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UNCONVENTIONAL RELIGION OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

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Abstract. Starting from the observation that faith is an important aspect of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–1869), we offer evidence that this novel is a vivid illustration of the author's version of American Protestantism, which takes the middle course between Puritanism and more progressive views of Christianity such as Unitarianism. The Alcottian version of religion as reflected in *Little Women* is closest to Horace Bushnell's view of Christian nurture presented in the book of the same name (1847), specifically, its emphasis on the parental role in instilling Christian virtues in children. The paper particularly focuses on the gradual conversion of the March sisters into better Christians, which occurs under the tutelage of their mother.

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Introduction

In the antebellum period, the novel became the most popular genre in the United States, dethroning the previously dominant literary forms—the sermon and the religious tract (Jackson, 2009, p. 128). On the one hand, this resulted in a more informal preaching style, since ministers were aware that “they had to compete with novels for the public’s attention” (Reynolds, 1988, p. 15). On the other hand, secular literature was increasingly incorporating religious themes and imagery. Historian Daniel Walker Howe claims that nineteenth-century literature “was saturated with religious meanings and motivations” (2007, p. 3). As Reynolds explains, this resulted in narrowing the gap between religion and popular literature to the proportions hardly conceivable in the earlier days of orthodox Protestantism (1988, p. 16). Gradually, popular literature, fiction by and about women in particular, became a legitimate substitute for the pulpit. Women, whose pious nature and religious influence were generally acknowledged,³ were often denied the possibility to preach. Therefore, fiction was a potentially influential alternative for spreading the religious convictions of women writers. Considering the fact that popular religious genres were becoming less rigid, the shift from a dogmatic to an imaginative use of religious texts and metaphors in secular literature was a natural course of things. This trend is exemplified by Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868–1869), which is loosely based upon John Bunyan’s religious allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678/1684). The intertextual link between the two texts is conspicuous, as reflected by the incorporation of the motif of pilgrimage and Bunyan’s imagery into the plot of *Little Women*. For example, the motif of spiritual quest is introduced in the very opening pages of Alcott’s novel, and numerous chapters are named after the characters and well-known places from Bunyan’s allegory, such as Apollyon, Faithful, Palace Beautiful, Valley of Humiliation, and Vanity Fair. Even though nineteenth-century readers were familiar with Bunyan’s work, authors had to

³ See Mary McCartin Wearn’s edited collection *Nineteenth-Century American Women Write Religion: Lived Theologies and Literature* (2016).

“adapt [it], creatively transform it, and place it into contexts of their own time and place” (Waters, 1994, p. 153). This adaptation, as Waters observes, in Alcott’s case entails transferring the quest motif from the sacred to the secular domain of the home. Despite the transposition of pilgrimage into the secular sphere, this paper argues that domestic experience as presented in *Little Women* offers the possibility for spiritual development, since the household is the place of religious formation of believers.

The novel’s vision of religion may be an unconventional one, but faith certainly constitutes an important aspect of life in the fictional world of *Little Women*. The members of the March family do believe in God, as they rely on him in times of crisis and illness. The readers and critics should not be confused by the fact that the Marches do not attend church. Their spiritual formation occurs at home under the watchful eye of their mother. Moreover, their faith is revealed by their good deeds, not by their words. This is perfectly consistent with the contemporary trend in America, which faced great turmoil and changes. Since the state decided to stop financially supporting the church in the first half of the nineteenth century, this resulted in the establishment of numerous sects and creeds. Consequently, people had more freedom to explore their faith. One should not overlook the fact that *Little Women* was published at the beginning of the Gilded Age,⁴ a period of intense industrial development in the second half of the nineteenth century, during which America became the richest country in the world. Having in mind that this era has become notorious for placing material values on a pedestal, it should not come as a surprise that the family was increasingly viewed as a sacred institution whose solid values should “serve as a moral counterweight to a materialistic and individualistic society” (Strickland, 1985, p. 5). Therefore, the relaxation of the strict Puritan precepts and the fact that initiation into the faith took place at home rather than in church—as reflected in the novel—should not be interpreted as evidence of a weakening of the influence of religion in mid-nineteenth-century American society. Rather, the fact that the spiritual education of the March children takes place at home attests to the contemporary shift in American society, a shift whose main consequence was that “the home was [now] more important than the church in the preservation of religious values” (Strickland, 1985, p. 8).

The Loosening of the Rigid Puritan Legacy

The plot of *Little Women* is set in New England, a state whose majority of inhabitants were descendants of the Puritans. According to the original Puritan

⁴ The period was named after Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873).

creed, human nature is depraved, and the possibility of an afterlife is predestined. Believers passively wait for an indication of God's grace, which is a sign that they are among the elect. The environment is seen as hostile, and God as "stern and distant" (Ronda, 2015, p. 62). The crucial event is the conversion experience, which is conceived as the rebirth of the soul resulting from its encounter with God's grace.

The shift towards loosening the rigid dogma of the Puritans took place during the first half of the nineteenth century, which roughly corresponds to the period known as the Second Great Awakening. As a result of this religious revival, the number of the faithful increased significantly. Believers were no longer expected to passively "wait for the grace of God but were encouraged to make a personal decision for Christ" (Howe, 2007, p. 172). Therefore, whereas original Puritanism denied the existence of an individual's will, now the believer's volition was acknowledged. Another important legacy of the revival was ministers' message that salvation was available to all who accepted God as their saviour, not just to a select few. In addition, as McCartin Wearn observes, the faithful were prompted to "move [their] spiritual commitment from the passive to the active mode" (2016, p. 4). In other words, while Puritanism in its original form preached that salvation could not be the result of the believer's good works during his lifetime, the faithful now hoped for salvation as a reward for a moral life and good deeds. Moreover, the image of God corresponded more to that of "a loving father" (Taves, 1987, p. 205) than to a stern and distant figure. Faith became more Jesus-focused, less dogmatic, and it took on an affective character.

As the number of the young willing to convert was unsatisfactory and Protestant ministers were increasingly influenced by the developments in rational thought, an orthodox conversion was challenged by Horace Bushnell's Christian nurture, a model of upbringing which adopted the position that children were not innately sinful but were morally undeveloped. More precisely, Bushnell preached that each person was born with a certain combination of virtues and faults. Therefore, in every child, there are both good and evil seeds. According to Bushnell, Christian life may be summarised as "the combat of the good with the evil" in a believer's soul (1910, p. 16). Whether good or evil wins in that battle depends, above all, on effective spiritual education, which is a kind of training of the Christian's will and character to recognise and choose good. In view of Christian nurture, the role of parents in inculcating Christian virtues is pivotal to the religious and moral upbringing of children. Dedicated parents carefully monitor and direct the acquisition of experience that leads to the proper formation of character. It is precisely on this model of spiritual edification that the character formation of the March sisters is based.

The Alcottian Religion

As Marchalonis notices in her essay on *Little Women*, “the religious framework of the novel is Christianity” (1999, p. 268). More precisely, *Little Women* takes the middle ground between Puritanism and more liberal versions of Christianity such as Unitarianism. The novel’s religious vision most closely resembles Horace Bushnell’s model of Christian nurture, presented in the book of the same name first published in 1847. As for the influence of orthodox Protestantism, *Little Women* espouses the Puritan belief that the command of life and death lies in God’s hands. This is attested by the example of Beth’s illness. As Beth’s health condition deteriorates, Jo puts her trust in God: “I don’t think she will die; she’s so good, and we all love her so much, I don’t believe God will take her away yet” (Alcott, 2008, p. 204). Although Hannah and the doctor wholeheartedly care about Beth and do their best to help her, with the sisters tirelessly over her bed, the narrator suggests that “the Divine arm ... alone could help her in her trouble” (Alcott, 2008, p. 203). Apart from the unshakable faith in God’s sovereignty, some of the main characteristics of the Puritan denomination are self-control, diligence, and frugality, all endorsed in *Little Women*’s version of religion.

However, the shift in religion that occurred in mid-nineteenth-century America is reflected and conspicuous in Alcott’s novel, specifically, ministers’ message that salvation is available to all and that human nature is not depraved. Hence, what the novel espouses is a progressive form of Puritanism, one which rejects some of the chief postulates of its original dogma, such as “*sola Scriptura*” (“Bible alone”) and the view of human nature as inclined towards evil. Significantly, the Bible is rarely mentioned in *Little Women*. Given the fact that the March sisters’ guidebook for Christian life is a literary text, not Scripture, Ronda argues that the fictional world of Alcott’s novel is secular (2015, p. 62). Admittedly, the Bible is somewhat marginalised in the novel, as evidenced by Scripture being only one of the books on Professor Bhaer’s bookshelf. However, this does not mean that *Little Women* relinquishes religion. Rather, equating the Bible with the literary classics testifies to the influence of the “Unitarian affirmation of knowledge, inner divine enlightenment through education, and the ability of literature to affect moral change in the individual” (Tippin, 2015, p. 133). In other words, *Little Women* suggests that literature may be equally, if not more, effective in conveying moral lessons and implanting Christian values in readers, especially the younger ones.

Furthermore, the image of God in *Little Women* is that of a loving parent. In moments of spiritual crisis, Marmee reminds Jo of God’s fatherly figure:

“... the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome them all, if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father. ... The more you love and trust him, the nearer you will feel to him, and the less you will depend on human

power and wisdom. His love or care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the lifelong source of peace, happiness, and strength.” (Alcott, 2008, p. 94)

Marmee’s belief in God’s omnipotence is clearly indicated by her claim that all distress and adversity can be overcome with God’s help. However, God is not only omnipotent but also tender and loving. Therefore, the faithful should not live in fear of his wrath but strive to feel his enveloping and all-pervading love. Mrs March suggests that feeling God’s love should give believers the strength to face trials and tribulations. Marmee’s vision of “Heavenly Father” reflects the changes in the perception of God which took place during the revival, specifically, the shift from an authoritarian God towards an affective one.

Moreover, conversion and confession are modified in *Little Women*. Instead of the traditional “once-and-for-all” conversion experience, the March sisters are urged to undergo a slow and complex process of steady growth. The girls are not delineated either as inherently sinful or as perfectly moral. To be sure, each of them has a flaw which must be mastered and overcome, but they also possess many virtues. Whereas Beth and Meg are docile, gentle, and pious, Jo and Amy are energetic and creative. Their innate combination of virtues and flaws is portrayed as their potential which may go either way, towards betterment as much as deterioration. In portraying the March sisters as neither innately sinful nor inherently divine, Alcott adopts Bushnell’s view of the child’s nature as possessing the “seeds” of both good and evil.

On their path of spiritual development, the March sisters have assistance in the form of Bunyan’s allegory, which deals with the temptations of Christians. At the beginning of his journey, Christian is a sinner, just like everyone else. By identifying with him, the March sisters are helped on their spiritual journey, as they attempt to develop their willpower and master their flaws. To reach the final destination, Christian must struggle with various enemies, which stand for his flaws. In a similar vein, the sisters are encouraged to strive towards self-knowledge, which is the first and crucial part of their gradual conversion into better versions of themselves. Specifically, in order to become a better Christian, Jo learns to control her stormy temper, Meg overcomes her vanity and materialistic aspirations, Amy conquers her selfishness, and Beth attempts to transcend her excessive timidity.

As Marmee claims, nearly every individual has a flaw (a burden). Their faults are treated as something quite natural, whereas Beth’s lack of burden is dangerous. As Sherman aptly observes, the novel suggests that desires are pretty normal, even desirable, whereas “the lack of desire makes Beth ultimately a martyr and a disembodied saint” (2013, p. 22). Her death is an overtone of Christ’s death and may be interpreted as a difficult but necessary sacrifice that will have a positive effect on the spiritual conversion of the sisters in the long term. According to Alcott’s version of faith, Beth is spiritually perfect in all respects

except one—her (in)ability to prove that she has truly adopted her mother's spiritual values by showing a willingness to separate from her. As Bushnell asserts, despite the connection between child and parent being organic, children prove their spiritual maturity by gradually separating from their parents (1910, p. 27), gaining the strength of will to continue their spiritual path independently. Not having overcome her extreme shyness, Beth spiritually remains at the level of a child. Spiritual development, as reflected in *Little Women*, does not take place in isolation but in an intricate tangle of family, friendship, and emotional relationships. In Alcott's novel, contact with others is a kind of mirror in which an individual's qualities, both good and bad, are best reflected. For example, Jo's conversation with her mother after Amy's near-drowning is the occasion when she opens up fully to Marmee and gains insight into her troubled nature more clearly than ever. It is this moment that marks the true turning point in Jo's development as her resolve to control her anger is solidified. Hence, the Alcottian version of conversion is not the result of divine action, but "a human and social process" (Sherman, 2013, p. 5). As evidenced by Marmee's case of forty years of struggle to control her anger, conversion is transformed into a lifelong battle with one's flaws, which is in accordance with Bushnell's vision. Struggle with evil, which is in the believer himself, has its ups and downs: "The growth of Christian virtue is no ... mere onward movement. It involves ... a fall and a rescue" (Bushnell, 1910, p. 23). During this lifelong struggle, occasional moral relapses are permitted; however, what is important is the believer's desire to be good and the commitment to stay on the path of spiritual growth.

On their journey of spiritual progress, the sisters are offered the help of their exemplary and self-sacrificing mother. This is in line with Bushnell's hypothesis that parents are crucial agents of Christian nurture, since they can instil Christian virtues in children before they grasp the meaning of the doctrine. To pass on those virtues, parents should become "a living epistle of gospel" (Bushnell, 1910, p. 22), so that a child may adopt a Christian character as embodied in the parent's "looks, manners, and ways of life." Significantly, Marmee is an embodiment of Christian values, specifically, of self-sacrifice, benevolence, patience, and temperance. At first, the March sisters' guide seems unrealistically moral and endowed with virtues. However, as the novel proceeds, the reader learns that Marmee also has flaws, which makes her a more human religious guide, and a more realistic and likeable character. With her assistance, the daughters are encouraged to confront and subdue their passions, their "bosom enemies," which enables them to realise their potential and grow towards maturity. Metaphorically, Marmee is an extended hand of God, a kind of guardian angel on earth, whose omnipresence and extraordinary dedication to her children greatly facilitate their spiritual and moral development. In the open and understanding relationship she establishes with her daughters, she acts as a confessor, a confidant, even a peer who treats them as her equals, always offering them advice and opinion but never forcing

them to do anything. For example, after allowing Sallie Gardiner to transform her into a flirtatious, champagne-drinking doll, Meg feels the need to confide in her beloved Marmee. On the other hand, Mrs March considers “the love, respect, and confidence of my children the sweetest reward I could receive” (Alcott, 2008, p. 93), and uses Meg’s trust to strengthen the mother-daughter bond and to convey her lessons in a subtle and unobtrusive way. Her assistance implies that the spiritual journey is anything but easy and that the faithful need help in the form of a more mature and experienced believer. An indisputable proof of a believer’s spiritual maturity is the transformation from the comforted to the comforter. After Beth’s death, which is a heavy blow to the whole family, Jo experiences this kind of transformation. The death of Beth and the moment Marmee leaves her daughters to care for her bedridden husband are the only moments in the novel when Marmee shows weakness and when she, not her daughters, needs support and help. The fact that Jo, at least temporarily, abandons her artistic dreams to be with her parents in the most difficult moments of their lives should not be interpreted as a sign of her yielding to the prevailing discourses of patriarchal society but as unequivocal evidence of her spiritual vigilance and fortitude.

In addition, Marmee teaches children not to be ashamed of their modest material possibilities but to bear poverty with dignity. However, following Marmee’s example is not simple for her daughters, Meg and Amy in particular, who are fond of luxury. At the beginning of the novel, Meg is portrayed as the most vocal in expressing her displeasure with her modest means as she remembers the days of abundance in the March family. While Marmee and Jo value labour as a means of economic independence, Meg is not at all satisfied with having to work as a governess: “I shall have to moil and toil all my days, with only little bits of fun now and then, and get old and ugly and sour, because I’m poor, and can’t enjoy my life as other girls do. It’s a shame” (Alcott, 2008, p. 44). On the other hand, Amy talks openly about her plans to marry into wealth and thus provide herself with a comfortable life while also helping her family. However, all the sisters gradually adopt their mother’s values. Their maturation is greatly aided by Beth’s untimely death, whose loss creates an emotional void that proves that relationships with loved ones represent a real wealth that no luxury can replace. Hence, even though Meg and Amy’s spiritual growth occurs within the confines of the home, it still reflects the path of Bunyan’s Christian—namely, they are also metaphorically “travelling from the City of Man to the City of God” (Jackson, 2009, p. 105). Similarly to Christian, Meg and Amy are initially dazzled by the glitter of wealth but recognise with time the inability of material things to bring lasting peace and happiness, unlike honest love.

The attitude towards money and wealth, which Marmee succeeds in passing on to her daughters, attests to her interpretation of the Puritan creed, which is pragmatic. Marmee claims that “money is a good and useful thing” (Alcott, 2008, p. 224) if wisely used. Emphasising that money is necessary, she does not deny

the material reality but underlines that money must be managed wisely, that is, sparingly and rationally. The March girls are taught from a young age to get by with the modest means at their disposal, to share, and to help each other. While as girls the March sisters are occasionally prone to selfishness with outbursts of mutual bigotry, under Marmee's spiritual tutelage they gradually build a female community based on Christian virtues, namely, on "sharing, mutual support, self-sacrifice and generosity" (Foster & Simons, 1995, p. 102). In addition, Amy and Jo, who both initially aim for fortune and fame, become rich only when they prove that money is not their goal, but that they are ready and willing to use their wealth for the greater good. For example, when Jo is rewarded for her story in the form of a check for a hundred dollars, she is convinced that the secret of her success is the desire to use the fruits of her labour to help her family, Beth in particular: "I never get on when I think of myself alone, so it will help me to work for you" (Alcott, 2008, p. 295).

Little Women, clearly, does not "preach a specific dogma"; it "simply took for granted common understandings about religion" (Marchalonis, 1999, p. 268). To put it differently, the essence of faith as reflected in the novel is not in a strict adherence to the precepts of a particular denomination, but in striving towards goodness, which is a universal characteristic of the faithful. Hence, the Alcottian version of religion is pluralist and genuinely democratic. For example, although most of the characters are Protestants, Aunt March's maid, Esther, who practises Catholicism, offers Amy help in moments of spiritual crisis, when she is away from home and separated from her mother by force of circumstance. This specific example is at odds with the prevailing anti-Catholic attitude in mid-nineteenth-century America, provoked by Americans' fears fuelled by the mass immigration of Catholics from Europe. Although Protestant, Amy accepts Esther's much-needed assistance. Significantly, Marmee *approves* of such interdenominational cooperation, which testifies to Alcott's impulse towards "a tolerance for diverse religious views" (Eiselein, 2016, p. 124), of course, on the condition that the faithful *practise* what they preach. Therefore, in Alcott's fictional world, faith is taken extremely seriously, but it is evidenced in practice, not in theory. The embodiment of generosity and charity is Marmee, who in the days of scarcity caused by the war and her husband's business recklessness does not think about the comfort of her family but finds the time and will to help those who live in extremely inhumane conditions. Even on Christmas morning, Mrs March does community service: "Some poor creeter come a-beggin', and your poor ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never *was* such a woman for givin' away vittles' and drink, clothes and firin'" (Alcott, 2008, p. 23). While the children look forward to Christmas as an occasion for celebration and feasting, she convinces them that instead of indulging themselves, they should give their breakfast to the Hummels, an immigrant family with many children. Whereas the instances when Marmee instructs her daughters to turn

their attention to those less privileged than themselves are often interpreted as lessons in female self-denial, they can also be cited as testimonies of Christian charity (one of the seven heavenly virtues), a virtue more than a necessity in the difficult times of the Civil War.

Hence, what is important in Alcott's fictional world is not one's word but a concrete good deed, that is, turning faith into action. Instead of a priest, the characters who are marked as spiritual guides in the novel are parents: Mr March, who serves as a chaplain in the army, and Mrs March, who is responsible for the religious and moral education of her daughters. Significantly, whereas Mr March's function is official, his character is somewhat marginalised and left aside. The father of the family is away in war for most of the first part of the novel. Even when he returns, he is not a dominating presence but rather a shadowy one, described by the narrator as "a quiet, studious man," who is "busy with his books and the small parish" (Alcott, 2008, p. 261), in contrast with Marmee's all-enveloping figure. The novel suggests that the spiritual formation of characters that takes place at home is more important than the work of priests and chaplains because, in the long run, it determines the spiritual vigilance and morale of the family, the basic unit and backbone of society. Taking into consideration the fact that the religious and moral education of children at the time was almost exclusively *the mother's responsibility*, it is rather natural that Marmee takes on the role of her children's spiritual guide. Therefore, even though Alcott's God is male, the novel's vision of religion focuses on God's female earthly ministers—mothers. The key role of Marmee in instilling spiritual values in her children supports the claim that the religious role of women, although not institutional, was essential in Victorian America (McCartin Wearn, 2016, p. 5).

Indeed, having in mind that *Little Women* deals with the spiritual formation of female characters, Showalter's assertion that Alcott "revised Bunyan's model of pilgrimage to explore female experience" (1991, p. 51) sounds convincing. Whereas Bunyan's Christian is a male character who travels to the Celestial City with his four sons, Alcott depicts the spiritual journey of a woman and her four daughters. Even though critics such as Foster and Simons claim that "the male text offers no easy solutions for female adaptation" (1995, p. 92), this paper argues that the novel suggests that the female domestic experience, like the male Christian journey, provides an opportunity for spiritual growth and progress. The novel implies that the female spiritual contribution is twofold. First, the love of Christ is embodied in female characters, and they change the world with the power of their love and care. In creating a close bond of affection with her daughters, Marmee teaches them to feel right. The power of her affective influence is significant, as evidenced by the example when Meg, who craves luxury, feels instinctively that the values promoted by the Moffett family stand in sharp contrast to the values promoted and lived by her mother. Second, feeling right is not enough—the March sisters are prompted to act according to their feelings. Hence, Meg decides to accept the

marriage proposal of an impoverished man, regardless of the likely exemption from her aunt's will. Similarly, Amy comes to realise that she cannot bring herself to enter into a mercenary marriage. Although the youngest March sister initially believes that she can learn to love wealthy Fred Vaughn, she eventually sees that feelings cannot be easily controlled and abandons her original plan to marry for convenience. In addition, the March sisters not only mature spiritually but also become active "promoters" of Christian values, who help other sinners on their spiritual journey. They use the power of their affections to help others in their spiritual uplift. For example, Amy harshly criticises Laurie to shake him out of the laziness, self-pity, and rut he has fallen into after Jo rejected his marriage proposal. Amy risks losing Laurie's favour by openly showing her disdain for him. However, the arguments for her sharp rebuke are quite convincing: "With every chance of being good, useful, and happy, you are faulty, lazy, and miserable" (Alcott, 2008, p. 440). Amy's transformation from an egocentric and materialistic girl into a young woman who marries for love, *assists prosperous artists of modest means*, and positively influences the spiritual development of her dearest ones with the power of her emotions, confirms Laurie's assertion that Amy has proven "true to her mother's teaching" (Alcott, 2008, p. 491), specifically, Marmee's Christian nurture.

Conclusion

Starting from the observation that faith is an important aspect of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, this paper offers evidence that this novel is a vivid illustration of the author's version of American Protestantism, which takes the middle course between Puritanism and more progressive views of Christianity such as Unitarianism. The Alcottian version of religion as reflected in *Little Women* is closest to Horace Bushnell's view of Christian nurture. The religious education of the March sisters occurs within the household framework—this is in line with the shift in religion which took place in antebellum America, when the home became a legitimate substitute for the church in the spiritual formation of children. The paper argues that the influence of the Puritan legacy on the religious vision of the novel is undeniable. *Little Women* reflects the Puritan belief in the sovereignty of God and espouses Puritan values such as self-control, diligence, and frugality. However, the novel also testifies to the revision of the rigid Puritan creed. The image of God as reflected in the novel is not that of a strict and distant ruler of human destinies but of a caring parental figure. Moreover, the novel endorses Bushnell's belief that the child's nature is not innately depraved but rather morally undeveloped. Children are depicted as beings that are born with a certain potential, which, depending on the upbringing, can go in two directions, towards moral progress as much as towards regression. Influenced by Bushnell's vision of Christian nurture, Alcott delineates parents as central figures with a decisive influence on the proper spiritual and moral formation of a person.

The most obvious example of the loosening of the staunch Puritan legacy is the modified nature of conversion and confession in *Little Women*. Instead of the traditional “once-and-for-all” conversion experience, whose nature is divine, the March sisters are urged to undergo a slow and complex process of steady growth, which is of human and social character. This process is delineated as lifelong struggle with one’s flaws, which requires the assistance of a more mature and experienced believer—a parent, a mother in particular. Even though the novel overtly aligns God with the male parent, its plot focuses on the religious role of the female earthly ministers—mothers. Marmee is, metaphorically, an extended hand of God, a kind of guardian angel on earth, whose omnipresence and extraordinary dedication to her children greatly facilitate their spiritual and moral development. In the open and understanding relationship Marmee establishes with her daughters, she acts as their confessor and confidant. Under her tutelage, the sisters learn how to overcome their faults and live their faith. This implies doing good deeds and giving priority to emotional relations over material goods. Through their mother’s love, which is the embodiment of God’s love, the March sisters learn how to be good Christians—charitable, diligent, humble, and patient.

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Неконвенционална религија *Малих жена* Луизе Меј Олкот

Резиме

Полазећи од запажања да је вера важан аспект романа *Мале жене* (1868–1869) Луизе Меј Олкот, овај рад нуди доказ да овај роман представља живописну илустрацију ауторкине верзије америчког протестантизма, која је негде између пуританизма и прогресивнијих варијанти хришћанства попут унитаризма. Религијска визија романа најсличнија је концепту хришћанског васпитања Хораса Бушнела, представљеног у истоименој књизи, нарочито у нагласку на улози родитеља у усађивању хришћанских врлина код деце. Рад се посебно усредсређује на постепени преображај сестара Марч у боље хришћанке, који се догађа под туторством њихове мајке.

Кључне речи: *Мале жене*; религија; Луиза Меј Олкот; хришћанско васпитање; *Ходочасничко иштовање*.



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