

Themes in little women

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Themes in Little Women English 472 Devotion to the family and parental approval are themes weaved throughout Little Women, a novel by Louisa May Alcott. Alcott details the lives of Jo, Meg, Beth and Amy to show their gradual maturation and acceptance of traditional familial roles as they would have been in 19th Century New England. The story opens with the father of the March family away at war and the women in the family pull together to get by in his absence. The scenes of them working together in the house to be sure that everything was done, and the scenes of them passing time together were very touching.

During the hardship they stayed together and grew closer together. This tone in the family is set by Mrs. March. She is the voice of faith and reason in Alcott's story. The girls not only heed her advice but seek it out frequently as if she were an oracle. Alcott introduces the reader to the four March sisters with descriptions of their general look and characteristics. Jo is utterly unladylike, Meg and Amy are vain and envious of other girls and Beth is a painfully shy homebody. As soon as Mrs. March enters the room, all girls rush immediately to attend to their matriarch. Even Mr.

March gives direction from the warfront in a letter to his family. " I know they... will do their duties faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women (p. 12). The enemies the sisters must face in the first few chapters are selfishness, temper, discontent and quarrelsomeness. They will defeat their enemies as long as they can exercise self-control. To fail in these endeavors would be to deny the wishes of their mother and father: possibly the worst offense they can imagine.

Jo is most obvious example of subversion of cultural and parental norms. Initially she wants nothing to do with marriage and the domestic life. Jo feels her temper is her greatest fault. When she has nearly given up on her efforts to control herself, Marmee steps in to advise her. " I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo. But I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so. " Mrs. March is the model of the virtue. It does not matter if she is speaking from her own experience or not. It is that Marmee knows exactly what to say to mend her frazzled daughter (p. 8). Laurie, who is a male equivalent to Jo, is kind and generous, but also spoiled, undisciplined and lazy. His family demonstrates the consequences of not loving and caring before family above all else. Laurie's father ran away from the elder Mr. Lawrence to marry a woman against the wishes of his father. Whatever happened to Laurie's father and mother we do not know; only that they had died. Of course Laurie changes over time with the influences of all the March women. In fact he becomes a member of the family long before he is wed to Amy. They called him " brother" throughout the novel.

Laurie embraced the March girls like a brother in speech and manner. When Beth was sick with Scarlet fever he called for Mrs. March to return without the girls knowledge. (p. 179) He made this decision against the will of Hannah and it demonstrates his important place as a loving member of the March family. By the time Meg has married John Brooke, she is living away from the family home but is as dedicated to her mother as ever. When the Demi and Daisy are young Meg struggles to care for her little ones, forsaking

all other responsibilities. Her marriage suffers and John soon felt like an unwelcome figure in his home.

Meg feels she has been wrong and pleads her case to Marmee. Meg is surprised to discover she is the one responsible for the strained relationship. “ You have only made the mistake that most young people make,—forgotten your duty to your husband in your love for your children” (p. 376). Once Meg allowed John to take care of the discipline of Demi, she finds he is better at controlling their son and she is saved the energy and fret. While Mrs. March never insisted all her daughters be married, there is suggestion that whatever choices they make must meet the approval of their parents.

When Jo learned Mr. Brooke was interested in marrying Meg, she protests the idea of a marriage. Mrs. March assures Jo that Meg will not leave the family quite yet. “ Your father and I have agreed that she shall not bind herself in any way, nor be married, before twenty” (p. 196). This line suggests that such a life decision was not wholly up to Meg, but would be made at their discretion. Often Little Women seems to be a guidebook for women transitioning from girls to motherhood. Despite their different hopes for the future all of the women become adoring wives and mothers.

Joe gives up writing “ trash” for money and writes what is in her heart, but her work became secondary to her job as mother to her own children and the boys in her little school. Amy never stops drawing but gives up her dreams of painting in Rome and Paris for a domestic life with Laurie. Meg, who wanted to be married all along, gives up her desire for money and servants for the love of a good and decent man. Through the characters and events in the

book, Alcott promotes devotion, self-restraint and loyal for the betterment of family and above all else.