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Beneath the Umbrellas of Benevolent Men: Validation of the Middle-Class Woman in "Little Women" and "Five Little Peppers and How They Grew"

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BENEATH THE UMBRELLAS OF BENEVOLENT MEN:
VALIDATION OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN IN
LITTLE WOMEN AND FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS AND HOW THEY GREW

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

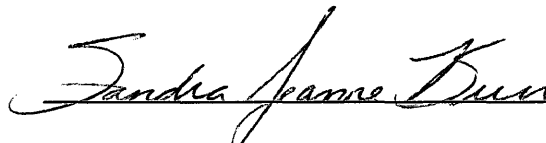
Sandra Jeanne Burr

1991


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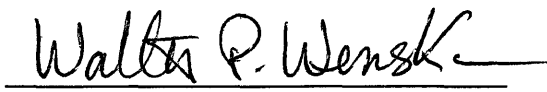
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MASTER OF ARTS


Sandra Jeanne Burr

Approved, December 1991


Richard Lowry, Chair


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ABSTRACT

Long considered a children's classic, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women has also garnered acclaim from critical feminist scholarship, while Margaret Sidney's popular juvenile book Five Little Peppers and How They Grew--strangely evocative of Little Women--has slept in relative obscurity. This nagging sense of deja-vu is quite plausible, perhaps even predictable, for Alcott and Sidney shared the daily intimacies of the social world of Concord, Massachusetts, as well as adhered--with varying degrees of intensity--to the domestic philosophy of the middle class, experiences that seeped under the shiny surfaces of their novels and formed social documentaries on the historical realities of women and work. For Jo March and Polly Pepper, as for their real-world counterparts, childhood labor is no frivolous pastime because it has a direct impact on their futures. Despite the vast differences in their childhoods, the task of being female and learning female tasks require Jo and Polly to seek security from men, in whose hands society traditionally has deposited the power and authority to decide how the female helpmeet may best help meet masculine needs. Therefore Jo and Polly undergo a similar rite of passage to become respectable women: they both leave the narrow confines of the domestic sphere--their feminine-centered homes sequestered from the harsh world in a protective, pastoralized setting--and experience life in the city, traditionally a male-dominated domain. Indeed, only by coming in close contact with mature male wisdom, the touchstone of virtue, do Jo and Polly become validated as middle-class women with legitimate, secure futures.

BENEATH THE UMBRELLAS OF BENEVOLENT MEN:
VALIDATION OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN IN
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In the epigraph to A Moveable Feast (1964) Ernest Hemingway remarks, "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast." The same may be said for the beloved books of childhood. Savory morsels of our favorite stories linger in our memories as mementos of the tales that tempted and fed our youthful literary appetites. For years, children's historian F. J. H. Darton carried with him a host of rousing impressions of Swiss Family Robinson that had invigorated him as a boy. He recalls "that a very large snake swallowed the donkey and was killed when comatose from repletion; that the family had a house in a tree; that they tamed and rode ostriches, made lassoes, built a boat, tapped the india-rubber tree, . . . and found a salt mine" (qtd. in Rodgers 128). Upon reading that same book as an adult, however, Darton discovered a text "full of the most extravagantly laboured piety" (qtd. in Rodgers 128) that his boyish mind had never fathomed. The story had been a movable feast, but time and maturity revealed that the youthful consumer had sampled only a portion of the meal.

Daniel T. Rodgers acknowledges the universality of this phenomenon in his book The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920. According to him, "all children's stories" can be termed "twice-told tales" that have been "revised, elaborated, and severely edited in the intermediary

of the child's imagination" (128). In other words, the child's mind acts as a censor, privileging those parts that most closely coincide with its own interests and ignoring the parts that do not. This phenomenon must have been in some way responsible for the success that writers of sentimental American children's literature enjoyed with audiences of all ages in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Whether thinly veiled or baldly stated, didactic texts could simultaneously please adults concerned with the transmission of proper moral instruction and children concerned with a jolly good read. As long as the story was woven around lively characters in interesting situations, children could swallow a dose of morality that pleased their parents but that only registered--if anywhere--in the murky depths of their youthful subconscious. In this way, didacticism could be digested without interfering with fun.

One of the most successful books of this genre is Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868-69). For generations, audiences have embraced it as the girl's book; adults have been enchanted with its gently didactic domestic drama, while children have delighted in Jo March's tomboyish romps. In the last decade, critical feminist scholarship has lent credence to this popular acclaim, hailing Alcott has an important, if fledgling, voice for women's freedom of self-expression in Victorian America. Wedding childhood memories of saucy Jo with adult perceptions of social history, scholars have explored Jo's unflagging desire to retain her independence despite her eventual evolution into a domestically oriented woman.¹

Twelve years after Little Women's publication, Margaret Sidney--

pen name for Harriett Mulford Stone Lothrop (1844-1924)--became the next aspiring American writer whom young audiences took to their hearts.

Wide Awake, the juvenile magazine founded by publisher Daniel Lothrop in 1875 (Burke 391), started serializing Sidney's story about the impoverished Pepper family's rise from rags to comparative riches in January 1880 (Johnson 139); Lothrop then published Five Little Peppers and How They Grew (Five Peppers) as a juvenile book in 1881. It went on to sell over two million copies by the author's death in 1924 (Kunitz 483). Its popularity also prompted the Daniel Lothrop Publishing Company to request, over time, eleven additional volumes about the Pepper clan to satisfy the clamoring public.

Sidney's book, however, has slept in critical obscurity. Considering the story's all-too-apparent simple plot, one-dimensional characters, and hackneyed language, this state of affairs is not surprising. Yet Five Peppers is strangely evocative of Little Women, although not enough to be considered a carbon copy. Both the March and the Pepper families flourish under the well-meaning direction of wealthy, unmarried male benefactors whose son or grandson provides companionship to Jo March and Polly Pepper, the two books' main characters. Both novels look back wistfully upon a time when the sexes knew their rightful place in society and were content with it. This nagging sense of déjà-vu within Five Peppers is quite plausible, perhaps even predictable. Margaret Sidney and Louisa May Alcott both came from families proud of their distinguished New England heritage and later shared the daily intimacies of the social world of Concord, Massachusetts. Indeed, through the magic of coincidence, Sidney and

Alcott's lives became irrevocably intertwined through their relationships with Nathaniel Hawthorne and his family.

Yet these social ties comprise only a portion of the shared experience that bonds these women on both a personal and professional level. In addition to promoting such values as industry, morality, and nationalism through their public participation in Concord's civic activities, Alcott and Sidney individually adhered to the domestic philosophy of the middle class, albeit with varying degrees of unwavering intensity. Though Alcott's journals clearly illustrate Louisa May's deeply etched ambivalence with the female's narrow sphere of influence as the gracious, benevolent angel who sweeps the stairs, cooks the meals, and showers morality equally on the dry, arid conscience of her more worldly husband and the moist, growing consciences of her young children, they reveal as well a woman so firmly manacled to the tenets of domesticity that she cannot help but propound those views in her literature for children. Sidney, on the other hand, was very comfortable with the domestic world. Energized by her deep interest in America's youth and her compelling "sense of responsibility towards them" (Lothrop 12), Sidney devised stories designed to inculcate proper moral instruction through the guise of animated, happy children complacently engaged in gender-appropriate activities. Alcott and Sidney may not have shared identical feelings on middle-class domesticity, but their individual contributions to its hegemonic role in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the face of women's steadily growing involvement in the workplace merits closer scrutiny. Given the public and the domestic ties between these two women, what

becomes surprising is the lack of critical attention toward a serious comparison of Little Women and Five Peppers.

Five Peppers explores many of the same issues as Little Women. Both novels emphasize how the moral character of youthful Americans thrives under the rigors of cheerful, honest toil. The four March girls, though periodically dismayed with the disadvantages of living under relative poverty, work through their disappointment as they grow closer to womanhood. Similarly, the five Pepper children, rooted in the soil of utter destitution, strengthen their moral rectitude in an environment saturated with endless chores and unquenchable exuberance while they "scramble[. . .]" (Sidney 1) toward adulthood.

For all the romantic illusions of work that Little Women and Five Peppers engender, underneath their shiny surfaces lurk the sharp edges of a social documentary on the historical realities of women and work. As Carl N. Degler points out in his in-depth study on the woman's role in American family life, "the Victorian lady of leisure so beloved by novelists and critics of the age was representative at best of a miniscule proportion of all women" (362). The same may be said of middle-class girls, according to Mary Kelley's book Private Woman, Public Stage. Kelley asserts that from colonial times through the nineteenth century, despite advances in equal education for children of both sexes, "girls were shaped as biblical helpmeets" (59), bereft of a social climate that would allow them to stretch far beyond a strictly domestic regimen. Instead of a playground, childhood was a drilling ground in which these miniature Eves, biologically and spiritually ordained to face the consequences of that plucked apple, learned how to

wash, pare, slice, dice, cook, bake, and clean, weaving a web of domestic skills into a sphere as fruitful and alluring to their future Adams as that infamous apple from Eden. While middle-class boys gained manly self-reliance from the nurturing attentions and sacrifices of the distaff sex, cosseted by the hearth's incubatory warmth before they ventured out of the schoolroom and the sitting room into the vigorous world of business,² girls learned their gender-oriented tasks to secure a future in a society accustomed to privileging the status of women who complied with the hegemonic code.

Thus for Jo March and Polly Pepper, as for their real-world counterparts, childhood labor is no frivolous pastime because it has a direct impact on their futures. Despite the vast differences in their childhood experiences, the task of being female and learning female tasks require Jo and Polly to seek security from men, in whose hands society traditionally has deposited the power and authority to decide how the female helpmeet may best help meet masculine needs. Therefore Jo and Polly undergo a similar rite of passage to become respectable women: they both leave the narrow confines of the domestic sphere--their feminine-centered homes sequestered from the harsh world in a protective, pastoralized setting--and experience life in the city, traditionally a male-dominated domain. Indeed, only by coming in close contact with mature male wisdom, the touchstone of virtue, do Jo and Polly become validated as middle-class women with legitimate, secure futures.

I

Five Peppers has been dismissed as merely one of several "imitations" (Marsella 145) of Little Women. This observation is rather weak, for although the two books share common elements, they are hardly the same story. Furthermore, considering that the former was published a good twelve years after the release of Little Women, Part Two, finally quelled the public's breathlessly eager question, "Will Jo marry Laurie?", one may well wonder why the critic was content to damn Five Peppers without questioning why such an obvious copy was published so long after the publication of Little Women. In the fickle world of publishing, twelve years is an eon. A far more pertinent question might consider why the well-worn elements of domestic drama would appeal to an author and, for that matter, to a publisher.

To answer this question, one should turn to the authors themselves. Louisa May Alcott is well known in literary circles; critical reaction to her work has blossomed in the last ten to fifteen years, further burgeoning the substantial biographical material already available. Margaret Sidney, however, is a relative unknown. Publications about her work and her life are scanty. Despite this disparity, one can still glean enough details about each author's life to draw some interesting and revealing conclusions.

Perhaps most noticeably, Alcott and Sidney share a deep involvement in the public culture of Concord, Massachusetts, an involvement that started in 1883, when Daniel Lothrop, Sidney's publisher and husband, purchased a house in Concord from George Parsons

Lathrop, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son-in-law. Hawthorne himself had lived in this house for twelve years after he had bought it from Bronson Alcott in 1852. Although Hawthorne and the Lothrop's referred to the house as the Wayside--Hawthorne's name for it--when Bronson Alcott had been the owner, he and his family had called it Hillside (Bartlett 96, 99, 87, 111). Little Women, of course, is based on Alcott's childhood feelings and experiences in Hillside, where Alcott lived with her family from 1845 to 1848 (Swayne 99). Thus Margaret Sidney moved into the same house that Louisa May Alcott had lived in as a "little woman," a house soaked in memories from Alcott's childhood. Furthermore, Sidney lived next door to Orchard House, Alcott's home from 1858 to 1882 and the site of the literary creation of Little Women.

Only twelve years separated these two authors, but it is improbable that they ever met, even though they lived in the same town, shared many of the same friends, and participated in Concord's civic life. As late as March 1882, Alcott had taken an active part in contributing to the moral health of her hometown and in keeping alive the American moral fiber that seemed to have been weakened since the days of John Hancock, her great-great grandfather (Stearns 87). In her journal for that month, she observes:

Helped start a Temperance Society. Much needed in C[oncord]. a great deal of drinking, not among the Irish but young Americans, gentlemen as well as farmers & mill hands. Women anxious to do something but find no interest beyond a few. Have meetings & try to learn how to work. I was secretary & wrote records, letters, & sent pledges &c. Also articles in C. Freeman & Woman's Journal about the Union & Town Meeting. (Journals 233)

Of course, Alcott's interest in preserving nationalism is best exemplified in her stint as a nurse in Georgetown during the Civil War. Eugenia Kaledin observes that "to have gone off nursing in the Civil War was at that time an assertion of . . . competence and freedom, the womanly equivalent to taking up arms" (252). Fighting death and disease, however, could not preclude Alcott from succumbing to disease herself, a raging typhoid that robbed her of her former robust constitution and of the long brown tresses that had been one of her small vanities (Stern 131). Alcott gave her vitality and her femininity to her country as bravely as any male with a musket. She had been "a soldier" who had waged "her own campaign upon a field called Georgetown" (Stern 130) and emerged with a battered and bald badge of courage.

Yet Alcott's severe decline in health from the poisonous effects of the medication she had been given to cure her illness restricted the sphere in which she moved and precluded her from widening it by introducing herself to Sidney. Nonetheless, given her own patriotic fervor and literary professionalism, Alcott probably would have approved of Sidney and her endeavors, both as a civic-minded citizen and as a responsible businesswoman. Like Alcott, Sidney was an American's American. Her father, Sidney Mason Stone, was one of the foremost architects in New Haven, Connecticut, and is considered an early luminary in the development of American architecture. Her mother, Harriett Mulford Stone, was a direct descendant of old New England stock. The blood of the Mulford and the Bradley families mingled in her veins, thus allowing her to live comfortably in the social standing of her lineage (Carson 407). As a descendant of Reverend Thomas Hooker,

several colonial governors, and Captain Enoch Woodruff of New Haven, Connecticut, a distinguished member of Colonel Gold Silliman's Light-Horse regiment, Sidney was a member of the national society Colonial Dames of America and the Society of Mayflower Descendants (Swayne 207; Allen 548). She considered her heritage a precious and serious responsibility, one she exercised on both the national and local levels.³ She founded the Old Concord chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which so invigorated her that she founded and became acting president of the Children of the American Revolution (C.A.R.) until 1901; she then acted as honorary president of the C.A.R. until her death in 1924 (Allen 548). Sidney was also extremely interested in historic preservation. She bought and restored the home of Ephraim Wales Bull, originator of the Concord grape, and purchased Alcott's Orchard House, which she retained until the Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association was created to preserve and maintain the property (Swayne 165; Johnson 143).

Sidney also became Concord's literary grand dame. She orchestrated a "literary afternoon" (Johnson 142) for Frank Sanborn, Bronson Alcott's biographer and close Alcott family friend. (Sanborn was both a guest at Anna's wedding to John Pratt and one of the four coffin bearers at Elizabeth's funeral [Stern 99; Elbert 97].) More significantly, she arranged Nathaniel Hawthorne's centenary exercises in 1904, a four-day fête that took place in Bronson Alcott's old School of Philosophy and in her own home (Swayne 150-51, 307).

Although Sidney was a prominent wife of a distinguished businessman, she was also a devoted professional. Her daughter Margaret

Lothrop has written that Sidney's social life evaporated when she was engaged to work on a manuscript. Mrs. Daniel Lothrop would "disappear" and be replaced by Margaret Sidney, a conscientious worker who dedicated herself to her writing eight hours a day. Between six o'clock in the morning and five o'clock in the afternoon, Sidney would interrupt her work only twice--from eight to ten (when she probably ate breakfast and tended to the household) and from noon to one (when she probably ate lunch) (Lothrop 177). She faithfully followed this regimen until she had completed her project. When Daniel Lothrop died in 1892, Sidney ran the publishing company until she sold it in 1894. Accomplished businesswoman, high-minded patriot, and devoted public servant, Sidney spent her life in Concord creating a construct that would reaffirm the values of industry, national pride, and moral backbone that she and Alcott believed were the essence of the American character.

The two authors thus had a good deal in common. Both grew up in important families in New England. Both considered themselves professional women for whom writing was a serious endeavor, although Alcott's sense of professionalism diverged somewhat from Sidney's. (At her publisher's behest, Alcott often had to repress her literary ideas in favor of the homogenized demands of the marketplace. Like her literary creation Jo, Alcott wrote chiefly to purchase "groceries and gowns" (Little Women 253) for her family. Anxious to keep the money coming in, Alcott realized that creativity was not a luxury she could afford. Sidney, on the other hand, was quite wealthy. Since she did not depend on her writing for her livelihood, she did not worry about losing her contract with her husband's publishing company. Nepotism, as

well, was an obvious cushion of comfort.) Both took pride in propagating the moral character that had first shaped America. Alcott and Sidney may never have met, but their lives were intertwined through their mutual acquaintances. They shared a geographic place and experienced a social climate that binds them morally.

Although Alcott and Sidney stepped fearlessly and autonomously into their civic public culture, as private women who strongly believed in what twentieth-century scholars have termed the cult of domesticity they could not go public as authors--rewarded under the financial umbrella that their publishers so eagerly proffered--without relying heavily on benevolent men. In this, Alcott and Sidney differed little from any other middle-class nineteenth-century woman. The female middle-class identity centered "around domestic values and family practices" (Ryan 15). At the heart(h) and center of the home stood the male, provider of financial security and seminal fluid, the two components that would give a woman all her basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, and children. Indeed, through marriage and impregnation, a man reified a woman's reason for living; he created the roles for which a woman could sacrifice herself, "a set of personal characteristics" (Ryan 190) that would permeate her very being and transmute any quirky individuality into a rigid mold of womanhood.

Males enjoyed this privileged status even as children. At the appropriate age they were sent to school to learn those rudiments necessary to smooth their transition from their mothers' hearth to their employers' business. Girls, on the other hand, were taught to ape their mothers, even in play. Playing with dolls and playing house geared

their young minds toward thoughts of future babies to cuddle and larders to stock. Once they were old enough to take on greater responsibility, girls joined their mothers in caring for the house and for their brothers, a move heartily endorsed by women's literature. The November 1838 edition of Mother's Magazine provides a typical example:

When your daughter is old enough to be your companion and friend allow her to participate in your cares and duties. It is the affectionate daughter and kind sister who will make the self-denying wife, and devoted mother. (qtd. in Ryan 193)

Thus girls early on were introduced to the strains and anxieties of adult women. With their mothers, they struggled to manage smoothly running households that would nourish and revitalize their business- or school-weary fathers and brothers around whom their hopes for continued security focused like a beaming ray of light.

For all of Alcott's desire to enjoy the perquisites allowed a nineteenth-century man--especially what seemed to her to be unlimited freedom--Alcott deeply felt that a woman's moral obligations tied her irrevocably to the home. Bronson Alcott played a key role in her conditioning. Although of all the Alcott children stormy Louisa grew the closest in heart to her patient, long-suffering mother Abigail, it was Bronson who shaped his daughters' moral characters when they were tender babes in the nursery, a direct contradiction to the sentimental concept promoting mothers as the primary instructors of morality. As an avid philosopher with a talent for staying far away from gainful employment, Bronson methodically, meticulously, enthusiastically instilled in Louisa his own idea of the ideal home:

It is a pure and happy; a kind and loving family--a house where peace and joy, and gentleness and quiet, abide always,

and from which sounds of content, and voices of confiding love, alone ascend--around whose hearth gather serene and loveful countenances; where every hand is quick to help, every foot swift to serve, every eye to catch the wishes, and every ear, the wants of the other. (qtd. in Strickland 20)

It took Louisa a while to decipher who that "other" was; initially, the "other" was every person in the family other than one's self. Self-denial for love's sake was propounded as a far sweeter characteristic than greed or self-interest. Thus Louisa was encouraged to give away all the special cakes that had been baked especially for her fourth birthday so that she could partake in the heady draught of selflessness (Strickland 28-29). Yet this lesson, like so many others, could not mold rambunctious Louisa into the angel her father so zealously hoped for. Stubborn, independent, and fiercely loyal to her father, Louisa was deeply torn between her father's desires and her own. Bronson's philosophy of self-denial for love's sake, well-intentioned as it might have been, interfered too strongly with Louisa's self-love and self-preservation when put into practice.

When Bronson seriously contemplated breaking up the family at Fruitlands in pursuit of a more spiritually enlightening life with his philosophical partner Charles Lane, Louisa's faith in her father was shaken irrevocably. Cornelia Meigs asserts that "it was in those dark and desperate days that Louisa learned to know the truth of what family life should be, learned it and never forgot" (Invincible Louisa 68). Meigs intimates that Louisa realized the primal importance of family and of sticking together through adversity. After all, Bronson did finally decide to stay with his family and perfect his philosophical conundrums

without Lane's guidance. Based on Alcott's journal, however, it seems far more feasible that Louisa learned instead that in family life, one truth existed for men and another existed for women.

In the Alcott home, only the women worked. Bronson lost his fervor for child-rearing, as he seemed to do with most of his projects; after a few years he retired to his study and there erected for himself an exquisite mental loft upon which he would perch for the rest of his life, content to ruminate on life without seriously partaking in its rigors. Abigail's anecdote for young Louisa's tumultuous soul, tucked into Louisa's journal in January of 1845, concisely sums up what consequently became the Alcott females' basic tenet of daily life-- "Hope, and keep busy" (Journals 55).

That same month Alcott unknowingly condemned her father's obvious financial negligence when she wrote, "I don't see who is to clothe and feed us all, when we are so poor now" (Journals 56). By 1852, little had changed: "Father idle, mother at work in the office, Nan & I governessing, Lizzie in the kitchen, Ab doing nothing but grow" (Journals 68). Alcott, however, had discovered that the women in the family were responsible for providing "every eye to catch the wishes, and every ear, the wants of the other"--that is, the wants of the father. In marked contrast to her father, Alcott determined in November of 1855 that she would not "go home to sit idle while I have a head and a pair of hands" (Journals 75). Fueled by her stubborn independence, Alcott sacrificed herself to keep the family's home and hearth secure. Sewing and teaching, though dismally dull prospects to Alcott's lively mind, lined the family's slender purse with a few precious dollars. As

Alcott's writing became more profitable, it, too, added conspicuously to the larder.

Ironically, Alcott's eventual success as a popular author in the public realm locked Alcott even more tightly into her role as family provider and family subservient. Alcott might have been content with her lot had she possessed a meeker demeanor and had she not harbored an absolutely impossible hope. In January of 1868, Alcott revealed to her journal that she wanted to realize her "dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent" (Journals 162). Alcott failed to see the inherent contradiction between happily providing for all her family's wants in an age in which women were trained to depend utterly on their provider and jauntily writing to her heart's content, free from all familial financial and emotional obligations. Facing this impossible struggle on a daily basis must have deepened Alcott's already ambivalent feelings about domesticity that her father's failures--and her own--had fostered within her. This ambivalence is clearly evident in two journal entries written in 1868.

On February 14, Alcott noted that a Mr. Bonner "lured" her to write "one column of Advice to Young Women"; after brief reflection she wrote an article entitled "Happy Women," in which she discussed "all the busy, useful, independent spinsters" she knew. Her piece was meant to encourage young females to rely on their own emotional and financial preserves for fulfillment. "Liberty," she told her journal, "is a better husband than love to many of us" (Journals 164-65). Yet by June, after she had sent twelve chapters of Little Women to her editor, she reflected that "lively, simple books are very much needed for girls" and

that she might supply that need (Journals 166). In the drain of churning out a large portion of her book, Alcott may well have forgotten about the lone column on liberated spinsters; indeed, her notes may only parrot the encouraging advice her editor, Thomas Niles, surely gave her. Nonetheless, the woman who preferred liberty to a husband's love was advocating the need for girls to read simple books that ostensibly would return their readers to simpler times, when love, marriage, and children were the happy and beneficial by-products of a husband's affection. Alcott may have thought that her own ambivalent feelings were too burdensome, perhaps even too immoral, for future women to entertain, even though more women would surely experience some of her own painful reality as they entered the workforce in increasing numbers. In writing about the warmth and goodness of the male father and husband in Little Women, Alcott saved her female readers and her female characters from the real burdens that permeated her own domestic life and fed them instead the beatific image that Bronson Alcott so early instilled within her. If reality was a bitter pill to swallow, perhaps an ideal vision of self-sacrifice--as repulsive as Alcott found it herself--might provide a sweeter antidote, just as Bronson Alcott had promised.

Margaret Sidney's father also left a deep impression on the young mind of little Harriett Mulford Stone. Though blessed with the comforts of plenty of money from Sidney Mason Stone's architectural labors, Harriett longed for what she did not have--a home in the country. Sidney explains that when she was "a slip of a girl" accompanying her family on their regular trips into the country, she

always longed to find a little brown house, well settled down at the back, and a good bit from the road. [She] knew

exactly how the little path ran up to the big green door, and the grass tried to grow in the front yard. And around it all was the glorious expanse of real country fields. (qtd. in Lothrop 170)

She "could not understand" why her father "ever had been so foolish as to live in a big city" when the delights of "hav[ing] hens and chickens and scratch[ing] the back of the pigs" (qtd. in Lothrop 170-71) beckoned so irresistably. To an only child who "played with the children of [her] imagination" (qtd. in Lothrop 170), the charms of a simple life devoid of any real work--the young girl never imagined, for instance, how she would tend to the daily care of pigs when not engaged in scratching their backs--seemed distinctly preferable to the boring routine in the confined spaces of the city. Sidney held her father accountable for not providing what she considered the ideal environment in which to grow up.

Despite the drawbacks of her city domicile, Sidney matured into a woman who held her father in high regard. When she decided to pursue writing seriously, Sidney admitted that she looked to her father for inspiration, even though he strongly disapproved of young women writing for publication:

I chose my penname "Sidney" because it was my father's first name. He was a splendid man, strong and true & that made me like "Sidney" which I had always liked from "Sir Philip" down. Besides I wanted something a good deal different from the lackadaisical soubriquets that were frequently selected in the "seventies," when I chose mine. "Margaret" was my favorite name for a girl not because it means "Pearl" and "Daisy" but because it means Truth. So there you have it--Truth and justice or chivalry, or whatever you call the broad helpful influence diffused by "Sidney."

I chose to write under a penname just as thousands of others do I suppose. I was not going to be good game for derision if I failed. (qtd. in Lothrop 156)

Sidney chose to defy her father by continuing to write, but by using his first name for her own pen name and his middle name--Mason--for the first name of the man who secures the future for Polly Pepper and her family, Sidney never relinquished her role as the little girl who craves her father's support and protection. Indeed, she linked her father's name to a shield of truth that she could wield like a protective umbrella in the public arena. Sidney thus publicly defined herself under the auspices of her father's male virtue, not to mention the male virtue of the literary Sir Philip Sidney.

So influential were Sidney's deep feelings for her father that she felt wicked about her decision not to include a father in the Pepper clan. In the following comment describing her emotions about what might seem a minor plot point, Sidney goes so far as to confuse the fictional and absent Mr. Pepper and Sidney Mason Stone:

It hurt me dreadfully. He was a most estimable man, and I loved my own father so much, it seemed the most wicked thing to do. I went around for days, feeling droopy and guilty. (qtd. in Lothrop 172)

Sidney's love and esteem for her father spill over onto a literary concept, a figment of her own imagination. That this masculine abstract could shake Sidney's conscience speaks volumes to the power and authority flesh-and-blood males could have over a female espousing the value of sentimental domesticity. Sidney's devotion to her father was rivaled only by her deep belief in the central importance of the home. As Daniel Lothrop's wife, Sidney turned her home into the hub of all her professional and social activities. Whether she was writing a book, informally gathering with the ladies who comprised the East Quarter

Reading Circle, or entertaining family friends "easily and often" (Johnson 142) during the evenings, Sidney always operated from the warm security of her home. Home, that concrete symbol of the domestic sphere, appealed to her so strongly that she made a habit of autographing Five Peppers with the following quotation from that book:

Mother's rich enough, if we can only keep together, dears, and grow up good so that the little brown house won't be ashamed of us, that's all I ask. (qtd. in Johnson 319)

Unconsciously Sidney insinuates that the mother, or housewife, was not only married to a man--she was married to a house and was therefore responsible for the solidity and security of its moral foundations: the family children. By emulating the housewife-mother's positive, gender-appropriate behavior, the children could "keep together" and "grow up good," thereby securing their home's moral structure and saving the family from embarrassment. In other words, a house was not a home without a proper female role model. Of course, Sidney helpfully provides her readers with just such a person in the form of Polly Pepper. According to Sidney, Polly

had so many interesting stories to tell, while she did so many other interesting things, that she just had to have a jolly, old-fashioned kitchen, a homey mother, and a group of lively brothers and sisters to make up a proper environment. (qtd. in Carson 408)

As a consummate Mother's helper, Polly is a domestic goddess, a miniature housewife whose repertoire of "interesting" activities focuses exclusively on cooking, cleaning, and baking. This perfect little woman thus deserves a proper home, one filled with children who will learn from Polly's example how to purify their morality and preserve their family's integrity. Sidney's ideas about home seemed to be woven

inextricably around the female's ability to perfect her domestic capacity.

Sidney's ideas did not extend only to literature. Just as Bronson Alcott revered his idealistic vision of angelic women spreading peace and joy throughout their earthly homes with the power of self-sacrifice, so Sidney steadfastly held to a personal manifesto that would guide her down the straight and narrow path of domesticity. This twelve-step guide to perfection, though equally applicable to men, seems particularly well-adapted for domestic women, for its emphasis on peace, harmony, optimism, and nurturing eerily echoes the beatific strains so evident in Bronson Alcott's ideal womanly home:

PROMISE YOURSELF

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.

To talk of health, happiness and prosperity to every person you meet.

To make all your friends feel that there is something to them.

To look on the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.

To think only of the best, to work only for the best, and to expect only the best.

To be just as enthusiastic about [the] success of others as you are about your own.

To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.

To wear a cheerful countenance at all times, and to have a smile ready for [every] living creature you meet.

To give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticise [sic] others.

To be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of

trouble.

To think well of yourself and to proclaim this fact to the world--not in loud words, but in great deeds.

To live to the faith that the world is on your side so long as you are true to the best that is in you. (qtd. in Lothrop 158)

This credo was no soapbox philosophy. According to Sidney's daughter Margaret Lothrop, "cheerful courage and the wish to make other people happy" (171) were as indigenous to her mother as "the cheerful acceptance of difficulties and the search for joy in everyday life" (175). The private Margaret Sidney strove to internalize a set of personal characteristics that would mold her into the perfect domestic woman.

Margaret Lothrop does not write a great deal about her relationship with her mother, so it is not very easy to decipher how closely Sidney's maternal behavior was patterned after sentimental domestic philosophy. Based on what Lothrop does relate, Sidney seemed to have been a typical mother who shared her cares and duties with her daughter. Lothrop reminisces that she "was not only my mother's faithful reader, but her messenger, and I remember carrying many histories home on my bicycle from the library" (12). She also paints a cozy picture of typical Concord evenings, in which she and her mother "would often sit in front of the open fire in the old sitting room" (173), like the March girls in Little Women. Although young Margaret showed a penchant for reading, Sidney would most often happily think of her imaginary family, the Peppers (Lothrop 173). On Margaret's birthdays, however, Sidney always arranged a splendid gala that featured

special entertainment. On Margaret's fourth birthday, in particular, Sidney had Miss Elizabeth Palmer Peabody teach the local girls a dance that would feature the birthday girl. Specifically,

the dancers, like so many butterflies, circled around an enormous artificial rose. [Margaret] was the little girl supposed to be called from the opening rosebud by their beckonings and pleadings. (Lothrop 165)

Lothrop ruefully admits that she "did not appreciate all of Mother's efforts on my behalf. Too vividly etched on my memory is the impatience I felt for the cue which would free me from my hot prison" (165).

Unwittingly Lothrop's description provides an interesting metaphor for her mother's love--the artificial rose. Sidney's strenuous efforts to throw a large fête for her daughter were a bit overpowering; smothered in the confines of the artificial rose, Margaret experienced an overwhelming, though well-intentioned, maternal embrace. This display of domestic warmth was a little overheated and constricting for so young a recipient. Lothrop's love for her mother overcame this brief debacle, but this celebration of Margaret's birthday--as much a celebration of Sidney's maternity, especially with the vision of the innocent child emerging from the confines of an ever-widening enclosure--illustrates the importance that motherhood played in Sidney's life.

No discussion of Sidney's domestic life would be complete without the inclusion of Daniel Lothrop. Sidney's husband, Margaret's father, and the Five Peppers' publisher, he played the dual role of the benevolent financial provider in both the domestic and business realms. Unfortunately, the information available on him is more concerned with his business life than with his domestic life. Like most middle-class

men, he spent his time and made his reputation in the office.

Daniel Lothrop was a shrewd New England businessman with an eye on the future. He had transformed a drugstore that featured an unusually good selection of books into a string of successful drug-and-bookstores.⁴ Eventually he settled in Boston and concentrated on publishing, soon becoming a "leader" (Johnson 140) in children's books. Indeed, he was referred to as "the children's friend" (Carson 410) for his pioneering efforts in creating a literature specifically geared to youthful interests and aspirations. This transplanted New Hampshire man could not help being aware of the local competition. When Roberts Brothers benefited from Alcott's phenomenal success, Lothrop was provided with new inspiration. He had sworn "Never to publish a book purely sensational, no matter what the chances of money it has in it"; with a good domestic novel written in accordance with his own life goal--"the uplifting of children and youth toward good citizenship"--he could publish a book with potentially sensational profits on a topic that would suit his most beloved standard: "To publish books which will make for true, steadfast growth in right living" (Carson 414; Hale 263). Starting with "Polly Pepper's Chicken Pie," Sidney's short stories about the Pepper family, published in Lothrop's Wide Awake magazine in 1878,⁵ became the genesis for Five Peppers and introduced Lothrop to his own potential Alcott, the woman who would become his wife in 1881, the same year he published her book (Carson 408; MacDonald 267). Margaret Sidney cemented her husband's reputation as a leading juvenile publisher and kept the profits from Five Peppers in his family. Thanks to her, Daniel Lothrop cashed in on the lucrative niche that Little Women created in

the literary marketplace. In return, Lothrop magnanimously supported his wife and child and kept his star writer continually under contract, secure in the knowledge that she shared his commitment to practice and to preach true, steadfast growth in proper middle-class values both publicly and privately.

In Old Concord, Her Highways and Byways, Sidney wrote:

When all things shall come up for a final adjustment in the last great Day of days, it seems that Concord might be gently passed by, and allowed amid general dissolution, to hold herself together untouched. (qtd. in Johnson 145)

In Little Women and Five Peppers Alcott and Sidney spin tales of a time that also seems gently passed by, its simple faith in morality and domesticity held together untouched amid the general dissolution of the traditional home as the demands of the Industrial Revolution lured women over the threshold of the domestic sphere and into the harsher, colder world of hard money and fast business practices. Greatly influenced by the virtues their fathers practiced--or at least appeared to embody-- these two women wed their strong domestic beliefs to their nationalistic pride to give to posterity what had been denied them: for Alcott, an ideal family life; for Sidney, an ideal family environment.

Yet the two share a far different critical tradition concerning their literary talent. Alcott's Little Women has been touted for generations as an unsinkable juvenile classic that, along with Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), "ushered in the 'golden age' of children's literature in English" (Coughlin 6) in the United States. James Steel Smith hails it as "vigorous, reasonably honest, and close to real people and their living" (11). Anne Thaxter

Eaton believes there is "something of universal nature in it" (213) that transcends the moral didacticism of its time. Of course, this universal quality could very well account for the wide readership the book enjoyed. Frank Preston Stearns notes that businessmen and family members read the book as well as the female audience for which it was obviously intended:

First the young people read it; then their fathers and mothers; and then the grandparents read it. Grave merchants and lawyers meeting on their way down town in the morning said to each other, "Have you read 'Little Women'"; and laughed as they said it. The clerks in my office read it, so also did the civil engineer, and the boy in the elevator. (81-82)

The years have not treated Sidney's Five Peppers quite as well. Early notices were quite positive, claiming her book was both "delightful" (Bartlett 99) and "charming" (Swayne 13). Reviewer Norma Bright Carson of The Book News Monthly raved about the Pepper children in February 1910:

They will live among American juveniles. Their appeal is universal, for they are typical of the brightness, the vivacity, the wholesomeness, the resourcefulness, of the average American boy and girl. They are not the goody-goody sickly-sentimental children of the Elsie Dinsmore variety; . . . they are just the unspoiled, unspotted children that belong to a world in which imagination must supply what fortune withholds (414)

Furthermore, she declares that by the early twentieth century, this children's book was an American institution, "as much at home among American children as Santa Claus and the Teddy Bear" (407). Not all early reviewers shared Carson's exuberance. A review in the 8 December 1881 issue of The Nation criticizes Sidney for giving the Peppers "sudden friends, rich and benevolent enough" to wrest the family from

poverty instead of showing how these "brave and helpful" characters "would have bettered themselves by their own steady effort." Far from praising Sidney's deftly realistic characters, the reviewer deprecates the author's ability to reproduce credible dialogue from her own region: "If ever the nondescript English which Mrs. Pepper uses was heard in real life, it certainly was not in the old New England villages, or from the old New England stock from which she came" (457).

Modern opinion is equally ungenerous. James Steel Smith is especially harsh. Unlike Carson, he places Five Peppers in the same category as Martha Finley's Elsie Dinsmore series and rates them both as "timid and overblown, saccharinely sentimental, dishonest" (11). He explains his reasoning in the following way:

the pathos has become bathos; the characters are black and white, wooden type figures; situations and emotions are generally described in unoriginal clichés and generalities; the dialogue is empty, puffed up. (11)

Ruth K. MacDonald tends to agree, though one of her chief complaints is that the characters' overwhelming "goodness" is "implausible" (269). On the other hand, major references on American authors tend to be more forgiving. The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature says that Five Peppers is "written with a simple, cheerful gusto and reality" (Herzberg 657). American Authors 1600-1900 also points out the "pleasant simplicity" of the book's "homely narrative" (Kunitz 484). The Dictionary of American Biography is struck by the book's "pleasurable impression of reality" (Malone 425). These last three opinions are somewhat suspect, for the works in which they rest are meant to be general purveyors of the American literary tradition rather

than repositories of critical scholarship. Yet all scholars do not denigrate Five Peppers. Anne Thaxter Eaton posits that Polly Pepper is "more human and natural than her predecessors" (207), a view that Elizabeth Johnson shares. Although she admits that readers' deepest impressions of the books center on "the poverty, the sunny dispositions, and the great sobbing tears whenever sorrow struck," she adds in the Peppers' defense that they are "more nearly like real children than those depicted in many of the books of their time" (313).

Five Peppers may not satisfy modern standards of reality-- "reality" and "fantasy" are subjective terms--but nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers seemed to appreciate the idea of reality that this book conveys. Sentimentality was popular, especially when it was applied to the family, the poor, and the domestic female. Indeed, "'Poverty enriches,' Louisa May Alcott said, and certainly in the literature of this period the poorer the family, the more loving it was" (Fritz 129). MacDonald observes that family stories adapted for children were "especially" sentimental because they were crammed with idealized images, and calls attention to "the idealization of the mother and of the deserving poor" (270) in Five Peppers as a case in point. Little Women is equally guilty. Marmee is a saint whom no one would dream of questioning or disobeying, while the girls, for all their imperfections, turn into saints themselves when Marmee asks them to sacrifice their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels, a poverty-ridden German family that could have been lifted from one of Jacob Riis' photographs. "The continual demand for book after book in the Pepper series" as well as for books tracing the Little Women characters,

"indicates the popular acceptance of such [sentimental] themes" (MacDonald 270) in the public mind.

Sentimentality was also easy to digest, for its sugar-coated messages slid smoothly in and out of the minds of an audience unaccustomed to and unprepared for critical thinking. Introspection was the province of the adult; as Eugenia Kaledin notes, "one reviewer praised [Alcott] for discouraging 'morbid self-searchings in her young readers'" (259). Yet Kaledin also insinuates that sentimental fiction protected female authors as much as their intended audiences. "Women," she says, were "particularly reluctant to face up to the extent of the difficulties facing the spirited woman in a life of domestic self-sacrifice" (259). Delving into the psychological and sociological factors motivating literary characters--or, especially in Alcott's case, their authors--might prove too painful. Alcott's characters are remarkably free of troublesome introspection, which, in Kaledin's eyes, had lucrative results for the author of Little Women. That Alcott "would not allow her characters to analyze their choices any more than she herself did made her especially popular" (Kaledin 259). In this respect, one could say that Alcott benefited from parroting the cues she received from the male literary establishment. Janet S. Zehr points to a specific culprit:

Thomas Niles, Alcott's editor at Roberts Brothers, frequently praised without analyzing: "Your prefatory note," he wrote on September 19, 1876, "is very happy, and the titles of some of the chapters are enough to make the girls scream [?]⁶ with delight and to echo 'O how jolly.'" In criticizing "Four Little Boys," a story that he did not find quite as jolly, he commented, "It has none of the snaps which glows from every page of 'Little Women'" (14 June 1875). (324)

Wielding this advice, Alcott could shield her readers, her characters, and herself from the pain of a more realistic portrayal of life.

Sidney's writing also reflects the values of her male publisher. Lothrop believed children's literary needs could be achieved by gearing books toward the specific vocabularies and intellectual interests of different age groups (Lothrop 153). The simple vocabulary in Five Peppers indicates that the book's intended audience was a young one indeed, a conclusion supported by a corresponding lack of introspection on the part of the Pepper family.

The publishers' desire to provide simple, wholesome, homogenized nourishment to the reading public does not preclude critical readers from exploring the murky depths beneath the texts. Jo March and Polly Pepper's faces may shine as brightly as the sun, but underneath the glare of beatific nineteenth-century domesticity, one can see two representations of middle-class young American females labor as children, and as women, to find legitimacy in the eyes of society.

II

Jo March lives in an age when children are children until they have finally digested the idea of what it means to be an adult, a realization that seems to take place for females on the eve of their engagement to their future husbands. A girl may be old enough to put up her hair by the time she is in her mid-teens, but she is not fully deserving of the term "young lady" until she has proved through her actions and demeanor that she is willing to take on the role of domestic

and moral inculcator.

In Part I of Little Women, Jo is definitely a child, one of Marmee's "little girls" (76) and Father's "little daughters" (77). She may be fifteen, but her looks and her manners belie her wholehearted enthusiasm for childish ways. Jo is "very tall, thin, and brown, and remind[s] one of a colt, for she never seem[s] to know what to do with her long limbs, which [are] very much in her way" (6). Twentieth-century readers would call her an adolescent, but that term had not yet penetrated nineteenth-century psychological ideology. Rather, Jo is still a child, as gangly and ebullient as the baby horse that she resembles. Indeed, "colt" is the correct term to use, for Jo does not feel like a "filly." She is a tomboy who loves to whistle, run, romp with pet rats, toss off slang words, and sprawl on the floor. Meg may believe Jo "is old enough to leave off boyish tricks and to behave better"--in other words, to jettison the behavior of "a little girl" (5)--but Meg does not yet realize that womanhood is more than a matter of chronology or physiology. Impatient to embark on the joys of womanhood herself, Meg can only equate a "young lady" with a "tall" body and "turn[ed] up" hair (5) because these are the traits that, superficially, first gain a female a slot on the roll of the society of Potential Women.

One look at Jo's life reveals how carefree and childlike it is. Though she trudges to Aunt March's every day to act as the elderly woman's companion, on the job she has a substantial amount of free, unstructured time in which she can indulge her love of books. Home by two o'clock in the afternoon, Jo then has plenty of time for play--the

"good times" (97) that Laurie wistfully watches from his lonely window as he pauses from the rigor of his lessons. When Jo is on vacation from her aunt, she has even more time to herself, which is only sporadically punctuated by gatherings of the Busy Bee Society. That Jo has the time to construct the society in order to slake her need to satisfy the family's love of the Protestant work ethic is very telling. Only a person with too much time on her hands has the compunction to create a scenario in which work plays a major role. In other words, the Busy Bee Society is no more than an improvised theatrical stripped of its gauze and tinsel and pasteboard guitars. The players wear simple costumes--"a large, flapping hat, a brown linen pouch slung over one shoulder, and . . . a long staff" (130)--and engage in dainty domestic pursuits. Meg sews, Beth sorts pine cones, Amy sketches, and Jo simultaneously knits and reads aloud to the group. The girls are engaged in the ultimate "girl's game" (131); they are rehearsing their future.

Karen Halttunen persuasively argues that "for Louisa May Alcott, 'domestic drama' had become an instrument of domestic harmony and happiness. At the heart of her concept of domestic drama was the implicit convention that the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions, curbed her rebelliousness, and learned to play the role assigned her within her family" ("Domestic Drama" 245). Bronson Alcott's behavioral philosophy on child-rearing clearly influenced Louisa's views on drama. He was the major force behind the didactic use of theatricals in the Alcott nursery. He believed that role-playing would teach his daughters the self-control they desperately needed to squash the seeds of devilry in their

spirits.⁷ Circumscribing outward, or public, behavior to the contours of another person would, with much practice, give his children the skills to suppress the intrusion of their own personalities--all, of course, for the sake of a successful production in which everyone stays "in character," whether one is treading the boards of a stage or of life. In this way the public role would control the private one. Theoretically, the girls would eventually be able to assimilate the lessons they had learned in the theater with the more domestic lessons ingested in the home and evolve into model figures of virtuous, passionless women controlled by their outward behavior.⁸

Not surprisingly, then, Jo and her sisters are indeed playing "little women" when they engage in genteel, womanly activities. Being a woman is thus equated with real work and steadfast discipline, while being a girl is equated with play. Jo's culinary skills are a typical example. She only knows how to make "gingerbread and molasses candy" (106), the kinds of sweet, easy-to-make foods that mothers first teach their children to satisfy their curiosity about kitchens and stoves and to help them play at cooking. Jo can only play at cooking--and successfully produce only the sweetest foods--because cooking is woman's work, bitter nourishment for a rebellious youth.

Jo, of course, is not wholly a child because she knows enough about the responsibilities of womanhood to feel ambivalent about them. She is well aware that staying at home and knitting are the pastimes of "a poky old woman" (5). She yearns to be "a little girl as long as [she] can" (144) because with that precious childhood time she has the freedom to indulge in a boy's game or in a copy of Undine and Sistrum.

Even Jo's body seems to be fighting the onslaught of womanhood: it has "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who [is] rapidly shooting up into a woman and [doesn't] like it" (6). Jo's predilection for burning things is also indicative of her discomfort with domestic duties. Her attempt to turn Meg into a fashionable young lady by giving her a cluster of soft curls results in disaster. When Jo burns Meg's hair off, she displays both an inability to control her impromptu hair iron and a soul deeply at odds with having a hand in creating even the superficial image of a young lady. Jo's hot poker cannot function as a transforming device--a magic wand--because Jo does not fully believe that transformation into womanhood will have positive results. Needless to say, Jo cannot transform herself either. She burns her dresses because she has a "bad trick of standing before the fire" (29). That she cannot stand by the fire without getting burned intimates that the domestic hearth is a dangerous place for her. Indeed, she has been scorched so many times that she has been scarred. Although warm domestic hands patiently mend her gowns, the burns still show. Thus, when Jo attends a New Year's Eve dance, she "must sit still all [she] can and keep her back out of sight" (23) so that the other young guests do not see her burned gown, the scar of her domestic pain. By putting on a brave front, Jo provides the illusion of womanhood without the substance. Later, Jo ruins this illusion when she blackens the front of her dress with coffee, an accident that enables her to hide away from the fashionable dancing crowd and play merry games with Meg, Laurie, and a few other young people--that is, to be a child. Even when Jo makes a genuine attempt to be domestic, her talent for burning has the upper

hand. Blackened bread, salty strawberries, wooden asparagus, and soured cream are the inedible results of her foray in the kitchen during "The Experiment." The palatability of Jo's cooking seems to reflect her distaste for womanly endeavors.

Despite Jo's bumbling ineptitude, she shows flashes of domestic capability. When Laurie is sick and confined to his room, Jo acts as a transmitter of domestic warmth and nurturing. Kittens and blancmange are the medicines Nurse Jo prescribes. The kittens will make Laurie laugh, while the blancmange will provide him with "simple," wholesome nourishment that is so "soft" it "will slip down without hurting [his] sore throat" (46). Indeed, the blancmange acts as a metaphor for domesticity. It may look "too pretty" (46) to spoil, but the act of consumption is so soft and soothing that the spirit is nourished, all qualms are dispelled, and the recipient is appreciative. Laurie's spirit is undoubtedly suffering, for he is trapped in a stifling, all-male environment. He implies that his room is not "kept nice" (46)--is not cozy--because it is strewn with the ravages of his own male carelessness. That "Laurie watches [Jo] in respectful silence" (47) as she tidies his room is not surprising: she is revealing her domestic skills, which he appreciates. She gives the boy's room "quite a different air" because she endows it with a woman's touch, just "what it want[s]" (47)--and just what Laurie wants--to feel the same "home love and happiness" that Laurie has often glimpsed in the March home. This domestic nurturing has immediate results. "There [is] color, light, and life in the boy's face now, vivacity in his manner, and genuine merriment in his laugh" (51). By bringing love and warmth to one of the

"splendid houses which are not homes because love is wanting" (92), Jo gives Laurie new life and helps transform a small part of his house into a home.

Jo also "play[s] mother" (39) to Beth, a role that takes a serious turn when Beth becomes deathly ill with scarlet fever. Jo "devote[s] herself to Beth day and`night" (171), concentrating so wholeheartedly on selfless nursing and nurturing that she recognizes the innate goodness that lies at the core of the womanly desire to give of one's self:

[Jo] acknowledge[s] the warmth of Beth's unselfish ambition to live for others, and make home happy by the exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth, or beauty. (171)

Yet Jo's concentration on her own literary talent, her creative capability, is not something she can lightly toss aside, no matter how poignant Beth's illness renders Jo's acknowledgement of domestic worth. Jo has always been the creative genius behind the girls' theatricals, writing the scripts and instigating the productions. Her talent has won her praise. In Beth's eyes, Jo is "a regular Shakespeare" (7).⁹ Since Beth is also Jo's "conscience" (173), this praise is doubly sweet; if Jo's conscience approves of her fiction, then her fiction withstands the rigor of moral examination. Even though Jo's writing is not domestic, it is still morally upright. Since Jo's lifelong dream is to "write books" (134), Jo desperately needs this moral affirmation. A "magic inkstand" (134) may provide a writer with incredible success and power, but it cannot guarantee moral rectitude. Only Jo's conscience can do that. Likewise, only Jo can use her conscience to come to terms with her creative bent. Jo can no easier relinquish her conscience than she

can her writing, for the two are irrevocably intertwined. She may better appreciate womanly domesticity, but she is not willing to sacrifice her creativity--that which makes her a uniquely powerful personality--for the relatively weak, passionless, homogenous existence of a conventional woman.

Jo is only a fledgling writer because she is still a child. The scene describing Jo's first glimpse of her first published story reinforces this conclusion. "Laurie chase[s] Jo all over the garden and finally capture[s] her in Amy's bower" (145), a section of the garden crowded with "brilliant, picturesque plants" (94), where the two giggle to see the "The Rival Painters" in print. That Jo should see her story in this part of the garden is significant, for the story, like Amy's bower, only deals with the bright and the picturesque instead of the substantial. At this stage, Jo is still fascinated with the bright and glossy image of melodrama; she has yet to learn to give her stories the substance of moral grounding. Jo is also gradually learning that she cannot manage people the way she can her heroines. She is a disgruntled author indeed when she sees that her "plan" to have Meg marry Laurie "is spoiled" (192). Real life has intruded upon her creative construct and has turned her glorious, magical image into a sharp splinter of reality. If dreams are created from a magic inkstand, then reality is created from a bronze inkstand with a missing cover--the well-worn correctness of morality--like the one Amy leaves Jo in her will. Jo must learn to ground her dreams and her writing in reality if she is to mature into a successful author and a successful woman.

By the end of Part I, Jo is different from the girl we see at the

beginning. Instead of lolling on the floor, this sixteen-year-old "loung[e] in her favorite low seat; with the grave, quiet look which best [becomes] her" (220). She begins to use words to instill domestic morality instead of frothy melodrama. For example, she suggests that a letter from Mr. Laurence to Laurie will "teach [the latter] his duty" (202). Domestic metaphors even weave themselves into her speech: she "hate[s] to see things going all crisscrossed and getting snarled up, when a pull here and a snip there would straighten it out" (192). While Marmee and Beth have been responsible for keeping alive the warmth and glow of home and hearth, Jo has been responsible for only one thing: concentrating on defining herself as a person. She has the "key" (135) to her dream because she has time--time to evolve slowly into a woman, time to accept gradually the worth of womanly responsibilities. "Whether [she] can unlock the door" and become a successful woman "remains to be seen" (135) because that is something only "time" can "tell" (37). Jo is extraordinarily lucky because she has the time to spare. A good metaphor for her is a well-stocked library, like the one in the Laurence house that she so delights in. There, deep in her books, Jo can nurture her needs. Surrounded by the wisdom of the ages, Jo can lose herself in time, can take the time to grow into and be comfortable with herself, her most important creative construct.

Polly Pepper, on the other hand, is an adult thrust in a child's body. Chronologically, she is ten years old; if we concentrate on descriptions of the five Peppers as a group, we can easily be swayed to believe that Polly is as young and carefree as Jo. The children are a "noisy, happy brood" (1), scampering, clucking "chickens in the house"

(49). Mrs. Henderson, the parson's wife, even calls Polly her own "little chicken" (63), as if Polly belongs among the brood of cute, fluffy chicks that the Hendersons are raising. These diminutive names are misleading. Polly may be ten, but she is mature enough to realize that five growing children can translate into "five bothers" (9) in the adult world. Polly and her eleven-year-old brother Ben do not even consider themselves to be children. They "always call[. . .] the three younger ones of the flock 'the children'" (154). As the "real" children in the household, only these three receive special treats. Polly begs her mother "many times" to "try" having a Christmas--but only "for the younger ones" (145). When Mamsie finally relents, she feels somewhat rueful that Ben and Polly have never had a Christmas. The eleven- and ten-year-old's protestation, however, reveals a sophisticated sense of self-denial: "It's a great deal better to have the children have a nice time" (160; my emphasis).

Polly's maturity stems from her exceedingly domestic role in the household, a womanly role that she fervently embraces. She makes all the meals, bakes the bread, washes the dishes, cleans the house, puts the children to bed, watches the children in Mamsie's absence, nurses the children when they are sick, and helps her mother mend clothing. As Mamsie says, "Polly does everything" (59). Domesticity is her job. In 1920, home economist Christine Frederick estimated that housekeeping--excluding the care of children--ate up a minimum of nine hours in a woman's day (Rodger 203). In a world void of the time-saving innovations of the early twentieth century, domesticity was a 'round-the-clock career. Thus, when Polly gets ready to cook, she "proceed[s]

to business" (12). The only education she has is of a domestic nature. Her "learning" (178) is sewing; the more nimble she is with a needle, the more able she will be to take on the burden of Mamsie's work as a seamstress. (Mamsie's cottage-industry occupation is onerous indeed, especially when we compare it to that of her peers in the streamlined apparatus of the apparel industry. "In 1859, less than a decade after the introduction of the sewing machine, a Cincinnati clothing factory had succeeded in dividing the making of a pair of men's pants, formerly the job of a single tailor, into seventeen different occupations" (Rodgers 25). In 1881, Mamsie does the work of seventeen people! She may control her work pace, rate, and environment, but she is utterly dependent on her supplier. Even in her idyllic village, the store that gives her work changes owners, "so that for a long time she fail[s] to get her usual supply of sacks and coats to make" [Five Peppers 2].)

Polly is more than an overworked drudge, however; she is a perfect housewife whose only concern is to give of herself unceasingly. When a severe case of measles settles in her eyes, a condition for which the doctor prescribes complete rest, Polly still "long[s] to spring out of bed and fix up a bit" (63) when Mrs. Henderson drops by to visit. She is willing to risk blindness for the sake of proving to the minister's wife that a little illness does not preclude her from keeping a sparkling clean house. Polly is so devoted to her domestic responsibilities that "the very idea" of not "do[ing] anything" fills her "active, wide-awake little body with horror" (67).¹⁰ Although Polly "doesn't have anything" (66) of her own, the one thing she wants above all else is a stove, an appliance that will allow her to be an even

better housewife. (Unlike Jo, Polly burns food--and just once, at that--only because the stove is old and unreliable.) The family doctor, anxious to do something for the family, provides Polly with a new, efficient replacement. Polly's reaction to it is significant. She drops "down on her knees with her arms flung right around the big, black thing" and "laugh[s] and cry[s] over it, all in the same breath" (92-93). The stove has "such a comfortable, homelike look about it" (90) that it exudes the very image of domesticity. It takes on the visage of a saint before which Polly worships in her domestic shrine. Her supplicant attitude before the stove then inspires the entire family, who grab hands and dance "around it like wild little things" (92) as if they are taking part in an exuberant ritual. The structure of the stove itself is very suggestive. "It's 'most all ovens" (92), familiar symbols of wombs, pregnancy, and nurturing. No wonder the stove "has a look about it as if it would say, 'I'm going to make sunshine in this house!'" (90). Polly will ensure the spread of domestic light, warmth, and nurturing.

Polly's devotion to domesticity may be tied to her sense of self, for Polly's value as a person in the eyes of other people stems from her domestic efficiency. Her rich friend Jasper thinks she is "smart" (139) and wishes she was his sister because she can bake. As Jasper expresses these ideas to Ben, Ben visibly swells with pride, "drawing himself up to his very tallest dimensions," and quickly tells Jasper that Polly's domestic virtues are far more encompassing: "She knows how to do everything, Jasper King!" (139). The gifts Polly receives from Jasper further reinforce her domestic value. Along with a songbird and a bunch

of flowers, Jasper surprises Polly with "A Complete Manual of Cookery," a book that will ensure Polly's enslavement to her stove and her success in the kitchen.

Throughout the book, the Pepper family refers to the Little Brown House as a separate entity. Mamsie hopes the family can "keep together" and "grow up good, so that the Little Brown House won't be ashamed of us" (9). Measles in the family means "Trouble for the Little Brown House," as the title to chapter 4 attests. Polly's new stove creates so much happiness that "it seem[s] as if the Little Brown House [will] turn inside out with joy" (90). The key to this personification rests firmly in Polly's grasp. Her domain--the kitchen--is "the principal room in the brown house" (1). There, with the aid of the stove, Polly stirs all the warmth and nurturing and morality of her domestic soul into a great big concoction called the Little Brown House. Her influence is so palpable that a house of wood takes on a nurturing quality of its own: it becomes an incubator of domestic virtue. Polly is indeed the "making" of her family because she provides a physical and emotional construct of warmth and love.

Polly is a very important person in this book. Ben is the first one to befriend Jasper and the first one we see as a storyteller for the children, yet Polly is the lucky one invited to visit Jasper's family in the city and the one who is touted as a wonderful storyteller. Polly is important because she, like Jo, is responsible for defining something. In Jo's case, that something is herself. Polly, however, has no time to define herself; instead, she must take over Mamsie's role and define "home" for her family. Polly balks at the idea of leaving home to go to

the city in her usual, self-sacrificing way--"Tisn't right" to go because "it's too good" (182)--but she has to spread the concepts of home and hearth. Mamsie believes Polly's trip "will be the making of [the Pepper family]" (182), but Polly has already achieved that in the Little Brown House.

With the Pepper family safe in the "warmest, snugest, most secure place" (Fritz 129) of domesticity, Polly must move on and spread the spirit of domestic warmth in more needy climates. Thus, she goes to the city. In the mansion amidst a bevy of bickering boys, Polly is a "bright-faced narrator" who constructs such a warm and cozy description of her family and "all the sayings and doings in the Little Brown House" (190) that everyone falls in love with her and the Little Brown House. She is "a comfort" (187) who brings the medicinal balm of domesticity: "in her smile the Little Brown House seem[s] to hop right out" (188). The warmth and love of the Little Brown House grows even stronger when Polly's sister Phronsie visits the city. Her added presence makes the "old dungeon" seem "a little like 'the Little Brown House'" (221). When the rest of the Peppers join Polly and Phronsie, Polly's job seems complete. "The emptying of the Little Brown House into the big one" (234) has made Jasper's house into a home. Neither Polly nor the readers need to go back to the country because domestic warmth and morality are now in town.

Polly is very successful nurturing others, but she rarely thinks of herself. She so internalizes her mother's belief that "the Little Brown House had got to be . . . just the niciest brown house that ever was" (245) that she expends all her energy on stoking the incubator and

ignores herself. The one time she thinks "of something besides cups and saucers," she is immediately "ashamed" (36) because she thinks she is being selfish. She is only guilty of longing "to go off for just one day, and do exactly as she [has] a mind to in everything" (36). She is only guilty of wanting to be a child who romps and frolics in the freedom of self-absorption. Yet in Polly's world, a ten-year-old girl is a woman who cannot indulge in unstructured time. Even in the city, she cannot lose herself in her love of music. "Every note" that she plays on the piano during her music lessons is "struck for the home brood" (191). Polly's inner resources are so depleted that she has to dwell on her domestic shrine--"her love for the Little Brown House"--to keep her "from flying up and spinning around in perfect despair" (192) when she cannot immediately master the piano. Since she "Never had . . . sat still for so long a time in her active little life" (192) as she must do on the piano bench, she seems to chafe at her inability to do something productive--which, in her life, means to give of herself successfully to others. Though free of the domestic chores that occupied her in the country, Polly's new responsibilities to the "home brood" and to Jasper's family keep her even busier than she was at home. Time is more elusive than ever because it is not a woman's ally. The education that will "come when it's time" (178) is thus very different for Polly than it is for Jo. Time is Polly's enemy, for the more she has, the more that others make demands upon it. Without the freedom to create her own person, Polly becomes a commodity whose energy and resources are drained for others' benefit, a portable incubator whose source of strength seems to derive from a well-deserved night's rest--

something we never see, of course; as a vital part of the domestic machinery, it must remain backstage, out of sight, in a well-mannered, "well-ordered household" (Mixing in Society 50).¹¹

The March home in Little Women is the American home that knows "no bounds of geography, no limits of time" (Stern 185). According to biographer Madeleine B. Stern, Alcott wanted readers to see this timeless place as "all the homes of America" (185). Americans would be proud to see girls like Jo loved and nurtured in a moral domestic atmosphere as they evolve awkwardly but oh so charmingly into fine women, healthy devotees to a socially defined construct so warm and true that they cannot help creating themselves in its mold. For Louisa May Alcott, girlhood was a time of discovery--the discovery of a girl's rightful and eventual alignment with womanhood. Though Alcott was by no means a rich woman when she wrote Little Women, she created a concept of childhood that takes for granted an abundance of time that only middle- and upper-class people can provide. Oddly enough, it took Margaret Sidney, daughter of wealthy parents, to reveal to middle-class America that the American childhood is not a homogeneous one. Mired in absolute poverty, Polly has no time to be a child. She is a ten-year-old woman, a domestic incorporation as neatly packaged as a ready-made product off a factory assembly line, as much a slave to time as the factory workers who participated in the movement for an eight-hour working day in the latter part of the 1800s (see Trachtenberg 91).

Just as "the image of machinery as 'labor-saving' [holds] a bitter irony for workers" (Trachtenberg 91), so childhood as a carefree, unvarying construct holds a bitter irony for the American female in the

late nineteenth century. Childhood is "labor-saving" only if the child is given time to be self-absorbed. In the increasingly time-starved American society, time becomes a luxury, a rare treat fit only for the children whose families can afford it. The middle- and upper-class children are guaranteed of a childhood, while poor children become commodities. Thus Polly is at the mercy of the wealthy children in Jasper's family. She is forced to give them nurturing quality time that will allow them to evolve gradually into moral adults. Bereft of time herself, she must nonetheless ensure that others receive it. In an era bursting with production and consumption, the poor children labor to provide their wealthier peers with time's nourishment. In Little Women, the very existence of the poor Hummel children enables Jo to be self-sacrificing. In German, Hummel means "bumblebee." The swarm of Hummel children produce the honeyed liqueur of poverty that feeds Jo's fledgling practice with the sweetness of self-denial. She takes one step closer to womanhood, while they slowly die of starvation and disease.

Through their depiction of childhood, Alcott's and Sidney's books give the middle class a positive self-image. The middle class may not always be wealthy, but it has enough money to allow its children the time to grow. Middle-class children are therefore exclusive products exquisitely and painstakingly crafted by an artisan's slow and loving hand. The lower class lacks both time and money; therefore it turns its children into adults as early as possible to enable the family to survive. Lower-class children are thus prefabricated products speedily formed in poverty's factory.

Yet middle-class families who have fallen on hard times also fit into this category, for they are, to use Alcott's phrase, the "silent poor" (Journals 187), respectable people who are too proud to beg for their needs. Mr. Pepper was never a wealthy man, but the tenor of the text suggests that his death ripped away an important source of income from a middle-class family. Sidney, however, never exposes the Pepper family gripped in the throes of gut-wrenching pain. Living on a diet of bread and potatoes, the growing children certainly would be flirting with malnutrition and deep, nagging hunger. But since the middle class believed in being sensitive to the suffering of others, they also conveniently relegated pain to the realm of those considered to be "other": the lower classes, "slaves, prisoners, mistreated animals, and the insane" (Lears 12). The Peppers did not feel the pain of the "other"; instead, they shared the pressure of labor's yoke as they scrambled to turn time to their advantage.

III

Emerson once wrote, "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit" ("Fate" 258). The March family, although not as financially solvent as it once had been, has enough money for "chrysanthemums and Christmas roses" (Little Women 5) to brighten the well-worn décor and enough time to allow Jo to build a child's playhouse from which her rebellious spirit can make cautious and then increasingly bold forays into the adult world. Marmee, the guardian of the moral key that can lock her daughters away from the possible dangers of such

liberty, legitimizes Jo's childish place in the world because she is responsible for putting Jo there. Nina Auerbach observes that the "one great freedom" that Mrs. March "allows her girls" is "the freedom to remain children" ("Austen and Alcott" 21).

Flowers are the rarest of luxuries for the Peppers, however. Only when Jasper sends Polly a Christmas floral arrangement can the blooms' delicious bouquet scent the air of Polly's self-erected domestic temple. Time, just as scarce as money, locks Polly into a woman's world and a woman's breathless schedule. Polly rarely complains, and her everlasting cheer certainly leads one to believe that the house of Polly's making, though confining, is sufficient to sustain her happiness. Yet Polly leaves this nourishing womb to go to the city. Jo, too, makes a similar journey, leaving behind her the security of her childhood playhouse. The March home--"an old, brown house" (44)--is as warm, safe, and intimate an incubator as Polly's Little Brown House; the rarefied world it shelters resembles a "little nunnery" (55). Bedell calls it a "charmed circle" (xi). And, indeed, it does seem charmed. Alcott's continual references to picnicking, boating, and whisking from one outdoor event to another give the reader the impression that the Marches live in the country; considering the autobiographical influences on the novel, one can be forgiven for mentally picturing the jolly girls in Concord, Massachusetts.

Looking closely at the text, however, reveals an interesting and somewhat disturbing fact. Jo's "Little Brown House" is in the city. Alcott slyly tucks this bit of information in only a few places. The first reference occurs immediately after the girls have sacrificed their

Christmas breakfast to the Hummels. As the March sisters wend their way homeward, Alcott mentions that "there were not in all the city four merrier people" (16) than these young girls. Alcott's choice of words is important. She easily could have used the word "town," which conjures up a warmer, more familial atmosphere than the loaded term "city." The word "city" crops up again when Alcott describes the adjoining March and Lawrence estates: "Both stood in a suburb of the city, which was still countrylike, with groves and lawns, large gardens, and quiet streets" (44). The nineteenth-century city, that fomenting locus of sales pitch and business fervor, the haunt of confidence men and painted women,¹² has been whitewashed, plucked from the ghetto and contoured according to ideal middle-class standards. Indeed, when Meg prepares to visit the Moffats, she packs her "'go abroady' trunk" (79) as if she were outfitting herself for a trip from the country to the city. Her journey is only across town, a journey up the social stratum. Although Alcott deliberately uses the word "city" to describe Jo's hometown--and with that word allows a host of mental images and expectations to slide through the reader's mind--she just as deliberately plays down the impact the word surely would have rendered for the nineteenth-century audience. The city--especially for women--was a perilous place, the haunt of society's liminal characters who crawled through its streets and endangered the good folk who unwittingly fell under their influence. In the whitewashed version, the liminal inhabitants would also sport a proportional coat of paint. The countrified--thus lovable--city would house equally countrified--thus lovable--people.

As the sole rebellious sister in the March home, Jo secures for herself a perch on the outskirts of the domestic threshold. In a community of women waiting for men,¹³ Jo would rather become a man than wish for one. At a time when one woman out of every ten became a spinster,¹⁴ Jo appears to be heading quickly toward membership in a significant social oddity. Marmee would rather Jo have self-respect and spinsterhood than wealth and despair (92), but her moralistic view, as Little Women suggests, belongs to the minority. Mrs. Moffat's lascivious scheming on behalf of her daughters' futures--what Marmee calls "worldly, ill-bred, and full of these vulgar ideas about young people" (91)--is far more indicative of the average middle-class woman's attitude toward the necessity of marriage.

Polly's overwhelming domesticity instantly precludes her from inclusion in the sisterhood of spinsterhood, but she, like Jo, is a liminal character. The location of her feminine-centered home is not described in ambiguous terms; we know she lives in a small rural village. The "big city" is "miles and miles away--oh, ever so far!" (177). The folk of Badgertown are definitely countrified, uttering (like the March servant Hannah) such rural--and therefore lower-class--words as "creeter" (82; cf. Little Women 14) and "a-hangin'" (22; cf. "a-beggin'" in Little Women 14). Yet Polly's lineage is of unknown quality. We learn on page 1 that "the father" is dead. No other mention is made of the family's background. Discerning readers will notice that the Peppers are among the few people in Badgertown--including the minister and the doctor--who do not speak in the rural dialect. Only Joel Pepper, the middle child, is inclined to blurt out

such "dreadful" and ill-bred words as, "My whockety, what a lot!" (3), an utterance that prompts a fierce reprimand from Polly, who is "very particular about things" (136). Although the Pepper family is obviously of good breeding, no one exists to verify it. Without this verification, Polly's eventual marriage prospects will almost certainly suffer.

Thus Jo and Polly are both liminal characters; saucy Jo lacks domesticity, that ultimate sign of femininity, while homey Polly lacks a verifiably good name. The two females are incomplete and will not become women with good futures until these voids are filled. Ironically, they will have to eschew their pastoralized, female-centered homes to discover their virtue in the dangerous streets of the city, for only in this male-centered domain can they find proper male tutors.

Since Jo already lives in the city, she must travel to a place with a reputation notorious enough to eclipse that of her hometown. Not surprisingly, Jo goes to New York City, where she quickly succumbs to her fascination with the financial rewards of writing spicy, lurid tales. As she winds her way up and down the "dark and dirty stairs" (324) at the Weekly Volcano offices, she grows accustomed to seeking out "the darker side of life" (328) for story material, unconsciously allying herself with characters who share with her a place on the scale of liminality--the perpetrators of "accidents, incidents, and crimes" (328). In penetrating books on poison and the facial expressions of pedestrians on the street, Jo starts to lose the degree of virtue that she has, the "innocent bloom" (328) that family life has protected up to now.

Jo is saved from herself by Professor Bhaer who, "acting as a substitute parent" (Bassil 192), becomes Jo's guide through the seamy side of the city's traditionally male domain. He persuades her to feel ashamed of the slant her writing has taken--and, with her writing, her subsequent voyeuristic behavior into the lurid fringes of society. Unlike the hospital, where, ironically, females have masculine sanction to wade hip-deep in gore and death and insanity, the city is one place where female warriors have yet to gain acceptance. Jo must realize that though she has her "grandfather's spirit" (50), in her his characteristics seem like "odd, blunt ways" (51); she is becoming a woman and must act accordingly.

Jo's full capitulation to womanhood does not occur until she is back in her hometown. Although she has followed Bhaer's advice and has written only of the moral things she knows, her education is not complete: she has not fully realized that the role of womanhood is her safest, most secure recourse for the future. In need of her final lesson, Jo wanders into "that part of the city" where gentlemen "most do congregate"--that is, "among the countinghouses, banks, and wholesale warerooms" (438). The atmosphere is dank and grim as glowering skies deepen the gloom of the "muddy" and "grimy" (439) surrounds, a smoldering fire waiting for ignition. The danger inherent to females in this environment then bursts into flame when Jo is "half-smothered by descending bales, and hustled unceremoniously by busy men who looked as if they wondered 'how the deuce she got there'" (438). This masculine response clearly indicates that Jo does not belong here because she is the wrong sex. Thus peril dogs her exit. Jo's "narrowly escaped

annihilation from a passing truck" (439) is but an ominous reminder that women have no business in a male domain.

Bhaer has not been remiss in his role, however, for he quickly appears on the scene, a watchful tutor who keenly scans his pupil for any signs of enlightenment. To propel Jo's eventual capitulation, Bhaer escorts Jo--under the protective auspices of his umbrella--to the thoroughly feminine world of a ribbon shop. Jo, confused and disoriented about her true place in the world, makes typical blunders in her transactions for frills and furbelows and weeps at the rage of feelings in her soul. She has always needed a little time to grow up; this situation is no different from any others in that respect. Bhaer very wisely grants it to her under the guise of taking a walk. Given time to grow, Jo realizes that she, too, waits for a man and accepts Bhaer's marriage proposal, sealing her future with a kiss for her Friedrich under the umbrella of his male wisdom and virtue.

Polly's initiation to the big city is more gradual than Jo's, perhaps because the initial reason for her going was not to "'help mother'" (183)--a favorite phrase with both the Marches and the Peppers--but to cheer an allegedly ailing Jasper. Wooed from the warmth of her incubator with the promise of nursing a more needy chick, Polly is geared to help someone else and, as usual, not think of herself. Thus, when she is driven to the King's home, the carriage travels "through the heart of the city, down narrow, noisy, busy streets, out into wide avenues with handsome stately mansions on either side" (185). Living on the pastoralized outskirts of the city, surrounded by wide open spaces, Polly has only a brief and gentle introduction from the depths of a

luxurious transport to the narrow and crooked haunts of the inner city.

Since Polly, unlike Jo, hails from the country, she requires male tutelage even in this gentrified section of the city. Thus, Jasper and his three male cousins Van, Percy, and Dick are her constant companions, both in the house and in occasional drives to the park. When not under the watchful eye of her schoolroom tutor, Polly is engaged in piano lessons from a male French music teacher. Even Polly's rare visits to the greenhouse are supervised by old Mr. Turner, the gardener. The hefty bulk of Polly's time is circumscribed by watchful masculine eyes.

Despite this veritable vanguard, the city encroaches menacingly upon Polly, for she has yet to find the tutor who can guide her to legitimacy. The first harrowing experience strikes not at her, however, but at her sister Phronsie. This makes sense, given Polly's proclivity for self-sacrifice. What better way to strike at her than to endanger her loved ones?

Perfect Polly forgets to write her weekly letter to Mamsie, even though she "had plenty of time" (207) in which to write it. In a sisterly effort to make up for Polly's unusual slip up, five-year-old Phronsie wanders alone from the comforting security of the spacious mansion and its surrounds to the heart of the business district, already described as a "narrow, noisy, busy" place, to mail her own hieroglyphic version of Mamsie's letter. "Turning corner after corner" (208) until she is hopelessly lost in alien terrain, Phronsie, like Jo, experiences society's keen displeasure with her as a foreign interloper. Great crowds of people throng around and press upon her, using their sheer bulk to impress upon her the weight of their disapproval. With "no time

for anything else but to stumble in and out" of the heavy masses, Phronsie can only desperately try to "keep from being crushed completely beneath their feet" (209). Painfully and obviously ill-equipped to help herself, Phronsie is the perfect target for the sordid, unfeeling, liminal characters of the streets. An "old huckster woman" raps Phronsie on the head, stripping from her the mark of her country innocence when her little bonnet is ripped from her head. Bereft of the protection of wide open spaces, Phronsie looks for a street in which "there might be room enough for her" (209). Crossing an avenue to search for this coveted protection, Phronsie recreates Jo's own headlong flight across the street to escape the danger of the warehouses. Just as Jo narrowly escaped death from a passing truck, Phronsie barely manages to dodge a horse-driven vehicle before she is propelled into the safe arms of old Mr. King.

Phronsie's near death is a clear warning for females to watch their step in the city. Just in case the message was not completely understood, however, the danger creeps closer to home. "Two dark figures, big and powerful" (231) with "two big holes" (233) for faces rupture the protective walls of the mansion and of Mr. King's safe. These symbols of stealth and cunning and menace cannot rob the house successfully because Phronsie discovers the thieves and rouses the household; but their ominous presence is enough. In choosing not to strike Phronsie--though one man is tempted to do so and even lifts his arm threateningly--the criminal element proves that its ability to strike at any time is a constant and very real source of danger. Mr. King's mansion may be located in a genteel section, but it remains in

the city, the haunt of shady, shadowy, indistinct characters who, unnoticed by the more privileged classes, can crawl subtly and easily into the crevices of even the upper echelon of society. If females act wisely and do not explore the murky recesses of the city's nooks and crannies--including the nooks and crannies of the allegedly "safe" city home--then they will not tempt the masculine purveyors of these closed spaces to knock the lesson permanently into their heads.

Polly, however, cannot learn everything vicariously. If anything, Phronsie's escapades with the fringe element of society remind Polly that her own liminal standing--and that of her family--puts her more in league with the thieves than with the legitimate members of the household. As the book approaches its last pages, Polly's behavior undergoes a drastic change. The domestic goddess turns all thumbs and cannot sew the buttons on her shoes. In her own words, she metamorphoses into "a hateful, cross old bear" (252) whose impatience and irritability wreak havoc on her schedule, a domestic woman's only ally in the exhausting fight against time. She "trie[s] to make up for lost time" (252),

But 'twas all of no use. The day seemed to be always just racing ahead of her, and turning a corner before she could catch up to it, and Ben and the other boys only caught dissolving views of her as she flitted through halls or over stairs. (253)

Bereft of the anchor of her domestic capability, Polly's very substance starts to melt away. She even forgets to feed her pet bird, failing to remember that she has allowed her store of birdseed--an external source of warmth and nourishment that very readily symbolizes Polly's internal source of warmth and nourishment--to dwindle into nothing. Reduced to a

shadowy version of herself, Polly must venture alone into the male domain (all her male escorts are nowhere to be found or are busy with other projects), must mingle freely with her shadowy compatriots of the streets, to seek more bird food--a new source of warmth and nourishment.

"Secretly glad at the chance for a good hearty run along the hard pavements, a thing she had been longing to do ever since she came to the city" (262), Polly seems to intuit that her errand will be fruitful. Paralleling Jo's flight in the rain into the open arms and open umbrella of Professor Bhaer, Polly dashes through the rain straight into a man with an umbrella. Although Polly loses her newly purchased birdseed in the incident, the stranger magnanimously buys her more in extravagant quantities, thereby replenishing Polly's external and internal larders. But the most significant largesse that he can endow is revealed after he has escorted her home under the beneficent and protective expanse of his umbrella. The stranger turns out to be Mason Whitney: Jasper King's brother-in-law, Percy, Van, and Dick's father, and Mrs. Pepper's first cousin. In one fell swoop, Polly has provided her family with "the father" who, missing since the beginning of the story, can establish the repute of the Peppers' lineage. Linked by blood to Jasper's cousins and brother-in-law, the Peppers can now verify that the "look about them that shows them worthy to be trusted" is indeed the product of "good blood" (202). With the quality of their lineage confirmed, the Peppers' close ties to the King and Whitney families are validated. "The father" of the Whitney children has thus provided for the Pepper family's future in a way that Polly never could. His good blood legitimizes any future ties of a more intimate sort between the three families, allowing Polly

to escape the pain of an inappropriate marriage and to marry Jasper in a later book.

Thus male virtue is responsible for defining the middle-class woman. Professor Bhaer's moral virtue redirects Jo's creative energies from the lurid liminality of the city streets to the feminine domesticity of marriage and children. Jo, "growing as thin as a shadow" (458), displays visible evidence of the male's success: time, a woman's enemy, is eating away at Jo's body, proving that she is finally a legitimate woman. Mason Whitney's genealogical virtue validates Polly's bloodline and thus smooths the way for Polly to eventually marry into a wealthy middle-class family.

But do men define women through male virtue or through the virtue of being male? An examination of the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) reveals that "virtue" has been associated with men longer than it has with women. Since the 1300s, virtue has denoted "the possession or display of manly qualities; manly excellence, manliness, courage, valour" (676). Not until the end of the sixteenth century was "virtue" aligned with "chastity, sexual purity, especially on the part of women" (676). As Hannah Pitkin notes in Ruth H. Bloch's essay on "Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," the word "virtue" "derives from the Latin virtus, and thus from vir, which means 'man'" (43). Thus virtue is irrevocably linked with the male. The virtue of being male and male virtue are virtually the same thing. In eighteenth-century America, feminine virtue, an inviolate cloister located in the private realm--literally, in a woman's privates--came under the protection of masculine virtue, that patriotic protector of the pub(1)ic. As English

sentimental literature permeated the young nation, female virtue "became more pronounced . . . as women were increasingly deemed the moral instructors of men" in the home, the schoolroom, and the church pew (Bloch 52, 55). Although private and public virtue grew increasingly entangled, men had to preserve their self-interest by disallowing women entrance into such traditionally male boundaries as politics (Bloch 57). The city, that fomenting locus of business activity created and supervised primarily by male energy--especially in the industrialized boom of the nineteenth century--rather typically became another arena off limits to females. Blanche H. Gelfant postulates that the literary heroine, hungry for the freedom allowed men in actuality and in tales of the frontier, viewed the city as a luscious harbor of independence and anonymity. There, liberty runs rampant, like wild grapes, ready to be picked anywhere: "around the corner, a few streets away, in another neighborhood where nobody knows [the female harvester] and where she alone will say who she is" and what fruits she will pick (279). Yet for Jo and Polly, turning corners and crossing city streets have ominous consequences. Jo and Polly's sister are nearly killed. Only the sheltering umbrellas of Professor Bhaer and Mason Whitney save Jo and Polly from the eventual obscurity of spinsterhood or an unworthy marriage. In the city, no one may know who Jo and Polly are, but their presence is resented just the same. They also cannot define themselves--stand alone and state who they are--because men take care of that for them. Professor Bhaer defines Jo as his future wife, and Mason Whitney defines Polly as his relative. Although Jo and Polly are rendered whole again, saved from the shadowy world of liminality, they could not have

saved themselves. They had to rely on the virtue of men to be legitimized in the eyes of law and society.

In the end, Jo and Polly's childhood experiences dwindle in importance. Jo has "liberty till [she] tires of it" (311), but she still becomes a domesticated woman at time's beck and call. Polly is always a slave to the clock because Sidney never allows her to help herself, never gives her a boost in life by granting the Pepper family a few more "luxuries" like the very chickens and pigs that she, as a girl, considered to be a vital and integral part of country life. Even for the moneyed middle class, childhood itself is a fantasy, for, as John W. Crowley bemoans, "there is no distinct girl-world to be lost" (391). Money and time may stave off the inevitable, but they cannot do so forever. In these children's books of the nineteenth century, the virtue of being female is as surely a trap as the virtue of being male is a road to liberty. Unwittingly, Alcott and Sidney, two fervently nationalistic authors who believe in the female need to be a warrior, admit that female virtue is not chaste and deep enough to legitimize the country and its progeny. Abandoned by the very women who created them, Jo and Polly are thrown at the mercy of the male-dominated society responsible for the extent of their literary lives in publication: the publishers. Lothrop, a man who "believed that, if there was to be a book, it must be a book which the American people wanted, and which it would be good for them to have" (Hale 260), is but one example of the male power structure that decided upon the proper literary diet of the nation. Anxious that the American people become and remain the right kind of American people, publishers force-fed the children a regimented

diet full of moral starch but liberally doused with sweet faces and toothsome adventures that more than obliterated the bitter taste of their cultural agenda. Thus, on the surface, Jo and Polly seem like jolly characters whose scrapes and triumphs more than adequately help pass the time in the childish mind. Underneath, however, lies a painful story of children abandoned to the whims of male publishers and women abandoned to the mores of men. Time and labor on the part of the authors and on the part of the literary characters are thereby rendered somewhat insignificant. Yet their very insignificance registers their importance, for the belittling of women's work, women's time, and women's creations is an age-old tale tucked neatly between the lines of two children's tales. Masculine mores, sandwiched within the white-bread morality of sentimental fiction, feeds the juvenile appetite in Little Women and Five Peppers and plants in the juvenile subconscious a seed that, nourished with time, matures into the adult realization that even the child's world--more readily available in the more enlightened twentieth century--is not an Eden when the books that feed its inhabitants harbor a bitter bough from the Tree of Knowledge.

NOTES

¹ For various interpretations, see Louisa May Alcott, Alternative Alcott and Behind a Mask; Nina Auerbach, "Austen and Alcott on Matriarchy: New Women or New Wives?" and Communities of Women; Veronica Bassil, "The Artist at Home: The Domestication of Louisa May Alcott"; John W. Crowley, "Little Women and the Boy-Book"; Anne Dalke, "'The House-Band': The Education of Men in Little Women"; Sarah Elbert, A Hunger for Home; Karen Halttunen, "The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott"; Eugenia Kaledin, "Louisa May Alcott: Success and the Sorrow of Self-Denial"; Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson, "The Female Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century America: Parameters of a Vision"; Joy A. Marsella, The Promise of Destiny; Joel Myerson, "Louisa May Alcott on Concord"; Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds. "Three Contemporary Accounts of Louisa May Alcott, with Glimpses of Other Concord Notables"; Charles Strickland, Victorian Domesticity; Janet S. Zehr, "The Response of Nineteenth-Century Audiences to Louisa May Alcott's Fiction."

² See Mary P. Ryan's Cradle of the Middle Class for a closer look at the middle-class male's upbringing.

³ Daniel Lothrop's lineage may also have fueled the fires of Sidney's fervent nationalism. Included among Lothrop's ancestors is John Lothrop, who traveled to America with Anne Hutchinson (Hale 254-55).

⁴ Edward E. Hale explains the New England attitude toward drugstores that sparked the genesis of Lothrop's combination drug-and-bookstores:

Any one who knows New England knows how the shop for drugs in any large town brings to itself customers who are not ill, and who want quite a large range of what perhaps might be called fancy goods, and that it may be made to be the centre of a very wide trade in such articles. If there is no book-store in a country village you go to the druggist's for pens, for paper, for envelopes, or for cards. (255)

Adding books to the already considerable inventory of a respectable drugstore would only increase the variety--and thus the desirability--of the store's wares. From an early age--he was only seventeen when he started expanding beyond his first drug-and-bookstore venture (Hale 256)--Lothrop catered to the physical and moral health of the public.

⁵ Anne Thaxter Eaton describes Wide Awake in more detail in her chapter "Magazines for Children in the Nineteenth Century," ed. Meigs, 248-62;

In size and general appearance it resembled St. Nicholas and was designed for the same public. It had many pictures, and pages in large type for the youngest readers. (255)

If the following notice in the weekly newspaper Lynn Record (November 1880) is representative of nationwide reaction to Lothrop's magazine, then St. Nicholas probably felt the pinch of competition:

The December number of the Wide Awake has been received and we need not say that it is well worth all that is asked for it. It is indeed a model of its kind and parents should see to it that their children are provided with it. It is beautifully illustrated while the stories and sketches are all that could be desired. Only two dollars a year. Ella Farman, editor. D. Lothrop & Co. Boston publisher. (qtd. in Johnson 316)

Incidentally, the last installment of Sidney's Five Peppers was included in this issue. In the long run, however, St. Nicholas prevailed in the marketplace and eventually took over Wide Awake (Eaton 255). Since Lothrop also published Babyland, Pansy, and Our Little Men and Women periodicals for juvenile readers (Hale 261), he was not completely swept out of this niche in the market.

⁶ The phrase "scream with delight" is familiar to anyone well-versed in children's literature of the nineteenth century, where girls scream with delight ad nauseum. A children's book editor would have been cognizant of this usage and would have wielded it accordingly. Zehr's questioning of the word "scream" could indicate her own uneasiness with a word so commonly associated in the twentieth century with pain and fear, especially in cases of domestic violence. If this interpretation is indeed the root of Zehr's question, however, she does not indicate it and thus leaves the matter in a far too ambiguous state. More than likely, Zehr is indeed unfamiliar with the phrase, which, unfortunately, does not speak well for her.

⁷ Bronson Alcott equated females, devilry, rebelliousness, and his own family in his journal entry for 16 March 1846: "Two devils as yet, I am not quite divine enough to vanquish--the mother fiend and her daughter" (qtd. in Halttunen, "Domestic Drama" 235).

⁸ For an interesting look at how both men and women fostered the idea of the passionless woman, see Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850."

⁹ Louisa May Alcott recalls that after reading eight-year-old Louisa's poem "To the First Robin," her "proud mother preserved [the poem] with care, assuring me that if I kept on in this way I might be a second Shakespeare in time" ("Sketch of My Childhood," Ladies' Home Journal, qtd. in Swayne 97, n. 2).

¹⁰ Whether or not Sidney is making a deliberate reference to Lothrop's magazine Wide Awake is a matter for conjecture, but her use of this particular adjective could be viewed as an instance of interpellation. Ostensibly, all little "wide awake" American children--

like Wide Awake's subscribers--would have been able to share in Polly's horror of idleness.

¹¹ Karen Halttunen explores this phenomenon in chapter 4, "Sentimental Culture and the Problem of Etiquette," of Confidence Men and Painted Women.

¹² Halttunen originated this phrase in the title of her book Confidence Men and Painted Women.

¹³ For a fuller discussion of this theme, see chapter 2, "Waiting Together: Two Families," in Nina Auerbach's Communities of Women and in "Austen and Alcott on Matriarchy: New Women or New Wives?".

¹⁴ Mary Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America, p. 34.

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