

# The Good Mother: A Moral Guide in Family Education

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*Little Women*, the masterpiece of American woman writer Louisa May Alcott, contains didactic messages that teach readers valuable lessons about life. This essay argues that readers can learn important moral lessons from Mrs March's very special kind of family education. It concentrates on the contents of her education and her methods, analyzing these from the point of view of the implied reader. Firstly, the essay addresses the issue of mercy, one of the most vital didactic lessons taught and presented from the very beginning of the novel. Despite the family's poverty, Mrs March practices what she teaches by urging the four March sisters to be kind to others. Four other qualities are also discussed: self-reliance, the value of labor and duty, the importance of the family, and modesty.

*Little Women* owns a good many didactic elements. For instance, each character in the family is considered to be a teacher, reinforcing the idea that the story is didactic. It has been demonstrated that "[...] family education is the most important one for children's early experience and has decisive influence on the form of their personalities." (Sun, p.149) It is thus not surprising that Mrs March's contributions to her family's education are of primary importance. Supervised by Mrs. March, the March sisters draw lessons from one difficulty after another, finally becoming a new generation of women with traditional virtues. At the same time, readers are also able to learn lessons from Mrs. March's programme of education.

Despite the examples mentioned above, however, some critics such as Ellen Butler Donovan argue that "Alcott's *Little Women* [...] were written in opposition to the didacticism of contemporary children's literature." (Donovan, p.143) Furthermore, she explains that "[t]he innovations in the narrative perspective in the novels may not be readily apparent [...]" (Donovan, p.143) according to the traditional nature of

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didactic children's literature. Similarly, "[f]rom a historical point of view, the didactic messages found in traditional children's literature have frequently been presented in an explicit manner [...]" (N.A., p.4). As is clearly stated in their own words, several critics are still against that the novel contains the didactic genre because of its inexplicit narration.

Traditionally, fiction has been written for a higher motive, but also for entertainment, which is its privacy function such as teaching moral and religious lessons, to prove its credibility. In 1820, MacLeod defines the nature of didacticism in the children's fiction as the following terms: "[t]ender minds were given [...] innumerable small tales of temptation resisted, anger restrained, disobedience punished, and forbearance learned." (MacLeod, p.42) He points out that children's literature is dominated by moralistic stories in which readers are taught to be moral. Didactic here is thus used in the sense prescribed by Bruno Bettelheim. Bettelheim emphasizes that children's literature must "stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions [...]" (Griesinger, p.459). Didactic children's literature encourages readers to imagine and aid them develop themselves instead of giving moral teachings barely. That is to say, readers are unlikely to read several stories with clearly stated moral and ethical lessons. As Perry Nodelman argues, "[g]ood children's books teach valuable lessons about life, but do so unobtrusively. They make learning fun." (Nodelman, p.73)

Throughout *Little Women*, the March sisters encounter many difficulties. Each time, Mrs March enables her daughters to overcome these and learn by their mistakes. The novel is filled with wisdom and morality. Mrs March does not preach, neither does she bore her daughters with long-winded moral lectures. Instead, she takes examples

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from daily life, enlightening her children and enabling them to see their shortcomings, establishing a viable philosophy of life that leads to security as well as happiness.

Because Mrs March lives by her own rules, her teaching is effective.

Thus, the implied reader of the novel is a teenage girl aged around like Mrs March's daughters. The girl comes from middle-class with a stable and strong loving family.

As little women in the book, each person in the family has a social reputation to protect.

At the very beginning, Mrs March demonstrates her exceptionally charitable nature.

She is virtuous, modest and kind to others. In the early morning of Christmas day, for example, the servant Hannah tells Meg and Jo that “[s]ome poor creeter came a-beggin, and your ma went straight off to see what was needed.”(Alcott, p.21)

“Straight off” indicates the speed and determination with which Mrs March reacts.

Mrs March is ready to help others as soon as those who are needed. This is particularly significant given that the March family is so poor. Then, at the end of the answer Hannah concludes that “[t]here never was such a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and firin [...]” (Alcott, p.21). “Never”, emphasizes just how unusual Mrs March is, which is enhanced by the fact that it is Christmas, a strictly family affair. At Christmas, no one except Mrs March gives drink and clothes to beggars.

For Mrs March, the notion of “mercy” incorporates not only kindness, but sacrifice for the benefit of others' happiness. When the four March sisters discuss their Christmas presents, Meg explains to her sisters why their mother proposes not having any presents at Christmas. The reason is that “[i]t is going to be a hard winter for

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everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure when our men are suffering so in the army.” (Alcott, p.2) At that time, all men joined the army and went to fight. Compared with their suffering, it is an unnecessary pleasure to buy presents for Christmas. In this case, spending money shall not be so as to please oneself. Therefore, Mrs March is so sympathetic that she advises her girls not buying any present on Christmas Day. She regards others’ miseries as hers’ and is always willing to help others at the expense of her own comfort and pleasure.

Mrs March puts her notion of “mercy” into practice. As Sun argues, “[e]ach lesson she teaches was not just tells to them, but demonstrated, and enforced with kindness and with love.” (Sun, p.149) On Christmas Day, Mrs March would still like to share food with the poor though their family is not rich. The help they give the poor Hummels is typical. In chapter two, Mrs March comes back and tells her children before starting their rich Christmas breakfast that not far away from their home there is a poor woman with six children suffering from both hunger and cold. After her talk, she does not force her four children to give a hand to the poor Hummels. Instead, she puts forward a question that “[m]y girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?” (Alcott, p.23) Instead of commanding the four March sisters giving their breakfast, Mrs March uses the imperative sentence “will you” to propose a question after her coming back from the outside. She does not force her girls to give their breakfast to the poor Hummels necessarily. It demonstrates that the girls are able to have their own choices. In other words, they can decide whether to give it or not on the basis of their willingness. The aim of this kind of question is just to enlighten her girls to think whether they ought to do a favor for the poor woman and her family. Hearing the miserable condition of the poor Hummels, the four March sisters’ compassion is evoked even though they are also all unusually hungry. Considering

that there are some far more pitiful than they are, they make up their mind to provide food for the poor Hummels.

Although the morning charities result in the four March sisters' being hungry and weary, they are deeply satisfied with themselves and enjoy being called "Die Engelkinder!" (Alcott, p.25, author's capitals) For them, it is a high praise and great return for they practicing mercy together with Mrs March. Furthermore, they realize that "[...] loving our neighbor better than ourselves [...]" (Alcott, p.25) by their own practice of the poor Hummels, which is precisely Mrs March's idea of "mercy".

In the whole process of the morning charities, Mrs March leads her four girls to visit the poor Hummels so as to assist them. She influences as well as inspires them through her own kind actions to others, which brings the pleasure and satisfaction of helping others for the four March sisters, and urges them to understand what love of neighbor is. Mrs March's benevolent action is not a show of vanity, but a real way of saying a word including universal love. Not any stereotyped expression exists in Mrs March's teaching. On the contrary, her teaching is truthful and natural more than inanimate and boring. It exhibits mercy and charity of maternal instinct.

In addition, Mrs March's attitude towards the poor affects the four March sisters deeply. At the end of the novel, the March sisters persist in helping the poor Hummels, especially Beth, who goes to the Hummels every day. As a result, she contracts the scarlet fever. Jo is also influenced by her mother's kind-hearted and sacrifice. During the absence of their father, Jo takes over the responsibility of supporting the whole family for which she is deeply grateful. In the later part of *Little Women*, she starts to have a thankful heart as what Mrs March also has. Jo tells Mrs March that "[n]ot half

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as good as yours, mother. Here it is, and we never can thank you enough for the patient sowing and reaping you have done [...]" (Alcott, p.83), thereby demonstrating her gratitude for the important lessons her mother has taught her.

For Mrs March, her noble personality has set a good example to her children, which is beneficial to help all her children growing up into noble ladies. Mrs March's mercy has a great influence on the four March sisters. They become concerned about others as well as themselves, especially the vulnerable. In this way, the quality of mercy is brought to the reader's attention and is shown to be an essential component of being a lady. Mrs March's charitable personality may affect the implied reader as well. It leads them to love and care about others, which is a most important characteristic for being a gentlewoman.

Besides the merit of mercy, in the story Mrs March is always standing on her own bottom to support the whole family and educate the four March sisters when her husband is away from home in the army. This demonstrates Mrs March maintains a high degree of self-reliance.

Ever since the publication of the book in 1869, *Little Women* has attracted considerable and diverse criticism. As feminist criticism has developed, *Little Women* has stimulated heated debate about women's role and place in society. The novel challenges patriarchal structures and patriarchal authority at that time. Nina Auerbach sees the subject of *Little Women* as self-sustaining communities of women. She concludes that the novel's portrayal of female self-sufficiency subverts ideals of domesticated womanhood. (Auerbach, p.467) The critic, Ken Parille, also calls out "[w]ake up, and be a man [...]" (Parille, p.34, author's italic). Ken Parille also argues

that contemporary critics have drawn too much attention to Alcott's exploration of patriarchal structures and their effect on girls and women.

In the story, Jo is a new kind of heroine, independent and self-reliant. She struggles with her professional life and personal life. In fact, her independence is not totally natural born. It is more or less affected by her mother, Mrs March, in daily life. For Mrs March, self-reliance has two aspects. One is to stand alone in economy, and the other one is to stand on one's own feet in marriage.

On the one hand, Jo's success in writing demonstrates the success of Mrs March's education in self-reliance. In chapter fourteen, Jo excitedly announces her success in publishing her first story, *The Rival Painters*. Shedding a few tears, when everyone cheers and congratulates her on her success, as "[...] to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end." (Alcott, p.260) Independence is what Jo strives for. Success in her writing project realizes her dream. In the family, Mrs March is enlightened and unrestrained, which encourages Jo to write freely. Accordingly, the reason for Jo's success is more or less related to Mrs March's family education. The family gives Jo enough room for imagination and writing, allowing her also to develop and realize her dreams. None except herself can hinder her from writing.

Jo's achievement is all the more remarkable given the patriarchal nature of society at the time. Had she been born into any other family, Jo would probably never have realized her dream of becoming a writer. As woman she is, Jo releases herself from types of social constraints for women by writing. She is free from staying at home in order to do what a usual woman did at that time. With the encouragement of Mrs

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March, Jo tries to break the rule that women can only be as wives and mothers in family.

On the other hand, when it comes to marriage, Mrs March tells her daughters that they should not feel obliged to find husbands, but should seek fulfillment on their own. “Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands [...]” (Alcott, p.161) is what Mrs March firmly believes. For women, wrong husbands are worse than no husband at all. Also, women do not need to merely rely on their husbands because it will make them unmaidenly. Thence, rather than being unfortunately with a wicked man and being unmaidenly, it is better for a woman to rely on herself.

At the end of Chapter Nine, Meg confesses to Mrs March about all sorts of crazy and silly things she has done in the Vanity Fair, and proposes questions about the marriage after having been humiliated at the Moffats’ party. This is an excellent example of Mrs March’s principle of self-reliance. When Meg asks her mother bashfully whether Mrs March has such plans like Mrs Moffat’s, Mrs March declares that “[p]oor girls don’t stand any chance, unless they put themselves forward [...]” (Alcott, p.161) is a totally wrong notion. According to Mrs Moffat, she puts emphasis on “poor girls” to infer that she attributes wealth to marriage. In her mind, only those who are born in rich families and girls who are in poverty but seizing each possible opportunity can get happiness in life. Without enough money and efforts, women will fail to deserve the chance. In Mrs March’s mind, however, being happy old maids is much better than unhappy wives and unmaidenly girls, which shows Mrs March’s one vital characteristics of self-reliance. For her, women should not be restricted in the marriage as accessories of men. Otherwise, it is possible to break the convention.

Women have right to decide their own destiny.

During the whole conversation, everyone is equal. Each one in the family is free to express their own opinion. There is no limit for the position. Under the help of free talk, every one opens their heart to discuss the problem. Thence, the four March sisters understand the essence of having a self in a marriage. That is to say, self-reliance is the first step and most important step to a happy marriage.

In addition, when it comes to money and marriage, Mrs March demonstrates her self-reliance once more, explaining to her daughters that “I’d rather see you poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace.” (Alcott, p.161) Here, there are two oppositions. She compares “poor men’s wives” with “queens on thrones” at first, and then compares “happy, beloved, contented” with “without self-respect and peace”. On one hand, queens as wives they are, they have to comply with their kings though kings are wealthy. On the other hand, probably the wives of poor men are adored by their husband and live in happiness. In this way, Mrs March demonstrates her daughters those who marry wealthy and powerful men are not bound to get happiness even though they are like queens in life. By contrast, to a certain extent, marrying a poor man is a comparatively good choice for a woman. At least, she will be happy, beloved and contented.

Money is necessary but must be used properly. If not, it will be a bad thing. She advises her daughters not to make it be all and end all of their lives. For her, women shall rely on themselves rather than marrying rich men one day in the near future. The splendid and rich houses are not homes where love is wanted. Again, marriage shall seek fulfillment by oneself.

In this way, the four March sisters are heavily influenced by their mother's notion. Under her influence, the sisters all find their ideal husbands and live happy lives in the story. In the later part of the book, the March sisters decide for themselves whom they shall marry. The eldest girl, Meg, has no interest in Laurie's tutor, Mr John Brooke, who is not very rich. Initially, she is proud of her extreme beauty and shamed of being impoverished. Thus, she is dying for luxury and money. Also, she hopes to marry a rich man so as to be in a wealthy family. However, suffering from the Moffats' party and the conversation between Mrs March and her, she changes her mind and finally falls in love with Brooke. Although he is not rich, he has a heart of gold, which makes Meg's mind to marry him. Additionally, Jo is the other one who is influenced remarkably by her mother on her attitude towards marriage deeply. At first, she is so independent that she declares "[t]hen we'll be old maids [...]" (Alcott, p.161). She is totally in favor of her mother's idea that being a happy old maid is better for a woman. Later on, she chooses Mr Bhare as her husband for he is a genuinely good man who will influence others significantly.

The four March sisters' choices of partners are profoundly influenced by their mother. They stand alone when choosing their partners. As a result, they obtain their happiness as wives. Mrs March's view of marriage demonstrates self-reliance is one of the important essences. Rather than worrying about marry a wealthy man all day long, it is better stand on one's own feet, just as Mrs March says "[...] wise to prepare for it, so that when the happy time comes, you may feel ready for the duties and worthy of the joy." (Alcott, p.161) As is clearly stated in Mrs March's own words, she advises her girls to prepare for their marriages on their own so as to be responsible for their duties and enjoy themselves for granted.

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The third vital didactic lesson Mrs March teaches the four March sisters is the value of labor and duty. Mrs March, together with her husband, advocates the hardworking. The value of labor and duty is presented at the very beginning of the novel. When Mr March is away, he writes to her girls that “[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.” (Alcott, p.14) “[R]emind” indicates that Mr March does not forget the work though he is far away from home and hard in the army. “[S]eems” implies that a year, as far as Mr March concerned, it is a very short period. As such, these days should be even more cherished by working instead of wasted.

In the letter quoted above, Mr March further explains that “I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully [...]” (Alcott, p.14). Mr March mentions “will” twice and there are three paratactic verbs “do”, “fight” and “conquer”, demonstrating that work entails being faithful and brave. In this way, his girls will not spend their precious teenage years in vain. Mr March uses “I know they will” in place of “you should” when he educates his girls, indicating that he does not like to force his children to comply with all his wishes and whims. Instead, he shows his encouragement and trust on his girls.

In this respect, Mrs March’s family education is consistent with Mr March’s principles. She also believes that work is fulfilling. In order to demonstrate the value of labor and duty, Mrs March places great emphasis on these two qualities. She conducts an experiment to help the four March sisters to realize the importance of work when the four March sisters try to avoid hard work by planning a week of relaxation in chapter 11. When the four March sisters ask for their mother’s opinion,

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Mrs March replies that “[y]ou may try your experiment for a week and see how you like it. I think by Saturday night you will find that all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play.” (Alcott, p.182) With regard to her girls’ thought of avoiding hard work, Mrs March does not reject them initially. On the other way round, she advises her girls to try what they want to do first. She has foreseen the result of the experiment, but she still encourages the four March sisters to experience for themselves.

At the beginning of the experiment, Mrs March goes away and lets everything be on purpose in order to see how the four March sisters get on. As expected, the experiment leads to deterioration in the home: the rooms are filled with dust. The life of the four March sisters all falls into disorder. For them, the day of resting becomes unusually long and uncomfortable. It even becomes a kind of heavy burdens for them to bear. Later on, the narrator explains why Mrs March tries to do this is that “[h]oping to impress the lesson more deeply, Mrs March, who had a good deal of humor, resolved to finish off the trial in an appropriate manner [...]” (Alcott, p.185). “[I]n an appropriate manner” shows Mrs March is an intelligent mother and teacher. She gets her girls experienced the disorder without working at first, and then she knows when to stop the experiment in that the four March sister has realized the importance of the work. Therefore, she gives Hannah a holiday to end the trial at last in order to impress the girls of the lesson. Eventually, the four March sisters learn by themselves that the life devoted solely to pleasure is boring and shameful. The three older girls are soon hard at work in the middle of the afternoon when Mrs March comes home, which proves how successful Mrs March’s experiment is.

In addition, Mrs March’s talk with her four daughters also plays a decisive role in the

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success of trial. When she explains the reason for what she has done, she states that “[s]o I thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when everyone thinks only of herself.” (Alcott, p.196) In Mrs March’s mind, only thinking of oneself means to enjoy one’s own pleasure instead of working like bees. The four March sisters’ wishes to take breaks demonstrate that they are merely to think of themselves first. In order to get rid of this idea, Mrs March therefore takes the experiment as a little lesson. Experienced by themselves, the four March sisters learn that it is necessary to work hard, and they all promise to do something for their holiday task, for instance, “I’ll make the set of shirts for father, instead of letting you do it, Marmee.” (Alcott, p.197) After the experiment, Meg promises to take the place of Mrs March to make shirts for father. Although she does not like sewing, she, as the eldest girl, begins to realize her duty and tries to take the responsibility of her mother. Similarly, Amy learns the value of work, “I’ll do my lessons every day, and not spend so much time with my music and dolls.” (Alcott, p.197) After the trial, she tends to find her lessons are the things that she should spend time. They are her work and duty. Thus, she promises to do her lessons in lieu of her music and dolls since.

After the four March sisters learn their lesson, Mrs March is delighted. However, at the same time she also advises her girls not to go to the other extreme. That is to say, working like a bee is complimented, but working like a slave is condemned. The four March sisters are given the notion that “[...] regular hours for work and play, make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well. Then youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life becomes a beautiful success [...]” (Alcott, pp.197-198). There are several oppositions in Mrs March’s statement. “[W]ork” and “play” are one of oppositions, which is equal to each other in daily life. The four March sisters should not spend too

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much time on playing or working. Instead, they'd better distribute some time to work as well as play. The second opposition is "useful" and "pleasant". They are against each other. Work makes life useful while play makes life pleasant. Mrs March wishes her girls to have the correct distribution of the time to work and play. She tends to let the four March sisters to understand the value of time as well as the value of labor and duty. In this way, even though they are relatively poor, there will be more pleasure and fewer regrets in their lives.

The fourth lesson that can be learned in the story is the importance of family. In the story, the four March sisters come up with disputes from time to time. Even though they are mad at one another at that time, in the end they make peace and learn that nothing in life is more important than staying close to whom you love.

Although the four March sisters represent four very different characters, they are united in one family together. Mrs March expresses clearly in her words that "[w]e can't give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another." (Alcott, p.53) "[G]ive up" shows that fortunes do not matter wealth, but togetherness does. Family, there is nothing more important. For Mrs March, family means that each member must get together closely in any case. They're the ones who show up when any one is in trouble, the ones who push them to succeed, and the ones who help keep their secrets. Only in this way, they have a happy family.

It is known that it is inevitably to have quarrels in every family. Therefore, there is no exception to the Marches. One most fierce carp happens in chapter 8 when Jo meets her apollyon. Considering that Amy has been sick with the cold, Meg and Jo insist that Amy stay at home in place of going to the theater. As a result, Amy burns Jo's

book angrily in revenge so as to make her sister sorry. Hearing of the storm, Mrs March brings Amy to a sense of the wrong she has done her sister in her unique way when Mrs March comes home. At the beginning, she does not scold Amy. Conversely, Mrs March tells Amy that how important Jo's book is for Jo, and her bonfire consumes Jo's loving work of several years. Through Mrs March's grave and grieved look, Amy finally learns that what she has done is totally wrong and she tries to ask Meg's pardon for the act.

Unfortunately, the quarrel does not end there. Later on, Amy's humble overtures of peace are repulsed by Jo ruthlessly. Familiar with Jo's temper, Mrs March is so wise that she does not speak of the great trouble again at that time. Only when Jo receives her good-night kiss, she whispers gently, "[m]y dear, don't let the sun go down upon your anger. Forgive each other, help each other, and begin again tomorrow." (Alcott, p.125) Again, she is bright enough to foresee what will take place at last. Therefore, she talks to Meg individually to remind her of the negative effect of anger. It will aggravate the quarrel severely. Thus, Mrs March advises her daughter to control her anger, to learn to forgive Amy. It is not only good for Amy but also is good for Jo in that she will start life anew.

Before long, Jo realizes the significance of Mrs March's words through Amy's falling into water. Jo blames herself for not helping rescue Amy in despair because of her dreadful temper. Again, Mrs March does not scold her at the beginning. On the contrary, she comforts Jo that Amy is safe in order to help her ease the burden. Furthermore, she even praises Jo for her intellect of covering and getting Amy home quickly.

Each time the four March sisters do something wrong, Mrs March is always patient and humble. She has never blame the four March sisters for their own mistakes. Instead, she is always consoling her children and giving them proper advices at the right moment, which is a better lesson for the four March sisters than the wisest lecture and the sharpest reproof. It is because Mrs March gives her daughters sympathy and confidence, which lets them feel comfortable. Sometimes, she even takes her own experience as an example to illustrate the point, for instance, “I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life [...]” (Alcott, p.130). This kind of personal experience is much more convincing for the girls. For Jo, a fifteen-year-old, forty years seems to be a rather long time to watch and pray. However, the knowledge that her mother has a fault just like hers and tries to mend it, encourages her own easier to bear and strengthens her resolution to cure it. Finally, with the help of Mrs March, the storm ends with a hug and hearty kiss. Everything is forgiven and forgotten.

The last but not the least didactic lesson of Mrs March is the modesty. When she refers to the modesty, she considers that “[t]hese things are always seen and felt in a person’s manner and conversations, if modestly used, but it is not necessary to display them [...]” (Alcott, p.117). As far as Mrs March is concerned, she defines modesty as a sort of attitude expressed in one’s manner and conversations. The sentence Mrs March is used to lecture Amy when Amy’s valley of humiliation takes place. She disapproves of Amy’s act of showing off, but as usual, the lecture ends in a laugh.

In order to keep up with the fashion, Amy buys some limes and brings them to the school regardless of money and school rules. Her strong vanity finally causes the punishment of throwing all the limes away and flinching several tingling blows on her

little palm, which consequently gives her shame and pain, neither of which she forgets. After learning from the incident, the first thing Mrs March has done is to let Jo deliver a letter from her to Mr Davis. Instead of scolding Amy, she helps Amy to quit the school. However, she explains to Amy that it does not mean she agrees what Amy has done at school. The reason for her doing this is that she does not “[...] approve corporal punishment, especially for girls.” (Alcott, p.115) She thinks Mr Davis has problems in his manner of teaching. For girls, the corporal punishment is much more harmful. Although she thinks she would not choose that way of mending a fault, it does not mean that she would punish Amy too mild.

Learning from the accomplished Laurie and talking with Mrs March, Amy further understands that what she has done in the past is totally wrong. Finally, she thoughtfully says that “[i]t’s nice to have accomplishments and be elegant, but not to show off or get perked up [...]” (Alcott, p.117). With the help of Laurie and Mrs March, Amy realizes that there is no need to parade one’s gifts and virtues, for there is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked for long. Even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one. Modesty is the great charm of all power.

As mentioned earlier, though Mrs March does not approve of what Amy has done at school, she still thinks of the problem standing in for Amy. She considers that Amy could be educated well in this kind of teaching, so she gives her a vacation from school before sending her anywhere else. At the same time, she tells Amy clearly and seriously what she has done is totally incorrect. She helps Amy to mend the fault of self-conceit and display. She comments that modesty is the great charm in one’s life.

In conclusion, *Little Women*, through its exploration of such qualities as mercy, self-reliance, the value of labor and duty, the importance of the family and modesty has important messages for readers. Christy Minadeo argues that Alcott's novel is valuable because it can tell us about girls' experiences, in particular their struggles with cultural limitations. "The trajectory of girls' lives," she argues, "remains carefully defined, and that is why *Little Women* remains relevant to contemporary readers [...]" (Minadeo, p.200). Although this essay does not pay much attention to this aspect of the novel, an interesting and potentially revealing area for future research would be to investigate the extent to which the didactic messages in the novels change or develop according to the impact of sexuality on the characters.

In the essay, it is demonstrated that a didactic world composed of Mrs March's unique way of education does indeed offer the implied reader valuable moral lessons about life in the areas of mercy, self-reliance, the value of labor and duty, the importance of the family and modesty—five qualities which in fact can be related to the real world. Time will tell that it is a classic in part because it teaches the implied reader valuable moral lessons. Its didactic messages and the fictional world in which they are presented provide a solid ground for the effective family education in reality.

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