

THE GOLDEN HEROINE:AN ANALYSIS OF THE DOMESTIC  
HEROINE IN GOLDEN AGE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

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## **DEDICATION**

The following work is dedicated to my two dear friends Brittany Sousa-Gonzalez and Eden R. Gonzalez.

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## ABSTRACT

The Golden Age of children's literature (1860s-1910s) was a period in literary history that saw the publication of many a beloved and, now, classic children's story. It was a time of reinvention for children's literature: writers came down from their moral high-ground and began to address children on a personal level. While encouraging virtue was still an obvious motive, authors also provided their young readers with tales of adventure and wonderment. Although young girls during the time were still socially discouraged from reading the same stories as boys, what books that were made to be accessible to them came to feature a special kind of feminine protagonist. Such a character—who shall be referred to in this paper as the “Domestic Heroine”—was not only an embodiment of Victorian ideals of domesticity; she was also a literary descendant of the same spirited heroine featured in the adult genre of domestic fiction, from the early half of the nineteenth-century. This paper will examine common traits and circumstances pertaining to the Domestic Heroine as she appeared in children's literature, drawing from well-known literary sources from the Golden Age. Such primary sources will include *Little Women* (1868); *A Little Princess* (1905); *The Railway Children* (1906); *Anne of Green Gables* (1908); and *Peter and Wendy* (1911).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The story of children's literature is a long and complicated one to observe. How did it originate? How has it evolved across time?

When simply considering both the English and American versions of the genre, literary scholars have managed to trace classic and modern traditions back to the cultural influences of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### I. Religion's Reign

Prior to the mid-nineteenth-century, the writings for both the English and American child were heavily influenced by Puritan (religious) ideology. As a result, the children's literature of the time focused predominately on the teaching and instilling of Christian virtues. What a child was, what significance he or she carried, was influenced by the fire and brimstone voices from the pulpit on Sundays; and, during the rest of the week, further condemnation could be found in the popular, circulating literature. Writer Mary Martha Sherwood encapsulated the Puritanic views of children in her novel *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818):

All children are by nature evil, and while they have none but the natural evil principle to guide them, pious and prudent parents must check their naughty passions in any way that they have in their power, and force them into decent and proper behaviour and into what are called good habits. (qtd. in Hunt, *Introduction* 48)

As part of their moral upbringing and religious indoctrination, it has been documented that children were encouraged to read stories about saintly and deceased children—such



as those featured in James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (published in 1692). Christian children were taught early to know and fear Hell, and to understand that, lest they adhere to the guidance of their parents and clergymen, it was to the pit of eternal fire that they were bound.

In summary: prior to the mid-nineteenth-century, children's literature bore little resemblance to the stories of love, joy, and inspiration that many a Western child has come to know and cherish.

## II. Victorian Influences

Following the ascent of Queen Victoria onto the English throne, Western culture—particularly in Great Britain and North America—entered into a new age of ideological and social reform. Among a number of other characteristics—including prudishness toward sexuality—the Victorian Era (1837-1901) came to foster what scholar Jackie Wullschläger called a “romance with childhood” (12).

One year following the coronation of Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens published *Oliver Twist*. The story of the adventures of an English boy, ascending from workhouse orphan to street urchin to cherished ward, found much popularity in its writer's lifetime. Many of Dickens's novels, classics of the past and present, brought to light some of the hardships faced by the children of the Industrial Age; hardships that Dickens, himself, knew intimately.

Additional books would soon come to be published that would bring the realities of childhood into the foreground. It would be nearly thirty years after the appearance of *Oliver Twist*, however, that one “golden afternoon” along a riverside with three

enchancing young girls would inspire a man to imagine a fantastical new world. This man, Charles Lutwidge Dodson (lovingly remembered as Lewis Carroll), would, as a result, come to pen a landmark piece in literary history: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). "Landmark" is a keyword in the previous statement as *Alice* has been credited by many academics, including Hunt and Wullschläger, as being a kind of primordial mitochondria for many a modern children's story, as well as a marker for the beginning of the Golden Age.

### III. The Metamorphosis

By the 1860s, due to the popularity of such works as Carroll's, a gradual shift in focus began to take place in Western literature. Instead of merely preaching at children, writers began to adopt a new sense of address toward their young audience: they started to engage with children on a personal level. The view of childhood, mostly due to the shared influences of the Romantics and the Victorians, had begun to evolve: adolescence changed from being seen as a time of unruliness and immorality to a period of wonderment and adventure. Depictions of child characters also became more complex: they showed mature mannerisms and deep consciousness, mimicking traits and thoughts that before were primarily reserved for fictional adult personas. As Hunt summarizes: "In a sense, children's literature was growing up—growing away from adults" (59, 1994).

The latter-mentioned magical time in literary maturity has since become known as the (first) Golden Age, dating from the middle of the eighteenth-century to the start of the First World War.

### IV. Golden Women

The role of women in literature, both as writers and as characters, has a long

history of being undervalued. In truth, female authors have had a strong influence over children's literature, both before and during the Golden Age. Whether it was in the form of a chapter book or a religious pamphlet, women were some of the greatest producers of children's readings from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries (Hunt, *Introduction* 32-33).

While the year 1744 is regarded by some scholars as being the starting point for modern children's literature, mostly due to the publication of John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*, one of the first books that could properly be referred to as a children's novel was not published until five years later: Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy* (Hunt, *Introduction* 32). In a 1968 edition of the novel, published by Oxford University Press, editor Jill E. Grey offered the following words regarding Fielding's influence on children's stories:

Sarah became the first author for children to establish a distinct contemporary social environment with a definite set of characters taken from ordinary life and using ordinary speech... and, more important for young readers, characters who were suppose to be real children like themselves... Sarah was the first writer for the young to try to give life to her characters by... making the ordinary happenings of their daily lives a subject for literature. (qtd. in Hunt, *Introduction* 43)

Fielding's depictions of the child were revolutionary for their time. While her work can be more obscure than that by Dickens and Carroll, traces of Fielding's influence can be

found woven throughout the stories of the nineteenth-century writers of Domestic Fiction: a genre of writing that focused, especially, on the homebound adventures of women.

In exercising their own voices through the medium of the written word, women writers—such as Sarah Fielding—encouraged the idea of personhood among the female populace, both within their own social circles and overall society. In time, more and more women would also incorporate children in their campaign, extending the idea of personhood to them as well. It would be the before-mentioned extension (or, inclusion) that would have a lasting effect on children’s literature in the centuries to come.

## 2. THE DOMESTIC HEROINE: A BRIEF LITERARY HISTORY

In the mid-eighteenth-century, a time when “the gentle sex” was still being subjected to gender segregated and censored reading materials, a formerly popular breed of literary hero found her way into children’s literature. This literary hero would provide the adolescent girls of the time with a symbol of female empowerment; one that was disguised in the garbs of Victorian domestic virtues. This breed of character was the Domestic Heroine, a prominent figure in the former literary era of Domestic Fiction.

But what is the making of a Domestic Heroine? Where did she come from, and what made her important in early twentieth-century children’s literature?

### I. The Female Hero

Before moving forward, it is important to acknowledge that feminine heroism is not a recent invention or inclusion in Western literature. As critic Gertrud Lehnert indicates, such a character has existed for at least six centuries—since the publication of Christine de Pisan’s *La Cite des Dames (The City of Ladies)* in 1405. Due to societal perspectives and prejudices, however, a number of female-oriented works were (i.e. became) suppressed, ignored, or forgotten over the course of centuries. Such, at least, was true until the rise of modernity in Europe and North America:

The history of the image of women in modernity can be characterized as an interplay of opposing views, one of which was the prevailing standard for several centuries, while the other, “unofficial” view was more or less suppressed and ignored until the twentieth-century, when it began to gain prominence in the West. (Lehnert 110)

Prior to the 1800s, many of the well-known literary heroes were predominately male: King Odysseus, Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, and so on. With the popularization of what came to be known as Domestic Fiction (from 1820 to, arguably, 1865), writers such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë came to pen two of the most popular Domestic Heroines in Western Literature: Elizabeth Bennett (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813) and Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*, 1847), respectively.

Before discussing the elements and achievements of Domestic Fiction, however, it is best to first understand and acknowledge the conditions of its origins.

## II. Disowning Eve

The origins of Domestic Fiction can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth-century, to the Age of Reason (or, “the Enlightenment”). Arguably ranging from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, the Enlightenment was a time of great scientific invention, exploration, and discovery. In particular, it was the era that saw the invention of Galileo Galilei’s telescope, as well as Isaac Newton’s work on universal gravitation. The great philosophers of the time, including John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, would come to pen works that led to the inspiration of two separate and bloody revolutions: the American Revolution (1765-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799). Referred to by some historians as “the long eighteenth-century,” the Enlightenment was an age of growing pains, of intellectual maturity. According to *History.com*: “Enlightened rationality gave way to the wildness of Romanticism, but 19th-century Liberalism and Classicism—not to mention 20th-century Modernism—all owe a heavy debt to the thinkers of the Enlightenment” (2016).

Influenced by the free-thinkers of the eighteenth-century, people began to question their beliefs, traditions, and lifestyles. Among such questioning included the people's general relationship with the Christian Church.

The belief in Original Sin, the idea of humanity being inherently depraved, was the foundation of the Puritan (Christian) doctrine. As such, tying in with the stories of the Book of Genesis, women would come to be associated with the first female, Eve. While the image of the Virgin Mary was still prevalent, in terms of honoring, she remained an unachievable standard.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not  
deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a  
transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing...

– 1 Timothy 2:13-15 (ESV)

Seen as the daughters of Eve, women of the eighteenth-century (and the ages before) were taught to believe that they were inherent transgressors; that their salvation rested only in submission, marriage, and childbearing. Such was to be seen as their inherent punishment for the sins of the original mother. But as society began to move away from the Church in the early nineteenth-century, the cultural depiction of women began to change. Women gradually came to be viewed not as shamefully weak transgressors so much as woefully vulnerable creatures to the Serpent of Temptation.

Stepping out of the shadow of Eve was a new female archetype: the Persecuted Maiden.

### III. The Maiden On Display

According to Charles Strickland, in his book *Victorian Domesticity* (1985),

Samuel Richardson's novel *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748) featured one of the first literary examples of the Persecuted Maiden.

Richardson's character Clarissa may have been written as a beautiful and intelligent daughter of a bourgeois family, but hers is a tragic story that reflects the misogynistic beliefs and practices of Western society at the time of the book's publication. Coerced by an overbearing father and a jealous brother, Clarissa is pushed into the arms of the lusty libertine Lovelace. She quickly comes to see through Lovelace's charms and rebukes his advances; but her male relatives insist on the match, coveting Lovelace's money and prospects. Although a dutiful daughter, Clarissa refuses to forsake her values and become yet another of Lovelace's sexual conquests. Frustrated, Lovelace manages to drug and rape Clarissa; but, as his ego thrives on willing consent, Clarissa ultimately triumphs over Lovelace's pride. A second victory comes when Clarissa turns down Lovelace's marriage proposal, willingly choosing a solitary life and virtuous death over a superficial union.

The popularity of Richardson's rather revolutionary novel would subsequently lead to the writing of a multitude of stories that glorified the lives and deeds of the Persecuted Maiden, including *Charlotte Temple* (1794) by British-American author Susanna Rowson. Unlike Richardson's Clarissa, Rowson's heroine (Charlotte) is a naïve young woman who, after being seduced by a young officer and corrupted by his friends, runs away with him to America and becomes his mistress. What follows is an unfortunate sequence of events, including betrayal and abandonment, which eventually leads to Charlotte's death. In her passing, however, Charlotte can be seen as finally finding peace, while those who had a hand in her corruption only find melancholy.



Such novels, as Richardson's and Rowson's, were meant to serve as cautionary tales to young women and their parents, warning against the valuing of a shallow seduction or an advantageous marriage over a union of love and equality.

#### IV. Domesticity: A Literary Cult

Richardson and Rowson are but two early influencers of what came to be known as the Sentimental Revolution, which would inspire a new literary genre in the early nineteenth-century. Sentimentalists became known for their value of emotions and relationships over logic and convention. They came to develop and reinforce a series of interrelated "cults": the cult of romantic love; the cult of domesticity; the cult of motherhood; and the cult of childhood (Strickland 5-6).

The cult of romantic love, as the title implies, emphasized the importance of love in a marriage. It also focused on aspects such as the rituals of courtship and the formation of families. The cults of motherhood and childhood, respectively, focused primarily on the woman's role in relation to family life.

Greater than any of the above-mentioned three, however, was the cult of domesticity: "Never before had the household been made the object of such adoration as the sentimental writers heaped upon it" (Strickland 8). In this new and "enlightened" world, the family household had replaced the Church as being the teaching ground for moral-development. It also became a place where a person, a child, first learned of the value of such expressions as love, kindness, and intimacy. The cult of domesticity, too, created a kind of melodramatic contrast between the family home and the outside world: in literature, a loving home was painted as a place of warmth and laughter while the marketplace was illustrated as an environment of coldness and cruelty. Such a division of

the private and public spheres in popular readings was an accurate depiction of the growing economic realities emerging, especially in urban America.

Following European literary tradition, the woman was placed in the middle of the domestic lifestyle as the pillar of morality within a household: “If, as the sentimentalists insisted, woman’s place was in the home, and if the home was a world radically apart from the marketplace, then it followed that woman’s role and identity would be radically different from that of man” (Strickland 9). For many an urban household, the financial success of a family depended on the obtaining and maintaining of a job outside of the home. While a lower class family could get away with both parents being employed, a respectable middle class family relied on the man as being the source of income. A middle class woman was expected to stay within the home and to tend to all domestic matters, including household management and children’s education.

Whether in life or in literature, a respectable and virtuous young woman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was expected by society to marry; and, from there, she was to enter and care for her husband’s house, where she would one day raise her children. For sentimental writers, the ultimate goal for a female protagonist was marriage; but if such was not possible without some sort of compromise to the character’s virtue, death was treated as an acceptable alternative. Suicide, even, was considered a better option than for a woman to live in a loveless marriage or in disgraced spinsterhood:

While depicting the Persecuted Maiden as the victim of all manner of assaults on her purity and her integrity, the sentimental novelist would not provide her with the escape hatch of leading a single life. Most sentimental authors

made it clear that marriage was the only possible destiny  
for a woman. (Strickland 8)

The growing popularity and demand for novels which featured the Persecuted Maiden gave way to the creation of a new literary genre: Sentimental Fiction, or Domestic Fiction. In time, the genre began to evolve and so did the character it revolved around. To match the new genre, the character was given a second name: the Sentimental Heroine, or the Domestic Heroine. (From this section onward, the above-mentioned character will be associated as the “Domestic Heroine”; and the literature that she is featured in will be referred to as “Domestic Fiction.”)

#### V. Defining the Domestic Heroine

To understand the Domestic Heroine as a character, it is important to acknowledge that she is not a hero as traditionally depicted in popular adventure novels. In contrast to her male, empire-building counterpart, the triumphs of the Domestic Heroine came in the form of seemingly small and quiet accomplishments rather than obviously large and explosive deeds. Rather than conquer the obstacles of the outside world, the female protagonist’s priorities lie in overcoming the challenges of the domestic sphere, as well as those of the inner (emotional and logical) being. Some such instances, of overcoming social restrictions, may include the protagonist assuming a new authoritative or economic role to keep the family together; or in her using her wits to overcome and overthrow the manipulative power of an evil figure (i.e. person).

According to literary critic and historian Nina Baym, a work of Domestic Fiction is essentially “the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of

winning her own way in the world...” (qtd. in Campbell 2013). By Baym’s definition, the character does not sound like the Persecuted Maiden of Richardson’s or Rowson’s creative fashioning or promotion. Rather, like their realistic (human) counterparts, the Domestic Heroine does evolve in each story and novel that she is featured in.

The female protagonists of Jane Austen’s beloved novels—particularly *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), as well as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)—correspond to Baym’s classification requirements for domestic heroism. Whether in reference to Eleanor Dashwood or Elizabeth Bennet, the primary challenge of the Austenian heroine was for her to overcome the injustices of British inheritance laws—those which barred women from assuming ownership of their father’s money and property. With little to no means of acquiring wealth of their own, nineteenth-century women of the British middle class had to rely on the favor and support of family to survive, as well as enough good fortune to secure an advantageous marriage.

Of course, each of Austen’s popular heroines finds herself happily married by the end of the respective novels. Good fortune in marriage, however, was not the only benefit that the author gave to her characters. Rather, Austen fashioned in each of her heroines a spirited personality, often including a strong sense of intelligence and self-worth. Mirroring the moral code of other sentimental writers, Austen took particular care in maintaining within her protagonists a sense of integrity.

By Baym’s definition, Charlotte Brontë’s gothic protagonist Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*, 1847) could also be considered a Domestic Heroine. At the beginning of Brontë’s novel, Jane is a young orphan who is living with her abusive aunt and cousins. Because of the level of hatred the aunt has toward her niece-in-law, Jane is constantly denied love

and inheritance. As an attempt to be rid of her niece, the hateful aunt sends the little girl to the charitable boarding school of Lowood, where a deadly sickness has broken out. The little girl, however, does not succumb to fever and die. Rather, she grows up and becomes an accomplished, passionate young woman.

It is in adulthood that Jane, both consciously and unconsciously, triumphs over the bleak and unjust circumstances of her earlier years. She becomes a governess to the motherless ward of a bitterly tragic and tragically bitter man: a Mr. Rochester of Thornfield Hall. And while she had little hope or ambition in doing so, Jane finds a new life at Thornfield; and, with greater surprise, she enters into a (complicated) romance with the estate's owner. By the end of her tale, Jane has also managed to inherit a fortune from a previously unknown relation. And as the sentimentalists would have it, the novel concludes with the following words: "Reader, I married him [Mr. Rochester]."

Despite often being limited by social conventions, the Domestic Heroine conquers the adversities of the world by first conquering herself, often establishing a sense of self-worth that did not exist at the beginning of the novel.

## VI. Bridging Genres

By the mid-nineteenth-century, just as the Golden Age was beginning to dawn for children's literature, sentimental novels were slowly slipping into the background—losing their popularity in the publishing world. In 1868, however, one known sentimental writer would come to pen and publish a book that would find resonance among readers of the old domestic genre as well as those of the emerging children's franchise. The writer, Louisa May Alcott, would thus aid in preserving and delivering the archetype of the Domestic Heroine into a new era of literature.

### 3. *LITTLE WOMEN: A SENTIMENTAL CHILDREN'S CLASSIC*

While the respective works of Sarah Fielding and Samuel Richardson may have aided the sentimental renovation of nineteenth-century literature, it would be a novel by a young struggling writer that would help cement the relationship between Domestic Fiction and children's stories for the next half-a-century:

Rare is the American girl who did not read... [Louisa May] Alcott's books during the highly impressionable preadolescent or adolescent years. Alcott's fiction thus has served to shape the attitudes of subsequent generations of women toward the sensitive issues of women's roles and family life. Her influence may in fact serve to explain, in part at least, the strange persistence of Victorian values among Americans... in the twentieth century. (Strickland 3)

Alcott's literary accomplishments are by no means restricted to *Little Women*. It would, however, be the adolescent adventures of the four March sisters that would provide one of the most influential works of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's literature.

In many of the reprinted versions of the book, both *Little Women* (1868) and its sequel (*Good Wives*, 1869) are combined into one single volume and published under the same title as the original novel. For the purposes of this paper, however, only Part I will be recognized and analyzed.

## I. A Transcendental Upbringing

Unlike the societal philosophies that circulated at the time, as well as those reflected in her novel, writer Louisa May Alcott was not a supporter of Victorian domesticity. She, in summary, was not a conformist. For example: Alcott was a feminist, whereas the majority of those who penned Domestic Fiction did not appear to support feminist ideology.

In an America that had become heavily influenced by sentimentalist ideologies, Louisa and her three sisters spent a fair amount of their childhoods in the transcendentalist culture of Concord, Massachusetts. Within their community resided some of the most influential thinkers of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It has even been documented by a few literary historians and critics that, as a child, Louisa would at times accompany Thoreau on his walks around Walden Pond (Douglas 45-46).

Within the Alcott household, differing parental beliefs were in practice. The father, Bronson Alcott, was said to have been a dedicated follower of Transcendentalism. (At the core of the Transcendental Movement was the belief that spiritual enlightenment was achieved only through individual contemplation and meditation, with little to no emphasis put on the need for an organized church or religion.) Due to his radical values and experimental approaches, Bronson, a teacher by trade, continually found himself restricted to teaching only his four children. As a result, Louisa and her sisters were both forced pupils of their father's philosophical dogmas and subjects of his psychological experiments.

In regard to parenting, Bronson treated the responsibility of child-rearing as one that was to be shared between man and woman, father and mother. His approach, however, appeared to conflict with the parenting style of his wife, Abigail “Abba” May: “Bronson thought his girls needed a balanced diet of discipline and encouragement: his calm, insistent instruction would check Abba’s more volatile, violent, and warmly maternal régime” (Douglas 45). Suffice to say, life in the Alcott household was not a domestic paradise; nor was it a transcendentalist utopia, despite Bronson’s extreme attempts to make it so—including a temporary establishment of a Transcendentalist school and commune.

Bronson’s philosophies often kept him out of work; and, as a result, the Alcott children were forced to resort to working outside of the home to support the family. As a young adult, Alcott supported herself through a variety of roles. Like her character Jo March, Alcott first found employment as a companion and then as a governess. She would also come to work in a number of menial positions, including that of a seamstress and a laundress. On the side, Alcott was also writing and selling sensation stories—also known as “thrillers”—for publication in newspapers and magazines. At the time, she published her work under the pseudonym “A.M. Barnard.”

Alcott’s act of writing *Little Women* has repeatedly been said to have come about as the result of a request made by Thomas Niles, the editor of Roberts Brothers Publishing. At the time, Alcott was still writing sensation literature and pulp fiction; the idea of writing for a younger, feminine audience did not suit her interests. In fact, she referred to the children’s writings of the time as “moral pap for the young” (Strickland



69). Eager for a major publication, however, Alcott promised Niles that she would make an attempt at writing a girls' novel.

As time went on, and Niles began to suspect that Alcott was purposely postponing progress, the editor began to assert pressure. He warned the authoress that, if she refused or failed to deliver on what she promised, he would approach Bronson, her own father, with a publishing contract.

Alcott buckled. *Little Women* (Part I) was written, in completion, ten weeks later. That following September, 1868, the novel was published.

Despite Alcott's disgust with the initial product, *Little Women* would quickly become a bestseller. As a result, the writer found herself lavished with a lifetime's worth of fame and riches:

...[I]t can be argued that the strength of *Little Women* lies precisely in the fact that Louisa Alcott...did not particularly want to write it, and was not happy with it... "I don't enjoy this sort of thing," she wrote. "Never liked girls or knew many except for my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it." She was, in effect, balancing the generic necessities of the form with "genuine" material. The result is a book which subtly satirizes the most popular formula elements of the nineteenth-century "girls' book," while making use of them for its own popular success. (Hunt, *Children's* 189)

Alcott may have ultimately conceded to Niles's request to write a girls' novel, but her addition to the genre could hardly be considered just another replication of the same sentimental storyline and characterization. Her heroines may have been girls whose adventures were traditionally limited to the domestic environment of their upbringing, but Alcott also injected her own beliefs and experiences into the core of the story. It would be those personal contributions of the writer, one can assume, that helped to create the success of the novel in Alcott's time and beyond.

## II. Alcott's Domestic Heroine(s)

In order to produce an acceptable storyline within a short span of time, one that would meet the demands and expectations of her publisher, Alcott may have felt the need to resort to imitating the literary formulas that had already been established for girls' books. Rather than following the domestic recipe religiously, however, Alcott intentionally dabbled in some seemingly small acts of defiance.

*Little Women* can be read and viewed as a satire of the popular "girls' books" of the nineteenth-century. However, it can also be argued that Alcott used the book as a means of critiquing the values of the cult of domesticity, which was first established by the Sentimentalists and then enforced by the Victorians.

In the opening page of the first chapter of her novel, Alcott makes a parody—albeit realistic representation—of the March sisters' domestic musings with one another. In the absence of their parents, each of the girls, including mousey Beth, complains of the family's financial misfortune and the lack of Christmas presents. The humor comes in the manner by which the girls speak. For example, Jo's speech is purposely filled with crude and boyish slang (as observed by her older sister, Meg); and little, pretentious

Amy's vocalizations are made up of mispronunciations and malapropisms. The characters' language could be viewed as a poke at the expectation for young Victorian and Jacksonian heroines to be well-educated and well-spoken members of society. It can also be seen as a creative protest of the poor education that was made available to the young women of the time.

Humor, too, can be found in the melodramatic dialog itself. Each of the three older sisters bemoan the hardships they suffer in their respective employments: Meg as a teacher, Jo as a companion, and Beth as a dishwasher. Even little Amy complains about having to go to school, if only as a means of showing how she is equally as unfortunate as her siblings. It is revealed to the reader that the March family was rich many years ago, and that they have since been reduced to more modest circumstances:

“...Don't you wish we had the money papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me, how happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries,” said Meg, who could remember better times.

“You said the other day you thought we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money.”

“So I did, Beth. Well, I guess we are; for though we do have to work, we make fun for ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say.” (Alcott 12)

The scene is depicted in such a theatrical manner that it comes across as being like a Victorian drama, with each of the girls playing the part of a Persecuted Maiden:

“...[Alcott believe that] the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions, curbed her rebelliousness, and learned to play the role assigned her within her family” (qtd. in Watters 194).

Literary critic David H. Watters illustrates in his article “A Power In the House: *Little Women* and the Architecture of Individual Expression” that the Cult of Domesticity—also referred to as the “cult of true womanhood”—crippled a woman’s expression of individuality not only in surrounding society but also in her family.

### III. The Individual and the Family

A second predominant element in Domestic Fiction, which was also fundamental to the story of *Little Women*, was that of family. As indicated by Watters, Alcott viewed the family as an obstacle, a potential struggle for the individual and the heroine’s need for autonomy.

Given the broad scope of both the title and the plot, it can be argued that there is no one central protagonist in the story of *Little Women*. Possibly due to her spunky and defiant nature, however, the character of Jo has become the most famous and memorable of Alcott’s four heroines.

Born a girl, Josephine “Jo” March longs to be a boy. Rather, she longs for the same degree of luxury that boys of her time, including her male-friend Theodore “Laurie” Laurence, are allowed:

Jo’s ambition was to do something splendid; what it was she had no idea, but left it for time to tell her; and, meanwhile, found her greatest affliction in the fact that she

couldn't read, run, and ride as much as she liked. (Alcott  
38)

Shortening her name and speaking in slang were but two small acts of gender defiance Jo is described as taking delight in.

Jo loves her sisters, and she values her family. However, she also longs to be her own person. To clarify: Jo struggles to be seen and treated as a separate entity from the rest of the women in her household. Ann Douglas makes note of such a struggle between family and individual in her introduction in the 1983 reprint of *Little Women*:

There is a tug of war, sometimes loving, sometimes fierce, between each March girls' right to independence and her allegiance to the cohesion of the family; the girls' cohesion gives them their strong identities, yet must, in self-preservation, limit the expression of those identities...

*Little Women* is a novel about suppression, as well as about self-expression, and, above all, about a possible union, both pragmatic and utopian, of the two. (Douglas 49)

While the Sentimental Revolution did help to bring about better treatment for women and children, it did not emphasize the element of autonomy within either group. To the sentimental fundamentalist, as Strickland repeatedly notes, a woman was meant to find fulfillment in her roles as wife and mother. Likewise, a child was meant to be both a complacent and saintly entity. In *Little Women*, author Alcott mocks such beliefs by giving her main adolescent, female characters—especially Jo—personalities that include both ambition and faults.

#### IV. Imaginative Play

Within their own house in rural Massachusetts, the March sisters construct an exclusive world. Secluded in the family garret, the sisters met and participated in a secret “gentlemanly” committee. “Gentlemanly” is a key description as each of the girls had adopted a manly name and identity for the purposes of their society: as soon as each session was called to order, Meg would become known as Mr. Samuel Pickwick; Jo as Mr. Augustus Snodgrass; Beth as Mr. Tracy Tupman; and Amy as Mr. Nathaniel Winkle. They called themselves the ‘P.C.’ or Pickwick Club, in tribute to Charles Dickens’s story *The Pickwick Papers*. The sisters, too, had a paper: *The Pickwick Portfolio*—“...to which all [of the girls] contributed something; while Jo, who reveled in pens and ink, was the editor” (Alcott 85).

Alcott treats her reader to one session of the P.C., as well as a single issue of *The Pickwick Portfolio* in Chapter 10 of *Little Women*: “Pickwick, the President, read the paper, which was filled with original tales, poetry, local news, funny advertisements, and hints, in which they good-naturedly reminded each other of their faults and shortcomings” (85). In almost each respective poem and story or funny advertisement, a reader can pick up on the individual writer’s satirical tone—often toward women or domesticity, in one form or another.

In playing their roles of gentlemen within the exclusive perimeters of their club, the girls portray a sense of at ease with themselves. In their manly guises, Meg and Beth and Amy break with their daily roles as nineteenth-century American women and are able to experience, through their imaginations, a degree of freedom that Jo often finds herself longing for.

As an aspiring writer, Jo is gifted with an untamable, but private, imagination. She does occasionally share fragments of her stories and plays with her family, and she contributes poetry to her and her sisters' secret newsletter. Generally, however, her writings and her imagination remain private. Such, perhaps, is Jo's attempt to exercise and protect her individual persona from the potential judgment of others.

The depth of Jo's love and protectiveness for her stories can be seen in Chapter VIII, when Jo flies into a rage following the realization that her youngest sister Amy, in an act of retribution, has burned her beloved manuscript:

...Jo burst into the room, looking excited, and demanding, breathlessly, "Has any one taken my story?"

... [Amy:] "I burnt it up."

"What! my little book I was so fond of, and worked over, and meant to finish before father got home? Have you really burnt it?" said Jo, turning pale, while her eyes kindled and her hands clutched Amy nervously.

"Yes, I did! I told you I'd make you pay for being so cross yesterday..."

... Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her family as a literary spout of great promise. It was only a half a dozen fairy tales, but Jo had worked over them patiently, putting her whole heart into her work... It seemed a small loss to others, but to Jo it was a dreadful

calamity, and she felt that it never could be made up to her.

(Alcott 64)

Imagination, as Alcott demonstrates through Jo, was a Victorian woman's true refuge and luxury.

## V. Maternal Images

The character of Marmee March, the mother, is an important figure in her daughters' lives. In the absence of Father March, she is the guiding, moral hand for her children. She is loving toward her daughters, but she is also strict. She is clear about what she dislikes—alcohol, flirting, vulgarity—and does her best to shield her daughters from any negative, external influences. Simultaneously, however, it is clear that Marmee loves her daughters enough not to want to deprive them of life experiences. One particular instance in the story is when Meg is invited to attend her first adult party. Although Marmee fears that the event will make her eldest daughter resent the family's modest circumstances, she still allows Meg to go. While the instance does prove disappointing and disastrous, the amount of leeway her mother gave her helps the eldest March girl to become a much stronger and more aware person.

While she does abide by certain codes of sentimentalism, Marmee can be viewed as a moderately feminist character. Such can be seen in the way that she encourages Jo to pursue her gift and ambitions as a writer, as well as in the way that Marmee warns her daughters against pursuing a marriage for reasons of money and security (Strickland 129).

It is perhaps due to Marmee's loving and nurturing approach that the children take to mimicking motherhood through the manner by which they comfort and counsel each other:



Meg was Amy's confidant and monitor, and, by some strange attraction of opposites, Jo was gentle Beth's. To Jo alone did the shy child tell her thoughts; and over her big, harum-scarum sister, Beth unconsciously exercised more influence than any one in the family. The two older girls were a great deal to each other, but both took one of the younger into their keeping, and watched over them in their own way, "playing mother" they called it, and put their sisters in the place of discarded dolls, with the maternal instinct of little women. (Alcott 40)

#### VI. Female Authority

In terms of power, especially in the absence of the father figure, the March women are their own tribe and ruling-power. Even when Laurie, their friend and neighbor, is welcomed into their exclusive world, the girls remain as they were before his arrival:

Alcott omits or underplays male characters not merely to protect the development of her female protagonists, but also because their presence is not necessary to her profoundly feminist sense of what constitutes a full, diverse fictive world. Girls' relations with parents and siblings are, in Alcott's view, not mere trial runs for later heterosexual commitments; they are intrinsically erotic, interesting, and

powerful. This belief simply in women's reality is Alcott's  
greatest gift to her readers. (Douglas 59)

Self-empowerment, especially for the woman, is a powerful lesson to be taken away  
from Alcott's novel.

## VII. Setting A Mold

Considering its ill-begotten conception, it's hard to imagine Louisa May Alcott  
being able to predict the overall influence that *Little Women* would come to have on  
literature. As Hunt summarizes:

There can be little question that the book challenged a  
sentimentalized and—it might be said—degenerate genre,  
and many critics would argue that since its publication no  
children's novel with a domestic setting or ambience has  
been free of its influence. (*Children's* 189)

In attempting to satirize the traditional "girls' novel," Alcott ultimately succeeded in  
setting a new mold for the beloved Domestic Heroine. With the publication of *Little  
Women* in 1868, the literary tradition of the mentioned archetype slowly and quietly  
began its transition into a new and redefined form of children's literature. And from  
such a transition came the invention of some of the most beloved childhood heroines  
known to date: Sara Crewe, Roberta ("Bobbie"), Anne Shirley, and Wendy Darling.

#### 4. CHILDHOOD IN THE GOLDEN AGE: 1860S-1910S

“The move towards a more child-oriented society was challenged at every stage, and never completed. [...] But evidence is powerful that a change of some magnitude occurred, one which may be summarised as the shift from a prime focus on the spiritual health of the child to a concern for the development of the individual child.” (Cunningham 59)

Much of what came to influence and establish modern children’s literature can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, during the time when both English and American social ideologies were being molded and remolded by the hands of the Free-thinkers, the Romantics, and, finally, the Victorians. The Victorians, themselves, both embraced and combined the philosophies of the Sentimentalists and the Romantics. And, in doing so, they ultimately created a culture that both cherished and glorified the child. Evidence of this shift in society—as previously referenced in the Hugh Cunningham quote at the beginning of this section—began to appear with prominence as early as the 1830s. According to Cunningham (2005):

A romantic sensibility towards childhood dominated the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. It was probably at its height between about 1860 and 1930.

Dickens’s childhood heroes did much to fix in the public mind the idea of a child as both pitiable (*Oliver Twist*), and,

“fresh from God,” as the embodiment of a force of innate goodness which could rescue embittered adults. (69)

By the 1860s, with the publication of such works as *The Water Babies* (1862-63) by Charles Kingsley and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1863) by Lewis Carroll, it was apparent that something new was underway.

## I. Defining the Golden Age

The Golden Age was given its name by scholars in reference to the many classic works of children’s fiction that were produced during the time period—ranging from the middle of the nineteenth-century to the start of World War I. This period, however, was not just a new beginning for children’s literature. This period also saw a shift in societal focus on the child in regard to family, education, politics, and science.

It was also during this time that a tier in the societal hierarchy, the middle-class, came to blossom in both Victorian England and Jacksonian America. Influenced by the Romantics, especially the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the middle-class helped to redefine methods of child-rearing:

The increasing privacy and comfort of upper- and middle-class family life was part and parcel of... [the] focus on the individuality of the child. The community and the extended family lost their role as arbiters of moral issues; their resolution became concentrated within the nuclear core of the family, as the same time did the strongest affections. The love between parents and children, and in particular between child and mother ... now became imbued with a

new intensity as it became secular. And this love could easily be expressed within the design of houses where there were now many more private spaces. (Cunningham 59)

As a result of society putting a profound emphasis on the well-being of children, the Golden Age would, in time, also become known as “the Age of the Child.”

## II. The Golden Child

Beginning with the sentimentalists of the eighteenth-century, the image of the child underwent a gradual reconstruction. Newly unshackled from the punishing perceptions of the Puritan religion, the child lost much of his stereotypical associations with sin and damnation. With the aid of such authors as Charles Dickens—as scholars such as Cunningham pointed out—children came to be seen as small and saintly beings that were often doomed to be exploited, deceived, and/or destroyed by cruel, embittered adults. In response to such a trending view, a cry to protect children and to preserve innocence rose up:

As Eric Hopkins has argued, the last quarter of the nineteenth century represents “the classic period in which childhood was transformed,” in that [the introduction of] compulsory schooling replaced wage-earning as the accepted occupation for children aged five to around twelve or thirteen. ... The significance of the classroom... lay partly in what was coming to be seen as the proper physical segregation of children from adults, and in its demand for “a truly *national* childhood”. ... In addition, “childhood”

was not only to be national, but also natural—unpolluted by any form of precocity. This reflected an evolving attitude towards children... that they should all display innocence, vulnerability, ignorance, and asexuality (as did those in the middle and upper classes—or so it was believed).

(Hendrick 12)

Authors responded to the changing perspective in a couple of different ways. The first involved a revision of the narrative contract between author and child. A difference in tone began to emerge, with most authors striving to sound warm and nurturing rather than cold and judgmental. The element of inclusion within narrative, too, would soon come to expand across the boundaries of a gender:

Under the impact of Romanticism “the child” was no longer thought of as a boy as had been the case with Erasmus and Locke. Childhood was coming to be a special time of life in which gender was no longer stressed as an attribute; rather it was the childlike quality of the child which needed to be preserved. [...] “The child,” wrote Krafft-Ebing, “is of the neuter gender.”... If anything people were more likely to imagine the romantic child as female rather than male, perhaps because the boys in the flesh were never sufficiently socialised into acting in harmony with ideas of nature. (Cunningham 70)

Such an inherited belief, however, did not guarantee an overall sense of fairness to what sort of literature a female child would be given access or encouragement to read.

### III. Gender Segregated Literature

As noted in Chapter 1, the popularity of the Sentimentalist Cult of Domesticity led to further division between the sexes. It became socially acceptable to regard males as belonging to the public sphere and females as inhabiting the private sphere. Additional reinforcement of said norm can be found in the readings that were published for the adolescent audience of the time.

In the brand of literature aimed for them, young boys were encouraged to venture out into the world and conquer unknown territories. British novelists such as G.A. Henty and W.H.G. Kingston were two of the most popular “empire-building” writers of the time—credited with promoting the ideology that it was the duty of a good English-boy to seek out and conquer new lands in the name of the British Empire.

In contrast, adolescent girls were encouraged to read the literature of their mothers and grandmothers. Some scholars believe that the daughters of the Golden Age were permitted to read such sentimental works as those of Fielding, Richardson, Austen, and Brontë. The principal intention was to school girls into believing that their primary goal was to obey their parents, find a husband, and become loving mothers. Such did not mean, however, that a young Victorian or Jacksonian girl would not find herself being drawn to read the popular empire-building books and magazines that her brothers were given. Sometimes, though, she might have felt the need to do it in secret. As the education of the child fell under the jurisdiction of the domestic, the mother was

responsible for ensuring that her charges, especially the girls, did not become influenced by inappropriate sources. Such sources, of course, included literature.

While popular girls' fiction was not known to have included pirates or bloodshed, they did pulse with adventure. If only homebound, imaginative adventure.

#### IV. Bridging the Centuries

The popularity of Alcott's first children's book helped to create a new mold for girls' fiction writers in the mid-nineteenth-century. The descendants of this new Domestic Fiction legacy can be identified by the following three traits, as they are displayed in each book's heroine: imagination, motherhood, and self-empowerment.



## 5. IMAGINATION

Due to the influence of British Romantic Edmund Burke and his belief in the “supremacy of imagination” (Cranston 49), English literature—particularly poetry—from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries began to draw and reflect more imagery from the inner-being. While this inner-being was closely tied in with images of nature, it was also strongly linked to the primitive (i.e. undomesticated) human. In other words, imagination and childhood—with the child being the rawest and unblemished version of humanity—carried strong associations with one another in both the Victorian and Jacksonian cultures.

Imagination, or imaginative play, serves as both a means of self-growth and self-preservation for budding female protagonists in Golden Age children’s literature. Feminine figures often find themselves to be traditionally confined to the walls of the family home. As such, imagination is seen and used by young girls as a means of escaping the confines of restricting, oppressive environments. In their quest for escape, however, many a heroine also discovers a way of coming into her own being; and such often leads to her ascension over the people and world that she originated from.

### I. Sara

France Hodgson Burnett’s novel *A Little Princess* is grounded, in terms of setting, in the world of early twentieth-century London. Its protagonist, Sara, finds herself in a place where she is forced to navigate the harshness and cruelties of grownup society. For Sara, the art of imagining serves as a means of comfort and survival during the years that she lives, first as a student and then a servant, at Miss Minchin’s Seminary for Girls.

Upon arriving at the Seminary, Sara incorporates her imagination as a means of coping with her separation from her father. As a means of doing so, she imagines that her doll Emily has the magical ability to move about and relay messages between herself (Sara) and her father—thus preserving their bond, their connection with each other, over any stretch of distance.

Following the death of her father, and her reduction in financial and social means, Sara finds herself dressed in tattered clothing and living in the Seminary's attic. Along with her fellow servant girl, Becky, Sara imagines that—when she is in the attic—she is a prisoner in the French Bastille. In time, however, such an image begins to shift and Sara begins to see the space as less of a prison and more of a sanctuary from the harshness of her bitter reality: “This initially intolerable space [the attic] Sara transforms with her imagination into an inviting and comfortable semblance of an ideal home...” (Floyd 189). Another form of imagination to surface in the story, the most memorable, is Sara's belief that—whether rich or poor, student or servant—she is a princess. Rather than using it as a means of making herself superior to everyone, Sara's view of herself as a princess is a form of self-imposed morality. By believing herself as a princess, Sara holds herself accountable for her own behavior; thus, she imposes on herself the expectation of upholding the highest forms of ladylike manners and countenances. Over and over again the mentioned form of imagining raised her above the behaviors and actions of such characters as Sara's bratty schoolmate Lavinia and the malicious headmistress Miss Minchen.

## II. Roberta

Edith “E.” Nesbit was an English poet and author, who found fame at the turn-of-

the-century with such works as *The Treasure-Seekers* (1899) and *Five Children and It* (1902). Although she dabbled artistically in a wide range of genres, including ghost stories, Nesbit is best known for her contribution to children's literature. A number of scholars and researches of the particular class of literature credit the authoress with the creation of the modern children's adventure story, in that she brought about the inclusion of such elements as fantasy and time-travel in the genre.

In the years of 1905 to 1906, Nesbit penned, serialized, and published one of her most well-known and best-celebrated children's stories: *The Railway Children*. Centered around three siblings—Roberta (“Bobbie”), Peter, and Phyllis—the story follows the children on their adventures in a small country village built along the railway which runs through it.

The siblings' tale begins, of course, on a happy note: the children live a perfectly uneventful life in a middle-class, English suburb with their mother and father. And then, one day, their father is made to leave them—on a business trip, their mother says. As to the legitimate reason, the reader and children alike are only given fragments of truth through slips of anger and whispers of sadness—made by adults—here and there, throughout the text. In the father's absence, however, the children and their mother pack up their basic possessions and move to a small cottage, far away from everything that they had known before.

Ignorance of the adult matter concerning their father, though, proves a blessing to the three children. Although they feel his absence, each of the children—especially the girls—remain hopeful that their father will return and set matters right. While their mother shuts herself away each day, writing stories as a means of supporting her family,

the children take to exploring their new home and observing the railway. They watch the trains with awe and appreciation, seeing the railroad as a symbolic connection between themselves and their former life. In a short while, the children also come to see the railway as a link between themselves and their father.

In their observations, the children come to know their local railway's schedule by heart. They even give the trains names; their favorite being the 9:15 (A.M.), which they called the "Green Dragon." In one instance, the siblings imagine the train as being a real dragon; or, at least, as a genuine means of transporting their love to their father:

"The Green Dragon's going where Father is," said Phyllis; "if it were a really real dragon, we could stop it and ask it to take our love to Father."

"Dragons don't carry people's love," said Peter; "they'd be above it."

"Yes, they do, if you tame them thoroughly first. They fetch and carry like pet spaniels," said Phyllis, "and feed out of your hand.["]...

"I say," Phyllis suggested, "let's all wave to the Green Dragon as it goes by. If it's a magic dragon, it'll understand and take our loves to Father. And if it isn't, three waves aren't much. We shall never miss them."

(Nesbit 46)

The children, in that instance, give in to their fantasy and wave at the Green Dragon as it passes along the rails. To their surprise, however, a passenger on the train—a man who

comes to be known between them as “the old gentleman”—waves back. In that moment, a special bond is forged between the children and the old gentleman. Every day, the children would return to their spot, overseeing the railway, and wave to the Green Dragon and the old gentleman as they passed by:

And the children, especially the girls, liked to think that perhaps the old gentleman knew Father, and would meet him “in business” wherever that shady retreat might be, and tell him how his three children stood on a rail far away in the green country and waved their love to him every morning, wet or fine. (47)

Their imagination, especially that belonging to the two girls (Roberta and Phyllis), gives them hope. And, in doing so, their imaginations helps them to live through a time in their young lives when so much of what they knew has fallen apart.

### III. Anne

Isn't it splendid to think of all the things there are to find out about? It just makes me feel glad to be alive—it's such an interesting world. It wouldn't be half so interesting if we knew all about everything, would it? There'd be no scope for imagination then, would there?

— Anne Shirley (Montgomery 18-19)

Growing up without her natural parents, and being tossed about from one home to another, Anne crafts for herself such an outrageous, larger-than-life imagination that—at times—a loose grip on reality, on her part, is reasonably suspected. Much like Sara

Crewe, however, Anne's imagination can be seen as a coping mechanism: it is a way for her to find the good and wonder in a world that had only, up to the age of eleven, rejected her over and over again.

It is Anne's ceaseless and outlandish imagination that can be credited with bringing new life to the once small and stuffy town of Avonlea. In her ability to find the magic in the most ordinary and mundane things—those that people pass by without a glance each day—Anne rejuvenates not only the town itself, but also the people who live there, by reawakening the inner child within many an individual.

#### IV. Wendy

Unlike Carroll's Wonderland, Barrie's Neverland is theorized by some literary critics as being strictly an alternate realm rather than a creation of a child's imagination. While it would not be farfetched to claim it as such, it can also be argued that Neverland is both: it operates on both extremes, being an alternative reality and an imaginative creation. Neverland does exist within its own bounds of reality. In the latter statement, there is no room for contradiction. Neverland as it is known, however, is the product of many a child's imaginings. Barrie, in his story, took pains to describe the different "Neverlands" that each of the three Darling children—Wendy, John, and Michael—dream about at night. He, the author, even went as far as to suggest that the reader too has a hand in the architectural creation of the magical island:

Of course the Neverlands vary a good deal... But on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood still in a row you could say of them that they have each other's nose, and so forth. We too have been

there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we  
shall land no more. (Barrie 9)

Wendy, it would appear, imagines herself playing a mother, a domesticated woman, in Neverland long before being recruited by Peter.

When describing Wendy's imagined characteristics of her Neverland, Barrie included the following: "...Wendy [imagined herself living] in a house of leaves deftly sewn together... [and she] had a pet wolf forsaken by its parents" (Barrie 9). Upon her arrival in the magical land, all such past musings are either seen or made into reality. For instance, the Lost Boys build a house around Wendy as she sleeps.

Without the imagination of children, Neverland is an island of unstable construction. Even without a mother, without Wendy, it is hinted by Barrie that Neverland is incomplete. The feminine touch provided by Wendy's imagination gives the island, the overwhelmingly masculine realm of infantile boys, a sense of balance.

#### V. Fitting the Alcott Mold

While imaginative expression was a trending feature in late nineteenth-century literature, a woman of Alcott's time was still being conditioned to live her life in accordance to "the role assigned her within her family" (qtd. in Watters 194). It was, often, only in the realm of her imagination that a young girl—like Jo with her writing—could escape or overcome the injustices thrust upon her (in agreement with Baym's description of a Domestic Heroine).

In the case of orphans Sara and Anne, each girl uses her imagination to prevail over the harshness and cruelty that she faces in the bleakest moments of her childhood. By holding on to the positive and magical visions in their heads, each girl manages to

hold on to her innocence instead of succumbing to the cynicism so often found in the adults in her surrounding environment. Holding tight to one's imagination, and the confidence that it inspires, is one way that each girl—Sara, Anne, and Jo—stands out among her peers.

For Roberta (as well as her younger sister, Phyllis), imagination is a method used to make sense of what has happened in her life: her father's sudden departure, and her mother's unexplained reclusiveness. In the absence of adult truth, the child dreams, along with her sibling, that such an ordinary thing—like the 9:15 train—could actually be a magical creature that can travel beyond the horizon, find her missing father, and bring him home safely. This act is a childlike reflection of a need to cope and understand a situation in the face of so much mystery and confusion. The longing for a return of a father figure, and the dependence on his return to make the family whole once again, also creates a strong link of similarity between Alcott's character Jo and Nesbit's Roberta.

Within this small pool of Domestic Heroines, Wendy is a unique character. As reflected in Barrie's description of Neverland (9), it can be surmised that Wendy's imagination is so strong that she literally contributes to the creation/building of an alternate world; it, of course, being a place where she can be both a child and a mother. Neverland, the land of her imagination, therefore, offers Wendy a temporary escape from reality—from social pressures to forsake childhood and embrace adulthood. In choosing to have this melded dream (to be both child and mother), however, Wendy realizes that she will have to compromise ambition (i.e. motherhood) for make-believe. In the end, like Alice and Jo, Wendy chooses the real world over that of her



imagination. Imagination, in all three instances, also acts as a means of prompting maturation within a character.

## 6. MOTHERHOOD

From the Victorian Era to post-World War I, an expectation remained among the general populace that a young woman's main want and priority should be to become a mother.

The Golden Age has been looked upon and criticized by some scholars as being a timeframe in literary history when authors inserted much nostalgia and sentimentality between the lines of their respective stories; nostalgia and sentimentality, that is, for the familial traditions of old. During the Victorian and Edwardian Eras of British literary history, the father became less and less of a prominent figure in stories; and, more and more, the mother was brought forward to become the incarnate symbol of stability, especially in the life of a child. As such, the archetype of what would become known as the "Good Mother" was born.

Among the Domestic Heroines that surfaced during the Golden Age, the theme of motherhood was often challenged, embraced, or encouraged. Each of the heroines named in this paper has her own interactions and thoughts concerning motherhood.

### I. Sara

Aside from her imagination, Sara Crewe's strongest allies at Miss Minchin's Seminary for Girls proves to be the girls that she not only befriends but mothers over the course of the story.

In the novel, all of the girls—not limited to young Sara—reflect a need for a traditional warm and nurturing motherly figure—the archetypal Good Mother. At Miss Minchin's Seminary, under the roof where the children lived and learned, both residing adult women—Miss Minchin and Miss Amelia—lack the appropriate qualities (i.e.

loving and nurturing characteristics) to be considered adequate motherly figures. As such, for a character such as Lottie, who lost her mother as an infant, the absence of motherly affection drives the child to seek out attention through infantile tactics. Like Lottie, Sara, too, did not know her mother. Her views and behaviors, however, differ from those of her younger classmate. Instead of seeking attention by crying and screaming, Sara attempts to mold herself into what she perceives as the ideal mother—into someone that would have made her own mother proud—and forms an adoptive, surrogate bond with little Lottie.

Critic David Floyd summarizes the relationships of motherhood between the deceased Mrs. Crewe and Sara, as well as Sara and Lottie, in his book *Street Urchins, Sociopaths and Degenerates*:

...Sara regards her dead mother as present in some spectral way, stating, “I am sure she comes out sometimes to see me—though I don’t see her”. It is arguable, this sense of mother’s attentiveness from the grave... that drives Sara, upon seeing that Lottie has no mother, to immediately sympathize with the little girl and proclaim, “I will be your mama” and “We will play that you are my little girl”... As Sara becomes Lottie’s “young adopted mother” and Lottie “her adopted child,” [Sara] establishes a provisional family construction... (183-184)

Surely, the relationship between orphans and mothers is an interesting one that is explored numerous times in Golden Age children’s books. In the case of Burnett’s novel, *A Little Princess*, the presence and ideals of motherhood as acted on and treated by children is as complex as it is revered.

## II. Roberta

Nesbit's characterization of Roberta's mother (known simply as "Mother"), can be seen as a rather revolutionary woman by the modern reader. In the beginning, Mother is described as having the essence of the idealized domestic female:

Mother did not spend all her time in paying dull calls to dull ladies, and sitting dully at home waiting for dull ladies to pay calls to her. She was almost always there, ready to play with the children, and read to them, and help them to do their home-lessons. Besides this she used to write stories for them while they were at school, and read them aloud after tea, and she always made up funny pieces of poetry for their birthdays and for other great occasions... (Nesbit 5-6)

Following the removal of her husband from their lives, Mother moves her children from their home in the city to a cottage in the country; and the matriarch takes on the task of supporting her family as a writer. For hours, she secludes herself in her bedroom and churns out words with the hope that what money she earns from her stories will be enough to feed and shelter her children:

They [the children] soon got used to being without Father, though they did not forget him; and they got used to not going to school, and to seeing very little of Mother, who was now almost all day shut up in her upstairs room writing, writing, writing. She used to come down at teatime

and read aloud the stories she had written. They were  
lovely stories. (Nesbit 35)

While their mother's physical absence is not as extreme as their father's, the distance is enough to encourage feelings of separation—though not necessarily neglect—within the children. As such, the three siblings begin to adopt and adapt to a new life away from their parents.

While she is more or less considered a partner-in-crime by her brother, Roberta soon becomes a mother figure to her sister. While still a child herself, Roberta does well in her new role as a surrogate parent. For example, she begins to model her maternal behaviors—for instance, talking sweetly and comfortingly toward young Phyllis—after their own mother's.

Roberta admires her mother. The latter is more than evident in the instances when the eldest child ponders and studies Mother's mannerisms and expressions from afar. It is due to such reflections and observations that Roberta, and the reader, is able to see through the façade that her mother has tried so hard to create and maintain, to protect the children from the truth. Roberta sees the pain in Mother's actions, and she admires the grown woman all the more for it:

As she [Mother] turned away Roberta saw her face. She  
never forgot it.

“Oh, Mother,” she whispered all to herself as she  
got into bed, “how brave you are! How I love you! Fancy  
being brave enough to laugh when you're feeling like  
*that!*” (Nesbit 19)

While attempting to shelter her siblings, by upholding—instead of poking at—Mother’s façade, Roberta also tries to protect her parent from (additional) pain:

Then she [Mother] was quiet again, and Bobbie [Roberta] kicked Phyllis hard under the table, because Bobbie understood a little bit the thoughts that were making Mother so quiet—the thoughts of the time when Mother was a little girl and was all the world to *her* mother. It seems so easy and natural to run to Mother when one is in trouble. Bobbie understood a little how people do not leave off running to their mothers when they are in trouble even when they are grown up, and she thought she knew a little what it must be to be sad, and have no mother to run to any more. (Nesbit 55)

Not only is Roberta an intuitive young woman, but she is also rather empathetic toward Mother. The girl is, in her own private way, lamenting the psychological distance between herself and her mother. And yet Roberta sees that, at the same time, she and Mother are longing for the safety and comfort of a maternal presence. In such a silent understanding, Roberta actually maintains a stronger connection with her mother than the other children are not able to have.

### III. Anne

Anne Shirley, orphaned at an early age, had little to no experience with adequate motherly figures; at least, such was true prior to her arrival in Avonlea, to the house of elderly siblings Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert. Although Anne does not become a

mother herself by the end of the novel, she does appear to awaken the long-suppressed motherly instincts of the spinster Marilla:

Far up in the shadows, a cheerful light gleamed out through the trees from the kitchen of Green Gables. Anne suddenly came close to Marilla and slipped her hand into the older woman's hard palm.

"It's lovely to be going home and know it's home," she said. "I love Green Gables already, and I never loved any place before. No place ever seemed like home. Oh, Marilla, I'm so happy. I could pray right now and not find it a bit hard."

Something warm and pleasant welled up in Marilla's heart at touch of that thin little hand in her own—a throb of the maternity she had missed, perhaps. Its very unaccustomedness and sweetness disturbed her.

(Montgomery 67)

While the aged spinster does find Anne to be tiresome upon first meeting her, Marilla unwittingly slips into the role of surrogate mother for the young heroine—instilling, more or less patiently, faith and morality in the girl as no one had done so before. In a short while, Marilla becomes attached enough to Anne that she cannot bring herself to send the child back to the orphanage and exchange Anne for a boy:

...[Marilla] glared at Matthew.

"Matthew Cuthbert, it's about time somebody

adopted that child and taught her something. She's next door to a perfect heathen. Will you believe that she never said a prayer in her life till to-night? ... I foresee that I shall have my hands full..." (Montgomery 48)

By the end of the novel, Anne has grown to revere Marilla so much that she rejects a prestigious position as a teacher in order to take care of her adopted mother in her old age. Their relationship by then mirrors that of Ruth and Naomi's (in the *Bible's* "Book of Ruth"). While Marilla encourages Anne to go out into the world and pursue a life away from her and Green Gables, Anne insists that she wants nothing more than to stay and care for the now elderly woman and their beloved home:

"You musn't sell Green Gables," said Anne resolutely.

"Oh, Anne, I wish I didn't have to. But you can see for yourself. I can't stay here alone. I'd go crazy with trouble and loneliness. And my sight would go—I know it would."

"You won't have to stay here alone, Marilla. I'll be with you"...

...["]Oh I have it all planned out, Marilla. And I'll read to you and keep you cheered up. You sha'n't be dull or lonesome. And we'll be real cosy and happy here together, you and I."

Marilla had listened like a woman in a dream.



...[“I’m heart glad over the thought of staying at dear Green Gables. Nobody could love it as you and I do—so we must keep it.”

“You blessed girl!” said Marilla, yielding. “I feel as if you’d given me new life...” (Montgomery 240-241)

#### IV. Wendy

In contrast to Peter, J.M. Barrie’s female protagonist—Wendy Moira Angela Darling—is a child that yearns to grow up. That is, she yearns to grow up and become a mirror image of her own mother, Mrs. Darling. The theme of motherhood is so complex within the realm of Barrie’s story that it is necessary for one to form a basic understanding of Peter before focusing entirely on Wendy and her influence on him.

As an infant, Peter “ran away” from his mother and lived among the fairies in Kensington Gardens, a park in London (Barrie 29). Growing up in the wilds of Neverland, Peter found himself to be incomplete of and in yearning of the mother he abandoned. Flying back to London, Peter finds his mother; but, due to bars on the windows, he is unable to get to her. Seeing that he is not only unwelcome but that he has also been replaced by another child, Peter leaves his mother’s house, brokenhearted. However, Peter’s yearning for motherly affection remains with him; so much so that he occasionally returns to London and peeks through windows, observing the families within each house he comes upon. It is through this act of covetous observation that Peter happens upon the Darling Family’s nursery and overhears the stories being told to the children by Mrs. Darling. Enchanted, Peter returns to the same windowsill over and over again.

And so begins Peter's relationship with Wendy and the rest of the Darling Family.

Playing the role of mother to Peter and the Lost Boys is Wendy's primary reason for flying away to Neverland. Before even receiving such a seductive proposal, in a time when Neverland was still but a magical place in her dreams, Wendy has domestic fantasies of living in a leaf-walled house and nursing an abandoned wolf cub. As a child who grew up in an idyllic Edwardian household, Wendy contrasts greatly with Peter: she carries with her warm and loving experiences and ideas concerning mother and motherhood. It's the children's differing perceptions and imaginings of family that leads to a stabilization of sorts in Neverland, with the girl bringing love and nourishment to a magical place that had, until then, been a boy's juvenile paradise. In time, while playing house with and telling stories to Peter and the Lost Boys, Wendy realizes that she, too, is still but a child; a child still in need of a mother.

By the end of the story, Wendy is able to convince her brothers and the Lost Boys to return to the real world—to the home and London that they left behind. Although she is not able to do the same for Peter, Wendy's motherly influence is so strong that it encourages the flighty boy to return time and time again, for generations to come, to that same window in search of a mother.

## V. Fitting the Alcott Mold

From Alcott to Barrie, the presence of the mother or a mother-like figure plays a fundamental part in the function and/or development of a Domestic Heroine. To understand why it may have been important for each of the characters to play mother or be mothered, one must reflect on the values of the cult of domesticity. At the heart of this particular cult was the importance of relationships; particularly the relationship between

mother and child. For a young woman to *accept* (in a submissive way) that she will grow from child to mother, eventually, was one matter. For a girl to *choose* to evolve from child to mother—willingly accepting domestic responsibilities and relationships—can be read as an act of heroism in itself. Assuming the power and responsibility of choice helps to remove the Heroine from whatever power—social or cultural—that may be preventing her from achieving her domestic goals.

## 7. POWER DYNAMICS

The topic of power for girls, especially self-empowerment, is a strong and recurrent element in turn-of-the-century children's literature. The social and literary elevation of women, as well as children, changed tremendously over the approximate span of two hundred years—from the eighteenth to the twentieth-century. Evolving from the Transgressor to the Persecuted, English and American maidens were reconditioned to believe that they could find power in their victimhood. As social outlooks began to shift further in the middle of the nineteenth-century, young girls learned that they could turn their victimhood into power.

With the cultivation of empowerment in a female character, however, also came about a challenge to that self-actualization. The fundamental or undermining challenge, often enough, is a social one: a societal expectation or an adult figure.

### I. Sara

Following the ruin and death of her father, as the result of a faulty business venture, little Sara Crewe loses all of the financial and social power that she once possessed. With no family to claim her, the newly orphaned child is left at the mercy of the bitter and malicious Miss Minchin. The villainous headmistress of the Seminary quickly strips Sara of her status as a student and reduces her to the role of a servant.

Even as a charity case and a domestic servant, Sara still has the ability to stand tall when compared alongside Miss Minchin. Sara's perception of herself as a princess helps to keep her moral compass pointing north. In her ability to maintain her imagination, as well as her honorable nature, Sara continually manages to overpower (i.e. overcome) Miss Minchin and her treachery.

...I never answer when I can help it. When people are insulting you, there is nothing so good for them as not to say a word—just to look at them and *think*. Miss Minchin turns pale with rage when I do it, Miss Amelia looks frightened, and so do the girls. When you will not fly into a passion people know you are stronger than they are, because you are strong enough to hold in your rage, and they are not, and they say stupid things they wished they hadn't said afterward. There's nothing so strong as rage, except what makes you hold it in—that's stronger. It's a good thing not to answer your enemies. I scarcely ever do.

— Sara Crewe (Burnett 147)

## II. Roberta

With their father away and their mother in seclusion, the three children are essentially left to their own devices. As models of the Golden Child, however, it is important to note that only harmless and good-natured mischief comes about while they are away from the parental eye.

Roberta, as the eldest child, takes it upon herself to adopt the role that was once filled by their mother. Without the father around, however, Roberta's younger brother Peter believes it is his right, rather than responsibility, to assume the position as Man of the House. Such differences in belief, as can be predicted, brings about disagreement and struggle between the two children.

Nesbit makes clear her stance, her perception of rightful power, through her

descriptions of each child's countenances (i.e. behaviors): while Roberta is calm and reasonable, Peter is quick-tempered and unreasonable. He often seems to be starting fights, baiting his sister(s) with name-calling: "Bobbie knows right enough that when I say "silly," it's the same as if I said Bobbie" (Nesbit 16).

Roberta does her best to keep her brother in good humor, often going along with his schemes despite knowing the danger that could come about (i.e. being caught). For instance: in one of the opening chapters of the story, Peter attempts to overcome the combined dilemma of nearly destitute circumstances and a cold house by "coal-mining" (stealing coal) from the railway's coal stack. Eventually, Roberta and Phyllis become involved; and, when Peter is caught, they rush to his rescue. In doing so, they embarrass Peter by revealing they knew what he was doing all along:

[Bobbie said to the station-master] "...It's our fault just as much as Peter's. We helped carry the coal away—and we knew where he got it."

"No, you didn't," said Peter.

"Yes, we did," said Bobbie. "We knew all the time. We only pretended we didn't just to humour you."

Peter's cup was full. He had mined for coal, he had struck coal, he had been caught, and now he learned that his sisters had "humoured" him. (42)

For a child, a boy, embarrassment can be one of the most disempowering experiences. And Roberta, though she does not do so maliciously, will occasionally overpower Peter by deflating his delusions of grandeur.

### III. Anne

Like Sara, Anne Shirley was also an orphan for the majority of her respective story. In contrast, however, Anne had known the hardships of an orphan's life for a great deal longer—nearly since birth. Until the age of eleven, when a misunderstanding brings her to live with the Cuthbert siblings, Anne knew only life as a domestic servant rather than an adopted daughter. Raised primarily in an orphan asylum, Anne's only solace came in the form of her lonely, imaginative mind.

Unlike the heroines mentioned thus far within this chapter, it can be argued that Anne's greatest power comes in the form of her gender. By being a girl, Anne brings about an emotional connection between herself and the Cuthberts that might not have come to fruition had the elderly siblings' original hopes been fulfilled.

When the Cuthberts initially agreed to adopt, the intention was to take in a boy who would be able to help the aging Matthew with the running of Green Gables, the family farm. When Matthew goes to the railway station and finds a girl waiting instead, the emotional connection between the Cuthberts and Anne Shirley begins to form.

In the text, Montgomery describes Matthew as “the shyest man alive... [who] hated to have to go among strangers or to any place where he might have to talk” (8). While his initial encounter with Anne is one riddled with confusion and awkwardness, the young girl and her talkative nature soon eases Matthew into a place of unforeseen comfort:

Matthew, much to his surprise, was enjoying himself  
[listening to Anne talk]. Like most quiet folks, he liked  
talkative people when they were willing to do the talking

themselves and did not expect him to keep up his end of it. But he had never expected to enjoy the society of a little girl. Women were bad enough in all conscience, but little girls were worse. He detested the way they had of sidling past him timidly, with side-wise glances, as if they expected him to gobble them up at a mouthful if they ventured to say a word. This was the Avonlea type of well-bred little girl. But this freckled witch was very different, and although he found it rather difficult for his slower intelligence to keep up with her brisk mental processes he thought that he “kind of liked her chatter.” (Montgomery 19)

As made apparent in the previous excerpt, Matthew Cuthbert did not commonly find comfort in the company and attention of females—of the adolescent or adult variety. It can therefore be inferred that, before Anne, the only other female Matthew showed an attachment to or fondness for was his sister, Marilla. Whether as a result of Marilla’s strong personality or his shy disposition, Matthew does not give the impression of being someone who is assertive in his differences and dealings with his sister. And, in a few instances in the text, such an impression proves true. In the case of Anne, however, Matthew does show a desire to step in and fight for the girl, even if it means putting himself at risk of entering into a conflict with Marilla.

One word in the above excerpt that is both interesting and important to note is “witch.” Some traditions use the label to refer to the outsiders or nonconformists within a



community. Indirectly, Matthew reflects on the primary difference between Anne and the typical, young girl native to Avonlea: she, the young orphan, is not afraid of him. What ugliness the Avonlea girls see, Anne does not: she does not treat Matthew like an oddity, a monstrosity. Being an oddity herself, possibly, makes it easier for Anne to bond with the old farmer.

Anne does bewitch Matthew, in a sense. In the short drive between the train station and Green Gables, he has become so intrigued and enchanted by the orphan's musings and confessions that Matthew finds himself emotionally troubled by the idea of potentially depriving the little girl of a home:

By the time they arrived at the house Matthew was shrinking from the approaching revelation with an energy he did not understand. It was not of Marilla or himself he was thinking or of the trouble this mistake was probably going to make for them, but of the child's disappointment. When he thought of that rapt light being quenched in her eyes he had an uncomfortable feeling that he was going to assist at murdering something—much the same feeling that came over him when he had to kill a lamb or calf or any other innocent little creature. (24)

While Matthew does not forcefully oppose his sister's desire to return the girl and to correct the mistake that had so obviously been made, his passive protest is enough to encourage a sense of reflection in Marilla.

For the Cuthbert spinster, Anne reminds Marilla of the wonder and excitement

she must have felt as a young woman. Reflecting on the Romantics' perception of children, Anne and her unique imaginings help to soften adult Marilla's embittered heart. As made evident in the previous chapter, Anne invokes in Marilla "a throb of the maternity she had missed" (Montgomery 67).

In theory, due to the stereotypical treatment and views of the genders, it is less likely that a boy orphan would have invoked the same feelings of guilt, protectiveness, and love that Anne comes to inspire in the Cuthbert siblings.

#### IV. Wendy

In Barrie's story *Peter and Wendy*, there are at least two interesting sets of power dynamics in play: child-adult, and child-child. The environment of the children's story is not, by tradition, the safest place for adults. The former observation is especially true in the case of Barrie's most well-known and beloved story, *Peter and Wendy*. Neverland, a fantastical world designed by the imagination of many different children, is not meant to be infiltrated by adults. Even in this fantastical utopia, however, there are villains-in-residence: pirates and Indians. Both of the latter, ironically, are adults. While it is suggested that the three parties—the Lost Boys, the redskins, and the pirates—are locked in a continuous loop (i.e. game) of hunt and capture, the biggest conflict between adult and child lies in the power struggle between Captain Hook and Peter Pan.

As Peter is the one responsible for removing Hook's hand and feeding it to a crocodile, it is understandable that pirate would dedicate his existence to seeking out and destroying the flying imp. One person who becomes caught in the rivalry of Peter and Hook is the innocent and naïve Wendy: as she is a fascination of Peter's, so too does she become a fascination of Hook's. In her own way, Wendy also brings about a struggle for

power.

In the child-child dynamic, Wendy and Peter find themselves in conflict with one another over the same role that they both intended her to assume: the mother of Peter and the Lost Boys. While Peter intended for their family to be make-believe, Wendy takes her place in the tribe to heart:

...[He] looked at her uncomfortably, blinking, you know,  
like one not sure whether he was awake or asleep.

“Peter, what is it?”

“I was just thinking,” he said, a little scared. “It is only make-believe, isn’t it; that I am their [the Lost Boys’] father?”

“Oh yes,” Wendy said primly.

“You see,” he continued apologetically, “it would make me seem so old to be their real father.”

“But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.”

“But not really, Wendy?” he asked anxiously.

“Not if you don’t wish it,” she replied; and she distinctly heard his sigh of relief. “Peter,” she asked, trying to speak firmly, “what are your exact feelings to me?”

“Those of a devoted son, Wendy.”

“I thought so,” she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room. (Barrie 92)

Peter stutters and fumbles at the idea of not having complete control over the illusion

that is the make-believe family he has created. Being a parent, a father, is a role for a grown-up; and Peter Pan, who famously promised to never grow up, cannot stomach the idea of assuming the part of an adult. Wendy, however, retains her deep longing to be a mother despite her disappointment in Peter's unwillingness to act fatherly to their "children"—Wendy's younger brothers and the Lost Boys. It is the revelation of Peter's immaturity and unavailability that, ultimately, encourages Wendy to reconsider her stay in Neverland and to return to her London nursery, to grow up.

While Barrie's novel does seem to hoist up a male character as its hero, hardly any of the males are painted in a favorable light. Rather, both boys and men alike (from the father Mr. Daring to youthful Peter Pan to insecure Captain Hook) are depicted as immature. If such is meant to be a reasonable reflection of Edwardian men, it would appear that the author was attempting to—aside from entertain—warn women against becoming "mother-enablers of boyish men" (Kidd 86).

By the end of story, the power balance between Wendy and Peter is restored: each of them is able to have what he or she wants. Peter is allowed to stay young and adventurous, and Wendy grows up to become the mother she once fantasized herself as being.

#### V. Fitting the Alcott Mold

While the sentimental novelists may not have promoted feminist thinking in their writings (Strickland 10), Alcott broke such a tradition by writing *Little Women*. Beginning with Jo, the Domestic Heroine of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century was given a new sense of consciousness: self-actualization. Rather than submitting fully to the will of others, each of the Domestic Heroines identified in this

paper were written as having her own will, logic, and/or ambitions. While often enough this kind of self-empowerment was curbed by the end of the novel—with the (re)appearance of a father or husband figure—the female protagonist is given ample opportunity over the course of the story to develop and express her own sense of personhood, and use it to surpass the jadedness of others and/or the cruelty of circumstance.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Golden Age of children's literature was the beginning of a new era of storytelling. Moving away from the didactic tones of the Puritan doctrines, children found a new and alien sense of warmth and engagement from authors. For the first time, through the written word, children were openly, socially encouraged to take fantastical adventures and to experience sensational wonderments —exercising and indulging their formerly suppressed imagination and autonomy. Children were permitted by adults to read not strictly for reasons of discipline and salvation but rather for enjoyment. The latter is a luxury that many British and American children have inherited and currently indulge in today, more than a century later.

Included within this literary inheritance are several hundred book titles, many of which are still beloved and now classics. For the purposes of this paper, only a handful of such works were identified and studied. The reasons behind such a selective approach, however, are tied to a quality that the five novels share: the distinct presence of a near-forgotten and often-overlooked archetype. This archetype, of course, was the Domestic Heroine: a literary embodiment of the core ideals of femininity, byproducts of the Sentimental Revolution that flourished from the beginning to the middle of the nineteenth-century.

The Sentimental Revolution brought about a social reformation that proved beneficial for both women and children. Inspired by the ideologies of both the Enlightenment Era and the Romantic Movement, the sentimentalists broke away from the self-flagellating Puritan attitudes of the earlier generations. They promoted a reimagining (i.e. a remolding) of romantic and familial bonds alike. In doing so, the sentimentalists

helped bring about the popularity of such revolutionary ideas as marrying for love and protecting children's welfare.

It was the sentimentalists' perceptions and writings regarding domesticity, however, that had the strongest influences on femininity—both in reality and fantasy. The authors of this revolution both acknowledged and reaffirmed the growing economic boundaries between the two realms of society: the public and the private, or the outside world and the domestic world. The growing division between worlds, too, succeeded in influencing further separation of the masculine and the feminine. Specifically, the lives and the roles of both men and women became even more distinct.

While the Age of Sentimentality may be seen by popular society as having ended, it has left an undeniable impression on British and American societies, both in regard to social practices and literary conventions.

Although most nineteenth-century sentimentalists would have denied harboring sympathy for the feminist politics of the time (Strickland 10), the images of women they fashioned helped lead to the creation of some of the most progressive heroines in literature. As acknowledged earlier in this text, two of the greatest sentimental heroines—based on perpetual popularity trends—include Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre.

In the genre of children's literature, one of the most beloved and endearing of the Domestic Heroines is Josephine "Jo" March: the unofficial central heroine in one of Louisa May Alcott's most beloved novels, *Little Women*.

The heritage of the modern and post-modern heroines, especially in children's literature, can be traced back to *Little Women*—to a point in literary history when

Victorian values, as they were reflected in literature, were challenged and changed. Alcott's *Little Women*; Burnett's *A Little Princess*; Nesbit's *The Railway Children*; Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*; and Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*: each of the titles features the archetypal character known as the Domestic Heroine. Aside from possessing the fundamental qualities of the archetype (as described by Nina Baym), each protagonist also bears a similar yet distinctive approach to such elements as imagination, motherhood, and self-empowerment. When viewed from a chronological angle, a reader may notice within each novel pieces of the feminist evolution in both American and British cultures.

Immortalized in the pages of cherished children's stories, if only in the five mentioned in this paper, is a symbol of idealized femininity—in both the sentimentalist and feminist sense. And though she is a product of long past and seemingly irrelevant eras, it can be surmised that the influence of the Domestic Heroine will remain present, significant, and valued in literature for years to come.



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