

# Female Work Ethic in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, Jo's Boys and An Old-Fashioned Girl

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Ledinski, Maja

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

FEMALE WORK ETHIC IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE  
WOMEN, JO'S BOYS AND AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL*

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki, amerikanistika)

Kandidatkinja: Maja Ledinski

Mentorica: dr. sc. Jelena Šesnić

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## 1. Introduction

*Little Women* (1868-1869), *Jo's Boys* (1886) and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870) are popular nineteenth-century novels written by Louisa May Alcott. This paper sets out to analyze the concept of “female work ethic” on the example of the three narratives. Firstly, this paper will offer an overview of the historical background which will include the Victorian era, Transcendentalism, and the Civil War. This part will show how the notion of “work” developed and changed in that it lost its traditional meaning in the American context by the late nineteenth-century. Initially, there was the Puritan work ethic which was not able to be maintained, and was followed by the Protestant work ethic. Max Weber was a German sociologist who coined the term “protestant work ethic” in 1905, and I will later introduce his influential model.

Secondly, the main part of this thesis is dedicated to the three novels, and each will be discussed by following the notion of female work – as a major historical fact but also a sign of incipient social changes - and it will be shown how these narratives tackle the same issue in different ways. Thirdly, a conclusion is provided which will encompass the main points of this paper and describe why Alcott’s works are progressive in relation to the notion of female work in her time. It is worth mentioning that this paper will incorporate Alcott’s biographical facts where necessary in order to depict which characters and situations served as a model for these facts. For instance, the author grew up in a Transcendentalist environment, which is why it is important to demonstrate in what way these circumstances strongly marked her professional path. Finally, I have chosen to discuss the aforementioned novels because even though they are children’s books, this should not be the only category through which they should be observed. There is more to them which Alcott does not explicitly write about, and yet it is of crucial importance for the discussions that want to argue that the author contributed

to the introduction of educated female heroines in American literature who advanced new ideas of women's work.

As Richard Brodhead explains, literature of the nineteenth century can be divided into three categories: serious literature, sensation literature and children's literature. Starting with the second half of the nineteenth century sensation literature became a popular genre which belonged to the lowbrow culture, for its purpose was amusement, and the topics were immoral and provocative. The low price and the format of this genre appealed to a broad audience which mainly comprised of lower-class readers. From the 1850s onwards the authors of story-paper fiction started to be perceived as vehicles of mass production and not as artists (Brodhead 82) which is why quantity and speed were necessary to sustain this new literary regime. Unlike other genres, sensation literature enabled Alcott to freely express her imagination and incorporate emotions such as female rage (Brodhead 64). Moreover, Brodhead avers that according to Alcott it was very unfeminine for women to be involved with sensation fiction as it led them to enter "bad society" and she referred to this genre as low-grade genre (101, 84). Gradually, Alcott turned to writing children's literature whose genre expectations were different given that these narratives had to be pedagogical and didactic. Alcott also noticed the aspect of dignity in writing children's literature, which is something that she found convenient about this genre (Brodhead 88). However, it has to be outlined that more than the personal wish, it was the need to be able to support herself and her family, that encouraged her to start writing such books (Brodhead 89). Furthermore, the author was earning a lot more with children's literature than with her previous writing style. Sensation literature and children's literature created a divided audience, and it is necessary to stress that Alcott's novel *Little Women* reflects on the coexistence of these two literary worlds and cultures. We could say that children's literature emerged from domestic fiction, for although there are evident differences, these genres also share mutual characteristics, such as

the focus on family life. An evident difference is the notion of fun which cannot be found in the domestic novels, but is very common in Alcott's narratives (Brodhead 92). In a way, the author loosened and expanded the conventional genre of domestic fiction in her works by introducing new concepts and reexamining traditional values.

I chose to discuss these three novels which are nominally considered children's literature because their target audience are children, which is why it is interesting to observe how Alcott induces them to consider the importance of notions such as the reevaluation of domestic work, and public work for women, hoping that the result would mean groundbreaking social changes and a more inclusive society. Moreover, the purpose of children's literature in these narratives is to provide its readers with lessons in such a way that it enables them to learn unconsciously, for Alcott's messages are very strong, but implied mildly and unobtrusively, and the way this genre is written provides a creative and inspiring content. These novels teach their audience that if they choose a traditional profession or decide not to step outside the domestic sphere, it should be their personal decision, and not the one that the society has in advance made for them. Furthermore, the major messages that these narratives point out are relevant even nowadays, which is another reason why I have decided to analyze them in my paper. Alcott teaches her characters and her readers the importance of virtues such as self-reliance, sense of duty and independence, all of which are necessary if one does not wish to depend on the help of others, be it in the domestic sphere or outside it. It should be noted that Alcott was a female writer in an era when this was a male-dominated profession. Moreover, her decision to create narratives which almost seem like manifestos given that they advocate for such important topics, contributed to the making of a strong foundation for the early feminist literature.

## **2. Historical Background**

During the Victorian Era in America there were two principal types of labor: manual or wage labor that was predominantly done by men and domestic or reproductive labor which was delegated to women. However, American transcendentalist reformers applied a particular reformist and spiritual understanding of labor which also concerned women, and in the United States it was based on Margaret Fuller's theory of women's labor. Taking up some of Fuller's notions, Louisa May Alcott tried to reexamine and revitalize the Puritan spiritual labor and its traditional traits, in as much as she did not engage with the domain of the new labor model which appeared with industrial capitalism. This revitalization attempt is reflected in all of her narratives that are discussed in this paper.

### **2.1. The Notion of Work Ethic in Victorian America**

The age of American Victorianism was marked by religion, reflected also in the Protestant work ethic, and although this ideology was dominant for quite a while, with the rise of industrial capitalism it was replaced by and transformed into a new model. According to Eric Schocket, the 1850s were the decade when the notion of "work" started to lose its primary meaning (38). Initially, there was the Puritan (Calvinist) work ethic which relied on the idea of calling (vocation). It is believed that every person's destiny is predetermined by God and only the chosen ones will be elected, i.e. saved. Nevertheless, one should work diligently in the vocation in which God had placed him or her. Schocket argues that capitalism transformed labor by diminishing its intrinsic values (41-42) which the Puritans cultivated, and it focused on the extrinsic values – a trait of the new ideology of labor. Schocket further asserts that in eighteenth-century-America there came to be two approaches to labor, one being sacred and the other secular (38).

Later, in his seminal study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* written in 1905, Max Weber called this combination “Protestant work ethic”. The traditional moral values provided by religion were increasingly replaced with a set of patterns which implied that the worker’s main goal in life is work which was a result of the employer’s greed and his need to sell his labor rather than of piety - the main element of the Puritan ideology. So, one of the points of Max Weber’s theory is that capitalism uses the idea of religious meaning of work but places it in an increasingly secular ambit, veiling its monetary nature. Piety simply became a nostalgic residue (Schocket 42) and it could no longer be sustained. Schocket points out that Karl Marx’s theory of capitalism examines and theorizes a new concept of labor as well as a new concept of the laborer (42). Labor was the only thing that the workers could sell relieved of its intrinsic values, which meant that their motivation and reward were merely of extrinsic and instrumental nature. Schocket claims that according to Karl Marx this laborer was a “free laborer” (42), but the connotation of this term is misleading because although the workers did get paid for their work, they were far from “free”, considering how much they worked and how little they earned.

The new industrial system reshaped the idea of vocation and it also upset the traditional gender roles. Instead of being devoted to God, people became devoted to their employers. Although men were predominantly working in the factories, more and more women were also workers and therefore stepped out of the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> This change did not lead to emancipation because women were still expected to do the household work, which meant that they had to work in both spheres. When it comes to women's domestic labor, it

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are no statistics for Victorian America, we can use comparable numbers from France and Britain. Ferguson notes that at the beginning of the nineteenth century 40 percent of women in France were working class, and in Britain the percentage of working class women was equal or even higher than the percentage of working class men (42).



was seen as good for the welfare of society because it created surplus value but it was degrading because the system did not acknowledge their domestic labor.

Further criticism of the capitalist transformation of labor comes from the socialists at the time. Just as with the connection of capitalism and calling, here we can also observe a contradictory impulse at play. So, Susan Ferguson asserts that the socialists August Bebel and Friedrich Engels perceived capitalism as an opportunity for gender equality and freedom (64) because it enabled women to enter the public sphere and earn a wage which contributed to their independence, but the critic points out that Bebel and Engels did not offer an analysis on how the unpaid domestic work is one of the reasons why capitalism is a successful system (64). While during the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were mostly part of the domestic sphere, with the beginning of industrial capitalism they became the main generators of surplus value because they were creating free labor force. Capitalism enabled the mass production of goods which were previously produced in the households and this way women's domestic work started to lose its meaning (Zetkin, qtd. in Ferguson 67). For example, these labors mostly included candle making and sewing. Women earned less than men and this is why they could not achieve complete equality with men, but another thing that needs to be emphasized according to Ferguson (69) is the fact that women were obliged to do the unpaid domestic labor and because of this they did not have enough time and energy to do the paid labor. It is easy to draw the conclusion that although industrial capitalism did seem like a long-awaited chance to come closer to gender equality, women's domestic work was treated as biologically predetermined and this is why it was impossible to keep a balance between the two spheres, meaning that women were not able to work as efficiently as men in terms of paid work.

## 2.2. Transcendentalist Ideas and Work Ethics

Transcendentalism offered its own view of the notion of labor. It was a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement, marked by philosophy and literature, founded in New England and flourishing in the 1830s and 1840s or, as some would argue, until the Civil War. Similar to the Victorian ideas, this movement was also oriented towards the Protestant work ethic and its main idea – vocation. One of the biggest differences between Puritanism and Transcendentalism is that Puritanism relies on strict religious doctrines, whereas Transcendentalism is not so heavily influenced by religion, for it focuses on nature, the spiritual values, and personal freedom. Moreover, on the one hand the Puritan ideology relies on the idea that hard work is a sign of God’s grace and that all people are sinners, whereas only some will be saved. On the other hand, Transcendentalism advocates the idea that people are good by nature and that the institutions corrupt them. One of the Transcendentalists with particular ideas on labor, among other things, was Louisa May Alcott’s father, Bronson Alcott, whose methods of experimental education and pedagogical values heavily influenced his daughter’s narratives, as will be shown later.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered the originator of Transcendentalism, was Alcott’s family friend. His decision to hold public speeches about women’s position was a milestone on women’s path to equality and it also demonstrated his developed theory of self-reliance. Carolyn Maibor describes Emerson’s model of women’s labor which relies on the hypothesis that marriage and family are women’s primary calling (36). However, it is necessary to point out that Emerson perceived women’s affection and empathy as positive traits which should be celebrated and not disrespected. The fact that women could not achieve as much as men beyond the domestic sphere was something that Emerson attributed to the issue of education (Maibor 36) which was relatively unattainable to women at the time rather than to their inherent weakness.

Emerson claimed that men's and women's roles are unique as well as equally valuable for the welfare of society. People who pursue a professional path only as a source of income cannot experience the sense of purpose, a feeling that true calling provides (Maibor 37). Maibor goes on to say: "A true vocation, for Emerson, is something that would be worth doing without getting paid for it..." (37). Maibor asserts that the abolitionist movement enabled women to recognize the rights that they should not have been denied in the past because those were increasingly seen as the fundamental rights, such as access to education, property, and the professions (41). Besides Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott was also instrumental for Emerson's decision to take a new approach to women's work (Maibor 51). Alcott's experience as a nurse enabled him to achieve a better understanding of women's work at the time of war.

Just like Emerson, Margaret Fuller, the most influential female transcendentalist, also used the word "Man" in a universal sense, whereas it stands for the male and the female sex. Fuller pointed out that there was a crucial potential in which women were better than men, and this is the element of intuition:

The electrical, the magnetic element in Woman has not been fairly brought out at any period. Everything might be expected from it; she has far more of it than Man. This is commonly expressed by saying that her intuitions are more rapid and more correct. You will often see men of high intellect absolutely stupid in regard to the atmospheric changes, the fine invisible links which connect the forms of life around them, while common women, if pure and modest, so that a vulgar self do not overshadow the mental eye, will seize and delineate these with unerring discrimination. (39)

However, she explained that this element still had room for development (Maibor 48). Fuller observed that women and men were taught the same subjects in schools, but when it came to

professional paths, women did not have access to them, which is why their knowledge became inapplicable. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (published in 1845) is one of Fuller's influential books which changed the perception of "work" and contributed to the affirmation of woman's position in society but did it from a transcendentalist perspective, which, as I have already pointed out, was an important source of Alcott's ideas.

Besides her writings, Fuller's public conversations were also very influential, for they raised awareness about women's rights. The meetings that Fuller initiated were seen as a milestone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because they opened a new chapter on women, whose intellect was finally used and discussed. Laraine Fergenson argues that Fuller became completely aware of gender inequalities when her father died. Fuller was twenty-five at the time and took over the charge of the family (Fergenson 11). The domestic chores did not allow her to dedicate herself to self-development and cultivating her intellect as much as she wanted. Since she was the eldest daughter and the family was quite poor, she was required to help them, but Fuller still managed to create valuable works, most of which remain one of the most important feminist narratives in modern times.

Fuller did not approve of the gender division of labor and she always advocated for intelligence as a trait which both sexes can possess. Fergenson contends that Fuller's role of the editor of "The Dial", which was a transcendentalist magazine, was another contribution that embodied her intellect and professionalism (14). Fuller advocated that women should have every right to enter the public sphere, and especially emphasized education and politics as two important goals that were yet to be reached. She considered that men should let women participate in important matters like tenure of property and public speaking (Fuller 120), and it is with the following words that Fuller proposed how to enable women to learn: "Plants of great vigor will almost always struggle into blossom, despite impediments. But there should be encouragement, and a free genial atmosphere for those of more timid sort, fair play for

each in its own kind” (19). Moreover, Fuller encouraged women to pursue professions based on their preferences and not on imposed beliefs: “But if you ask me what offices they may fill, I reply--any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will” (66). When it comes to marriage, she believed that women should not be forced into it because it distances them from independence. Fuller left an indelible mark and set the footing for many social changes, with education and women’s labor being just some of them.

### **2.3. The Civil War and its Impact on Women**

Another transformative influence on the notion of “labor” was the Civil War which impacted American society on many levels, and some of the turbulences that it caused concerned labor, the domestic sphere, and women’s position. Traditional gender roles were disrupted and the previous Victorian ideology of the domestic sphere as a place of security, nurture, and affection, was replaced with an environment which no longer had fathers as the head of the family but mothers whose lives had to be readjusted either temporarily or permanently. The war changed the previously strict division of separate spheres since women started to enter the public sphere which was a turning point, for it marked the end of the Victorian era. Phyllis Thompson posits that by separating the families, the war disturbed the previous harmony of the domestic sphere, and it deprived women of their delicacy (33). In the pre-war era women were responsible for spreading religious piety, being submissive, serving their families and doing housework. But the war put an end to this “cult of domesticity” (Thompson 33). For one thing, the Civil War was the first war in the history of the US in which women could serve their country. For example, women worked as nurses, spies and writers, and they sewed clothes for the soldiers and fed them. On the other hand, the absence of men meant that women were supposed to replace their role of fathers and physical laborers. They were required to do the jobs that were physically and emotionally exhausting. Thompson points out that there was a shortage of clothing and food during the war time (38).

Production decreased and the prices were high, which made garments and food a limited purchase, and led women to remake their old clothes. When it comes to food, the members of households needed to get used to smaller portions of it. The abolition of slavery meant that even women from the upper-class had to learn some basic domestic skills, such as cooking. Women who became widows had it the hardest because they could not hope for a revival of pre-war life and had to take the role of their husbands permanently. Some of the daughters had to fill their father's or brother's place and this work was done outside home. For instance, the authors Dorothy Denneen Volo and James M. Volo explain how in rural America during and after the war, women and girls were required to do men's work in the fields and in farm maintenance (351).

During the war it was not easy to maintain communication and since the military mail service was not always reliable, some women did not receive news from their husbands for months, and due to the lack of financial resources some even had to leave their homes because they could not afford paying for them (Denneen Volo and Volo, 351). In order to support their families, a lot of children had to find jobs and some of them were forced to leave school. Children who became orphans were given to their relatives or they had to manage living on the streets and in lodging houses (Denneen Volo and Volo, 353-354). Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber observe that the Civil War caused a "crisis of gender" (13), which was also reflected in wartime literature. The war influenced Alcott's model of female protagonists and some of her heroines are marked by masculine characteristics, including the sphere of labor and jobs appropriate for women (Clinton and Silber 13-14). Her novel *Little Women* is the best instance of such protagonists since the plot takes place during the Civil War and describes some of these changes.

Alcott was a transitional author and her experience as a nurse during the Civil War was her opportunity to contribute to the nation, and also to find inspiration for her literary

works. Although a new culture ensued for women after the Civil War, Alcott created her fiction based on the previous ideologies of Victorianism and Transcendentalism, and the traditional values were always revalorized and revived in her narratives. Her works are a combination of personal experience, her father's influence, and progressive and Transcendentalist ideas.

### **3. Different Forms of Work Ethics in *Little Women***

*Little Women* is the first novel in Alcott's trilogy, in which the other two works include *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys*. The novel *Little Men* is not going to be tackled in this paper. *Little Women* was published rather soon after the Civil War, and the plot takes place in New England following the life of the March family with a special focus on female characters. Although it is nominally a children's book, *Little Women* concerns the whole society, and was read by audiences of different ages and both sexes. Let me provide a summary of the novel's plot before delving into the major topics of the paper. The members of the March family are Mr. March (the father), Marmee (the mother), the oldest daughter Margaret, Josephine, Elizabeth and the youngest daughter Amy. Besides Amy, the other sisters will be addressed by their nicknames and those are Meg, Jo and Beth, respectively. Their neighbors are the rich elderly Mr. James Laurence and his grandson Theodore "Laurie" Laurence. John Brooke is Laurie's tutor and he marries Meg which makes him another important character in the novel. Alvina Treut Burrows claims that it is not possible to analyze *Little Women* without considering Alcott's biography (286), as this novel is to a considerable extent a semi-autobiographical work. Jo is the embodiment of Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth stands for Alcott's sister Elizabeth, Meg represents Alcott's oldest sister Anna, and May Alcott (whose nickname was Amy) is reflected in the character of the youngest sister Amy (Burrows 286-287). Moreover, Burrows asserts that Alcott's mother, Abigail Alcott, was a loving mother with a sense of humor, just like Mrs. March (287).

According to Burrows, Alcott's father Bronson does not quite have his substitute in *Little Women* but some of his influential ideas and methods earned their place in Louisa's works (287).

Furthermore, the concept of labor will be discussed by focusing on multiple types of female work ethics, and the genre of children's literature is suitable to analyze how the work ethics of female characters improve on their way to womanhood as they have the opportunity to show inclination for a profession that they want to pursue already at a young age. Jelena Šesnić, in a somewhat different context, argues that Alcott is changing the concept of work by reinforcing its connection with the intimate, private, and domestic spheres (4). Moreover, Alcott expands the notion of work, for she places her female protagonists in the circumstances which allow them to psychologically and spiritually develop, and to freely decide about their life paths (Harris, qtd. in Šesnić 3). The author is not advocating for women to abandon the traditional feminine roles, but she is suggesting that they can be reexamined.

### **3.1. Self-Sacrifice, Sense of Duty and the Influence of *Pilgrim's Progress***

In this part it will be discussed how the concepts of self-sacrifice, sense of duty, and selflessness impinge on the notion of emotional and spiritual labor that women do at home, in their social circles, and for one another. Judith Fetterley writes about the importance of self-sacrifice in *Little Women* and finds an example already in the second chapter (371-372). The girls are required to give up their Christmas breakfast and take it to the Hummels, a poor immigrant family that lives nearby. Mrs. March is proud to see that her daughters have done a good deed without regret for the lost meal. This example teaches the girls the importance of Christian charity and self-sacrifice. Another oft-quoted act is the episode in which Jo cuts and sells her hair in order to collect the money for Marmee's visit to the sick father at the battlefield, which is seen by John Crowley both as a self-sacrifice and a subversive act (389).



Notably, the act of having her hair cut brings out the rebellious, untamed side of Jo tempered by the deed of self-abnegation, which makes it admirable even if problematically uncontrollable (Crowley 390). Later on, before visiting her sick husband in the hospital, Marmee begs the girls not to forget about the poor Hummels. Beth is the only one who decides to be selfless and she goes to check up on the mother and her children every day. One day Beth comes home and tells Jo that the baby died of scarlet fever (Alcott, *Little Women* 311)<sup>2</sup> and since she was in contact with the baby, Beth falls gravely ill. After that the girl never fully recovers and eventually dies. With Beth's death, Alcott shows that when taken to the extremes, the virtues such as self-sacrifice can even cause a bad outcome as is the case with Beth who risked her health and ultimately her life. However, Abate contends that Beth represents the character of the invalid whose role is to teach the tomboyish girls how to enhance their feminine traits, with self-sacrifice being the most important one in that regard (46).

Marmee provides the girls with the advice on how to conquer one's flaws. Moreover, here Alcott alludes to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which serves as an educational and moral model for her novel. Linda K. Kerber points out that *Little Women* is one of the very few nineteenth-century works that include a Puritan narrative so openly (165). One of the ways in which the March girls are Puritan descendants is their willingness to encourage female literacy which is in accordance with Puritan faith (Kerber 175). Perhaps the most effectively incorporated Puritan principle in *Little Women* is in learning how to control oneself (Kerber 166), for which Jo and Marmee are the best representatives. On the contrary, an element in which the novel shows deviation from the *Pilgrim's Progress* is the self-discovery of the March girls which happens in or close to their homes (Kerber 166). Although Jo goes to New York, she does not reside there very long, and Amy could perhaps be the only

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth all quotations from the novel will be marked as LW, followed by page number.

exception since her trip to Europe takes her away from her family and her home. But it is debatable whether Amy's trip truly offers her a thorough self-discovery.

### **3.2. Jo's Spiritual, Domestic and Professional Work Ethic**

Most girls of that time wanted to marry and dreamt of becoming role model housewives and tender mothers, such as the eldest sister Meg. Jo, however, is an outsider in that respect because she wants to dedicate her life to writing and cannot imagine that there might be a man who would make her change her mind: "Nothing more, except that I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (LW 641). Moreover, with her traits Jo exemplifies a new type of girlhood which emerged during the 1860s, this concept being called "the tomboy". Tomboyism was primarily a cultural phenomenon which came about due to the war circumstances that left women and girls either to help the soldiers or to manage the domestic sphere. Along with this change, tomboyism became also a literary concept. Alcott, who was a tomboy herself, loved to spend time outdoors, get into scrapes and run wild (Abate 26). Such is also Jo, who often indulges in boys' pastimes. For example, there is an episode in which she accepts Laurie's invitation to race him down a hill (LW 271). Michelle Ann Abate observes that Jo behaves tomboyishly from the beginning of the novel where she expresses her regret of not being a boy because she would gladly fight in the war (28). Moreover, although Jo stands for a new female type, tomboy, she is also required to undergo the process of "tomboy taming" (Abate 31). By opting for marriage, motherhood, and teaching, Jo embodies this new practice. She realizes that her initial dream was selfish, and that the future experiences of a mother and wife will come useful, for they will provide inspiration for her literary works (LW 858). Jo replaces her adolescent wish to become rich and famous with the belief that happiness can only be found in the spiritual and inner values. This is why she is genuinely happy when she gets the opportunity to open a school whose students teach her the

invaluable lessons on patience and forgiveness. It is possible to conclude that by depicting Jo as a tomboy, Alcott was trying to emancipate her and place her in a range of new roles. Moreover, Jo also works outside the home as Aunt March's companion. This sort of labor was common for women at the time. At first, she is not happy with this position because Aunt March is demanding and at times unpleasant, but Jo learns how to please her and also earns a small income for her labor, which mostly includes reading to her aunt and taking care of her parrot and dog. Aunt March has a library and whenever she can, Jo reads her favorite books there: "The moment Aunt March took her nap, or was busy with company, Jo hurried to this quiet place, and curling herself up in the easy chair, devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures like a regular bookworm" (LW 65).

Roberta S. Trites also observes that it is ironic on Jo's behalf to think that she will have to try much harder in order to be worthy of heaven (49). Jo shows that she does not care about money or fame on many occasions. For example, when she writes a sensational story for the newspaper and wins \$100, she immediately intends the money for Beth's trip to the seaside (LW 471). This episode shows that Jo is trying to assert herself as a writer influenced by the domestic sphere. The approach to writing and selling at that time was such that only what was thrilling and amusing would sell: "People want to be amused, not preached at, you know. Morals don't sell nowadays" (LW 609). Since Jo wants her stories to encompass the pedagogical elements, it is very challenging for her to become a writer. Furthermore, Jo is depicted as Beth's dearest sister because she is the only one who understands her completely even without talking and she is the first to realize that Beth is going to die. The part where Beth discovers how deeply her older sister loves and admires her is one of the most touching scenes, for this is where Beth realizes that she did not live in vain: "Then I don't feel as if I'd wasted my life. [...] And now, when it's too late to begin even to do better, it's such a comfort to know that someone loves me so much, and feels as if I'd helped them" (LW 734).

Another episode in which domesticity interferes with writing and which might be said to morally improve Jo is the one in which Amy burns her book (LW 130). Jo invested years of love and hard work into this manuscript. This is one of the episodes which shows Jo's temper as rash and impulsive, and as such very uncommon for Victorian girls and women. Moreover, her desire to become a writer also makes her stand out because this type of work was atypical for women at the time. Amy's irrational decision makes Jo very angry and after the incident with the book, Jo hesitates to save Amy from drowning. However, this situation eventually teaches Jo that family comes first and that one must forgive. Mrs. March tells Jo that in her younger days she was also quick-tempered and had to learn how to self-improve (LW 139). Besides this lesson, Jo should look up to Marmee's productive interweaving of domestic, spiritual, and professional work ethic. She successfully manages to run a household, raise her daughters, and work outside the home. The March girls do not lack emotional support and guidance since their mother always finds time to talk to them and to see what each needs the most. Marmee is economical and does not let her daughters be spoiled by vanities such as the inclination towards luxury. Furthermore, it is important to stress that Jo marries Fritz Bhaer whom she meets in New York. She refuses to marry Laurie, which is another atypical decision for a Victorian woman because Laurie is rich and it was uncommon for women at the time to refuse proposals that would raise their social class. Jo marries for love and her family approves of her match.

### **3.3.Meg's Domestic Work Ethic**

Although talented, Meg never intends to pursue the profession of an actress. Besides this, she shows affinities towards fashion and strives to become a good housewife, which are the aspirations attributed to Victorian women. Initially, she teaches small children and works as nursery governess but she does not find it fulfilling, for this job serves only as a source of income to her. Stephanie Foote contends that Alcott poses questions of gender and class

which are well exemplified in the character of Meg (73). Meg decides to marry John Brooke even though Aunt March declares that he is not a good match for her since he is not quite well-off (Foote 73). Thus, the idea of work for Meg is to be exemplified and practiced in the sphere of home. Once Meg marries, she is determined to become an exemplary housewife and a caring mother when she has children. Unfortunately, things do not go as planned and she goes to extremes in both aspects. For instance, she turns her home into a nursery and unconsciously neglects her husband by giving all her attention to the twins.

Meg learns how to keep a balance in the domestic sphere when Mrs. March explains to her that her husband needs her just as much as her children. John's pedagogical methods seem too strict to Meg, but eventually she realizes that children should not be bribed in order to behave obediently and this is why she learns to approve of her husband's decisions: "I never need fear that John will be too harsh with my babies. He does know how to manage them, and will be a great help, for Demi is getting too much for me" (LW 697). Except for that, she makes a mistake already at the beginning of her marriage when she tells John that he can bring a friend from work whenever it suits him, but the first time that he does so, Meg breaks her promise. On that day she is making jam and turns her kitchen into a chaos just at the moment her husband and his guest come home. This domestic episode improves and develops Meg's character since it teaches her the importance of keeping promises as well as not promising what one cannot fulfill. Furthermore, Meg is the most class-conscious of the four sisters – she professes her desire to marry for ease and comfort that such an arrangement would provide (LW 254). Part of Meg's education concerns her interest in fashion, one of her vanities. She is easily convinced by her friends that she deserves to spend money on pretty clothes, and although she cannot afford that, Meg does not want her friends to pity her, which is why she listens to their suggestions. Fetterley argues that with the episode in which Meg buys a dress and then John cannot afford a coat, Alcott is actually presenting woman's

position in society (376). Later on, Meg settles the matter and buys the coat as a present to her husband (LW 499). John works outside of the domestic sphere and Meg does not, which is why unlike Meg, he deserves the garment considering that his work requires him to appear in the public (Fetterley 376). One part of Alcott's motivation concerns the fact that her novels are children's literature which is why it is not possible to talk openly about every topic, and the other part has to do with her decision to redefine women's domestic roles, but also to encourage them to enter the public sphere more. Meg and Jo are put in contrast to show Meg as a character who, with her work ethic, conforms to society's expectations and Jo stands for a female reformer whose personality and choice of career make her stand out from the traditional feminine role.

### **3.4. Beth's Domestic and Spiritual Work Ethic**

Fetterley claims that of the March daughters, Beth is the most similar to her mother when it comes to the traditional virtues (379). Both of them are altruistic and always look after others without giving much attention to their own needs (Fetterley 379). Beth is a thoughtful and humble girl who enjoys playing with her kittens and dolls. Her "castle in the air" differs greatly from her sisters' dreams because she does not wish to leave the domestic sphere – neither to follow a professional path nor to marry: " 'Mine is to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family,' said Beth contentedly" (LW 255). To sum up, she cannot imagine herself growing up and becoming a woman. As such Beth appears to be a true example of a "little woman" (Fetterley 379). Moreover, she shows artistic aspirations and her talent is playing the piano. The March family cannot afford a piano and this is why Beth often goes to the Laurences to practice because the old gentleman is happy to listen to her music and indulge her. Mr. Laurence sends a piano as a present to Beth's home so that she can play it there because Beth is a shy girl (LW 107). Considering her talent and

hard work, she could definitely strive to become a professional musician, but this idea never seems to occupy her mind.

Even shortly before her death, Beth is not idle and still manages to put others first. She enjoys giving little gifts to the children whom she observes from her window. These items are personalized in a sense that Beth gives the children what each of them needs the most. For instance, she provides one child with gloves (LW 728). Beth rarely leaves the domestic sphere and unlike Jo, she is genuinely happy for Amy to go abroad. She is not particularly enthusiastic about doing the housework but she still does it and this is perhaps the only aspect where she could be perceived as lacking but makes up for it with her selflessness and a sense of duty, which only makes her even more virtuous. Fetterley contends that there is a paradox in the fact that Beth is loved by everyone but that she thinks that she is worthless (380). Although, at first, we might think that Beth does not fit in because she is very modest and does not show any personal aspirations, she is in fact the most admirable female character in *Little Women*, which is depicted in her courage at such a young age. Moreover, Fetterley posits that it is possible to conclude that Beth's main role in the novel is to be a lesson to Jo (381). Beth shows to Jo what she could improve about herself (Fetterley 381). That her death is eventually a consequence of Jo's lapse of duty, makes it all the more poignant.

### **3.5. Amy's Domestic Work Ethic**

Amy is the youngest daughter and she is supposed to emulate her mother and her older sisters. She attends school but her act of bringing limes to the classroom upsets the teacher who explicitly forbade such matters. His decision to expose Amy as a lawbreaker in front of the whole class and inflict corporeal punishment on her, induces her family to pull her out of the public school (LW 119-120). Once she withdraws from school, Amy devotes herself to the domestic sphere and occasionally attends social gatherings but she dreams of visiting

Europe and becoming a great artist. As a child, she is stubborn, revengeful and wants to have things her way. For instance, Meg has to put in a lot of effort to convince Amy that she must stay with Aunt March because Beth has the fever and could infect her. The act of burning Jo's book reveals her revengeful side since it was triggered by Jo's decision not to take Amy to the theater earlier that day: "'You'll be sorry for this, Jo March, see if you ain't'" (LW 127).

There is an episode in which Alcott implements her father's doctrine of learning from experience (LW 454). This experiment concerns the part where Amy wants to invite her friends for lunch and treat them well, no matter the amount of time and money that will need to be invested. But her plans fail due to bad weather and poorly prepared dishes. On her way home Amy accidentally drops the lobster in front of one of Laurie's college friends, and feels ashamed because of that. The worst of all is that only one girl decides to show up at Amy's lunch party. Amy eventually admits that her decision was irrational. Moreover, during her adolescence, Amy grows up to be a gracious girl with a talent for art. She wants to follow her mother's example: "I can't explain exactly, but I want to be above the little meannesses and follies and faults that spoil so many women. I'm far from it now, but I do my best, and hope in time to be what Mother is" (LW 540-541). Fetterley asserts that Amy's initial wish was to become a famous artist, but her relationship with Laurie changes her intention and art becomes a secondary thing in her life, whereas family comes first (373). It is necessary to point out that she does not neglect her art, it is just that she loses interest in pursuing artistic profession once she realizes that she does not have genius but only moderate talent: "That's just why, because talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more" (LW 712). Amy's manners are always ladylike, but she does not consider that women should fight for equality, for her idea of women's position is such that she believes that they should only



please men: “Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive” (LW 520).

### **3.6. Concluding Remarks on *Little Women***

*Little Women* presents a medley of traditional female roles and new feminine types such as the tomboy. The notion of female labor is firstly manifested in the domestic sphere where female characters are improving in the spiritual sense which is shown on the example of moral lessons that they receive. After that, Alcott shifts the notion of work ethic, and represents the model of women who are given the opportunity to pursue different artistic careers which are writing, acting, and painting. However, the author also provides the idea that women can pursue a professional career or choose a domestic sphere after all. For instance, Marmee is the character who exercises labor in the domestic sphere and she also does charitable work. Moreover, once married, Meg and Amy settle with the life in the domestic sphere and put their family first. It is necessary to point out that none of these models are given priority, for all of them are simply represented as attainable to women at the time. This novel demonstrates the gender expectations of the time, and it provides female characters who conform to the social norms, as well as those who do not, for the post-Civil war era set a different footing for them and an awareness which takes them a step further when compared with the previous generation of women.

## **4. A Topical Reading of *Jo's Boys***

*Jo's Boys* is Alcott's novel published in 1886, as the last work of her trilogy. Importantly, women in this narrative are given the opportunity to step outside the domestic sphere and contribute to society, which will be presented on the example of several female characters in the text. The author provides the idea of a new educational project by combining the modern context and the traditional notions. Let me provide a summary of *Jo's Boys*. The

setting of the novel is Plumfield, a coeducational school which Jo founds with her husband, Professor Bhaer. Louisa May Alcott was inspired by Bronson Alcott's transcendentalist and pedagogical methods which she expanded upon and incorporated into the fictional Plumfield. For example, she teaches her readers invaluable lessons on equality, sense of duty, traditional inner values, and suffrage. Although the novel is dedicated to boys there is still a lot of insight into the work ethic of women as well. Besides Jo, Meg and Amy, who are now adult women, there are other three female characters who are very important for the discussion of this paper. Those are Nan, the aspiring doctor; Josie, the future actress; and Bess, the wanna-be sculptor. Nan is a strong-minded girl who attends Plumfield, Josie is Meg's younger daughter, and Bess is Amy's daughter. Just like in the other two novels discussed in this paper, here Alcott provides a representation of marriage, spinsterhood and the professional career for women, which is addressed later in the chapter.

#### **4.1. Female Work Ethic on the Example of Plumfield School, College and Theater**

Laurie, who endowed the Plumfield college, adds a theater to the educational complex, and he and Jo enjoy the process of working together. There is one particular play that they write which is held on Christmas Day, and special roles are given to Mrs. Meg and Josie. The two of them take on roles from real life by presenting a mother-daughter relationship as a nexus of the play. Women's influence is crucial for the moral development of the students allowing Azelina Flint to argue that Plumfield is a matrilineal community whose male students admit that they would not be what they are if it were not for the women in their surroundings (93). Women are true role models in Plumfield, and Marmee's portrait reinforces this idea because although she was physically never present in the school, she is still regarded as the symbolic foundress of it (Flint 93). Marmee is no longer a character in this narrative, but her pedagogical ideas and Christian values still continue to inspire her descendants.

Mrs. Jo teaches her male students how to behave in the public sphere, and talks about promiscuous sexual behavior, alcohol consumption and the disrespect toward women (Flint 94), all of which are problems that dominated American colleges in nineteenth-century America, and still continue to do so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through her narrative Alcott provides a critique of all-male American colleges, offering a somewhat utopian Plumfield as a contrast. Unlike Plumfield, Harvard, a prestigious American college, did not prepare its students for life. Flint mentions that Plumfield prepares its students for the outside world by providing them the opportunity to meet people who differ in gender, economic status, and in worldviews (95). This school is an experimental arrangement which proves that coeducation is possible, but at the same time it is home-like, because it offers its students life advice and affection. Furthermore, Alcott incorporated another biographical fact, and that is the possibility for third-generation March women to pursue an artistic path which was not an option for the previous generation (Flint 94). Here we particularly have in mind Josie, who - considering her talent - could become a professional actress which is a profession that her mother (Mrs. Meg) was talented in, but withdrew from. Bess (Amy's daughter) is another character who takes this progressive step, for she intends to become a sculptor. Moreover, we can conclude that the role of professional women (artists) is a new addition to the scope of female characters in children's literature.

#### **4.2. Mrs. Jo's and Mrs. Amy's Domestic, Professional and Emotional Work Ethic**

In *Jo's Boys*, Mrs. Jo does not have the opportunity to dedicate herself to her writing as much as she did when she was an adolescent given that taking care of the family matters and running a school consumes a lot of her time. Except for that, Jo is also actively engaged in the sewing circle, which she founds together with her sisters. Flint posits that the sewing circle encourages the conversations on important matters like abolition and poverty work, which makes it a platform for reformist debate in nineteenth-century New England (95). Jo's

students vary from obedient to rebellious, but they all have one thing in common, and that is the fact that all of them confide in Mrs. Bhaer. Therefore, we could posit that for Jo Bhaer the domestic work is entangled with the professional work. Moreover, Susan Laird notes that Jo's teaching surroundings completely differs from Marmee's given that Marmee taught her children in a predominantly female world, and Jo's students are equally represented by both genders (303). Jo treats her sons, Teddy and Rob, with the same attention and care as her other students. She often tells the boys that they should pray (Alcott *Jo's Boys* 85)<sup>3</sup>, especially when going through difficult trials. When it comes to Jo's professional work ethic which is practiced in the domestic sphere, it is necessary to stress that she does not like to be in the public eye. Moreover, just like Alcott, Jo also pretends to be a servant in front of her fans because she does not want to meet them in person. However, her disguise does not succeed due to her portrait on the wall that the fans notice (JB 40). This part introduces the idea of (literary) celebrity which was a new concept at the time. Furthermore, the idea that a female writer can attain that status is also being promoted here. Alcott represents this with her personal experience of a female author in real life and with Jo's profession in the imaginary world. According to Katherine Adams, with Jo's reluctance to meet her fans, Alcott introduces another important topic for nineteenth-century United States, and that is privacy (185), as well as the idea that it has to be guarded. Adams also posits that once women find themselves in the economy of privacy, things become harder for them because, if exposed to the public, they risk more than men, and they are less hopeful of full inclusion (185). These topics concern the new work ethic by women in the sense that they expose the disadvantages of the public sphere which they have entered. Women's professional work ethic and, especially labor such as writing, was a long-awaited opportunity which now shows the unpleasant and unfeminine side-effects that women need to endure.

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth all quotations from the novel will be marked as JB, followed by page number.

Mrs. Amy continues to do what she started in *Little Women* and that is the management of the domestic sphere, where she promotes the model of a good housewife, and a caring wife and mother. She is not part of the public sphere, and her work ethic is primarily that of supplying affection and nurture: “for she was one of those who prove that women can be faithful wives and mothers without sacrificing the special gift bestowed upon them for their own development and the good of others” (JB 15). Amy and Laurie are doing everything they can to protect Bess, and they both have an equal share in raising her. Moreover, Amy also helps young people who want to become painters and sculptors. She also plays an important role in the life of her niece Josie. For instance, she wants Josie to become a proper lady, gives her lessons on social conduct (JB 112), and helps her with dressing up. Furthermore, when Meg is not around, Amy steps in and offers Josie her affection and advice. When it comes to Amy’s art, her sculptures are not for the public eye and she creates in order to fulfill her talent, and to store her art in a private collection (Fetterley 373). That is why it is possible to conclude that Amy incorporates her artistic ambitions into the domestic sphere, and although she does not pursue a career outside home, her work ethic is very inspiring, for her daughter Bess wishes to become a sculptor too. Moreover, in the sewing circle that she founds with her sisters, Amy gives the young girls lessons on sewing. These gatherings have a multifunctional purpose, for they enable women to socialize and work: “In these household retreats, with books and work, and their daughters by them, they read and sewed and talked in the sweet privacy that domestic women love, and can make so helpful by a wise mixture of cooks and chemistry, table linen and theology, prosaic duties and good poetry” (JB 207). Furthermore, Amy helps the girls with their appearance, and familiarizes them with books about art (JB 207-208). These examples imply that women need to become accomplished in order to achieve independence regardless if they decide to marry or not. Besides, these skills help them to use their intellect instead of cultivating only their emotional and spiritual sides,

as was done previously. Furthermore, women need to change the conventional Victorian ideals and become active members of the society.

### **4.3. The New Woman's Domestic, Professional and Emotional Work Ethic**

I will now illustrate how a younger generation of women of the March family, or educated by them, features in the roles of new women, taking the idea one step further than the previous generation. Meg's older daughter Daisy is not emotionally independent so she submits to her mother's influence. She remains a domestic type and emulates her mother's example: "She was an old-fashioned daughter, dutiful and docile, with such love and reverence for her mother that her will was law; and if love was forbidden, friendship must suffice" (JB 68). Daisy does not feel the need to step outside the domestic sphere and chooses to nurture her feminine ways. Her domestic work ethic is represented as admirable and exemplary. Daisy loves music, and this is why she grows attached to Nat, who studies music. Nat is problematic because he is an orphan and has a complex past. He affects the dynamics between Daisy and Meg, and once he changes his work ethic Meg is more inclined to allow him to court Daisy. In *Jo's Boys* Mrs. Meg is a widow, for her husband died in *Little Men*. Her role in this novel is to guide her children, and help them make the best choices when it comes to love and work. Meg wants her children to acquire excellent education, which is something that her husband was very dedicated to: "for the memory of her husband was a very tender one, and the education of his children had been a sacred task to which she gave all her heart and life, and so far she had done wonderfully well—as her good son and loving daughters tried to prove" (JB 138). Together with Josie, Meg gets a part in the Christmas play that Jo and Laurie have written, and her performance is so remarkable that Jo regrets Meg not being a professional actress (JB 178). Moreover, Meg also contributes to the sewing circle, and she was the first to notice that it would be useful to expand it (JB 207). With time, more and more girls start to join the circle, which leads to its flourishing in the atmosphere of work

and joy. Meg instructs and teaches the young girls to gain a sense of duty just like Marmee taught her and her sisters: “Cultivate cheerfulness and content, if nothing else. But there are so many little odd jobs waiting to be done that nobody need “sit idle and look on,” unless she chooses,’ said Mrs Meg” (JB 209). Daisy is also an active member of the circle, and she follows her mother’s instructions in this regard as well.

In contrast to Daisy, Nan is originally presented as a tomboy: “She was simply and sensibly dressed, walked easily, and seemed full of vigour, with her broad shoulders well back, arms swinging freely, and the elasticity of youth and health in every motion” (JB 5). Nan is an independent young woman who does not show a love interest in anyone. From the beginning of the novel, she has a good work ethic, and would like to help more than she has the chance to: “I long for broken bones, surgery is so interesting and I get so little here” (JB 52). In many ways, she is a lot like Jo, because she too is a reformer, and recognizes that women are deprived in all important matters: “‘It has some advantages, but not all. The women of England can vote, and we can't. I'm ashamed of America that she isn't ahead in all good things,’ cried Nan” (JB 59). There is another autobiographical fact here as it is well-known that Alcott promoted women’s suffrage, and she was pronounced the first woman to vote in the Concord school committee election. Moreover, Nan and Jo are both tomboyish, but Nan’s tomboyishness has to be mellowed down by education and growing up. Abate contends that with her decision to go to college and study medicine, Nan embodies the next phase of tomboyism in the United States (48). The 1880s and 1890s were the decades when women started occupying professions which were previously male-dominated, and this is why Nan is one of the characters who change the traditional conception of womanhood (Abate 48).

There are two reasons which confirm that Nan does not fit the portrait of a Victorian woman: she remains a spinster and she wishes to become a doctor, which was a male-dominated profession in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nan cannot stand idleness and takes life seriously,

which is why she is a true role model for a new woman in all regards. The following passage depicts Nan's observation of men's inability to represent women: "I went to a suffrage debate in the Legislature last winter; and of all the feeble, vulgar twaddle I ever heard, that was the worst; and those men were our representatives. [...] I want an intelligent man to represent me, if I can't do it myself, not a fool" (JB 80). Carrie Tirado Bramen avers that Alcott's conclusion of Nan's destiny is actually based on her personal experience (232). Alcott apparently intends Nan to remain a spinster, and this did not deprive her of leading a happy life which was dedicated to others in need.

Amy's daughter Bess has hyperfeminine and angelic characteristics just like Beth March: "Bess had grown into a tall, beautiful girl looking several years older than she was, with the same graceful ways and dainty tastes which the little Princess had, and a rich inheritance of both the father's and mother's gifts, fostered by every aid love and money could give" (JB 4). Bess is her mother's and father's pride, and she loves sculpting, which is an activity that she pursues as a career. Bess integrates the professional and the domestic which is what makes her a desirable young woman, and this model is different from Nan's or Josie's since they do not exercise their work ethic in the domestic sphere. Bess is very mature for her age and she is never idle. Just like her mother, she is also ladylike and wants to help others. For instance, she reads to Dan because that makes him very happy. When it comes to love interests, we find out that Dan is secretly in love with Bess. On one of his adventures, Dan commits a murder, and although this is done in defense, Jo does not want Bess to fall in love with him. Bess is depicted as being angelic in appearance and in character, but it is peculiar that Alcott wants her to remain that way, not letting her be affected by Dan's experience, which could help her to develop (Keyser 178). Through the emotional attachment with Dan Bess could become emotionally independent and accomplish herself in another way, but the novel does not allow her to grow in that sense. Adams contends that Bess and Dan are two



poles: she represents civilization and domesticity, and he stands for wilderness (199). Moreover, his eyes and his complexion are depicted as dark, while Bess is emphatically white (Adams 199), and she is always portrayed as pure and gentle. Dan is not suitable for marriage because he is marked by his past and prone to violent outbursts. Furthermore, Bess is very successful in her artistic profession, and eventually should marry a spouse who is worthy of her (JB 269).

Keyser concludes that Nan and Josie are two female revolutionaries who best represent the social changes taking place (172). Josie looks up to Miss Cameron, a famous actress, who gladly teaches her the secrets of becoming an actress, offering her helpful advice. They meet during the summer holidays when Miss Cameron loses her bracelet in the sea and Josie manages to find it (JB 115). Moreover, her performances of Shakespeare's plays are accurately performed, but Miss Cameron tells her that given that she is fourteen, she is too young to understand some parts of them, which does not discourage the girl, for she is willing to work hard: "Pride and satisfaction, and a new feeling of responsibility both sobered and sustained her, and she felt that any amount of dry study and long waiting would be bearable, if in the glorious future she could be an honour to her profession and a comrade to the new friend whom she already adored with girlish ardour" (JB 123). Josie's most notable role is the one that she has in the Christmas play. Miss Cameron and the whole audience are genuinely touched by her performance, and this accomplishment is a great milestone on her professional path. Karen Halttunen asserts that Josie is the one who fulfills Miss Cameron's dream by helping her to improve American theater (249). Although Josie is a very young female character, she is also crucial for posing questions about equality and thus evoking contemporary discussions. After a feisty argument with her cousin Ted, Josie poses the question: "must women always obey men and say they are the wisest, just because they are the strongest" (JB 36)? Mr. March offers an optimistic anticipation by claiming that women

do not lag behind men anymore, “and may reach the goal first” (JB 37). The decision to dedicate herself to studying first, and then pursuing the career of an actress, improves Josie’s work ethic, and it also helps to prepare her for every other challenge that she might face in life. Josie’s love interests are never discussed in the narrative, but at the end of the novel the author reveals that she won honours in her artistic career and married someone worthy of her (JB 269).

#### **4.4. Concluding Remarks on *Jo’s Boys***

Among other things, this novel represents progressive female characters and their visions on how to achieve equality. The narrative shows the progression from the older generation of women who are mostly situated in the domestic sphere in which they practice their professions, to the younger generation of women who wish to pursue either artistic careers or study medicine. This newer generation takes the female work ethic a step further and opens the discussions related to the challenges that the public sphere imposes. By presenting this progression, Alcott openly discusses important women’s issues such as women’s rights and work – the major topic of this paper. Moreover, although Plumfield is to some extent a utopian institution, it still provides valuable lessons which are important for the outside world. For instance, it teaches men to show more respect for women and to refrain from promiscuous behavior. Meg, Jo and Amy are cultivating their mother’s pedagogical values, ingraining them into their children and students, and by doing so they help them to choose honorable life paths and partners. One of the most important projects of this novel is the sewing circle which promotes practical and skilled work, and enables women to share their ideas on women’s rights. Furthermore, by choosing progressive professional careers and founding platforms where their voice is heard, the female characters are breaking the previously established stereotype that women’s place is not in the public sphere. The analysis of this novel was an attempt to show that marriage and the domestic sphere are not the only

possible paths for women although the novel also shows that some women might choose that as their favored way and why they would do so.

## **5. A Topical Reading of *An Old-Fashioned Girl***

*An Old-Fashioned Girl* is Alcott's novel which reflects on women's role in the creation of the post-Civil War American identity by reevaluating the domestic sphere. Let me provide a summary of the novel's plot before tackling the topic of the paper. The novel portrays the life of a country girl called Polly Milton, who is good-natured, unspoiled, and very traditional in her manners. She comes from a poor but respectable family. The narrative is divided into two sections, so that the first section follows the life of Polly and her friends as children, while the second one depicts their lives as young adults. Her friends are the siblings Fanny, Tom, and Maud Shaw, who live in Boston with their parents and their grandmother. The older Mrs. Shaw (the grandmother) dies during the course of the novel, and she does not appear in the second part. Polly is fourteen at the beginning of the narrative, and in the second part she is twenty as the plot of the sequel takes place six years later. Kristina West asserts that Polly represents 'the country mouse' while Fanny stands for the 'city mouse' (81). It is necessary to mention that, as Alcott states in the preface of the narrative, her old-fashioned girl is not flawless, for she is simply an improvement of the "girl of the period" who is dedicated to fashionable ways, instead of promoting the traditional ones, and this paper will try to depict the model of this new (but still old-fashioned) type of girl.

### **5.1. Polly's Domestic, Emotional and Professional Work Ethic**

In the first section Polly goes to Boston to visit her friends for the holidays, and while staying there she exerts her influence on the whole Shaw household. One way of exercising that is her ability to develop and improve their family relationships. For instance, by following Polly's example Fanny decides to accompany her father on his way to work.

Furthermore, it is by observing Polly's behavior that the Shaw children learn the importance of spending time with their grandmother. Moreover, Polly awakens the feeling of fraternal love in her friends by presenting them the sad story of her deceased brother Jimmy as she teaches them that we do not know when we are going to be separated from our loved ones. Polly, who grew up in a very close relationship with her siblings, is surprised to learn how insensitively Fanny and Tom treat each other. Charles Strickland contends that their arguments are a representation of the battle of the sexes (110). Polly's role here is instrumental, for she teaches her friends the invaluable worth of the emotional labor entailed in family relationships. Ultimately, when Tom returns home from the West, his sister Maud depicts the encounter of the two of them as very tender: "He looks so funny with whiskers, but he's ever so nice, real big and brown, and he swung me right up when he kissed me" (Alcott *An Old-Fashioned Girl* 274)<sup>4</sup>.

Lydia A. Schultz claims that Alcott teaches her audience also how to deal with the influence of others whose behavior is unacceptable (34). For instance, when Fanny and Polly go to the theatre, Polly is appalled with the dancing of the young performers. However, she does not let Fanny's admiration towards the show change her opinion.: "'I'll never come again,' said Polly, decidedly; for her innocent nature rebelled against the spectacle, which, as yet, gave her more pain than pleasure" (OFG 13). Moreover, Alcott provides a setting in which children play, and by doing so she presents what is a healthy environment for them (Schultz 44). In this novel, the countryside is represented as a better environment for the children because there they are encouraged to play, unlike in the city. Polly goes coasting with Tom, and although Fanny and Mrs. Shaw do not take Polly's side in this matter, Polly being a girl, Mr. Shaw does. Polly is unconsciously showing Mr. Shaw the benefits of the country life which in turn create healthy and cheerful children. However, there are situations when even

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth all quotations from the novel will be marked as OFG, followed by page number.

Polly is brought into temptation as, for example, when she decides to replace a dull day at home by going to the opera with Fanny and Tom, or when she buys the new boots with the money that she intended for the presents for her siblings (OFG 172, 38). These weaknesses make Polly a character with whom we can easily identify, and although she is a role model, Polly is not supposed to present a perfect character given that Alcott intended her to represent a girl of the times. The novel also focuses on the management of the domestic sphere while it stresses the importance of exemplary female role models. Alcott teaches her audience that cooking skills are a necessary item for every housewife. To illustrate, Polly teaches the Shaw children to make molasses candy. Moreover, Polly reflects on the complete contrast between Mrs. Shaw and her own mother:

She thought of another woman, whose dress never was too fine for little wet cheeks to lie against, or loving little arms to press; whose face, in spite of many lines and the gray hairs above it, was never sour or unsympathetic when children's eyes turned towards it; and whose hands never were too busy, too full or too nice to welcome and serve the little sons and daughters [...]. (OFG 92-93)

This passage represents a model of exemplary emotional work ethic and the embodiment of motherly affection. Alcott extolls qualities like selflessness, thoughtfulness, nurture, and affection, all of which are the qualities that caring mothers should possess.

As a young adult, Polly still sticks to her traditional ways and promotes the old-fashioned values. Alcott does not want to present a false picture of work to her audience, so she objectively depicts Polly's work experience which is not always pleasant given that she has a repetitive job (Schultz 38). This is another way of presenting characters as images of real-life people with whom the readers can relate. In the second part, Polly moves to Boston to work there as a music teacher and, by doing so, she financially supports her brother Will, who goes to college, and herself. It is well-known that Alcott also had to support herself and

her family. Polly's landlady, Miss Mills, is one of her major role models. Miss Mills follows Christian principles, and she provides Polly with an account of an orphaned girl Jenny who was on the verge of committing suicide due to her harsh destiny. In order to help Jenny, Polly arranges for Jenny to sew for Fanny's friends, and Miss Mills notes the manifold benefits of Polly's effort: "This will help Jenny very much; but the way in which it was done will do her more good than double the money, because it will prove to her that she isn't without friends, and make her feel that there is a place in the world for her" (OFG 167-168). Miss Mills, thus, teaches Polly the importance of Christian charity and sacrifice.

Deanna Stover claims that sisterhood is a very important notion for Alcott, for it enables women to achieve power (91), and makes for a platform through which they can share ideas and discuss important topics. To illustrate, Polly's decision to distance herself from Arthur Sydney, who is her suitor at one point, but also Fanny's love interest, is Polly's way of showing that female friendship is more important than love interests (Stover 89). She is genuinely happy for their engagement and she helps Fanny to improve herself. At the end of the novel, we find out that Polly wants to join Tom and work in the West. This departure is Alcott's way of involving women in the formation of a new American identity engaged in the settling of the West (Stover 82). Moreover, this means that after being married, Polly does not intend to stop working, which accords with Stover's mention that the Midwest at the time was known for women's participation in the public life (90). Except for her lessons on relationships, the domestic sphere, and helping others in need, Alcott also shows how to manage difficult situations. After the bankruptcy of the Shaw family, Polly teaches Fanny that there is no shame in receiving money from friends. She encourages Fanny to accept her friend Belle's offer to buy the dress that she does not want to wear anymore. Moreover, she also teaches her friends (and the readers) the importance of handwork. With this Alcott specifically promotes sewing which was a widespread women's activity in nineteenth-century

America, bringing to mind a comparable episode in *Jo's Boys* where female students, among other things, also sew. Polly shows Fanny how to reuse her old clothes, and make it suitable for her spring wardrobe. Besides that, she also makes her understand that there is no shame in wearing clothes which are not brand new: "I've worn turned and dyed gowns all my days, and it don't seem to have alienated my friends, or injured my constitution" (OFG 237).

Although *An Old-Fashioned Girl* has elements of Max Weber's concept of Protestant work ethic, it also shows a deviation from it, and a revitalization of the spiritual work ethic which predates industrial capitalism. For instance, the author depicts the main protagonist as a girl who wants to marry for love, and she does not work to become rich, for she does it to support her family and herself. Moreover, Stover contends that there is an evident change in the second part because now Polly is not the only woman who participates in the reform attempts, for other women follow her example too (82). There is an episode where Polly introduces Fanny to her friends Bess and Rebecca, who are artists, and to Kate who is a writer. Rebecca is a sculptor, and she shows the girls her current work which is a statue of a woman. She shares her vision of the coming woman: "'Yes, strong-minded, strong-hearted, strong-souled, and strong-bodied; that is why I made her larger than the miserable, pinched-up woman of our day. Strength and beauty must go together'" (OFG 197). Unlike Fanny's friends, Polly's friends find purpose in work, and they want to contribute to society by offering their talents and by discussing important topics such as art, religion and economy (OFG 200). Strickland posits that the episode about the coming woman expresses radical feminism (87), and along similar lines, Briallen Hopper describes this feminist discussion as a spinster manifesto (47). Fanny is astonished by the new realization that women can be as independent as Polly's friends are, and work so patiently driven by the purpose that they find in work. Another thing that astonishes Fanny is Polly's emotional work ethic which is reflected in her honest love for Tom. Before Tom comes home from the West, Fanny finds

out that Polly loves him, and the way she talks about her feelings for him makes Fanny understand the definition of true love (OFG 268). Except for her influence on women, Polly also impacts Tom, who changes his work ethic because of her, and the two of them eventually get married. In order to pay off his debts, Tom decides to join Polly's brother Ned and work in the West. Polly is hardworking from the beginning of the novel, but Tom is not, and this is why he needs to change and work hard in order to deserve her love. He comes to understand that being idle and prank-prone is unacceptable, and realizes that Polly's work ethic is admirable and should be pursued. We can conclude that this is why Polly's work ethic triumphs over Tom's work ethic, for she humbles him.

## **5.2.Fanny's and Maud's Emotional and Domestic Work Ethic**

Alcott enables her readers to understand why the environment in which Fanny grows up is not admirable since it is impossible for Fanny and her friends to become active individuals (Schultz 35). Strickland notes that Fanny's manners are not in accord with her age, especially her flirtatious behavior which is perceived as a risk of premarital sex (143). Mr. Shaw harshly condemns Fanny's suitor because he is "not a boy, but a fast fellow" (OFG 56). The novel also puts great focus on moral lessons about fashion and dressing, which presents to the readers the danger of growing up prematurely. Alcott alludes that this leads to idleness and a lack of direction in life. Schultz posits that Fanny's way of dressing prevents her from playing, and it also does not allow her to go outside because the rain could damage her appearance (31). The urge to dress up is also encouraged by the peer culture, and school as an institution is a place where children can observe and judge each other's looks (Hunter 287). The grandmother Shaw claims that "young things don't need any ornaments but youth, health, intelligence, and modesty" (OFG 95). With this, Alcott teaches her young female audience not to dedicate too much attention to their appearance. Stover contends that Fanny can be perceived as Alcott's Girl of the Period whom she critiques (81). Furthermore, when it



comes to education, there is an evident difference between Fanny and the girls from her school, on one hand, and Polly, on the other. Unlike Fanny's friends who gossip, Polly knows Latin in a period when the knowledge of rhetoric is crucial and is mostly exhibited by men (Stover 85). Moreover, the experience of bankruptcy is very beneficial for Fanny given that it improves her domestic skills, and in turn makes her a desirable wife for the man she loves. Although she has many vanities, and is not virtuous from the beginning, her character improves. The biggest accomplishment on her way of transformation is her decision to marry for love rather than money or social status.

Maud is Fanny's younger sister, and we learn that already as a six-year-old she is introduced to the world of romance (OFG 36). The three siblings rarely play or talk to each other without insults, while the following passage portrays Maud's submissiveness towards her brother: "Maud admired Tom with all her heart, and made a little slave of herself to him, feeling well repaid if he merely said, 'Thank you, chicken,' or didn't pinch her nose, or nip her ear, as he had a way of doing, 'just as if I was a doll, or a dog, and hadn't got any feelings,'" (OFG 139-140). The bankruptcy experience improves Maud's character as well: "she felt that a good time was coming for her and fell to dusting furniture, washing cups, and making toast, the happiest, fussiest little housewife in the city. For Maud inherited the notable gifts of her grandmother, and would have made a capital farmer's daughter, in spite of her city breeding" (OFG 235).

Stover posits that speech is an efficient tool in the narrative, for by talking to Fanny's friends, Polly raises awareness of the importance of work, which makes her a social reformer and puts her rhetorical skills into practice (87). When it comes to language in general, the novel represents country language as an improved variant of English, and Polly as its representative, on the one hand, and on the other hand, there are characters like Fanny and Maud who stand for the citified variant which is heavily corrupted. Language became

corrupted because of the imposed foreign fashions which affected American culture and identity, and this situation can be improved by turning to the pure English which should be encouraged and taught in school, and everyone should take the responsibility to promote the proper English. Alcott represents the “corrupted” American language, and a good example of it is Fanny’s observation of Polly’s name which she finds too countrified, and would like to give her a new name – “Marie” (Stover 84), which is a French name. Moreover, Maud’s English is also bad, as she shows a preference for French expressions. Stover asserts that Maud’s corrections of Polly’s speech - which is proper- implicate a danger for American culture (84) given that it is being influenced by foreign languages and foreign fashions that could corrupt children and young adults. We find out that Maud remains a spinster, and by doing so presents what is an uncommon path for women at the time, but her character shows that it can be as fulfilling as marriage.

### **5.3.The Grandmother’s and Mrs. Shaw’s Domestic and Emotional Work Ethic**

The grandmother Shaw is Polly’s second role model in life, and her work ethic mostly revolves around the fact that she encourages others to be virtuous and diligent. Unlike Mrs. Shaw and Fanny who try to emulate European aristocratic notions, the older Mrs. Shaw stands for the virtues stemming from the American Revolution (Stoneley, qtd. in Stover 83). Furthermore, the grandmother tells Polly and her grandchildren about her childhood experience, and she also mentions that the children in her time had to honor their parents. Schultz points out that this is a reference to the biblical commandment (31). Although she does not step outside the domestic sphere, the grandmother’s work ethic, advice, and affection are an endless source of inspiration. Just like Polly, the grandmother also cultivates the old-fashioned values, and a sense of duty, which is why she is happy to realize that Polly has a positive influence on her grandchildren. For example, she is pleased to see them involved in useful activities, such as sewing: “Sew away, my dears; dollies are safe companions, and

needlework an accomplishment that's sadly neglected nowadays'" (OFG 41). In the second part, the grandmother is no longer present, but Polly and her friends remember her advice, and Tom states that Polly took her place given that they have embodied the same values (OFG 255).

Alcott represents multiple types of work ethics whereas in the character of the younger Mrs. Shaw, the mother, she shows a deviation from the exemplary work ethic. For example, Mrs. Shaw does not let Maud near her because the child has dirty hands (OFG 92). Moreover, she lets her husband and their servants raise their children. Mrs. Shaw cares for luxury and a good reputation, and the old-fashioned values are something that she does not approve of. In a way, Mrs. Shaw is a hypochondriac because she often stays in bed, and instead of dedicating herself to her children, she is the one who needs to be looked after: "Mrs. Shaw was a nervous, fussy invalid, who wanted something every five minutes; so Polly found plenty of small things to do for her and did, them so cheerfully, that the poor lady loved to have the quiet, helpful child near, to wait upon her, read to her, run errands, or hand the seven different shawls which were continually being put on or off" (OFG 43). Furthermore, Mrs. Shaw is the only person in the family who cannot adapt to life after bankruptcy. She falls into an even deeper despair and cannot accept the loss of privileges: "Polly's hopes of Mrs. Shaw were disappointed, for misfortune did not have a bracing effect. She took to her bed at once, received her friends in tears and a point-lace cap, and cheered her family by plaintively inquiring when she was to be taken to the almshouse" (OFG 234). Mrs. Shaw is thus a peculiar character in the narrative, for she is the only one whose work ethic does not improve, which in turn makes her a representative of an unsuccessful model for both the family and the domestic sphere in general.

#### **5.4. Concluding Remarks on *An Old-Fashioned Girl***

The novel promotes and revitalizes the traditional values by showing why they should not become part of the past, for they have a major role in the creation of post-war national identity. The main protagonist provides workable advice and moral lessons, but she also has a real-life personality and is not flawless, which is why readers can relate to her. Moreover, Alcott points out the importance of women helping each other, and implements the notion of sisterhood as one of the vehicles which would facilitate the introduction of suffrage. The author also provides examples of different types of professions and shows spinsterhood as a possible choice, as well as the combination of the professional and the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, grandmother Shaw represents the traditional role of women as she does not leave the domestic sphere. The younger Mrs. Shaw represents a model which should not be pursued given that she fails as a mother, a wife, and a housewife. Polly's friends are another essential element of the novel, for they advocate for women's rights, and embody a sense of duty and progressive professional paths. Furthermore, Alcott teaches her readers to resist fashionable ways and to strive for a good education, inner values, and an exemplary work ethic. The fact that Alcott incorporated autobiographical elements and propagated her repeated message that life is meaningless without work makes the story very poignant and authentic.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate how the notion of “female work” shifts in the three novels written by Louisa May Alcott. Since the novels are children’s literature, they need to be entertaining, but also conventional which means that the writer has to use didactic and pedagogical methods, and respect the demands of the audience. One of Alcott’s biggest novelties was her decision to introduce and imbed new feminist ideas within the framework of a precisely defined genre. Alcott shows how and why women should freely choose to pursue their professions, without being influenced by society or men. Since Alcott was a transitional author, this analysis tried to show how the Victorian era, Transcendentalism, and the Civil War affected and shaped her works. Moreover, the sewing circle and the coeducational school are some of the most important projects in these novels, for they teach the audience that education and inclusion are the fundamental rights of every person. It is important to emphasize that all of Alcott’s female characters have flaws, and none of them serve as the perfect model, for their purpose is for their readers to be able to identify with them. This is why Alcott not only represents exemplary work ethics, but those unsuccessful ones too. As it was mentioned, the autobiographical facts and the influence of Bronson Alcott’s methods also have a large role in the analyzed narratives. Alcott’s work experience and life experience helped her to better depict the types of characters, families, and settings which occur in the novels. Moreover, the focus in the narratives is also put on the revitalization of traditional values which are promoted through a combination of Protestant work ethic and transcendentalism, which is another idea that this paper tackled.

This analysis also tried to point out the importance of women helping each other, which is another idea that the author promotes. When it comes to work, Alcott advocates that it is necessary to find purpose in work because idleness spoils people and makes them miserable. However, it has to be emphasized that children in Alcott’s narratives are not the

working class and the type of childhood that is promoted is the one which is filled with joy, play and outdoor activities. In this regard, country life is depicted as better surroundings for children because it does not encourage gender division in play and it also nurtures qualities such as simplicity and humbleness. Besides that, the countryside stimulates children to learn proper English language and not to succumb to foreign fashions. Except for labor, which is the major topic of this paper, attention was also given to the notion of family and family relationships. The author promotes the importance of family and teaches her readers that family should come first in life. The narratives show that nothing compares to a family whose members respect and love each other, live in harmony, and in turn help others who are less privileged. Some of Alcott's female characters marry rich men and some of them poor, but the point is that all of them marry for love and are willing to face the challenges that these unions pose. To conclude, this paper is one of the possible interpretations and discussions of Alcott's works. Hopefully, this analysis managed to provide a useful overview of one salient cultural topic and the way it was represented in the corpus of nineteenth-century American literature.

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## 8. Abstract and key words

This paper provides an overview of three popular children's nineteenth-century novels written by Louisa May Alcott. One of the ideas that the author advocates for are women's rights and the idea of a more inclusive educational system. Focusing on the concept of "female work ethic", I show how Alcott approached this topic in the framework of children's literature. Certain examples from the novels provide a better insight into the core of this discussion, and each novel was influenced by the historical circumstances that took place, which is why there is an evident difference between the older and the younger generation of female characters in these novels. Besides the major topic of this paper, this analysis also touches upon other relatable notions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as woman's position in society, family life and relationships, etc. It is also worth mentioning influential messages that the author provides in her works, and to name just a few, Alcott for instance promotes the importance of family, labor in general, and inner values. Moreover, notions such as materialism, inclination towards money, fame and foreign fashions are condemned as undesirable traits in women. I also show how the author discusses the combination of older and modern values which her characters embody. Although the paper is dedicated to women's labor, some minor parts of the discussion also tackle male characters whose role is instrumental for reinforcing certain arguments which concern female work ethic. I also discuss the introduction of new topics and concepts which Alcott included in her novels, and this refers to the new cultural concept called "tomboy" whose traits are presented in the characters of Jo and Nan, and it is also necessary to mention the idea of literary celebrity and the notion of privacy. Furthermore, these concepts enabled this paper to show the challenges and the complexities of women's position in Victorian and postbellum America.

**Key words:** Louisa May Alcott, children's literature, female work ethic, Victorian America, moral lessons