

Analyzing Female Consciousness in *Little Women* from the Perspective of Family Education

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The 19th century was a significant period for feminine literature. Louisa May Alcott, a representative female writer of the time, created numerous romance novels. Her masterpiece *Little Women* follows the growth experiences of the four March sisters and illustrates their the pursuit of independence under family education. This paper will analyze how family education impacts the characters' growth and explore the formation of female independence.

Keywords: *Little Women*, female independence, family education

The Influence of Mr. March's Family Education in *Little Women*

In *Little Women*, although Mr. March has limited presence for being on the battlefield, his influence on daughters is profound and he has always been a spiritual pillar during their life journey. In one of his letters, he writes:

"Give them all of my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pray for them by night at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted."— Chapter 16 (Alcott, 2020, p. 120)

The letter contains no complaints about war and is instead filled with optimism, showcasing his positive attitude toward life.

When Jo learns of her father's improved health, she writes:

"Three cheers for dear Father! Brooke was a trump to telegraph right off, and let us know the minute he was better. I rushed up garret when the letter came, and tried to thank god for being so good to us, but I could only cry, and say, 'I'm glad !'"— Chapter 16 (Alcott, 2020, p. 122)

This passage demonstrates Jo's deep affection for father and how, under his influence, she gradually learns to take responsibility.

Furthermore, Mr. March leads by example through own actions. He said to Jo:

"If I don't seem to need help, it is because I have a better friend, even than Father, to comfort and sustain me. My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one."— Chapter 8 (Alcott, 2020, p. 60)

This passage highlights the role of parents in children's growth. When Jo decides to pursue a career in writing, Mr. March also shows respect for daughters' choices, reflecting his support for women's independence.

Overall, despite Mr. March's absence from family life, he continually conveys hope through letters. His educational approach deeply influenced the four sisters' growth, helping them maintain their identity, pursue independence.

The Influence of Mrs. March's Family Education in *Little Women*

Mrs. March's Educational Philosophy

In the early 19th century, the transcendentalist movement in New England emphasized personal independence and spiritual perfection. At that time, women were still focused on domestic abilities, particularly in Puritan households in New England, where women were expected to be obedient in home. The title *Little Women* itself also reflects society's expectations of women's roles. However, under the influence of transcendentalism, American society entered a transformative period where feminism began to encourage women to break traditional views and develop independent consciousness. Mrs. March embodies this philosophy; she breaks away from the traditional housewife image and becomes a spiritual guide for children.

Mrs. March firmly believed that women should strive for financial independence. In Chapter 14, Jo excitedly announces that she has successfully published her first novel and can earn money to support the family. Mrs. March is proud of her. It is evident that Jo's success is not only due to personal efforts but also close to the open-minded environment Mrs. March creates. For instance, she never stifles Jo's passion for writing, instead, she encourages her to freely explore her creative talents. In this case, Jo's potential is stimulated and finally becomes a writer.

Next, Mrs. March believes that women should maintain own judgment when choosing husbands, she once encouraged Jo to reject Laurie:

"It is better to be a happy old maid than a miserable wife or an improper woman" — Chapter 9 (Alcott, 2020, p. 66)

Through this conversation, Mrs. March expresses her views, that is, women should not be restrained by marriage; instead, they should possess own lives.

Mrs. March also emphasizes kindness and care. Despite financial difficulties, she still encourages daughters to help those in need. At the beginning, she asks daughters:

"Not far from here is a poor woman with a new-born baby, and six children crowded on one bed. They have no fire to keep from freezing. My daughters, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas gift?" — Chapter 1 (Alcott, 2020, p. 4)

In a word, *Little Women* is indeed a work that presents new types of female characters, shaping a feminist message in 19th-century American society.

Mrs. March's Educational Methods

Mrs. March is skilled at using "experimentalism" in education. She believes that experience is the best teacher and designs many experimental activities. Chapter 11 is titled "*Experiments*," where this educational approach is typically applied. One day, the children ask Mrs. March if they could enjoy a few days without doing housework. Mrs. March doesn't directly refuse:

“You may try for a week without doing anything and see if you like it, but I believe by Saturday night you will find that it is just as unpleasant to do nothing.”— Chapter 11 (Alcott, 2020, p. 82)

Firstly, they feel relaxed, but gradually the sisters begin to feel uncomfortable. The weather turns unpredictable, and their moods follow suit. To make the experiment more meaningful, Mrs. March deliberately allows them time for self-reflection a whole day. By the evening, four sisters are disappointed. Mrs. March tells them:

“Doing what you ought to do seriously will bring inner peace.”— Chapter 11 (Alcott, 2020, p. 82)

Through this experiment, the girls learn the significance of work. They begin to keep diligent and take on own tasks.

In conclusion, Mrs. March, as a devout Puritan, allows her daughters to learn life lessons through practical engagement. *Little Women* can, to some extent, be seen as an Americanized version of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. It focuses on the Christian growth and struggles of Mrs. March and her four children, depicting how they overcome hardships and, through various challenges, ultimately find beautiful lives.

The Influence of Sisters’ Family Education in *Little Women*

In *Little Women*, each of the four sisters has a distinct personality, and under the guidance of parents, they gradually overcome flaws and grow into well-rounded women.

First, the sisters have different dreams. Meg desires a luxurious house filled with fine food, beautiful clothes. Her ideal reflects her focus on the family, as she hopes to become the center of it. At the same time, as the eldest sister, Meg always takes on responsibility, serving as a caregiver. In contrast, Jo hopes to help her family through financial independence, especially after Beth falls ill. She uses the income from writing to support Beth’s treatment. It shows that Jo is an independent woman with a clear goal in career. What’s more, Beth is the third daughter. Although Beth is the least conspicuous among the four, she quietly cares for others, bringing peace to the family with her gentleness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Little Women* is not just a story about female growth, but also a profound exploration of family education and self-worth. Whether it is Meg, Jo, or Beth, their growth is deeply influenced by family and they commit to passing on the love through mutual support.

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