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# Book Notes #128

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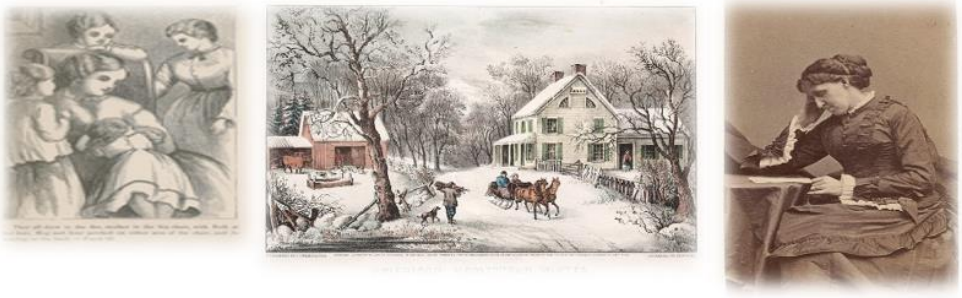
## *'Little Women,' 'Home,' and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'*



*From left: March Family, Currier & Ives: Home at Winter, and Louisa May Alcott*

Every snowy January for years I have read a "classic" I had either not previously read or had read so long ago that I now wanted to revisit an old favorite. During the 20-aughts, I read most of Thomas Hardy. Several years ago, I read George Eliot's ***Middlemarch*** and the past several Januarys squeezed in Charles Dickens' ***Great Expectations*** and ***David Copperfield***. Currently, I am 300-plus pages into Dickens' ***Dombey and Son***.

Despite the decidedly 19th century slant to these readings, I have a confession to make.

I had never read Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women***.

I enjoyed two film versions of it: the classic 1933 adaptation in which Katharine Hepburn seems Jo March incarnate and even the 1994 rendering in which Susan Sarandon plays radically against type as the near sainted mother Marmee. But, like most smugly obtuse males, dismissing the novel itself as an antique sort of "chick lit," I never read it.

One of the most important works in all of American literature, ***Little Women*** has inspired generations of women, including some of the 20th century's greatest writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Virtually any woman I know could have told me I was wrong.

Actually, I was doubly wrong, for what finally caused me to read ***Little Women*** was an article in **The New York Times**, whose headline asked, "Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?" [1] When I mentioned this to a reading group to which I belong, one of the women members said, "*Oh, pleeeez*!"

She was right.

What is the point of worrying about whether Louisa May Alcott and/or her alter ego Jo March were transgender? Is it to justify the present by showing it has historical roots, or is it – well, I don't know what. I agree with the feminists who object to classifying any woman who steps outside of traditional roles as wanting to be a man as an unintended attack upon women, i.e., that women are not capable of doing what men can do. It follows that the women who can and do are actually somehow males or male wannabes. It's really a dead end. Maybe the transcendentalists, of whom Louisa May Alcott's father Bronson Alcott was a founder, were right – we're all just spirits temporarily occupying corporeal bodies and sometimes a spirit gets in the wrong body, etc.

The article did, however, finally prompt me to read ***Little Women***.

To my pleasant surprise, the book is wonderful.

Why?

Well, for two reasons. First, like one of my wife Judy's and my favorite television series, ***All Creatures Great and Small***, ***Little Women*** describes a world in which people are *kind*. A world in which not all people, but almost all people are *kind*. A world in which people *care* for one another in all senses of the word *care*; a world in which people are generous, considerate, and kind. Marmee, the

mother in ***Little Women***, is "a good kind, woman." In fact, even those who first appear to be scolds, like Aunt March and Grandfather Laurence, all of the women and men in ***Little Women*** are kind, caring, and generous. One could spend several pleasant hours simply detailing all of the incidents in ***Little Women*** in which characters display patience, care, and considerateness to one another.

In our 21st century world, *kindness* is in short supply.

Maybe more importantly, but I am not sure it's more important than being kind to one another, ***Little Women's*** cultural importance is immense. ***Little Women*** perfectly illustrates two essential 19th century social concepts and their discontents. "Concepts," with its implications of a mental construct or simple idea, is inadequate to describe the power of an idea, in this instance two related ideas, so embedded in the American mythos as to disappear in plain sight and whose tendrils and their related discontents reach into the 21st century fueling much of our current culture wars. No, not mere "concepts," ***Little Women*** illustrates a cluster of values, attitudes, and beliefs – a *culture* – and the reaction against it in the person of Jo March that are two major threads in ***The American Tapestry Project***.

We've touched on them before in ***The American Tapestry Project*** and the ***American Holidays*** series. In ***American Holidays***, we've seen how the creation of Thanksgiving Day and *The American Way of Christmas* sought to make *Home* the unifying foundation of American society; we've seen how differing notions of womanhood challenged the mother/daughter duo who created Mother's Day. In ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Freedom's Story: Tales of Race and Gender" we explored First Wave, 19th century women's rights activists, such as Margaret Fuller, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, and their reactions to the social restrictions of their time.

What were the 19th century notions of *Home* and the *Cult of True Womanhood?*

And what have they to do with our 21st century culture wars?

***Little Women*** illuminates each of those questions.

What does *Home* mean?

Robert Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." [2] T.S. Eliot noted, "Home is where one starts from" only to return to it in the end and in returning see it for the first time. [3] That is what Jo does in ***Little Women*** when she returns to Concord from her sojourn in New York City. For both Eliot and Frost, home anchors society. It is the point from which one departs, embarking upon life's great journey of discovery and it

is the sanctuary to which one returns. In western culture, its roots go back to Odysseus' great odyssey of discovery anchored by the ever-faithful Penelope's guarding the Ithacan home against the suitors' assaults. Earl Rovit says in "The American Concept of Home" that home's stability is one of the two archetypal pole points in American culture balancing off the instability of the other pole point's freedom of the open road. [4]

Although the family was the basic unit of Puritan society and one's home the center of most social life throughout the colonial American period, the concept of *Home* in all its fullness developed in the early 19th century. It was a response to the great political, social, and economic turbulence enveloping post-revolutionary America. Because we know how it all turned out, we tend to view the period between 1776 and, to pick a date, 1848, as inevitable. It was anything but, for it was a period of rapid, disorienting transformation. Americans in this era navigated four major concurrent waves of destabilizing social change.

First, so obvious it is frequently overlooked, was the post-revolutionary task of transforming 13 separate British colonies into a unified, coherent nation sharing a common American culture. That task was made more difficult by the erosion of traditional church structures undergirding society. In the North, it was the Puritan grip upon society fading into a more flexible Unitarianism; in both the North and the South, it was the rise of revivalism emphasizing individual salvation. In both instances, the rights and welfare of the individual began to replace communal values. Simultaneously, Americans experienced the rise of Hamiltonian capitalism centered on banks and manufacturing displacing both farming and the earlier, home-based handicraft industries. Lastly, while all of this was happening, America experienced the first significant non-English, non-Protestant immigration as waves of Irish and German Catholics arrived.

In response to all of this social instability, Americans looked to home as a source of solace. Rather than seeing home as an integral part of American society's external spiritual, economic, and social activity, Americans began to think of home as a place apart, as a place separate from all of society's external turbulence. They began to think of *Home* as a sanctuary.

Regarding the emerging 19th century notion of *Home* as a bastion against society's instability, Maxine Van de Wetering says:

> The home came to be strikingly antagonistic to the frenetic, commercial world 'outside.' In this antagonism, the home emerged as a stronghold of stability, traditional morality, and order, in opposition to the flux of society … and related to this, it served as a paradigm of serenity, not merely negation of the outer frenzy in the world but positively, as a generator of personal nurture. [5]

***Little Women*** portrays that *Home* better than any other work in American literature. Think of the four March sisters in the cocoon of their *Home*. They do not go to church; they do not go to school. They live at *Home* where all of their needs are met. Jo even has a sanctuary within a sanctuary – her attic writing room. All of their needs – spiritual and physical – are met at *Home,* which is presided over by the nurturing Marmee and the servant Hannah. When Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy venture out, it is on neighborhood excursions or on brief trips to the town shops. When Jo ventures to the city to sell her manuscripts, the grubby environment of Dashwood's publishing establishment starkly contrasts against the order of *Home*; when she goes to New York City, the turbulence of that experience is tempered by her quasi-*Home* at the Kirke's.

*Home* was a woman's world.

Men are peripheral to this world. In ***Little Women***, the father, Mr. March, is ineffectual. Having lost his inheritance, he cannot provide for his family. A minister, he returns wounded from the Civil War to serve as a moral backstop to the story. It is the son-in-law John Brooke who represents the 19th century man. The man, father, having left to work outside of the *Home* in the new capitalistic society, cedes authority to mother.

Mother – *Woman* – became the rock upon which *Home* was built. It was mother who brought order to the *Home;* it was mother who nurtured the children. It was mother, in Van De Wetering's words, who practiced "'disinterested love,' a love which was given without qualification and which was consistent and reliable despite the circumstances or the possible short-comings of the beloved." [6] Think of any of many scenes in which the preternaturally patient Marmee counsels her daughters. Men could also love, but to them fell the role of stern disciplinarian when mother's softer approach failed. Think of Meg and John when their baby son balked at going to sleep.

*Home's* conceptual power lingers into the present. Buffeted by the concept of the New Woman in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it rebounded during the Great Depression years of the 1930s only to be battered again by Rosie the Riveter during World War II. It returned with new power during the 1950s and a renewed cult of domesticity urging American women to return to the *Home*. Its 1950s popular culture images – think the ***Donna Reed Show, Father Knows Best,*** and ***Ozzie and Harriet*** among numerous others – defined *Home* for an entire generation of American women, inspiring some to become "Marmees" and others, like their hero Jo, to rebel against it. But that is getting ahead of the story.

For *Home* came in combination with another 19th century concept whose impact doesn't linger but resounds in the present. It inspired not only those who supported it, but legions of women's rights activists who opposed it. In fact, it

inspired the entire feminist movement in America, beginning with First Wave Feminists in the 19th century.

What was that concept?

It was the concept of the *Cult of True Womanhood*.

It was not for everyone. Slaves, the poor, and immigrants were excluded. It was a middle and upper-middle class value system that made woman, in particular mother, society's bedrock. As such, she needed an organizing philosophy. The popular media of the early 19th century – women's magazines, gift books, annuals, and religious literature – supplied it. As Barbara Welter said, "Woman, in the Cult of True Womanhood … was the hostage in the home." [7] Welter continues:

> In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same – a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic. It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth century American woman had – to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand. [8]

Sometimes also called the *Cult of Domesticity*, what attributes defined a *True Woman's* value as a person?

They were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. [9]

If one of ***Little Women's*** charms rests in the kindness of its characters, then its value as a social document rests in its brilliant depiction of each of these attributes, the strength they provided, and the restlessness and resentment they frequently created. It was chafing against them that put Jo in her double bind of family loyalty and the desire to be herself, to be a writer, and to be free. It was against the backdrop of their restrictions that Margaret Fuller made her famous declaration that women should be free "to be sea captains if they will."

If women were to be the moral protector of *Home*, if "women were seen as naturally more pious than men … and the spiritual cornerstone of family life," then they were responsible for their children's moral education. [10] In that role, "religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength." [11] In ***Little Women***, this is shown as the novel opens on a wintry Christmas Day when Marmee – the affectionate name the four sisters have for their beloved mother – suggests to the girls that they give their Christmas breakfast away to an impoverished family. Marmee also gives each of the girls as a

Christmas gift a copy of John Bunyan's ***Pilgrim's Progress,*** an allegory of the good man's pilgrimage through life. Marmee wants it to be the girls' guide to living a life of virtue. In a very general sense, ***Little Women*** tracks the moral progress of the four girls' maturation into *true womanhood*.

If a woman's lack of religion was considered "the most revolting human characteristic," then to lose her purity – her sexual purity – doomed her. Impure – "without sexual purity, a woman was no woman, but rather a lower form of being, a 'fallen woman,' unworthy of the love of her sex and unfit for their company." [12] "Purity was woman's greatest virtue in the 19th century … virginity was to be protected at all costs, and death was considered preferable to the loss of virtue. … (T)he gift of a woman's chastity to her husband was something to be treasured on their wedding night; sex was to be endured as part of the sacred bond of marriage." [13] As a result, as Barbara Welter asserts, "all True Women were urged, in the strongest possible terms, to maintain their virtue, although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it." [14]

***Little Women*** is rife with instances in which men and women keep one another at arm's length to the point that one begins to wonder how all that suppressed emotion and sexual energy is to be vented. Two examples will suffice. First, the courtship of Meg, the eldest sister, and John Brooke proceeds at such a crawl one doubts it will ever be consummated. But it is, for after a decorous wedding at *Home* and an appropriate interval of time Meg is suddenly a mother. How that came about is one of those topics polite society did not discuss.

More pointedly is the relationship between Jo and Laurie. It is clear as they navigate their teenage years, lurking just below the surface of their intense friendship is the possibility of something more than being mere friends. But they always follow the advice of Mrs. Eliza Farrar in *The Young Lady's Friend* to "not sit with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another person's." [15]

When Jo and Laurie sit together on a couch or divan, their running joke with one another and the reader is that they always have a cushion between them. The cushion becomes part of the architecture of their relationship enabling Jo to preserve her "purity." After Jo rejects Laurie's proposal of marriage, late in the novel when he returns from Europe having finally accepted Jo's refusal through the kind ministrations of Amy, who he then marries, Laurie visits Jo to get her blessing and to cement their friendship. They sit upon the same couch they always sat, but as a sign of their adult maturity that they can now trust one another and resist temptation, they place the cushion aside. Not to put too much

weight on a cushion, but it stands as a symbol of female purity and the need to fend off eager males threatening her virtue.

"Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women," Welter notes, as "men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were passive, submissive responders. The order of dialogue was, of course, fixed in Heaven. … (W)omen were warned that if they tampered with this quality they tampered with the order of the Universe." [16] It is against this attribute that Jo recoils and makes her frequent assertions that she thinks she must be a man for she yearns to be free to become all that she can be. Throughout ***Little Women***, Jo struggles with this conundrum – the conflict between her desire to be free to pursue her own interests and her deeply ingrained sense of love and duty to her family. At the very beginning of the novel, when Jo says, "I'll try and be what he (her father) loves to call me, "a little woman," and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" it is this cult of submissiveness she struggles against. As Welter says, "Woman then, in all her roles, accepted submission as her lot. It was a lot she had not chosen or deserved." [17]

Her lot was domesticity. A woman's place was in the home by her own hearth – as "daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother." [18] Housework was highly valued – it was seen as uplifting. Note all the time the women and girls in ***Little Women*** spend at needlework, crafts, and tending to the *Home*. As Catherine Lavender points out, "women were expected to uphold the values of stability, morality, and democracy by making the home a special place, a refuge from the world where her husband could escape from the highly competitive, unstable, immoral world of business and industry." [19 ] ***Little Women*** contains the almost archetypal example of this in the chapter when the newlywed Meg dotes upon her children to the neglect of her husband John. John begins to spend time at the neighbor's home. Perplexed and saddened, Meg asks Marmee what has gone wrong. Marmee explains to Meg that her primary duty is to her husband and to make his *Home* a welcoming sanctuary from the outer world. Meg does; John returns. The natural order is restored.

Woman, in her domestic role, was also caregiver. As such, nursing became an essential component of her character. As the novel opens, Mr. March, wounded during the Civil War, languishes in a hospital. Word comes that he can only be saved through the ministrations of a loving nurse. Marmee, entrusting the four girls to the servant Hannah, goes to Washington, D.C. to nurse her husband back to health. While there she is summoned back to Concord to minister to her daughter, the sublimely submissive Beth, who is dying of an unspecified "wasting disease." Marmee – *mother* –returns in the proverbial "nick of time" to nurse Beth back to some semblance of health.

Marmee is the embodiment of the Cult of True Womanhood. It is her duty to raise her daughters – her *Little Women* – to assume their proper role in American society as *Women*.

She does.

***Little Women*** is a great novel. Louisa May Alcott creates an emotionally rich portrayal of the double-edged nature of the 19th century's idea of *Home*. She not only describes in loving detail the reality of *Home* – all of its promises and virtues – but also all of its stifling limitations.

Limitations, since she never married, were what Alcott herself resisted. In the character Jo, Alcott brilliantly describes the double bind that ambitious and capable women found themselves in: torn between loyalty to family and a desire to pursue their own talents. That bind could lead either to submission within a system breeding resentment or to rebellion. Even the sainted Marmee suffered under its strictures, for in Chapter 8 she tells Jo, while trying to help Jo resolve her inner turmoil, that "I am angry nearly every day of my life" – a statement many have taken to be Marmee's sublimated resentment of *Home's* strictures.

Alcott doesn't pursue that resentment to its logical conclusion, for women's options under the Cult of True Womanhood were really only three: silent, dutiful resignation like Marmee's; compromise like Jo's; or rebellion, like that of First Wave feminists Margaret Fuller, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Anthony, like Alcott herself, never married, never went *Home* and, in an explicit rebuke to the Cult of True Womanhood, invented the *New Woman*.

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## End Notes

1. Thomas, Peyton. *"Did the Mother of Young Adult Literature Identify as a Man?"* **The New York Times** (December 24, 2022) available at Opinion | Louisa May Alcott, the Author of Little Women, Identified with Manhood - The New York Times (nytimes.com) accessed January 15, 2023.
2. Frost, Robert. *"The Death of the Hired Man"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at The Death of the Hired Man by Robert Frost | Poetry Foundation accessed January 15, 2023.
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4. Cf. Earl Rovit, *"The American Concept of Home"* in **The American Scholar** (Autumn, 1960), V.29, No. 4, pp. 521-530 at JSTOR https://www.jstor.org/stable/41208690 accessed December 17, 2022.
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7. Welter, Barbara. *"The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,"* **American Quarterly** V. 18, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966), p. 151.
8. Ibid., pp. 151-152.
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11. Welter, p. 152.
12. Lavender, Catherine J., *"Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood,"* Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, Department of History, **The College of Staten Island/CUNY** (1998).
13. Wagington, **cited above**.
14. Welter, p. 155.
15. Quoted in Welter, **cited above**, p. 155.
16. Welter, pp. 158-159.
17. Ibid., p. 162.
18. Ibid.
19. Lavender, **cited above**.

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