

19TH CENTURY GIRLS' LITERATURE:
STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT OR LIMITATION?

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Anna Szabo, B.A.

Georgetown University
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Anna Szabo, B.A.

Mentor: Michael Collins, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Domestic fiction is a genre of novels that were for girls and young women in the 19th century and revealed the dominant culture in America under which they were written. These novels usually involved sentimental plots and were written mostly by, for and about women. They have been criticized for legitimizing society's restrictive standards for women and reinforcing gender-roles rather than making an effort to change them. This thesis will consider whether 19th century girls' literature reinforced society's limitations for girls or empowered girls to live a more self-fulfilling life within society's standards.

First, this thesis describes the history of children's literature as a genre in America, by looking at its origins and evolution from the colonial period up to the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. It then explains the emergence of the domestic novel and

outlines the specific conventions that define it. To gain a deeper knowledge into the lives of the readers of Alcott and other writers of domestic fiction, this thesis shows the typical life of a 19th century (middle class) American girl, her girlhood, teen years, and both the life of a wedded and single young woman, as she is the intended audience for the domestic novel. Then this thesis analyzes the influence of two major writers in the domestic fiction genre, Martha Finley and Elizabeth Wetherell and then introduces the works of Louisa May Alcott, in particular the *Little Women* series. IT is then examined as to whether the stories sent a message of empowerment or constraint to girls and young women. Finally, this thesis will conclude, that based on my research and analysis, that although 19th century girls' literature did in some instances reinforce society's limitations for girls, in general it also empowered girls to live a more self-fulfilling life within society's standards.

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Thank you to my mother who supported me throughout the entire process, and who gave me *Little Women* when I was a little woman.

I learned to love literature because of you, Mama.

INTRODUCTION

No one would argue that the children's literature of today does not have an influence over the girls and boys who read it. But modern children have many things that potentially influence them- television, radio, the internet, cell phone technology, advertising, and myriad other types of social communication that affect their perspectives and attitudes. In the nineteenth century there were far fewer influences on children's lives. They had their family, their school, their church, and they had novels written specifically for them. For the boys there were adventure novels, westerns, "Dime" novels, and religious books. For girls, there was the "domestic" novel. These novels were read both by girls and to girls by other members of the family. Since these books were one of the few ways girls had to imagine a life other than their own, they must have had a great impact on how the girls saw themselves both personally and in society.

The writers of nineteenth century domestic fiction were women. For any woman to be a writer was a new concept, and women writers were limited as to which genre they could work within. Because many of these early writers of domestic

fiction were supporting themselves and their families, they were also constricted by the expectations of the society for which they wrote. If their books were considered unseemly, no one would buy them for their young girls. For this and many other reasons, it was unusual for a writer of domestic fiction to allow her characters to step outside the boundaries of society's very restrictive standards for female behavior. And yet, some of them, most notably Louisa May Alcott, did seem to subtly navigate outside the expected stereotypes. These early writers of domestic fiction for young girls did not simply reinforce the social limitations and behavioral expectations for the younger generation, they somehow often managed to empower their young female readers to reach outside their limited social structures and grow stronger emotionally.

Domestic literature of this period was notable for its sentimentality, its overly dramatic scenes, and the predictability of the plot lines. Many of the main female characters were weepy (hence the genre descriptor "the language of tears") and thought only about the day they would marry. For a woman to be single was a tragedy, although many of the female writers of the genre were in

fact single women. The genre was innovative in that prior to it in America there was virtually no children's literature for girls except for religious tracts, catechisms, and instructional books. It was thought to be unnecessary to educate women only to teach them moral behavior. Yet the readers of these domestic novels were obviously literate and primarily female. The novels often dealt with issues of class, yet it would be difficult to make a case that they were in any way trying to attack the class system.

Domestic fiction as a genre has gone through various permutations of criticism. At the time in which it was written, domestic fiction for children was considered the perfect means in which to teach children, and particularly young girls, how they ought to behave. It taught them to be obedient, pious, respectful and educated. Early domestic literature was didactic and overly sentimental with characters that were unrealistic and woodenly drawn. However, with the publication of *Little Women* in 1863, Louisa May Alcott brought literary merit to domestic literature and also changed what it meant to be a girl in the Victorian age and for decades to come.

Louisa May Alcott is by far the shining star that

emerged from the genre of nineteenth century domestic fiction. Her novels are famous to this day. Such works as *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys* have been read by generation after generation. In our day they seem quaint and anachronistic, but still the characters touch the reader. At different times her novels have been hailed, critiqued, reviled, and torn apart for underlying meanings. A critical examination of her works reveals, that though it was written within the limiting genre of domestic fiction, Alcott's *Little Women* series taught girls a different lesson. It is clear that her novels had quite an impact on the girls of her generation and on writers both of her own generation and generations thereafter.

Because of the vast popularity of the genre, it is undeniable that the domestic novel of the nineteenth century had an effect on its readers, the little girls who read it, the mothers who read it to them, the siblings and even the fathers who were sometimes listeners as part of the family's pastime. But was this effect a positive effect in terms of the development of women's rights, women's issues of self esteem, and the expansion of women's positions in the American social structure? The chapters that follow will try

to answer this question.

CHAPTER 1:

WOMEN AND GIRLS' ROLES IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA

The mid-nineteenth-century girl spent most of her time in the company of women. In particular, middle-class girls spent time with their mothers, sisters and any female servant or nanny that may have lived with them. Their core experience was that of a feminine community in which domesticity and their future domestic role was the central theme. There was very little interaction with boys, as often girls were educated in single-sex schools and their brothers were encouraged to socialize with other boys and play outside. Girls were seen as physically inferior and too delicate to play the way that boys did and were encouraged to play inside, thus sending a subtle message that their sphere was inside the home. Girls also typically had little interaction with their fathers. From the middle to late nineteenth century, a large percentage of men were involved in the Civil War and were away from home. Girls were given little to no support from any male figures and it has been posited that "part of the message young women were given was that the sexes were so different from each other that communication and mutual understanding

were rare between women and men.”¹ In fact, in the late nineteenth century, there were very few men as a result of the mass casualties from the war though it lasted only four years. The circumstance of war and women being left to care for the family made the female community even more tightly knit, particularly in the face of injury and death of male household figures, both fathers and elder sons. For this reason girls were also given a heftier responsibility in terms of caring for younger siblings and taking over their mother’s chores, enabling her in turn to take on all the responsibilities of the absent or occupied father or son. Often the message sent to a daughter by her mother was that of self-sacrifice and the importance of familial duty in the face of adversity.

The domestic duties, however, were not so heavy that girls did not have time to play. In fact, much of their domestic training was in the form of play. Girls learned to sew by sewing dresses for their dolls or crocheting doilies for tea parties. Girls learned to cook by cooking small meals for themselves, their playmates and their

1. Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 67.

dolls. Their dolls, in and of themselves, were models for learning good child rearing and care taking skills. In general most girls took on a significant portion of the household responsibilities. Some mothers gave their daughters few real household chores so that they might have a time in their lives in which they were carefree.

"According to mid-century observers and late-century women who made up the daughters' generation, the female adolescent lifestyle was characterized by a certain educational experience, a great deal of leisure time for reading, parties, and courting, and the absence of domestic responsibilities. This relatively frivolous adolescence can be seen as a mother's final gift to her daughter, a gift for which the mother sacrificed."² However, this was fairly unusual. In most households, the contributions of the children were necessary and though the girls used play as a mode of learning domestic tasks, they were still counted on to contribute to the household particularly in terms of completing domestic chores.

Girls' contribution to the home was significant but their lives were not entirely made up of domestic

2. Ibid., 74.

responsibility. It was actually quite common for girls to be as well educated as their brothers and to be accomplished in what was considered more genteel talents such as music and art as well. For the lower and middle classes, common or public schools were available (although not yet mandatory) as well as small private schools. Girls were most often educated from the age of six to the age of fourteen or fifteen. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, higher education was also available, though sparsely attended. The most common type of school to which middle-class girls went was a small, private, single-sex school run by a single-woman or man. Some girls attended college for a year and then became teachers; however, it was expected that after a year or two of teaching, a girl would then marry and retire from teaching. Often the teachers were not much older than the students they taught. A fourteen-year-old student might easily have a sixteen-year-old teacher. By the late nineteenth century, education itself had become a feminine occupation in which the women who had been previously thought intellectually inferior and unnecessary to educate were educating the boys

and young men who were expected to become the future intelligentsia and leaders of the community.

The course of study for girls was surprisingly rigorous. Although girls were not encouraged as fervently as boys were, the curriculum was just as challenging. In the diary of a ten-year old girl living in 1849 the rules of her school were recorded, and it was strongly asserted that all young ladies were expected to be punctual and neat and to not fail in *any* lessons.³ In reading the diary of this ten-year old girl, one can see in her writing the superior education she had received. The quality and precision of her writing would be considered remarkable for a ten-year-old of today.

Despite their sometimes admirable educational prowess, women were still subtly and sometimes not so subtly discouraged from pursuing a rigorous education, as it would interfere with their domestic duties. An article entitled "Female Education" published in *The Mother's Magazine* in July of 1848 encouraged mothers to limit the time their daughters spent in the classroom. They argued that "such

3. Catherine Elizabeth Havens, *Diary of a Little Girl in Old New York* (Second Edition, New York: Henry Collins Brown, 1920), 151-154.

accomplishments as usually become obsolete soon after their marriage, have engrossed too much of the time and instruction of their parents and teachers." The article goes further and says that girls should focus more on their domestic duties:

. . .let her seek a thorough practical understanding of those principals of which she may as a wife, mother, and housekeeper, be called to make daily use.

We are advocates for a thorough scientific education; but at the same time, for an education for the ordinary, every-day duties of life- for those duties which females, as wives, daughters, and mothers, will be called upon to perform. The piano, and the brush, should never take the place of the needle- nay, even of the broom or the rolling pin.

Another writer of that time used a physiological argument in an article entitled "Confinement of Children in School" printed in *The Mother's Assistant* in 1845. The writer felt that children should not be "confined" in school for more than four hours because "young children cannot maintain a purpose a long time, nor an effort a long time, without fatigue... for their muscles require more frequent alternations...than those of adults." As it was, mothers could not afford their children, particularly their daughters, coming home tired since they were expected to

continue their domestic education upon completion of their common education. To mothers, the domestic education had to take precedence so that their daughter could be aptly prepared for their inevitable future as a wife and mother.

Before the nineteenth century, marriages were arranged based on economic necessity and parental choice, especially in middle and upper class society New England. The nineteenth century ushered in a new age in which companionate marriage, or partnership based on love and respect, became the norm. Of course, the man was expected to propose and the woman was expected to accept. The women's limited role in this arrangement was lamented by one young woman who explained, "true we have the liberty of refusing those we don't like, but not of selecting those we do." Although there were no more arranged marriages in reality marriage remained an economic arrangement with clearly defined roles for both men and women.⁴ The man was the bread-winner and the woman was essentially a domestic employee.

4. Tiffany K. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 4.

This was especially true in middle and upper class families. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of families that were not reliant on farming as their sole income. Women were no longer expected to work outside of the home in agricultural labor and fewer children were needed to help run the household. It was also no longer necessary to marry off daughters as soon as possible to make room for sons' families and to lighten the burden of feeding so many people. Women, girls, were marrying later. No longer were girls getting married at sixteen or seventeen. In the North, women delayed marriage into their early and mid 20's and were having fewer children. As a result, the birthrate dropped and women spent more of their time and energy on child rearing and on developing skills as efficient housekeepers⁵.

By the 1830's an entire literary genre had developed to instruct middle-class white women in their proper roles and duties within the home. Several women's magazines and instructional pamphlets began to be the primary influence on how women defined their role in the household. Women

5. Ibid., 3.

were not simply responsible for the household, as indeed they always had been, but child rearing, housekeeping, and domesticity became seen as a separate "job" within the new economy.⁶ Women became "workers" in their household and under the unofficial employ of their husband.

Ladies' magazines for the most part emphasized the importance of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Samuel Jennings in *The Married Lady's Companion* asserted that "marriage rests on a condition of a loving and cheerful submission on the part of the wife," and reminded women that "when you became a wife, [your husband] became your head, and your supposed superiority was buried in that voluntary act."⁷ Although there were various forms of social reform afoot (industrialization, abolitionism, suffrage, and women's rights), the "true" American woman was one who stayed at home, took care of her family and bent to the will of her husband. The reasoning for the role of the woman as subordinate was founded in the Bible in Ephesians 5:22-21 that commanded "Wives, submit

6. Ibid., 3.

7. Dr. Samuel K. Jennings, *The Married Lady's Companion or Poor Man's Friend*, 1808. National Humanities Center, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/equality/text4/jennin gs.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2008).

yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the family, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body."⁸

Marriage was inevitable except for a choice few, and even at a young age, girls expected to be married and have children. There was very little aspiration for a career or an independent life. In her diary the ten-year-old Catherine Elizabeth Havens she wrote, "I expect I shall marry somebody by the time I am eighteen, for I don't intend to be an old maid."⁹ Unfortunately, upon marriage, women gave up almost all of their few legal rights. American society and particularly the legal system were predominantly designed for men. Legally, women were strictly dependent and unequal. American law followed eighteenth century English law in which it was asserted that "by marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being and legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage."¹⁰ Husbands had a right

8. Barbara Welter. *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), 37-38.

9. Havens, *Diary of a Little Girl in Old New York*, 144.

10. English jurist William Blackstone's *1765 Commentaries on the Law of England* cited in Pauline E. Schlosser, *The Fair Sex: White Women*

to both the person and the property of the wife, including that which the wife owned and maintained prior to the marriage.

It was not until 1848 that married women were given any right to their own property anywhere. New York was the first state to enact a progressive reform for married women in the form of the 1848 Married Women's Property Act. The statute allowed for women to own property and that even upon her marriage, such property would not be subject to the "sole disposal of her husband, nor be liable for his debts, and shall continue in her sole and separate property, as if she were a single female."¹¹ A married woman would also be allowed to take inheritance or any type of bequest from any person and hold it for her own and separate use and it too would not be subject to any of her husband's debts. This statute became the model that the rest of the United States adopted throughout the rest of the century.¹²

and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 30.

11. Jone Johnson Lewis, *Married Women's Property Act: 1848, New York State, Gains in Women's Property Rights During the 19th Century*, http://womenshistory.about.com/od/marriedwomensproperty/a/property_1848.ny.htm (accessed May 29, 2008).

12. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America*, 18.

Although women had rights in regard to property, women had few rights in almost every other sphere. Women did not have the right to execute a will, enter into a contract or sue in court without her husband's consent. Furthermore, children officially belonged to the woman's husband (though he probably had little to do with raising them), and he could theoretically dispense with them as he pleased in his will. Though it was possible to ask for a divorce, it was not in the best interest of the woman to do so. A woman would probably be living in a home that her husband purchased and would therefore be homeless upon a divorce. Without a home or ability to get a job that would pay enough to support herself, let alone her children, it was practically unfeasible to divorce.¹³ Divorces were also only granted in extreme situations such as proven adultery, physical abuse or desertion. An unhappy match or an emotionally absent husband or father was not enough to warrant a breaking of the marital contract. As a result, divorces were rare. Prior to the Civil War there were only

13. Edward Pessen. *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1978), 49.

1.2 divorces of every 1,000 marriages and by 1900 still only 4 divorces for every 1,000 marriages.¹⁴

Before 1800 a single woman was an unusual phenomenon. But the nineteenth century saw a trend of an increasing percentage of unmarried women. Between 1835 and 1838, 7.3 percent of women remained unmarried and there was a slight rise to 8.0 percent unmarried women between 1845 and 1849. And then between the 1870s and 1880s the percentage rose to nearly 11 percent, the highest percent of never-married women in American history.¹⁵

This rise in "single blessedness" was initially a decision of young women who were fearful of marriage and motherhood or simply disinterested in the choice of men. After the Civil War, spinster-hood was less of a choice and more of a necessity as the population of men was diminished with nearly 620,000 men killed during the war.¹⁶

Single women were most likely to be of the middle or upper class, white and native-born, with some formal

14. S. J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830-1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 141.

15. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America*, 8.

16. John W. Chambers, II, ed. in chief, *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 849.

education. By mid-century, the population of unmarried women insisted that being single made it so that they were better able to devote themselves, both physically and emotionally, to the needs of others, including society at large. Being single was, to their way of thinking, not a selfish choice but rather a selfless one.

Still, being single in the nineteenth century was not easy. The American economic structure did not offer women a comfortable place to live outside of marriage.¹⁷ There were very few opportunities for a woman to earn wages. She could become a teacher in female education or elementary education, or serve in the domestic sphere as a servant or governess in another's household or that of her relatives. Most unmarried women retained these care-taking roles within their parent's home or in the home of their adult siblings. In either case, these women were not the carefree, independent women that married women made them out to be. Clementine Smith of Pennsylvania complained "that even in a state of single blessedness when ladies are supposed to have their own way they are not always without constraint . . . Spinsters are no more independent than

17. Wayne, *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America*, 30.

married people, if they are as much so indeed."¹⁸ Escaping the role as a domestic was near impossible.

The option of working outside of the domestic sphere was bleak indeed, and few middle class unmarried women would deign to work in a textile mill. With the new influx of immigrants, lower class girls from families with an overabundance of children or ones that had lost the male wage earner generally took jobs in mills or factories. And, of course, these jobs did not give young women independence. The wages that they earned were often needed to support the family-- her mother and younger siblings.

In rare cases women were able to earn a living by their pen. Louisa May Alcott, one of the few women authors who remained unmarried, saw the personal costs of marriage as being too high. She explained in 1868 that "the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called Mrs. instead of Miss," revealing the concept that the new single woman need not be pitied, as women such as Alcott were quite "happy in their choice."¹⁹

18. Ibid., 7-8.

19. Ibid., 6.

Also, beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, some women's rights activists began to avoid marriage, either out of principle or sometimes out of necessity in order to continue their reform work. Susan B. Anthony, for example, was never married and was bothered at times that her close friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was kept from the cause by her marriage and by the care of seven children. Anthony asserted that "as long as marriage and motherhood went hand-in-hand, and as long as women were unable to completely control the number and spacing of births, marriage was seen as too confining for women who wanted to pursue other paths."²⁰

Another option for women who chose to forego marriage and childbirth was to establish relationships with other women. This arrangement was called a "Boston marriage" and was usually between two white, middle or upper middle class women who established a long-term domestic partnership and shared financial responsibilities. They were able to do this either because one or both of them had an inheritance off which they could live comfortably or they had a career. The careered woman would almost have to be single because

20. Ibid., 16.

of the expectations of the typical nineteenth century man, who would not want his wife to focus on anything other than their home and family. In a culture where traditionally married women had close emotional relationships with other women, Boston marriages were rarely criticized for being sexually immoral. If ever they were criticized, it was for the participants being feminist-minded reformers or for forgoing the traditional role of wife and mother.²¹ Though it became more common during this period to be a single woman, essentially the choice a woman had to make was between marriage and career, and that career was most likely to be that of a domestic.

21. Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109.

CHAPTER 2:

HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FROM 1620-1850

One can look at the literature of any society and learn almost everything about the people who live in it. Children's literature is much the same, but it tells the story of children and the expectations that their society impressed upon them. The history of American children's literature has revealed how girls and boys were expected to behave and what was important to American society at a specific time.

The aim of American children's literature has always been threefold: to teach basic reading skills, to engage the mind or imagination, and to instill the morals and beliefs of society. American children's literature began at a very simple, primitive level and developed slowly. Just as the colonies themselves evolved and grew, so did the literature they gave to their children to read. America's domestic literature genre of the nineteenth century shows clear evidence of its origins.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century children could expect little in the way of printed material, even less so, printed material aimed towards

children. Children would occasionally be able to see a copy of *King Arthur* (published as *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1634), or current fiction written for adults with themes suitable for children such as *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). However, in general children in colonial America were much more likely to see the so-called "courtesy literature" that was imported from England.¹ These texts were essentially advice literature which helped to prepare children for genteel society and indoctrinate them into Protestant theology, with titles such as *The School of Good Manners; A Father's Legacy to His Daughters; The Lady's Gift, or Advice to a Daughter; Principles of Politeness; or Compleat Gentleman*. Because they were imported from England, procuring these books was oftentimes difficult and quite expensive. The most common book for a child to learn from was the Bible. But although the Bible does have fairly simple stories, it was a difficult vehicle from which to learn basic literacy skills.

1. Gail Schmunk Murray, *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 4.

The first definitive children's works produced in the American colonies were the primers and catechisms of the various separatist groups that settled around Massachusetts Bay. The first and most popular children's book was written by Reverend John Cotton entitled *Milk for Boston Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments. Chiefly, for the Spirituall Nourishment of Boston Babes in Either England: But May Be of Like Use for Any Children (1646)*. John Cotton's *Milk for Babes* (also known as *Spiritual Milk for Babes*), a beginning catechism for primary school-aged children and young Puritans, was first published in the 1640s and remained in print continuously for over two-hundred years.² In a series of sixty-four questions and answers, it rehearses sin and the law, the Ten Commandments, the role of the Church, the nature of grace, the covenant, salvation, the sacraments, and the last judgment.³ *Milk for Babes* was not a tool for teaching

2. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 4-5.

3. John Cotton, *Milk for Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments. Chiefly, for the Spirituall Nourishment of Boston Babes in Either England: But May Be of Like Use for Any Children (1646)*, ed. Paul Royster, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/18/> (accessed July 1, 2008).

literacy but rather one for teaching moral and religious values of the newly established Puritan societies.

The role of instructional texts in literacy was filled by the widely popular *New England Primer*, published sometime between 1688 and 1690. *The New England Primer* varied somewhat across time and region, however there was standard content for beginning reading instruction including teaching the alphabet, vowels, consonants, double letters and the English syllabary. The work contained religious maxims, catechisms, and moral lessons. Many of its selections were drawn from the King James Bible while others were original. Between 1690 and 1701, *Milk for Babes* was first incorporated into *The New-England Primer*, and the combined volume remained an essential component of that work and an integral part of American religious education for the next 150 years. These early works for children embodied the dominant Puritan attitude and worldview of the day and focused on topics relevant to the society, such as respect for parental figures, sin, and salvation.⁴

As a result of the popularity of catechisms and primers, there evolved more secular books, stories that

4. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 9-12.

were designed to entertain as well as teach. The most influential figure in early American children's literature was Englishman John Newberry. Inspired by philosopher John Locke's very successful work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Newberry believed that children could learn best through delight and entertainment.⁵ His works were an amalgamation of information and games, including riddles and advice on a proper diet, but its primary message was for children to learn their lessons so that they might become successful and affluent members of society. Most of his stories concerned a pious and virtuous orphan who works and is industrious and therefore eventually becomes prosperous. Newberry envisions the world as a meritocracy where a child rises or falls based on his or her good behavior and piety. In the burgeoning colonial society, both children and parents could identify with the characters that worked hard and were rewarded for their work ethic. Colonials thought of themselves as upwardly mobile and found Newberry's characters to be a good example of how industriousness could lead to middle-class rewards.⁶

5. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 15.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

It was not for several decades that there emerged any American children's authors that were nearly as popular as John Newberry. The next wave of popular authors was that of British women writers who wrote similarly to Newberry, but with a much softer tone. Authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Mary Butt Sherwood and Sarah Trimmer infused their stories with Protestant maxims and moral dictates.⁷ Their characters were placed in a more domestic setting and were unrealistically well-mannered and reverent. The stories were meant to be read aloud in a family, as this was the practice of genteel middle-class society, and used as a tool for teaching literacy. The stories not only taught reading skills but also the value of education. The influence of these female British authors was paramount in the development of American children's literature. Though these books were far from secular works, they were not exclusively Puritan in their religious message. Rather, they imparted moral lessons and defined behavioral principles by having their characters make choices that illustrated their ethical character. The trend of using children's literature for the sole purpose of inculcating

7. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 20.

religious doctrine came to an end with the early domestic works of British female authors.

After the Revolutionary War, children's literature began to focus on American nationalism and teaching children the value of their newly formed republican government. There was more emphasis on the importance of education, particularly education of girls, for they would become the future mothers of sons who would participate in the new democracy. Educators wanted girls to be "properly steeped in republican virtues and moral principles," which meant that their education would have to exceed the realm of purely domestic duty.⁸

It was Noah Webster (of the popular *Webster's Dictionary*) who began to write books aimed at children that would help literacy skills but also would be instructive in republican virtues and morals. Webster's most widely sold book, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, also known simply as the "Blue-Backed Speller," was made to teach children based on their age and ability even more complex skills. Webster thought the *Speller* should be simple and give an orderly presentation of words and the

8. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 27.

rules of spelling and pronunciation.⁹ In this work (and the subsequent editions) he introduced students to American history, American spelling and also the usual moral lessons and proper behavior. Drawing on the work of John Cotton's *Milk for Babes*, Webster also wrote *The Little Reader's Assistant* (1790) in the form of a "federal catechism" that taught children the principals of republican government and the important roles of the founding fathers.

Samuel Goodrich, who wrote under the pen name Peter Parley, followed the lead of Noah Webster and wrote works for children that would instruct about American history while instilling the importance of virtuous behavior. With titles such as *Tales of Peter Parley about America* and *Stories about Captain John Smith*, Goodrich sought to explain important historical events and describe American landmarks in direct, simple language while still highlighting moral principles.¹⁰ He voiced his disdain for fairy tales, fantasy and folklore and felt that his works would aid in early learning achievement and the moral exactitude of children.

9. Joseph J. Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), Chapter 6.

Fairy tales were not popular in American children's literature. This is mostly because they were not available, but also because many Americans believed them to be inappropriate for their children. Charles Perrault (b.1628- d.1703), the Frenchman, who wrote popular versions of such well known tales as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* was hardly known at all in America. This was mostly because he lived during a time in which the colonies had very little contact with foreigners, particularly the French, but also because they did not receive much, if any, written material that was not published in England or written in English. The Brothers Grimm, who lived from 1785 to 1863 and authored tales including *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* and *Hansel and Gretel*, wrote during a time in which the American Puritan community was influenced by the rational childhood model of Locke and Newberry. Many religious American parents and educators associated such fairy-tales with the uneducated and unsophisticated and felt they belonged to a

10. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 33.

peasant culture.¹¹ Educated parents in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were the ones who could afford works of literature for their children but at the same thought that it was not beneficial to their children's education, which they wanted focused on being rational and well-informed.

The works of Dutchman Hans Christian Andersen (b. 1805- d.1875), including *The Snow Queen*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Thumbelina* and *The Ugly Duckling* were translated and published in America in the 1840's. Andersen's tales were strongly infused with moral reflection, which was very much to Victorian taste, and were quite popular in England. However, publishers in America were reluctant to publish much in the way of fairy-tales for fear of offending and alienating those with strict views.¹² Moreover, Andersen's fairy-tales were overshadowed by the popularity of American dime novels and the evolving genre of domestic literature for girls and thus did not attain great popularity in the United States.

The immense popularity of Samuel Goodrich's works, along with the lingering popularity of the British female

11. Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books 1621-1922* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Univeristy Press, 1994), 61.

authors, inspired American female writers to carve their own niche in the thriving market for children's literature. Authors like Catharine Sedgwick and Lydia Sigourney combined moral story telling with the early eighteenth century advice or "courtesy literature." Their stories were still predicated on Locke and Newberry's moralistic childhood model in which good behavior begot rewards while naughty children "got lost in the woods, drowned, were attacked by wild animals, or fell ill."¹³ The books that were aimed at girls described the "perfect wife and mother" who was always attentive to her children, kept a neat and well-run household and catered to her hardworking husband's needs. Their works would inspire the next genre of children's literature, Sunday school literature.

Between 1790 and 1840 the second Great Awakening, a widespread religious revival, hit America and Sunday schools became an influential forum for education. The spirit of nationalism contributed to a growing demand for a Sunday school organization on a *national* level. Sunday school leaders felt it important to educate children who

12. Avery, *Behold the Child*, 123-124.

13. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 34.

were too poor or too busy working to receive a traditional education. Attaining literacy became an important feature in Sunday schools. Soon a genre of children's literature emerged--Sunday school literature. Like previous works for children, Sunday school literature focused on morality and Protestant values. The stories upheld the acceptable gender distinction in early nineteenth century America. Boys were very active and adventurous and learned their lessons through the honest mistakes they made. Girls involved themselves in domestic tasks, played games that would reflect their future role in the family (as housekeeper and mother) and usually exhibited concern for others without having to learn a lesson first.¹⁴ These stories were taught in the Sunday school classroom and did

The two most popular writers of Sunday school literature were Lydia Child and Jacob Abbott. They made didactic fiction (like that of Maria Edgeworth and Catharine Sedgwick) more engaging with expanded story lines and sympathetic child characters.¹⁵ Through his series of books (from 1834-1843), Jacob Abbott's character "Rollo"

14. Mary Lystad, *At Home in America as Seen through Its Books for Children* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing, 1984), 9.

developed morally, physically and intellectually. Abbott put Rollo into predicaments that middle-class nineteenth century children might encounter and through his own personal failures and mistakes taught children how they could have acted better. Abbott eventually authored over 100 fictional titles with both male and female protagonists. Though Abbott allowed his male characters to make immoral decisions (from which they of course learned a valuable lesson), his female characters seldom make improper moral choices, though they may have been tempted to do so. Boys were given more leeway to make mistakes, while girls seemed not capable of acting immorally. Sunday school literature reflected American society's attitude that women, though still the weaker sex, had some sort of moral superiority. This theme was challenged by the subsequent women authors whose female characters were allowed to make poor decisions and get into "scrapes." These were the authors of the domestic novel.

15. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 38.

CHAPTER 3:

DOMESTIC FICTION

Sometimes called "sentimental fiction" or "woman's fiction," "domestic fiction" refers to a type of novel popular with women and girls during the middle of the nineteenth century. The domestic fiction genre evolved from Sunday school literature and drew heavily on its theology. However, instead of simply imparting information through perfect children, domestic fiction emphasized girls that leaned a moral and religious message through their failures. Domestic fiction began with didactic writers such as Catharine Sedgwick and her *New-England Tale* (1822) who were influenced by the Second Great Awakening. Domestic fiction gained widespread popularity with Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, and eventually the genre evolved to include writers such as Louisa May Alcott and her *Little Women* series, whose literary style was less didactic in tone and considerably more literary. Domestic fiction for children remained a dominant fictional type into the early 20th century with popular works such as Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) and Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913). In their reliance on the

inherent goodness of human nature and the power of feelings as a guide to right conduct, these novels were in part a reaction against Calvinistic doctrines that viewed humanity as inherently depraved and children as the corrupted products of original sin.¹ In the domestic fiction novel, children, namely girls, were considered to embody more of God's grace than adults did, because adults had a longer association with the tainted, sinful world.

The basic plot of domestic fiction involved the story of a young girl, oftentimes a newly orphaned girl, who was deprived of the supports she had depended on to sustain her throughout life and is then faced with the necessity of making her own way in the world. At the outset she takes herself very lightly, has no ego, or a damaged one, and looks to the world, particularly her mother, to coddle and protect her. To some extent her expectations are reasonable. She thinks that her guardians will always nurture her and protect her, but then she becomes painfully acquainted with the real world. She sees a world in which she is not immune to pain, loss, and hardship, a world

1. Gail Schmunk Murray, *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 53.

filled with less than pious people. But the failure of the world to satisfy either reasonable or unreasonable expectations awakens the young girl to inner possibilities, in particular her own spirituality and her inherently good nature. By the novel's end she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth and has made an ultimate Christian realization; that everything in life, even the bad things, is caused by God and leads to something good, especially in the spiritual sense.

Although many of the authors came from privileged backgrounds, their heroines found their virtue tested by suffering a drop in social status or geographical location (the big city to the less glamorous rural areas), or in being misunderstood by family and friends.² The young woman served as the catalyst for character improvement and would ultimately influence those around her to become as virtuous as herself. In the domestic novel, the child's inherent good nature served as an instrument of reformation for society at large.

Anne Scott McLeod, a preeminent scholar on children's literature, states that there was a definitive shift in the

2. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 55.

domestic novel from the early nineteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the child was a rational, sober and imperfect being for whom the parent's role as moral instructor was decisive³: children served as "apprentices to moral perfection, not as examples to it".⁴ However this changed in the early 1850's wherein the child became the force for moral change and, rather than being influenced, found herself influencing her elders, making them morally aware and accountable and often inspiring a Christian moment of revelation. McLeod believes that this shift served as a form of social protest, to arouse public concern for the children of the increasing population of indigent immigrants. Between 1845 and 1855, the percentage of the immigrant population in New York increased from one-third to one-half⁵ and in 1850, New York's Chief of Police estimated that 3,000 vagrant children lived in the street and were forced to beg or

3. Anne Scott MacLeod, "The Children of Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Children's Literature (Spring 1992): 142.

4. MacLeod, "the Children of Children's Literature," 143.

5. Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 24.

steal to survive.⁶ Domestic novels, as a result, often featured children who had at some point endured poverty and were saved by the generosity of a well-to-do benefactor and his Christian imperative to save. The domestic novel became not only a reflection of social conditions, but also a vehicle to inspire generosity and reinforce the importance of the Christian precept of charity. Children's literature, accordingly, evolved a tone of sentimentality and a theme of rescuing innocent, pious and unfairly victimized children.

As the term "domestic fiction" implies, this literature showed the home and the family as the best context for the character building and moral reformation that the girl would undergo and disseminate to society at large. In the novels girls usually served as the superior moral force, guiding others to a reformation of their character through devotion, charity, prayer and a copious amount of tears.⁷ This genre drew heavily on the Sunday school movement and embodied children with the ability to transform and save those around them. However, unlike the

6. MacLeod, "The Children of Children's Literature," 145.

7. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 54.

early didactic stories that originally stemmed from the Sunday school movement, this domestic fiction allowed the girls to occasionally fail and engage in less than exemplary behavior. Domestic fiction embodied a worldview that took children and their role seriously, as young people who could transform and save their culture.⁸

The domestic novel almost always contains certain characteristics that seem to be requirements of the genre. Most, if not all such books of this era, contain these key components. The plot focuses on a heroine who embodies one of two types. The first is the pious angel who through her commitment to Christ is able to confront situations, places and people to which she was not previously exposed. The second is the practical girl, who has had a difficult life (ie, an impoverished orphan) but is essentially noble and good and has been given the chance to improve her circumstances through a benefactor. Either of these two characters is contrasted with the "bad" girl, one who is disrespectful, uneducated and/or lacking in Christian teachings. The heroine, through her piety and goodness, helps the "bad" girl overcome her wicked ways, often by

8. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 54.

inspiring a Christian realization. The heroine struggles for self-mastery, learning the pain of conquering her own passions through prayer and good deeds, particularly toward those who are unkind to her or are seemingly lacking in redeemable qualities.

Another component to the story line often involves the heroine suffering at the hands of abusers of power, for example, an unkind relative or adoptive parent, before establishing a network of surrogate kin or finding a benefactor. Commonly, illness, either of the heroine or a loved one, is a catalyst for either religious conversion or moral reformation.⁹

The solution to the story line is generally that the heroine must learn to control her emotions (particularly selfishness) and avoid temptations so as to be fully educated in the obligations of domesticity. The novels generally end with a marriage, usually one of two possible kinds, reforming the bad or imperfect male or marrying the solid male who already meets her qualifications.

The heroine in domestic fiction was often poised between a lower-class family exemplifying poverty and

9. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 60.

domestic disorganization and upper-class characters exemplifying an idle, frivolous existence. The middle class was represented as the most virtuous class, one that is both piously frugal and also gainfully employed and hardworking. The setting for these stories were often split between the city and the countryside. The "big city" (oftentimes New York or Boston, as most of the writers of domestic fiction were from the Northeast) was seen as being corrupt and the young girls in them as being too mature for their age and lacking in Christian morals. While the city was bustling but praetorian, the countryside is innocent although populated by undereducated yokels. Oftentimes, the heroine was from the city and was forced to move to the crass countryside or was from the countryside and was awkwardly displaced to the city. In either case, the challenge for the heroine was to be able to navigate herself in both places, maintaining both her Christian piety and her sense of middle class propriety.

The difficult situations that the heroine encounters were always met with copious amounts of weeping. Domestic fiction was known for its sentimentality and the use of a "language of tears" which evoked sympathy from the readers

and also depicted the heroine welling up at the slightest provocation. As the heroine experienced disappointment, pain, hardship and even happiness, the language of the novel, in all its sentimentality, would beg tears from the reader and describe the ever-present tears of the protagonist. In the last moments of Beth in *Little Women*, the reader was reminded for an entire chapter of Beth's patience and piety as Beth gives her last instruction to Jo. Beth says:

You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to father and mother when I'm gone. They will turn to you, don't fail them; and if it's hard work alone, remember that I don't forget you . . . for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy.

Beth's death was described as a holy event as noted below:

. . . with tears and prayers and tender hands, mother and sisters made her ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again, seeing with grateful eyes the beautiful serenity that soon replaced the pathetic patience that had wrung their hearts so long, and feeling, with reverent joy, that their darling death was a benignant angel, not a phantom full of dread.¹⁰

10. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 428.

The "language of tears" was not only used in scenes of death, but most often in scenes of Christian devotion. Within the first chapter of Martha Finley's hugely popular domestic novel, *Elsie Dinsmore*, Elsie cried for being reprimanded in class, over the guilt of her self-proclaimed "naughtiness" and for her perceived failure as a good Christian. Elsie bemoaned to the only devout lady in the household that "I'm afraid I shall never be like Jesus! Never, never . . . I have asked Him to forgive me, and I know He has; but I am so sorry, oh! so sorry that I have grieved and displeased Him; for O Miss Allison, I do love Jesus, and want to be like Him always."¹¹ In Elizabeth Wetherell's *Wide, Wide World* the heroine, Ellen Montgomery, spent several chapters crying over the departure of her mother and her own failure as a perfect Christian example and throughout the entire seven-hundred page book over all the abuses done to her and all the hardships she suffered. And at the end Ellen shed tears of joy when she was reunited with her adopted brother after a long unwanted absence; she "sat down, and bowing her head on the arm of

11. Martha Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore* (Project Gutenberg , 2004 eBook #6440), <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lstdns10.txt> (accessed August 12, 2008).

the sofa, wept with all the vehement passion of her childhood, quivering from head to foot with convulsive sobs."¹²

Though often criticized for its sentimentality and didacticism, domestic fiction provided an important function in the lives of children. It addressed the importance of obedience, respect for elders, truthfulness and Christian piety in a society that stressed Protestant evangelism. However, these stories were written during a time in which there was no equality for women and little girls were often required to be seen and not heard. Their futures were tied almost exclusively to the home, and these novels reinforced that domestic role. It is difficult to see from a modern standpoint whether these works reinforced society's limitations for girls or empowered girls to live a more self-fulfilling life within society's standards.

12. Elizabeth Wetherell, *The Wide, Wide World* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, no date given), 695.

CHAPTER 4:

THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD AND ELSIE DINSMORE

The Wide, Wide World was written by Elizabeth Wetherell, whose actual name was Susan Warner, born July 11, 1819 and died March 17, 1885. She was an American evangelical writer of religious fiction, children's fiction, and theological works. Though Warner's works were some of the most popular domestic novels written in the nineteenth century, Warner never considered her works to be novels. Rather, she described them as "stories" since novels were considered sinful and detrimental to a person's moral education. Like other female novelists Warner never married. Instead, she lived and worked with her sister, Anna Warner, who was also a popular author of children's literature and evangelical works. Susan Warner became the main wage earner as her father, Henry Warner, a lawyer, lost most of his fortune in the Panic of 1837 and in subsequent lawsuits and poor investments. The family had to leave their mansion at St. Mark's Place in New York and move to an old Revolutionary War-era farmhouse on Constitution Island, near West Point, NY. In 1849, seeing little change in their family's financial situation, Susan

and Anna started writing to earn money.¹ She was successful throughout her career, as was her sister, and she supported her family from the money from her writing. Early twentieth-century critics classified Warner's work as "sentimental" and lacking in literary value. Recently, feminist critics have rediscovered *The Wide, Wide World*, discussing it as a quintessential domestic novel and focusing on analyzing its portrayal of gender dynamics.

The Wide, Wide World is the book that first established the domestic children's literature genre, sometimes called "sentimental literature". It was published in 1850 and went through fourteen editions in only two years. It maintained its popularity throughout the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, though it lost popularity in the 1920s as an established non-domestic children's literature genre began to flourish. It is, however, one of the earliest and best examples of what was to become the most popular nineteenth century genre for children- the sentimental or domestic novel. In their book *What Katy Read*, Shirley Foster and Judy Simmons,

1. John William Cousin. *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature*. (London: J. M. Dent & sons; New York, E. P. Dutton, 1910), 213.

scholars of nineteenth century girls' literature wrote that *The Wide, Wide World* "served as bridge between the pious and dull Sunday school stories of the 1830s and the child-centered adventure stories later in the century." It created the paradigm that would dominate the family novel for the next sixty years and implemented what became the archetypal plot in which an "unprotected heroine overcomes suffering and tribulations to achieve spiritual perfection and moral maturity."² The novel painted an accurate picture of the Victorian era of the United States, which is why it gained such popularity. Readers of the mid-nineteenth century appreciated its relevancy to their own lives, and women in particular saw themselves and their situation reflected in *The Wide, Wide World's* protagonist Ellen Montgomery and the women she met throughout the story. This book and the others that followed in its footsteps were written by women and for women and not particularly for children. What made it a children's book, and specifically a girl's book, was that the main character was a young girl. It gained popularity among children since many

popular works of fiction were read aloud to the family, as this was one of the few middle-class modes of entertainment. But it was not specifically children's literature.

The Wide, Wide World begins after Ellen's happy life with her mother has been disrupted because her mother is slowly dying and her father has lost his fortune due to an unsuccessful law suit and poor investments (reminiscent of Warner's own family story). In light of these events and upon the recommendation of doctors, Ellen's parents must travel to Europe for an unknown length of time. Ellen must leave her home and pampered lifestyle in New York to live with her Aunt Fortune, the sister of her father, in the countryside. This sets the model of the genre in which a perfect orphan is left alone in the "wide, wide world" and, rather than making her own way, relies on the kindness of other pious Christians to care for her and further her religious education. Though Ellen tries to be strong for her mother's sake, she is devastated and can find little solace. It is within the first chapter that the "language

2. Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press), 37.

of tears," the defining feature of the domestic novel, is evoked as it is described that "with a wild cry [Ellen] flung her arms round her mother, and hiding her face in her lap gave way to a violent burst of grief that seemed for a few moments as if it would rend soul and body in twain."³ On Ellen's first night in her aunt's home in Thirlwall, she learns that her father did not send word to her aunt that she was coming and her aunt is none too pleased at her arrival. To make things even more miserable and tear-worthy, Aunt Fortune turns out to be the complete opposite of Ellen's mother. She is callous and unkind and shows no affection towards Ellen. Ellen has been forced into an unsympathetic place in which only the lowly and uncouth farmhand, Mr. Van Brunt, can defend Ellen from her uncaring aunt. It is not until Ellen meets a refined woman and fellow Christian, Alice Humphrey, who is reminiscent of her mother, that Ellen finds any solace in this miserable place. Alice is an idealized woman who is very pious, and unlike anyone else in the area, is an ardent churchgoer and the daughter of a minister. Ellen is "adopted" by Alice and

3. Elizabeth Wetherell, *The Wide, Wide World* (London: Thomas Nelson and Son, no date given), 12.

her brother John (who is often away at school) and receives the schooling and moral instruction that Aunt Fortune refused her. Alice and John are essentially Ellen's rescuers from her impious and unkind aunt as well as from a life of labor and ignorance both scholastically and morally. By this model, girls were instructed not to assert their own desires and needs but to wait for a fellow Christian savior to intervene, which, of course, they always did.

The Wide, Wide World set the precedent that the good and pious die an untimely yet religiously meaningful death: both Alice and Ellen's mother die a beautiful and serene death. This pattern allows other characters to recognize their own moral failures as they witness the dying one's pious acceptance of God's will. Though Aunt Fortune gets seriously ill, she is not allowed a soulful death because thematically she is not devout enough and must remain in her earthly realm, ostensibly giving her the opportunity to make a religious conversion. In fact, the reader sees the beginning of Fortune's conversion, both religiously and culturally, as she marries Mr. Van Brunt who has begun a religious conversion under the influence of Ellen. Marriage

is the only good thing that could happen to Ellen's evil aunt.

The story ends with Ellen's mother's family, who live in Scotland, discovering Ellen's existence and sending for her. Ellen is saddened to leave John, who had taken over the role of teacher and moral instructor for her after the death of his sister Alice, but feels that it is her duty to follow her family's wishes, thus reinforcing the important theme of familial duty. Ellen is disappointed to find that she does not fit in with her family in Scotland. They find her to be overly patriotic, which to them is silly and unsophisticated, and are also offended by her overt religious devotion, considering it unsuitable for a child her age. They are depicted as being snobbish and irreligious and unsympathetic to Ellen's desire to adhere to her beliefs. This attitude reflects the lingering American resentment in that most Protestants in America had fled Europe because of religious persecution. Though Ellen is grateful of their love and concern for her well-being, she wants only to return to John, who had left for Europe before she was sent off to Scotland. Typical of the domestic novel, Ellen does get her happily ever after as

John comes to her new home in Scotland and demands to see her. Though he does not take her away, he does promise that when she is older he will take her home to the United States and in the meanwhile he will continue her moral education through correspondence and frequent visits. In all editions but the first, the story ends there. However, in the first edition of *The Wide, Wide World*, the last chapter depicts Ellen and John happily married, him the minister of a church and she the complacent housewife in a lavish household enjoying the material benefits of an upper middle-class existence.

Though recent literary critics have reexamined *The Wide, Wide World* for positive feminist themes, there remains undeniable negative female stereotypes, in which the women are humbled by men, lacking in ambition, and so religiously devoted that it denies them of their own personality and point of view. The perfect woman, embodied in the character of Alice, was well educated, beautiful, humble, generous, domesticated and, moreover, pious. Any woman lacking in religion or a liberal arts education was considered provincial and in need of a religious and cultural conversion. Though just a child, Ellen is clearly

the future perfect female. She is excessively pious, educable, beautiful and submissive to both her elders and her God. Though Ellen comes from money and luxury, she learns to become more domestic and care for both herself and the household. She learns humility and self-sacrifice, as she must do without the luxuries she had once been afforded. Though comfort and luxury are best, the middle-class woman had to be able to adapt to adverse situations and be able to sacrifice her own desires for the good of others. Ellen learns to do this when her Aunt becomes ill and Ellen must run the household and again after the death of Alice when Ellen has to help run Mr. Humphrey's household and do all that Alice had once done. To be adaptable and maintain one's composure in adverse situations was paramount for an exemplary nineteenth century woman. Ellen's mother and Alice were the example from which Ellen learned and became the ideal middle-class girl.

In contrast to both Alice and Ellen is Aunt Fortune and the local "bad girl" Nancy. Nancy is the granddaughter of Mrs. Vawse, a widowed immigrant who lives high up in the mountains. Nancy had been raised poorly by her now

deceased mother and has become the local naughty child. She is rude, unabashed, iniquitous and illiterate. She plays cruel pranks on poor Ellen and makes it all the more difficult for her to adjust to her new surroundings. Ellen shows Nancy nothing but kindness and patience though everyone has warned her that it will do no good. Nancy's only redeeming feature is her ability to accomplish domestic tasks with great prowess. Though her proficiency in the domestic sphere is commendable, her other abilities such as her strength and knowledge of agriculture are portrayed as masculine and therefore uncouth and unbecoming a lady. Though it takes most of the story for Nancy to be positively influenced by Ellen's goodness, she does come around and even begins to embrace Ellen's religious tenets as her own. Nancy does not renounce all of her unfeminine ways, but she does acquire in addition to them the female positive attributes of education, piety, humility and generosity. The implied message here is that even an uncouth lower class person can be uplifted by the teaching and example of Christian virtues.

Like Nancy, Aunt Fortune is plain, irreverent, assertive and uneducated (in the traditional sense). Her

laudable asset is her attention to her household, though she receives little credit for her domestic abilities because of her sour demeanor. She sees little value in the little luxuries of life and goes so far as to dye Ellen's immaculate white stockings gray as she believes they will be ruined in this environment. She is lacking the grace and gentility of the ideal nineteenth century woman and portrays a frontiersman persona that is, though admirable, far from ladylike. Aunt Fortune is interesting not only because she is a single woman but also because through her exacting and domineering personality, she runs a successful farm. Though Aunt Fortune may initially seem like a progressive character, the best thing that is allowed to happen to Fortune is that at the end of the novel she and the newly converted farmhand Mr. Van Brunt agree to marry. She no longer finds strength in her own ability but rather in the support of a strong and now morally upright husband. This union is highly celebrated and all agree it is the best possible situation for the indurate and unfeminine Aunt Fortune.

Advocating Christian values and themes, *The Wide, Wide World* and the novels that followed in the genre were a

guide to young ladies of the time who were encouraged to have submissive and humble attitudes towards their elders, especially men. Aunt Fortune, though independent and assertive, could be handled by one person and one person only, and of course this person is a man. Mr. Van Brunt, who later marries Fortune, is the only one who can convince her of anything and the only one who can control her, particularly when she is on the rampage against Ellen. Ellen relies on Mr. Van Brunt's power over Fortune and Fortune's submission to Mr. Van Brunt to keep from being beaten or denied certain things she desires. In comparison to Ellen's mother, however, Fortune is an impenetrable force. Ellen's mother is entirely submissive to her husband. She does not want Ellen to be sent away, nor does she want to go to Europe, but since both her doctor (who is, of course, male) and her husband demand it, she must go. She has no power in her husband's household yet never complains even as she is separated from the one thing in life that she loves and desires, Ellen. Ellen follows her mother's example and is humbly compliant to the instructions of her adopted "brother" John. Though John is nowhere near as unkind as was Ellen's father, he is just as

demanding and controlling. He denies Ellen novels and demands that she only read and learn certain things. For this, Ellen loves him all the more, thus reinforcing the theme of female submission to male instruction. Through this submission, female characters become entirely reliant on their male saviors. After the death of Alice and her mother, John takes over Ellen's moral education, saving her from having to return to her heathen Aunt Fortune. Rather than becoming stronger or more independent in light of the deaths of the women her life, Ellen becomes reinfantilized and dependent once more on the kindness of others, in this case a morally and intellectually superior male.

The Wide, Wide World can be characterized by its plodding style, its lack of a cohesive plot and its overt religious overtone, almost reading like a catechism. It is essentially a series of vignettes, much like a modern soap opera. This book and those that followed in the genre were instructional as well as entertaining to the nineteenth century family. A child, and even an adult, reading it today would find it too slow, lacking in adventure and excitement and would be intimidated by its length at over

seven-hundred pages. These characteristics changed a bit with the very popular *Elsie Dinsmore* series.

Following the success of *The Wide, Wide World*, author Martha Finley (b.1828- d.1909) began writing books for children. Her first attempts were not entirely successful, but with *Elsie Dinsmore* she found a formula that would bring her lifelong fame and fortune. Writing under the pseudonym Martha Farquharson, Finley published the first *Elsie* book in 1867. *Elsie Dinsmore* is a tale of an abnormally virtuous young girl that courageously resists various petty temptations in the name of her fundamentalist Christian beliefs. The novel and its 27 sequels found a wide audience that grew to some 25 million readers in the United States and Britain.⁴

Similar to *The Wide, Wide World*, *Elsie Dinsmore* is a didactic novel about a young girl who is bereft of her mother and father. *Elsie* lives in the home of her callous and uncaring grandfather and step-grandmother (who is as old as *Elsie's* mother would be) as well as their

4. Martha Finley (2008). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. From Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.search.eb.com/library.lausys.georgetown.edu/eb/article-9125724> (Accessed October 19, 2008).

tempestuous, "bad" children, Elsie's aunts and uncles. Though the set up is the same, the plot, similarly loose and plodding though it may be, is quite different. Elsie's mother, remembered as an especially pious and good woman, died shortly after Elsie was born. Elsie's father was so distraught by her death that he fled to Europe leaving Elsie in the care of the Scottish nanny, also a very devout woman, and the evangelical "Negro" housekeeper, Aunt Chloe. After eight years in the loving care and Christian household of the Scottish nanny, Elsie and Aunt Chloe are shipped off to live with Elsie's father's family at their plantation, the Roselands. There Elsie is tortured and teased by her housemates and schoolmates, her naughty aunts and uncles and by the cruel and overly demanding governess and teacher, Miss Day. At every turn Elsie is misunderstood and wrongly accused of atrocities her evil little aunts and uncles have committed. She receives no love from anyone and is blamed unfairly for things she did not do. Every night, and several times during the day, Elsie is propelled into uncontrollable bouts of weeping to which only her loving nanny, Aunt Chloe, can provide solace. Elsie briefly befriends a fellow Christian, a pious

young woman named Miss Allison, who assures that she is on the righteous path and tries to defend her against her adversaries. But this is short-lived as Miss Allison is only a visitor and must leave just as Elsie is getting used to having a friend and protector.

It seems hopeless for poor Elsie until she receives word that her long lost father is returning to Roselands to reclaim his daughter and live once again with his father and young stepmother. Without ever having met him, Elsie repeatedly espouses her enduring love and admiration for the father that abandoned her. She is sure that he is the most wonderful sort of man and is elated at the prospect of being able to submit to his authority and show what a good little submissive daughter she is. Elsie is so nervous and excited at his arrival and so overwrought with emotion that, when he does arrive, Elsie is so nervous that she can barely go to him, so afraid is she of his not loving her. Elsie's father expects his daughter, whom he abandoned 8 years earlier, to leap into his arms and is disappointed and even angered that she only shyly greeted him, her eyes cast to the floor. Elsie, frightened that he would not love her, had hoped beyond hope that he would sweep her up into

his arms so that she would be sure that her own affection was returned. When he did not do so because she had been so demure, she is entirely convinced that he does not love her and never will unless she proves to him what a good little girl she is.

Through a series of misunderstandings, Elsie's father is led to believe that his daughter is a mischievous and disobedient little girl whose strange devotion to God makes her even more of a social misfit. He is always having to punish her, sending her to her room, tying her naughty hands behind her back and making her sit beside him silently while he reads, apparently to keep her out of the mischief that she would inevitably find. For most of the novel he is depicted as strict, unfair, domineering and unaffectionate ostensibly because he has not yet realized the goodness of Elsie and also because he does not subscribe to the Christian maxims to which Elsie so fervently adheres. Finley does a good job of making Elsie seem entirely faultless and in fact a character that should be emulated for her piety and humility and not continually chastised. Though it takes almost the entirety of the first novel, Elsie's father does come to realize the

inherent goodness of his daughter and finally remits to her unvoiced desires of endless fondling and caressing as well as embarks on a path of becoming a good Christian himself.

This book is more didactic than *The Wide, Wide World* but has the same high emotional energy and language of tears that made Susan Warner's book so popular. What makes Elsie Dinsmore so striking and even disturbing is the relationship between Elsie and her father, the main vehicle for the language of tears. In Deborah O'Keefe's book *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Mislead by Their Favorite Books*, O'Keefe asserts that Elsie had two great needs: to be loved and to be punished.⁵ This was fulfilled with the return of her father who both loves her dearly yet feels compelled to subdue her through a series of rather severe punishments. Furthermore, Elsie would do anything (except disobey the teachings of Jesus) to attain the caresses that she yearned for from her father. She wants only to be taken upon his knee and fondled as her father does her little aunt Enna. She is miserable by his inattention and blames herself for him not loving her. She

5. Deborah O'Keefe, *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Mislead by Their Favorite Books* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 200), 92.

appeals to her God to help her but at the same times feels unworthy of God's help as she considers herself too naughty to deserve it.

This theme of self-flagellation for her misperceived impiety and worthlessness could have made nineteenth century girl readers feel even less deserving as doubtlessly they were not as faultless as Elsie was. As discussed previously, the nineteenth century father was often absent or inattentive particularly of his daughters. Reading Elsie Dinsmore gives an entirely different perception. Elsie's father is overly involved in the life of his daughter. At first he is only involved in disciplining her but, when eventually softened, provides her with a great deal of lapsitting, caressing, fondling, entwining and embracing- almost to the level of pedophilia. As a modern reader, it is difficult not to find the descriptions of their interactions disturbing, though a nineteenth century reader might have found it endearing if not desirable. Similar to *The Wide, Wide World*, there is a strange relationship between a young girl and older man, whether it be Ellen and her adoptive brother (and later husband) or Elsie and her father.

The Wide, Wide World and the *Elsie Dinsmore* novels are prototypical examples of the nineteenth century domestic novel. In both novels (or "Stories" as Susan Warner would have us call them) the plots are thin and serve only as a vehicle through which nineteenth century values are expressed. There is little literary merit to the works, and they serve to address for young girls the importance of obedience, respect for elders, truthfulness and Christian piety. Though some modern critics have searched for hidden feminist messages, there is little more to these stories than a reinforcement of already established nineteenth century mores. It would be difficult to argue that these works did little more but to reinforce society's limitations for girls.

CHAPTER 5:

THE INFLUENCE OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Most enduring of all the writers of nineteenth century domestic fiction is Louisa May Alcott. Louisa May Alcott is not typical of the female domestic writers of the mid-nineteenth century. She grew up in a much less affluent family; she was well-educated but financially insecure and she was known for being headstrong and for having a feisty temperament. Her upbringing was anything but traditional and her life experiences were hardly conventional. Unlike many women, Louisa held many different types of jobs, never married and openly advocated for women's rights.

Louisa's adulthood was shaped by her unconventional childhood and her unusual family dynamic. Arguably, the most influential person in her life was her father, Bronson Alcott. Bronson Alcott was known as one of Boston's leading transcendentalist intellectuals and proponents of educational reform. Growing up, Louisa participated in her father's innovative schools as well as his transcendentalist ventures, including living in the utopian commune Fruitlands. Though he held the traditional family structure in great reverence, Bronson encouraged his four

young daughters to be active and to learn and play out-of-doors. Needless to say, this was quite unusual in an age that generally kept girls inside in the domestic sphere and considered physical activity to be more hurtful to young girls than helpful. Because of her father's intellectual and philosophical affiliations, Louisa was acquainted with some of New England's most noted intellectuals, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who remained a lifelong friend of the Alcott family and of Louisa herself. Although Bronson was well known and was for the most part a respected intellectual, he was not so financially successful. The Alcott household often teetered on the brink of financial disaster and the women of the family provided much of the family's income. Louisa's mother, Abba May Alcott, worked outside of the home in a variety of occupations while Bronson was off giving lectures or occupied with writing.¹ When Louisa and her elder sister Anna were old enough, both followed their mother's example and helped to earn money. In addition to sewing, Louisa worked as a teacher, governess and then a writer. Prior to writing *Little*

1. Joy S. Kasson, Introduction to *Work*, by Louisa May Alcott (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), ix-x.

Women, like her character Jo, Alcott wrote short sensational works and also chronicled her Civil War volunteer work in her novel *Hospital Sketches* (1863). Her writings were a needed financial contribution to her family as well as an intellectual outlet for herself.

Louisa had no desire to write domestic fiction but was propositioned by her prominent Boston publisher to do so. Because of her father's unreliability in procuring meaningful employment, Louisa's writing was often the main means by which her family survived. Writing in the popular domestic genre had already proved to be lucrative for other writers, so Alcott agreed to write a "girls' story." Within six weeks Alcott created *Little Women*. The novel was, like her previous works, heavily drawn on personal experiences. This time it was a chronicle of her childhood and relationship with her sisters.² With the publication of the book in 1868, Alcott's popularity soared, and she was pressured to continue the series. Alcott did not hesitate to capitalize on the popularity of the novel and wrote three sequels: *Good Wives* (which is now almost always

2. Gail Schmunk Murray, *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 63.

published with *Little Women* as a single work), *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886), which was published shortly after Alcott's death. Though she did not intend to be a writer of domestic fiction or juvenile fiction, her characters had become too cherished by her readers and her success too lucrative to stop publishing such works.

In several areas, Alcott's writing departs from the paradigm of acceptable female behavior, which works like *Wide, Wide World* and *Elsie Dinsmore* had so assiduously scripted. Through the success of the *Little Women* series, Alcott reminds us that "Victorian domesticity and the separate sphere ideology were not monolithic constructs encompassing all middle-class American women all the time."³

The domestic novels endorsed the doctrine of separate spheres in which each sex was assigned a proper set of roles. "Women were to preside over the private sphere of home and family, playing the role of wife and mother, while men were to manage the public sphere of business and politics, playing the role of breadwinner in their families. Domestic and unassuming, women were to concentrate their energies on motherhood and on ensuring

3. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 63.

that their homes provided their husbands utopian retreats from the world of work. Women were to remain gentle, nurturing and untouched by the contentious arenas of business and politics."⁴

The March family, however, did not have the luxury of having entirely separate spheres. *Little Women* was one of the first domestic novels in which a strong male figure was entirely absent. For the majority of the first book in the series, Mr. March is off acting as minister to Union troops in the Civil War. He is only heard from in letters and even then, upon his return, plays only a small part in the novel. This allowed the female Marches to create their own sphere that did not just encompass the prototypical domestic sphere. It is not as though there is an absence of males entirely, but rather an absence of men who wield some sort of household authority. The most present male character is Laurie. However, Laurie is depicted as a somewhat feminine boy who relishes his time with the March girls next door. Though he has a special affinity to Jo,

4. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness: Searching for Feminist Utopia in *Little Women*," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1999), 241.

his seemingly masculine counterpart, he interacts with all the ladies of the household and is often referred to as "their boy." He never assumes a typically male domineering role, but rather is often swayed by the opinion of the "little women" around him. His male presence, and even that of his stoic grandfather, does not change the independent community of the March women.

The male presence changes when Meg becomes engaged and then married to Laurie's tutor John Brooke. Though there is now a male character, he still does not exert power over Meg or any of the other female characters. In fact, he is passive when it comes to getting his wife to do what he would like. After their twins are born, Meg becomes wrapped up entirely in the affairs of her children and neglects the company of her husband. As a result, John starts visiting his newlywed friend's home, who has a busy and gay wife who is happy to entertain both her husband and John. Meg is upset with his absence, thinking that he prefers the young wife of his friend to her own company. Meg of course goes to Marmee with these marital problems. Marmee advises her that she ought to stop spending so much time in the nursery and to lure her husband back to her own

fireside and away from that of his friends by showing interest in his affairs and cooking him a good meal. Meg follows her mother's advice and John returns, happier than before. It could easily be interpreted that for Meg, "the price of complementarity is the loss of authority,"⁵ or it can be seen as Meg readjusting her habits for her own well-being and happiness and not just that of her husband's. Furthermore, after this incident, John begins to take on responsibilities for caring for the twins. Though Meg is a good and caring mother, she is not as effective a disciplinarian. John is able to help her in effectively disciplining their son Demi, his firm hand and strong presence proves a good influence on their son, but he remains kind and gentle with his wife. He insists on helping care for his children, thus taking on a role that had often been solely a part of the feminine sphere.

Marmee describes her marriage to Meg in the chapter entitled "On the Shelf": "This is the secret of our home happiness... Each do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always." Through Marmee, Alcott is

5. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness," in Alberghene and Clarke, 247.

advocating the sharing of the domestic sphere with the husband, most particularly in the education of children: these are, as Marmee would say, "the little cares and duties that affect us all".⁶ When he returns from the war, Mr. March is supposed to in some way displace Marmee as the moral director. In fact, Alcott writes that, upon his return, Mr. March regained his post as "the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor and comforter,... husband and father."⁷ But Marmee remains the more prominent figure, and the storyline continues with Mr. March as a small part, often unmentioned as the lives of the four girls are chronicled.

Alcott also shows in *Little Women* that even genteel women like the Marches often had to work for wages. Meg works as a nursery governess, and Jo serves as a companion to Aunt March. Alcott proves through her character's work that "the separation of spheres that was so essential to nineteenth-century gender norms [were] almost entirely

6. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 401.

7. *Ibid.*, 244.

ideological."⁸ The March family thus proves not to be yet another example of girls in training to be domesticated women. Though some of the March girls do become domesticated, Alcott made a concerted effort to show that women could also be more. In *Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, Alcott emphasizes that women must be trained in academic arts in addition to the domestic arts. In *Little Women*, Marmee does not allow shy little Beth to be ignorant, and though she stays home and tends to many of the domestic tasks, she still studies on her own and was just as well educated as Jo and the other girls. In *Little Men*, Jo introduces her female students to the "splendid new play" of cooking, but they may only play such games when their studies have been completed. In *Jo's Boys*, Mrs. Meg creates a sewing circle in which the collegiate women of Plumfield mix domestic responsibility with discussions of politics and poetry.

Domesticity and education were incredibly important to Alcott's women, and the character who would best embody what Alcott thought women could be was Jo March. Much like

8. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness," in Alberghene and Clarke, 242.

Louisa herself, Jo is independent, imperfect, headstrong, outspoken and most importantly intelligent. Louisa May Alcott made Jo an example of what women could become- an advocate of women's rights, educational reform and still a good mother and wife.

Though almost all of Alcott's characters diverged from the genre's standards in many ways, the most obvious difference is in Jo, who exhibited patent gender ambiguities. Within the first few chapters, Josephine March, who preferred the more masculine moniker "Jo", decries how she could not "get over my disappointment in not being a boy." Whenever it comes to the girls play-acting Jo always assumes the male character. Her very desire to become a writer and her declaration to never marry marks her as a deviant of traditional gender expectations.⁹ Jo is also fiercely independent, claiming that marriage would be an end of her liberty and that no man is worth that.

Unlike the works of Susan Warner and Martha Finley, Alcott allowed all of her female characters to be imperfect. They are wont to misbehave, feel anger and

9. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 63-64.

envy, to be indolent or to outwardly disobey authority figures. Little Ellen Montgomery or Elsie Dinsmore would never have been so daring and so naturally childish. Alcott used the natural character traits as a means to teach a lesson and to address this behavior as undesirable, but never unnatural or impious; "she does not preach character or virtue overtly, yet each of the girls and their neighbor Laurie display some character fault that they seek to eradicate by the book's end..."¹⁰ Even Marmee, a seemingly perfect and enlightened parent who refuses to dictate her children's behavior, admits to having a temper that she must often control. The moral lesson is still present in Alcott's novel, but is less of a focal point than in other forms of the genre.

In terms of religiosity, Alcott steered clear of religious didacticism. There is no long preaching on the importance of accepting the teachings of Christ and Alcott's characters have virtually no interaction with traditional religion. Though Mr. March is a minister, he is absent from the entire first volume of *Little Women* and is hardly mentioned in the sequels. He is never depicted

10. Ibid., 64.

as giving sermons in a formal setting or even in his own home. Unlike the characters in previously mentioned domestic/didactic fiction, Alcott's characters do not fit neatly into the Sunday School characterizations, in which the characters were either all good or all bad (and thus offer either religious reformation or immediate reprisal). Alcott's characters are human, both good and bad, having moments of moral righteousness and of imperfection. Though there are no sermons, the struggle to improve one's character is a central theme and thus an appropriate example of Victorian American Protestant values.

Alcott has been famously quoted as saying "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone."¹¹ And she didn't. She gave Jo a partner, a goal and a profession, not just a husband. Jo wants to start her own school, a school for boys in which she could teach them how to become good men (maybe even ones that would recognize the importance and prominence of the women in their lives). Jo also spends the entire story

11. Ednah D. Cheyney (ed.), *Louisa May Alcott, her Life, Letters and Journals* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston; Searle & Rivington, 1889), 201.

of *Little Women* pining to become an author, and even though she takes a detour as a wife, mother and teacher, she is also given a career, a legitimate career, in which her literary efforts are praised and admired. This is not the typical character of a domestic novel. Jo is not a wistful Ellen Montgomery and certainly not a pious and perfect Elsie Dinsmore. Jo is a female character with all the imperfections and passions of a real woman, regardless of the century.

One of the prominent features of Alcott's female characters was their uncharacteristic assertiveness. Jo's forceful personality defines her character. She is shamelessly outspoken and "her chafing at the constraints of propriety kept *Little Women* popular with girls long after the Victorian age had faded away."¹² As many scholars have noted, Jo is a direct reflection of Alcott herself. Jo and Alcott both struggled against societal conformity. Alcott is often criticized by feminist scholars for letting up on Jo's independence by giving her a husband and children. Alcott struggled with her literary decisions

12. Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 65.

herself, but ultimately gave in to the pressures of her readers, with a bit of wicked enjoyment:

Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn't dare refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect.

But based on the popularity of the subsequent volumes, readers rather enjoyed the headstrong Jo blushing and awkwardly being courted by the foreign professor, Mr. Bhaer. Alcott wrote within the terms of the Victorian ideology even as she resisted it. The difficulties she encountered as she tried to envision her own feminist utopia emerge with particular clarity in the way that she continually revises Jo's fate in *Little Women* and its sequels.¹³

Throughout the first part of *Little Women*, Jo is fully independent, only needing her mother's occasional advice and guidance (and even then taking it only after she has made some serious blunder). She pursues her own passions and even dares to deny Laurie when he asks for her hand in marriage. When Jo meets the Professor, her status as a

fully independent individual comes to an end. She has previously been proud of her sensational stories' success, though still telling herself that sensational stories are not the most prestigious genre in which to be successful. But Professor Bhaer, in his paternal way, opposes her writing sensational stories and encourages discontinuing writing them, even though they are a source of income (and thus financial independence) for her. By the final chapter of Book II, Jo has set aside writing in favor of building "'a happy home like place for boys who needed teaching, care and kindness'" [485]. Jo still cherishes the hope of becoming a writer some day, but postpones her dreams to create a domestic life.¹⁴ Alcott seems prescient in writing about a female dilemma that almost all women of the twenty-first century experience.

Many feminist scholars interpret this evolution in Jo's character as a sign that Alcott had succumbed to society's, and more particularly her readers', pressures. They see Alcott as yielding to the gender norms prevalent in domestic literature, particularly at the end of *Little*

13. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness," in Alberghene and Clarke, 244.

Women (or *Good Wives*). After all the time and effort Jo put into exerting her independence, Jo marries and thus becomes a part of the domestic ideal which she had previously spurned. But Alcott creates for Jo a new kind of independence within her marriage to Professor Bhaer. She is the mother and caretaker to the boys in her and Professor Bhaer's school at Plumfield. The Professor defers to her good judgment on many an occasion throughout the novel and she and her husband are genuine partners.

Though Alcott did allow Jo to be married, have children and become as many feminist critics assert "domesticated," she also created a female for the new era, one who would bend gender norms, defy the domestic ideal and create for herself a career that was wholly unfeminine. That character is Nan. Nan is introduced in *Little Men* as a terror who is specifically recruited by Jo to join the all male (and one female) student population at Plumfield. She would seem to fall into the frequently used genre pattern of the displaced girl who either finds redemption in or brings redemption to her new environment. But Nan's

14. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness," in Alberghene and Clarke, 240.

role would be to liven up the life of Daisy, Meg's perfectly innocent and tame child, gain a bit of education and to hopefully glean some feminine virtues from Daisy. Nan comes from a home in which her mother has died and her obliging father is unsure how to raise a little girl. As a result, Nan is "running wild at home" and according to Jo is "too bright a child to be spoilt by servants."¹⁵ Upon arriving to Plumfield, Nan gains the favor of all the boys as she challenges them to every competition imaginable and "showed them that girls could do most things as well as boys, and some things better".¹⁶

Alcott does not make Nan a traditional feminine character, but rather a feminist character. Unlike her female playmates, Meg's daughter Daisy and Amy and Laurie's daughter Bess, Nan is not interested in domestic play like cooking and dolls. In fact, when Nan arrives, Daisy excitedly asks if she has brought her doll, but Nan responds, "Yes, she's somewhere round" and says so, as Alcott describes, "with most unmaternal carelessness."¹⁷ As

15. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 99.

16. Alcott, *Little Men*, 109.

17. *Ibid.*, 101.

the story progresses, Nan's true passion is revealed. To Daisy's horror Nan tells her disinterest in normal doll play and asserts to her friend, "Let 'em die; I'm tired of fussing over babies, and I'm going to play with the boys; they need me to see to 'em."¹⁸ Nan wants real human interaction and enjoys nothing more than to doctor the boys' "cut fingers, bumped heads or bruised joints." She became "Dr. Giddy-Gaddy," and begins her career as a doctor. Jo acknowledges and encourages Nan's new interest and tells Professor Bhaer that "she wants something to live for even now, and will be one of the sharp, strong, discontented women if she does not have it..."¹⁹ Professor Bhaer takes her on as a different type of student, teaches her the various healing properties of herbs and lets her practice at bandaging. Nan is described as having good sense and interest which is most encouraging to her Professor, "who did not shut his door in her face because she was a little woman."²⁰ Even as a child, Nan is

18. Ibid., 225.

19. Ibid., 226.

20. Ibid., 227.

described by Alcott as having a strong will and "the spirit of a rampant reformer."

In *Jo's Boys*, Nan is all grown up and is an active feminist and advocate for women's rights, specifically the right to remain single. Doing exactly the opposite of what the typical domestic novel would have, she is studying to become a doctor. Not a nurse, but a doctor. She says, "If we girls have any influence we should use it for the good of these boys, and not pamper them up, making slaves of ourselves and tyrants of them."²¹ Unlike the other girls of her age, she is annoyed by boys who flirt and profess their love for her and would have boys who "treated [girls] like reasonable beings, not dolls to flirt with."²² *Jo's Boys* has more of a political agenda than *Little Men* and *Little Women*. It seeks to accord equal respect to marrying or remaining single, acknowledging both options as necessary because of the gender imbalance in the US created by the Civil War.²³ In fact, when grown up Demi (the son of Meg

21. Louisa May Alcott, *Jo's Boys* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 91.

22. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 94.

23. Trites, *Twain, Alcott*, 98.

and John Brooke) mentions that the female population exceeds the male, particularly in New England, Nan is quick to remind her friends and family that she intends to be unmarried and is "very glad and grateful that [her] profession will make [her] a useful, happy, and independent spinster."²⁴ Throughout the book, Nan shuns various male suitors, particularly her childhood sweetheart Tom, preferring to focus on her medical studies. At the end of the novel, when Alcott obligingly answers the question "How did they end?", she describes how "Nan remained a busy, cheerful, independent spinster, and dedicated her life to her suffering sisters and their children, in which true women's work she found abiding happiness."²⁵

Nan also acts as Alcott's consistent mouthpiece in advocating for suffrage. Nan talks about women's rights, saying, "The Women of England can vote, and we can't. I'm ashamed of America that she isn't ahead in *all* good things." Daisy, symbolic of the docile Victorian female, pleads with Nan not to talk about that subject since "people always quarrel over the question, and call names,

24. Alcott, *Jo's Boys*, 15.

25. *Ibid.*, 323.

and never agree."²⁶ Nan also tells a group of male students that are facetiously begging her to be nicer to them, "We'll be kinder to you if you will be just to us. I don't say generous, only just. I went to a suffrage debate in the legislature last winter; and of all the feeble, vulgar twaddle I ever heard, that was the worst; and those men were *our* representatives. I blushed for them, and their wives and mothers. I want an intelligent man to represent me, if I can't do it myself, not a fool."²⁷ When Nan asks the boys with whom she grew up whether they supported women's rights, the sea-going fellow Emil professes he would "ship a crew of girls anytime," Dan asserts that he would fight any man who said that women did not deserve liberty, and Nat claims he owed everything that he is to the women in his life. Tom, who has been chasing after Nan for his wife, says that he would die for any woman to support that cause. Nan finds Tom's answer barely passable and says that "Living and working for [suffrage] is harder, and therefore more honorable. Men are always ready to die for us, but not to make our lives worth having." She

26. Ibid., 68.

27. Ibid., 92.

claims Tom to have "cheap sentiment and bad logic," but still is satisfied that the boys raised at Plumfield will continue to have good principles and an appreciation for the women who raised them.²⁸

Alice Heath, a fellow student of Nan's at Plumfield and also an adamant defender of women's rights, laments that women have not been fully educated to assume the responsibilities of citizenship and yet are expected to be the intellectual equals of males.²⁹ Alice proclaims, and rightly so, that "we are expected to be as wise as men who have had generation of all the help there is, and we scarcely anything. Let us have equal opportunities, and in a few generations we will see what the judgment is. I like justice, and we get very little of it."³⁰ In *Jo's Boys*, Alcott's characters act as reformers of education and women's rights. In creating characters that are concerned with these issues, Alcott is directly addressing her adolescent (and mostly female) readers, telling them that there is not only the possibility of reform, but that it is

28. *Ibid.*, 93-95.

29. Trites, *Twain, Alcott*, 97.

30. Alcott, *Jo's Boys*, 91.

the responsibility of youth to change a nation's prejudices.³¹

The *Little Women* series insists that women can have both a career and domestic happiness, but Alcott has been accused of describing this as a reality only for Josie and Nan and not for all of the female characters. It can be also be interpreted that throughout the novel, girls are depicted as either sweet, loving and obedient to their parents, or outspoken, independent, and uninterested in family life. But Jo and Nan are both outspoken and independent and interested in family life. Jo creates her own family and even opens her family to orphans. Nan neither marries nor has children, but she is deeply concerned with the boys with whom she grows up, her family.

Many feminist critics have read *Little Women* as subversive, but Jo's domestication and marriage strike other readers as an unsatisfactory ending to a heroine who seems to promise an alternative to the Victorian domestic ideal.³² But the character of Jo can also be interpreted as the beginning of a new Victorian ideal, one in which women

31. Trites, *Twain, Alcott*, 97.

can have a partner as a spouse, a family that genuinely appreciates its mother's sacrifices and a career that is not only acknowledged as useful by others but is also self-fulfilling. Alcott's strong opinions about women's rights and women's roles are tempered by the realities of her commercial potential as a writer, and possibly because of her conflicting emotions about her own choices in life. Jo serves as Alcott's ambassador for women's independence when she says that the goal for girls at Plumfield should be to "become noble, useful and independent women" and that they should not worry about "their sphere, but make it wherever duty calls them" [294]. Through the character of Nan, Alcott wanted to make it clear that women who chose to remain single, as she did and as Nan did, had much to contribute to society and should not feel ashamed of diverging from the stereotypical role of wife and mother. Through her characters in the *Little Women* series, Alcott showed that women did in fact have options outside the domestic sphere. Throughout these novels speaks the voice of a culture that limited the ways in which women might

32. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, "A Greater Happiness," in Alberghene and Clarke, 237.

achieve fulfillment. Alcott confronts these cultural restrictions head on and shows her readers that the Victorian woman can do more than household chores.

CONCLUSION

Early children's literature was a means in which children were taught the moral precepts of their society. As American society changed, so did its literature for children. The availability of children's literature became widespread in the nineteenth century and the domestic fiction genre was very popular. The popularity of the genre influenced not only the future of children's literature, but inevitably had an impact on how children perceived themselves.

Though easily read as sentimental and reinforcing of gender norms, the domestic novel evolved to become a means in which girls could envision themselves as relevant to their society and more than just domestic servants. Even the didactic works of Martha Finley and Elizabeth Wetherall gave girls a voice in a time in which children and particularly girls were supposed to be seen and not heard. Though early domestic fiction did not have a message of empowerment, it did show the plight of the domestic female and even the single woman (like Aunt Fortune in *The Wide, Wide World*). The girls were tearful and unrealistically moral, but they were also consistently depicted as

exceptionally bright. The portrayal of smart girls showed not only that girls were educable, but that they wanted to be educated and that being educated was useful, even if only in the domestic sphere. Written during a time in which school was not compulsory and girls' education often took place in the home, books showing the desirability of an intelligent female child may have influenced parents and girls alike to desire an education. And with a good education a girl could contemplate something more for herself, even a career. And then beginning with Louisa May Alcott's realistic and creative characters, girls could see themselves as able to make a change not only within their households, but in society at large.

Where nineteenth century girls were previously limited in their endeavors, Alcott's stories showed them that they could have a fulfilling life within the home and/or a career and purpose outside of the home. Alcott had a "capacity for portraying children as genuine people, not just patterns for her readers, [and this] went far to move

children's fiction from the instructive abstractions of earlier decades toward romantic particularity."¹

During Alcott's lifetime her works were considered American classics. Young girls and women adored her *Little Women* series for their idealistic tone and happy endings. But apart from expanding upon a popular genre, Alcott played an important role in the lives of girls in the nineteenth century and up into the twentieth. Her books had a clear message of female empowerment. This can be seen particularly in *Jo's Boys*, in which her female characters rallied for women's suffrage and a women's right to choose between having a husband and a career. Though Alcott wrote within the confines of the domestic fiction genre, her books did not promote typical nineteenth century gender roles.

Alcott's characterizations "conveyed personality and individuality, rather than ideal types,"² thus influencing domestic fiction writers during her time and beyond. It is

1. Anne Scott McLeod, *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 151.

2. McLeod, *American Childhood*, 151.

clear that as a result of Alcott's depiction of girls and women in her novels, the domestic genre evolved with the rise of the twentieth century. In works like *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Pollyanna* and even Canadian author L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, the characters, like Alcott's, were fully rounded characters that were basically good and well intentioned but were allowed to be less than perfect. The female characters were spirited (to an acceptable fault), they dared to do things that boys did, assumed leadership, excelled in school and, to their benefit, had more of an imagination than anyone else. Essentially, these novels told girls that they ought to be good but that it was acceptable to learn from their failures and that there was no societal expectation that they be faultless. Little girls were told that they did not have to be morally superior, as they had in earlier genres of children's literature, but that they could be imperfect and that society would not scorn them for it. Though it was a small step in the movement for women's rights, it was a step, and it was first taken by Louisa May Alcott. Her literature irrefutably improved the self image of American girls.

For a modern reader, the domestic novel is endearing to read but oftentimes overly sentimental and didactic, even the more tempered *Little Women* series of Louisa May Alcott. Children today might find the literature boring in comparison to modern fantasy and adventure literature and would also probably not understand the historical context in which these books were written. During the early twentieth century, when the women's movement was just beginning, Alcott's work was criticized as being sentimental and moralizing. Her work appeared to critics at that time to support the prevailing beliefs about women's position in society. Alcott and the genre as a whole were seen to be part of the social ideologies that were holding women back.

With the rise of the feminist movement in the mid and late 1900s, however Alcott was identified by the movement as a champion of women's rights. She was aligned with feminist causes throughout her life, and she wrote many non-fiction pieces supporting women's suffrage and women's issues in general. Her adult fiction, written under a pseudonym, also was evidence of her feminist positions. She supported education, equal pay for equal

work, and voting rights for women.³ In Alcott's writings one does not sense that she considers women to be the equal of men, but superior in character, a civilizing influence on men. In this aspect, she is both a product of her era and a predictor and instigator for future generations of young women.

In almost all cases, the writers of American domestic fiction were women who were supporting their families in part or in total. At that time, there were few occupations that were acceptable for women. One must assume that women who became writers were intelligent, educated and had a degree of assertiveness that allowed them to pursue a career in writing. It is reasonable to expect then that these qualities would somehow come through in their female characters, and in fact they do. Alcott even has one of her most memorable characters, Jo, become a writer. If you were to ask any older women of today if they have read any of the books from the 19th century domestic literature genre, the answer will almost definitely be affirmative.

3. "Introduction." *Feminism in Literature*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter. Gale Cengage, 2006. [eNotes.com](http://www.enotes.com/feminism-literature/alcott-louisa-may). 2006. <http://www.enotes.com/feminism-literature/alcott-louisa-may> (Accessed: March 28, 2009).

They may have read *Elsie Dinsmore*, they frequently will have read *What Katie Did*, and they almost definitely read *Little Women* and other of Alcott's books. Younger women are less likely to have read any of the books from this nineteenth century genre with one exception- girls still read Louisa May Alcott.

The enduring popularity of her books is testimony to their influence and their relevance. The underlying themes of personal strength and independence, the aspirations and vulnerabilities of Alcott's characters are just as inspiring to girls today as they must have been to the girls who first read her books. The fact that the stories are set in a society where women are valued mainly for their work in the home does not offend the modern reader. In a time when women are constantly torn between their roles as caregivers and their potential careers, Alcott does not force the reader to choose one or the other, even though Alcott herself did actually make that choice. In showing the realities of women in the home along with the possibilities of women working as teachers and writers, she foretells some of the dilemmas women will encounter and some possible solutions.

When one looks at the fact that 19th century girls' literature was immensely popular, read in many homes not only by girls but by entire families, and the fact that the early twentieth century saw the development of the suffrage movement, women's rights, and women beginning to join the work force, one can only conclude that, at the very least, the genre did not harm the women's movement. Because the genre depicted intelligent girls who read, went to school, and were important influences on the family, it is clear that the genre as a whole probably had a positive influence on its readers. Yes, there were restrictive elements: the submissive roles, the dominance of men, the lack of opportunities, and narrowness of perspective. Yet there is an undercurrent, a subliminal message, that persists, possibly because the writers themselves had pursued a career and understood that women can do more than what was expected of them at that time.

The literature of a society always both reflects and influences its people. Nineteenth century girls' literature should be judged not only for what it shows about the social mores of its era, but also for how that society eventually evolved. In that context, 19th century

domestic literature played a mostly positive role, no matter how subtle, in the ongoing evolution of what it means to grow up female in America.

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