

# An essay on the influence of an author's era expressed in their literary works



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Consciously and unconsciously, we are shaped by the world we live in. The events, people, ideology, and lifestyle of our era affect our thoughts, behavior, and how we express ourselves, be it verbal such as speech or nonverbal such as writing. Literary works especially are exclusive snapshots of the era in which they were created. Whether they are set in the time frame that they were written in or deal with events of the past, the writing still contains, to some degree, the mindset of its author which is shaped by the ideology of the world they live in. Examples of these can be found in two famous literary works, *The Prioress's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

In the first example, *The Prioress's Tale*, we gain an insight into the world of medieval England in the 1400s. It was a time in which people's lives, made harsh and uncertain by plagues, wars, and famines, revolved around religion and the establishment of the Church. A group of pilgrims, amongst whom is a prioress, take turns telling tales to each other. The prioress tells the tale of a young boy who is known far and wide for his continuous, beautiful singing praises of the Virgin Mary. His virtuousness and innocence is described by the prioress in the quote below: " And is this song made in honor of Christ's mother?" said this innocent one. " Now I will do my duty, surely, to learn it all before Christmas is past. Even if I will be scolded for not learning my own lessons, and beaten thrice in an hour, I will learn it in honor of our Lady.

(Geoffrey Chaucer, 1478) The quote not only shows the intense religiosity of the era, but also how virtuousness, piety, and devotion to religion was praised, even expected, from both adults and children. The tale progresses to the rage of the vindictive, hateful Jews that live in the quarter of town

through which the boy passes singing praises of the Virgin Mary. This is where we discover the religious intolerance and anti-semitism that was rampant in medieval Europe. The prioress speaks of Satan, who she claims resides in the heart of the Jews, and inspires them to do evil to devout Christians: Our first foe, the serpent Satan, who has his wasp's nest in the Jewish heart, swelled up and said, "O Hebrew people, alas, is this honorable to you that such a boy shall walk at will in spite of you and sing of such matter as is against the reverence due your faith?" From this point on the Jews conspired to drive this innocent one out of the world. To this purpose they hired a murderer who took up a secret place in an alley, and as the child went by, this cursed Jew seized and held him tight, and then cut his throat and cast him into a pit. (Geoffrey Chaucer, 1478) The tale ends with the boy, despite having a slit throat, still singing praises of the Virgin Mary due to a magical grain upon his tongue. Tales like these of virtue and religiousness being triumphant against evil were quite popular in medieval Europe.

The second example, *Little Women*, is another good example of a literary work whose attributes can be linked to the period in which it was written. It gives an insight into the lives of women in the Reconstruction era in America, which was mostly centered around a common prospect for women of their time; marry, be a good wife, and have many children. Those women, in turn, would be expected to prepare their daughters to be married one day. They were supposed to teach their daughters the same skills they'd learned, guide them in making a choice on who to marry, and assist in securing their daughters' futures in a good marriage. This can be seen in Mrs. March, the

sister's mother, expressing her wishes for the futures of her daughters: I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. It is natural to think of it, Meg, right to hope and wait for it, and wise to prepare for it, so that when the happy time comes, you may feel ready for the duties and worthy of the joy. (Louisa May Alcott, 1868) The story, although centered around this main goal of the sisters to secure themselves in good marriages, also deals with the struggles and joys of each sister in their relationships with relatives and friends, falling in love, settling down with families, and little events of the day-to-day lifestyle.

In this way, Louisa May Alcott provides a window into their world, allowing us, in a way, to put ourselves in the characters' shoes as we accurately shape an intricate picture of their environment and mindset based on the details of their daily life that we read. There are many famous literary works that provide a brilliant insight into the era in which it was created, as well as the mind of its creator. This allows us to become the characters and walk through their environment as though we are them, feeling their emotions and thinking their thoughts. We are able to walk through a world long past.