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Quiet Virtue: The Worlds of Louisa May Alcott and Claire Keegan

Lousia May Alcott, left, and Claire Keegan

When reading fiction, people frequently ask “What is the moral of the story?” As we mentioned last week, paraphrasing Joan Didion, we tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experiences.

We look for the moral in the story.

What do we mean when we say a story is "moral"? Do we mean it offers a list of virtues, like some sort of ***Virtue for Dummies***? Do we mean it points its finger with a list of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots?" Or do we mean something subtly deeper: that gradually and almost invisibly, stories shape our moral sense by placing us inside the lives of other people with all their messy, inconsistent, and often ambiguous behavior?

Simplistically, when people ask what is the "moral in the story" they mean what does it tell us about right and wrong and the goodness and badness of human character.

These questions were prompted by several readers' reactions to last week's ***Book Note #215*** about Claire Keegan's ***Small Things Like These***, which can be found here. In that "note," I referred to Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women*** to distinguish fiction from history. I noted that if you want to know about the 19th century cult of true womanhood, more frequently referred to as the cult of domesticity, and how reaction against it spawned the women's movement, then you should read history. But if you want to know what living in such a culture felt like, then you need to read Alcott's ***Little Women***, which I wrote about in ***Book Note #128***, which can be found here.

What I did not write about last week was the moral world either Alcott or Keegan depicts. Thinking about it, I grasped that they perfectly depict the two pole points of a changed moral order. Alcott wrote before the 20th century's political and cultural revolutions; Keegan writes in their aftermath. Alcott wrote an expansive domestic novel for an audience comfortable with the language of virtue and the moral authority of church, school, and home. Keegan wrote a compressed late-modern novella for readers suspicious of institutional authority and allergic to moralizing.

Since I'm not qualified, I'll not comment on the trajectory of Irish culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as it shed or, maybe more accurately, seriously rethought its Roman Catholic heritage. As Keegan said, "I wasn't setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland." [1] On the other hand, seeking to understand how Americans became so polarized, in my ***The American Tapestry Project*** I have written extensively about the arc of American history from Alcott's time to ours.

Yet, upon reflection, I realized that these two superficially vastly different novels thematically very much resemble each other. They both insist that character and moral life are not forged in political slogans or abstract cultural principles. Each examines something more profound –– the character of its society's people. Each

understands that any culture's bedrock is its people's character. Each understands that character is formed by individual moral choices. Each understands that character is fashioned through habit, memory, attention, and the accumulated weight of small choices.

Each understands that character is not a pose. It is a practice.

Alcott and Keegan share an old moral imagination that predates them. It believes character is like a muscle. It is trained through repetition, strengthened by use, and weakened by neglect. That older notion understands that most of life's decisive moments arrive quietly, in the guise of the ordinary, and by the time we recognize them, we have already been preparing for them for years.

Alcott shows that preparation happening inside a largely trusted moral order. Alcott's world is the 19th century home and a culture that assumes moral improvement is possible and admirable. Keegan shows what happens when that world has hollowed out, when institutions are compromised, when a culture's moral language has become a costume for fear, and when responsibility falls squarely on the solitary individual.

The difference between them is not that one believes in morality and the other does not. The difference is that Alcott wrote in a world that still respected institutional authority: parents, ministers, and teachers. Keegan writes in a time when all forms of institutional authority have become suspect, and the individual conscience must teach itself.

Let's see if we can connect some dots to illustrate that point.

Dot #1: Moral Formation Through Habit, Not Heroism

Our age loves moral melodrama. We live in an age starring comic book and video game superheroes. We want villains and heroes, exposés and climaxes. We love the moment when the character "becomes" who they are: the brave, defining, triumphant moment. But Alcott and Keegan understand a deeper truth: most defining moments do not create character.

They reveal it.

Alcott's March sisters are not heroic figures. They are not storming battlefields. They are arguing about gloves and vanity, scolding one another, failing, repenting, trying again. Their moral life is like the ordinary life most of us actually live: full of jealousy, impatience, pride, resentment, and fatigue. Their moral anchor is their mother Marmee, but she is not a plaster saint floating above human weakness. She is a woman who admits that she is still struggling; That she is still

working on mastering her own character. In her most famous confession, she tells Jo: “I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it.” [2]

Puncturing the illusion that virtue is effortless, that sentence suggests that goodness is not innocence but the fruit of experience. It is learned. And it comes at a cost. At the novel’s very beginning, Alcott brilliantly makes the point. When Marmee encourages the sisters to give their Christmas breakfast away to a poorer family, it is not depicted as an easy virtue. It is a choice that costs the sisters something. They’re hungry. They notice their hunger. And yet they give their breakfast away. That, in miniature, is moral formation: you want one thing, your conscience another, and you must decide which will rule.

So, too, with Jo’s recurring attempts to tame her temper: her regret, her shame, her constant effort to master herself. Alcott refuses the post-modern fantasy of instant transformation through downloading an app. Her characters do not learn a lesson once to be cured forever. She shows them learning the same lesson again and again, because building character is not a switch you flip. It is a road you walk.

Keegan’s character Bill Furlong grows the same way, only without the voice of domestic authority guiding it. Bill does not have a Marmee. He has routine. He has work. He has memory. He has the quiet weight of a life built through responsibility. He rises early. He delivers coal. He provides for his wife and five daughters. He navigates the small social rituals of a town where everyone knows everyone, and politeness is a form of law. And under that everyday life, he carries the knowledge of his own precarious origin: son of an unwed mother, a boy who could easily have been shamed, discarded, and erased.

Keegan does not present Bill as a man whose character suddenly blossoms. She presents him as a man whose character has been forming for decades. He remembers Mrs. Wilson, the woman who sheltered his mother. He remembers what it meant for his mother to be shown kindness in a society prepared to punish her. That remembered kindness is not a “lesson” he was taught. It is an inheritance. It becomes, in the deepest way, part of who he is.

And then when human cruelty becomes visible, not as rumor, not as background noise, but as a human being in front of him, cold, terrified and desperate, Keegan’s point is the same as Alcott’s. When the moment arrives, when your character is tested, the choice you make will not be made from nowhere. It will be made out of what you have become.

Dot #2: Home as a Moral Classroom — and the Classroom’s Collapse

In *Little Women*, home is an institution. It is the novel's moral engine. It is the place where one learns sympathy, responsibility, and gratitude. This is easy to miss in our own time because we tend to hear "domestic" and think "small," "private," "unimportant." But for Alcott and a 19th-century culture that placed women outside formal power, the home was not a retreat from moral life. Home was where moral life happened most relentlessly. It was where character was formed.

The daughter, Beth, illustrates how seriously Alcott takes "home." Beth does not "achieve" in any public way. She does not conquer anything. She becomes, instead, the moral center of the family through attention and care: the one who notices, comforts, and quietly absorbs others' burdens without demanding recognition. Beth's goodness is not dramatic. It is gravitational.

Beth's illness and death reveal Alcott's moral imagination's essence: her conviction that a life's significance is not measured solely by public accomplishment. It is also measured by how deeply one has loved, how faithfully one has cared, and how consistently one has chosen gentleness over cruelty.

Keegan's world contains a home too, but it does not trust the home as a protected moral space. Bill Furlong's home is a place of love and decency, but it is also a place of risk. When Bill tells his wife Eileen about the suffering girl he has seen, she replies, "What has that to do with us?"

Alcott's domestic sphere reinforces moral choice. Keegan's domestic sphere complicates it.

Bill is a husband and father. His moral calculations are inseparable from his responsibilities. He knows what it costs to be vulnerable and to have people dependent on you. So, when he begins to see the injustice at the convent, he is not thinking only as a solitary soul. He is thinking as a provider. What happens if he speaks? What happens if he acts? What happens if he loses customers? What happens if his family pays the price?

Keegan's genius is that she refuses to romanticize moral courage. She shows its weight. Bill's dilemma is not staged as melodrama but as the painfully ordinary tension between doing what is right and protecting what is ours.

In Alcott, moral formation happens within a moral community. In Keegan, moral formation happens when the moral community has failed and the individual must decide whether to be shaped by the community's silence or to break it.

Dot #3: Sympathy as Moral Knowledge

Alcott is often accused of sentimentality. But Alcott's moral method depends on emotion because moral judgment without sympathy easily becomes cruelty. She assumes that we do not treat human beings justly unless we can feel their humanity.

Alcott encourages your sympathy by immersing you in the March sisters' interior lives. She invites you to understand before you judge. When Amy burns Jo's manuscript, Alcott does not condemn Amy as a villain. She lets you see the childish resentment that motivates her even as she makes you feel the devastation Jo experiences. Your sympathy becomes the groundwork for discernment. That is moral education, not by lecture, but by imaginative participation.

Keegan does something similar, but in a radically different key. Her prose refuses the emotional cues Alcott often supplied. She does not tell the reader what to feel. She does not underline the moment in red ink. She writes with restraint so severe it almost feels like silence. And that is precisely the point.

In Keegan, sympathy arises not from rhetorical flourish but from proximity. The suffering is shown plainly, stripped of decoration. The lack of commentary forces you to do moral work. You must supply the response. Along with Bill, you, too, must feel.

Keegan's quietness is not minimalism for its own sake. It is a moral strategy. She writes like a person who understands that in a culture both wary and weary of instruction, the most powerful moral pressure is the one you experience as your own.

Alcott's sympathy is warm, enveloping, and maternal. Keegan's sympathy is stark, unadorned, and piercing. But Alcott and Keegan share the same conviction: the heart is not the enemy of moral judgment. It is one of its essential instruments.

Dot #4: Silence, Self-Governance, and the Moral Cost of Being "Good"

In Alcott, self-governance is a virtue. It is a way of winning moral victories that look, from the outside, like nothing at all. Jo learns when to restrain herself. Marmee restrains her anger. Meg restrains her vanity. Amy restrains her selfishness. Alcott celebrates restraint because she understands that the ability to hold one's temper and curb one's ego is not small. It is the difference between harmony and misery. Life is made or broken by "small things."

But Keegan places that same ideal under terrible pressure. In *Small Things Like These*, silence is not merely personal restraint. It is a social system. It is the town's operating principle. It is the grease that keeps the machinery running. Everyone knows, at some level, what happens at the convent laundry. People may not know

details; they may not speak it aloud. But they know. They sense it. They feel it. But they avoid looking too closely.

Why? Because silence is rewarded; silence allows you to keep your business, allows you to keep your standing. Keegan's moral vision and sense of character is unsparing: the town's "goodness" is, in part, a performance. Politeness becomes complicity. Respectability becomes cowardice.

This is where Keegan exposes the limits of Alcott's moral framework, not because Alcott is wrong, but because history has changed the moral landscape. There are moments when restraint is virtue, but there are also moments when restraint becomes cooperation with evil. Bill's crisis, then, is not whether he recognizes injustice. He does. The crisis is whether he will break the silence when silence is the town's currency.

In Alcott, character often means learning not to lash out; in Keegan, character means learning when not to remain quiet.

That shift is enormous. It is the shift between a world where moral improvement happens inside a basically decent order, and a world where the order itself is corrupt and therefore the person of conscience must rebel.

Keegan's point is that Bill is not a Marvel movie hero. Bill is not charging barricades. He is not making speeches. He is simply doing the hardest thing many people will ever confront: refusing to participate in a lie.

Dot #5: "Small Things" as a Moral Theology

Although Keegan never quotes scripture, the phrase "small things like these" alludes to the parable of the servant in the Gospel of Luke (16:10): "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with very much." [3] Keegan wants you to realize that what matters most are not the grand gestures. It is the daily choices no one applauds.

In that sense, Keegan's title could serve as a subtitle for *Little Women*. Because what is *Little Women* if not a book about small things? A sister giving away her breakfast. A girl swallowing a cruel remark. A mother confessing anger. A family learning to live with less. A child choosing generosity over pride.

Alcott's moral theology of smallness is rooted in the domestic and Christian-inflected moral culture of her time. Virtue is often presented as a form of self-denial. Keegan's moral theology of smallness is rooted in a darker world. Keegan's

world, our 21st-century world, is a world where institutions that claim moral authority may themselves be abusive.

But both Keegan and Alcott converge on the same insight: moral greatness is not primarily a matter of grand achievement. To use a simple metaphor: most of life is not lived on mountaintops. It is lived in the valleys. It is lived in kitchens, workplaces, streets, and quiet rooms. That is where character is formed. That is where one's moral life either grows or collapses.

Alcott shows virtue forming through repetition, supported by a community that values it.

Keegan shows virtue forming through repetition, threatened by a community that punishes it.

In Alcott, small acts accumulate into a life; in Keegan, small acts accumulate until one act becomes unavoidable.

Dot #6: Moral Memory and Moral Rehearsal

Alcott and Keegan show us how moral memory preserves emotional knowledge. *Little Women* preserves a record of how moral formation was imagined in a 19th-century American home: the language of self-improvement, the belief that conscience can be trained, the assumption that family life is the primary school of virtue. Even when the March sisters fail, the culture around them assumes that failing is not the end. It is the beginning of learning.

Small Things Like These preserves a record of something else. It shows what moral courage looks like when society discourages it. It preserves a record of the way institutions can weaponize shame. It preserves the truth that evil often survives not because most people are actively cruel, but because most people are quietly afraid.

Alcott reminds us that moral life can be cultivated. Keegan reminds us that moral life must sometimes resist cultivation by the wrong hands. Both remind us that we are always being formed by something: by habit, by memory, by culture, by silence, by courage, by avoidance.

Dot #7: Not What to Think, but How to See

So, ending where we began, what is the "moral" of these two very different yet similar books? Or, phrased a bit differently, which is the "moral" book? Is it *Little Women*, with its explicit language of virtue, its domestic lessons, its motherly instruction? Or is it *Small Things Like These*, with its bleak landscape of

complicity, its quiet rebellion against silence, its moral courage enacted without speeches?

Alcott helps you recognize the moral significance of ordinary life. She helps you see that self-governance matters. That virtue is practiced. That love is discipline. That the smallest acts, the tone of a voice, the gift of a breakfast, the restraint of anger, build character.

Keegan shows you that the ordinary is not always innocent. That quietness can be either virtue or cowardice. That self-governance without courage becomes complicity. That goodness is sometimes tested not by the temptation to do wrong, but by the temptation to do nothing.

Alcott shows how moral formation begins. Keegan shows what it costs when it is finally tested.

They also show that it's not what you say that counts. Virtue is not revealed in words, but in action. When the decisive moment arrives, it will not ask you what you posted online or what you said you believed.

It will ask you what you did.

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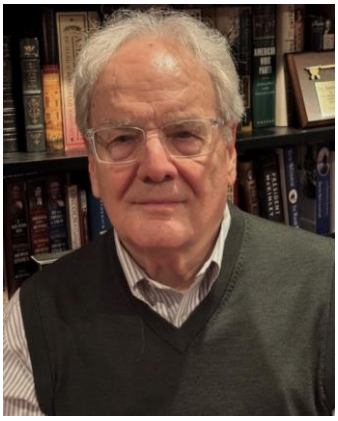
"Claire Keegan," at "'Kleine Dinge wie diese': Dieser Roman ist ganz grosz" at **Berliner-Zeitung** available at „Kleine Dinge wie diese": Dieser Roman ist ganz groß accessed Jan. 14, 2026.

End Notes

1. *"Interview with 'Claire Keegan on Small Things Like These:' I wasn't setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland,"* at **The Booker Prizes** available at Claire Keegan on Small Things Like These: 'I wasn't setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland' | The Booker Prizes accessed Jan. 11, 2026.
2. Alcott, Louisa May. **Little Women** Ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 79.
3. *"Gospel of Luke,"* in **The Oxford Study Bible** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 1352.



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