

Life at Plumfield. Raising little women and little men through Louisa May Alcott's progressive American education

La vita a Plumfield. Crescere piccole donne e piccoli uomini attraverso l'educazione americana progressista di Louisa May Alcott

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Louisa May Alcott, American authoress of the novels centred on the lives of the four March sisters, rewrote her childhood experiences into *Little Women*, sweetening their bitterness for her young readers and perhaps also for herself. Marmee March, the beloved mother of the March girls, is a character literary construct of LMA's mother, Abba Alcott. While her father, Bronson Amos Alcott, constantly observed and intervened in the upbringing of his two eldest daughters, Marmee enjoys complete authority in the domestic sphere, encouraging her daughters to become the little women their father March wishes them to be. Marmee's omnipotent presence in *Little Women* reflects the cult of motherhood that was prevalent in mid-19th century America (Antonini, 1971; Eiselein, Phillips, Orlando, 2001). Mothers had the power, within the private sphere, to educate and mould the shapeless characters of their children. Alcott's novels turn her family into an opportunity to redesign a new female universe (Trisciuzzi, 2018), which breaks out of the formal patterns of the time, inspired by freedom and respect: freedom to work, to independently choose a husband, to quit an authoritarian school, to experiment with one's own ideas. The paper will explore the theme of the female figure and the mother-daughter/mother-son relationship, both within the LMA novels and in the reality of the time. Both the life of women in the private sphere of the home – accompanied by women's domestic work, the upbringing of sons and daughters, marriage and motherhood – and the public sphere, outside the *interiors* (Beseghi, 1995) of the family home, will be analysed, presenting women's work as an autonomous and positive reality.

KEYWORDS

**Children's literature, Louisa May Alcott, gender, maternal bonds, women's emancipation.
Letteratura per l'infanzia, Louisa May Alcott, genere, legami materni, emancipazione femminile.**

Louisa May Alcott, autrice americana dei romanzi incentrati sulla vita delle quattro sorelle March, ha riscritto le sue esperienze infantili in *Piccole donne*, addolcendone l'amarezza per i suoi giovani lettori e forse anche per se stessa. Marmee March, l'amata madre delle bambine March, è un personaggio letterario costruito sul modello della madre di LMA, Abba Alcott. Mentre il padre, Bronson Amos Alcott, osservava e interveniva costantemente nell'educazione delle sue due figlie maggiori, Marmee gode di completa autorità nella sfera domestica, incoraggiando le sue figlie a diventare le piccole donne che il padre March desidera che siano. La presenza onnipotente di Marmee nei romanzi delle *Piccole donne* riflette il culto della maternità che era prevalente nell'America della metà del XIX secolo (Antonini, 1971; Eiselein, Phillips, Orlando, 2001). Le madri avevano il potere, all'interno della sfera privata, di educare e plasmare i caratteri informi dei loro figli. I romanzi della Alcott fanno della sua famiglia un'occasione per ridisegnare un universo femminile nuovo (Trisciuzzi, 2018), che fuoriesce dagli schemi formali dell'epoca, ispirato alla libertà e al rispetto: libertà di lavorare, di scegliere autonomamente un marito, di abbandonare una scuola autoritaria, di sperimentare le proprie idee. Nell'articolo verrà approfondito il tema della figura femminile e del rapporto madre-figlia/madre-figlio, sia all'interno dei romanzi di LMA che nella realtà dell'epoca. Sarà analizzata sia la vita delle donne nella sfera privata della casa – accompagnata dal lavoro domestico femminile, dall'educazione dei figli e delle figlie, dal matrimonio e dalla maternità – sia quella pubblica, fuori degli *interiors* (Beseghi, 1995) della casa familiare, presentando il lavoro delle donne come una realtà autonoma e positiva.

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1. Introduction: Louisa May Alcott

The authoress of the novel *Little Women, or Chronicle of the March Family* (1868), counted among the Classics of Children's Literature, read and loved by young people and adults all over the world, Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) stands out in the vast literary output of the second half of the nineteenth century (See Angel, Lant, 1989; Gillian, 1996). On the topic of children's literature, from the beginning of the nineteenth century in America, the literary market became richer and richer, aimed at meeting the wide demands of a curious and interested public. Thanks to women like Jo or like Louisa who determinedly made the decision *to write about girls to girls*, the production of genre stories increased. American literature thus became populated with realistic-familiar tales, that is, "stories of young girls" who, devoted to tears, fainting spells and faithful to Christian virtues, lived in a familiar reality well known to young female readers. As the years go by, the type of American girl described in the novels changes, thus unconventional (for the time) protagonists are discovered, who abandon tears for cheerfulness, hysterical fits and pallor for rosy cheeks and outdoor runs.

And so, along with the success that Alcott had almost immediately upon the release of *Little Women*, a women's children's literature "with an open horizon, writing capable of creating positive and authentic female role models" began to emerge in America (Terzi, 1994, pp. 19-20).

Louisa May Alcott's life was very different from that of other women who were her contemporaries. Seemingly bare and resigned, it becomes a compelling tale through the mirror of the pages of *Little Women*. The enormous success of the book had taken the Authoress by surprise. She had chronicled the lives of four girls, the only ones she knew well. Her sisters and herself. Not quite the true story, all the more difficult and such as to appear, to many, foreign and perhaps absurd. But intact had remained what, in poverty, had constituted their wealth: the free, joyful and affectionate confidence, the taste for fantastic games, the principle, seldom expressed in words but always operative, that life is to be felt and faced as a trial, a struggle, a commitment to progress (Ortona, 1970, p. 525).

It should be noted that, of all the characters born from Alcott's pen, Jo's is the most autobiographical, the one in which the Authress infused more of herself and her own outlook on life. Jo, like a seagull, loves freedom and hates convention: "Jo exasperated her love of freedom and contempt for convention to such an extent that she ended up in trouble" (Alcott, 1990, p. 26). Peter Hunt states, "Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* was revolutionary in showing the clash between the willful and energetic Jo and contemporary social standards" (Hunt, 2009, p. 75). To better understand, then, her little women and, above all, the choices of the strong and sensitive Jo, it is necessary to take a step back and see the work not for what it is, but for how it came into being, closely related to the life of its Authress.

2. Chronicle of the March and Alcott Family

The daughter of Bronson Amos Alcott (1799 -1888), an educationalist and teacher, Louisa followed her father with her mother Abigail May Alcott (Abba) and sisters Anna, Elizabeth and May, on the trips he made to lectures on such "highbrow and frayed" (Lurie, 2005, p. 32) topics as transcendental philosophy and educational reform. Bronson Alcott, called the "Pestalozzi of America" (Antonini, 1971, p. 98), was friends with great transcendentalist intellectuals at the time of the so-called "American Renaissance," well-known names including Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864).

Louisa grew up with an education given to her by her father based on avant-garde religious and social beliefs; she fed on extensive literary-type reading in the library of Emerson, a family friend and neighbor; she acted as governess to Emerson's daughter, Ellen, and studied botany with Thoreau.

Over the years she became a self-sufficient woman with her own job and did not need to marry for a livelihood. A committed feminist, in favor of women's rights, during the publication of the novel *Little Women* she joined the New England Suffragette Association.

Her father, meanwhile, had tried unsuccessfully to establish an "experimental Utopian community", an utopian experiment in community living that Bronson had launched with the help of an English friend, Charles Lane, under the suggestive name of Utopian Fruitlands, at Harvard in Massachusetts, inspired by social ideals that others, such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi, had spread in Europe with far greater acceptance.

Very early on Alcott realized that her father's philosophical and educational beliefs could not adequately support the family economically, so she found herself looking for ways to provide for financial stability.

In 1867 she was commissioned by Roberts Brothers, her Boston publishers, to write a work "for young girls" about her childhood and youth, spent with her family in Concord: "a work of this kind is lacking in our country. A straightforward, living book, written in everyday language, introducing young female readers to a familiar environment" (Ortona, 1970, p. 243).

So it was that on September 30, 1868, the novel *Little Women* appeared in bookstores and the public was cap-

tivated. Not only read by the young girls, who participated emotionally in the story of the four sisters, but also by their mothers who, in turn, found themselves flipping through the pages of the story, immersed in a familiar and affectionate environment, finding themselves reliving feelings and emotions experienced in their youth. A familiar environment that on the one hand seemed “normal” and reassuring, but which also presented significant desire to change the place and role of women in the new American society where the emancipationist and antislavery politics of North America had prevailed.

Readers, most of them women readers, clamored to the publisher, and thus consequently to the Authoress, for a sequel to the events of America’s *Little Women*. So on Nov. 1, only a month after the release of the first novel, Louisa May Alcott “plunged into the whirlwind” of new writing so as not to extinguish “the flame of genius” (Alcott, 1990, p. 46), somewhat as happened to her *Jo*. The second part of *Little Women* was published on April 14, 1869.

Louisa May Alcott provides the female imagination with a multiplicity of representations of femininity contemporary to her, depending on lifestyles and life plans, through the path of *Jo* and her sisters’ education. Four different profiles of young girls and four equally different ways of thinking about the future seem to break the broad parameter of predestination reserved in that era for female children (Terzi, 1994, p. 8), suggesting a much wider range of possibilities. An era in which families were patriarchal, however, it is worth noting that the March family is a clear example of matriarchy. Although Mr. March – despite his absence – is the dominant force in the household, there are nevertheless many hints to suggest that the book subtly opposes the subservience of women to the patriarchal model. It shows the growth and development of independent girls, even if they revert to type and marry respectably and become ‘good wives’ (Hunt, 2001, pp.191-192).

The unconventional story of these little women was particularly successful in England, where the public was attracted to the freedom of the four March girls as opposed to the real-life restrictions experienced by the teenage girls who were their contemporaries in everyday life. What is more profoundly new is to have placed at the center of the story four young women who independently construct their own destiny.

The Authoress tells the story of the March family, an “idealized version” (Gamble, 2001), similar but perhaps more conventional, than the direct copy of the Alcott family.

The image of Mrs. March, a “tall, motherly-looking lady” (Alcott, 1987, p. 10), is painted with affection and warmth by the Authoress, who nevertheless often confines her to scenes with a domestic background, perhaps after she has been to help some poor family; Alcott tells how, for the March family, every evening was devoted to sewing, telling stories, recounting the events that happened during the day, and listening to her mother’s sermons that offer, day after day, spiritual and moral guidance and psychological support.

Louisa’s mother, Abigail, less conventional than the patient and full of a sense of duty “Marmee,” a nickname Mrs. March had been given by her four daughters, is a well-educated woman, idealistic but frustrated by the limitations society of the time imposed on women. Abigail’s father, Colonel Joseph May, had fought in the American Revolutionary War, helped the abolitionist cause, prison reform, and participated in various philanthropic movements. For her daughters, their mother, she was an authoritative and strong role model equal to her father Bronson, also influencing the lives and education of the four young Alcott girls.

Louisa’s relationship with her father was a contentious one; in fact, Mr. March – a reflected figure of her father between the pages of her novels – was initially “confined” outside the “picture,” placing him in a military hospital in Washington. The removal of direct patriarchal influence gives the possibility of female freedom and allows the author to focus on the mother-daughter relationship and the relationship between the sisters. Emy Beseghi speaks of Alcott’s works in *A Marble Woman or The Mysterious Model*, published in 1865 under the pen name A. M. Barnard: “Alcott’s novel breaks away from the austere and limited morality of Puritanism and makes her family an opportunity to redesign a female universe marked by a new mother-daughter relationship. It is a relationship that breaks out of the formal patterns of the time, inspired by freedom and respect: freedom to work, to choose a husband independently, to stop an authoritarian school, to experiment with her own ideas” (Beseghi, 1990, p. 30). And again, “more than family, one should perhaps speak of a female universe that values and strengths each other and where men are rather blurred. It is no accident that Alcott has been seen as an anticipator of feminism (Ibid.).

Although distant, however, the father continues to assert his influence through his letters, festively expected by the girls. Ann Alston affirms in this regard: “Let it not be forgotten that the letter they are all sharing is from the hands of their father: it is the father’s written words which gather the family together, warrant their actions, and illustrate his powerful position in the family” (2008, pp. 37-38).

3. Four little women: metaphors of female growth

The four paths of these little women, with such different existential tone, symbolize metaphors of female growth. Indeed, the chronicle of the March family can be counted on the shelf of the *Bildungsroman* (Moretti, 1986; Papini, Fioretti, Spignoli, 2007; Bernardi, 2011; Calabrese, 2013).

Meg, a typical example of a mid-nineteenth-century woman, like her older sister Anna, marries and becomes the mother of twins (in the novel *Daisy and Demi*). Meg's character is the most conscientious, very patient with the other sisters: perhaps her more responsible character is also due to her older age; she remembers with sadness the "good old days," when the family lived a more affluent life. Alcott depicts young March not only with gifts and virtues, but never conceals flaws, thus delineating characters closer to reality than to fiction.

Jo, rebellious and nonconformist, with an all too impetuous temperament, rowdy and considered a bit of a "tomboy" by the entire family, traces the life of the Authress at times. Like Louisa May Alcott, Jo is an avid reader and delights in writing short essays, fairy tales and stories, until she discovers that she can earn and support her family with her literary talent. She devoted her life to culture and writing, helping around the house and supporting her mother and sisters in times of need. One substantial difference is that Alcott never married, unlike Jo, who found in Professor Bhaer the ideal life partner, with whom she established a school called Bhaer's Garden, or also called Plumfield, "a good boarding school that has the atmosphere of a home for boys in need of teaching, warmth and kindness" (Alcott, 1990, p. 218), a place that is, humanly and socially, a true sampler of varied humanity.

Jo acts as an older brother to the sisters he feels she should protect: at the beginning of the novel she calls herself the man of the house, since her father has left for war. Humphrey Carpenter states about the figure of Jo: "She is 'rapidly shooting up into a woman' but 'didn't like it'. Masculinity is her guiding principle. 'I'm the man of the family now papa is away,' she tells her sisters at the beginning of the book, and the story is constructed to demonstrate the truth of this statement. [...] She woos them in male costume during the Christmas play, earns money for them (by selling story), and, in a revealing moment, has all her hair cut off" (1987, p. 94). This action taken by Jo was later taken up by the protagonist of the Disney film of the same name, *Mulan*, a 1998 animated film directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook and inspired by the ancient Chinese legend of *Hua Mulan*. In fact, the protagonist decides to cut off her hair to hide her generalities and pretend to be a man, and thus be able to go to war replacing her aging father and save him from certain death. The choice to change one's destiny to rescue and help one's father, in both Jo's and Mulan's cases, returns to the imaginary. Saving their father by not sending him to war – Mulan – or by trying to bring him home – Jo – are two actions that also, and more importantly, lead to a further action: the girls manage to save themselves from a life of constraints, homologating to what was required of them as women of their time. The action Jo takes is only the beginning of a series of choices that will lead her, page after page, to become the woman, the individual she wants to be. Certainly, Jo's life remains to the eye of an attentive reader more conforming than that of her pen mother Louisa, who chooses a freer and, from a certain point of view, even more modern life.

Sometimes similar, other times mirroring the figure of Jo, is the character of Laurie. The archetypal "boy next door," he can be considered the same Jo, but in another way: "Laurie in fact is Jo, in another manifestation" (Carpenter, 1987, p. 95). Tall and vivacious, dark of hair and skin, Laurie is "particularly effeminate for his sex as Jo is masculine for hers. He has "small hands and small feet," he picks flowers for her and her family, flowers he collects in impeccably tasteful bouquets, he plays the piano remarkably well, "he's not very loud," and, above all, he has a feminine nickname: "Laurie Laurence, what a strange name!" "My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it because my classmates used to call me Dora; so I made them call me Laurie" (Alcott, 1987, p. 37).

Amy echoes the characteristics of her sister May, both in the anagram of her name and in her artistic creativity. The story of Amy, a "delightful creature" with blond hair and blue eyes, represents a peculiar event of the second half of the nineteenth century: the entry of women into the world of the arts. Amy, as a small, cold, reserved, and somewhat selfish woman, grows up to change, becoming more conscientious, open, and rational, what probably, both according to Alcott and the standards of the time, should conventionally have been a "good wife".

And finally, the small, sad, shy Beth. The smallest of the March sisters. Through this character we identify the cohort of somewhat special children, the category of orphans (Trisciuzzi, 2018): orphans of life, orphans of the life force that they lack to project themselves into the future, and who therefore tend to take refuge more and more in themselves, far from the carefree and joyfulness of life. As if they know they are doomed to leave the world within a short time, they do not indulge in aspirations or visions of themselves in the future but seek the strength to live through spiritual and inner values.

Beth's fate is fulfilled like that of Louisa's beloved sister, Lizzy, who died on March 14, 1858, having not recovered since contracting scarlet fever in Walpole from a poor laboring family she and her mother had gone to care for.

4. Life at Plumfield: Jo and Fritz's boys

Louisa May Alcott would later write in 1871 *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys*. The last chapter, the concluding one, or *Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out*. Alcott would write it several years later, in 1886, because of her serious health condition that would lead to her death two years later, in 1888. In these two novels readers get to know the "little men" raised by Jo and Fritz Bhaer, educated from the perspective of respect for difference and

with the human values of equality so dear to Reverend Bronson. One owes to him the pedagogical themes that Alcott inserts within these familiar novels of hers, especially can be seen in *Little Men: Life at Plumfield*, a work among Alcott's that most resembles a pedagogical treatise.

With *Little Men* Louisa May Alcott did not intend to give the audience of her young men and women readers a male equivalent of the two earlier novels, *Little Women* and *Little Women Part II*, but a worthy sequel and an unexpected development to the narrated events of the March sisters.

First in *Little Men*, and later *Jo's Boys*, our Josephine is even more energetically confirmed as the primary protagonist of the series. In the third novel, *Little Men*, Aunt March has recently passed away leaving Jo heir to the Plumfield Manor, her vast home, rejecting the advice everyone gave her, which was to sell the property immediately.

But about that house Jo has plans: after getting married to Professor Fritz Bhaer, finding in him a life partner with genuine human values and a valuable ally to transform Aunt March's house into a place of welcome, education and study for poor girls and boys. They will be helped to meet the expenses of onerous management by a few paying guests whose presence will also provide the boarding school with a social balance through the coexistence of young people from different social backgrounds.

The Bhaers create a very various community at Plumfield, and to fully understand its significance for the historical era in which the novels are set, it is necessary to pause and examine it.

The books stand as anticipatory works in the field of family and school education, because the world of Plumfield is familiar before it is scholastic, as is the kind of life there, representative of a new modern, libertarian educational system in which outdoor education, interdisciplinary teaching set the stage for a progressive pedagogy.

Jo and Fritz teach young men and women to study through play and to combine study with work, stimulated by creativity and directing life choices in line with their own inclinations.

In the life of Plumfield, the creative element plays an important role and is solicited in children on many occasions. Among the strengths that make Plumfield a place where the little guests live, live and learn happily and serenely we find the readings of fairy tales and stories of life stories, in which Jo and Fritz lovingly tell daily; their indulgence towards the most restless, whose misdeeds try to turn each time into an apologetic lesson; the invention of games, which solicit the intelligence of the boys.

Life in Plumfield is full of initiatives: music, dance, fencing are practiced; a circle has been established where they meet, read, play chess. At Plumfield there are competitions of study that make them stimulating is not so much the desire to excel, as the spirit of emulation towards those others who are the best. They take care of the garden, they raise hens, worms for fishing. The animals of the community are numerous, an authentic menagerie that also includes a donkey, hens, rabbits and turtles, and are carefully bred, loved with tenderness and used with intelligence.

Reading these novels, one gets a further lesson on one of the most necessary themes in the life of children: the game, one of the fundamental elements of the educational system of Bhaer. Everything at Plumfield, and the game in a special way, takes place within the collective, and this freedom of expression is favored by the possibility that little men and small women have to find themselves outdoors. The true nature of the activity is made to be lived in collective and outdoor, in line with a modern *outdoor education*. In this sense, Plumfield is the ideal place to carry it out, the Bhaers are paternal and maternal educators capable of stimulating the creativity of their young students. Among the pages of the novels, we recall for example the episode of the trip during which two children are lost in the woods. *Little Thumbs* of Alcottian memory, they live a story in which is narrated the risk related to disobedience. At the end of the adventure, Jo will defuse what happened, managing to make an accident, a negative behavior, a wrong choice, a life lesson imparted with the grace suggested by feeling. If we think that these methods were reported in the events of a book for children at a time when punitive education was even imposed by the school, through the baton of the teacher, it is not difficult to understand how the lesson of Bronson Amos Alcott, the father of Louisa May, precursor of modern pedagogy, had been received and put to good use by the author of *Little Men: Life at Plumfield* and *Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out*.

In conclusion, reading these novels one can learn about humanity and modernity with which Jo and Fritz face and carry on the difficult task of managing this community, which for their little men must represent both the family and the school.

Little Men and *Jo's Boys* are two *choral novels* in which Jo is not a *deamicisian* "schoolteacher with a red pen", but a woman who before a teacher tries to be a mother.

The writer Luisa May Alcott leaves us a thought on which to reflect, which echoes through the words of the character of Jo, who says:

"If men and women had more faith in each other, they understood and helped each other like my little ones, how beautiful the world would be!" and Mrs Jo's eyes were lost far away, in the fantastic vision of a new and better society that would allow people to live happily and innocently like the little flock of Plumfield" (Alcott, 2006, p. 830).

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