



## Sentimental Conventions and Self-Protection: *Little Women* and *The Wide, Wide World*

Donna M. Campbell  
State University College at Buffalo

In 1878, as the successful and harassed author of *Little Women* and other "moral tales" for the young, Louisa May Alcott wrote that she had "discovered the secret of winning the ear & touching the heart of the public by simply telling the comic & pathetic incidents of life" (*Letters* 232). As Janet Zehr has shown, however, even a "consummate" professional like Alcott "had to tread a thin line to satisfy" the uneasy trio of "delight, naturalness, and instruction" that readers and critics alike demanded of her work (335).<sup>1</sup> By the time of *Little Women* (1868), Alcott knew better than to trust her audience's ability to read correctly; her readers' misprision of genre and authorial purpose had contributed to the mixed reception of *Moods* (1864), her first novel, and she would take no such chances with *Little Women*.<sup>2</sup> In *Little Women*, just as she provides *Pilgrim's Progress* as a guide for right living,<sup>3</sup> Alcott inscribes into the text a guide for "right reading" when she allows the heroine, Jo March, to spend a summer

afternoon "reading and crying over *The Wide, Wide World*."<sup>4</sup>

Alcott's method in *Little Women* is both to evoke and to transcend the broad outlines of what Susan K. Harris calls "the dominant novelistic subgenre of the 1850s and 1860s, the novel type that Brown called 'sentimental,' Baym 'women's,' and Kelley 'domestic,'" a type that Harris herself terms "exploratory" (*19th-Century* 20). In the forty years since Edward Wagenknecht concluded that "*Little Women* itself accepts the limitations of the domestic sentimentalists and imposes charm and common sense upon them" (89), scholars of women's fiction have challenged this somewhat narrow judgment; as Judith Fetterley remarks in another context, the novel instead "survives by subversion" (371). Specifically, Alcott situates herself as a resisting writer challenging the canon and tenets of sentimental fiction, participating in the strategies of subversion that it calls forth even as she struggles to transcend its limitations. Although critics from Wagenknecht to Fet-

terley have noted the sentimental novel tradition alluded to in *Little Women*, what has gone generally unrecognized is the extent to which Alcott relies on Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), "the Ur-text of the nineteenth-century United States" (Tompkins, *Afterword* 585), as a single exemplary novel within this tradition. She indemnifies her work against misreading by evoking Warner's work as a strong, specific, and parallel subtext to the story of Jo March. An examination of the two texts serves to demonstrate not only Alcott's close borrowings from the earlier work but also the ways in which such evocations protect the text from her readers' misinterpretation and possible rejection.

The conventions of sentimental fiction, exemplified by Warner's work and subverted by Alcott's, focus upon a heroine who embodies one of two "types of moral exemplar: the angel . . . and the practical woman" (Reynolds 342), types that sometimes exist in "counterpoint" within the same work (Baym 36). The "practical" young heroine struggles for self-mastery, confronting "the pain of learning to conquer her own passions" (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* 172) as she attempts to balance society's demands for self-denial with her own desire for autonomy. The process of her development requires that she first endure injustices at the hands of an "[abuser] of power," often a cruel aunt, before establishing a "network of surrogate kin" to provide solace and right guidance (Baym 37-38). Part of the right guidance advocated by conduct books and sentimental novels alike included the opportunity for a "rounded, fully developed liberal education with which to realize . . . feminine obliga-

tions" (Cogan 74). According to advice books such as the Reverend Daniel Wise's *The Young Lady's Counsellor* (1851), proper education conferred two qualities of paramount importance: first, "a reasonable and Christian self-reliance" (137) consisting of "mental strength, firmness, courage, industry, perseverance, and skill in some art or profession" (150); and second, the ability to evaluate potential suitors. A suitor's wealth was not an essential element in this decision, but his piety was, along with a "cultivated intellect," self-denial, energy, industry, and benevolence (Wise 244-45).<sup>5</sup> In short, sentimental conventions offered a map for the imaginative journey toward the possibility of control—not over life, a manifestly impossible task, but over the self and its responses to life's vicissitudes.

In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen Montgomery, the heroine, follows this pattern. Separated from her parents when her beloved mother falls ill with consumption, Ellen goes to live with Miss Fortune Emerson, a crotchety aunt whose lack of sympathy and affection drives Ellen to find a substitute family in Alice, John, and the Reverend Mr. Humphreys. After many hardships, including the death of her mother, the death of Alice, and an unwelcome term of residence in Scotland, Ellen returns to "spend her life with the friends and guardians she best loved."<sup>6</sup> The novel basically tells the story of her education, a "training narrative" or "American Protestant *bildungsroman*" (*Sensational Designs* 176, 184) in Jane Tompkins's terms, the process of which is twofold: not only does she learn to survive in the world in a practical way, gaining from her taskmistress aunt experience in the necessary household

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arts, but she also learns to survive in a Christian, Calvinist sense. Her religious education aids her from a practical standpoint as well, for in learning to compromise or submit in smaller matters she becomes able to survive in the adult world, a world seen by Warner as characterized by often unreasonable demands.

In *Little Women*, Alcott echoes Warner's themes rather more than her situations, softening the harsh particulars of Ellen's plight to reflect the "simple facts" of "every day life" that comprise Jo's story (*Letters* 118). At first glance there would appear to be few reasons for Jo March to identify with Ellen. Jo is part of a happy family, and during the course of the book is neither subjected to sudden poverty nor orphaned. Unlike Ellen, Jo is not a victim of the rather capricious whims of the adults around her. She is well into her teens as the novel begins, and for this reason, too, can fend for herself in a way that the child Ellen cannot. Nor must Jo live up to the saintlike standards of perfection held up to Ellen; throughout *Little Women* the ideal is not that one be a "double-distilled saint" (139) but that each character be as good as humanly possible. It is perhaps this sort of modified condition as well as the more casual, jaunty tone that mark *Little Women* so obviously as a "girls' book" rather than as "woman's fiction," just as *The Wide, Wide World* is clearly the reverse.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite these differences, the sentimental conventions that ensure Jo and Ellen's moral education through the ministrations of the crotchety aunt, the gentle "sister," and, finally, the male mentor/guardian remain strikingly similar in both.

Both *Little Women* and *The Wide, Wide World* deal with their protagonists' moral education. Ellen and Jo suffer from the same basic flaw in the opening chapters of these novels: both are cursed with a strong streak of independence and an unmanageable temper, traits that within the context of sentimental fiction signal a true heroine ripe for moral education, just as excessive docility and otherwise perfect behavior often mark a character as too good to live. One major difference between the characters is that Ellen's temper clearly derives from the Calvinist doctrine of man's natural depravity, whereas Jo's is plainly an individual exuberance. In a curious way, however, Alcott condemns Jo's temper much more harshly than Warner condemns Ellen's. Despite Ellen's eventual education into the art of compromise, Warner justifies her early lapses by her provocations. Tormented in many ways, as when Miss Fortune cruelly withholds her mother's letters, Ellen injures only herself by her expressions of temper; readers in turn tend less to condemn Ellen's outbursts than to sympathize with their causes. Jo's temper, on the other hand, causes harm to others as well as to herself. When Jo and Laurie go skating, Jo, angry at Amy's destruction of her manuscript, fails to warn her sister of the thin ice on the river; after Amy falls through the ice and nearly drowns, Jo bewails her "dreadful temper" to her mother (75). Her provocation—which, like Ellen's, involves being forcibly deprived of a handwritten, emotionally significant text—yields a nearly disastrous result, in what Fetterley calls the novel's "pattern of maximum possible consequences for a

minimal degree of self-absorption and selfishness" (381).

In another difference that runs throughout the experiences of the two characters, Ellen's punishment for her excitable temper generally comes from her superiors, while Jo's own conscience torments her for her lapses. This shift perhaps reflects the trend identified by Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture*, a movement away from the Calvinist doctrine of judgment by God to the more humanized emphasis on individual judgment according to one's own conscience. More directly, perhaps, it derives both from the controls Jo has internalized because of her greater age and from the family-directed self-criticism that Bronson Alcott encouraged as part of his educational experiments. As Madelon Bedell comments in *The Alcotts*, "What Alcott did was simply to transpose... external threats into internal ones. In place of the concrete devil, Satan, he created a more subtle and abstract, but equally powerful being: guilt" (79). In *Little Women*, the net effect of internalizing such prescriptive social norms is to force a more complex conflict upon Jo herself. She must first learn to control her temper as Ellen does, because God and society expect it, a situation that posits an external locus of control;<sup>8</sup> further, she must actually learn to war against and ultimately obliterate the rebellious part of her character, the portion from which springs not only her bad temper but also her writerly imagination. In *Little Women's* emotional economy, both temper and imagination exist as equally volatile by-products of Jo's personality. They require careful manage-

ment, a task initially accomplished through the family's elaborate signifying system of defensive objects, such as the prickly horsehair pillow placed flat across the sofa to denote Jo's bad moods (300) and the "Genius burns!" cap and red bow (246) to ward off those who would interrupt her writing. Ultimately, however, both temper and imagination must undergo a permanent diversion into approved channels lest they explode into anger, injuring Amy and the rest of her family; or into the writing of thrillers, injuring Jo's moral character (320) and that of the community at large.<sup>9</sup>

Helping to effect this moral education are the heroines' crotchety aunts, in each of whom is combined the absolute authority, petty cruelty, and exacting standards of a wicked stepmother.<sup>10</sup> Although Jo does not live with Aunt March, a marginally less irascible character than Ellen's Miss Fortune, both Jo and Ellen learn patience through their attempts to placate the older women. The two heroines become exasperated at the tasks, sometimes necessary but often niggling, that the older women impose upon them; as part of their preparation for the Christian lives they will lead, they learn not to call their time, or their lives, their own. Quite literally it is Jo's job to please Aunt March, for she is Aunt March's companion, answering that lady's "perpetual 'Josy-phine'" (37) and reading the boring but morally instructive Belsham's essays aloud by the hour. In a similar way, Ellen's jobs, like churning butter until her arms ache, prepare her to take her place in the household and to manage Miss Fortune, both actually and metaphorically. Each protagonist must

go beyond her sympathetic, protective mother and learn to function in a world of women who, if they possess a mother's power, fail to possess a mother's capacity for nurturance.

What in part saves Jo and Ellen is their involvement with women who are nurturing but not, in the worldly sense, powerful: their gentle "sisters." Although they are unrelated by blood, Alice Humphreys refers to Ellen as her "little sister" (274) and exercises much the same kind of restraining influence that Beth March does over her "big, harum-scarum sister" Jo (39). In each case, the relationship between the sisters forms a study in contrasts as the fiery-tempered sister is tamed by the more compliant one.

Both Beth and Alice teach patience through example, and their roles as their respective families' housekeepers emphasize this. In each book, housework, as a practical embodiment of continual and selfless service to others, provides important moral and physical training for Jo and Ellen. Beth and Alice take this work seriously despite the presence of servants in each home: Beth shops and cleans in order to free her mother for nursing and charity work, and Alice, the oldest and most accomplished housekeeper of the four characters, cleans her father's study and cooks. The point is less that actual work be performed than that the figuration of domesticity be understood, ritually enacted, and preserved. Domestic ritual functions on several levels, production among them; and what Alice really produces in the obviously emblematic display of her "large, well-appointed, and spotlessly neat kitchen" (167) is herself as a domestic woman. Self-mastery, how-

ever, must precede mastery over domestic space. As Nancy Armstrong notes in "The Rise of the Domestic Woman," in conduct books promoting the domestic ideal, "self-regulation became a form of labor superior to labor. Self-regulation alone gave a woman authority over the field of domestic objects and personnel where her supervision constituted a form of value in its own right . . ." (120). Appropriating for her "work" the space between the unseen depths of Margery's "lower kitchen" and the class-bound sanctuary of the parlor, Alice establishes both domestic space and the persona of her domestic self as an orderly, inclusive, and community-enhancing common ground, a fitting place for Ellen to serve her apprenticeship.

Once the "Angel in the House"<sup>11</sup> has subdued and prepared her successor, her novelistic function has ended; thus as Jo and Ellen come to understand their place in the home and in society, each of their gentle sisters goes into a consumptive decline. After living through scarlet fever, Beth never quite recovers, and in classic nineteenth-century fashion, she grows more and more ethereal as she wastes away. Also dying of consumption, Alice, like Beth, wastes away before the eyes of her sister Ellen. The fiery-tempered sisters recognize this process. Just as it comes to Jo "more bitterly than ever that Beth [is] slowly drifting away from her" (341), so the thought occurs to Ellen that "Alice was very thin . . . [and] the bright spots of color on Alice's cheeks were just like what her mother's cheeks used to wear in her last illness" (427). This recognition marks in each heroine a greater trend toward selflessness and away from self-absorption. The dying sisters are themselves already

selfless—indeed, their early deaths confirm their goodness, their unearthly spirituality. Beth will not let the knowledge of her impending death "trouble anyone" (341), and Alice is "not sorry [to die], except for others" (429). In both cases the gentle sister's calmness reveals a lofty spiritual passivity in strong contrast to the heroine's energetic, untamed egotism.

The recognition of the gentle sister's impending death marks the penultimate stage in the heroine's moral transformation. When they recognize the impending deaths of their gentle sisters, both Jo and Ellen become first distressed, then resigned, and a new type of selflessness accompanies their resignation. After the death of the gentle sister, the fiery-tempered sister attempts to make the loss more tolerable for the rest of the family, including the mostly absent ministerial father who presides over each household. As they have learned to do, Jo and Ellen find refuge in domesticity, their duties taking on sacerdotal significance as they preserve the household shrine. Ellen takes over Alice's duties, including the cleaning of the study, which causes the servant Margery to exclaim that "that blessed child was the light of the house" (460). Similarly, Jo's assumption of Beth's household tasks causes Hannah, the Marches' servant, to say to her approvingly, "you thoughtful creter, you're determined we shan't miss that dear lamb ef you can help it" (397). Assuming the household tasks that they had so disliked demonstrates Jo's and Ellen's selflessness, their submission to a womanly role that each had earlier refused to assume—Jo by her boyish ways, and Ellen by her childish behavior. Alcott emphasizes the signifi-

cance of this process earlier in the novel by making it the subject of one of Mr. March's few speeches. When he returns from the hospital, he praises the girls' growth into womanhood, taking particular pains to note Jo's continuing transformation from "wild girl" to "strong, helpful, tender-hearted woman" (205). Although John Crowley sees Alcott as presenting "no essential difference between female children and adults" in that "girls are little women . . . circumscribed by the woman's sphere and governed by its civilizing codes" (388), clearly both Jo and Ellen have undergone a significant process of growth from girlhood to "little" womanhood.

To attain "full" rather than "little" womanhood, the heroine of the sentimental novel must, if possible, marry well; specifically, genre conventions dictate that she marry a guardian of her morals as well as her person, often a "dominating man" (Harris, "But is it any good?" 44). It is at this point that Alcott initially tries to distance herself most strongly from the traditions of the sentimental novel. The first book of *Little Women* not only reveals no such mentor for Jo as John Humphreys is for Ellen, but Alcott actually tantalized her readers by presenting young, handsome, impetuous Laurie as a possible (and, in sentimental terms, probably unsuitable) mate for Jo.<sup>12</sup> In attempting to make her heroine transcend the inevitable, however, Alcott had not reckoned with the power of her audience, which demanded that she provide Jo with a husband. Bowing before the inevitable clamor to marry off her heroine, Alcott yet retained one bit of independence: in order to disappoint the "young gossips who vowed that

Laurie & Jo *should* marry," she wrote to Alfred Whitman in 1869, she had "written [a sequel] which will make you laugh, especially the pairing off part" (*Letters* 120). Writing to Elizabeth Powell shortly before the sequel was published, Alcott explained more fully:

A sequel will be out early in April, & like all sequels will probably disappoint or disgust most readers, for publishers wont let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me. "Jo" should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didnt dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect. (*Letters* 125; punctuation Alcott's)

Alcott's glee at outfoxing her readers, her eagerness at the prospect of a good fight, suggests a ruffled and unrepentant Jo at her most contrary. She surely succeeded in frustrating her readers: the debate still continues over whether, as Madelon Bedell suggests, Jo "betray[s] herself, the reader, and the bright promise she showed at the beginning of the legend" (Introduction 147), or whether she blossoms, becoming, in Nina Auerbach's term, "a cosmic mother—the greatest power available in her domestic world" (136).

The ending of *Little Women*, however, is less radical than Alcott's comments would indicate, unless one assumes the tantalizing but unlikely

position that Alcott, with all that talk of the "funny" ending, intended Friedrich Bhaer as a sort of parody. It is more probable that in creating Professor Bhaer, whom Sarah Elbert describes as a "transformed, lovable Bronson [Alcott]" (165), Alcott dutifully provides as her heroine's husband a fatherly mentor from whom she somewhat maliciously removes every trace of sex appeal. In fact, she again follows the dictates of the sentimental novel, for Bhaer fulfills a function in the plot similar to that of Warner's John Humphreys, although the latter is younger, more priggish, and far more controlling than Jo's Professor. Each man is specifically identified in some ways as the steadfast guardian of the heroine's spiritual life. The "higher style of kindness . . . [and] authority" (538) with which John Humphreys keeps Ellen on the right path corresponds in part to the "defense of religion with all the eloquence of truth" (324) with which Mr. Bhaer prevents Jo from being disillusioned by a philosophical discussion of Kant and Hegel. As a practical embodiment of this moral guardianship, the mentors channel the heroines' potentially disruptive impulses into approved modes of feminine art: early in the novel, John helps Ellen avoid playing games on Sunday by introducing her to the useful accomplishment of sketching, just as Mr. Bhaer converts Jo from writing thrillers to writing moral tales.

In addition to creating a fatherly mentor, by summoning Professor Bhaer to be Jo's husband Alcott follows not only the plot conventions of sentimental novels but one of the genre's darker undercurrents as well: the disturbingly

incestuous relationship that occurs between the heroine and her mentor/guardian. Glenn Hendler has argued that the intimations of incest are inherent in the form itself: "Sentimental novels' use of familial rhetoric risks incestuous implications in part because sympathy implies that family ties can be voluntary, based on affective, not biological or conventional bonds" (690). The risk of "incestuous implications" serves in effect to distract from the greater, more subversive threat to the family: the possibility that sentimental heroines may choose families for themselves and thus reject traditional means of patriarchal control. Hendler believes this pattern occurs in *The Wide, Wide World* when "Ellen ultimately marries John Humphreys—the man she has insisted on calling her brother—in a match that can only be described as quasi-incestuous, as they have lived together like siblings since Ellen was quite young" (688). Alfred Habegger reads the incestuous pairing in the sentimental novel somewhat differently:

It is not the "brother" the heroine grows up to marry but the "father." In *The Wide, Wide World* . . . the orphan-heroine falls in love with her husband-to-be at a time when he is already a grown man and she is still a little girl; and not only that, but man and girl reside for a time in the same household, where he is clearly the person in authority and she is a dependent and insignificant-feeling child. (18)

The theme of "the precocious girl and her middle-aged lover" was, according to Habegger, "everywhere in nineteenth-century novels by women"

(64).<sup>13</sup> As Madelon Bedell suggests, it was certainly everywhere in Alcott's writing: "Many of her writings are concerned with the repeated theme of a romance between a child-woman and an older man; the latter often a guardian, an uncle or an older friend; in short a displaced father" (*The Alcotts* 241–42). By "doubling" this convention when she splits the brother/father figure of a John Humphreys into two characters (Jo's "brother," the sexually appealing Laurie, and the man Jo identifies as her father's friend, Professor Bhaer), Alcott deprives it of its emotional efficacy.

As a "happy ending" that disappointed almost everyone, the marriage of Jo and Friedrich Bhaer thus becomes in one sense Alcott's triumph. Having disappointed her readers by refusing to sanctify her heroine's "quasi-incestuous" relationship with brother Laurie as they had expected, Alcott fulfills the letter of her contract with them by offering instead the relationship with kindly "Papa Bhaer" (Fetterley 382), whose egalitarian principles cannot compensate for his lack of dominance, of that controlled and controlling personality that perversely constitutes sex appeal in the sentimental novel. In rewriting the form while abiding by its major principles, Alcott creates an expectation, in effect makes a fictional promise to her readers, that her last-minute adherence to the rules of the genre cannot satisfy. She technically keeps the promise of the sentimental novel, but by depriving the match of its romantic power, she subverts the intent of the form's conventions. The subdued Jo/Alcott may have learned the trick of writing, indeed using moral tales for her own purposes, but by frustrating her readers with the

"funny" ending, the rebellious Jo/Alcott emerges victorious.

As a method of self-protection within *Little Women*, then, *The Wide, Wide World* transmutes itself into a set of genre-linked embedded codes whose cultural resonance reflects the eighteen years' worth of sentimental fiction published between Warner's book and Alcott's. With due regard for her younger readership, Alcott softens these conventions when the need arises: the threat posed by unmediated contact between woman's sphere and a male commercial world, for example, is signified in *The Wide, Wide World* by the sexually menacing Mr. Saunders, whose rudeness early in the book escalates later into physically detaining Ellen and abusing her horse.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, *Little Women* renders this encounter in a much less threatening manner in Jo's meeting with the abrupt and unmanly editor Mr. Dashwood of the *Daily Volcano*. Despite such alterations, the enduring presence of the genre allowed Alcott to appropriate, to comment upon, and ultimately to subvert certain sentimental conventions: the overall narrative of the heroine's struggle for self-mastery, the stock characters of sister, aunt, and mentor/guardian, and the formulaic marriage (implicit in *The Wide, Wide World*) with its problematic issues of incestuous overtones, autonomy, submission, and control.

To invoke the protection of sentimental conventions after the genre's moment has passed, however, confers risks as well; familiarity with conventions breeds readers' contempt as well as their acceptance. Hence while preserving its underlying types and themes, Alcott abandons sentimental fiction's

characteristic high seriousness and formal language, anticipating readers' objections by undercutting her characters' sermons and their verbal pretentiousness alike with a gentle, self-mocking humor that never descends to the negation of irony. What further distinguishes *Little Women* from the sentimental model Alcott conscientiously evokes is that she has exposed what she considered to be its limitations in the most direct way possible: through the thoroughly engaged yet frustrated responses of her audience. She manages to have it both ways: by inscribing *The Wide, Wide World* into the text, she can confidently evoke a properly sympathetic reading according to genre-based conventions; but by calling attention to the genre's limitations through her technical fulfillment of them, she successfully resists closure and distances her own fiction from the rest.

### Notes

1. Among those who address Alcott's professional approach to her work are David Reynolds and Charles Strickland. The latter argues that, with "consummate" professionalism, Alcott "kept firmly in mind the character of her audience as she wrote, and each type of literature—literary, juvenile, and sensational—reflected an aspect of her family experience. Each also projected a different image of young womanhood" (58).

2. *Moods* was published on 25 December 1864, and Alcott's journal entries for late 1864 and early 1865 reflect both an early pride in her creation and her fear lest it be misunderstood. "Glad but not proud" at the end of 1864 that the book went rapidly into a second edition and was causing "a little stir" (*Journals* 133, 134), Alcott begins to register some misgivings about its reception in January 1865: "[T]hrough people didn't understand my ideas owing to my shortening the book so much, the notices were mostly favorable & gave quite as much praise as was good for me" (138; punctuation and spelling here and in all subsequent references is Alcott's). By May, she frankly complains that "English people

don't understand 'Transcendental Literature'" and vows that her "next book shall have no *ideas* in it, only facts & the people shall be as ordinary as possible, then critics will say its all right" (140). Her 1865 entry in "Notes and Memoranda," the book in which she kept a summary of the year's events and earnings, completes Alcott's chronicle of disillusionment over the reception of *Moods*: "Notices of my book in all directions & much talk about it. It was spoilt by shortening. I shall know better another time & criticism will do me good" (146). Alcott's resolve to "know better another time" and her transition from the euphoria of receiving "as much praise as was good for me" to the sober acceptance of "criticism [that] will do me good" suggest that this was a cautionary experience for her.

3. With its narrative structure of the lone pilgrim's journey through temptations and false choices to an ultimate reward, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* plays an important role in both *The Wide, Wide World* and *Little Women*. After John Humphreys reads the story to Ellen Montgomery, he sends her an annotated copy that she treasures even after her Scottish guardian Mr. Lindsay confiscates it in one of the many tests of her faith. Ellen finds much comfort in the book and resolves to "try to be a good pilgrim" (360). As children, the March girls "play Pilgrim's Progress" (10) before receiving their copies as Marmee's Christmas gift; like Ellen, as they begin to assume adult responsibilities they commit themselves to re-enacting Christian's journey on a symbolic instead of a fantasy level. According to Elaine Showalter, Alcott's plan for the novel "incorporated both patriarchal and matriarchal traditions: the allegory of *Pilgrim's Progress* and the theatrical melodrama of 'The Witch's Curse'" (51).

4. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: New American Library, 1983), p. 103. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

5. Baym, Reynolds, and Cogan all assert that the plot of the heroine marrying the "saved" male, as happens in Augusta Evans's *St. Elmo*, is much less common than that of the heroine marrying the more solid male who already meets her qualifications, all of which involved character rather than wealth. Indeed, according to both Frances Cogan and Barbara Welter, whose argument in "The Cult of True Womanhood" Cogan systematically refutes, advice writers inveighed against marrying for money. Jo and Ellen implicitly face that choice, Jo through Laurie's proposal and Ellen through the suitors she might meet in the fashionable Lindsay

household. Alcott refers again to this tradition by establishing that Amy, true to her mother's teaching, rejects the much richer Fred Vaughan before marrying Laurie.

6. Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World: A Novel* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), p. 523. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

7. Nina Baym observes that "Alcott . . . presided over the waning days of woman's fiction, when it permuted into children's literature" (23).

8. In "*The Lamplighter, The Wide, Wide World, and Hope Leslie*: Reconsidering the Recipes for Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels," Erica Bauermeister takes exception to Jane Tompkins's reading of Ellen's submission and self-conquest: "Ellen's submission to John is usually just that, submission. . . . While there are times when obedience to John means self-control . . . her dependence upon John for this spiritual interpretation, as well as her willingness to agree to all his wishes, emphasize submission far more than self-conquest" (21). These two perspectives are not necessarily incompatible: according to the novel's domestic ideology, Ellen must first be taught that her anger is unacceptable before she can begin to ask for help in controlling it. Under the tutelage of first Alice and then John Humphreys, she learns to substitute self-control as a defense strategy for the morally unacceptable (and pragmatically useless) self-justification that she employs early in the story. Alice tries to show Ellen that submission to others is the first step toward the will's triumph over the rebellious self.

9. For a more extensive discussion of Jo's anger, see Greta Gaard's "Self-Denial Was All The Fashion': Repressing Anger in *Little Women*." Drawing upon Judith Fetterley's analysis of the contradictions embodied in *Little Women* in "*Little Women*: Alcott's Civil War," Gaard reads the novel as "a 'civil war' between the overt messages of little womanhood and the covert messages of anger and resistance" (17).

10. Nina Baym notes that the heroine's role in woman's fiction "is precisely analogous to the unrecognized or undervalued youths of fairy tales who perform dazzling exploits and win a place for themselves in the land of happy endings" (12). Baym, Tompkins, and Harris all note some parallels between fairy-tale elements and the sentimental novel. Both *The Wide, Wide World* and *Little Women* contain a number of these fairy-tale elements: the "undervalued youth," the triumph over the wicked stepmother, the death of the faithful spiritual

mentor/companion, and the tantalizing promise of ultimate marriage to a worthy prince or princess. In the unpublished final chapter of *The Wide, Wide World*, Warner keeps her promise by showering Ellen with good fortune: marriage to John, a "castle" complete with her own room and morally instructive art, and "a certain concealed drawer, well lined with gold and silver pieces and bank bills" (582).

11. Alcott refers to her sister Elizabeth, the prototype of Beth, by this term; in an 1858 letter to Eliza Wells, she writes, "We shall go to our new home soon where she can be more truly what we often called her 'Our Angel in the House'" (*Letters* 33). The phrase appears as the title of Coventry Patmore's popular long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854).

12. Before she wrote the sequel *Good Wives* (1869), Alcott ended *Little Women* with the same romantic ambiguity that Warner employed in *The Wide, Wide World*. Despite Warner's hint that the "third thing John wanted" of Ellen is marriage, *The Wide, Wide World* discloses only that Ellen returns to "the friends and guardians she best loved" (569). In a similarly suspenseful way, Alcott concludes *Little Women* with a family tableau in which Laurie, leaning on the back of Jo's chair, "nodded at her in the long glass which reflected them both" (217), an ending suggesting the possibility of marriage between Jo and Laurie.

Although Alcott could not have been aware of it, the unpublished final chapter of *The Wide, Wide World* presents an interesting contrast with the final chapters of Book Two of *Little Women*. After their marriage, John assigns Ellen a completely outfitted room that caters to "the luxury of the mind" (575), an action that reveals both his measured generosity and his proprietorship. By contrast, instead of being confined within a predetermined space, and, metaphorically, a fixed social role, as Ellen is, Jo literally "owns" Plumfield and her own future, an ownership that she uses to create the rough-and-tumble Eden, complete with apple tree, of the final chapter.

13. Henry James alludes to this pairing in his review of *Moods*, where he takes Alcott to task for her "ignorance of human nature" and her stock depiction of one such character: "Mr. Adam Warwick is one of our oldest and most inveterate foes. He is the inevitable *cavaliere servente* of the precocious little girl; the laconical, satirical, dogmatical lover, of about thirty five, with the 'brown mane,' the quiet smile, the 'masterful soul,' and the 'commanding eye.' Do not all novel-readers remember a figure, a

hundred figures, analogous to this? Can they not, one of his properties being given,—the 'quiet smile' for instance—reconstruct the whole monstrous shape?" (70). Lacking equally in the humor and wickedness that make Warwick interesting, John Humphreys shares his physical features and his taste for dominance.

14. G. M. Goshgarian discusses the sexual menace of Mr. Saunders in *To Kiss the Chastening Rod: Domestic Fiction and Sexual Ideology in the American Renaissance* (1992).

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