

Chapter 11

Domestic Feminism

The Problematic Louisa May Alcott

Recent critics have been fascinated by the “double life” of Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888), who is almost exclusively known to general readers today as the author of popular stories about children and young people – stories full of good humor and sentiment and conventional piety.¹ But she also published a large number of sensational gothic romances. In addition, she wrote at least two versions of a “Mephistopheles” story: *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (written c. 1866) and *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877). What Alcott called her “blood-and-thunder” tales are full of abuse and revenge, violence and murder, with doses of drugs, mesmerism, abduction, and soft-core sex – hardly what most readers expect from the author of *Little Women* (1868).²

Alcott also wrote on behalf of abolition, legal and social justice for African Americans, equal rights for women, and women’s suffrage. Among her early book-length publications is *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a redaction of a series of letters she had written to her family regarding her experiences as a nurse during the Civil War.³ Amidst a certain levity provided by the folksy narrator, Nurse Periwinkle, the pathos of war is vividly presented and an earnest moral drawn from each narrative. She commends Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and extends the idea of “liberation” to women: she proclaims herself a “woman’s rights woman” and claims she can do anything a man can and probably do it better. The book in fact begins with the manifesto of “work,” a declaration of the need to be *useful*: “I want something to do,” says Periwinkle. This manifesto is central to a once-forgotten novel, *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), rediscovered a century later by academic critics as an important study of a woman’s independent place in society. Another largely unknown work is *Moods* (1864,

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rev. 1882), a serious adult novel about what it means to be a woman in the later nineteenth century.

“Cosy Domesticity”: The Children’s Writer

Alcott’s fictions about and for children run to several volumes published regularly over many years. The *Little Women* trilogy spans almost twenty years from the publication of the first volume (1868) to the last (1886).⁴ Feminist and other critics have divided opinions about the *Little Women* volumes, especially the first one. Some see *Little Women* as anti-feminist; others see the trilogy, along with *Work*, as constructing an idealized gynocentric society. *Work* does move in that direction; but the world of *Little Women* is a far cry from, say, that of the all-female utopia envisioned decades later by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* (1915). Angeles M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant are so appalled by the final acquiescence of *Little Women*’s central character to domesticity that they refer to the “horror” of the gentle story of the March family girls. Although somewhat hyperbolic, the criticism makes an important point about the conflict between domesticity and career embedded in the novel – and the heroine’s marriage to a male chauvinist.⁵

Little Women is immediately recognizable as sentimental juvenile fiction. The consciously charming story begins in rural New England in the early 1860s, during the American Civil War. The family consists of a largely absent father and five women – Marmee (dialect for mother, i.e., “Mommy”) and four daughters. Meg, the oldest and most overtly motherly of the four sisters, acts as a kind of babysitter for children in the neighborhood. Beth, frail, gentle, and domestic, habitually knits by the hearth-fire. Amy, ambitious to be a famous sculptor and painter, is also a motherly woman. Jo, tall, strong, tomboyish, and independent of temperament, wants to be a writer. The Reverend Mr March is serving as a chaplain for the Union Army in the Civil War. Their genteel poverty contrasts with the wealth of the family next door, the Lawrences. Young Theodore Lawrence (“Laurie”), privileged and indulged, is the lonely “boy next door.” For much of the novel, he moons after Jo.

A conservative pietistic element is emphasized from the start by allusions to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678; 1684). Alcott’s story is preceded by an “adapted” epigraph from Bunyan’s book about little “tripping maids” becoming “pilgrims” journeying toward the “world which is to come.” The first chapter of *Little Women* is titled “Playing Pilgrims,” and several of the chapter titles of Part I invoke the Christian story and draw analogies to Bunyan. In the fifth chapter (“Being Neighborly”), Beth anticipates their move to a new home in terms of getting out of the Slough of Despond, going through the Wicket

Gate, and finding the beautiful Palace, while Jo reminds her that they “have to get by the lions first.” Chapter 6 is titled “Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful,” the first of four chapters that indicate a central character trait for each of the four girls – especially faults to be amended. Beth is too passive and submissive; Amy is too materialistic; Jo is too arrogant and intemperate; Meg is too vain. Chapter 7 is titled “Amy’s Valley of Humiliation”; Chapter 8 is “Jo meets Apollyon” (Bunyan’s scaly giant of “Pride”); Chapter 9 is “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair.” In spite of these allusions, the novel does not act out a complete allegory but remains a lively and amiable story of recognizably real people coping with real problems.

When word comes that Mr March is seriously ill, Jo sells her long, beautiful hair to get money to enable her mother to visit her sick husband at the front.⁶ Jo’s conflicted femininity is charmingly demonstrated when Marmee finds her daughter privately crying, not for her sick father, but for her hair. Another disruption occurs when an aunt takes Amy to Europe with her as a traveling companion, and Jo decides to take a position as a governess in New York. There Jo meets Friedrich Bhaer, formerly a distinguished professor in Berlin, who is eking out a living by tutoring in German. She is impressed by his intelligence and by his goodness.

With the introduction of Professor Bhaer, the implicit piety of the narrative gradually becomes more overt; and a seemingly major contradiction in theme and character develops. Upon her return home, Jo refuses Laurie’s proposal of marriage because she intends to be a writer and earn her own way. But the feminist theme of independence is about to undergo a radical reversal. Beth, who had contracted scarlet fever while caring for a neighbor’s sick baby, begins to deteriorate rapidly, and Jo dedicates herself to caring for her. The requisite prolonged death scene of sentimental fiction takes several chapters, replete with heavy-handed piety and religious imagery. Beth finally dies “in the dark hour before the dawn” with “no farewell but one loving look and a little sigh.” Mother and sisters make her “ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again,” feeling that to “their darling” death “was a benignant angel – not a phantom full of dread.” Lonely and distraught, Jo seeks solace in writing and in her family, eventually becoming a successful writer of popular fiction. Very late in the narrative, Professor Bhaer comes to see Jo on his way to take up a faculty post in the Midwest. Awkward and hesitant, he proposes. This time Jo decides in favor of marriage (Part II, Ch. 23, “Under the Umbrella”).

The end of independence?

To conventional minds of the time, Professor Bhaer may have represented solid traditional values of piety and domesticity, but he is not really a very appealing

character. He condescendingly lectures Jo on the rightness of traditional religion and the immorality of trashy story-papers, remarking that he does not think “good young girls” should see such stories as appear in them (Part II, Ch. 11). Jo counters: “Many respectable people make an honest living out of what are called sensation stories.” His response: “If respectable people knew what harm they did, they would not feel that the living *was* honest.” Later, in her room, Jo decides Bhaer is right: “They *are* trash, and will soon be worse than trash if I go on; for each is more sensational than the last.” She then stuffs “the whole bundle” of her manuscripts into her stove. When “nothing remained of all her three months’ work, except a heap of ashes, and the money in her lap, Jo looked sober, as she sat on the floor, wondering what she ought to do about her wages.” She decides she can keep the money but will not write any more “sensational stories.”

Going “to the other extreme,” she writes heavily moralizing stories, but her “lively fancy and girlish romance” is “ill at ease in the new style.” She then tries “a child’s story” and “juvenile literature.” But the only publisher she finds “felt it his mission to convert all the world to his particular belief.” Jo finds she cannot consign all the naughty boys to a brutal end just “because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school” or reward all the “good infants” with “every kind of bliss”; so she simply “corked up her inkstand.” Noticing she has ceased to write, Professor Bhaer is pleased that she is “occupying her mind with something useful.” Many readers do not find Jo’s attraction to Bhaer convincing, especially after her rejection of her intimate friend, Laurie. No Brontëan Rochester or Heathcliff, Bhaer seems quite unsuitable for a high-spirited, ambitious, independent-minded heroine.

Alcott said that she had to marry Jo off because, after the publication of Part I, she received scores of letters from young ladies begging her to marry Jo to *someone*. Alcott gave in to the commercial imperative, but refused to marry Jo to Laurie, the proverbial boy next door. That would have been too utterly conventional. Jo *should* have remained a spinster, she said; but unwilling to go against the public clamor of “so many enthusiastic young ladies,” Alcott made a “funny match” for her heroine out of the spirit of “perversity.”⁷

The requisite domestic ending

The final chapter (Part II, Ch. 47, “Harvest Time”) completes the conventional domestic denouement with an overview of the prospering extended family. Old Aunt March has willed Jo her big house, “Plumfield,” and Jo and her professor have decided to use it as a school for boys. The novel ends with a pious,

sentimental passage that many nineteenth-century readers seemed to find satisfyingly affirmative but that many modern readers find cloying.

The family is gathered around an outside table, surrounding the central figure of Marmee. It is her sixtieth birthday. One chair is empty, representing the place of little Beth; and Amy is worried about the health of her baby, who like Beth is a “frail little creature”; the “dread of losing her” is the “shadow” over Amy’s habitual “sunshine.” This “cross” binds them more “closely together.” Jo, “glancing from her husband to her chubby children, tumbling on the grass beside her,” declares: “I’m far happier than I deserve.” When she expresses her deep gratitude for life’s bountiful harvest under her mother’s “patient sowing and reaping,” the family matriarch, “touched to the heart,” stretches out her arms, “as if to gather children and grandchildren to herself.” The novel concludes with these words: “O my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!”

Beyond *Little Women*

Despite the final sacrifice of Jo’s creativity to conventionality and domesticity, most of the descriptions of her literary efforts suggest, if not an *anti*-domestic bent, at least a counter-current. Unlike Jo, Alcott did not give up writing thriller fiction. A half-dozen sensation stories appeared the same year as the first volume of *Little Women*; in 1869 and 1870, another eight appeared; and she continued intermittently to work on *A Modern Mephistopheles*, which was published in 1877. Almost all of Alcott’s thrillers were published either anonymously or under the pseudonym of “A. M. Barnard.” The plots tended to follow an exaggerated pattern of danger-and-doom and last-minute rescue. Alcott’s experiments in the romance genre of the sensational thriller are usually mingled with parody and irony on the one hand, and on the other (more overtly) with romantic or pietistic uplift, involving both moral “punishment” and woman as “redeemer.”

Several of these stories involve the “masks” that women adopt and the “roles” they play – in either their victimization or in their “will to power.” In fact, power could be seen as perhaps the basic theme of all these stories. Alcott repeatedly presents the covert power of a woman over men, usually accompanied by a revenge theme. These stories thus raise the question for modern readers of whether they are merely conventional romance thrillers or undercover feminist narratives, semi-covert examples of a newly emerging “woman’s fiction.” The main such work is not quite a gothic thriller; it is a realistic romance of domestic intrigue: *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power* (1866).

The drama queen

Alcott's now celebrated "governess novel" has been called one of her most "radical" texts and her most important sensation story. Judith Fetterley has praised *Behind a Mask* for its "incisive analysis of the economic situation of the white middle-class woman" in the late nineteenth century. Since women were grossly undervalued and underpaid, they had to resort to indirection and deception; and *Behind a Mask*, she suggests, dramatizes more or less realistically (within the sentimental romance tradition) their predicament without necessarily casting aspersions on the stratagems they employ. Following up on the implications of Fetterley's reading, Elaine Showalter suggests that the book is "a narrative meditation on the possibilities for feminist subversion of patriarchal culture" through "role playing."⁸

The central figure of *Behind a Mask*, Jean Muir, is an aging stage actress, who, with the help of makeup, wigs, dentures, and costume, disguises herself as a younger woman and plays the role of a governess in order to insinuate herself into the household of the wealthy Coventry family. She presents herself as a young person just blossoming into womanhood – innocent, selfless, altruistic, and well disposed. But beneath this mask, she is an angry, scheming, vengeful woman. Shown to her room after her arrival at the family mansion, she removes false hair and teeth, revealing herself as "a haggard, worn and moody woman." Decanting a drink, she sighs that at least here, safely ensconced in her room, she can be herself, "if actresses are ever themselves."

Jean's plan is to win over all the men and choose the richest. But her carefully plotted schemes are discovered because she has imprudently detailed them in letters to a female friend who is also looking to infiltrate a wealthy family. Nevertheless, she manages to convince the Coventry patriarch, the elderly Sir John, of her innocence, and, sensing her advantage, she forthwith seduces and secretly marries him. Gerald Coventry, who has suspected her motives all along, but who has also fallen for her, is stunned. As she departs on the wedding journey with old Sir John, she says to Gerald in a penetrating voice, "Is not the last scene better than the first?"

Jean Muir has been called one of Alcott's most nuanced characters. She is deceitful and manipulative, but her judgment of other people is incisive, sometimes even sympathetic. She struggles with a less than coherent concept of morality and self-identity; and her purpose, if not truly evil, seems immoral; yet the plot conveys an odd feeling of amoral just deserts. Alcott's conception of a Machiavellian female character, neither moral nor immoral, certainly struck a new chord in "woman's fiction" in America.

So too did *Moods* (1864; rev. 1882). Alcott struggled with this novel, starting and stopping, publishing what she considered an unsatisfactory version in 1864, and reworking it over a period of eighteen years before reissuing it in a revised version in 1882.⁹ The autobiographical elements are noticeable, though the story line is in the tradition of sentimental romance. Alcott initially inscribed the book to her mother as a “romance,” based on “my own life experience”; later she felt uncomfortable about the personal nature of the book and wrote that it was from observation. She also changed the ending: instead of dying, the heroine adopts a life of dedicated service to others. In doing so, she transcends her moody self-absorption and finds a degree of happiness in self-sacrifice.

The first reviews were mainly, though not completely, negative. Some critics found the book immoral, accusing Alcott of advocating free love because the plot revolves around a heroine who wants to cleave to her husband but is obsessed with his best friend. While presenting the heroine’s quandary, the book discusses the possibility of divorce in a more or less morally neutral manner – and in terms of a woman’s independence and her right to choose. A correlative theme is the defects of marriage as a social convention, especially the mandate of total and exclusive “rights” to another person. Depressed by the reception of *Moods*, Alcott temporarily gave up writing what she intended as her next novel, *Work*. It took her nearly a decade to return to it and complete it.

Achieving “Woman’s Fiction”: The Sentimental Realism of *Work*

Work, A Story of Experience (1873) moves more convincingly than *Moods* toward its problematic yet inspirational conclusion. In one context, the denouement is quite conventional. In another, it is almost revolutionary. The book opens with a manifesto, spoken by the orphaned Christie Devon to her Aunt Betsy: “. . . there’s going to be a new Declaration of Independence.” Christie explains that she is “old enough to take care of myself; and if I’d been a boy, I should have been told to do it long ago.” So, “like the people in fairy tales,” it is her intent to “travel away into the world and seek my fortune.” While speaking, she vigorously kneads “the dough as if it was her destiny,” an ambiguous, even ironic image since she thinks she wishes to escape conventional domesticity.

In another variation on the archetype of “woman’s fiction,” Christie’s journey will be both an individual *bildungsroman* and a larger Everywoman’s mission – or as the recurrent allusions in the novel suggest, a Pilgrim’s Progress.¹⁰ After much travail, including a visit to her personal Slough of

Despond, she will find self-fulfillment in a larger moral-religious sense of community. Within this large context, Christie's story exemplifies the philosophy of work extolled by Victorians (notably Thomas Carlyle) as the "cure" for despair.

Christie is twenty-one when she leaves home; the narrative ends two decades later when she is forty. Overall, Christie's passage toward independence brings her to a realization of the interdependence of all human beings and, especially, the need to work for the mutual benefit of other women. This emphasis on the status of women and the idea of a women's community has made the novel an object of special interest to feminist critics and historians; but the book retains a strong conservative bias toward the traditional view of domesticity as the proper sphere of woman.¹¹ It is heavily and conventionally religious (specifically Christian and Protestant); and for some, an over-indulgence in pious bromides undercuts Christie's feminist social revelation.

Structural and thematic issues

Readers have also been critical of the overly episodic quality of the novel, finding it loose-jointed in structure and even contradictory in theme. Some critics have suggested that the novel is a *picaresque*, an episodic journey. In a general way the first part of the novel is in the tradition of "on the road" narratives; but the concomitant view of Christie as a "rogue" (*pizaro*, outlaw) seems rather strained, even though she is somewhat outside the conventional dictates of society. Actually, the twenty chapters of the book divide rather obviously into two coherent halves; and Chapter 10 is titled "Beginning Again." In addition to this basic two-part division are other overlapping, interlocking, or interpenetrating clusters of chapters that demonstrate progress toward an overarching theme.¹² As in other works we have examined, the middle-point of the book is not one chapter or passage but a sequence of transitional chapters. These chapters form a hinge between the two consistent divisions of the larger bipartite structure.

The initial six chapters describe Christie striking out on her own to attempt to find "useful" work. The occupations that Christie attempts in Chapters 2–6 (titled "Servant," "Actress," "Governess," "Companion," "Seamstress") represent some of the major kinds of employment available to women in the nineteenth century. They also represent a spectrum of social classes associated with working women. But these jobs grant neither economic independence nor dignity – in fact they reinforce poverty and mortification – although there is an implied progression to these chapters. In "Servant" (Ch. 2) and "Actress" (Ch. 3), Christie experiences for the first time supercilious condescension, as if

she were a person of a lower class. In “Governess” (Ch. 4) and “Companion” (Ch. 5), each a step up in class, she experiences deception and dishonesty. In “Seamstress” (Ch. 6), Christie goes down in class to a mind-numbing job where she is regarded as nothing more than a machine. There is also an alternation between domestic, “inside” jobs and other, “outside” jobs. In “Servant,” she is in a domestic position inside a family circle; in the next position, “Actress,” in an outside, public job. “Governess” and “Companion,” which follow, are both inside domestic positions. Then in “Through the Mist” (Ch. 7), Christie is in an outside position as a “needle-woman” for independent hire. Each of these occupations is portrayed with a certain satiric and often comic verve, within the context of deadly seriousness.

By Chapter 7, Christie has not only become disenchanted with the very idea of opportunity outside the domestic sphere, but also has come to despair of ever achieving womanly independence. Each of her employments has entailed some sort of degradation; and, as a result, she feels increasing (if reluctant) identification with the lower classes. She leaves her position in a factory-like sewing establishment as an act of solidarity with a lower-class woman called Rachel. Discovered to be a “fallen woman,” Rachel has been rejected by her fellow workers. Christie embraces her as a sister, foreshadowing the sisterhood theme that culminates the novel. But as for herself, Christie feels an overwhelming sense of repeated failure. Out of a job, she now faces poverty. She has arrived at the point of suicide.

Rescue and rehabilitation

Christie is saved from throwing herself into the river by her friend Rachel, who takes her to a wiser woman. Chapter 8, titled “A Cure for Despair,” reveals that the cure for Christie’s despondency is a return to the values of domesticity – an *enlightened* domesticity. Christie’s spiritual rehabilitation takes place in the domestic sphere of an older laundress, Mrs Cynthia Wilkins, who (in Ch. 9) introduces Christie to the potent sermonizing of the Reverend Mr Power. This chapter continues the moral turn of the narrative toward the positive, with true Christianity as a guide. The primacy of the religious theme is fully established and followed out with increasing insistence in the remainder of the novel. Christie is moved by two of Power’s sermons: one an Old Testament explication of the stern justice of Jehovah; the other a milder New Testament meditation on forgiveness, mercy, and love. Alcott does not give us either of the sermons. Instead, we get summary descriptions of the responses of the congregation and Christie, who “felt as if he preached to her alone.”

Through Mr Power, she meets David Sterling, a “florist” (really a gardener and botanist) and quasi-transcendentalist. He has tried to work out his own redemption from a mysterious sorrow through discovering the spirit in nature, especially in the cultivation of flowers and exotic plants.¹³ Chapter 10 (“Beginning Again”) concludes the first half of the narrative and begins the second. The penultimate step in Christie’s rehabilitation through love, marriage, and motherhood is now set in motion. This set of values hardly sounds like a feminist revolution, but, as we shall see, certain aspects of the “cure for despair” are radical.

Christie comes back to hearth and home with an enlightened sensibility and elevation of the spirit, and the novel concludes as a kind of *exemplum* of broad humanitarianism and spiritual uplift. But within this narrative contour, the story turns at the midway point to the mode of domestic romance, with a sentimental interlude of pastoral idyll, geared to the popular tastes of the time. Christie and David slowly and gently fall in love and marry. Since their romance takes place against the backdrop of the American Civil War, the story is also laced with patriotism, another feature popular with Alcott’s primary audience. The concession to conventions of popular taste is relative, however. The Civil War also reveals Christie’s continuing development as an independent woman. As Christie and David grow ever closer, she notices that little by little he is neglecting his garden and seems distracted. He feels a duty to join the Northern troops. Christie tells him that the very day he enlists, she too will stand “ready” to serve in a Union hospital. Two years pass, during which Christie engages in “all sorts of service” to her country. Then she gets word that David is dead.

Culture and social class: A new emancipation and the ideal republic

In the second half of the narrative, Christie faces her greatest single trial in the death of her husband. But she wins through to happiness and self-fulfillment in other ways – including motherhood and the formation of a proto-feminist sisterhood of oppressed and exploited women. The chapters of the second part are more tightly linked together than those of the first part, involving a unifying utopian theme of gender equality that is almost messianic. The last chapter (Ch. 20) presents an overarching vision of the “coming woman” and the new society of equal workers to which many modern readers respond very positively. The “religious” revelation governing the whole is also sociopolitical, leading toward the establishment of a new community of women as a “loving league of sisters.” Thus, as a whole, the novel is not as disconnected as some critics have suggested.

The last two chapters round off the narrative fairly quickly. The title of Chapter 19, “Little Heart’s-Ease,” refers to the nickname (after the flower) of Christie’s baby, a little girl whose Christian name is Ruth. Despite the compensation of her little girl, Christie feels for a while that she “cannot forgive God” for taking David from her; but she is learning “submission through the stern discipline of grief.”

Christie now advocates for “working-women,” feeling a special “sympathy for this class of workers.” Attending what purports to be a support group meeting, she discovers that the society ladies who presume to run the meeting do not understand working women, nor the workers them – “in spite of the utmost need on one side and the sincerest good will on the other.” It’s up to Christie to “bring the helpers and the helped into truer relations with each other.” That will be the first step toward the “Ideal Republic.” Because Christie (like Alcott) comes from “genteel” poverty, she seems “fitted to act as interpreter between the two classes.” Christie has finally found the “calling” she has been seeking. The only portion of her speech actually rendered is short. Whereas the War achieved the emancipation of black people from slavery, she speaks now of the emancipation of women. This second emancipation – the freeing of women from social and economic constraints – will be the foundation of the Ideal Republic.

Christie asks Bella Carrol, a well-to-do society lady, to try an “experiment.” Bella is to make her home “beautiful and attractive,” keeping “all the elegance and refinement of former times.” To this high-toned *milieu*, she is to add “common sense” and invite old friends and new to come to her home to engage in “conversation instead of gossip” and in “nobler” pursuits instead of “present dissipation.” The “sort of society we need,” says Christie, is in the hands of “those who possess the means of culture.” Christie herself cannot be the leader of this enterprise because she’s too radical a reformer: as a woman, she is too “strong-minded.” Perhaps more importantly, she doesn’t have the necessary social and economic position. Is this snobbery – or social realism?

At this point, as if to redeem Christie’s expressed social elitism, two of her old acquaintances from the first part of the novel reappear: a fugitive slave, and Mrs Wilkins, the laundress. She calls them her “dear friends.” One, she says, “has saved scores of her own people, and is my pet heroine”; the other “has the bravest, cheeriest soul I know, and is my private oracle.”

The last supper: From the female Christ to Christian socialism

The last few pages of the last chapter present a tableau of the new woman. Christie and a number of others, including her little daughter, have joined

hands around a kitchen table. On the wall is a painting of a scene from the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* that suggests a unifying parable for the novel.

.....
It was a quaint and lovely picture of Mr. Greatheart, leading the fugitives from the City of Destruction. A dark wood lay behind; a wide river rolled before; Mercy and Christiana pressed close to their faithful guide, who went down the rough and narrow path bearing a cross-hilted sword in his right hand, and holding a sleeping baby with the left. The sun was just rising.
.....

The symbolic import of the imagery for American women as presented in Christie's story is clear. Asked what she will do now, Christie says she just plans to "work" quietly, for "in labor, and the efforts and experiences that grew out of it, I have found independence, education, happiness, and religion."

The new woman will have learned that "the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work." Conventionally pious as this statement sounds, it is actually in the service of the more radical idea of complete equality for women. As several critics have observed, the joining of hands suggests that the relative powerlessness of women – dramatized in the first several chapters as the typical fragmentation of their life experiences – can be overcome through unity. The women gathered at Christie's table are a "loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end." As she sits with her disciples at the table, the woman named "Christie" seems to function as a Female Christ – bringing enlightenment and prophesying the social and moral salvation of both men and women.¹⁴

Some readers see an unresolved contradiction in this conception of Christie as the herald of the New Woman. From the beginning, the narrative divides women into two groups: the weak who make a mistake in striking out on their own and should never have left the domestic nest; and the strong who find that self-discipline and self-discovery lead them back to domestic values. The "strongest" women struggle and suffer danger and even (temporary) defeat. They attempt to achieve success out in the world and thereby achieve certain values of "self," as opposed to self-abnegation. Christie has learned to be selfless, but she has also learned not to sacrifice herself always.¹⁵

In this, Christie is reminiscent of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*; and Christie's little daughter functions symbolically like Hester's daughter, Pearl: "a hopeful omen, seeming to promise that the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty . . ." Like

Hester, Christie is both her liberated self and a representative of a class of oppressed women – a point announced back in the first chapter.

.....
Christie was one of that large class of women who, moderately endowed with talents, earnest and true-hearted, are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves. Many turn back discouraged; more accept shadow for substance, and discover their mistake too late; the weakest lose their purpose and themselves; but the strongest struggle on, and, after danger and defeat, earn at last the best success this world can give us, the possession of a brave and cheerful spirit, rich in self-knowledge, self-control, self-help.
.....

Although, as in *Little Women*, the pilgrim’s “progress” is circular, from home outward and back to home and domesticity, the passage affirms individual quest and affirmation of “self.”

It is clear that we are supposed to admire Christie as one of the strong. For all its sentimental and melodramatic flaws, Christie’s triumphant story may be said to exemplify the theory of “woman’s fiction” far better than works like Evans’s *St. Elmo*. The “Ideal Republic” requires a woman of independence, which means the ability to help herself. Men’s help can be appreciated, but the new woman will not require or depend on male assistance. The strong woman’s true “home” lies in affirmations of the self in the community of women.

Notes

1. Matteson’s *ACAF* essay (2009), 451–467, is a concise and well-balanced introduction to Alcott’s complexities. His prize-winning biography (2007) of Louisa May and her father, Bronson, places her in the intellectual and social environment of New England. Stern’s biography (1950), long standard, has been frequently revised. In 1975, Stern published a collection of previously unknown gothic tales by Alcott (see next note). Partially in response, Saxton (1977) reevaluated the darker side of the famous “children’s writer,” though she was not the first to employ a psychoanalytic approach. Both Stern and Saxton have had a major impact on subsequent critics with strong feminist interests. One of the most influential books of reinterpretation is the anthology, *Alternative Alcott*, ed. Showalter (1988).
2. In 1975, Stern brought out a collection of the “Unknown Thrillers” of Alcott (rpt. 1978). Over the years, Stern has incrementally added to the list of Alcott’s

- anonymous and pseudonymous thrillers in several edited collections, the most inclusive of which is the “Collected Thrillers” (1995). Stern is also the author of *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home* (1998). Keyser’s study of the fiction, *Whispers in the Dark* (1993), takes its name from one of Alcott’s gothic thrillers.
3. Contracting a fever during her war service, Alcott was treated with a mercury compound that made her seriously ill for the rest of her life.
 4. *Little Women*, or *Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* appeared in two parts in 1868 and 1869. *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo’s Boys* came out two years later in 1871; but not until 1886 did she finally end the March family story with *Jo’s Boys, and How they Turned Out*. The recent Norton Critical Edition of *Little Women* (2004) contains useful general assessments and background materials, including the important Estes and Lant essay on the feminist failings of the novel (referenced below). Although Alcott expressed a certain cynical contempt for “juvenile” writing, she produced, in the fifteen years between the two “Jo’s Boys” volumes, several works trading on the name and/or character of the heroine of *Little Women*: principally six volumes of *Aunt Jo’s Scrap-Bag* (1872–82), *Eight Cousins; or the Aunt-Hill* (1875), and *Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins* (1876). Other of her once well-known young people’s works include *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Jack and Jill: A Village Story* (1880), and *A Garland for Girls* (1888).
 5. Estes and Lant’s 1989 essay is reprinted in the 2004 Norton Critical Edition of *Little Women*, 564–583.
 6. A woman selling her tresses is a motif of folk tales and sentimental fiction. See, for example, the famous story by O. Henry (William Sydney Porter 1862–1910), “The Gift of the Magi” (1906).
 7. See the discussion of Bhaer and the “funny match” in *Eden’s Outcasts*, 346–348.
 8. See Showalter, Introduction (xxx), *Alternative Alcott*; and Fetterley (1983), 2.
 9. Matteson (2007) provides a good discussion of these struggles; see esp. 298–304, 400–403. To an extent, Alcott toned down some of her more radical critiques of social convention and gender inequality. Elbert’s edition of *Moods* (1991) prints variant passages. The opposite endings of the two Mephisto stories parallel the different endings of *Moods*. *A Long Fatal Love Chase* presents a Faustian attitude of defiance and declaration of undying love (or possessiveness); *A Modern Mephistopheles* sees unsanctioned love as moral error and extols self-sacrifice.
 10. A *bildungsroman* is a novel of the “education” or “development” of the hero; when the protagonist in such a novel is female, some critics use the term *female bildungsroman*, sometimes attributing special characteristics to it as genre.
 11. See Grace Farrell’s comparison of *Work* with *Fettered for Life* toward the end of the preceding chapter.
 12. Yellin (1980) has argued that aesthetically the novel ultimately fails because the episodes are not tightly connected thematically. Originally titling it *Success*, Alcott re-titled it twice.

13. These two male figures are supposedly based on real people: Power on Theodore Parker (1810–1860), and Sterling on Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).
14. In another of their noteworthy articles on Alcott, Lant and Estes argue that Christie is a Christ figure and that the episodic structure of *Work* results from its being in the tradition of parables; see Lant and Estes (1991).
15. Although “self-abnegation” is a “noble thing,” Alcott once wrote, “there is a limit to it” (Saxton 1977, 273).

See also

Alcott (1975, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2004); Bedell (1980); Boyd (2004); Camfield (ACAF, 2009); Clark and Alberghene (1998); Kasson (1994); Keyser (1983, 1999); MacDonald (1983); Stern (1984, 1999 [1950], 1998); Strickland (1985); Tarbox (ACAF, 2009).