

7.1 Little Women

The theme of poverty and wealth comes up in a variety of ways throughout *Little Women*. While the underlying theme is constant and it is about the virtue of living in poverty and the corruption of wealth it is not always handled in the same manner. There are many times when the issue comes up in the story, but for many of the times it does come up it is from a different perspective that reinforces this theme. It never is so blatant as to always pronounce the evils of money and the goodness of poverty, but with each instance this perspective is being reinforced. What we see is that this theme has many shades to it but throughout Alcott weaves a story that is constant in its message about poverty and wealth.

We have situations where it is an issue of what other people think of the girls and yet others where it has a direct impact on the March family's ability to meet their own needs. For example, in the very first Chapter when we are introduced to this theme it is when Amy is complaining to her sisters that she suffers more than they do. "I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy, "for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice." (Chapter 1 – page 4) While this is not all about poverty there is the statement about the father not being rich which implies that the other girls at school come from families with money and also implies that Amy's dresses are either old, shabby or both. Amy feels that she has to suffer because her father is not rich. So here we have the first taste that living in poverty is virtuous because Amy has to endure this insult and we also have the hint of an idea that wealth is corrupting because these other school girls are acting so poorly towards Amy.

In Chapter two this theme comes up again as the reader sees that the March family does not go out as others do for entertainment. "Being still too young to go often to the theater, and not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed." (Chapter 2 – page 17) While there is no indictment of money here, the righteousness of poverty is

upheld because the lack of money to go to the theater as often as other families or to hire entertainers for a private performance was the 'mother of invention' and led the girls to figure things out for themselves. We see here that poverty has been a teacher in this situation and in a way helped change them for the better.

These examples do not cover all the different perspectives that we see on this theme. As we are getting introduced to Laurie we get a sense of the pride of the March family and the difference in economic station between them and their neighbors. "The other lion was the fact that they were poor and Laurie rich, for this made them shy of accepting favors which they could not return." (Chapter 6 – page 55) This again reinforces the idea that living in poverty has an inherent virtue; they did not want to accept gifts as charity. They wanted to be an equal in their relationship with their neighbor, not a burden.

Now while the reality of living in poverty is part of the everyday life of the March family sometimes it is a surprise when it comes up. When the story was about a balance between work and play and the girls made the choice of too much play and not enough work there was not even a hint about any differences between poverty and wealth. Yet because poverty colors most everything in the girl's lives Mrs. March has this closing thought in this Chapter eleven. "Then youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty." (Chapter 11 – page 111) What we are seeing confirmed here is that in almost every way the March family has to deal with the fact that they live in poverty and that it impacts just about every aspect of their lives; because of this they need to learn how to rise above it.

The issue of poverty is also subjective because while it is clear that the March family sees themselves as poor they certainly do have the basic necessities of life and indeed they go out of their way to help others less fortunate than themselves. The Hummel family is a case in point. This family is introduced early in the story when Mrs. March asks the girls to give up their Christmas morning breakfast so that it can be given to the Hummels who do not even have enough food to feed themselves. This again shows the March family in a positive light, that even though they live in poverty they are able to think of others and help those less fortunate than themselves.

Yet another variation on this theme of poverty and wealth goes to the idea that money encourages bad behavior. When Meg spends a fortnight with Annie Moffat, whose family has money, she finds that she is pitied "...but in their kindness Meg saw only pity for her poverty, and her heart felt very heavy as she stood by herself, while the others laughed, chattered, and flew about like gauzy butterflies." (Chapter 9 – page 81) Here we see both the insult that Meg has to suffer but also the insufferable behavior of those girls who are not living in poverty. In Chapter 13 when the girls and Laurie talk about their dreams for the future the girls have already learned their lesson about balancing leisure and work, not so Laurie.

"...Well, we have tried not to waste our holiday, but each has had a task and worked at it with a will. The vacation is nearly over, the stints are all done, and we are ever so glad that we didn't dawdle."
"Yes, I should think so." And Laurie thought regretfully of his own idle days.

(Chapter 13 – page 131). Both of these situations are about the faults that come with money, which reinforces the virtue of living in poverty and the corruption of wealth.

While everything that I have referred to has been in part one of *Little Women* this is a theme that carries throughout the book. There are many other examples, but one that sums it up is at the end of the book when Jo March and Mr. Bhaer are the focus of the story. "Everyone greeted him kindly, for Jo's sake at first, but very soon they liked him for his own. They could not help it, for he carried the talisman that opens all hearts, and these simple people warmed to him at once, feeling even the more friendly because he was poor. For poverty enriches those who live above it, and is a sure passport to truly hospitable spirits." (Chapter 43 – page 412) The line "For poverty enriches those who live above it..." is a very good summary of how the March family tried to lead their lives. They knew they were in poverty and they did their best to rise above it and they did this by helping those who were less fortunate than themselves and by not allowing poverty to become an excuse for not achieving, for not striving and for not doing what is right.

I believe Alcott's treatment of this theme is consistent with the conventions of the time. While I do not have an extensive education in American history the theme of poverty and wealth in *Little Women* is consistent with my own view of how America at that time viewed this issue. There is much talk now

about the virtues and high morals of the good old days, how our grandparents and great grandparents were always striving for a higher moral ground. I think it is through the lens of selective memory we look back and relate that striving for high moral ground to our ancestors and regret its' absence in our generation. We remember that this is something they preached and somehow we translate it into something that everyone at that time strived for. Even though prostitutes, drunks and criminals flourished in these times, along with a lot of other undesirable behaviors, such as racism and sexism, we still tend to look back at this time and think that they adhered to a stronger moral code than we do now. So while I believe Alcott's treatment of this theme is consistent with this time I believe that consistency lies in the fact that these were the ideals that people were striving for not necessarily the reality they were living in.

I suspect, and I feel like a cynic for writing this, but one of the reasons that *Little Women* is considered a classic is that there are many adults who really want this lesson to be passed on. Parents want their children to learn this lesson and teachers want their students to learn this lesson. The idea that "poverty enriches those who live above it" is a moral lesson that the older generation wants to pass onto the younger generation and one clever way is through the use of the 'classic.' This is the first time I have read this novel and even though I am a bit of a cynic, about one of the reasons why adults call this a classic, I do think that the younger reader can connect with the themes within it especially the issue of poverty and wealth. This connection may even be more pertinent than it has been in a long time because of the economically hard times we are in right now. Prior to the recent economic downturn nobody in school now, K-12, has experienced anything but the appearance of prosperity. Many more children, unfortunately, are going to experience what it is like to be poor. Will they rise above it? I certainly hope so and perhaps for one or two *Little Women* may provide the inspiration to rise above it.

Another reason this treatment of the theme 'fits' is that it appeals to our societies' sense of independence and self reliance. This is an American cultural phenomenon not a basic human instinct. For example, I would be surprised if this novel is considered a classic in Middle Eastern countries. Even in our time of mutual interdependence we still strongly revere the individual. The person who can make in on their own no assistance needed, who can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This is something that is a

part of our culture so even though our society looks and is much different than Civil War society this theme can still resonate with children today.

There are many things that *Little Women* has to offer the young readers of today. The theme of poverty and wealth is a broader theme that promotes the idea of rising above one's circumstances and promotes the idea of independence and self reliance. That is the big theme, on top of this though there are several other opportunities for young readers to learn. They get a look at history through the telling of a tale, not through a history book. While this book is not historical fiction it does give the reader a look at a segment of society back in the Civil War era.

Another opportunity to learn and also an obstacle are the differences in the use of language. For example, the use of the word promiscuously on page 237 is quite different than its usage today "... red-hot pokers lay about promiscuously." In *Little Women* the use of this word is about the pokers lying about randomly, but young readers today if they knew the meaning for this word would link it to sexuality. Another example of this difference in language usage, that does not need to be explained, is the use of the word gay.

Yet another opportunity to learn but perhaps also is an obstacle is the family relationships that we see; Mothers and children subservient to the Father. A lesson in history perhaps, but also perhaps a barrier to the young reader who is trying to make a connection to one of the characters; a connection that is needed in many instances for the reader to truly enjoy the story.

I do wonder about the passage of time and this story's ability to connect with future generations. While the issue of poverty and wealth is timeless, if it is within a context that no longer resonates with the young reader will they still connect with this theme. Will *Little Women* be described in the future as being a novel 'that was considered a classic in the twentieth and early twenty first century, but if you want something more current then...?'