

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

**Innocent, Yet Ambitious -  
Childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America  
as Depicted in Louisa May Alcott's  
*Little Women Series***

**A Pro Gradu thesis**

**by**

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## HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA

### KIELTEN LAITOS

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Innocent, yet Ambitious –

Childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America as Depicted in Louisa May Alcott's

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, minkälaisen kuvan lapsuudesta 1800-luvun Amerikassa Louisa May Alcottin *Pikku Naisia* -lastenkirjasarja antaa. Tutkielmassa selvitetään seuraavia asioita: 1) Ovatko romaanisarjan lapset yhtä arvokkaita yksilöinä kuin aikuiset? 2) Nähdäänkö lapsuus vain valmistautumisena aikuisuuteen vai onko lapsuudella merkitystä sinänsä? 3) Miten koulunkäyntiä ja kasvatusta kuvataan? 4) Miten ja miksi lapset leikkivät?

Lähtökohtana tutkimukselle on *Pikku Naisia* -sarjan neljä teosta; *Pikku Naisia* (*Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, 1868), *Viimevuotiset ystävämmme* (*Good Wives*, 1869), *Pikku Miehiä* (*Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys*, 1871) ja *Plumfieldin Pojat* (*Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out*, 1886). Tutkimuksen aluksi perehdytään lapsuuden ja koulunkäynnin historiaan sekä erityisesti lapsuuteen Pohjois-Amerikassa 1800-luvulla. Lisäksi tutustutaan lyhyesti 1800-luvun amerikkalaiseen lastenkirjallisuuteen ja sarjan kirjoittajaan, Louisa May Alcottiin. Itse tutkimus jakautuu viiteen osaan, joissa käsitellään lapsuutta yleensä *Pikku Naisia* -sarjassa, viattomuuden käsitettä, aikuisuuteen valmistautumista ja itsenäisyyttä, koulua ja oppimista sekä leikkiä.

Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että lapsuus amerikkalaisessa keskiluokan perheessä on hyvin suojattua. Lapset ovat viattomia ja luottavat vanhempiinsa täysin, mutta eivät silti ole avuttomia tai passiivisia. *Pikku Naisia* -kirjojen lapset ovat kunnianhimoisia ja heillä on omat suunnitelmansa tulevaisuuden suhteen. Kuitenkaan lapsuus ei ole pelkkää aikuisuuteen valmistautumista, vaan lapsia arvostetaan heinä itsenään. Kodilla ja perheellä on keskeinen rooli niin sarjan teemoissa kuin lapsuudessa yleensäkin. Kirjojen romanttisen realistinen tyyli vaikuttaa lapsuuden ja lasten kuvaukseen, ja täten myös tutkimustuloksiin.

Asiasanat: Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Children's Literature, Childhood, Children, 19<sup>th</sup> century, America, Innocence, Individuality, School, Play, Family

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Building on my Bachelor's Thesis that concentrated only on the first novel of the *Little Women* series by Louisa May Alcott, this study will examine the concept of childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century America in more depth. The focus is on the image of childhood depicted by Alcott in the *Little Women* series. As a starting point, the first part of this study presents the history of childhood in the western world, and particularly in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Secondly, Alcott's life, her works and especially the primary sources of this study (the *Little Women* series) are described. Thirdly, the core analysis will be divided into five subsections: Childhood in the *Little Women* series, Romantic Innocence, Little Adults, School, and Play.

The study of childhood is a relatively new branch in science, so it is motivating to examine childhood in various contexts. It is often difficult to determine who 'a child' really is and what belongs to children's culture or to childhood. Moreover, as studies and historical documents are written from adults' points of view, it is almost impossible to discover the real voices of children and the experiences of being a child (see for example James & James 2008: 28-31). However, it is important to try to find information of this phase that belongs essentially to human life.

James and James (2008: 22) define childhood at its simplest as "the early phase of the life-course of all people in all societies". Childhood is characterized by physiological and psychological growth, but it also includes socialization into the society and the predominant culture (James & James, 2008: 22-24). The periodizations of the life course determine childhood as well, meaning that in Western societies it "follows infancy and is succeeded by adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age" (Prout & James 1997: 230).

The legal western definition of a child includes people less than 18 years of age. However, different definitions have also been made. Sometimes it is said that a

child is 0 to 12 years old and a teenager 13 to 19. Nevertheless, the concept of childhood has changed during the past decades and even years, so it is not possible to compare children of certain age in a certain period of time to children of the same age in other times. The focus of this study is to examine the “fictional” childhood of the *Little Women* series by Louisa May Alcott, childhood being defined according to the legal western definition of age (0-18).

*Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* (1868, henceforth referred to as LW) is a traditional domestic fiction story about four sisters living in America during the Civil War. The emphasis is on their daily lives, with worries, joys, loves and little adventures. The book follows the girls’ maturation and socialization during one year, but the story continues in the sequel *Good Wives* (1869, GW) that is sometimes considered to be an inseparable part of LW. However, for the sake of clarity, the two books are treated individually in this study. There are also two more sequels to LW. The next book, *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* (1871, LM) describes the life of grown-up Jo and her students in a school she has established with her husband. The last one of the series, *Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out* (1886, JB), follows the maturation of the characters even further. The fact that the novels have been translated into 27 languages (Elbert 1987: xiv) reflects the popularity of the March family “trilogy”.

There are a lot of studies about the roles of women and women-to-be in LW. The series, in particular the first novel, has been material for various feminist studies (see Elbert 1987: xvi, Wells 1998 and Klein 2000), for example, exploring the roles and the influence of women in 19th century America. Therefore it is important to examine specifically also the “beginning” of these women, so to speak, their childhood. This study is not written from a feminist point of view, but as the main characters of the books are future women and men, the roles of women (and men) must be taken into consideration at some level.

In addition, when comparing with another “subsection” of human history, women studies or the history of women, for example, it is possible to find several sources categorized as belonging to them (see for example The Virtual Library [www.wlib.org](http://www.wlib.org)), but when it comes to children, no such categorization is made. For that reason I find it important and useful to focus on childhood in the series, instead of womanhood for example, and try to build a little piece of history of childhood as my contribution. These books are particularly suitable material for this kind of study, since it was during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when childhood was essentially recognized (Gillis 2003: 150-151, Heywood 2001: 23-30).

Despite the vast popularity and interest that Alcott has gained among literary critics, scholars and feminist historians (Eiselein & Phillips 2001: 180-181), the image of childhood in the *Little Women* series has been studied less. The scholars that write about Alcott’s personal history, such as Cheney (1980), Elbert (1987), and Stern (1950), focus on the autobiographical elements, whereas literary critics (see Eiselein & Phillips 2001, Klein 2000, Lurie 2004, and Wells 1998) concentrate on literary elements or only superficially discuss the ideas of childhood in the novels. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to provide a coherent analysis of Alcott’s depiction of 19<sup>th</sup> century American childhood, as portrayed in all the four books of the series.

Despite the name of the series, the novels concentrate on both girls and boys. The first two books, LW and GW depict mostly girls, whereas the last two, LM and JB, focus on boys. Naturally, in order to familiarize oneself with 19<sup>th</sup> century childhood, also the historical background until that point must be examined, from the Middle Ages onwards. In addition, Alcott’s personal history will be described as to provide an accurate image of the author in question.

This thesis is a part of childhood studies. References to childhood in general, children's status, school and play in the *Little Women* series will be examined and analyzed with the help of the background materials. The historical setting will serve as a starting point for the analysis, though the focus is on Alcott's depiction of childhood. There are many questions that are related to the concept of childhood in a certain time and space. This study will contemplate the following main aspects: Are children as "good and worthy" individuals as adults? Is childhood seen only as a preparation for adulthood or has it a meaning of its own? In addition, school has an important role in the life of children, so the methods of educating, teaching and learning especially in the latter novels of the series will be observed. Also, the role and the ways of playing will be examined, because play is such a fundamental part of being a child.

The hypothesis is that the results will present childhood as something very protected and innocent, according to the Romantic perception of life and in literature in that time (Bradley et al. 1962a: 11). Even though children participated on working at home and even in supporting the family financially, they were considered "little" not only because of their obviously smaller size. Childhood was mostly preparation for adulthood and for their roles as men and women. In addition, it seems that childhood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lasted longer than today, and children were not ashamed of being "true" children. That might be because the concept of teenage had not appeared yet.



## **2 CHILDHOOD**

### **2.1 The history of childhood**

This chapter will explore the history of childhood in Europe and America from the Middle Ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, one must notice that there are quite a few different views of historical childhood available. Actually, it seems that childhood has been discovered several times and in various ways. This chapter will draw mostly on two contradictory views, those of Philippe Ariès (1962) and Colin Heywood (2001).

#### **2.1.1 The Middle Ages**

According to Ariès (1962: 13-32), before and during the Middle Ages the concept of childhood did not exist as we know it today. Childhood was a quickly-passing, unimportant period of transition, and children were portrayed as small-scale adults, in European art as well as in literature. Consequently, the particular nature of childhood was not recognized in the medieval society. In art, only around the 13<sup>th</sup> century were the first more realistic portraits of children painted, and the discoveries from the following centuries prove that children were depicted as blending with adults in the everyday life. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards the development of educational institutions in Europe lengthened the duration of childhood, so that children were not considered to belong to the world of adults up to the early age of five or seven. (Ariès 1962: 15-32.)

Moreover, the unimportance of the individuality of children was emphasized by the fact that still in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, infant mortality was high (see for example Gillis 2003: 152). As Ariès writes (1962: 37-40), children were not considered to have personalities or even to be human beings. However, this does not necessarily mean that the parents did not care for their children or not grieve if they died young (Pollock 1983, as quoted by Cunningham 1995: 14).

The harsh reality and weak living conditions forced the parents to try to be prepared for the high probability of losing their children.

Heywood (2001: 12-15) has criticized Ariès' strong views of medieval childhood. He states that childhood was not ignored but, rather, loosely defined (2001: 15-18). The difference between childhood and adulthood was less significant than today, as children took part in the adult world at an earlier age than nowadays. According to Gillis (2003: 153), "children were treated as little adults, less capable cognitively and physically, but not qualitatively different". However, it is important to notice that the whole culture and living conditions were different than in today's Europe and that childhood is also "culturally constructed" (Heywood 2001:12). Moreover, James & James (2004: 13) clarify Ariès' statements: by saying that childhood did not exist, Ariès means that it had no special social status in the medieval society. In addition, as Heywood (2001: 16-17) points out, childhood was almost completely excluded from the works of medieval writers, so there are not many contemporary written sources to draw on.

In the Middle Ages children were seen as innocent intermediaries between Heaven and Earth (Heywood 2001: 15-16). However, also the aspect of sin was considered to be present in children. As Warner (1995, as quoted by Gillis 2003: 156) puts it (and this might be true even today): "We find it easier to imagine children either as little angels or as little monsters than as just children".

In addition, what Ariès did not perceive was the notion of childhood as development. Heywood (2001: 14) states that already in the Middle Ages people recognized some stages in childhood, reflecting the views of today. Gillis (2003: 152) supports the idea of the stages of life (infancy, childhood, youth, prime of life and old age, to be exact), but points out that before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, children were seen as miniature adults (2003: 150).

### 2.1.2 The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries

The views of childhood in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century America were contradictory, as presented by Walzer (1974: 366-375), James & James (2004: 11) and James et al. (1998). Children were depicted as both angelic and wicked, but also as material for their parents to form. It was extremely important to teach the children to be obedient and diligent, and the ways of governing were quite harsh from today's point of view. Threatening and humiliating children as well as using physical punishments were not foreign methods of educating the offspring of the family. On the other hand, as Gillis (2003: 153) points out, corporal punishments were not solely used on children, but also on adults (the poor, slaves and women).

In addition, the attitudes towards play were somewhat ambiguous. Play was considered as idle and therefore not recommendable, but it was not totally forbidden. It seems that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most common view towards children was to think of them as the property of, or, as Cunningham (1995: 72) puts it, "luxury objects" that belonged to their parents and other adults who had power over them. The reasons to have children were practical and selfish, since when grown up, children would work and take care of their parents in their old age (Walzer 1974: 362).

According to Illick (2002: 29-32), three types of parenting occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Protestants, affected by their religion, believed in the old method of "breaking the children's will". Especially the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans believed in the "evilness" of the child (James & James 2004: 25, James et al. 1998: 12). These families most often lived in the rural areas, with only two adults, father and mother, present in the family. The more secular, or moderate, parents related to their children in a softer and more loving way, still encouraging their offspring to be obedient and reasonable. The growing wealth in families lengthened the childhood and gave the parents the chance to show more emotions towards their children. The third group, "the genteel parents" were

part of extended families, often with slaves or servants, and treated their children quite indifferently. Corporal punishment was used and the role of the father as the head of the family was unquestioned.

However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a tendency to move towards a more child-orientated society, though this was challenged at every turn. The individuality of the child was recognized, and childhood was seen “as a stage of life to be valued in its own right” (Cunningham 1995: 61). The development of the genre of children’s literature and the use of children as an inspiration in the arts aimed at adults reflected the idea of childhood as a separate and special world (Cunningham 1995: 61-70). According to Heywood (2001: 23), in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century children were considered to be worthy as such, not as “imperfect adults”. Although it might be exaggerated to name a certain period of time for “the discovery of the child” (Heywood 2001: 30), during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the interest towards childhood certainly started to grow. Moreover, as Gillis (2003: 157) puts it: “Paradise lost became childhood lost.” The longing of the heavenly paradise lost changed into the wish to return to the natural and romantic state of childhood.

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were also called the Age of Reason according to the general admiration of reason and self-control (Greenleaf 1979: 62). John Locke led the way in seeing education as the best way “to produce rational men out of immature children” (Greenleaf 1979: 62). According to him, “Few of Adam’s Children are so happy as not to be born with some Byass in their natural Temper, which it is the Business of Education either to take off, or counter-balance” (Locke 1693, as quoted by Cunningham 1995: 64). Furthermore, he believed that a child was born as a “tabula rasa”, an empty slate, and that it was the educators’ (parents’) task to mold the child into a decent man (Heywood 2001: 23).

Challenging Locke's rational views, one of the earliest Romantics, Jacques Rousseau, connected children profoundly with nature and emphasized their right to be children. He was one of the first to call out for appreciating children as they are and focused on nature's role in raising children (Cunningham 1995: 61-70, Greenleaf 1979: 62-65, Heywood 2001: 24, James et al. 1998: 13-15). Rousseau also divided childhood into three stages: Age of Instinct (0-3), Age of Sensations (4-12), and Age of Ideas (puberty). He believed that Locke's idea of reasoning with children was pointless, because children did not have enough capacity for it before their early teens. (Heywood 2001: 24.)

Most importantly, Rousseau brought up the issue of the innocence of children against the idea of original sin. The Romantic conception of childhood took this idea even further, depicting children as "creatures of deeper wisdom, finer aesthetic sensitivity, and a more profound awareness of enduring moral truths" (Grylls 1978, as quoted by Heywood 2001: 24). The Romantics declared their visions through art and poetry, bringing their ideas of nature, joy in living and original innocence to 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America (Greenleaf 1979: 62, Heywood 2001: 25-27).

### **2.1.3 Schooling prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

In today's views, education plays an important role when growing up. However, the ways and places of educating children have not always been institutionalized or equal. The first schools in medieval Europe were actually not meant for children at all, but for priests in training. In the context of childhood, the following paragraphs will explore the history of educational institutions, patterns and methods.

The methods of schooling were various in the medieval Europe and America. The first schools in European cities were church schools, and according to Ariès (1962: 139), "it is the cathedral school which is the original cell of our entire scholastic system in the West". The language used was Latin, and there

was no institutionalized elementary education provided, since all the basic skills, such as reading and writing, were taught at home or in an apprenticeship. The main subjects were religion (the Psalms and the Scriptures) and arts. In addition, no grading was used, and pupils (boys) studied in mixed groups. In England in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, the division into grammar school and university subjects was vague. The average age of starting school was around ten years, and the basic studies lasted only a couple of years. There were both day-schools and boarding schools, but towards the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the last mentioned became more common. Also individual tutoring occurred, often beside the church schooling. (Ariès 1962: 38-154, 269-277.)

In France, there were two types of boarding schools: “the pedagogicas which sent their pupils to classes in the colleges (sort of secondary schools), and the licensed schools which taught the younger children themselves, up to the fourth class” (Ariès 1962: 280). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century these two were unified, and thus formed new private institutions of comprehensive education. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century boarding schools were still popular, as a consequence of the belief that children “should live apart from adults, under a special discipline” (Ariès 1962: 283). However, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this principle lost its support, and parents wanted their children to live near them.

The origins of the primary school lie in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, where “little schools” were held. The little schools taught reading and singing, etiquette, and writing and arithmetic to children from seven to twelve years of age. (Ariès 1962: 288-300.) In addition, charity schools were established in France and in England to educate also the poor children, including girls (Ariès 1962: 303-305). In the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the separation of middle class and the lower classes created so-called public schools in England.

As in Europe, also in America the apprenticeship was an accepted way of teaching boys and young men all the skills and knowledge they would need in life. However, in the antebellum period the economic change transformed the relationship of a master and his apprentice – wages were required in compensation for the work. Supported by the ideas of educational reformers, the economic and the social changes resulted in a need of public school. (Reese 2005: 15-16.)

Cunningham (1995: 101-106) approaches the question of schooling from a different angle than Ariès. Taking the child and the family into focus, he finds three reasons for schooling: the need for religious education, reading skills and child-minding. The last mentioned issue does not come up in Ariès' writings, but the parents needed someone to take care of the children when they were working. So primary school also served as a kind of kindergarten for the youngest pupils.

As mentioned above, schools were not originally established to educate children. Only when the awareness of the special nature of childhood was recognized, did the educators become concerned about children as potential learners and citizens. Also in the United States the interest towards schooling increased significantly towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the recognition of childhood and the changes in the society (see Chapter 2.2.2).

## **2.2 Childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century America**

This chapter will concentrate on childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, since that is when and where the *Little Women* series takes place. According to Illick (2002: 58), in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century childhood lengthened its duration and slowly become more and more important as a stage of life, at least in the middle class society. Also the growing significance of schooling and the creation of the common school influenced children's lives and the concept of childhood. In addition, this chapter includes Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott's

views about raising and educating children that evidently affected also Alcott's own childhood and opinions, as well as her writings.

### **2.2.1 Age of innocence**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, children belonged to the home (and to women) and they were to be separated from working life, publicity and competition, in other words, areas of life that belong to men (Elbert 1987: 22), at least when it came to middle class children. From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the mother's role in the family extended and the shift towards a more matriarchal society begun. According to Gillis (2003: 150), the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also the time when "the very notion of family time emerged in Europe and in North America". Before that also the meaning of family was different, and everyone belonging in the household, including servants and slaves, were part of the family as well. Only in the Victorian era and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was having a family closely associated with having children. (Gillis 2003: 151, 157.)

It was the family's responsibility to take care of children, since there was no social security, day care, compulsory school attendance, or basically any other instance that would look after them outside the family. In addition, children's rights were not universally introduced until in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when the United Nations proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959).

Ariès (1962: 29) has said that the privileged age in the nineteenth century was actually childhood, even though it has been argued that the century of the child was, in fact, the following one (Key 1900, as quoted by Cunningham 1995: 163). Nevertheless, interest in and understanding of childhood continued to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was visible also in literature. As Burr (2001: 51) points out: "With the rise of the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, authors began to reconceive the child as a pure, wise, and glorious spirit". As the American genres of literature and types of writing reflected those of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fiction also aimed at children was



mostly romantic (see Chapter 2.3), according to the prevailing beliefs of children in general being “born as pure, unique wellsprings of creativity” (Elbert 1987: 198). A need to preserve the so-called innocence and the enjoyment of childhood developed (Cunningham 1995: 134).

However, contradictory views also emerged. As Reynolds (1990: 32) mentions, childhood was considered simultaneously as sentimental, good and uncontaminated, but also as “the domain of covert desires and fantasies”. In addition, combined with the Romantic visions that gained ground, Locke’s idea of children’s minds as empty slates were also popular among 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans (Illick 2002: 58).

In terms of clothing, children were dressed similarly until the age of seven to emphasize their asexual innocence. When it came to toys and general behaviour, however, boys and girls had their own, different habits. Boys were encouraged to act energetically by competing and going in for sports, and they had the freedom of playing outside in the streets and playfields, learning to become independent men. Quite the opposite, girls were supposed to control themselves in delicate play with dolls, inside the house. Boys were allowed to express strong feelings such as anger, and conquered fear, but girls were to be totally protected from these kinds of emotions. The division between girls and boys grew so immense in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that even child-advice books were aimed at one gender or the other. (Illick 2002: 63-65.) Also children’s fiction was aimed at either boys or girls – mostly boys – so therefore there was a need for girls’ books in 19<sup>th</sup> century America (see Chapter 3.4).

“By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, writes Cunningham (1995: 41), “an ideology of childhood had become a powerful force in middle-class Europe and North America”. According to this ideology, the significance of childhood to what kind of person one becomes as an adult as well as childhood’s rights and privileges were recognized. As Zelizer (1985, as quoted by Heywood 2001:

27) puts it; “between the 1870s and the 1930s there emerged in America the economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless' child”. Consequently, children no longer helped the family financially, but it did not reduce the appreciation of them.

Additionally, the family’s role in child rearing was considered to be very important. According to Cunningham (1995: 41), the value of childhood became visible in various ways: “in a belief in the importance of early education; in a concern for the salvation of the child’s soul; in a growing interest in the way children learn; and in a sense that children were messengers of God; and that childhood was therefore the best time of life”. Especially the ideas of learning seem to be of great relevance, since schooling children had already become a matter of discussion and progress in Europe and in North America (see Chapters 2.1.3 and 2.2.2). In addition to the personal benefits for each individual, schooling also profited the state and the society by creating accomplished citizens. The state performed social control over its citizens through institutionalized schooling, as all the pupils were taught the same things, approved by the state (Cunningham 1995: 119).

### **2.2.2 Public schooling: “the schooled society”**

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the interest towards schooling children was slowly increasing in colonial America. However, only after the creation of the new republic at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the need of communally schooled citizens recognized. Formerly the school system had consisted of a separate mixture of private and public schools. In cities, wealthy parents sent their children to boarding schools or hired tutors for them, whereas middle class children attended academies or independent pay schools. There were also some charity schools for poor pupils. In the countryside, however, the school system consisted of one common school, which children attended irregularly, depending on the harvesting cycle in the farms.

The government and the states, together with the educational reformers, started a public school movement that lasted from the 1830s to the 1860s, creating systems of education for the states. Especially in the cities some changes took place: the curriculum was standardised, teachers' training gained attention and pupils were divided into groups according to their ages. Alongside with the public school there were Sunday schools that taught the Bible, reading and writing, also for those who had to work during weekdays.

Schools were now places in which children were taught to be obedient and morally disciplined. The task of education was taken away from homes and families, leaving parents with the function of providing their children emotional and physical nourishment. (Illick 2002: 67-70, Reese 2005: 10-13.)

### **2.2.3 Bronson Alcott, an educational reformer**

Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father, was as well interested in educating and raising children. He "had canonized childhood in meticulous observations of his daughters' early development" (Elbert 1987: xiv), basing his theories on his observations on his own children. He followed Anna's (Louisa's big sister) and Louisa's physical, psychological and emotional growth, observing especially their relationship with their mother (Elbert 1987: 26-27, 29).

Alcott senior was a teacher who put his own methods of education into use in his own schools. Unfortunately, not many of these schools succeeded, maybe because his ideas were too progressive for the time. He said that "education was an inalienable right" (Elbert 1987: 10), and accepted students (also girls) from poor or black families. Louisa and her sisters were among his most enthusiastic students. According to Elbert (1897: 22), Bronson's writings put him in "mainstream of liberal reformers".

Bronson Alcott believed in Johann H. Pestalozzi's methods in education, which meant generally learning through activity (Elbert 1987: 23). He also thought

that children were naturally sensible and truly good. He followed Locke's ideas of the mind as "tabula rasa", an empty slate, rejecting the puritan theology of original sin (Petrino 2001: 120, Elbert 1987: 8-9). However, his main principle was a transcendentalist one: "children are born knowing everything, and need only to have their inner thought 'opened out of the soul'" (Miller 1957: 86), which he tried to do when teaching, with varying success.

Consequently, Bronson Alcott was one of the first American Transcendentalists, who trusted in "inner light and direct personal experience with nature" (Elbert 1987: 3). He experimented his philosophy in a farm called Fruitlands with his family (see chapter 3.1). The Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau to name a few, were "an American counterpart to the ebullient Romanticism in Europe" (Miller 1957: x), and objected the materialistic standpoint of life.

In addition, Bronson Alcott believed that children's innate morality was often challenged by "wildness". Therefore it was important that children were given a freedom of will and that the methods used in educating them were encouraging (Elbert 1987: 8-9, 23-26). Louisa May Alcott agreed with her father, and as shown later in this study, these ideas of education are noticeable also in the *Little Women* series.

### **2.3 Children's literature in 19<sup>th</sup> century America**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century America, the roots of children's literature lie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European juvenile literature full of moral pedagogy and Puritan ideology of the sinful child (Burr 2001: 50). The purpose of children's literature was mainly to educate, and only secondly to entertain. However, also the Romanticism of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America (Bradley et al. 1962a: 11) affected the style of children's books. Fairy tales and didactic fantasy gained popularity among child audiences (Burr 2001: 51).

Romanticism was gradually overcome by realism, with “pragmatic, instrumental, or naturalistic interpretations of man and his destiny” (Bradley et al. 1962b: 4). The American Civil War affected this shift when Alcott and her generation got involved in liberal reformers’ activities (Elbert 1987: xvii). As it usually is the case, also Alcott’s fictional works reflect the social, economical and personal circumstances in the real world.

LW does not fit in completely to the contemporary style of writing for girls (Reynolds 1990: 92-99), though it was the first one of its genre. According to Klein (2000), LW has its roots in American conduct books that offered Christian-based ethical advice and guidelines to girls. This background is noticeable in the text, but not thoroughly, as Alcott did not encourage her girls to be passive and submissive. Alcott’s domestic realism is combined with Romantic elements, with atypical rebellious girl characters (see Chapter 5.3). In addition, her other writings for children and adults included also other progressive themes such as temperance, coeducation, antislavery and women’s suffrage (Burr 2001: 53).

### 3 LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

This chapter will introduce the life and works of the author in question, Louisa May Alcott. As *Little Women* can be seen as an autobiographical series and as the author's own childhood and her views on it have most likely affected her writings, it is important to familiarize oneself with Alcott's roots as well. However, not all little incidents and episodes of her life are reported here; only the main events and those that are relevant to the topic of childhood. The chapter will draw mostly on two writers; Sarah Elbert (1987) and Ednah D. Cheney (1980), a contemporary writer who has written the first biography on Alcott. In addition to the author's personal life, the primary sources of this study, the *Little Women* series, will be presented.

#### 3.1 Childhood

Louisa May Alcott was born in November 29, 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. As mentioned earlier, her father Amos Bronson Alcott was a noted transcendentalist (see for example Elbert 1987) and an educator, and her mother Abigail May Alcott, was a home builder and a social worker. Louisa May was the second of four daughters. The eldest, Anna Bronson Alcott was one and a half years older than Louisa, and the youngest were Elizabeth Sewall Alcott and Abigail May Alcott (named after her mother). They also had a brother who died as a baby (Cheney 1980: 18, Elbert 1987: 41).

The family moved around quite a lot, first to Boston when Louisa was two, then to Concord, Massachusetts in 1840. Louisa and her sisters were educated by their father, and they barely went to other schools except for his (Cheney 1980: 25-26). Already at the age of three, Louisa attended her father's Temple School in Boston as his youngest student. The main principles of governing at the school and at Alcotts' home were self-examination and self-sacrifice. The

family was poor, and getting by was not easy for them. Bronson did not succeed with his schools, as his quite radical views on childhood were disapproved of (Elbert 1987: 30-37). When the times were hardest, the Alcotts borrowed money from Abba's father, Colonel May. Their friends, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, also helped them financially and by offering their support (Elbert 1987: 39). Louisa was especially keen on Emerson's library that was always open for her and her sisters (Elbert 1987: 44). Later on, Louisa had an adolescent affection towards Emerson, and she wrote him poems and letter, but only revealed her fascination to him as an adult (Elbert 1987: 90).

Bronson Alcott arranged his children's days according to a quite strict routine (Elbert 1987: 32), yet allowed them to play and actively exercise their bodies. The family followed a vegetarian diet, as Bronson believed that it would help to maintain a sweet temper (Cheney 1980: 53). Both Bronson and Abba were reformists, believing "equal education, equal property and equal privileges" (Elbert 1987: 40). The Romantic reformists called themselves the Transcendentalists (see Chapter 2.2.4), and "criticized the dominant materialistic ideology", believing in "human perfectability" and nature (Elbert 1987: 42, 44).

In 1843, after returning from an idealistic working trip to England, Bronson Alcott bought a farm in Harvard, near Concord, with his friend Charles Lane, and named it "Fruitlands". It was his "ideal, organic community of simple values" (Elbert 1987: 43). During that time, Mr. Lane took care of the children's education. Later, in a story called "Transcendental Wild Oats" (published in *Independent*, December 8, 1873), Louisa May Alcott wrote about this time in Fruitlands (Cheney 1980: 33-34). However, the experiment failed and the family moved first to Still River, then back to Concord (Cheney 1980: 48-49). Mr. Alcott still taught his children himself, and encouraged them to write and play in order to improve their language skills and feed their imagination (Cheney 1980: 49-50). The parents also wrote little notes on the girls' pillows

and in their diaries in order to encourage them in their striving for good virtues (Elbert 1987: 45). According to Louisa herself, she was a moody child who struggled to be kind, obedient and patient (Cheney 1980: 35-48). She also acted like the son of the family, as her temper and activity were not typical for a girl (Elbert 1987: 45).

Cheney (1980: 44-45) writes that religion (Protestantism) was a natural part of Louisa's life, and she trusted God's guidance without doubt. This kind of faith is visible also in the narration of the *Little Women* series. Religion was an important source of strength for her also as an adult, but she did not care much for religious forms and rites (Cheney 1980: 115-116).

In 1845, the Alcotts were able to buy a house of their own in Concord. Louisa has stated that the years in Concord were the happiest times of her life, and that the life in this house acted as a model for the paradisiacal atmosphere in LW (Cheney 1980: 31, 52). However, the financial uncertainty forced the family to remove to Boston, where Mrs. Alcott got a job as a social worker. By taking part in voluntary associations Abba Alcott entered the public life, especially engaging herself in helping poor families and children (Elbert 1987: 93-95). Louisa worked as a teacher (Cheney 1980: 52, 62), but her true passion was theatre. She wrote plays (like Jo in LW) and performed them with her sister Anna (Cheney 1980: 63-66). She also served as a companion for a family for two months, which was not a pleasant experience for her and helped inspire a story entitled "How I Went Out To Service" (Cheney 1980: 66-67).

Alcott got her first story published in 1852 (Cheney 1980: 68), but as writing did not profit her financially yet, she spent her time also teaching and sewing (Cheney 1980: 70-71, Elbert 1987: 106). The first real publication was a little book called *Flower Fables* (1955), a collection of stories Louisa wrote for Emerson's daughter (Cheney 1980: 76, Elbert 1987: 106). She proudly received



32 dollars from this “first-born” (Elbert 1987:106), and started her career as a writer.

In October 1857 the Alcotts moved back to Concord and bought a house called the “Orchard House”. There Louisa’s younger sister Elizabeth died of a long-term illness that started with scarlet fever (Cheney 1980: 92-93, Elbert 1987: 111-112). Later, Louisa immortalizes the memory of her sister as Beth in *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. Beth is depicted as an angelic and sweet girl who accepts her approaching death peacefully (see chapter 5.1).

### 3.2 Adulthood

Her sister Anna got engaged and then married, and her husband and their marriage are depicted in *GW* and *JB*. Louisa too got an offer of marriage, but she declined, as she did to other proposals she received later on. She was so closely involved with her family that she could not think of a life outside the family; and, besides, she said that “she got tired of everybody” (Cheney 1980: 94), including any possible husband. Louisa concentrated on her writing, and slowly, started earning a living from it.

In 1860, Mr. Alcott was appointed as Superintendent of Schools in Concord (Cheney 1980: 111), which improved the family’s financial situation. In her diary and her letters, Louisa declares their happiness and starts to form up the idea of “the Pathetic Family”, as she calls it, of the *Little Women* series (Cheney 1980: 110-114).

Already as a child, Louisa had been a keen reader, and this habit continued throughout her life. She found great pleasure in reading almost anything that “came in her way” (Cheney 1980: 115). In 1861 she started writing her first novel called *Moods*. Many publishers turned it down, and it was published only later, after the success of her other books. However, as Cheney states

(1980: 116-120), *Moods* was Louisa's own favourite among all her works, maybe just because it was her first novel. She continued writing, taking her ideas "from her own experience of life" (Cheney 1980: 129). Additionally, she wrote several stories to different newspapers (Cheney 1980: 157), and thrillers using a pseudonym of A.M. Barnard (Elbert 1987: 170). These so-called "Blood and Thunder Stories" are very much disapproved of in LW and GW, where Jo tries to gain some money by writing stories about sensational love, betrayal and crime. Actually, as the thrillers were written under the secret identity, not many people in Alcott's lifetime knew that they were hers (Porter & Reiser 2009).

When the Civil War broke out in the United States, Louisa felt that she had to do her part by working as a nurse in the Union Hospital at Georgetown. She only had been there for six weeks when she got too sick to work, and never fully regained her health. She returned home, and allowed the letters she had written in Georgetown for her family to be published in the *Commonwealth* newspaper. She also wrote a story called "Hospital Sketches" (1963), using her experiences in the hospital as an inspiration. (Cheney 1980: 137-157.)

In 1865 Louisa got the opportunity to travel to Europe with an invalid lady, but the companionship did not last long as Louisa felt too moody to be able to serve her employer satisfactorily. She travelled for a while alone in Paris and England, and returned home in July 1866 to care for her mother who was taken ill. She worked hard on her stories, trying to support the family sufficiently. In 1968 she got a request from the firm of Robert Brothers, that later became her publisher for twenty years, suggesting that she would write a girls' book for them. She agreed, and in July 1868, LW was finished. Using her own experiences and her family as a model, Alcott, to her own surprise, had finally succeeded in creating a story that gained a large audience. (Cheney 1980: 171-190.)

According to Cheney (1980: 191), “The excitement of the children [the intended audience, children who had read the book] was intense; they claimed the author as their own property, and felt as if she were interpreting their very lives and thoughts”. However, Alcott did not want to be a public person herself (Elbert 1987: 281) and was quite bothered with all the attention she gained from her little fans. LW was translated into French, German and Dutch soon after its publication (Cheney 1980: 191), and later into many other languages as well, mesmerizing children around the world. Alcott had decided to keep the copyright of the book to herself, which turned out to be a fortunate choice as LW provided her income years after its publication (Elbert 1987: 184).

In the next twenty years, Alcott wrote and published eight popular novels and numerous short stories (Elbert 1987: 219). Working on LW, its sequel GW and the following stories and books was quite exhausting for her, since she suffered from constant illness, for example a chronically sore throat (Elbert 1987: 223). Fortunately, she was able to travel to Europe with her sister May and gather her strengths by the capital earned from LW in 1870. During the year she spent in Europe she wrote LM, partly in memory of her sister Anna’s beloved husband Mr. Pratt, who had passed away. When she returned to Concord, LM was published and had sold 50,000 copies. However, Alcott could not stay at home, but went to Boston where she was able to concentrate on working better. At the age of 40, Alcott was now finally able to support her family financially in a way that satisfied her, “the son of the family”. (Cheney 1980: 209-256, Elbert 1987: 239.)

The following years Alcott spent writing. In 1872, *Work*, one of her most successful novels, was published. She spent the summers 1876 and 1877 in Concord, taking care of her mother who was very ill (Cheney 1980: 289). Louisa herself was not well either, but suffered, for example, from insomnia (Cheney 1980: 266). In 1877, Alcott wrote a story called “A Modern Mephistopheles” anonymously for the famous Robert Brothers “No Name Series”. And, as she

was not recognised, she could try out a different style of writing than that of the famous children's author (Cheney 1980: 289-290, 296).

Alcott also spoke of a woman's and women's rights (Elbert 1987: xv, 257-258, Cheney 1980: 275-276). Her writings support the idea of women's right to both home life (private) and individuality (public) (Elbert 1987: xiii-xix, 1).

Louisa's mother died in November 1877. Her youngest sister May got married to a man called Mr. Nieriker in 1878 and gave birth to a little girl. Soon after the delivery her health worsened and in 1879 she passed away. May's wish was that the little daughter, Louisa May Nieriker (Lulu), would be sent to Louisa's care, and so it happened in 1880. (Cheney 1980: 308-311, Elbert 1987: 281.) Louisa enjoyed the company of the little girl, feeling like a mother herself, but she also continued writing.

In 1880, Bronson Alcott established the School of Philosophy, and despite her disinterest in philosophy, Louisa supported her father in realizing his dream (Cheney 1980: 314). In the autumn 1882 Bronson suffered from a serious stroke of paralysis, from which he never completely recovered. Louisa and her sister Anna henceforth took care of him. The Orchard House was sold and they all moved in with Anna. (Cheney 1980: 346-347.)

Despite her weak health, Louisa worked on a collection of stories called *Lulu's Library*, published in 1885, 1887 and 1889. In addition, the last part of the *Little Women* series, JB, came out in 1886. (Cheney 1980: 348.) She suffered from nervousness, hoarseness, feebleness and sleeplessness, among other things, and was treated by Dr. Rhoda Lawrence, at whose house she also lived for the rest of her life. She was getting prepared for her own death, and decided to adopt her youngest nephew, in order for him to inherit her (Cheney 1980: 366-368). She experienced serious headaches, and according to Cheney (1980: 371), "the trouble on the brain increased rapidly". Elbert (1987: 282) states that Alcott

suffered from mercury poisoning as a result of the treatment of the typhoid fever. In March 6, 1888, two days after her father's death, she quietly passed away.

According to Cheney (1980: 393), "Miss Alcott's literary work is so closely interwoven with her personal life that it need little separate mention". After all, Alcott was a versatile writer: she wrote a lot of stories for children, but also a couple novels for elder audience, in addition to poems, letters and diary texts for others' as well as her own pleasure.

### **3.3 The *Little Women* series**

LW is a typical example of domestic fiction. Elbert (1987: 199) states that the book is actually the first one of its genre, and cleared way for other works of that style. There was a need for a girls' book, as publisher Thomas Niles pointed out to Alcott (Eiselein & Phillips 2001: 178), so one can assume that the audience already existed when LW was published. The book has been very popular among girls of all ages over the years, and it seems that it has not lost its charm even after 150 years of its publication. The main characters of the series are presented in the Appendix. The first one of the four novels describes the life of the March family during a year, all the girls being still children and eager to grow up. The second book, *GW*, follows their life further. The girls are older now, with their own adventures and aims in life. They are also forced to leave their paradise-like childhood and encounter some hardships and sadness. In the third book of the series, the events take place in a new setting, Jo and her husband's boarding school called Plumfield. The characters are also different; the protagonists are the students who are mainly boys. The last novel describes the futures of these boys, still concentrating on the life at Plumfield.

According to Elbert (1987: 195), the title of *Little Women* is "a common-place nineteenth-century expression". However, it feels strange that Alcott would have chosen such a diminutive expression for the title of her book, since she

was “a committed feminist” and an active suffragette (Lurie 2004: 14). The more accurate explanation comes from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (Elbert 1987: 195-196). The Dickensian meaning of a little woman portrays a girl that is in between of the stages of being a child and a young woman. The innocence of childhood is gradually vanishing and the role of a woman is gaining ground. This explanation for the title is accurate on the grounds that Alcott was obviously familiar with Dickens’ writings, which is shown for example in the March girls’ admiration of him. They read his books and even set up a literary club in his honour (The Pickwick Club, LW: 98-105). The difficulty of determining one’s stage of being is expressed well by Amy, the youngest sister: “I don’t call myself a child, and I’m not in my teens yet” (LW: 59). It is remarkable that Alcott uses the word “teens”, as the very notion of teenage had not appeared yet in the general insight. Consequently Alcott was possibly a pioneer in labelling and subdividing childhood into different periods. However, the girls are constantly referred to as children by the other characters and the narrator of the book, despite Amy’s own opinion.

The narrator of the *Little Women* series is omniscient and omnipresent, that is to say (s)he knows everything and can “go” everywhere (see Nikolajeva 2002: 117). The narrator is also extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, meaning that (s)he is outside the narrative and not a character in the story. One could assume that the narrator is an adult, as it often is in children’s literature (Nikolajeva 2002: 117), since his/her attitude is all-knowing and educative. Therefore the narrator must be regarded as a trustworthy and believable authority. The reader does not find out anything personal about the narrator, but (s)he comments on the events and the feelings, revealing something about his/her attitude and world view. The narrator is clearly telling a story, and (s)he actually mentions his/her role as a narrator and something about the implied readers: “As young readers like to know ‘how people look’, we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight” (LW: 10). According to Elbert (1987: 196), Jo has the role of a part-

time narrator in *LW*, but in my opinion, rather than being a narrator as such, Jo is used as the source for focalization. Jo's voice is audible in the text and the story is partly told from her point of view, but the adult narrator still remains in the background.

The setting in the series is domestic and the importance of home is clearly pointed out. The events concentrate on family life. As often in domestic fiction, the indoor setting (home) is important, but the girls and boys also spend time outside the house. The environment is described beautifully, and the setting supports the idea of a utopian world, and the myth of an almost perfect childhood (see Elbert 1987: 231). Also, the first book's cyclical and circular time, the complete cycle of one year, maintains the idyllic atmosphere. In addition to the romantic features, however, the descriptions are rather realistic and believable, according to the writing style of realism that was gaining ground in Europe and in America (Bradley et al. 1962b: 4).

As mentioned above, Alcott's own view of life is obviously reflected in the text. *LW* is an autobiographical book, describing Alcott herself as Jo and her sisters as the rest of the March girls. As Lurie (2004: 13) puts it: "the book is American history as well as myth: it is based on Alcott's own childhood and adolescence". The author herself has said that "It's simple and true, and we really lived most of it" (Porter & Reiser 2009). However, the author's own childhood was not as happy and content as it is described in *LW* (Cheney 1980: 16-74).

The basic themes in all the books of the series focus on family life, friendship, growing up and learning. Even though there are also different themes in the novels (loving and losing one's love (*LW*, *GW*), adjusting to new environments (*LM*, *JB*) etc.), the tone is alike in all of them, probably because of the narrator.

### 3.3.1 *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy (1868)*

LW begins with a description of the March family's Christmas preparations. It is made clear from the beginning that this is a family whose members deeply care for each other dearly. Situated in the war-time America, in 1860s, also religion, patriotism and helping each other are important factors in the life of the March family. However, the focus is not on war but on family life.

The first book of the series follows the life of the March girls for one year, during which quite a lot happens. The family consists of a father, who is absent most of the time as he serves as a chaplain in the war, a mother, four sisters (Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy) and a servant called Hannah. The story concentrates on family life, growing up, love and the girls' little adventures in the social life of their town. Additional main characters in the story are the Marches' neighbour Mr. Lawrence and his grandson Theodore (also called Laurie). During the year that passes, the girls fight against their childish flaws, learn to take care of themselves and grow towards adulthood. At the end of the book, the eldest sister Meg is even planning to get married to Laurie's tutor, John Brooke.

There is a collective protagonist in the novel (Nikolajeva 2002: 117); all the main characters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, represent different characteristics and ages, and therefore attract different kinds of readers. In writing LW, Alcott created the versatile "American girl" who may have diverse personalities (Elbert 1987: 199) and represent different views of contemporary womanhood (Lurie 2004: 18). The characters are described externally by their looks and actions, but also internally. Their thoughts, feelings and emotions have a crucial role in the narration, which makes the book highly character-orientated. All the girls are used as the sources of focalization (focalizers), but so are also Laurie, the boy from next door, and the girls' mother, Marmee.



The tone of the book is moralistic but caring, and the events are described in a down-to-earth way. As Cheney (1980: 192) reviews the style of LW:

It is a realistic transcript of life, but idealized by the tenderness of real feeling. It teaches the lessons of every-day conduct and inculcates the simplest virtues of truth, earnest effort, and loving affection. There is abundant humor, but no caricature, and tender, deep feeling without sentimentality.

However, though it is easy to agree with Cheney's praise, the style of the book can sometimes feel even too sweet, and the characters too good to be true. In the following books, the characters get a little more edge, so to speak, and become more interesting as persons.

### **3.3.2 *Good Wives* (1869)**

In the second novel in the series, *GW*, continues the story of the March sisters. Happy childhood turns gradually into adolescence and adulthood, bringing worries and grief, but also new kind of happiness and love. As mentioned above, the two first books are often considered as inseparable, even though *GW* takes place three years after the end of *LW*.

The sisters go their separate ways in *GW*, gradually leaving their home to building one their own, or trying their skills in the world outside. Meg becomes Mrs. John Brooke and gives birth to adorable twins, Daisy and Demi. Jo decides to become a governess in a friend's family and meets a new friend, the German Professor Bhaer. Amy goes to travel in Europe with her aunt, practising her art skills and socializing with European friends and Laurie. Beth's angelic childhood never proceeds further: to the sadness of the family, friends and the reader, she dies of a long-term illness.

In *GW*, the attitudes towards childhood are not as visible as in *LW*, since the characters are older and starting their lives independently. However, the themes of the book examine the roles of mother and father (see Chapters 4.3 and 5.4), for example.

### 3.3.3 *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys (1871)*

Meg, Jo and Amy are grown-up, married and have children of their own in the third book of the series. The novel focuses on the life at Plumfield Estate School run by Jo and her husband Fritz Bhaer. Jo's school is a homelike environment for boys to learn, play, and live. The eldest of the boys is Mr. Bhaer's German nephew Franz, 16 years old, and the youngest is the Bhaers' own son Teddy, of three years. The rest of the boys have different ages and different personalities, constructing a similar type of collective protagonist as the March girls in the previous novels. Even though the book focuses on boys and young men, also a couple of girls are present, contrasting with the boys (see Appendix 1).

As the primary setting of the book is school, the focus of LM is on education. However, the novel points out that not only is "literary" education important, but also becoming a good man or woman. The Bhaers teach their boys good manners, morality and compassion, in addition to the traditional school subjects. As some of the boys are orphans or come from otherwise broken homes, Plumfield is the nearest thing to home they have ever experienced. Jo herself continues the tradition of encouraging and loving motherhood, following her own mother's example. As in the previous books, the use of focalization, sometimes overriding the adult narrator, brings out also the children's point of view.

According to Elbert (1987: 235), "there is no real plot in *Little Men*, but the book holds reader interest because Plumfield seems "the nicest place in the world", and in such a place it seems there are no really bad people or serious misfortunes." Indeed, nothing really bad happens in Plumfield, and at the end, Jo and Fritz can be very content the way their "crop" has grown during the summer and the autumn.

### **3.3.4 *Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out* (1886)**

According to its title, the last novel of the series describes the futures of Jo's boys and girls (see Appendix 1). The novel takes place ten years after the previous one, so the most of the characters are not children anymore. Some of the boys have left Plumfield; Franz to write for newspapers, Emil to serve as a sailor, Demi to write for newspapers and to become a publisher, Nat to study in Germany and Dan to try his wings all around the country. In the course of the book, Emil and Franz get married, and also Demi and Tom find themselves fiancées. Daisy and Nat fall in love with each other, but their romance is postponed until they get a little older. Plumfield has been expanded with the Lawrence College, and its students crowd the premises most of the time. Jo herself has become a famous children's author, modelling Alcott herself.

In JB, the youngest characters are cousins Bess and Josie (see Appendix 1.), and the focus is not on childhood to any further extent. However, the attitudes towards schooling and learning are still available. The themes of the book discuss growing up, the importance of education in general, and succeeding in raising children, and thus provide decent material for this study as well.

#### 4 CHILDHOOD IN THE *LITTLE WOMEN* SERIES

The core analysis is divided into five parts; the first discusses childhood in the series in general, and the rest concentrate each on one important aspect of childhood. The aim of this study is, consequently, to provide a comprehensive image of childhood as depicted in the four novels of the *Little Women* series, and thus examine childhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century America from the perspective of one of the most popular female writer's, Louisa May Alcott.

Childhood in the series is presented as innocent but creative. Children are seen as individuals with different personalities, but the emphasis is on educating them and in helping them to become civilized women and men. At first it may seem that childhood is described only as preparation for adulthood; but, looking more closely, the matter becomes more complicated. After all, the girls and boys are not passive objects of governing, but active learners who have their own ambitions.

##### 4.1 Children's individuality

The main characters in LW are "imaginative, energetic and imperfect" and therefore "fully human" (Eiselein & Phillips 2001: 181). The March girls' individuality is noticeable, since they all represent different types of girls, with different characteristics and little faults. Also the students in Jo's school have their own personalities from a shy and smart bookworm to a reckless "wannabe" hero. This idea of the individuality of children reflects the opinions of John Locke (1693, as quoted by Cunningham 1995: 64): "they have their various Tempers, different Inclinations, and particular Defaults". It is interesting that, on the one hand, LW seems like a pure praise of individuality, but on the other hand, the moral of the book supports the ideas of traditional domesticity. Although the parents encourage the girls to fulfil their personal ambitions, they also assume them to practice their domestic skills and become "good wives". The girls are supposed to know how to take care of the home

and the family, even if their goals in life lie elsewhere. In addition, in the last two books, the boys are to become good, civilized men who can take care of their family financially and act bravely in any given situation.

Elbert (1987: 199) points out that “*Little Women* significantly reassures young readers, who are generally younger than Amy March in the first part, that they will remain truly themselves in growing up.” Even though the main characters grow up, they do not lose their individual characteristics that make them such fascinating as children. However, their characters do round up a little, as their “childish” tempers soften up.

In the first two books, the protagonists are the March girls. As mentioned above, they all have different personalities: the eldest, Meg, is sensible and calm, Jo is a wilful and creative tomboy, Beth is the quiet and sweet angel of the family, and the youngest Amy is somewhat spoilt and vain, but also adventurous and kind-hearted. These features are revealed right from the beginning of LW, when the girls are seen knitting in their living room and waiting their mother to come home. First they discuss Jo’s boyish behaviour, and then continue on Amy’s character:

‘As for you, Amy,’ continued Meg, ‘you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now, but you’ll grow up an affected little goose, if you don’t take care. I like your nice manners and refined ways of speaking when you don’t try to be elegant; but your absurd words are as bad as Jo’s slang.’ ‘If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?’ asked Beth, ready to share the lecture. ‘You’re a dear, and nothing else,’ answered Meg, warmly, and no one contradicted her, for the “Mouse” was the pet of the family. (LW: 9)

Consequently, though the sisters are of almost same age (between 16 and 12), their personalities differ from each other considerably. However, the basis of their characters lies in the respect towards other people and their wish to “be good”, which is most probably an outcome of the education provided by their mother and father. The differences in their characters is taken into consideration also in their education, as Amy goes to school but Beth is educated at home (see Chapter 7.3).

As mentioned above, the two latter novels describe the life in Jo's schools, mainly focusing on the twelve boy students, who also possess different qualities and characteristics. Some of the characters are wild and adventurous (Tommy, Dan, Nan), some quiet and clever (Demi, Nat, Rob) and some sweet and homely (Daisy, Teddy as a baby). However, not all the characters are described as thoroughly as the others. The narrator gives less attention to Dick, Dolly, Jack and Ned, for example, who therefore stay quite distant to the reader.

#### **4.2 Sweet girls and active boys - and vice versa**

The social standards of that time encourage girls to behave more virtuously and more decently than boys, which causes especially young Jo (in LW & GW) and rebellious Nan (in LM & JB) constant anxiety. These girls are not typical girls in the sense that they are not passive or submissive, but fight against their flaws and rebel against the prevailing attitudes, creating a new type of a girl child. As Jo puts it: "Can't keep still all day, and, not being a pussy-cat, I don't like to dose by the fire. I like adventures, and I'm going to find some" (LW: 48).

For a modern reader, it is quite surprising that, despite Alcott's reputation as an active feminist, the girls in the series are so distinctively different than the boys, and are encouraged to be so. Of course, the timing must be taken into consideration, and also the modern reader must recognise the fact that the culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is different than that of today's. Therefore, although the modern reader may not find it so, Alcott's views on girlhood might have been regarded radical in her own time. Especially the tomboy characters, Jo and Nan, represent a new kind of girl. As Elbert (1987: xvi) explains, Alcott wanted to combine individuality and domesticity - to give her female characters a chance to choose both.

There are also the more traditional girls, Meg, Amy and Beth (in LW and GW), as well as Daisy and little Bess (in LM and JB), who are quite satisfied with

their roles as little women. Still, if they try to break out of their roles as girly girls, most of the times they do not succeed. In LM, Daisy is not allowed to take part in the “rough” boy games, so Jo decides to make a little kitchen for her to play in (see Chapter 8.1). It is strange that even though Jo herself was such a tomboy as a child who got frustrated in the traditional girl’s role, she as an adult forbids Daisy to play with the boys, explaining that “it’s too rough a game for you with dozen boys” (LM: 63). It seems that even though it is often stated that Jo is close to the children and remembers her own childhood, she has forgotten some important aspects of it in becoming an adult and a woman.

When it comes to boys in LM and JB, they are encouraged to be active and sportive, and the importance of physical exercise is emphasized. However, because the setting is in a school (no matter how unordinary) also literal education has its place. The boys are described as noisy, wild, upfront and playful, but also the more quiet characters are noticed. A good example of that is the beginning of LM (2-5), where the boys are described as playing and rampaging around the house, with tranquil Demi depicted as well, reading a book in all peace. The diversity of the boys comes across in the learning habits, games and speaking manners. Unlike the protagonists of the first two books in the series (LW and GW), the protagonists of LM and JB come from different backgrounds, with different families and ways of living.

The children in Jo’s school are supposed to learn from each other. At first, Daisy is the only girl in the school, but then Jo decides to take in Nan. The purpose is to give Daisy an energetic companion and to teach the boys to respect women, but also to educate Nan of course. As Jo says, “half the science of teaching is knowing how much children do for one another, and when to mix them” (LM: 111). Also Amy’s daughter, little “Goldilocks” Bess, visits the school occasionally, giving the boys the possibility to learn to behave like real gentlemen (see Chapter 5.1).

The general impression based on the series is that boys are active and playful, whereas girls are fun-loving but obedient and domestic. Of course, some exceptions to the rule occur, as mentioned above. However, all the children need adults' guidance and encouragement, especially when planning their future.

### 4.3 Children and adults

"They [children] teach us quite as much as we teach them" said Mr. Bhaer" (LM: 218). This sentence reflects the general attitude that adults have towards children in the *Little Women* series. Alcott's father Bronson Alcott had similar ideas about childhood (see chapter 2.2.4), and he also stated "Childhood hath saved me", after spending time with his two eldest daughters (Heywood 2001: 25). Children and their company are appreciated as such, and also adults can learn from their attitudes towards life and its challenges. Having been a tomboy herself, Jo likes especially boys:

"Yes, I know many people think boys are a nuisance, but that is because they don't understand them. I do; and I never saw the boy yet whom I could not get on capitally with after I had once found a soft spot in his heart. Bless me, I couldn't get on at all without my flock of dear, noisy, naughty, harum-scarum little lads, could I, my Teddy?" (LM: 31)

As Jo says, understanding is an important ability when being around children and educating them, and not all adults have the capacity or will to do that. It is interesting to notice that the adults who have the most significant roles in the book (for example Mr. and Mrs. March in LW and GW, and the Bhaers in LM and JB) seem to truly respect and support the children. Jo's attitude in LM reflects this quite well: "...she believed that the small hopes and plans and pleasures of children should be tenderly respected by grown-up people, and never rudely thwarted or ridiculed" (LM: 188). However, when it comes to less central characters, such as Aunt March or Amy's school teacher (in LW), the views are different. Demeaning attitudes towards children and childhood are revealed through their words and actions. For example Amy's teacher favours



physical punishment and Aunt March thinks that children should be seen but not heard. Moreover, humiliation seems still to be one of the ways to govern children, which is shown in a little confession by Amy, describing how one of her friends was punished:

‘My only comfort’, she said to Meg, with tears in her eyes, ‘is that my mother don't make tucks in my dresses whenever I'm naughty, as Maria Park's mother does. My dear, it's really dreadful; for sometimes she is so bad, her frock is up to her knees, and she can't come to school. When I think of this *deggerredation*, I feel that I can bear even my flat nose and purple gown, with yellow sky-rockets on it.’ (LW: 43)

As Amy explains, Maria Parks mother humiliates her daughter by making “tucks” in her dresses, so that everyone can see when she has misbehaved. However, this is an exception in the series, as most of the time the punishments used do not include humiliation and absolutely no physical violence, but rather are an educative and encouraging way of teaching children (see Chapter 6.2).

According to Elbert (1987: 198), “placing children at the center of the action, Romantic juvenile fiction also encourages them to reveal adult hypocrisy. Sometimes, childhood ends with the pragmatic necessity of growing up to join the hypocrites.” This is true when it comes to grown-up Jo, as she apparently has forgotten her passion for wild and active games (see Chapter 4.2), and agrees with the way most adults think of girly manners and safety issues.

Elbert (1987: 235) also states that “grownups always maintain their authority in Alcott’s fiction, in large measure by posing as children’s best friends and companions”. I have to disagree with Elbert at some level, as in my opinion, the adults actually are the children’s good friends and trustees, instead of just posing to be such. The children do not question the adults’ authority, and they trust in their friendship unconditionally.

To conclude, the child characters in the series are nice and naughty, domestic and adventurous, as well as noisy and quiet; in other words individuals with

many different characteristics. Differences between boys and girls occur, and the traditional view of wild boys and sweet girls is present, but Alcott introduces also untamed girls and calm boys. As shown above, the children have personalities of their own, but most of the time they are recognized and treated according to their gender, as girls or boys. The adults, on their part, mostly act as children's trustees in the series. They have the authority provided by their age and experience in life, but the ways of educating children are encouraging. The adults truly want to take part in the lives of the children, and be good examples for them. The parents also wish to protect their children and their innocence, so the next chapter will discuss the ideas of Romantic innocence in the series.

## 5 ROMANTIC INNOCENCE

In general, the description of childhood is very romantic in the series. The prevailing literary style naturally affects also the image of childhood in the books. According to Elbert (1987: 80-82), no such thing existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as female adolescence. The “little women’s” innocence was protected and their life sphere was principally domestic. When it came to young men, in contrast, they were considered as dangerous threat to the established order, mostly because of their growing sexuality.

According to James & James (2001: 74), the concept of innocence was proposed by Rousseau in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Chapters 2.1.2 and 2.2.1). Innocence means a state that is naive, and “free from moral guilt” (James & James 2001: 74). The term is often used in contrast to the “evil child” (see for example Heywood 2001 and James et al 1998), especially before the Romantics.

Even though the girls and boys participate in the daily routines of taking care of the house and educating themselves in one way or another, their days still consist mostly of moments dedicated to playing, acting and telling stories. Children are safe in their idyllic homes, and their life is pleasant, despite the fact that the families are not especially wealthy. The real poverty, hunger or the horrors of the Civil War touch them only from the outside, if at all.

### 5.1 No “loving”

According to Reynolds (1990: 93), children and especially girls in girls’ books are usually very much protected, and their innocence is to be preserved, like that of their readers’ as well. It is noticeable that the March girls are not particularly interested in the opposite sex, except as friends, although the eldest sister Meg eventually falls in love with Laurie’s tutor, John Brooke. Their parents seem to support the idea of keeping the girls “innocent” as long as

possible, but they recognise the fact that some day they'll have to grow up and leave their childhood home. As Marmee tells Jo:

“It is natural and right you should all go to homes of your own in time, but I do want to keep my girls as long as I can, and I am sorry that this happened so soon, for Meg is only seventeen and it will be some years before John can make a home for her. Your father and I have agreed that she shall not bind herself in any way, nor be married, before twenty. If she and John love one another, they can wait, and test the love by doing so. She is conscientious, and I have no fear of her treating him unkindly. My pretty, tender hearted girl! I hope things will go happily with her.” (LW: 194)

The supposition of men having to take care of women is visible in Marmee's speech. She says that John has to “make a home” for Meg before they can get married, so that he would be able to maintain her. In addition, the parents wish their daughter to preserve her innocence at least a little longer, before she gets married and starts having children herself.

The parents have power over their children when it comes to their future plans and marital choices. This is the case at least in the March family, in which the children respect their parents' opinion. Also Meg herself as an adult forbids her daughter Daisy to get involved with any romance:

“Daisy knows my wishes, and I trust her. You [Jo] must keep an eye on Nat, and let him clearly understand that there will be no “loving”, or I shall forbid the letter-writing. I hate to seem cruel, but it is too soon for my dear girl to bind herself in any way.” (JB: 105)

When it comes to young Meg and Daisy, the children understand surprisingly well that their parents only want their best. In my opinion, this reflects the idea of mutual respect: the parents use their experience in life for the good of their children, and the children know that.

## **5.2 Angelic Beth and little Bess**

The most protected and innocent of the March girls is thirteen-year-old Beth. She likes to stay at home, performing her little duties and taking care of her dolls. According to the views of Alcott's father Bronson, children are naturally

sensible, before social institutions spoil them (Elbert 1987: 24). Probably respecting her father's ideas of valuing children's individuality, Alcott wanted Beth to be schooled at home. This reflects also the thought of appreciating children's uniqueness: the Marches let their girls be who they are.

Beth is extremely obedient and represents the traditional view of girlhood. As Lurie (2004: 18) states, "Beth is the typical early Victorian girl-child: sweet, shy, passive, and domestic - the traditional 'angel in the house'". She seems almost too good to be true; her only fault is that she is so shy. Also the fact that Beth is not let to live to adulthood makes her character even more saintly. Her purity of childhood is never destroyed; she remains an innocent angel in the memories of her loved ones. The question is, still, how realistic an image of a child does she actually represent? Could that kind of child - or rather human being in general - exist in real life? It seems that in Beth's case, it is the romantic writing style that makes her the ideal child; good, pure and angelic. The model behind Beth is Alcott's own sister Elizabeth who died young as well (see Chapter 3.1). Maybe the author's personal experience of her sister's death has affected also the angelic image of Beth.

The other delicate character in the series is Bess, Amy and Laurie's little daughter. She is the princess of the family, and even Jo's wild boys respect her sweet manners. She seems even too ladylike for her age:

She would let no one touch her roughly or with unclean hands, and more soap was used during her visits than any other time, because the boys considered it the highest honour to be allowed to carry her highness, and the deepest disgrace to be repulsed with the disdainful command, 'Do away, dirty boy!'. (LM: 215)

Bess, as well as Beth, is an exception to the assumption that children are noisy, dirty, and by possessed by wildness. Bess is also a good example of the influence of education; her parents' efforts to make her a little lady have succeeded. The description of Bess is somewhat one-sided, as all the activities in which she is present concentrate on good manners and being a princess. Maybe such characters, along with the rebellious girls, are needed in children's

literature to show that it is important to respect each other, and that anyone can be just who they are.

### 5.3 Rebellious characters

Also so-called rebellious or naughty girls are presented in girls' fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Reynolds 1990: 98). As Lurie (2004:20) writes, "Jo is also the first and the most famous positive example in fiction of a new kind of girl: the tomboy." She does not want to settle on the traditional place or behaviour that is seen as suitable for girls, but prefers to go her own way:

"I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa, and I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (LW: 9)

Jo's comment reflects the traditional idea of girls' role as a pretty doll and a housewife. She does not want to settle with this role, but instead of actually speaking of changing it for all women, she wishes to change herself, and be a boy. Jo is not interested in tasks that are considered to belong to girls, but would rather "go and fight" outside home. However, she cannot entirely break the patterns set by the society, but is able to influence her life, for example, by educating herself.

Jo's own voice is remarkably audible in the text, creating a realistic image of her passion. One could assume that such an enthusiasm is typical for children, but at least a glimpse of the same passionate attitude towards life can be noticed in the grown-up Jo as well. Accordingly, Mills (2000: 46) has noticed that from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, children's voices can actually be heard in literature, which is an indication of growing importance of childhood.

In LM and JB, the rebelliousness is present in Dan, Tommy, and Annie "Naughty Nan" Harding. Tommy is "as full of mischief as a monkey, yet so

good-hearted that no-one could help forgiving his tricks" (LM: 25). He is a traditional boy character; wild and adventurous, but never purposefully bad or mean. Nan, on her part, is witty but wild, and Jo feels "a great sympathy for Nan, because I was such a naughty child myself that I know all about it" (LM: 110). It is exceptional that also these "naughty girls" have such central roles in the series.

Dan, on the other hand, has been neglected for so long that he does not know how to settle down in Plumfield. He is restless and finds Plumfield too small a place for him, but is finally willing to focus his energy to useful tasks instead of running away. Jo points out (LM: 270-271) that having a loving mother can cool "wild colts" down, and so can the rebelliousness be beaten.

In general, the books' moral does not suggest taming wild children completely, but rather encouraging them to channel their liveliness into other things. There is a time and a place for wild games, but it is also important to know how to control oneself. Also the rebellious children calm down in the presence of their mother.

#### **5.4 Motherly affection**

The mother's role as a domestic angel, visible in 19<sup>th</sup> century British children's literature (Reynolds 1990: 96), is there also in LW and its sequences. The importance of motherly affection and unconditional love can be seen in a scene in which Meg and Jo are leaving the house in the morning to go to work. Their mother comes to the window smiling and waving her hand at them: "Somehow it seemed as if they couldn't have got through the day without that, for whatever their mood might be, the last glimpse of that motherly face was sure to affect them like sunshine" (LW: 38). What differentiates Marmee from the traditional mothers is that she is not passive or dependent. She is the real power that keeps the family together, at least when the father is at war, making

the March family a matriarchy, atypical of the prevailing Victorian type of society (Lurie 2004: 18).

In the latter books, Jo, Meg and Amy themselves continue this tradition of participating motherhood, following the example of Marmee. Additionally, the example of Bronson Alcott and his observations on children are visible in LM, as also Jo takes notes of her boys' progress:

...she took down a thick book, which seemed half-full of writing, and opened at a page on which there was one word at the top. 'Why, that's my name!' cried Nat, looking both surprised and interested. 'Yes; I have a page for each boy. I keep a little account of how he gets on through the week, and Sunday night I show him the record. If it is bad I am sorry and disappointed, if it is good I am glad and proud; but, whichever it is, the boys know I want to help them, and they try to do their best for love of me and father Bhaer.' (LM: 30)

Unlike Bronson Alcott, however, Jo does not make generalized observations of childhood, but wishes to use her remarks for the education of the child in question.

The importance of motherly love is presented in a scene where Rob and Nan are lost in the woods when picking huckleberries. Rob states that "Marmar will come and find me - she always does; I ain't afraid now" (LM: 194), with complete trust in her mother. Then, later when the two runaways are found, the unconditional love of mother and son is revealed:

'I knew you'd come! O Marmar! I did want you so!' For a moment they kissed and clung to another, quite forgetting all the world; for no matter how lost and soiled and worn-out wandering sons may be, mothers can forgive and forget everything as they fold them in their fostering arms. (LM: 202)

What is surprising in JB is that also as good a mother as Jo can "fail" her educational task. This comes across when Jo calls Jack, who is in business with his father, and Ned, who is studying law, "her failures" (JB: 87), without any proper explanation. She is probably disappointed that the boys did not turn out how she would have wanted them to be; morally firm and righteous by



nature. However, it still feels quite harsh to call a child “a failure”, especially when the person saying it is such a gentle and understanding adult as Jo.

### 5.5 The importance of home and family

All the books in the *Little Women* series emphasize the importance of having a place where one can feel safe and comfortable – a home. Already the first chapters of the books lead the reader to the warmth of the homes of the Marches (LW: 7-10) and the Bhaers (LM: 1-2), showing that the children are safe within these houses and with the people living in them. Cheney (1980: 394-395) states that “an especial merit of these books for young boys and girls is their purity of feeling. The family affection which was so predominant in the author’s own life, always appears as the holiest and sweetest phase in human nature.” It indeed seems that the main moral in the novels comes from the love towards one’s family and friends, and that the feelings presented are pure and real.

According to Gillis (2003: 151), prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, children belonged to the household in which they were living, not to the one which they were born to. Even though the *Little Women* series was written during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this kind of view is present especially also in LM, somewhat altered though. Plumfield is a home for all the boys living there, even though some of them actually have a home and parents elsewhere. Of course, as Plumfield is a boarding school, the boys are supposed to spend their weeks there, but on several occasions they also refer to Plumfield as their home. The Bhaers are happy to welcome new non-related members to their family: “My child, you *have* got a father and a mother now, and this is home”, as Jo says to little orphan Nat when he comes to Plumfield (LM: 14).

Furthermore, LM states that the parents do not always know what is best for their children. For example, George Cole, also known as Stuffy, “had been

spoilt by an over-indulgent mother, who stuffed him with sweetmeats till he was sick" (LM: 23), and was sent to Plumfield to get exercise and education. Another example is Billy Ward (LM: 24), whose ambitious father had tried to educate his son too much and too early, and caused only damage to his delicate brain. Weak and retarded Billy was sent to Plumfield in hope of recovery, as his father felt he was incapable of doing any good to him. The idea of the privileges of institutionalized education and the benefits of sending children away to be schooled is visible in LM, however the narrator makes it clear that this school is exceptionally homely and good.

It must be noticed that the family in the *Little Women* series belongs to the middle class, and even though they are not rich, they have enough. According to Joseph Tuckerman, a distant cousin of Abba Alcott (in Elbert 1987: 95), "poor children did not really have a family life as the middle classes knew it." This is visible in LM, as the orphan Nat feels extraordinarily safe in Plumfield after spending some time playing violin in the streets.

The basis of a happy childhood lies in the family, and the March family seems to be an idyllic example of a supporting and loving household. The children are seen as an inseparable part of the family. Mr. March lost his property in trying to help a friend in need, so an elderly relative, Aunt March was willing to adopt one of the girls in order to give her a better life. "Putting out" children, either to be nursed or educated, was a common act and a survival strategy for poor families in the 18<sup>th</sup> century America (Walzer 1974: 353-355, Gillis 2003: 152), and the practice most likely continued also during the nineteenth century. The March family, however, has no intentions of giving up any of their children: "We can't give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another" (LW: 40).

According to its genre, the series is truly domestic fiction. The importance of home and family is pointed out in and between the lines, focusing especially

on the parents' role. Of course, children are an important part of the family as well - there would really be no family without children, according to the series. Consequently, the idea of romantic innocence is visible throughout the novels; in the characters and in the themes.

## 6 LITTLE ADULTS

In the *Little Women* series, childhood is seen as preparation for adulthood and life in general. Marmee tries her best to teach her daughters to become civilized, well-behaving, independent and hard-working individuals, and Jo continues in the footsteps of her mother with her students. From the teachings of the parents and teachers the reader might learn something too; at least that was the purpose of 19<sup>th</sup> century children's literature. Christian values and morality are clearly available in the text, as the March girls and Jo's students are seriously taught to respect their parents, elderly people, and God.

Moreover, it has to be noticed that the respect is mutual. Marmee, Jo and her husband appreciate their girls' and their students' opinions and see them as individuals. The adults do not think that their children are only humans-to-be, but worthy persons as such. However, as time goes by in the story, also the child characters improve. In the beginning of the book the protagonists seem rather flat or even stereotypical with their one-sided qualities, but as the story goes on, they try to improve their little flaws, becoming rounded out as characters. That also makes them dynamic; chronologically as they grow older, but also ethically as they try to pursue some good virtues and get rid of childish vanity, quick-temperedness, shyness or selfishness. It can be said that the children, especially the March girls, become more individualistic during their maturation, and therefore more "valuable" as almost grown-ups than as little children. However, it must be noticed that having the characters improve is also a literal means in creating tension and interest in fictional writing. Therefore the reason for the development of the characters may not merely be that they are children and need to grow up, but that they need to develop as fictional characters, regardless of their age.

## 6.1 Independent learning

When growing up, the contradiction between being dependent on one's parents and becoming an independent individual is probably one of the most difficult challenges to balance with. According to Walzer (1974: 374), preferring attitudes towards independence existed already in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and also in *Little Women* series the emphasis is on individuality. Especially the ambitions of Jo, Nan and Josie guide their choices in life and prevent them from becoming stereotypically domestic female figures.

In the first novel, each of the girls has her own responsibilities inside or outside home. Meg and Jo get their parents support for working outside home, even though women of that time were mostly associated with domestic duties and not with taking care of the family financially. Meg goes to work as a nursery governess for a wealthy family, and Jo as a companion for Aunt March. Both of these are typical jobs for women. Amy goes to school, and as mentioned above, Beth studies at home. In addition to the traditional school subjects, the girls must also learn about cooking, cleaning as well as taking care of the house and the family. The most important task to learn for these 19<sup>th</sup> century girls was how to be a good mother and a wife. They were supposed to know how to run the household by the time they got married. Especially Meg, being the eldest, is getting prepared for marriage and practising her motherly instincts by taking care of the younger sisters. It is remarkable also that Jo, the tomboy of the family, takes Beth under her protection. Maybe she feels that the company of her little sister will calm her down and therefore she herself can also benefit from looking after Beth, or maybe it is her motherly or sisterly instinct that breaks through her boyish nature. In the end, all the girls seem to be at least somewhat feminine in the traditional sense. On the other hand, the series challenges the traditional view by educating the main characters and providing them with ambitions that involve activities outside the home as well, up to a certain point at least (see Chapter 7).

The elder girls also start participating in the social life of the town. For 19<sup>th</sup> century girls it was important to learn good manners and to behave according to etiquette. As a quite traditional female character, Meg seems to enjoy these occasions of social interaction and dressing up, but for Jo they are a cause of anxiety. Jo thinks that boys have often more fun, since they do not have to care so much about their looks or behaving primly. Maybe that is why she later decides to establish a school for boys with her husband.

Amy would very much like to join in the parties, trips and other occasions of “coming out”, but being only 12 years old, she is seen as a child still, and is not yet allowed to take part in these amusements of the young ladies and young men. It becomes clear that children must know their place and try not to get into the adults’ world until the unwritten (and written) rules of the society allow it.

The Plumfield boys have their own tasks and businesses to practise their working skills with: “Several of the boys were ‘in business’, as they called it, for most of them were poor, and knowing that they would have their own way to make by and by, the Bhaers encouraged any efforts at independence” (LM: 54). For example, the boys take care of their animals and plants, and sell eggs and vegetables to gain some pocket money. In trying to raise the boys to become good men, Jo and Fritz prefer giving them quite a lot of freedom in exchange for their efforts.

Even though apprenticeship as a form of education was losing its popularity in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Chapter 2.1.3), some of Jo’s boys are sent away to learn the profession most suitable for them. In JB, Emil serves as a sailor and later a second mate, and Nat is going to Germany to finish his music studies. In the *Little Women* series, working experience is appreciated as much as studying, whichever is the most suitable method for each individual to gain professional skills. As the narrator in JB proposes, “education is not confined to

books, and the finest characters often graduate from no college, but make experience their master, and life their book" (JB:268).

When growing up, the tension between independence and dependence on other people can become overwhelming. Most of the children seem to accept the dependence on adults quite easily, but the wild boy Dan has troubles in adapting to the domestic life of Plumfield (LM & JB). Fortunately Jo understands his restless nature, and gradually teaches him to appreciate also the peacefulness of his new home. Consequently, as the novels propose, it is important to give children responsibilities of their own and some freedom in their actions, in order to help them to become independent men and women.

## 6.2 Imaginative punishments

Children are bound to make mischief and act naughtily sometimes. Most people agree that then they should be punished in a way or another in order to teach them that all actions have consequences. Neither the Marches nor the Bhaers accept corporal punishment. As the *Little Women* series shows, it takes much more imagination to punish a child in another, more efficacious way. Rather than threatening them with punishments, the adults try to make the children want to be good and worthy. As Jo says to the wild boy Dan: "You are my boy now, and if you choose you can make me proud and glad to say so" (LM: 158).

Mr. Bhaer also uses the most unusual punishments. For example, he makes Nat, who is again caught up in a lie, punish him:

Nat took the rule, for when Mr. Bhaer spoke in that tone everyone obeyed him, and, looking as scared and guilty as if about to stab his master, he gave two feeble blows on the broad hand held out to him. Then he stopped and looked up half-blind with tears, but Mr. Bhaer said steadily: "Go on, strike harder." (LM: 60)

This kind of lesson worked efficiently in teaching Nat the consequences of his lies. Marmee's apology had a similar effect on Jo, who was punished after running away for a whole day:

"Did your mother whip you?" asked Nan, curiously.

"She never whipped me but once, and then she begged my pardon, or I don't think I ever should have forgiven her, it hurt my feelings so much."

"Why did she peg your pardon - my father don't."

"Because, when she had done it, I turned round and said, 'Well, you are mad yourself, and ought to be whipped as much as me.' She looked at me a minute, then her anger all died out, and she said, as if ashamed, 'You are right, Jo, I *am* angry; and why should I punish you for being in a passion when I set you such a bad example? Forgive me, dear, and let us try to help one another in a better way.' I never forgot it, and it did me more good than a dozen rods." (LM: 207)

As shown above, though corporal punishment was still used in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, not all parents accepted it. However, they are not heavily judged either, or at least Jo does not comment at all when Nan says her father beats her. In LW, Amy's teacher strikes her hand after she has, against the rules, brought limes (fruits) to school. Her mother states she does not approve of corporal punishments and lets her "have a vacation from the school" (LW: 71), as long as she studies every day at home with Beth. However, it is clear that children's rights were not brought up yet, at any rate in a national or international level (see Chapter 2.2.1).

Alcott has used her own experiences also in describing the punishments of the children. In LM, Jo ties Nan to the sofa after she had run away and got lost when picking huckleberries with little Rob (LM: 186-213). According to Elbert (1987: 35-36), this was a punishment Alcott's own mother used on little Louisa, and she might have learned it from Lydia Maria Child's advice books. Limiting a child's freedom is a powerful punishment, as Nan and Alcott herself found out.

In conclusion, independence and dependence are central concepts in growing up. The "little adults" want to take part in supporting the family both financially and emotionally. Despite how hard the children try to be good and



obedient, sometimes they are bound to make mischief. Punishing children when they have been naughty is a way of teaching them to take responsibility of their actions. The methods of punishments in the *Little Women* series are imaginative and progressive, and therefore worth examining. As childhood is a phase of growing up and practising one's skills for the present and future life, the next chapter will examine features associated with school and education in the series.

## 7 SCHOOL AND EDUCATION

The role of schooling and formal education is presented in the two latest parts of the series. The Bhaers' private boarding school offers a home-like environment for primarily boys from different conditions. The goal is to educate the boys in the usual school subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics and biology, but also to teach them to be good and honest people. The school does not seem to follow any given curriculum, but the boys are educated according to their age and skills.

### 7.1 Moral education

Reese (2005: 38-42) points out that the common schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century America taught literacy, morals and adult authority, and that building one's character was as important a lesson to learn as reading or writing. This kind of mindset is visible also in the *Little Women* series, as inner growth and good morals are seen as the best virtues a child (or a person in general) can pursue.

The boys of Plumfield are introduced in the second chapter of LM, as well as the nature of the school and the subjects of learning:

These were the boys, and they lived together as happily as twelve lads could, studying and playing, working and squabbling, fighting faults and cultivating virtues in the good old-fashioned way. Boys at other schools probably learned more from books, but less of that better wisdom which makes good men. Latin, Greek, and mathematics were all very well, but in Professor Bhaer's opinion, self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control were more important, and he tried to teach them carefully. People shook their heads sometimes at his ideas, even while they owned that the boys improved wonderfully in manners and morals. But then, as Mrs. Jo said to Nat, it was an 'odd school'. (LM: 27)

These ideas remind us of Bronson Alcott and his thoughts on education (see Chapters 2.2.3 and 3.1). The purpose of schooling is not to provide just literal or academic education, but to help pupils become useful men and women. In addition, Alcott's own father's views of supporting children in their learning and aiming at moral perfection (Petrino 2001: 120) can be noticed in Marmee's

moral stories that encourage the girls to solve their problems and think about their flaws themselves. Marmee (and Jo in the latter novels) believes in subtle methods of education. She and her husband do not seem to consider their children as “little” at all, even though Mr. March playfully refers to their girls as “little women”.

Moreover, Pestalozzi’s ideas of persuading “parents to nurture their children’s moral instinct and eliminate their desire for material possessions” (Petrino 2001: 120) are visible in the text. Even though the family is poor, Marmee assures the girls that they have everything they need: a loving family. Material goods do not provide happiness, as she says in one of her moral speeches:

“Money is a needful and precious thing - and when well used, a noble thing - but I never want you to think of it as the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace.” (LW: 97)

## 7.2 Equality

Bronson Alcott’s Temple School served as a model for Louisa’s Plumfield. Bronson was a visionary of public schooling, and Louisa followed his example in creating an equal school that basically any child could attend - her school was only imaginary. “Intellectual and practical skills, peer-group approval, adult love, and authority are all included in one institution. Public school was to take another forty years to attempt what Plumfield represents: an integrated social institution” (Elbert 1987: 234). However, not anyone could come to Plumfield - financing was needed in some way or another. Additionally, social class do not affect the acceptance to Plumfield, but behaviour and manners do.

According to Elbert (1987: 231),

In *Little Men* L.M.A. presents an institution so invitingly sugared and toasted that it warms the hearts of readers and coaxes them to accept democratic institutional responses to the problem of social inequality. Alcott maintained her belief that men and women could live together equitably and therefore harmoniously if they were trained to do so in their earliest years. Moreover,

citizens accustomed in their youth to a prosperous equality, would help generate change in the larger sociality. A school for boys proved a socially acceptable device to promote the spirit of cooperation and democracy, but coeducation, especially in a boarding school, was another matter. Alcott solved this difficulty by gradually introducing three very different little girls to the fifteen assorted boys at Plumfield.

What Elbert does not take into account is that, in fact, the students of Plumfield have problems accepting equality between men and women. In JB, Stuffy and Dolly get a little sermon from Jo, who hears the two young men talking about girls disrespectfully:

“Frivolous girls may like to be called “little dears” and things of that sort; but the girls who love to study wish to be treated like reasonable beings, not dolls to flirt with. Yes, I’m going to preach; that’s my business; so stand up and take it like men.” (JB: 261)

Also the female students themselves seem to question the equal possibilities of men and women in life, as it turns out in a chapter describing the girls’ needlework session in JB. The girls’ ambitions end up with “Till I marry.” (JB: 271), which is not a very progressive viewpoint. However, Jo and Meg try to encourage the girls to do some “little odd jobs” like working for the poor, instead of sitting still and waiting for marriage. Nevertheless, even though the girls are studying and educating themselves, they ought to know how to knit, sew, and take care of the home as well. After all, as the series proposes, a girl’s job is, eventually, to get married and look after her family.

### 7.3 Outside the classroom

Putting children in a classroom with other pupils is not the only way of giving education in the *Little Women* series. Apparently, the public school movement (see Chapter 2.2.2) had not yet had its effects in Alcott’s New England, and the forms of schooling are various. As mentioned above, in LW Beth is schooled at home, and she studies with the help of her father:

Beth was too bashful to go to school; it had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up, and she did her lessons at home with her father. Even when he went away, and her mother was called to devote her skill and energy to

Soldiers' Aid Societies, Beth went faithfully on by herself, and did the best she could. (LW: 41)

The narration does not mention what those "lessons" include, but one could assume that she studies basically the same subjects as Amy does at school; such as Greek, Latin, and algebra.

In Plumfield, the boys have their own "menagerie" (LM: 33) for their pets and garden for their vegetables and flowers. By taking care of animals and growing plants, the boys learn the value of responsibility, patience and hard work. They also gain useful basic skills of life, as they perform little tasks in the house and in the garden. Professor Bhaer also uses the garden as a symbol for his school:

Father and Mother Bhaer's crop was of a different sort, and not so easily described [as the vegetables the boys had cultivated]; but they were satisfied with it, felt that their summer work had prospered well, and by and by had a harvest that made them very happy. (LM: 308)

In the *Little Women* series, the most efficient education happens outside the classroom. The elementary education includes reading, writing and arithmetic, but also good manners, respecting other people and oneself, and basic skills needed in life. Of course, the life of the March family and in Plumfield is not merely studying and working, but includes also a lot of playing and having fun.

## 8 PLAY

Play means “pleasurable activities freely engaged in by children; freedom from work; to act frivolously or capriciously” (James & James 2001: 98). Playing is a natural part of being a child, but it is most often observed from adult’s perspective. This chapter will take a look into the ways of playing in the series, with examples from both girls and boys’ play.

### 8.1 Role play

The active use of imagination is one of the things that separate children from adults. In the field of play, children create new worlds that are unreachable for most adults. But as the March girls are also enthusiastic actresses, they often share their imaginative ideas with an audience that consists of their parents, neighbours and friends. It is mostly Jo who writes the plays and performs in the roles of men, but the star actress of the family is Meg (and Meg’s daughter Josie later in JB). Marmee and the other adults show respect towards the children’s own culture by letting them arrange theatrical events at their home and supporting the future actresses and writers in many other ways as well.

Role play is one of the most popular ways of playing among children of almost all ages. Beth especially enjoys acting as a mother to her doll children:

Long, quiet days she spent, not lonely nor idle, for her little world was peopled with imaginary friends, and she was by nature a busy bee. There were six dolls to be taken up and dressed every morning, for Beth was a child still and loved her pets as well as ever. (LW: 41)

Playing alone does not seem to bother Beth; more likely, she rather enjoys this time dedicated just to herself. It provides a nice contrast to other situations of play and work in which she is surrounded by three lively sisters. It is interesting that even though Amy is actually the youngest of the girls, it is Beth who is described as being the most childish. Maybe this is one way of breaking the traditional patterns of children’s literature and creating something new.

Amy, even though the youngest by age, is more adventurous and interested in the outside world than Beth, who is the most idyllic and traditional character of LW and GW.

Also Daisy is a traditional, domestic girl. She enjoys enormously when learning to cook in her little play kitchen, and organizing a ball with Nan (LM: 63-85, 133-149). Role play in Daisy's kitchen and especially the outcomes of her cooking seem so attractive that even the boys want to take part. At first the boys do not follow the rules of the game, and ruin Daisy's nice festivities by teasing the girls and fighting. Eventually, however, they all understand that if they respect each other's play culture, everyone can benefit from playing together, in both girls and boys' games. Role play especially is a fitted way to make girls and boys play together, as well as different outdoor games.

Through play children can rebel and rampage in a safe way. The Naughty Kitty-Mouse (LM: 121-128), for example, is a play in which a character invented by Demi, the Kitty-Mouse, tells the children to do all kinds of bizarre things, such as sacrifice their favourite toys in a bonfire. It is impossible for an outsider to know what makes children invent this kind of odd plays, but maybe it is just a way of creating excitement, adventures and little fright in their own world.

## **8.2 Children's leisure activities**

From a 21<sup>st</sup> century point of view, the March girls and the Plumfield boys have hobbies of their own. Probably the contemporary readers would have not interpreted Beth's and Nat's passion for music, Amy's and Bess' interest towards art and Jo's and Demi's enthusiasm for literature as hobbies, but the way the children practise and spend time absorbed in these areas of culture clearly reminds the reader of the children and the youth of today. These leisure activities are also an important part of the boys and girls' individuality, since

they each have a talent of their own they wish to develop and perhaps even create a career from it.

Also the other pupils of Plumfield have interests of their own. Emil is a devoted sailor-to-be, who “spent his holidays on the river or the pond” (LM: 131), Jack likes buying and selling different things to the boys and, against rules, to outsiders, and Nan enjoys studying medicine and curing anyone who is hurt. Josie follows her mother’s footsteps and wishes to become an actress, for which she apparently has a talent. What differentiates these “hobbies” from other kind of play is the regularity of performing them and the will to improve. Many of the children also wish to create a career out of their hobbies, and some of them succeed. Jo becomes an author, Demi a journalist and a publisher, Emil a sailor, Nat a musician and Nan a nurse, for example.

### **8.3 Differences between boys’ and girls’ games**

As mentioned above, the boys’ games are more adventurous and physical than those of the girls. The boys play baseball, run and chase each other around the yard, swim, climb trees, play circus etc. As hardy as the boys’ play may seem, they are not allowed to hurt each other on purpose or fight. When Mr. Bhaer finds his boys fighting like gladiators, he

walked into the ring, plucked the combatants apart with a strong hand, and said, in a voice that was seldom heard, “I can’t allow this, boys! Stop it at once; and never let me see it again. I keep a school for boys, not for wild beasts. Look at each other and be ashamed of yourselves” (LM: 94).

Accordingly, the Bhaers try to teach their children to learn how to behave like civilized human beings.

The girls, on they part, play house and take care of their dolls. Daisy and Nan even wash their dolls’ clothes and prepare their beds and bed linens themselves (LM: 248-250), being decent women- (and wives-) to-be. However, Nan is not as traditional a girl as Daisy, and is not as happy as her with their



homely play. She longs for more energetic activities. As Jo figures out Nan's eagerness to help other people, she starts to encourage her in her work and study of medicine (LM: 250-254). That way Nan can find a more feminine way, so to speak, to fulfil herself. Still, she is not a traditional, domestic woman-to-be, but chooses a real career as a doctor for herself.

The most princess-like of the girls is little Bess, referred to as the Goldilocks, or the Angel of the house (see Chapter 5.1). Despite her young age, Bess is gentle and polite in her manners, and has a calming effect on rebellious Nan and the wild boys. "Not a boy in the house but felt the pretty child's influence, and was improved by it without exactly knowing how or why, for babies can work miracles in the hearts that love them" (LM: 217). This phrase reveals also the appreciation and confidence towards babies and children, and reflects also the romantic idea of the influence of children upon adults (see also Chapter 4).

#### **8.4 Children's culture**

As mentioned above, the girls practise daily their domestic skills. Often these occasions of work are turned into play, and imagination takes over. Playing seems like a way to escape reality and to create a pleasant atmosphere in order to make working enjoyable. Taking care of dolls, being a member of a secret club, or acting in self-written plays help the girls (and boys) develop their imagination, but also their skills for real life. For example "The Busy Bee Society" assembles on a hill nearby, and each of the girls has a task to perform, so that their holiday is spent in a useful way. As Jo explains to Laurie, who once comes to join the girls:

"Mother likes to have us out of doors as much as possible; so we bring our work here, and have nice times. For the fun of it we bring our things in these bags, wear the old hats, use poles to climb the hill, and play pilgrims, as we used to do years ago" (LW: 136-137).

Children's own culture is depicted in the world of play, which is most often not accessible for adults. It seems that in play children can connect their own

imaginative world with that of adults, imitating adulthood but also making fun of it. All the March girls take part in play and are not ashamed of it, not even the eldest sister Meg, who is almost a young woman already. This is a feature of childhood and play that seems to have changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: even though the girls, especially Meg and Amy, are eager to grow up, they are proud of their own culture and wish to preserve it in their actions more openly than children of today.

Conversely, as in a story that Jo tells to her children about flying a kite with Laurie, children or, in this case, little women can be also ashamed of the “childish” plays. Young Jo was afraid of what her other friends might think and wanted them not to see her playing with kites, so Laurie let the kites go free. They were saved from the shame of being called childish, and Jo decided she will never fly a kite again before she is an adult (LM: 147-149). Accordingly, the conclusion is that an adult is safer from accusations of acting “childish” than a young girl, who is in the sensitive stage between being a child and a woman.

The boys, for their part, are full of playfulness, adventures and mischief despite their age or approaching adulthood. The essence of boyhood is summarized by Jo after a quiet and peaceful period in the life of Plumfield:

‘It is too good to last’, said Mrs. Jo; for years of boy-culture had taught her that such lulls were usually followed by outbreaks of some sort, and when less wise women would have thought that the boys had become confirmed saints, she prepared herself for a sudden eruption of the domestic volcano. (LM: 214)

As Jo assumes, the boys will try and invent adventures themselves, if there are not any interesting events coming up. Laurie in LW and Tommy and the others in LM are tempted by making pranks of different kinds, including setting the house on fire (LM: 101-106). Of course, they never mean any harm, but if not supervised, their carelessness can lead to serious accidents sometimes.

Like most children, the March girls and the Plumfield boys like to play and amuse themselves. The sisters perform in plays written by Jo, start up a literary group that is named after Charles Dickens' Pickwick Club and take part in excursions and parties with their friends. The girls also make the boring duties fun, as they tell stories or dress up in funny clothes when they have, for example, to knit. In addition, in LM, the boys are encouraged to play and exercise outside, whereas the girls (Daisy, Nan and little Bess) are supposed to play in the house and not take part in the at least wildest games. Despite the so-called radical roles of girls and women in the series, the traditional side of the characters is reflected in play. The play of the girls and the boys differ from and are separated from each other; the boys' games being more adventurous and physical than those of girls. As mentioned above, the series has both traditional and fresh features, the description of play belonging also to both.

## 9 CONCLUSIONS

According to Lurie (2004: 18), “from a mid-nineteenth-century perspective *Little Women* is both a conservative and a radical novel. Some aspects of it, and some characters, represent the past; others look to the future”. The results of this study support Lurie’s view, but extended to all of the four novels in the series and in more depth. The children in the books are quite traditional from one point of view, but some of the female characters also challenge the conventional image of girls in the 19<sup>th</sup> century world. The March girls, as well as their own children and students, respect their parents, wanting to learn to take care of their home and loved ones, but they also have ambitions of their own that might take them away from the safe home environment. Probably the timing was right for this kind of development, as the feminist movements were gathering support in Europe and in America. Still, most of the characters and the opinions in the series represent the traditional point of view, with emphasis on the domestic life.

In comparison to previous studies on Louisa May Alcott and the *Little Women* series, this thesis has focused on the aspect of childhood as such, building a piece of childhood studies and the history of childhood. The study provides extended information of being a child in Alcott’s 19<sup>th</sup> century America, the emphasis being on the children’s point of view.

According to their titles, LW and LM concentrate more on the aspects of childhood than the other novels in the series, GW and JB. Consequently, the two first mentioned books provided more material for this study than the others. Therefore the study might seem a little unbalanced when it comes to the handling of the materials, but one must not let that disturb the understanding of the main results. After all, the primary sources – the novels in question – are what they are, and direct the study and the results by their themes.

Firstly, this study discussed the individuality of children. The results showed that the children's uniqueness and their personalities are emphasized in the *Little Women* series, probably as a result of historical development in the prevailing attitudes. It is interesting that even though the concept of childhood seems to be rather easily defined, the actual experiences of being a child are very diverse and therefore difficult to examine. However, Alcott seems to succeed in creating an atmosphere that feels genuine to the reader.

Secondly, the children practise the skills needed in daily adult life, often in parallel with play. Even though the adults encourage the children to prepare themselves for adulthood and to become independent grown-ups, they wish to preserve the children's innocence as long as possible. In the narration of the novels, the importance of family and home is clearly pointed out. The family is the setting for childhood – without it there really is no real childhood. In the series, Alcott states that all children should have a home and a place where he or she is taken care of. Children need adults around them who know what is best for them, emotionally, psychologically and physically.

When it comes to the aspect of schooling, the girls are educated in traditional ways, in a public school and at home in LW. Plumfield in LM and JB, on the other hand, is not a traditional boarding school, but rather a progressive one. The education concentrates more on moral righteousness and becoming a good person than the usual school subjects. The role of schooling is important, but the children are educated in a subtle way, with gentle methods that suit each boy and girl individually.

The ways of playing are various in the series. Role play, different games and sports as well as their "hobbies" belong to the children's daily activities. Girls and boys' play differ from each other by their level of activity and roughness, as the boys are encouraged to play dynamically and the girls peacefully. In the

world of play the children also practise the skills needed in daily life, and educate themselves in different ways.

Overall, the results of this study proved most of the hypotheses to be correct. As assumed in the introduction, childhood in the *Little Women* series is very protected and innocent. The children trust the adults unconditionally, but they are not passive or submissive in any way. Nevertheless, the learning aspect of childhood is emphasized in the series, and the parents and teachers instruct the children to become good and decent women and men. In addition, most of the time the children are not ashamed of being “true children” (meaning that they show their feelings, play and act according to their age), but there are occasions in which at least the eldest girls try to hide their desire to play and try to act all grown-up.

However, the concept of being psychologically or emotionally “little” was not centrally brought up in the series. The respect between children and adults is mutual, and the adults appreciate the children’s opinions as much as their own. Yet the children seem to occasionally see themselves or each other, especially the youngest ones, as “little” or incapable of doing something, but such feelings of momentary incompetence can be said to be quite natural for children or, furthermore, people in general.

One could say that, in fact, childhood is preparation not for adulthood but for life in general. During childhood one must learn vital skills for life, but it has to be noticed that learning is not limited only to childhood. Therefore, as the *Little Women* series proposes, children should not be considered only as humans-to-be, but worthy individuals. Childhood has a value of its own as an imaginative and innocent period of life. Maybe one reason for the success of the March family “trilogy” lies in the positive attitude it has towards children and childhood. Even though the series is educative and even moralistic sometimes,

it presents its protagonists as fully human characters with whom the reader can identify, in spite of his/her age.

After all, it is impossible for a non-participant to define the authentic experience of being a child in the nineteenth century. One can only critically evaluate the available information that is most often depicted from adult's point of view, and try to create as accurate an image as possible. However, in order to get to know the roots of the existing cultures, it is important to try to understand the history and the culture of childhood. This study has examined childhood in one context and culture, and according to the results, being a child in Alcott's 19<sup>th</sup> century America has included caring, love, little adventures, peer encouragement and worrying about growing up. However, one must remember that the books tell a story of only one (extended) middle class family, and it is not a comprehensive description of the prevailing children's culture.

In the future, it would be interesting to examine the gender roles of the children in the series in more depth and compare them with the results of already existing studies. In addition, observing how the March girls' own childhood affects their methods of raising children and the way they relate to their own children would be useful. Furthermore, it would be motivating to compare *Little Women* or *Little Men* to a children's book that is published 100 or 150 years later and to study the representation of childhood in contemporary America.

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## 11. APPENDICES

### Appendix 1.

The main characters in the series, as they appear in the novels

*Little Women and Good Wives*

**Father March** Father of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March

**Mother (Marmee) March** Mother of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy March

**Meg March** The eldest of the March girls, later known as Mrs. Brooke

**Jo March** The second eldest of the March girls, later known as Mrs. Bhaer

**Elizabeth (Beth) March** The second youngest of the March girls

**Amy March** The youngest of the March girls, later known as Mrs. Lawrence

**Hannah Mullet** The maid, a family member

**Theodore (Laurie or Teddy) Lawrence** The boy next door, friend of the March family, later marries Amy

**Mr. Lawrence** Laurie's grandfather

**John Brooke** Laurie's tutor who marries Meg in GW

**Fritz Bhaer** An elderly German gentleman who later marries Jo

*Little Men and Jo's Boys*

**Jo Bhaer (néé March) as an adult** Grown-up Jo, now also mother of two boys of her own and a "stepmother" of twelve other boys at their school called Plumfield

**Friedrich (Fritz) Bhaer** Jo's husband, father of Rob and Teddy and teacher in Plumfield, also known as the Professor

**Rob Bhaer** a boy of five in LM, Teddy's big brother

**Teddy Bhaer** the baby of the family Bhaer

**Franz** 16-year old (in LM) Fritz Bhaer's nephew raised by him, now part of family Bhaer

**Emil** Franz's younger brother, also part of family Bhaer

**Students of Plumfield**, a homelike school established by Jo and Fritz Bhaer:

**Dick Brown**

**Adolphus (Dolly) Pettingill**

**Jack Ford**

**Ned Barker**

**George (Stuffy) Cole**

**Billy Ward**

**Tommy Bangs**

**Nat Blake** An orphan who was found by Laurie and sent to Plumfield

**Daniel (Dan) Kean** A friend of Nat's who, after some mischief, ends up in Plumfield

**Annie (Nan) Harding** a rebellious girl who joins the gang of Plumfield to be educated and to bring the presence of a girl among the boys

**Meg Brooke (née March) as an adult** Mother of Demi and Daisy, wife of John Brooke, also known as Aunt Meg

**John Brooke as an adult** Father of Demi and Daisy, husband of Meg, also known as Uncle John

**Demi-John (Demi) Brooke** Daisy's twin brother, intelligent bookworm who is educated at Plumfield, future publisher

**Daisy Brooke** Demi's twin sister, also goes to school at Plumfield, future wife of Nat

**Josie Brooke** The youngest of the Brooke siblings, wild and adventurous girl

**Amy Lawrence (née March) as an adult** Bess' mother, wife of Laurie, also known as Aunt Amy

**Theodore Lawrence (Laurie or Teddy) as an adult** Bess' father, husband of Amy, also known as Uncle Laurie

**Elizabeth (Bess) Lawrence** The "Goldilocks" and the angel of the family, who visits Plumfield delighting everybody

## Appendix 2.

Selected works by Louisa May Alcott, excluding the *Little Women* series

*Flower Fables* (1854)

*Hospital Sketches* (1863)

*Moods* (1865, revised 1882)

*Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power* (1866) As A.M. Barnard

*A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1866 - first published 1995) As A.M. Barnard

*The Abbot's Ghost, or Maurice Treherne's Temptation* (1867) As A.M. Barnard

*An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870)

*Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1872-1882)

*Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873)

*Work: A Story of Experience* (1873)

*Eight Cousins or The Aunt-Hill* (1875)

*Beginning Again, Being a Continuation of Work* (1875)

*Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins* (1876)

*A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) First published anonymously

*Under the Lilacs* (1878)

*Jack and Jill: A Village Story* (1880)

*Lulu's Library* (1886-1889)

*A Garland for Girls* (1888)

*Comic Tragedies* (1893)