

About a Girl: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* at 150th Anniversary – Analysing Its Cultural and Literary Impact¹

Shealy, D. (Ed.). (2022). *Little Women at 150*. University Press of Mississippi.

Abstract:

The review article outlines the key issues and themes of the anthology *Little Women at 150*, edited by Daniel Shealy (2022), and describes its structure and contributions. It highlights the extensive introduction, which provides historical context and insights into Louisa May Alcott's approach to *Little Women* (1868–1869). The paper also discusses the novel's relevance in modern times, its cultural impact over the past 150 years, and the various scholarly perspectives presented in this monograph.

Key words:

19th-century literature, American literature, girls' novel, *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, women's writing

* Agnieszka Kocznur – MA, prepares a doctoral dissertation at the Doctoral School of Languages and Literatures at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland) on contemporary Polish girls' novel and young adult fiction; member of the Children's Literature and Culture Research Team at AMU. Contact: agnkoc@amu.edu.pl.

¹ The article was prepared as part of the Polish National Science Centre grant Opus 21 – project no. 2021/41/B/HS2/00876: *Pół wieku polskiej literatury dziecięcej. Twórczość dla dzieci w kręgu władzy i produkcji kulturowej: odbiorca literatury – literatura jako odbiorca* [Half a Century of Children's Literature in Poland. Texts for a Young Audience in the Context of Cultural Production and Power: The Recipient of Literature – Literature as a Recipient].

O dziewczynie. 150 lat *Małych kobietek* Louisy May Alcott – literackie i kulturowe znaczenie powieści

Shealy, D. (red.). (2022). *Little Women at 150*. University Press of Mississippi.

Abstrakt:

Niniejszy artykuł recenzyjny nakreśla kluczowe problemy i tematy antologii *Little Women at 150* [150 lat *Małych kobietek*] pod redakcją Daniela Shealy'ego (2022) oraz opisuje jej strukturę i treść. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono obszernemu wprowadzeniu, które przybliży kontekst historyczny oraz podejście Louisy May Alcott do *Małych kobietek* (1868–1869). W recenzji omówiono znaczenie powieści w czasach współczesnych, jej kulturowy wpływ na przestrzeni 150 lat oraz różne naukowe perspektywy przedstawione w monografii.

Słowa kluczowe:

literatura XIX wieku, literatura amerykańska, powieść dla dziewcząt, *Małe kobiety*, Louisa May Alcott, pisarstwo kobiet

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868–1869) is one of the most famous girls' novels worldwide, and its influence remains unparalleled. The legacy of *Little Women* has expanded Alcott's novel into a cultural phenomenon that continues to be studied, interpreted, adapted and, above all, read by generations. This review article discusses the multiauthored monograph *Little Women at 150*, edited by Daniel Shealy (2022b) and published by the University Press of Mississippi. This volume is the result of a collaborative effort between the editor and eight Alcott scholars, who have spent years researching the author's work and promoting her legacy: John Matteson, Roberta Seelinger Trites, Sandra Harbert Petruionis, Beverly Lyon Clark, Anne K. Phillips, Christine Doyle, Joel Myerson and Gregory Eiselein. The body of research on Louisa May Alcott's life and work is extensive and multifaceted, encompassing biographies (e.g., Matteson, 2008; Reisen, 2009), critical studies (e.g., Eiselein & Phillips, 2001; Clark, 2004), thematic analyses, discussions of illustrations, and numerous comparative studies. The enduring relevance of *Little Women* is further evidenced by recent scholarly discussions within the frameworks of ecocriticism (Tsirakoglou, 2023) and queer studies (Quimby, 2003; Tuck, 2006; Wolverton, 2022), reflecting the continuous interest and evolving perspectives of successive generations of scholars specialising in Golden Age children's literature.

The "Introduction" (Shealy, 2022a) provides detailed historical overview of the first edition of *Little Women* and discusses Louisa May Alcott's approach to her own work. It offers an insightful synthesis of various issues related to

the novel. An analysis in the “Introduction” reveals that Alcott viewed her work with a surprising degree of scepticism, providing a crucial interpretative context for literary scholars. In her letter from October 1868, Alcott (1987) referred to *Little Women* as “the little story” (p. 118) reflecting her perception of it as lesser literature – a view likely influenced by the prestigious literary environment of Concord and Boston where she grew up. Despite the novel’s enduring success, she considered juvenile fiction inferior and, near the end of her life, expressed regret for not having written the more serious novels she had envisioned (Shealy, 2022a, p. 5). Shealy underscores the cultural significance of *Little Women* over the past 150 years, highlighting its influence on prominent figures such as Carson McCullers, Gloria Steinem, Theodore Roosevelt, Patti Smith, J. K. Rowling, and many others (p. 8). By examining how the novel has inspired these individuals, Shealy further demonstrates its enduring and widespread impact on culture and literature. Additionally, he emphasises the novel’s importance within the American literary landscape. The author also reviews the film and television adaptations of the book, noting its significant resonance in popular culture. Furthermore, the “Introduction” provides an overview of various English-language scholarly studies, serving as a guidepost for further in-depth research. Shealy also raises questions that shape our expectations for the book:

What did Louisa May Alcott create that transformed *Little Women*, a novel about an impoverished family, into one of the classic imaginative works of children’s literature? Is *Little Women* still relevant in the twenty-first century? What is the reason for the novel’s enduring popularity? Did Alcott’s earlier fiction influence her most famous work? What was the effect of *Little Women* on readers and writers in other countries? Why does the character of Jo March resonate so much with readers? Does the novel still have important ideas to convey to young readers on the verge of adulthood?” (p. 11).

However, these questions, which could certainly be addressed within the individual essays, do not reflect the primary objective behind the creation of this book. While any monograph aims to function as a cohesive whole, the lack of a clearly defined purpose in the “Introduction” sometimes gives the impression of a random collection of essays. The reasoning behind their arrangement is also unclear, and Shealy does not address this in his section. Therefore, I will discuss them in my own thematic order, grouping them into pairs or threes based on their thematic connections.

The first essay, “Class, Charity, and Coming of Age in *Little Women*” by John Matteson (2022), primarily focuses on interpreting the novel through the lens of

social class. This perspective underlines a harmonious and interdependent social order, reflecting the belief in the inherent value and purpose of every social role within the community. The novel, through its narrative and character interactions, subtly reinforces this ideology by portraying a society where cooperation and shared responsibility are paramount. This echoes the Puritan view of a divinely ordained social hierarchy, one that functions cohesively for the common good and spiritual upliftment (p. 19). Matteson (p. 20) juxtaposes *Little Women's* class consciousness with John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630) and Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). The conclusions of this comparison are laid out clearly: in *Little Women*, Alcott preserves the notion that, while familial bonds are essential, they are insufficient on their own. She emphasises the necessity of forging broader social connections beyond the confines of the immediate household, recognising that a child's upbringing requires the support of a larger community – it takes a village to raise a child. The biographical context from Alcott's life is also introduced, a common theme throughout the essays. The relationship between the March family and the Hummels is presented as a social compact of charity, highlighting the objectification and disempowerment of a poor immigrant family.

It is interesting to note that Matteson's essay is perfectly complemented by the third essay in the monograph, "Faithfulness Itself: The Imperative for Hannah Mullet in *Little Women*" by Sandra Harbert Petrulionis (2022). The author analyses the character of Hannah Mullet, the March family's domestic servant (also from a social class perspective), who has been largely omitted from previous discussions (including by Matteson) and pushed to the margins of the story. The essay begins by describing the moments when Hannah appears in the book and her actions, then examines how this character has been almost entirely overlooked in academic research and portrayed on screen and in illustrations. The reconstruction of existing research on this secondary character is truly impressive, as is the in-depth comparative interpretation of Hannah and Marmee. The author also argues that Hannah is Irish (p. 72), a claim grounded in Alcott's anti-immigrant sentiment towards the Irish. According to Petrulionis:

In contrast to their reformist sensibility on antislavery and women's rights, Alcott and her mother both expressed antipathy toward Irish men and women [...]. For her part, in her private writings, Louisa Alcott disparages the unprincipled "Irish incapables" [...]; in her fiction, she routinely portrays them negatively [...]. In Alcott's adult novel *Work*, the Irish domestic workers appear wholly unfavourably (p. 73–74).

The author analyses the family's actual attitude towards Hannah, examining all the scenes where she either plays a key role or is overlooked, with attention to what is explicitly stated (e.g., in the form of microaggressions) and what is left for the reader to infer. Hannah's labour and dedication allow Marmee to focus on nurturing her daughters, highlighting the essential yet often overlooked role of working-class women in Alcott's novels. Through her in-depth research, Petrulionis has accomplished a title-worthy work, and one can certainly consider her contribution outstanding.

Between these two chapters is an essay seemingly intended to connect them: "Louisa May Alcott's Emersonian Use of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. *Little Women* as Palimpsest" by Roberta Seelinger Trites (2022). The first section of the essay primarily explores Alcott's inspirations, specifically Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and their relationships with Alcott. Trites places particular emphasis on the concept of self-reliance, underscoring its importance in both Emerson's and Alcott's works. The second section provides an analysis of one of Alcott's lesser-known works, her debut novel *Moods* (1864), through the palimpsestic lens of John Bunyan's Puritan text *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), drawing parallels with *Little Women*. The author elucidates how the nine chapter titles in *Little Women* reference incidents or ideas from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Furthermore, the essay explores the expression of transcendental philosophy in Alcott's language and its relevance to the experiences of the women characters in the novel, as well as to Alcott herself. This analysis complements and expands upon previous research on the intertextual connections between these works, such as Caroline Hunt's (2001) entry in *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* (Eiselein & Phillips, 2001).

"Marriage in the Nineteenth Century: The Influence of Margaret Fuller's *The Great Lawsuit on Little Women*" by Christine Doyle (2022) can be read as an essay that complements Trites's work. Doyle initially discusses the personal relationships of Louisa May Alcott and her mother, Abby, with Margaret Fuller, an icon of the women's right movement and a well-known transcendentalist. However, the most significant part of the essay is devoted to interpreting the marriages in *Little Women* through the framework set out in *The Great Lawsuit* (1843): household partnership, intellectual partnership, mutual idolatry, and single women, or the so-called "old maids" (p. 146–157). Doyle defends Jo's marriage to Friedrich Bhaer, which to this day is sometimes read by critics and fans as a controversial submission to Victorian patriarchy (Ninčetiović, 2024), showing how it represents the highest form of equal partnership proposed by Fuller, while also addressing gender issues specific to the 19th century.

The issues surrounding Jo's marital union are further examined in "‘This Was Something Altogether New’: On Jo March's Adulthood and *Little Women's* Final Chapters" by Anne K. Philips (2022). She demonstrates how Jo's development into womanhood and her role as a wife diverge from conventional romantic tropes through a detailed analysis of various scenes from the novel's concluding chapters. As Philips asserts: "While those significant scenes have often been alluded to by scholars, they operate and correspond to one another in ways that have not been previously understood" (p. 122), presenting a bold yet valid claim. The author also engages with Frank T. Merrill's 1880 illustrations, comparing them with Frances Brundage's 1929 drawings (pp. 129–136), which primarily depict the relationship between Jo and Friedrich. Despite potential discrepancies between reader expectations and Alcott's own intentions, a close reading of the novel's final chapters reveals that Jo ultimately receives what she needs, rather than being betrayed by her creator, as the author demonstrates clearly and convincingly.

The illustrations are also discussed in a fascinating essay, "Mobilizing the *Little Women*: Images of Transport and the Domestic," by Beverly Lyon Clark (2022), who explores how illustrators depict the gendering of mobility in the novel, specifically focusing on various forms of transportation as "at least a partial metaphor for social and/or economic independence" (p. 89). Clark examines the work of illustrators of *Little Women*, including Frank Merrill (1880), Elinore Blaisdell (1946), Reisie Lonette (1950), Mark English (1967), Tasha Tudor (1969), and Hodges Soileau (1985). The detailed analysis refers to depictions of boats, trains, carriages, wagons, horses, and bicycles, which are juxtaposed with the illustrators' portrayals of the Marches' house, commonly seen as an emblem of stasis and permanence. The essay concludes with the intriguing observation that illustrators sometimes suggest more nuanced meanings by depicting various forms of mediated mobility, thereby granting the characters a degree of agency and blurring the distinctions between domesticity and mobility (p. 109). This portrayal fosters a sense of movement and transition for both the characters and the audience.

The theme of mobility is also explored in "Louisa May Alcott, Ethel Turner, and Some *Little Women* Down Under" by Joel Myerson (2022), who offers a detailed comparative analysis. This essay juxtaposes Alcott's *Little Women* with Ethel Turner's novel *Seven Little Australians* (1894), an Australian work directly inspired by Alcott's work. Myerson begins with a biographical comparison, highlighting similarities between the characters created by Alcott and Turner (p. 163), before transitioning to a comparative analysis of the two novels. The essay also incorporates colonial and historical contexts, examining

the critical and social receptions of both works. Myerson notes that both were criticised for their language use, and in Alcott's case, for a perceived lack of religious content. The essay provides a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the two novels, addressing their respective controversies and shortcomings. Both authors share similarities in their personal lives and professional paths, writing to gain financial independence and remaining closely involved in the production of their works. While *Little Women* is regarded as the more sophisticated of the two, the novels also diverge significantly in their portrayals of people of colour. African Americans are largely absent from *Little Women*, while Aboriginal Australians in *Seven Little Australians* are marginalised and depicted in a limited, stereotypical manner. Notably, Turner later revised her novel, removing a section concerning Aboriginals, which reflects her evolving sensitivity toward Australia's Indigenous people (p. 175). The analysis ultimately enriches our understanding of the cross-cultural influences between the American and Australian literary landscapes.

The concluding essay of the monograph, "Louisa May Alcott, Major Author: *Little Women* and Beyond" by Gregory Eiselein (2022), presents a compelling argument for the relevance of Alcott's novel in contemporary society. The content is exceptionally well-developed and engaging, with the initial rock'n'roll conclusion being particularly captivating. Eiselein uses *Little Women* as the cornerstone of his analysis, delving into Alcott's contributions across multiple genres and examining shifts in her reputation, especially over the past quarter-century years. The focus on feminist criticism in the late 20th century, as it pertains to the scholarly examination of Alcott's work, aligns with the themes introduced by Shealy (2022a). This article serves as an effective finale, providing a comprehensive closure to the volume.

In conclusion, this monograph offers comprehensive and, at times, exceptionally insightful scholarship, as exemplified by the essay by Petrulionis (2022). It represents a substantial contribution to both comparative literature and literary history, affirming that Alcott's novel remains a significant and enduring work even 150 years after its initial publication. The contributors skilfully bridge historical context with contemporary literary analysis, offering a nuanced exploration of themes such as gender, morality, and social reform. By engaging with Alcott's life and legacy from multiple scholarly angles, the anthology not only celebrates *Little Women* but also invites further discourse on its place in both American and global literary canons. Through a range of perspectives, these essays deepen our understanding of Alcott's influence and the continued relevance of her work. The collection's scholarly rigor and analytical depth also emphasise the novel's profound and lasting impact on literary studies.

References

- Alcott, L. M. (1987). A letter to Mary E. Channing Higginson, 18th October 1868. In J. Myerson, D. Shealy, & M. B. Stern (Eds.), *The selected letters of Louisa May Alcott* (pp. 117–118). Little, Brown.
- Clark, B. L. (Ed.). (2004). *Louisa May Alcott: The contemporary reviews*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, B. L. (2022). Mobilizing the little women: Images of transport and the domestic. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 89–113). University Press of Mississippi.
- Doyle, C. (2022). Marriage in the nineteenth century: The influence of Margaret Fuller's *The Great Lawsuit on Little Women*. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 140–161). University Press of Mississippi.
- Eiselein, G. (2022). Louisa May Alcott, major author: *Little Women* and beyond. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 180–204). University Press of Mississippi.
- Eiselein, G., & Phillips, A. K. (Eds.). (2001). *The Louisa May Alcott encyclopedia*. Greenwood.
- Matteson, J. (2008). *Eden's outcasts: The story of Louisa May Alcott and her father*. W. W. Norton.
- Matteson, J. (2022). Class, charity, and coming of age in *Little Women*. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 18–36). University Press of Mississippi.
- Myerson, J. (2022). Louisa May Alcott, Ethel Turner, and some *Little Women* down under. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 162–179). University Press of Mississippi.
- Ninčetiović, N. V. (2024). Louisa May Alcott's vision of marriage in *Little Women*. *SCIENCE International Journal*, 3(2), 81–87. <https://doi.org/10.35120/science-j0302081n>.
- Petrulionis, S. H. (2022). "Faithfulness itself": The imperative for Hannah Mullet in *Little Women*. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 65–88). University Press of Mississippi.
- Phillips, A. K. (2022). "This was something altogether new": On Jo March's adulthood and *Little Women's* final chapters. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 114–139). University Press of Mississippi.
- Reisen, H. (2009). *Louisa May Alcott: The woman behind Little Women*. Holt.
- Shealy, D. (Ed.). (2005). *Alcott in her own time*. University of Iowa Press.
- Shealy, D. (2022a). Introduction. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 3–17). University Press of Mississippi.
- Shealy, D. (Ed.). (2022b). *Little Women at 150*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Trites, R. S. (2022). Louisa May Alcott's Emersonian use of *The Pilgrim's Progress: Little Women* as palimpsest. In D. Shealy (Ed.), *Little Women at 150* (pp. 37–64). University Press of Mississippi.

- Tsirakoglou, E. (2020). Nature, women, and animals: Louisa May Alcott's environmental imagination. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 22(4), 392–416.
- Tuck, D.-M. (2006). Blurring the boundaries: The sexuality of *Little Women*. *Working With English: Medieval and Modern Language, Literature and Drama*, 2(1), 82–88. University of Nottingham.
- Wolverton, M. (2022). *Transformations: Examining Jo March's transmasculine identity in Little Women*. Showcase of Undergraduate Research and Creative Endeavors. Retrieved December 19, 2024, from https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/source/SOURCE_2022/allpresentationsandperformances/220/.