

Little women: an approach to class, society, and money



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The 1868 novel *Little Women* is not only a heartwarming and heartbreaking story set in the midst of the Civil War, but also a series of veiled narratives of the life of the author, Louisa May Alcott. The story coincides with many of the economic and social struggles that Alcott faced throughout her life, and raises the importance of concepts such as sisterhood and familial bonds, concepts that the main character, Jo March, learns of throughout the journey of her life. Alcott's father, once a wealthy man, decided to move his family out of their wealthy community and lavish lifestyle, giving away almost all their money and leaving the Alcott mother and sisters in poverty (Nancy Porter Productions). Thus began the circumstances which gave Alcott the basis for all the social and financial hardship present in her novel. One common theme derived from these circumstances, and continually demonstrated in the book, is the idea that genuine happiness cannot be obtained through monetary security or class ranking, but through strong underlying family ties and moral values.

One simple way that this theme is illustrated throughout the novel is through the different characters of the four March sisters, and their different reactions to economic hardship. These character differentiations are seen even in the opening scene of the novel, when the girls are discussing the family's financial situation around Christmas time. Alcott uses the dialogue between the sisters to show each sister's views on the situation, and how these views reflect their attitudes. Beth says in this scene, " We've got Mother and Father and each other," and Amy later adds, " I don't believe any of you suffer as I do, for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who laugh at your dresses and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you

if your nose isn't nice" (2). These character descriptions illustrate how Beth, perhaps the most genuinely happy character in the story, understands the irrelevance of material worth and the importance of family values, and how Amy, the petty sister whose life goal is to marry into a wealthy family and become famous, focuses solely on her material worth, which in turn makes her discontent with most aspects of her life.

Another way that Louisa May Alcott supports her ideas throughout the novel is through the introduction of varying social classes and the reactions to those classes. When it becomes known that Meg intends to marry Laurie's tutor, Mr. John Brooke, the reactions from different characters illustrate how a focus on class and money affects one's overall happiness. Aunt March, for example, is one of the most unpleasant and rude characters in the book, yet also one of the wealthiest and socially prestigious. When she learns that John Brooke is poor, she responds to Meg, " So you intend to marry a man without money, position or business...when you might be more comfortable all your days by minding me?" (252), proving that her only worry is for Meg's social status and fiscal circumstances. Such a mentality essentially makes her the crotchety woman that she is. A further introduction to a different social class than that of the Marches occurs when Meg attends the wedding of her snobby friend Annie Moffat. Annie's family is a great deal wealthier than Meg's, and Meg's embarrassment over her class is apparent when she is in the presence of the socially prominent, wealthy girls: " So out came the tarlatan, looking older, limper, and shabbier than ever, beside Annie's crisp new one. Meg saw the girls glance at it and then at one another, and her cheeks began to burn" (93). Meg is humiliated by her inability to provide

herself with a new dress, supporting Alcott's message that when a character focuses on material worth, that character becomes unhappy or distracted from the things that matter. Stephanie Foote, an accredited college literature analyst, shares her opinion on this chapter of the book, claiming, " Meg is introduced to class distinctions...and she is overtaken by a host of negative emotions that center on the different kinds of value accorded to different social actors." This sense that preoccupation with class is mainly a source of insecurity and misery further supports Alcott's theme.

Little Women was widely appreciated by both upper and lower classes, because the book had characters from both walks of life for the people of the post-Civil War era to relate to. It struck close to home for rich, love-deprived young ladies and gentlemen who saw themselves in the character Theodore Laurence, yet also felt familiar for the poorer wives and children of Civil War veterans through the lives of the March girls. Alcott effectively connected with and communicated her message to her readers, making a lasting statement that still rings true today: family is the only thing that can make anything worthwhile.

Works Cited

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