside and outside of her home, worked actively for the abolitionary movement, women suffrage and her family:

She could have continued her studies, possibly even taken up a vocation as a writer. She certainly had the gift, if her letters and diaries are any evidence. There were examples of female scholars and writers around her to inspire her – women like Sarah Ripley, Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller ... Something held Abby back from emulating these women ... in part certainly, a reflection of her times – women scholars were a rarity in the early 1800s, as were women novelists. (Bedell, p. 31)

Abby's way of engagement to Amos Bronson Alcott proved her again to be independent and forward woman. As she had proudly written in her diary: "I have conducted this matter on my own responsibility...I have without advice or counsel committed my happiness, my future interests to Mr. Alcott's keeping." (Bedell, p. 48) This step was undoubtedly unconventional and Abby's father felt, understandably, insulted by her action: "It was all in keeping with her bold and independent character – but not in keeping with the custom of her time, which demanded that a daughter consult her parents and that a prospective husband first ask the father's permission to press his suit." (Bedell, p. 48)

Abby decided to marry a poor man who was not to succeed in providing for his family for most of his life. As Bronson kept moving from school to school, his wife and family had to move houses far too often. The relationship between Abby and her father had never quite recovered and even Abby's brother, who on one hand valued and respected Bronson as an educator and philosopher and even loaned money to finance some of his experimental schools, on the other hand, however, he demonstrated his disapproving opinion with Abby's unconventional decisions, she had made. It was woman's duty to choose a husband who would be able to provide for his family and Abby, in the eyes of her brother, failed this duty. In one of his letters he wrote to her:

You have made several important mistakes since you began to manage for yourself, and *without* or *against* the advice of your friends – Marrying man without possessing the needful to keep house – and without having tried the success of your Friend's pursuits to obtain a support. (Bedell, p. 136)

Abby was very much aware of their situation and she knew that Bronson would have no trouble finding a job as a school master if only he could conduct the school in a

way the society expects it. However, she would never suggest it to her husband, not only because she knew that he would never agree to do that, but partly also because she still believed that: “he was her ‘exemplary hero’ victim of a heartless society.” (Bedell, p. 158) As a True Woman, she supported her husband in what he did and valued, even if she knew, her family needed something different. It is apparent from her journals that she never regretted her decision to marry Bronson, and she never advised her daughters to find rich husbands: “‘My girls shall have trades,’ she vowed, wishing them never to be so dependent as their mother ... never in her life did she wish for her daughters the more conventional alternative: rich husbands.” (Bedell, p. 159) Despite all the difficult times Abby had to overcome, she “had never complained or looked back since the day she was married.” (Meigs, p. 61)

Abby May Alcott was undoubtedly an unconventional woman, who raised her daughters to become good women. She was spontaneous, intelligent, compassionate woman who devoted herself to her family and who was to become a model of a perfect American mother as her daughter portrayed her in the novel *Little Women*.

5.2. Louisa May

Louisa was born as a second daughter of Abby and Bronson. Both of her parents had a major influence on her personality. In her character, Louisa was enormously similar to Abby who was the actual head of the household. At the same time, Bronson was the philosopher and educator who decided to play an important role in his daughters’ education. As a transcendental philosopher he believed in a natural goodness of every human being that must be cherished and cultivated through a proper education. He started to observe his daughters’ behaviour and development and he kept a detailed documentation; *Observations on the Spiritual Nurture of My Children*. When he started to engage in the education of his daughters, the situation was far from what he expected. Louisa and her older sister Anna used to quarrel all the time, they refused to engage in the daily routines and the natural inborn goodness of children was hardly observable: “In place of ordered harmony he thought necessary for the cultivation of the young, chaos and anarchy reigned. His two ‘divine babes’ were manifesting little of the spiritual nature, much of the animal.” (Bedell, p. 73)

Bronson started applying his educational methods on the girls. As soon as the order was established and the girls learned to engage in every day routines, which Bronson managed to relate to little pleasures, the nurturing of Anna's and Louisa's essential goodness could have begun. Bronson did not teach his daughters what was right and what was wrong by demonstrating it on established dogmas. Rather, he had developed his own method based on a dialog that led the girls to realise for themselves what was right:

He used a particularly Alcottian technique ...: intellectual persuasion through the use of Socratic dialogue ... in the course of which the response was 'tempted' out of the child's mind – patiently, persistently and so seductively that, in the end, both the questioner and respondent were quite certain that the child herself had arrived independently at the 'right' answer." (Bedell, p. 79)

Bronson's educational methods were far from conventional and it had a major effect on his daughters, who were, ever since their early childhood, used to employ their intellect and judgement. They distinguished between right and wrong according to their own conscience.

The Alcott's girls were highly influenced by another of their father's beliefs and that was the pre-existence of the soul and particular divinity of all human beings that were supposed to be more transparent with children. It was believed, in particular philosophical groups, that the soul existed before it entered the body and that it is carrying the divine experience. The Romantic era, unlike the colonial Puritanism, supported the imaginative capacity of children: "Bronson believed that imagination was the very core of holiness in a child. The stories they told, the images they evoked in their minds, the pictures they drew – all these, he believed, were evidences of the spiritual world from which they had come." (Bedell, p. 87) Therefore, Bronson encouraged imaginative activities of his daughters, especially their little plays that they used to enact, or stories that they made up. "He was especially delighted in Louisa's narrative powers, which had already begun to manifest themselves." (Bedell, p. 87)

Bronson's duties outside his home forced him to leave the educating of the girls to Abby. However, his role of a parent remained quite strong, and the years that he had spent educating his daughters influenced them a great deal.

His two daughters ... could never really forget those brief years of overpowering intimacy. The older, Anna, had yielded herself up to the seductive control of her

messianic father with barely a protest. The younger, Louisa, continued to struggle against it for many years to come, indeed, her entire life. (Bedell, p. 89)

In *Little Women*, Louisa pictured the memory of the times when her father was educating her and her sister. For most parts of the book the father is not physically present, however, ever since the opening paragraph, the father figure is strongly apparent. The girls in the book often ask, what would father say and his approval is very important for them. In one of the scenes Louisa depicted her father while teaching his grandson an alphabet: “Prone on the floor lay Mr. March [Bronson], with his respectable legs in the air, and beside him, likewise prone, was Demi [his grandson] ... both grovelers so seriously absorbed that they were unconscious of spectators.” (*Little Women*, p. 547)

Both Bronson and Abby agreed that while Anna was in her character very much like her father, Louisa was very similar to Abby. While Anna accepted his methods, Louisa rebelled against them. She was the wild, independent child, impetuous and arbitrary just like her mother. She was the “villain” of both sisters. Bronson thought that Abby favoured the younger daughter, because she identified with her character. In his journal he wrote: “With Louisa, the mother has more sympathy. ... They are more alike; the elements of their being are similar. The will is the predominating power.” (Bedell, p. 74) However, what he did not see was, that he himself favoured the older of his daughter, who he sympathised with, understood her temper and paid sufficient attention to her needs.

On the other hand, Bronson never reconciled to Louisa’s wild character and always let her know that she was not, what he would expect from his “little woman”. He “found her too aggressive, wilful, and fierce for his definition of feminine ... He was never comfortable with her expressive temperament.” (Saxton, p. 7)

Bronson’s influence on his daughter’s personality is evident. Her wild character struggled against her father’s educational methods of “psychological control and manipulation” (Bedell, p. 73) However, regarding from the way that she portrayed her father in the novel, she learned to value them and towards her father she held a great deal of respect and love. “As she grew up she came to understand his virtues better and appreciate his tranquillity and his dedication to philosophy.” (Saxton, p. 14)

The head of the household was, however, Abby. While Bronson was engaged in his philosophic work, Abby took care of the house and the children. “She made no attempt to follow his philosophies; instead she brought her courage and resourcefulness to making what she could for him and their children” (Meigs, p. 14) Being impetuous herself, she used the corporal punishment more often than Bronson, who more tended to employ the Socratic dialogue. On one hand, she was quite a liberal woman, who was not really true to the ideal of the nineteenth century wife, on the other hand, she taught her daughters, what was expected from a woman; to be calm, passive and submissive. “Clearly, her upbringing engendered within [Louisa] the contradictory message that intellect was both a gift. ... and a burden to the proper woman.” (Labbe) Wild and impulsive Louisa, who was so much like her mother, struggled with the proper behaviour. In *Little Women*, Jo (Louisa) comes to Marmee (Abby) to confide the trouble she has controlling her temper and Marmee confesses to Jo that she had struggled with the very same, however, she managed to learn to control her temper, with a lot of help from her husband (Bronson).

You think your temper is the worst in the world, but mine used to be just like it ... I've been trying to cure it for forty years and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life. I had a hard time ... for in spite of my efforts I never seemed to get on. Then your father came ... He never loses patience ... He helped and comforted me, and showed me that I must try to practice all the virtues. (*Little Women*, p. 93, 94)

Nevertheless, in real life, it seems that Abby was not as successful as Marmee in the novel: “If we can believe the circumstantial references which crop up now and then in various memoirs of the Alcotts' contemporaries, Abby was famous for her temper during most of her life.” (Bedell, p. 75) The fact, Louisa was aware of her impetuous character, which was so much as her mother's, is quite obvious from her fiction, however, to what extent she tried to or managed to control it is not really evident.

Abby was used, from her own family, to a lively family life, evening talks and entertainment, unlike Bronson, who came from a rural family, where it was not common to enjoy evenings together. He was “...brought up in the atmosphere of a work-worn, sparse farm household, where men and women, even of the same family, rarely talked together, and such things as music and dancing, the embroideries of life, hardly existed.” (Bedell, p. 4) The family evenings, as they are pictured in the book,

undoubtedly come from Abby's background. Long talks, singing and playing the piano; that is the kind of family gatherings described in *Little Women* as well as in Bronson's journal as he portrayed it after he had visited the Mays' household and experienced such an evening for the first time.

Next to the unconventional and liberal mother, intellectual father with untraditional educational approaches, and evening talks developing ones intellect, was the openness of the family to reformatory movements in general. Abby came from an established American family. One of her ancestors was "one of the early radicals in America: a supporter of women's rights, ... an antislavery advocate, who, in 1700, wrote one of the first antislavery pamphlets in the colonies. Almost without exception, his descendants were to carry on the tradition of the patrician as public servant and reformer." (Bedell, p. 22) Abby was not an exception; she was active in the abolitionary movement and women's suffrage and her daughter Louisa was to continue the tradition as well.

Alcott's family moved to Concord Massachusetts in 1840. Here, Louisa met great transcendentalists and writers Thoreau and Emerson, who she admired; especially Waldo Emerson, who was a great supporter of Bronson's theories and his whole family. "He was always at hand to advise or assist where he could, or to discuss philosophy with Bronson, whom he admired." (Meigs, p. 23) Abby thought of him as their guardian angel and Louisa adored him.

During ... the years of her awakening to womanhood, the figure of her father's friend loomed large in her imagination; she began to spin fantasies about him and to fix on his person ... She seems to have sought every opportunity to be near him, teaching his children, ...listening to his lectures and conversations, reading romantically, alone in his library. (Bedell, p. 240)

Her admiration to Waldo Emerson was to have an influence on her writing, as well as many other aspects, including her experiences as a domestic servant or a nurse in the army hospital. During 1850s, Louisa wrote one of her first pieces, a little book of stories, *Flower Fables*, dedicated to the daughter of Waldo Emerson, Ellen. She occasionally published stories and poems in newspapers and journals, both using pen names and her own name. However, as Elaine Showalter notes in her anthology *Alternative Alcott*: "Alcott's professional writing life really began after 1862 when she

made the daring decision to volunteer as a nurse in the civil war army hospital in Washington D.C.” (Labbe) During her service for the army, Louisa caught typhoid fever from which she never really recovered. She was treated with mercury that caused her a lifelong weakness and pain.

6. Louisa May Alcott's writing

Early in her life, Louisa May Alcott decided that when her father did not succeed in providing for his family, she would take the burden herself and support the family. She taught at schools, worked as a seamstress, nurse and domestic servant. More importantly she started publishing her own stories and novels. At that time, Bronson had already stopped trying to be the breadwinner for his family and Abby was growing tired with life. "The depressed, overwrought mother poured her bitterness, grief and disappointment into her daughter." (Saxton, p. 8) and Louisa, trying to relieve her mothers worries, took the burden of taking care of the family with all "obligations, demands and restrictions attached to it" (Saxton, p. 8)

When Louisa was seventeen, she helped her sister Anna with teaching and later opened a small school of her own. However, she never really liked teaching; she did not have the patience and being taught by her father, in an experimental way, she never really knew how to teach according to accepted school routine. After about three years, her first story was published in 1852 and in her letter to Anna she shared with her the "advice" she got from her publisher: "Now Lu, the door is open, go and win." (Meigs, p. 30) Following his advice, Louisa found a publisher for the *Flower Fables* that she wrote five years earlier for Ellen Emerson and that had been refused by the publishers back then. The *Flower Fables* appeared in 1855. At that time Louisa made a decision to move to Boston and support herself to ease the family situation. "It would be the first real step in that plan for taking care of [the family] which she had formed so early with such determination." (Meigs, p. 31)

6.1. The sensational stories

In the nineteenth century, a genre of sensational stories became very popular among readers and therefore, the publishers were on a search for such material. "Certain editors found that Louisa ... could produce, in easy quantity, just such tales that would please their readers who were developing an appetite for a lurid and romantic style." (Meigs, p. 41)

Even though Louisa knew, these tales were not the best she could produce, the determination to support her family, which was still recovering from the bereavement of Elizabeth, who had died after a long illness, overrode the doubts she had about the

legitimacy of writing such stories. The editors ensured her they would take as many as she can produce because her stories were “so dramatic, so vivid and full of plot” (Meigs, p. 41) and Louisa got into the habit of writing more and more.

The fact that Louisa was not really satisfied with the artistic value of these stories, is reflected in *Little Women*, where such stories, written by Jo, are despised by Professor Bhaer, Jo’s husband to be and whom she deeply respects. “I wish these papers did not come in the house, they are not for children to see, nor young people to read. It is not well, and I haf no patience with those who make this harm,” says Professor Bhaer about the newspaper that published Jo’s stories. Jo is aware of the fact that her sensational stories are not something she should be proud of. “She had a feeling that Father and Mother would not approve.” (*Little Women*, p. 411) and even Professor Bhaer realized that “she was doing what she was ashamed to own.” (*Little Women*, p. 418)

The stories were published under a pen name and Jo tried to justify the writing of them, convincing herself that she writes them only because they earn money that she needs to take Beth, who was still weak after her illness, to the mountains, or the shore, to help to improve her health. However, after Professor Bhaer expresses his disagreement, she abandons her work. As well as in Jo’s case, the money she earned was to help to support her family. And therefore Louisa kept writing her romantic stories as long as it was earning her money.

6.1.1. A. M. Barnard

Even though Louisa was aware of the fact that her lurid stories are not really artistically the best she could produce, she really enjoyed writing them; they allowed her to escape the real world that burdened her so much. Unlike, the writing of *Little Women* that was a demanding job, requiring hard work on the regular basis. “Instead of a retreat into a heady, imaginary world ... where fantasy generated exhilaration and optimism, sending her into temporary euphoria; it was only rarely a labour of love.” (Saxton, p. 3)

Louisa found a way how to write stories that would excite her and, at the same time, she would not have to face the disapproval of her father, his friends, such as Emerson or Thoreau, as Louisa believed that their attitude towards this kind of literature

would be very similar to the one of Professor Bhaer, and society in general. Jo tells her publisher in *Little Women* that the stories she had brought him were written by her friend as she feels ashamed of what her father would think of her, writing such “rubbish”. By publishing under a pen name Louisa acquired a space where she could write what she really wanted and enjoyed. She used both male and female pseudonyms, however, the stories published under the name of A. M. Barnard were especially famous and lucrative.

As it was improper for a woman to write the kind of literature that Louisa wrote, she decided to publish under a male pen name of A. M. Barnard, a pseudonym that was only discovered to belong to Louisa May Alcott in the 1950s, by Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine B. Stern. By uncovering Louisa’s pseudonym and her anonymous stories on subjects such as transvestites, hashish smoking and feminism, they revealed a part of Louisa’s life that remained, until the mid twentieth century, Louisa’s secret.

Under a male pen name, Louisa dared to write what she really felt, she did not have to limit her subjects and characters to morality and acceptability. She could immerse into her imaginary world, undisturbed and unlimited by the conventions that were especially severe with women writers. “In her lurid stories, she didn’t have to be responsible for a morality ... Her characters could behave with the violence, anger and ruthlessness ... her women could behave without regards to ... Victorian claims of femininity.” (Saxton, p. 261) Under a pen name, Louisa wrote what she would never write using her own name. And therefore, her sensational stories are extraordinary narratives that combine profound intellectualism, ostentatious sensationalism, and strong feminist tendencies. Its subject, style, and language deviate radically from what would be expected from Louisa May Alcott. (Stern, Introduction)

In Louisa’s gothic stories, she often reflected her irritation with the financial dependence of women on men, especially when, in her own case, the man, her father, was always financially very unstable. Therefore, her sensational stories are usually centred on a strong, opinionated and often manipulative female character, who is usually very much aware of the mask she is wearing, or role she is playing; mask of vulnerable, naïve and timid woman, role of innocence. “In Alcott’s scandals, women often do not play the expected role of victim, but are instead assertive heroines who use whatever powers ... to succeed ... They are often conscious of the ... power that not

‘being themselves’ gives them.” (Wells) In fact, all the heroines of Louisa’s Gothic stories are actresses playing the role of “proper woman” using the limitations of the society to their advantage. “Alcott’s characters reveal ... that they are aware that there is a difference between what society expects of women and what society rewards; ... Those differences actively ‘made all women actresses’, because they cannot claim power outright.” (Davis, qtd. in Wells)

Another fact that was not really acceptable is that Louisa portrays her manipulative heroines with sympathy, and their behaviour as understandable. Though they are usually punished at the end of the story, they are not judged for their actions and their ways are not frowned upon throughout the narrative. “Unlike other authors who portray immoral women who lie, cheat, and dissemble, Alcott does not make her readers dislike or fear [the heroines] suggesting that the author identifies to some extent with their creation.” (Wells)

Some of A. M. Barnard’s most famous stories were “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment”, “V. V., or Plots and Counterplots”, “Whisper in the Dark”, or “Behind a Mask” that is actually to some extent different as the manipulative heroine receives no punishment for her actions, or “A Modern Mephistopheles” that had been refused to be published and was reworked and published fifteen years later.

Louisa’s writing had, however, changed after her experience in the army hospital and after her illness. And “when in *Little Women* she ‘teaches’ Jo to renounce gothic thrillers ... she does not continue writing those tales [herself].” (Wells) Some critics consider *Little Women* a regression for Louisa, both as woman and as artist, as with writing it, she “subdued her own fires to the dictates of male authority and the demands of the Victorian marketplace.” (Newman), “She had abandoned the struggle for multifaceted truth and replaced it with a programmatic morality.” (Saxton, p. 9) However, the popularity of *Little Women* did much to convince her that “her earlier groping toward complete womanhood was misguided, embarrassing and even shameful.” (Saxton, p. 306) Therefore, when she was asked to republish those sensational stories, many years later, she refused, except for re-working of “A Modern Mephistopheles”, and “A Whisper in the Dark”, “to satisfy the curiosity of young readers as to what Jo March’s ‘necessity stories’ were really like.” (Meigs, p. 41). On

the other hand, some critics argue, that her writing career did not really begin until her army hospital service and Louisa herself declared the *Hospital Sketches* to “show [her her] style” (Saxton, p. 264)

Alcott’s writing life can be divided into two competing and mutually exclusive strands: On one hand there is Auntie Lou or Aunt Jo ... whose stories ... provide enduring pictures of mid-nineteenth-century American life; On the other hand there is A.M. Barnard, the sensation writer ... concerned with the underbelly of respectability and with exposing the root causes of human misery ... the very pot-boilers over which Jo March in *Little Women* felt first such pride, and then such guilt. (Labbe)

Louisa actually believed that as well as her scandal’s heroines had to face the consequences of their actions at the end of the stories, she had to face hers. She wanted to become financially independent through her writing that was, however, unacceptable for a proper woman and she was punished by the illness and consequential weakness that made her writing particularly painful for her.

6.2. *Hospital Sketches*

For a very long time the Alcotts had supported the abolition movement and when the Civil War started Louisa decided to support the North. She had always wished to be a boy and the fact, that she would like to take part in the war is also expressed in *Little Women*, where Jo complains: “I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with Papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!” (*Little Women*, p. 5) As she could not join the military she at least wanted to help where the women were allowed and considered acceptable. Many women helped with sawing bandages and the demand for nurses was enormous. Louisa did not have any medical training, but that was more than common in the nineteenth century, and Louisa had learned how to take care of a patient during Elizabeth’s long illness. When she hesitated and questioned her decision, Abby encouraged her and Bronson said “he was giving his only son.” (Meigs, p. 49)

Her participation in the war influenced Louisa a great deal. All the records prove that she was a remarkable nurse; competent, emphatic and understanding. She said of herself: “[I] was ignorant, awkward and bashful at first ... but [I] learned rapidly to be effective, skilled – and brave.” (Meigs, p. 49) Next to the number of indifferent nurses, she had a vital interest in her patients. She wrote letters to their mothers, wives and

beloved. She experienced the “cold, damp and dirty” hospital (as she described it), wounded and crippled patients, physical and psychic pain, and death. “She was completely unused to this kind of life, to the foul air, the bad food, the constant emotional strain of keeping up spirits, her own and those of others, in this desert of pain and death.” (Meigs, p. 51)

Louisa remained in the army hospital for only about six weeks as she began to feel ill and was diagnosed with typhoid fever accompanied by pneumonia; illness that she had never really recovered from. She was sent home where her health was slowly improving. In the meantime, however, the editor of the *Commonwealth* newspaper had happened to see some of the letters she had written during her service in the army hospital. “He was impressed with their vividness and graphic simplicity” (Meigs, p. 52) and he became interested in publishing them. Not long after some of the letters were published in the newspaper another editors came with an idea to publish the letters in a form of book under the title *Hospital Sketches*.

So many people who had relatives at the front were anxious to know how their boys would fare if they were wounded and, though Louisa had spared no details of the confusion and inefficiency at the hospital, the letters still managed to tell much of they wanted to know. (Meigs, p. 52)

More importantly, the experience of the war; her illness and pain, which she had both seen and suffered, had a major effect on Louisa’s writing. “[*Hospital Sketches*] shows ... the profound change which was coming over Louisa’s writing after this experience ... there was no return to the melodramatic tales.” (Meigs, p. 53) As Elaine Showalter stressed, Louisa’s writing career really started only after the war experience and “*Hospital Sketches* were making the name of Louisa May Alcott ... well known.” (Meigs, p. 53)

6.3. *Little Women*

After the *Hospital Sketches* had been published, Louisa was asked by family friends to accompany their invalid daughter to Europe as a companion and a nurse. Louisa hesitated for some time but then decided to go and, at the end, she spent in Europe almost a year. In September 1867, about a year after she had returned from Europe, she received a request from a chief editor to write a story for girls. Louisa had always said that she did not understand girls and therefore she refused the offer, in

which she had such a little interest. However, once again Louisa needed money to support her family and as the publisher still requested the “girls’ book”, even though more than a year had passed since his last request, Louisa began to write. The result is a charming book portraying the lives of March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, who are just approaching the young womanhood, under a loving tuition of their mother, Marmee, while the father is gone to serve the Union Army as a chaplain. “The plot is the character development of young people learning to make the most of all that is in them.” (Meigs, p. 69) The story pictures the girls as they become friends with their next door neighbour, boy called Laurie, who lives with his wealthy grandfather, and as they experience numerous events, adventures, but also go through difficult situations together.

As Louisa noted in her journals, working on *Little Women* was a hard work, duty she had to fulfil, far from excitement. The period of approaching the young womanhood was the most difficult stage of Louisa’s life and through *Little Women* she was to retrieve this time.

Ironically, it was Bronson, who in fact hardly appears in the book, who unconsciously influenced the writing of *Little Women*. Many times he had spoken of the necessity to write simple books for boys and girls “about childish victories over selfishness and anger.” (Saxton, p. 3) It was also Bronson who supplied the book with its title as he used to refer to his daughters as to “his little women”. Bronson’s scarce presence in the book could be explained by the fact that Louisa did not really understand him; they were too different in their character and Bronson did not agree with her impulsive temper and therefore “kept Louisa at a critical distance from him throughout her life”. (Saxton, p. 7) As a result she could not really get to know him. She did pay some attention to him in the book, but mostly she showed a good deal of respect she held towards his intellect.

In *Little Women* Louisa wrote that “the girls gave their hearts to mother’s keeping, their souls into their father’s.” It is clear that Louisa respected and loved her father for his self-possession and intellect but, as she did not really understand him, she never used him as a model for any of her characters. She said that Mr. March is not inspired by her father but more, by her uncle Samuel May.

It is evident that [Bronson] was, to her, just as much an enigma as he is to posterity. She would have had to look for a way of doing justice to a parent who was singularly lacking in a sense of responsibility towards his family ... Yet her definition of a philosopher as a man in a balloon with all his family tugging at the ropes to hold him to earth is a metaphor of pure love. (Meigs, p. 69)

The father figure is therefore either not present in the book at all, or, after Mr. March returns from the war, he spends most of his time in his study. However, the girls come to him in troubled times to receive a good advice from the loving father.

6.3.1. The “little women” and their little flaws

As Louisa’s father suggested, *Little Women* were written as a simple book for girls about the childish victories over one’s selfishness and temper, but it is also about the difficult transition from girlhood to young womanhood. It is a book for girls about girls. Unlike other authors of children literature, Louisa did not want to write a sentimental novel that would preach and she portrayed her characters in a rational pre-romantic view. The girls in *Little Women* were not idealised, unlike the children of the romantic era, which tended to portray children as innocent, charming and perfect.

The March sisters have their little flaws, they are, as children were mainly perceived in the nineteenth century, considered adults-in-process. “Alcott, like many of her contemporaries, saw childhood as a period of preparation.” (MacLeod, p. 23) The reader sees Jo struggling against her temper, Meg against her envy, Amy against her selfishness and even Beth struggles against her shyness. “Alcott’s children are basically good and well intentioned, but they are always less than perfect.” (MacLeod, p. 149) Unlike the romantic children that are born faultless, March sisters must gradually come to win against their flaws of character through experience; by learning from their mistakes, they improve and become better women, with a significant help from their parents, in the case of the March family, with a significant help from their mother as “early nineteenth century Americans never considered children self-sufficient; the parents’ role as moral instructor was crucial.” (MacLeod, p. 145)

Marmee, unlike Abby, was an ideal, rational, nineteenth century parent and she became a model of a perfect mother. She allowed her daughters to learn through experience; she was not angry with them nor did she punish them, because “fictional

parents were never angry with their children. They approached childish failings calmly, explaining rather than punishing.” (MacLeod, p. 145) Abby was not really a calm parent, she, unlike Bronson, tended to use the corporal punishment, but she still became the model mother for the idealised character of Marmee.

One of the situations that Marmee has to resolve comes when her daughters think that their daily routines around the house are too much of a burden. Instead of explaining why it is important to have some duties, Marmee allows the girls to take “vacation” from their obligations for a week. The girls like it at the beginning, but towards the end of the week they are terribly bored and fretful and they admit their mistake. When Marmee asks: “Are you satisfied with your experiment, girls, or would you like another week of it?” all the girls speak as one and refuse the offer: “Lounging and larking doesn’t pay ... I am tired of it and mean to go to work at something right off”, complained Jo. (*Little women*, p. 139) Though Marmee let the experience teach the girls the lesson, she comes afterwards, like the model parent, to voice the lesson after all: “Don’t you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes? ... Then let me advice you to take up your little burdens again, for though they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them.” (*Little Women*, p. 138)

When writing *Little Women* Louisa tried to avoid both sentimentalism and preaching that were very common for the children’s literature at her times. Even though the modern readers find the book both sentimental and preaching, it was not considered so when the book was published. In comparison to Louisa’s contemporaries, her novel was far from being a “moral pap” as Louisa used to call it.

Critics of today find sentimentality in Louisa’s writing, but it is far less in extent and kind than in other writers of her time ... Nor did she really preach. She shared some experiences of living with young readers, especially her own experience in learning to control an explosive temper, just as her mother had done battle with hers. (Meigs, p. 68)

In *Little Women* the moral lesson is more like an advise from a wise woman, mother who herself had to win over her flaws and temper.

Considering the fact that Louisa was never taught the right and wrong in a traditional way, as her father did not preach either, the way she presents her

“experiences of living” seems to be somewhat similar. She lets her readers realize for themselves, learn from experience together with the heroines of the book, and the lesson is voiced later by Marmee.

The book is semi-autobiographical, influenced by real people and experiences, which cause the characters to be realistic; not romanticised individuals without flaws. It makes the story authentic and believable. “Those qualities, together with Alcott’s capacity for portraying children as genuine people, not just patterns for her readers, went far to move children’s fiction from the instructive abstractions ... toward romantic particularity.” (MacLeod, p. 151) Unlike the instructive children’s literature, Louisa admitted and showed that it is difficult to recognize one’s own flaws and faults and that it is even more difficult to win against them. She showed her characters trying to defeat their flaws, often not succeeding but trying again. And with the character of Marmee, Louisa admitted that sometimes it is impossible to win against one’s flaws, however hard they try. “Even idealised Mrs. March has never altogether defeated her own natural temperament, but only learned to control it.” (MacLeod, p. 151)

6.3.2. Abby, Marmee, and mothers’ intentions

Abby May Alcott did not entirely suit the ideals of the nineteenth century but Marmee is the perfect mother and wife. She dedicated her life to her husband and children, and despite her own poverty, never refused to help neighbours in need. Marmee matches what Victorian society expected of its women: “Women were supposed to be good mothers, domestic paragons, and, when they had enough money, benevolent contributors to society.” (Wells) Even though, the Marches do not have enough money for them selves, Marmee still contributes to the society as much as she can.

At Christmas, when there is not enough money for presents for the girls, Marmee asks her daughters: “Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby ... There is nothing to eat over there ... My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?” (*Little Women*, p. 18) and the girls agree and even admit afterwards that “That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn’t get any of it.” (*Little Women*, p. 19)

As well as Marmee, Abby did dedicate her life to her husband and children, and she devoted a lot of her time and energy to charity; and, she also had other interests such as working for the abolitionary movement and women's suffrage that helped to fulfil her intellectual and "political" needs. And unlike Marmee, she never in fact managed to control her wild and impulsive temper.

Abby was in number of aspects different from Mrs. March, however, she was, undoubtedly, idealised into Marmee. As well as Abby did not emphasise to her daughters the importance of finding rich husbands, who could provide for their families, Marmee expresses the very same idea in the book.

Very often, it was considered women's main duty in life, to find good and prosperous husbands. The prevailing tendencies in the society are represented in the book by the community around the rich Moffat family, who gossip and accuse Mrs. March of planning to marry Meg to Laurie, who would be, according to the customs of that time, a very sensible match. To the circles that accepted the established conventions, this seemed to be only logical as they would not do otherwise in Marmee's position. However, for Mrs. March there are apparently matters that she considers much more important. When Meg asks her mother whether she did have "plans" as Mrs. Moffat said, Marmee answers: "Yes, my dear, I have a great many; all mothers do, but mine differ somewhat from Mrs. Moffat's, I suspect" And she carries on to give her daughters a motherly advice and share her "plans":

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married ... To be loved and chosen by a good man is the sweetest thing which can happen to a woman ... I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world – marry rich man merely because they are rich ... Money is a needful 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. (*Little Women*, p. 115)

While Mrs. Moffat follows the traditional believe that her daughters will be happy only if they marry well; then they will not have to worry about the financial well-being of their families, and they could concentrate on the emotional, and unconditional, support of their husbands, and providing of delightful homes.

Marmee, on the other hand believed, that a woman, without being loved and respected, cannot provide a happy home for her family and by being submissive and unconditionally supportive of her husband, she can hardly develop self-respect. Being domestic, without having any concerns outside the home, may lead to dependency, and as many women used to call this status – the voluntary enslavement.

Abby, just like Marmee, never advised her daughters to marry rich men, even though she knew, from her own experience, how difficult it is to run a family, where the husband does not serve as the breadwinner. She wanted for her daughters much more unconventional option; the occupation that would provide them with some support so that they were never entirely dependent on their husbands.

Louisa's belief that women dependency on men was merely caused by their inability of financial self-support is presented here. The society considered it inappropriate for women to work outside their homes and therefore, in fact, did not allow women to become financially independent.

The way Louisa portrays the situation and compares both the traditional and untraditional of the mothers' intentions for their daughters implies, that Louisa favoured the unconventional way, presenting Mrs. Moffat and circles around her as gossiping and intriguing and shallow; people who judge others according to their clothes and possessions and who would therefore hardly believe that it is not all the girls' primary ambition to marry well. Through Marmee, she presents her attitude toward these people: "I was very unwise to let you go among people of whom I know so little – kind, I dare say, but worldly, ill-bred, and full of these vulgar ideas about young people." (*Little Women*, p. 114) It suggests that Louisa would rather be poor but independent, than a housewife of a rich husband with no other issues in her free time than gossiping and worrying about new clothes.

6.3.3. Being womanly

Louisa struggled with her femininity, perceived herself as too wild and impetuous, which characteristics were considered male. She even noted several times during her life that she would rather be a boy and she did not consider herself a beautiful woman. "Louisa's ... spontaneity and aggression, all convinced her that she was part boy ... the only terms which she could understand herself were that she was a

boy trapped by some freak of nature in a girls body.” (Saxton, p. 165) In *Little Women* she described herself in this particular manner, non-girly and not exactly pretty:

Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, grey eyes ... Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet ... and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it.” (*Little Women*, p. 6)

Unlike Louisa, Jo was not really fond of beautiful robes. When invited for a New Year's Eve dance, Meg is troubled about what she will wear, wishing she had a proper silk dress, while Jo remarks: “I'm sure our pops look like silk, and they are nice enough for us,” (p. 29) not even worrying about the fact that she had spoiled her only pair of gloves: “I shall have to go without,” (p. 29) Jo resolves the situation her own way as she “never troubles herself much about dress.” (*Little Women*, p. 29) Her attitude does not really change even as she gets older. When Amy insists on her putting on a better dress, when Jo is to accompany her on a neighbourly visits, Jo protests: “If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don't wish to see them.” (p. 339)

As much as Jo did not like worrying about clothes, she disliked the official social gatherings and visits, as everybody expected a proper ladylike behaviour from her, as from all the other girls, and it cost Jo much of an effort and despite trying, she did not manage to succeed.

When going with Amy to return the neighbours' visits, Amy, aware of Jo's clumsy ways, asks her to behave as she will advice her, at every place they will go: “Don't make your abrupt remarks ... just be calm, cool, and quiet ... try to be sociable ... gossip as other girls do, and be interested in dress and flirtations and whatever nonsense comes up.” (p. 341) However, Jo's behaviour turns to be somewhat different from what Amy actually intended by her advice. Jo agrees to “gossip and giggle, and have horrors and raptures over any trifle” (p. 342) and she takes one of the girls as a model to imitate at their next stop. And as she promised she does, she tells stories, giggles and gossips; however, her imitation is too lifelike to escape detection and the girls realize that Jo is making fun of their ways.

Jo despises the girly habits; gossiping, and dramatizing over trifles. The tomboyish Jo finds these customs silly and their conversations boring and shallow. It was unacceptable to share or talk about one's worries and troubles; matters important to women and girls, at such gatherings outside the family circle, and Jo found tattling about trifles a wasting of her time. However, she was to learn that her unconventional behaviour will not be accepted by the conventional people around her. When Jo and Amy pay a visit to their Aunt, Jo's impertinence is to be paid of dearly. The Aunt, judging her and Amy according to their manners and attitudes, decides to send the amiable and angelic Amy to Europe, instead of Jo.

Louisa did not enjoy these social gatherings and tattling as much as Jo. She was used to attend the lectures and conversations of Emerson, and Thoreau, she was present during her father's meetings with Elizabeth Stanton, Lucy Stone, or Elizabeth Peabody; women active in the suffrage and many other intellectuals and women activists. During her life she preferred to socialize with people with whom she could have distinguished conversations, like the ones she had with her cousin: "[He] was very interested in Louisa's father and his friends, and Louisa enjoyed her talks with him ... Louisa enjoyed her cousin's earnest company and his high-minded conversation." (Saxton, p. 298)

As an opposition to Jo, both Meg, and Amy, are portrayed as very womanly in this aspect. They enjoy socializing with other girls, gossiping, dressing properly, and they do not struggle with the ladylike behaviour. In *Little Women* Louisa described both Meg and Amy as very beautiful and feminine: "Margaret ... was very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands ... Amy was ... a regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners." (p. 6) As well as Meg does not struggle with her femininity, nor did Anna. Being in her character very much similar to her father, she had all the virtues and characteristics that were considered proper for women, unlike Louisa, who always struggled with her character. "Bronson further complicated Louisa's problems by demonstrating the "feminine" virtues himself. Being passive came naturally to him ... [he] displayed little or no temper. He seemed to have achieved a female docility and Louisa born to the gender couldn't match it." (Saxton, p. 7)

Anna, for she satisfied the expectations the society, and her father, had about women, did not revolt against the established customs, partly perhaps, because she was used to a kind of dependency and submission since her childhood. Louisa never really learned to get on well with Bronson, who kept a certain distance from his second daughter, however, she found a way how to get on with her sister, who was so much alike their father “Louisa ... got along with Anna by managing her. In Anna’s dependence, Louisa found the kind of satisfaction she could allow herself.” (Saxton, p. 14) Louisa “learned to use the physical superiority to gain psychological mastery as well ... Anna ..., although the older, gave up her natural position of leadership at a very early age.” (Bedell, p. 84) Therefore, when Anna married she only replaced one form of dependency with other.

As well as Anna, Meg is also very womanly, even though not particularly submissive, but still quite passive. Meg “is in conventional terms, the most womanly, preoccupied with her appearance, without real ambition, destined for romance tamed down into domesticity.” (Bedell, p. 246) and therefore she does not fight her approaching womanhood and accepts it rather voluntarily. “Meg ... is almost passive and expressionless enough to qualify for little womanhood.” (Saxton, p. 5) Meg is actually almost a little woman at the beginning of the novel, being aware of and accepting her role in the society. And Amy “always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners”, even though the youngest, is already much closer to the young womanhood, than Jo.

The fact, that Meg is reconciled with the duties and virtues that the society expected from women and that she finds them natural, is presented when Meg wants her tomboyish sister to adopt these ways of behaviour herself, commenting on her boyish manners: “You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn’t matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady.” Jo’s reaction is typical for her and emphasizes her attitude towards growing up: “I’m not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I’ll wear it in two tails till I’m twenty.” (*Little Women*, p. 5)

Nevertheless, however hard Jo tries to resist the approaching womanhood, she cannot stop it and she is aware of it. She learns that even though her parents did never

oppose her wild, boyish manners (unlike Louisa who faced her father's strong disapproval), the society would not accept it, when her Aunt chooses Amy to go to Europe instead of her, only because of Jo's own tactless and too independent opinions. The price Jo paid for her nonconformity was high, and it made her realize that her manners will not be accepted. After this chapter, it seems that Jo cannot win either way; whether she tries to behave as the society would wish and expect from her, or she behaves as it comes natural to her, she never makes a good impression.

6.3.4. Meg's marriage

When Meg is asked by John Brook to marry him, it is her time to stand up for herself against the convention, as she has to face the disapproval of her rich Aunt March. Unexpectedly, Meg confronts her aunt, supporting and defending John and his intentions, which is not really in agreement with Meg's submissive character. Aunt March expresses the opinion prevailing in the society: "You ought to marry well and help your family; it's your duty to make a rich match." But Meg dares to oppose, probably encouraged by the attitude, which Marmee had shared with her and Jo, towards the wealthy but love and respect lacking marriages: "John is good and wise ... he's willing to work and sure to get on, he's so energetic and brave ... and I'm proud to think he cares for me, though I'm so poor and young and silly." (*Little Women*, p. 269)

John Pratt, Anna's husband and the model for John Brook was not exactly wealthy, but he was not poor either. He managed to provide for Anna and their family well. However Louisa, as well as Jo in the novel, did not accept the fact that her older sister should leave the family and start a life of her own.

When Anna announced her engagement to John Pratt, Louisa had been determined for a long time to take care of her family, devote her life to supporting her sisters and parents. Anna's engagement came after about a month after Lizzie's death and Louisa felt, that her family was crumbling in front of her eyes. "Here was her family, for whom she had cherished such hopes and ambitions, whom she had been so determined to keep together, melting away." (Meigs, p. 38) Suddenly, Louisa was not to be the only person who was able to support the family: "Anna found a man on whom to depend, and Louisa was left unneeded and short of her believe in her own indispensability." (Saxton, p. 14)

She depicted her emotions over Anna's engagement through Jo, who as well, takes the news about Meg's plans to marry John Brooke rather badly. She is astonished when she realizes that Meg has accepted John's proposal and later confides to Laurie: "I don't approve of the match, but I've made up my mind to bear it, and shall not say a word against it ... You can't know how hard it is for me to give up Meg." (p. 273) Though Jo's and Louisa's reasons for opposing feelings over the sister's engagement are somewhat different, they both resent losing the sister; one as her soul mate, the other as the burden she desires to bear.

For Jo, Meg's wedding is another sign that her adulthood is approaching and she fears that, almost as much as she fears that her family will be separated when Meg moves to her new home. "The dominant emotion is a passionate regret for the childhood about to be left behind, for the family unity about to be splintered as the girls move toward their separate futures." (MacLeod, p. 15)

For Louisa, Anna's marriage meant something different. At the time of Anna's engagement, Louisa was already adult, twenty-nine years old, independent woman whose goal in life, however, was sacrifice her own life and needs for the sake of the family, which was now disintegrating. Louisa, convinced by her father of the illness of her character, felt a strong desire to compensate it to her family. "Instead of expanding her own existence, adding new experiences and relations, she burrowed deeper into her world of obligations, taking on new family burdens, giving herself tighter restrictions." (Saxton, p. 9)

6.3.5. The family breadwinner and Jo's punishment

When Mr. March gets ill in the army and Marmee has to go to nurse him and bring him home, Jo has her hair cut to pay for the travelling fees. Jo, as well as Louisa would sacrifice anything for the comfort of the family. "Jo sacrifices her femininity to her duty ... To be female is to sacrifice, but ironically, for Louisa/Jo the sacrifice is so great that it is no longer a passive giving up but an active, male assertion." (Saxton, p. 11) And Louisa vowed to take care of her family and sacrifice her own well-being and she kept to this vow for her whole life.

Louisa's resolution to support her family probably came from her feeling of guilt. Anna was good and womanly and she deserved her own family, Lizzie was an angel, Abbie May was a proper lady and she deserved everything she asked for, and

Louisa was bad and unfeminine. “She had to understand her inability to fit the Victorian definitions of women as her fault ... She accepted responsibility for everything in an effort to pay for sins she had never understood.” (Saxton, p. 10) In *Little Women*, it seems that Louisa often punishes Jo for her temper and character and it is very often Jo, who is to be blamed for much of the troubles the family has to overcome; it suggest in a way that Jo should pay for the problems her character has caused and does not deserve to be really happy.

In the novel, Louisa imputed Jo with the responsibility over Beth’s death. Jo feels that her carelessness, laziness from her cold and her wish to work on her writing caused Beth’s illness that lead to her weakness and death. For the rest of Beth’s short life, when she is very ill and weak, Jo tries to help to improve Beth’s health by nursing her or by taking her to the beach with the money she had earned. When Beth worries for the first time she might get the fever, Jo cries: “Oh Beth, if you should be sick, I never could forgive myself!” (p. 206) However, in reality it was Abby, who brought the disease and infected Lizzie. Louisa might have been either trying to spare Abby from facing the pain of infecting her child with a serious disease as the feeling was too painful for her already, or the reality did not actually agree with the concept of idealised mother, that Marmee represents. Then, the nonconforming Jo seems to be the obvious choice in the matter of who should be held responsible.

When Jo refuses to let Amy accompany her to a play in the theatre, Amy feels hurt by this exclusion and she burns Jo’s only copy of her handwritten collection of original stories. Jo gets really angry with her, not capable of controlling her temper. The following day, Jo, unable to forgive Amy, does not keep a close eye on her going skating. The thin ice breaks and Amy falls in the cold water. Laurie tried to warn the girls about the smooth ice, but Jo did not make sure, Amy heard him: “the little demon she was harbouring said in her ear - ‘No matter whether she heard or not, let her take care of herself.’” (*Little Women*, p. 91) Partly, the situation arose from Jo’s umbrage, but Louisa does not really stress that Jo had a reason to be cross with Amy. And at the end, everything is blamed on Jo’s temper and angriness, while Amy ends without bearing any responsibility. It is Jo, who harbours the little demons. This incident makes Jo horrified over her own character and he confides to her mother: “It seems as if I

could do anything when I'm in passion ... I could hurt anyone and enjoy it. I'm afraid I *should* do something dreadful one day." (p. 93)

Jo's mother and sisters understand the significance of 'Amy's bonfire,' but they cannot quite understand the intensity of Jo's response ... While Amy's skating accident prompts Jo to say that she fears she will do something terrible, it is also true that Amy has already gotten into a 'passion' in which she enjoyed hurting Jo, and in which she did something genuinely dreadful. But ... it is Amy, not Jo, who is the final victim in this scenario. (Foote, p. 63, 64)

Louisa punished her literary alter-ego again when she refused to let Jo grow into a passionate relationship with Laurie. When Laurie asks Jo to marry him, because "he has loved Jo ever since he has known her", she refuses "thinking they are too much alike, too male. However, the fact that they enjoy each other and share interests and honesty argues against Jo's decision." (Saxton, p. 11) The scene where Jo tells Laurie that she does not love him is very touching and it can be difficult for the reader to believe that Jo did really have no romantic feelings towards Laurie. The scene may appear as if Jo suppressed these feelings and let the reason win over her emotions. The readers wanted Louisa to marry Jo to Laurie and even Bronson spoke during his conversation tours of his "disappointment with Jo's thwarted romance. But Louisa insisted on punishing the fictional Louisa." (Saxton, p. 11)

Louisa always resented her youngest sister, Abbie May, for she got everything she wanted and that is also how she is portrayed in the book, where Louisa even gave her the journey to Europe and Laurie, both of which Jo did not, according to Louisa, deserve. Instead, Jo marries a middle-aged German Professor, who is not really passionate nor impetuous, but distinguished intellectual and philosopher. "Professor Bhaer is a man indistinguishable in temperament and philosophy from Bronson. He provides moralism and control. [He] is sufficiently old so that Jo's interest in him cannot be construed as sexual." (Saxton, p. 11)

6.3.6. Growing up and defeating the flaws

As Cornelia Meigs states in her biography of Louisa May Alcott, the plot of *Little Women* is the development of the characters as they are learning how to become better people. Anne Scott McLeod claims, it is a book about the difficult transition between girlhood and womanhood and the hard struggle against one's flaws. However, when the reader meets the March sisters, Meg has already gone through the transition

and she is nearly a “little woman”, accepting the role prescribed to a woman by the society, Beth, though not a woman yet, fulfils the True Woman’s virtues; she is the pure woman who could preserve a man from yielding to sins, she is pious, passive, submissive and tranquil. She is simply the saint. And Amy, with her ladylike manners does not seem to suffer with the transition to the womanhood; on the contrary, she seems to be anxious to grow into a proper lady.

It is Jo, who struggles with the transition, who does not want to become an adult; especially an adult woman: “I hate to think I’ve got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster! It’s bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boys’ games and work and manners!” cries Jo (p. 5), when Meg is lecturing her about leaving the boyish ways. The situation is different for Jo in the other aspect as well. While Meg has to fight her vanity, Beth her profuse shyness, and Amy her selfishness to become better people, Jo has to fight her impetuous temper to become a better woman, for the impetuous temper would not matter if Jo were a man; unlike the vanity or selfishness.

Even though Beth’s shyness cannot be really considered a flaw of character, as it was completely acceptable and even desirable for a woman to be shy, and Beth does never really voice her desire to fight it, it is suggested by her sisters, and mainly Jo, that she should not fear people, and man in particular, as much as she does. The way, Beth is portrayed, makes her look almost supernatural, too perfect to be believed. “Beth ... was born the littlest woman of them all. She is patient, undemanding, quiet, docile, timid and unassuming ... She teaches the lesson of self-sacrifice.” In order not to spoil Beth’s angelic image that Louisa depicted and slightly idealised in *Little Women*, she let Beth die in the same manner she had lived; modestly, quietly and peacefully while in reality, when Lizzie was becoming so weak that a needle seemed too heavy for her, she was, understandably, not as peaceful as Beth in the book.

Louisa barely recognized her sister ... In one way Lizzie was more real to her, revealing for the first time in her life her resentments and desires. In life she had been passive, undemanding, and therefore, in family terms, blameless. In dying she was angry, frightened, and complaining ... (Saxton, p. 215)

The fact, that Lizzie’s dying was long, and demanding for Louisa who was nursing her, is evident from Louisa’s journal where she wrote: “A hard thing to bear, but if she is only to suffer, I pray she may go soon,” and “Louisa even resented losing Anna and her

mother to Lizzie's endless needs." (Saxton, p. 215) However, there is no suggestion of Lizzie's/Beth's demands or anger in the novel. Beth is portrayed as an angelic creature and remains one until her death.

6.3.7. Marmee and Marmee-to-be

As Anna did not deviate from the traditional women's role, neither did Meg. And in the book, her conventional behaviour is even supported by Marmee. When Meg feels neglected by her husband after their babies were born, Marmee looks at the situation from John's perspective, claiming that she had seen it for some weeks that Meg had forgotten her duty to her husband, in her love for her children, emphasizing that it is actually Meg who neglects John, not having any time for him as she spends all her time with the babies. When Marmee asks: "Did John ever neglect you ... while you made it a point to give him your society of an evening, his only leisure time?" (*Little Women*, p. 459) Meg objects that it is impossible when she has two babies to tend. However Marmee insists that she should manage her children without forgetting her duties towards her husband, suggesting Meg should allow John to help her, especially with Demi, the son, as boy needs some training.

However, Marmee also stresses that a welcoming home is essential for a man if the wife wants him to be happy there and not to go visiting his friends all the time. "Make [your home] so pleasant he won't want to go away." (p. 460) Marmee advises her and even suggests that Meg should try to take an interest in whatever John likes, talk to him, understand what is going on and educate herself. She does not advise Meg to talk with John about what she prefers but to find an interest in what concerns John. She, as a proper - and conventional - wife should submit to her husband's needs, make the home a lovely place, where the husband would feel pleasantly as well as needed. And the fact that she must take care of the babies must not stand in her way.

In this aspect, Marmee serves in a very traditional manner, advising her daughter to be the proper wife, who sacrifices her own interests to please her husband. "She is the mother everyone needs: selfless, available, with no life of her own beyond her family. She is deeply sympathetic and strong, and her aims for the girls are, finally, always in concert with their own. She is the model mother ... who has learned to derive her satisfactions solely from the satisfactions of others." (Saxton, p. 4) And Meg is in fact

becoming the new Marmee, following her mother's example. "Meg learned that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art of ruling it not as a queen, but a wise wife and mother." (*Little Women*, p. 470)

6.3.8. Male characters

While Beth is so quiet and passive that she sometimes seems nearly invisible, Meg traditional and adult before it is really her time and Amy a proper lady already, Jo, with her struggle against her temper, her failing to succeed and trying again, is the most real character of the book, probably because she is inspired by Louisa herself, her own emotions, fears and struggles are reflected in Jo. "It is Jo – her roughness, her ambition, her earnest yearning to be good; and above all, her humanness, good, bad, and mistaken – to whom every reader responds." (MacLeod, p. 15) That is, probably, why the readers wanted Louisa to marry Jo to Laurie, for he is the charming, young and high-spirited Jo's soul mate.

The character of Laurie was inspired by a Polish boy, Ladislav Wisniewski, who Louisa met on her journey to Europe. With Laurie, he shared the passion for music, and the way his friendship with Louisa grew quickly and intensively. When Jo refuses to marry Laurie, because they are too much alike, she means mostly their impetuous tempers that make them both too male. However, Laurie is not a typical example of masculine character himself. The way Louisa portrayed him attributes Laurie with qualities that could be considered, according to nineteenth century customs, particularly feminine. Therefore, while Jo is not feminine enough for her times, Laurie is, on the contrary, not masculine enough. Laurie does not want to enter the business world as his grandfather intends for him and he would rather devote his life to music. Business sphere meant a nearly certain supply of income that would easily cover the needs of one's family and it was considered exclusively male pursuit. On the other hand, music, as it was one of the activities connected to domesticity, was considered highly feminine pursuit.

Laurie's grandfather represents the most male figure in the book; the opposition to the March household. While Mr. March is gone to the war and after his return home, spends most of the time in his study, Mr. Laurence is the main male figure in the first part of the book (later, he is joined by Mr. Brooke and Professor Bhaer). Even though

Louisa claimed that Mr. March is not inspired by Bronson, a similarity in the behaviour of both is quite evident. Bronson, too, had spent most of his life in his study, not providing for his family. Mr. March is in his study as well, while Marmee and the girls take little jobs to provide for the family or at least cover their own expenses; teach at schools, sew, or work as servants and governesses. Mr. March is passive and calm, and he displays little or even no temper. Just as Bronson he is actually quite feminine.

On the contrary, Mr. Laurence is the real male figure. Inspired by Louisa's grandfather from Abby's side, Joseph May, he suits the conventional ideas of truly masculine man perfectly. The May family was perhaps of the Portuguese origin and that is probably were both Abby and Louisa got their dark complexion and, very likely, even the wild temper. "Abby was always proudest of her May heritage, feeling that, with ... her zest for life ... she was a 'true May' ... she passed on such a vivid portraits of her father that he became a legend in the Alcott family – returned to life in the character of 'Mr. Laurence'." (Bedell, p. 24)

Mr. Laurence is pictured as a fusty, stubborn, proud and determined man. He seems to be gruff, but when the girls get to know him, he is very friendly and kind. He is a wealthy and successful businessman and in the same manner he is ambitious for his grandson Laurie, being convinced that only business is a proper sphere for a young man, who is once to become a breadwinner for his family. Therefore he makes Laurie study really hard. He also does not agree with Laurie's passion for music, as it is not a proper occupation for a man. When Laurie is playing a little music to Jo, Mr. Laurence interrupts them: "That will do, that will do, young lady ... His music isn't bad, but I hope he will do as well in more important things." (*Little Women*, p. 65) However, he does not find music disturbing at all, when it is connected to a girl; Mr. Laurence is astonished by Beth's musical talent. He loves her playing and he even presents her with a cabinet piano.

In a way, Mr. Laurence becomes a supporter for the March family. He sends the girls Christmas presents, he allows Jo to borrow books from his library, endows Beth with the piano and helps John Brooke with his career when after he decides to marry Meg so that he is able to provide for their family.

When Marmee is needed to go and help to nurse Mr. March who got ill in the army, Mr. Laurence's role of supporter and protector of the family is even more significant. "Mr. Laurence came ... bringing every comfort the kind old gentleman could think of for the invalid, and friendliest promises of protection for the girls during the mother's absence" (*Little Women*, p. 188) And Marmee gratefully accepts his offer of protection for the girls: "I leave you ... to Mr. Laurence's protection ... our good neighbour will guard you as if you were his own ... and in any perplexity, go to [him]." (p. 195) Throughout the book, Mr. Laurence serves in the masculine role of the protector, fulfilling the conventional idea of manhood and male duty to protect women, while Mr. March is more in the passive role of a moral counsellor and adviser that the girls may come to in the times of troubles or life uncertainty.

Mr. Brooke is another male figure that suits the nineteenth century conventions of masculinity. He marries Meg, a woman with conventional desires to have a family and nice little home where she could work to make the family happy, cherish her children and husband and even learn to take an interest in talks about politics, when it is necessary. And John Brooke is a man who serves the traditional role of a family breadwinner, who wants his home to be a welcoming place with happy children and pretty wife, who waits for him to come home, prepared to satisfy her husband's needs.

On the other hand, Professor Bhaer is again portrayed with particularly feminine qualities, "indistinguishable in temperament and philosophy from Bronson" (Saxton, p. 11) he has the passivity and calm temper. It is interesting that Louisa married Jo to a man who is so much similar to her father, who she did not really understand and against whose control and moralization she struggled for her whole life. And Professor Bhaer provides both control and moralization, telling Jo how bad it is to write her lurid stories. For Jo, he probably represents a man who would help her to control her temper, just as Mr. March helped Marmee to control hers; which Jo could have probably hardly achieve as Mrs. Laurence, since Laurie is of quite a wild temper himself.

Professor Bhaer, as many others of Louisa's male characters, was inspired by her infatuation to Waldo Emerson and a story she found in Emerson's library. It is a story of a strange relationship, which grows into love, between the German writer Goethe, who is in his fifties, and a very young girl Bettina. In her journal, Louisa

described her reaction to the story. “At once I was fired with a desire to be a Bettina, making my father’s friend [Emerson] my Goethe. So I wrote letters to him, but never sent them.” (Bedell, p. 241) Louisa used the theme of a romance between a young girl and an older man very often. The character of Professor Bhaer is not an exception.

More over, Emerson, as the model for Bhaer, was also aware of his female qualities and often: “retired into his study and ruminated on his female nature.” (Saxton, p. 7) During her life, Louisa learned that, as well as women may have the male qualities, men very often have the female ones. She also, however, experienced that while a masculine temper and behaviour is socially unacceptable for women, the feminine qualities and behaviour is completely tolerable for men. “Louisa was familiar with people who crossed the sex barriers, but for women the tariff was very high.” (Saxton, p. 7)

6.3.9. Castles in the air; ambition and acceptance

In marrying Jo to the unromantic, older Professor Bhaer, Louisa resolved a dilemma, she was never able to resolve for herself in her real life. She would have preferred Jo to remain unmarried, but the readers wanted to see Jo marry Laurie. However, marriage to Laurie would transfer Jo into the conventional role of a housewife. “Marriage with Laurie would have made Jo a feminine success in conventional terms, certainly; she would have been beloved ... well-off, but she would also have been idle. As Mrs. Laurence, she would have had no function in the world beyond the domestic doorstep.” (MacLeod, p. 16)

Louisa, as well as Jo, had always struggled with the balance between ambition and acceptance. When the girls together with Laurie build their castles in the air, Jo says, the thing she wants most in the world is to become a writer: “I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle – something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead ... I think I shall write books and get rich and famous.” (*Little Women*, p. 168) On the other hand, Louisa and Jo had another desire in their life and that was to be good. “I have made a plan for my life,” Louisa wrote in her journal, “I am going to be good ... I’m going to *work really*, for I feel a true desire to improve.” (Saxton, p. 165) By “good” Louisa meant to become more like Anna or Elizabeth “more ‘feminine, ‘passive, yielding, and gentle.” (Saxton, p. 165)

Jo seems to make a similar decision after Amy is chosen by their Aunt for the trip to Europe. There, Jo realizes that, even though her boyish behaviour was accepted and considered amusing by her closest family, it will not be accepted by the society. And when Jo decides to go to New York her boyish manners are somewhat forgotten; Jo appears to finally cross the line between her wild boyish childhood and womanhood after all. She seems to undergo a kind of domestication as “many critics have made incisive arguments about the transformation of Jo’s rebelliousness, and the text’s domestication of her character.” While on one hand, she seems to reconcile to the more conventional women’s status, she becomes, at the same time, financially independent and successful with her writing. “In New York she becomes a professional author, and in New York she meets Professor Bhaer ... and it is here that she learns to internalize and naturalize ... status distinctions as if [it was] natural distinction.” (Foote, p. 79)

Louisa was aware of the limitations that the conventions, established within the society, prescribed to women. The professional life meant a personal loss for women and vice versa. Louisa managed to reach a compromise between both in the fictional world for Jo, even though she was never able to reach it for herself. By marrying Jo to Mr. Bhaer, Jo found a husband and, at the same time, a profession. “Professor ... gave her domestic happiness in the form of affection and children, but with it, work.” (MacLeod, p. 16) However, to reach the compromise, Jo must have sacrificed a little from both her personal and professional success; she refused to marry the romantic Laurie and she decided to conduct a school together with her husband, though her castle in the air was to become a famous and wealthy writer. Louisa, on the other hand, did not compromise her writing career and never got married.

Meg’s castle in the air was particularly conventional. It was considered women’s main duty in life to marry well and work for the well-being of her family. “I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things – nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like,” Meg builds her castle. (*Little Women*, p. 167) She would be satisfied with her domestic role, considering the home her sphere, where she could work independently, manage it as she would like. But Meg too, achieves her dream only partly. She does acquire a husband and a little house that she can manage and beautify, however, without all the luxury she desired and which was stressed so many times

through out the book. Meg chooses to oppose the conventions and decides to marry a poor man. It seems that at this point she had won against her biggest flaw, vanity; however, she is to yield into a temptation and receive one more lesson later in the book, not from Marmee, but this time from her husband.

Beth's castle was as modest as Beth herself. She did not wish for anything else, than to stay home with Mother and Father and help them to take care of the family. Beth is the extreme example of passivity, submission and domesticity. She fears the outside world and she feels secure only as long as she is at home. Even becoming neighbourly with the Laurences is, at the end, more like expanding her own home than coming out of it. "Also by sending Beth the piano, Mr. Laurence guarantees that the only thing that could have possibly drawn Beth out of the house is now safe inside." (Wells) She is the angel of the household with only purpose in life and that is to support and encourage others in fulfilling their dreams.

On the other hand, Amy's castle was very ambitious: "I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world." As well as Jo's and Meg's dreams, Amy's was not fulfilled entirely either. However, Amy got everything she desired and she could receive from others, the trip to Europe, or drawing lessons, exactly as Abbie May.

May had had a childhood without responsibilities, unlike Louisa. May enjoyed herself and ... she did not identify herself through her duties toward others. She went after her own pursuits, pestered her parents for drawing lessons that they could ill afford, and ... painted and drew despite her family's judgement that she had 'talent' but not 'genius'. She learned social graces and made herself agreeable to people. May did what Louisa claimed she wanted to do but couldn't allow herself. She stepped into the world and tried to find out what it could do for her. (Saxton, p. 15)

In fact, Amy is in a way similar to Louisa's sensational stories' heroines. She is very much conscious of the role of a distinguished young lady she has to play to achieve what she desires. "By performing the 'proper' roles of Victorian womanhood" (Wells), she manipulates people around her and she acquires all she wants. At the beginning of the novel, Amy is described as a "regular snow maiden" and "[she] is willing to play the snow queen in order to find the control and independence that great wealth can give her." (Wells)

Unlike Jo and Meg, Amy did not compromise her dream; she did not achieve it because her artistic work was not recognized, different from Jo's stories that were actually published. However, the dream of an artist was a dream of a girl, not the little woman Amy has become. Her grown up castle in the air was different and she succeeded completely in fulfilling the latter of her dreams: "I want to be a lady, but I mean a true gentlewoman in mind and manners," says Amy (p. 374) and that the match she makes by marrying Laurie is not only circumstantial is indicated by the fact that after finding her own artwork too insignificant, Amy consciously decides to "polish up [her] other talents and be an ornament to society." (*Little Women*, p. 447) She knows very well what colour to wear and how to stand or how to decorate her dress and hair with flowers to make the best impression.

By the marriage to Laurie, she makes the conventional good match that moves her forward to the fulfilment of one of her dreams and at the same time, it does not mean that her artistic tendencies should be forgotten entirely. At the end of the book Amy says: "I don't relinquish all my artistic hopes ... I begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done." (p. 576) And for Jo, the way to her castle in the air remains open in the same manner as Amy's: "I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait." Says Jo. (p. 576) After becoming the domestic Jo, she finds the ambition, she had had so long ago, when she was building her castle in the air, "selfish, lonely and cold now." (*Little Women*, p. 575)

In the first half of the novel, Jo and Amy are each others' counterparts. Amy, though very young, is very much concerned about her femininity, clothes, looks and behaviour while Jo is not concerned about her gender role at all. During their girlhood Jo was favoured because her behaviour was considered entertaining. Her parents never seemed to complain about it, and Meg says about Jo's boyish ways: "It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl". (*Little Women*, p. 5) On the other hand, in the first half of the book, Amy is very often ridiculed for her attempts to be "a lady"; she is portrayed as spoiled, and ignorant. However, in the second half of the book, as the girls grow up, Jo's manners become unacceptable, while Amy, who manages to tend her pride and affectations, becomes a distinguished young lady, who pleases effortlessly people around her.

At the beginning of the novel, it is actually Amy who believes: “Jo and I are going to make fortunes for you all; just wait ten years, and see if we don’t.” (*Little Women*, p. 185) However, Amy grew out of her idea of supporting the family by her art work and she rather chose a way that was more common and conventional for a woman, a wealthy husband: “I hate poverty and don’t mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help. One of us *must* marry well; Meg didn’t, Jo won’t, Beth can’t yet, so I shall.” (*Little Women*, p. 376) At the end, both Jo and Amy exchanged their artistic tendencies for much more conventional roles of wives and mothers.

7. Conclusion

The fact that Louisa May Alcott was a woman aware of limitations that the nineteenth century women had to face is undeniable. Very often, she expressed her wish to be a man, since women were expected to dedicate their lives to their husbands and families and if they decided to prioritize their career, they had to compromise their personal life. Louisa chose the professional life because she was determined to support her family financially, and by nursing and taking care of them when it was needed. Louisa in fact, did dedicate her life to her family but the support she provided was not the female but the male one.

Louisa also realized that a woman can be independent only when she does not depend on her husband financially. With her writing, she earned enough money to support herself and her family, and therefore, she could be the independent woman; also active in the Women's Suffrage movement since 1968.

The question that many critics argue about is, however, to what extent were her beliefs and opinions reflected in the heroines of her stories and novels. Some argue that the heroines break taboos of the traditional belief about women's proper sphere, some, on the contrary, believe that Louisa's women are portrayed in a way that supports the conventional women's status.

During her life, Louisa was considered a children's literature writer. However, with the discovery of her pseudonymous novels, she started to be perceived in a slightly different manner. The feminist critics often felt that "her characters support dominant and patriarchally defined roles for women, thus reinforcing in those who read the story those very roles." (Wells) The publication of "Behind a Mask" and the modern biography by Martha Saxton caused many critics to consider Louisa's writing unconventional, at least in some aspects.

As Gilbert and Gubar argue, in their analysis of nineteenth century women authors: "Women writers of this era, having no successful paradigm within which to create their art, had to repress their expressions of both art and anger, and these repressed urges found other ways of manifesting themselves." (Wells) Louisa was undoubtedly angry, suppressing her feelings. She was angry with Bronson, for he never learned to approve with her ways, she was probably angry with the establishments of

the society, and most of all, she was angry with herself as she never managed to become agreeable to the world. And her suppressed anger probably found the way how to manifest itself and that is through Louisa's characters, especially, her female heroines.

In her gothic stories, Louisa makes it evident that she was very much aware of what behaviour the society expected from women and also how limited the women's status was. She also suggested that women who did not accept this status that was determined for them, could "put on a mask" and pretend to be just the women the society desired, and use the virtues, which the society valued so much in women, to their advantage. Louisa suggested that these women were capable of gaining power over the men by playing the role the men wanted to see.

What Alcott reveals in her depiction of [her gothic heroines'] deliberate manipulations and constant awareness that [they are] on stage... is that nineteenth-century women are powerful in proportion to their success as artists ... Alcott's femmes fatales are aware of the 'enchantment' that a woman must enact to fool men into believing their fondest wishes and therefore gain power over those men. (Wells)

Louisa shows that she does not approve to these expectations that force the ambitious women, who do not want to be just passive housewives living their lives for others, to act, pretend and wear a mask of a True Woman. As her heroines are forced to this kind of manipulative behaviour, and therefore are not in fact bad and manipulative in their nature, she portrays them with a sympathy and understanding though she punishes them, usually, at the end. Louisa shows that women have no other choice than to either internalize the conventional believes of women's proper sphere and behaviour, or pretend to do so.

The women in her sensational stories are, actually, portrayed in an unconventional way as they are not passive, pure, pious or submissive; they are not fully devoted to their husbands. They are completely in control of their own circumstances. They cheat lie and use the conventions to their advantage to gain power. However, they are succeeding only as long as they play their role of proper women and they have to face their punishment at the end. This seems to re-establish the nineteenth century order by the final morally efficient punishment. Even though Louisa seems to understand the despair of these women oppressed by the conventions throughout the story, at the end, she seems to incline to the society that perceives such women as

immoral. In the case of “Behind a Mask” where the element of punishment is absent, the heroine adopts the mask of proper woman to such an extent that she actually “impersonates the character of a ‘little woman’.” (Wells)

Although Louisa considered *Little Women* a “moral pap for children”, it became a puzzle for the feminist criticism. The critics argue whether the March sisters were portrayed in a way that supported the conventional establishment within the society, or whether their depiction was critical of the women’s status.

Meg, Amy and Beth are all portrayed as very womanly. Meg is a little woman already at the beginning of the novel; worried about her dress, enjoying the social gatherings, her biggest ambition being a desire to marry and have a nice house and family. Probably the only moment when Meg revolts the convention is, when she decides to marry a poor man and even opposes her rich aunt who is trying to convince her of the impropriety of her decision. “Alcott wanted her women’s choices to seem like more than just getting married; she wanted those choices to be made freely and to reflect other opinions.” And she did succeed in acquiring this for Meg, as the decision to marry John is made freely without considering anybody else’s opinion. Meg does not marry because the society expects that of her, but because she wants to and freely decides to do so.

She then becomes a proper housewife, domestic, caring and sacrificing. However, not as a traditional wife and mother, she asks John, following Marmee’s advice to help her in the nursery. A True Victorian wife would not expect her husband to help her with what are her own domestic duties, and would not ask that of him. “In keeping with the cult of domesticity, [a woman] was advised not to share this sacred responsibility with others.” (Wells) However, Meg did. First she asked her mother’s advice and then John’s help with their children. This fact, however, does not make Meg less a good wife and mother, and as John turns out to be very much capable of parenting the children, especially the son, the relationship grows, thanks to this shared duty, into a partnership and cooperation rather than dependence. “The relationship that Meg finds with her husband, then, ... unites those domestic ‘duties’ in a consequential equality of sexes, sharing the family together.” (Wells)

Therefore, while Meg is portrayed as very conventional, fulfilling the ideas of a proper woman, it is suggested, that the domestic happiness depends not only on the wife's ability to provide a warm and welcoming household, but also on the ability of husband to support his wife in her domestic duties. The importance of a partnership is valued over the relationship of power and dependence.

When Amy's girlhood ambition of becoming an artist is not taken into consideration, then her biggest wish is to become a real gentlewoman. In fact, she is a proper lady since the very beginning of the novel, only her manners get more mature, and therefore natural, as she grows into a little woman. The portrayal of Amy as a conventional woman, whose main aim in the life is to find a wealthy husband and thus solve her own poverty, however, appears differently, if the character is perceived on the background of Louisa's gothic heroines.

It is evident, that Amy is very much aware of the fact that if she performs according to what is expected from her, and every woman, she will succeed in gaining everything she desires. The fact that her ladylike behaviour is mostly a performance is supported by Amy's own statement that she will "polish up [her] other talents and be an ornament to society." (*Little Women*, p. 447) Perceived like this, Amy is not the traditionally proper woman, but she only uses the conventionally prescribed women's virtues to her advantage, in order to gain power. "Amy is one of Alcott's most skilful actresses because ... she realizes that the most effective performance is the one that seems nonexistent ... Even she seems to believe her act, which then becomes unconscious, and therefore, most effective." (Wells)

Then, while Amy appears to be the truest little woman, with proper womanly manners, and truly conventional belief that her main duty is to marry well, all this can be just a role that she plays in order to gain wealth and power.

Both Beth and Marmee are portrayed in a very conventional way. They are passive, domestic, living their lives for the others; for the well-being of the family. While Beth is the angel, "little tranquillity", as her father calls her, by nature, Marmee is wild and angry inside, but she manages to control her temper to become the ideal and proper mother. They do not have a life, and therefore story of their own.

Beth's main purpose in the life is to support the others in their dreams. She reminds her sisters of what they should, according to the Victorian values, be: modest, tranquil and unselfish. However, in a way Beth's most significant influence comes after her death. Only after Beth is gone, Jo resolves to take her place and take care of the family, and only then she starts to become the little woman.

Marmee's role is definitely the one of adviser and comforter. Though she is a traditionally True Woman, knowing her sphere and expected behaviour she does not stress the importance of her daughters to marry wealthy men, which was conventionally considered women's main duty. Rather she stresses the importance of her daughters to be happy. Therefore, she does not object when both Meg and Jo decide to marry poor men or Jo, before she meets her husband to be, Professor Bhaer, wants rather to try to earn her own living.

The most questionable of all is probably the character of Jo, who is, to some extent, Louisa's fictional alter-ego. She is a tomboy, wild in her temper, impetuous, outspoken and independent in her character. She expresses many times her wish to be a boy as she is aware of the limitations that she will have to face when she grows into the "little woman" and she is trying to resent the approaching womanhood. However, she does not succeed and her ways that were considered amusing when she was a little girl are now unacceptable and Jo pays dearly for her behaviour that is found improper for a young woman.

In the first half of the novel, Jo is portrayed as an ambitious girl, who wants to earn her living by writing books because she hates poverty. She does not speak of acquiring a husband and she even despises romance. She does not enjoy typically girly social gatherings, gossiping and tattling. She does not even care much about her wardrobe or proper ways to dress for certain occasions. She enjoys the boy's games and manners and the ones of girls' ones seem too boring and shallow to her. And as she despises the ladylike manners, she struggles with performing them herself.

Not only is Jo portrayed in an unconventional way but she very strongly fights against the established orders concerning women's sphere. When she has the chance to make a good match, which was considered women's main duty, she refuses and rather travels to New York to work. There she even succeeds with her writing that earns her a

regular income. With the money she becomes independent and it allows her to fulfil her determination to provide for her family and take care of them.

However, at this moment, Jo, as a character, starts to change. Under the influence of Professor Bhaer she starts to yield into the conventions, her wild temper gets very much under control, she becomes domestic, and she marries the Professor. Jo finally accepts the fact that she has grown, and she becomes a little woman; abandoning her writing and becoming quite a conventional woman. Though she claims at the end of the novel that she can still write “She eventually abandons her public writing to run a school for boys, in which she only writes communal plays for the boys to perform. Jo ... finds a ‘normal’ role where she chooses to give of herself for others, denying any desire for fame.” (Wells)

Very often, Louisa is Jo, and Jo is Louisa, however, it is mainly true only for the first half of the book. In the second part Jo is more a woman that Louisa wanted to be, but never was. While Louisa never got married, never learned to control her temper and never learned to be the proper woman, agreeable for the society according to its conventions, she made Jo happy in the conventional sense. She married her of, made her domestic and agreeable. “Jo is redeemed and becomes exactly the daughter Bronson would like to have had when she opens a school that incorporates Bronson’s fondest desires and theories into its curriculum.” (Wells)

Louisa depicted, through the character of Jo, her awareness of expectations that are aimed at women’s proper behaviour, the difficulty of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, as it is the beginning of limitations that the “little women” have to face, and the struggle of ambitious and energetic women against the conventions that expect them to be passive and submissive. However, in the novel, its main heroine resolves the situation by adapting and conforming to the convention, even though under her own terms. She does not make the conventional good match but chooses a husband, with whom she acquires also an occupation, to be able to help with the support of the family, but she does become a “little woman” after all.

For herself, Louisa chose a different way of gaining the independence. She saw the main reason for women’s dependence on men in their economic inability to provide for themselves, as the occupations that were considered suitable or acceptable for

women were again highly restricted. However, Louisa managed to become financially self-supportive and she earned enough to even support her family. When Louisa moved to Boston to live on her own, she wrote a letter to Bronson that reflects not only the fact that Louisa realised that money can mean independence, but also her anger with Bronson and his inability to provide for the family: “though an *Alcott* I *can* support myself. I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it.” (Saxton, p. 210) The fact, that Louisa liked her independence is obvious, and though she did not fulfil her main woman’s duty as she never got married, she dedicated her life to the emotional support of her family and, at the same time, became its only breadwinner. She managed to perform in both typically male and female functions.

Considering both Louisa’s sensational stories and *Little Women*, its heroines seem to struggle between the conventional and unconventional. On one hand, the women fulfil the ideas of True Womanhood; limit their lives within their proper sphere, and their behaviour to the expectations of the society. On the other hand, these women are often ambitious, seeking power and independence, both emotional and financial; women, who want more in the life than just being wives and mothers.

From this point of view, Louisa could be, to some extent, considered a predecessor of the Women’s Right’s Movement ideas that were spelled later. Though she portrayed many of her women characters in a very conventional way, she still depicted the limitations of women’s spheres and the struggle of the women against those limitations. She stressed that not all women were satisfied within the spheres that were considered proper for them and that their ambitions and abilities were often beyond those limitations. Louisa herself had to fight against the conventions that expected her to be a woman that she was not. She was opinionated, impetuous, speaking for women’s rights and she was independent. She was everything but a little woman.

Resumé

Louisa May Alcottová se narodila 29. listopadu 1832 jako druhá dcera Amose Bronsona Alcotta a Abby May Alcottové. Přestože se rodina často stěhovala, většinu života Louisa prožila v Concordu v Massachusetts, malém městě na sever od Bostonu, kde Alcottovi sousedili s významnými filozofy a spisovateli byli jsou Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, nebo Henry David Thoreau.

Louisin otec, Bronson, byl také filozofem, transcendentalistou a pedagogem. Zatímco se pokoušel učit a vést školy v mnoha městech Nové Anglie, dluhy jeho rodiny rostly, jelikož Bronsonovy pedagogické postupy byly zcela netradiční, a tak, i když byly jeho metody často z počátku rodiči jeho žáků přijímány se zvědavostí, časem začaly být podezřelé a rodiče své děti z Bronsonových škol odhlašovali.

Jeho vlastní dcery ale byly vychovávány a vzdělávány jeho vlastními metodami. Zatímco starší Anně, která byla klidné povahy, stejně jako Bronson, nedělaly otcovy postupy žádné obtíže a vedla si dobře, mladší Louisa, která byla prudké povahy, stejně jako její matka Abby, otcovými metodami trpěla. Ani v dospělosti si Louisa nenašla k otci cestu a nikdy si s ním nevytvořila vřelý vztah.

Bronson byl muž, který věřil názoru převažujícímu v americké společnosti devatenáctého století, že ženy by měly být pasivní, poddajné a klidné. Louisa tyto předpoklady nesplňovala. Na rozdíl od svých sester, starší Anny, a mladších Elizabeth a Abbie May se Louisa, především v mládí, potýkala s neschopností naplnit očekávání svého otce, a společnosti, které se týkalo jejího chování, jež nebylo dosti ženské a podle zvyků devatenáctého století nepřijatelné. Bronson se s Louisinou divokou, a ne dosti ženskou, povahou nikdy nesmířil a udržoval si od své druhorozené dcery jistý odstup.

Louisina povaha nebyla příliš velkou překážkou dokud byla děvčetem. Pro dívky většinou platila stejná pravidla jako pro chlapce, ale jakmile se děvčata začala blížit období dospívání, jejich dětství bylo často rázem ukončeno a od dívek začalo být vyžadováno vybrané chování. Takzvané „malé ženy“ začaly poznávat hranice svého působení, které se od té doby soustředilo kolem jejich domova. Hlavní náplní jejich života se stala starost o domácnost a později manžela a děti, začaly se učit, co je pro ženu považováno za přípustné a nepřípustné.

Louisa May Alcottová zobrazila toto období ve svém románu *Malé ženy*. Jedná se o semi-autobiografické dílo, které je z velké části inspirováno právě rodinou Alcottových. Příběh čtyř sester, Meg, Jo, Beth a Amy, inspirovaný právě Annou, Louisou, Elizabethou, a Abbie May, začíná v době, kdy sestry Marchovi stojí na prahu dospělosti. Zatímco jejich otec slouží v občanské válce jako kaplan, jeho dcery doma dospívají v „malé ženy“, pod dohledem laskavé a milující matky, Marmee.

Meg, nejstarší ze sester, inspirována Louisinou starší sestrou Annou, je vlastně už na počátku příběhu „malou ženou“. Její povaha vyhovuje, stejně jako Annina, požadavkům společnosti. Meg je krásná, má vybrané chování, ví co se sluší v dané společnosti a co se od ní očekává. Má také ale, stejně jako její sestry, drobné povahové vady, které, na druhou stranu, činí její postavu realistickou a lépe uvěřitelnou. Meg se potýká s marnivostí, touhou po krásných šatech a špercích, které si ale chudí Marchovi nemohou dovolit. Jejím největším a jediným snem je tak útulný domov; krásný dům plný luxusního nábytku a šatů.

Jo, která zobrazuje samotnou Louisu, je, stejně jako autorka, divoké, impulzivní povahy, prostořeká a přímočará. Stejně jako Louisa se kvůli své povaze potýká se správným vybraným chováním, a odmítá dospět, protože ví, že dospělost pro ni bude znamenat spoustu omezení, kterým bude muset jako žena čelit. Její chlapecké způsoby se stanou společensky nepřijatelné a bude od ní očekáváno, že přijme tradiční ženskou roli pasivní, oddané manželky a matky. Jo se ale mnohem více ambiciózní. Jo chce v životě dokázat něco velkolepého, co nebude zapomenuto ani dlouho po její smrti. Chce se stát spisovatelkou, být bohatá a slavná.

V postavě Jo se ale odrazila i jiná Louisina vlastnost, její pevné rozhodnutí starat se o svou rodinu, jak po emocionální stránce, tak i po finanční, jelikož Bronson, stejně jako pan March nezastávají v rodině tradiční mužskou funkci živitele, což vede k jejich chudobě. Pravděpodobně proto, že Bronson nikdy neměl pro Louisu pochopení a nikdy se s ní nesblížil, Louisa svého otce nikdy řádně nepoznala. V knize je tedy postava otce nejprve zcela nepřítomná, a po jeho návratu z války tráví většinu času ve své studovně. Jo se tedy rozhodne, že pomocí svého psaní bude rodinu sama finančně podporovat.

Postava Beth je velmi plachá a tichá, často až „neviditelná“. Žije proto, aby podporovala druhé v jejich rozhodnutích, a jejím jediným snem je zůstat doma s rodiči a

starat se o rodinu. Beth, stejně jako Lizzie, ale onemocní spálou a na následky nemoci zemře.

Nejmladší ze sester je Amy, které, narozdíl od Jo, nedělá vhodné chování žádné problémy. Už od dětství se vehementně snaží chovat se jako dáma, což je na jednu stranu zesměšňováno, dokud je Amy malým děvčetem, na druhou stranu, když dosáhne dospělosti, její vystupování se stane mnohem přirozenějším a Amy dokáže ze svého příjemného jednání těžit. Na rozdíl od prostořeké Jo zapůsobí svými vybranými způsoby na svou tetu, která ji, místo Jo, zaplatí cestu do Evropy. Stejně jako Abbie May, Amy v románu získá vše po čem touží a stačí jí jen si o to říct.

Amy je sice postavou, která splňuje ideály ženství devatenáctého století, na rozdíl od Meg, ale, sahají její sny za hranice takzvané „ženské sféry“, kterou byl jejich domov. Jejím dětským snem je stát se malířkou, být slavná a bohatá, ale jak Amy dospívá, její sen se změní na mnohem konvenčnější ambici a tou je bohatý manžel a dobré společenské postavení.

Jo se podaří přiblížit se ke naplnění svého snu. Odjíždí do New Yorku, kde získá nezávislost a také uspěje s napínavými povídkami, které napsala. V tom okamžiku ale do děje zasáhne postarší německý profesor, pan Bhaer. Nelichotivě se vyjádří o napínavých povídkách, které podle něj nejsou dosti mravné, ale jsou publikovány v místních novinách, protože jsou mezi čtenáři velmi oblíbené, aniž by věděl, že autorkou mnoha z nich je právě Jo. Jo, která si názoru profesora Bhaera velmi váží, přestane povídky psát, přestože jí zajišťovaly pravidelný příjem, nezávislost a možnost finančně vypomoci své rodině a postarat se o nemocnou Beth. Jo tedy v době, kdy se její sen začne plnit a ona se může stát slavnou a nezávislou, přehodnotí své cíle, dospěje a vnitřně se smíří s konvencemi, které ženy limitují, a proti kterým se tak dlouho bránila, když se odmítala stát „malou ženou“. Jo se vdá za profesora Bhaera, a společně otevřou školu pro chlapce. Z Jo se tedy nestane konvenční manželka a matka, protože společně s manželem získává zaměstnání, které zajistí, že se Jo uplatní i za prahem svého domu.

Po dlouhou dobu byla Louisa May Alcottová považována za autorku dětské literatury. Bylo známo, že stejně jako Jo, publikovala i napínavé povídky pod různými pseudonymy, ale až do poloviny dvacátého století nebylo známo, že i povídky psané pod mužským pseudonymem A. M. Barnard jsou také jejím dílem. Převážně tyto

povídky zajistily, že se na Louisino literární dílo začalo pohlížet i z perspektivy feministické literární kritiky, včetně románu *Malé ženy*. Zatímco jedni tvrdí, že způsob jakým Louisa zobrazuje své hrdinky podporuje konvenční názory na sféru ženského působení a správného chování, a tím pádem ve svých mladých čtenářkách upevňuje legitimitu těchto ideálů, druzí tvrdí, že zobrazuje ženy, které s těmito omezeními ženské sféry bojují a jen těžko se s nimi smiřují.

Hrdinky Luisiných napínavých povídek jsou často ženy, které na první pohled splňují ideály ženství. Jsou pasivní, oddané a sférou jejich působení je jejich domov. Na druhou stranu, tyto hrdinky, jak je Louisa zobrazuje, jsou ale často ambiciózními ženami a dobrými herečkami, které si jsou velmi dobře vědomy ctností, které společnost cení, a dokážou tyto ctnosti využít ve svůj prospěch. Tím, že předstírají, že jsou přesně takové ženy, jaké společnost vyžaduje, dosáhnou snadno svého cíle, získají majetek, nezávislost a moc. Louisa ale tyto ženy ve své próze neodsuzuje, naopak je zobrazuje s jistým pochopením. Tyto ženy nejsou v jádru špatné, jsou dohnány společenskými konvencemi a omezeními k jednání, díky kterému jediné mohou dosáhnout svého cíle.

Fakt, že Louisa pomocí svých hrdinek kritizuje společenské postavení žen, je popírán v momentě, kdy Louisa na konci svých příběhů své hrdinky za jejich manipulující chování potrestá, aby tak znovu nastolila morální pořádek.

V *Malých ženách*, jak se na první pohled může zdát, jsou hrdinky vyobrazeny jako velmi konvenční, snad jen s výjimkou Jo, ale i Meg a Amy mají své nekonvenční momenty. Meg se rozhodne, i přes nesouhlas bohaté tety, provdat se za muže bez prostředků a později ho dokonce požádá o pomoc při péči o děti, což bylo považováno za nepřípustné. Domácí práce včetně péče o děti byly doménou žen, jejich jedinou a hlavní povinností, kterou musely zvládnout.

Někteří kritici tvrdí, že v postavě Amy, Louisa dovedla k dokonalosti manipulující „herečky“ z jejích napínavých příběhů. Amy si je velmi dobře vědoma jaké chování je od ní očekáváno a nedělá jí žádné potíže chovat se podle těchto očekávání. Působí proto velmi příjemným dojmem a lidé jí rádi splní každé její přání. Amy ví jak se obléknout, postavit, chovat, aby udělala ten nejlepší dojem dosáhla tak svého největšího cíle, bohatství a společenského postavení. Není tedy ženou

omezovanou konvencemi, ale ženou, která dokáže využít konvencí ke svému prospěchu.

Na druhou stranu, Jo, která je v první části knihy zobrazována jako velmi netradiční, bouřící se proti konvencím se na konci knihy smiřuje se svým osudem a přijímá tradiční postavení ženy, manželky a matky. Opouští svou ambici a sen stát se spisovatelkou. Nicméně, fakt, že s rodinou získává také zaměstnání, a tím se sféra jejího působení neomezí pouze na péči o domov a rodinu ji opět posouvá za hranice tradiční ženské sféry.

Louisa May Alcottová může být do jisté míry považována za předchůdkyni myšlenek ženského hnutí, jelikož, přestože je mnoho jejích hrdinek zobrazeno konvenčně, jsou v jejím díle zachycena omezení týkající se takzvané ženské sféry a způsoby, jakými se ženy proti těmto omezením bránily. Louisa poukázala na fakt, že ambice a schopnosti mnoha žen sahají za hranice sféry, kterou jim společnost vymezila. Ona sama se po celý svůj život potýkala se společenskými zvyklostmi, které vyžadovaly, aby byla řádnou ženou, zatímco Louisa byla impulsivní, tvrdohlavá a prostořeká. Vše co by řádná žena být neměla. Louisa se nikdy nestala „malou ženou“, jak její otec a společnost vyžadovali.

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Název práce	Postavení žen v próze L. M. Alcottové
Autor práce	Hana Štráchalová
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Vedoucí práce	Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D.
Anotace	<p>Cílem této práce je zanalyzovat zvolenou prózu Louisy May Alcottové, především románu <i>Malé ženy</i> na pozadí historicky-kulturního kontextu a specifik autorčina rodinného zázemí.</p> <p>Práce bude zaměřena především na způsob, jakým Alcottová zachycuje své ženské postavy a nakolik jsou tyto hrdinky zobrazeny konvenčně, podle ideálů ženství devatenáctého století a nakolik je ve svých názorech Alcottová k těmto ideálům kritická.</p>
Klíčová slova	Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, <i>Malé ženy</i> , ženská otázka, ženy v 19.století, feminismus, Kult pravého ženství, Hnutí za ženská práva

FORMULÁŘ PRO ZPŘÍSTUPNĚNÍ PRÁCE V ELEKTRONICKÉ FORMĚ – ČESKY

Typ dokumentu	<i>diplomová práce</i>		
Autor	Štráchalová, Hana		
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Název závěrečné práce	<i>Postavení žen v próze L. M. Alcottové</i>		
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Vedoucí práce, školitelé	Mgr. Šárka Bubíková Ph.D., vedoucí práce		
Klíčová slova	<i>Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Malé ženy, ženská otázka, ženy v 19.století, feminismus, Kult pravého ženství, Hnutí za ženská práva</i>		
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Označení rozsahu zpřístupnění	1/ <i>souhlasím se zveřejněním celé práce</i> 2/ <i>souhlasím se zveřejněním celé práce až od data ...</i> 3/ <i>souhlasím se zveřejněním pouze souboru yyy.pdf</i>	Datum:	Podpis autora:
Abstrakt	<p><i>Cílem této práce je zanalyzovat zvolenou prózu Louisy May Alcottové, především románu Malé ženy na pozadí historicky-kulturního kontextu a specifik autorčina rodinného zázemí.</i></p> <p><i>Práce bude zaměřena především na způsob, jakým Alcottová zachycuje své ženské postavy a nakolik jsou tyto hrdinky zobrazeny konvenčně, podle ideálů ženství devatenáctého století a nakolik je ve svých názorech Alcottová k těmto ideálům kritická.</i></p>		
Název souboru	<i>xxx.pdf</i>	Velikost souboru	254 Kb