

THE FUSION OF TRANSCENDENTALISM
AND SENTIMENTALISM IN LOUISA MAY
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Abstract: Starting from the observation that Louisa May Alcott's most famous novel *Little Women* (1868) is an unconventional "girls' novel", this paper offers evidence that it actually represents a fusion of transcendental and sentimental ideas. The initial hypothesis is that Alcott attempts to translate Emerson's concept of self-reliance, which is male, into its female version. Moreover, the novel's vision also aligns with Bronson Alcott's views on child-rearing and education. However, to make their philosophical ideas more appealing and down-to-earth, the novel combines them with the sentimental worldview, resulting in a pragmatic form of Transcendentalism. In examining the issues of self-actualisation, children's upbringing, education, and work, as reflected in *Little Women*, the conclusion emerges that not only is the novel's vision shaped by both transcendental and sentimental ideologies, but also that some of the concepts of these ideologies coincide. The paper argues that it is precisely this unusual combination of progressive ideas and everyday issues in the novel that continues to spark the interest of both readers and critics almost 160 years after its publication.

Keywords: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, Transcendentalism, sentimental, Emerson, self-reliance, Bronson Alcott, education, child-rearing, work

1. Introduction

When the publisher Thomas Niles proposed that Louisa May Alcott should write a "girls' novel", she was rather reluctant to do so. Her main argument was that she was not particularly fond of girls and did not know many of them. However, a compromise was reached. Alcott wrote a female Bildungsroman based on her own experiences. Today, almost 160 years after its publication, *Little Women* (1868) is considered a classic of world literature in spite of its domestic, romantic, and sentimental surface. The main reason why the novel continues to spark the interest of both readers and critics is that beneath its apparent simplicity progressive ideas are hidden. This paper adopts the position that *Little Women* represents a vivid illustration of Alcott's version of transcendental ideas. More precisely, Alcott's vision in this novel may be depicted as a kind of fusion of Transcendentalism and Sentimentalism.

Alcott was inevitably influenced by the progressive ideas of her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, one of the most radical figures of Transcendentalism (1836–1847). Her father had progressive views on education and he consistently applied these ideas when raising his own children, especially

Louisa and Anna. In addition, Louisa grew up in Concord, the town where the movement flourished, in the immediate vicinity of Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller. Since “Louisa was immersed in transcendentalism, lived and breathed it, heroicized its leaders, and was the subject of its experiments” (Rogers 2019: 3), a conclusion may be drawn that the movement had a great impact on her.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most prominent luminary of Transcendentalism, describes it as an essentially idealistic movement (1842: 1). In opposition to materialists, whose judging is based on facts and senses, the transcendentalists believe that intuition, vision and insight are beyond them. The most significant difference between the two opposing ideologies concerns the place and role of the individual in society. In order to prosper, the materialists require conformity to its established rules and conventions. Alternatively, Emerson argues that the society of his time is reduced to a “mob” (1841: 14) from which unquestioning submission was expected. So conceived, society is the greatest enemy of humanity, authenticity, and autonomy of the individual (1841: 3). Therefore, the transcendentalists argue against conformity. Instead of turning outward, people should turn inward, to the essence of their beings. It is for this reason that the transcendentalists, and especially Emerson, insist on the importance of self-introspection and self-reliance. The self-reliant individual is the one who is focused on listening and acting upon one’s inner voice, which is, according to Emerson, the inviolable guide on the quest to self-discovery.

As this paper aims to demonstrate, many of the ideas of the Transcendentalist movement, such as self-reliance, the importance of work and poverty as an impetus to self-improvement, were wholeheartedly embraced by Louisa May Alcott. Contrary to the views of some feminist critics that the development of the March girls goes in the direction of submission to social norms, this article begins with the observation that the sisters actually learn how to actualise their own potentials and develop their own value systems, which are in considerable opposition to social conformity. More precisely, the maturing of the sisters may be described as facing their own shortcomings and overcoming them, as well as finding a balance between self-control and self-actualisation, between idealism and pragmatism. However, it should be remembered that self-control was a virtue advocated not only by the transcendentalists but also by the so-called sentimental revolution. Similarly to the transcendentalists, the sentimentalists are opposed to materialism and reliance on the “voice of reason”. The influence of the sentimental view of the world is perhaps most obvious in the novel’s emphasis on the attention and power of the family. Taking all this into consideration, as well as the fact that *Little Women* is dominated by domestic themes, such as raising children, education, and marriage, this paper asserts that Alcott’s best-known novel is a vivid illustration of her own version of female Transcendentalism,

a kind which fuses progressive ideals with domesticity. The following sections of this paper will delve more thoroughly into the issues of self-actualisation, child-rearing, education, and the importance of work in *Little Women*. These sections aim to demonstrate that Alcott not only combines transcendental ideas with domesticity and sentimentality but also that some of their concepts, particularly in education and raising children, match.

2. Self-actualisation

The starting hypothesis of this paper is that the March family, Jo in particular, represent the embodiment of Emersonian ideas, self-reliance in the first place. In our view, many critics have been led by the novel's happy ending to the wrong conclusion that the heroines of *Little Women* are embodiments of the self-denial that was expected of women in Victorian America.¹ This paper argues that *Little Women* is an unconventional female Bildungsroman. At first glance, it may seem that the March sisters' development aligns with conforming to society's expectations. However, this is not the case here. Although the novel's focus is on the coming of age of Jo, the same pattern of growth is evident in Meg and Amy as well. Their parents teach them to master themselves, to learn how to deal with their greatest flaws – their “bosom enemies”. In order to become self-actualised individuals, the March sisters are encouraged to “overcome their internal conflicts, fears, doubts, and the expectations of society” (Goswami and Kumaran 2019: 104). Therefore, the girls' effort to become the best versions of themselves has often been misinterpreted as meeting society's demand for female self-denial. This assertion is supported by the fact that Beth, the embodiment of self-denial, dies. As Maruo-Schröder convincingly argues, “Beth's death can be seen as a lesson of self-denial gone too far” (2018: 404). Her death testifies to the fact that this novel suggests that the individual should find a balance between self-expression and self-denial.

This paper adopts the position that it is true that “the novel focuses on the girls' project to better themselves” (Maruo-Schröder 2018: 403), but this process is not undertaken to meet society's expectations. According to Emerson, to experience self-actualisation and true happiness, we must recognise our own flaws, face and eventually overcome them: “Every man in his lifetime has to thank his faults” (1910: 22). Flaws are useful because they are the main impetus for change: “When he is pushed, tormented, defeated, he has a chance to learn something” (1910: 22). Therefore, the March sisters are encouraged to know themselves and deal with their “burdens” because it is the only way to realise their full potential.

¹ See Judith Fetterley's article “‘Little Women’: Alcott's Civil War” or Marta Miquel Baldellou's paper “Inheriting Traditional Roles of Female Growth: From Louisa May Alcott's ‘Little Women’ to Jeffrey Eugenides' ‘The Virgin Suicides’”.

Moreover, the representation of the sisters is in accordance with Emerson's claim that every individual is unique (1841: 2). Each of them is endowed with both virtues and flaws. Such a representation of characters is consistent with Emerson's assertion that there is a perfect balance not only in nature but also in every creature, so that "A surplusage given to one part is paid out of a reduction from another part of the same creature" (1910: 6).² Meg is a little vain and materialistic, too fond of luxury – her journey to self-actualisation implies modesty. Jo (Josephine) is honest, intelligent and generous, but possesses a stormy temper. Her maturation goes in the direction of curbing her innate impetuosity which often gets her into trouble. Beth is excessively shy, selfless and introverted, and her development goes in the direction of overcoming these shortcomings. Amy's greatest flaw is her selfishness and craving for material things. By the end of the novel, Amy marries Laurie, a rich young man, but not for his wealth. In addition, she stops thinking only of herself and becomes aware of the needs of others. In conclusion, all sisters succeed in exhibiting self-control.

However, it should be noted that the sentimentalists, just like Emerson, highlighted the importance of self-control. The character of Jo perfectly fits into the concept of a sentimental heroine who endeavours to master herself. According to Donna Campbell, the striving for independence and a stormy temper (the two most dominant attributes of Jo) are traits that, "within the context of sentimental fiction", unambiguously point to "a true heroine ripe for moral education" (1994: 120). In other words, moral education is the ultimate goal in both Transcendentalism and sentimental fiction. Although *Little Women* does not contain all the elements of a sentimental novel, Campbell recognises three main conventions of the genre: the crotchety aunt, the gentle sister, and the moral mentor/guardian (1994: 120). This critic correctly notices that self-reliance is an integral and essential part of the moral education of a sentimental heroine (1994: 119). Taking all this into consideration, as well as the fact that facing one's own faults and overcoming them was considered of crucial importance both by the transcendentalists and the sentimentalists, the conclusion emerges that the sisters' mastery of self-control coincides with both ideologies.

Although the March sisters (except for Beth) experience self-actualisation at the end of the novel, the journey to fulfilment is long and thorny. At the very beginning of the book, all the sisters but Beth are dissatisfied. For example, Jo feels constrained by being female. Instead of being Aunt March's companion, she would rather go to war and attempt to do something important. However, it is the oldest sister, Meg, who is the loudest in voicing her displeasure due to their poverty and unfavourable

2 Although this paper interprets the development of the March sisters from the point of view of Emersonian self-reliance, their learning to control passions also coincides with Margaret Fuller's position on self-mastery as an integral and important part of maturation, which is elaborated in her seminal *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

life prospects. She wants to become a proper Victorian woman, a “real” lady, but this seems impossible in the current life circumstances: “I shall have to toil and moil all my days, with only little bits of fun now and then and get old and ugly and sour, because I’m poor, and can’t enjoy my life as other girls do – it’s a shame” (1869: 55).

Contrastingly, Jo, as the most sober of the sisters, is the first to realise that many rich families do not have what they possess – mutual affection, support of the parents and the warmth of the family home. Their house, full of energy and closeness, stands in stark contrast to the Laurence family house. Only when the sisters compare themselves to Laurie, a wealthy, but lonely boy without parents, do they begin to understand how happy they are to have their parents and each other.

It should be noted that whereas conforming to society is envisioned as undesirable, adapting to the needs of the family is essential in the fictional world of *Little Women*. Hence, while the novel places great emphasis on self-reliance, this self-reliance has to be compatible with the values and interests of the family. The March sisters are supported to pursue their dreams, but they are also encouraged to strike a balance between individual fulfilment and the family’s welfare. For example, Jo has the full support of her family to become a professional writer, but her parents do not approve of her writing sensationalist stories. However, the main reason for Jo’s undertaking the genre is that she wants her creativity to bring her (and her family) economic independence. Her version of self-reliance is practical, in contrast to Bronson Alcott’s impractical one, which Louisa criticised in her prose satire *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873). Life in an idealist family that was constantly in debt turned Louise into a pragmatic idealist, that is, a woman who insisted on ideology that could be put into practice. Hence, she advocated that personal ambitions and “spirituality were the whole guide to correct conduct” (Alcott 2000: 11) – they had to be combined with practicality and the common welfare.

This balance is highlighted and striven for throughout *Little Women*. However, straddling the gap between personal pursuits and the family’s needs and expectations is not simple, which is testified by the sisters’ occasional bickering and conflicts. Still, with the help of their devoted mother, the girls succeed in creating a harmonious community. The greatest turning point in the March sisters’ worldviews occurs when they face the biggest temptation – when the black cloud of death hangs over the Marches’ house. The moment in which Beth’s life is in jeopardy marks the crucial point when the development of her sisters moves in a different direction. It is just then that the sisters realise how blessed they are and begin to feel gratitude for everything they have. This transformation is completely in the spirit of Transcendentalism, which suggests that an individual does not influence many life circumstances, but may change the way (s)he views life. For example, Meg finally understands how insignificant material things are compared to the truly valuable gifts of

life: “how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy; in love, protection, peace and health; the rich blessings of life” (1869: 266).

Still, Beth’s death is also consistent with the conventions of the sentimental novel. In this genre, it is precisely the death of the gentle sister that causes a change in the heroine’s worldview. As Campbell convincingly argues, only after Beth dies does Jo begin to appreciate all that she embodied, primarily serving others and taking care of the household (1994: 122). However, we disagree with the critic’s assertion that this transformation signifies Jo’s “submission to a womanly role” (1994: 123). Rather, her reconciliation with the performance of duties in the home indicates the desired balance between her aspirations and self-control. Jo’s acceptance of her “domestic side” does not mean giving up on her personal wishes and plans, which she is still attempting to realise.

2.1. Marriage

With this twist, however, the self-actualisation of the March sisters has not yet been achieved. An important phase of their maturation is marriage. Many critics interpret their marriages as conventional and as unequivocal indicators of compromise with the society. The character of Jo’s husband, Professor Bhaer, in particular, has been associated with male control and authority (Maruo-Schröder 2018: 410). Although the three March sisters marry by the end of the novel, the paper aims to demonstrate that marriage is an integral part of their journey to self-actualisation, “not the primary goal of their adult life” (Phillips 1993: 5). Meg, Amy, and Jo have independently chosen their spouses. Their respective marriages are neither imposed from external influences nor are they the result of their desire to climb the social ladder. According to Emerson, those individuals who allow society to deprive them of the opportunity to choose their own marriages, occupations or religion are to be condemned. Starting from this observation, the decision of Meg and Amy to renounce their materialistic aspirations and choose partners to whom they are sincerely attached and who match their inclinations and temperaments is particularly striking and significant. Meg’s choice not to follow her aunt’s advice and wait for a better (that is, wealthier) match and Amy’s decision to give up her previous goal to marry well at any cost and thus help her family symbolise the Emersonian “moment they [he] act[s] from themselves [himself], tossing the laws, the books, idolatries and customs of the window” (1841: 15). The way Meg and Amy choose their life companions testifies to their maturity, which is reflected in their determination to act by their own vision: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion... the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps... the independence” (1841: 5). The peak of their personal

growth is the point at which they reject entrenched, conventional thinking and choose to live according to their own values and principles.

Likewise, Jo's decision to marry actually testifies that she has fully matured. It is important to notice that Jo has long been a strong opponent of the institution of marriage for two reasons. The first reason is that Jo is aware that, given the fact that all the children of the Marches are female, marriage will inevitably mean leaving home and disintegration of the family. When news of Meg's possible proposal reaches Jo, she is horrified to learn that the family may fall apart. However, as an excellent judge of character and behaviour, Jo quickly sees that marriage is inevitable due to Meg's obvious affection for the suitor and that she must come to terms with the "harsh" reality. The second reason is the fact that marriage in the Victorian period mostly restricted women. Jo fears that marriage will inevitably mean the end of the freedom she enjoyed in her parents' house. It should come as no surprise that Jo is afraid to leave her unconventional home, where she is allowed to work on her creativity alone in the attic and take on the traditionally male role of breadwinner.

However, Jo's choice of a spouse is such that it will in no way hinder her personal development and freedom. Some critics have misinterpreted Jo's choice to stop writing sensational stories as unequivocal proof of her submission to her husband. Actually, both Jo's husband and her father have reservations about such writing not because they want to subdue her, but because they share the opinion that she can do much better. Professor Bhaer is somewhat similar to Jo's parents, but not because he wants to establish control over her, but because he is like a guide who brings her back to the right path. Reading Shakespeare, to whom her husband refers her, will surely have a better effect on her, both as a writer and as a person, than "reading books of poisoning and perusing the records of insane asylums and prisons" (Douglas 2013: 54). By the end of the novel, Jo has finally succeeded in striking a balance between her personal aspirations and her desire to fulfil herself as a wife and mother. The school she establishes and runs along with her husband is innovative and progressive, far ahead of the standards of her time. Moreover, the ending of the novel is open and Jo does not relinquish hope that one day she may write a book that will secure her place in the canon, just as this novel about little women has secured for Alcott.

While the March sisters' respective trajectories to marriage can be interpreted as facets of Emersonian self-reliance, it should be noted that Alcott somewhat modifies this concept. As West astutely observes, the author chooses not to present marriage as the pinnacle of a woman's life, but rather, through descriptions of the trials of married life, suggests that the development of an individual does not end with marriage – it is actually a lifelong process (2020: 13). This is testified not only by Meg's struggles as she learns how to balance motherhood, personal development, and marriage but also by Jo's conjugal maturation and experience acquisition

that will culminate in the realisation of her lifelong dream of becoming a celebrated writer.

To sum up, the self-actualisation of the March girls is in accordance with transcendental ideas that each individual is unique and that each quest for self-actualisation is different. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are encouraged to know themselves, face and overcome their flaws, and develop their own value systems, which are at odds with social norms. While the establishment of self-control is propagated by both the transcendentalists and sentimentalists, the concept of marriage advocated by *Little Women* signifies a considerable shift from sentimental conventions. To be sure, Professor Bhaer functions as Jo's moral guardian. However, Jo and Friedrich's relationship is based on principles of equality, and precisely because of this, he is less dominant than the classic male character in a sentimental novel. The sentimentalists, admittedly, emphasised the role of women in raising children and managing the household, but they insisted that women were subordinate to men, whose authority they never opposed. On the contrary, Alcott was an ardent advocate of the so-called "companionate marriage". In her view, gender roles and separate spheres are artificial and designed to create a gap between the sexes. Indeed, the novel suggests that marriage should be based upon mutual affection and respect and that obligations and duties should be shared. In conclusion, the novel's vision of marriage may be interpreted as an integral (but not necessary) part of Emersonian self-actualisation, but is arguably different from the sentimental vision of marriage. Alcott, assuredly, represents the husband (both Friedrich and Mr March) as a moral guardian of his wife, but their relationships manifest the lack of sexual appeal and suspense characteristic of sentimental fiction.

3. Child-rearing and education

One of the major themes of *Little Women* is an implicit critique of the Victorian concept of formal education in the mid-nineteenth century America. The attitude that education should be reformed as soon as possible was shared by all representatives of the Transcendentalist movement, and Bronson Alcott was perhaps the most vocal in advocating an innovative approach to raising children, their upbringing and education. In the middle of the nineteenth century, American education focused on the reproduction of facts. Conversely, Bronson Alcott adopted the position that the purpose of education was not to overburden the student with information but to inspire creative thought. Therefore, Bronson's daughter, just like the March sisters, was encouraged to read and write but was also expected to participate in unconventional methods such as the Socratic dialogue. Moreover, according to Alcott, education should be aimed at not only the intellectual, but also spiritual and emotional development of a child, and this is where parents have a key role. In his

view, teachers (whose role is assumed by parents) should not only inspire students to think independently but also encourage the inculcation of virtues by their example.

When it comes to education, this paper adopts the position that the fiction of Louisa Alcott was a fertile ground for illustrating her father's views on the proper upbringing and education of children.³ As Joel Myerson observes, Bronson Alcott was the only self-taught male representative of Transcendentalism (2000: 167). According to Alcott, there is a much greater chance that children will realise their full potential if the function of their tutors is taken over by the parents. Likewise, *Little Women* suggests that informal education in the form of edification at home may develop a child's potential much better than classical, formal education. A diligent reader must notice and be somewhat surprised by the fact that, apart from Amy, the March sisters do not attend school. As we learn, Meg and Jo were forced to leave school so as to do some work and contribute to the improvement of the family's financial situation. When it comes to Beth, the reason for her not attending school is her excessive shyness. However, even though the formal education of the three sisters came to an end, their eloquence, creativity and knowledge of literature are evident. As it turns out, there is a lot of reading in the home of the Marches, such as the works written by Scott, Bramer, Edgeworth, Shakespeare, etc. Moreover, the best proof of the creativity of the March sisters are the plays for which they write scripts and make costumes all by themselves, finding ways to manage with the minimal means at their disposal.

The education of the March girls is attributed to the dedication of their parents. Mr and Mrs March, just like Mr and Mrs Alcott, did not hold the formal education of their time in high esteem. Hence, the schooling of the March girls is repositioned at home, where their mother's "lesson and lecture address the (whole) child" (West 2020: 168), not just the mind. Parents, who, by nature, know their own children best, can adapt teaching to the interests and preferences of each child. All sisters have different abilities, interests and views of the world. Apart from Meg, who is the most conventional sister, Jo, Beth and Amy have interests not quite expected of the Victorian girls. Jo is gifted at writing, Beth is fond of music, and Amy dreams of becoming a painter. Their parents are aware of their individualities, which they support and guide. The March family is very unconventional. It is a family where everyone is equal, where everyone loves and respects each other, where everyone's personality is valued, and where authority is not based on strictness

³ It is important to note that Louisa, although she basically agreed with her father's ideas, did not share his belief that children's nature is saintly. Her fictitious children are capable of showing the entire range of emotions characteristic of humans, both positive and negative. Her view of children was heavily influenced by her father's views, but was a shade more realistic.

and rigid rules, but on love and trust. It is precisely such an atmosphere, inspired by “praise, patience, and calm correction” (West 2020: 169), that is the right environment in which a child will simultaneously develop intellectually, creatively, emotionally, and spiritually. Unlike the typical Victorian family, where young women were expected to acquire merely certain accomplishments, the March sisters are encouraged to strive for higher goals, to work hard and to use all their capacities to realise their dreams. A deep analysis of Alcott’s upbringing of children refutes the claims of critics such as Orly Lubin that the goal of their child-rearing is to confine girls to the private sphere (2003: 22). Quite the contrary, parental confinement of children at home in *Little Women* is done with the best of intentions, to “enable their self-expression and realisation of their talents” (Rudin 2019: 118). Therefore, under the superficial image of a conventional family, a progressive, democratic and self-sustaining family is hidden, precisely due to the unconventional methods of child-rearing adopted by Mr and Mrs March.

In the view of Transcendentalism, everything that makes up the universe, including the child, partakes of God’s divinity. According to Bronson Alcott, if we want the “man [to] reappear in his original brightness” (Myerson 2000: 170), a child’s upbringing should be approached with great care and seriousness. For example, Mr and Mrs March, who take their parental duties seriously, stand in stark contrast to Mr and Mrs Moffat, who may be described as the representatives of the so-called “fashionable family”. The Marches, whose children’s upbringing reflects the progressive views of Bronson Alcott, want and do their best for their daughters to remain children as long as possible. According to Alcott, if parents want their children to develop virtues, they should keep them away from temptation as long as possible, since “temptations... stagger their feeble virtue” (Myerson 2000: 177). Here temptation refers to pleasing the senses, which, according to Transcendentalism, has disastrous effects on the development of highly desirable virtues of the individual – self-control and integrity. It is precisely for this reason that Mrs March teaches her children self-restraint and self-discipline from an early age, and she even succeeds in persuading them to donate their Christmas breakfast to a poor family with a new-born baby.

Moreover, knowing their children are susceptible to external influences, Mrs March keeps a watchful eye on her daughters’ friends and acquaintances. However, although Marmee acts as a guardian angel to her children, this paper disagrees with Charles Strickland’s assertion that “growing up in a utopia of warmth and affection seems hardly the best preparation” (1985: 137) for life in the harsh outside world. Despite worrying about her daughters, Marmee allows them to experience life outside her reach, so Meg visits the Moffatts, Amy travels to Europe, and Jo leaves to look for work in New York. She relies on the fact that she brought up her daughters by her own example, practising what she preached, and

that she instilled in them the virtues that will resist temptations. This is again in the spirit of Alcott's idea that the parents should establish an atmosphere of absolute trust and intimacy with the child, and it is this closeness that will most beneficially affect the development of virtues and principles in a child. That Mrs March has been an excellent role model is best seen from the outcome of her "release of children". Each of her daughters proves worthy of her mother's trust. After the initial short-sightedness, Meg realises that her family's values are much nobler than those of the superficial and conventional Moffatts. Amy, who for most of the novel is least influenced by her mother, finally realises that the value of a spouse is not in direct proportion to his wealth. Instead of Fred Vaughn, she chooses Laurie, a man who suits her much more in terms of temperament and character. Finally, Jo, a fierce opponent of the institution of marriage, realises that getting married will not either restrict her or sever her ties with her parents and sisters. Professor Bhaer, who not only allows Jo as much freedom as she needs, but also steers her intellectual aspiration in the right direction, represents the right choice and is exactly the type of a man who will contribute to her actualisation, both professionally and personally.

However, it should be noted that the harshest criticism of *Little Women* is aimed at corporal punishment as an integral part of formal education in mid-nineteenth-century America. Louisa May Alcott, who showed her exceptional knowledge of child psychology in this novel, demonstrated the effects of such treatment of children in a detailed description of the abuse of Amy, which caused the end of her formal education. The reader sees this experience from the child's point of view and realises that physical abuse not only fails to have a positive impact on the child's development, but, quite the contrary, represents a trauma that will be remembered for the rest of his or her life. The novel suggests that the authority of the teacher should be based on the bond of affection and respect between the teacher and his/her charges and that conscience is a much more effective punishment method than violence and humiliation.

From everything presented, it may be argued that the concept of education which the novel suggests reflects the transcendental ideas of Bronson Alcott. Still, it should be noted that Alcott's view on education coincides with the sentimental understanding of this concept. The sentimentalists not only placed great importance on raising children and on the role of parents both in child-rearing and the education of their offspring but also insisted on the abolition of corporal punishment. Moreover, the sentimentalists were also opposed to pleasing the senses and condemned drinking, gambling, flirting, and premarital sexual experiences. Additionally, the sentimentalists highlighted the role of a mother who, through her commitments and personal example, influenced the proper development of her children. If we take into account the fact that Mr March is absent for a long period, whereas Mrs March keeps a watch-

ful eye on her daughters, the conclusion emerges that the vision of education advocated by *Little Women* may be even more influenced by sentimental than transcendental ideas.

4. Work

The vision of work in *Little Women* is, similarly to that of self-actualisation and education, shaped by both transcendental and sentimental ideas. Louisa May Alcott embraces Emerson's idea of self-reliance as based upon work, both paid and unpaid (1903–4: 166). According to the transcendentalists, work is crucial for self-discovery – it is only by doing that the individuals realise what they are capable of. However, Emerson always talks about male self-reliance, whereas he advocates the position, at least in his earlier essays and lectures, that a woman's place is in the home. Alcott's attitude is somewhat more sophisticated. Assuredly, she does not deviate from the sentimental view that a woman's work in the house, both in running the household and in raising children, is extremely important. However, she insists on the fact that work, both inside and outside the house, is important for the personal development and actualisation of women. As Carolyn Maibor notices, Louisa May Alcott was faced with the problem of translating the male concept of self-reliance into the female one (2004: 88). In order to solve the problem, she created a form of sentimental self-reliance, emphasising equal importance for a woman to take care of home and family while also having the opportunity to actualise her potential outside the home.

In Emerson's view, work does not necessarily refer to occupation and does not have to be paid, but it must be in accordance with the individual's abilities and talents. Since each individual is unique (Emerson 1841: 2) and has a gift for something, our work must emanate from the essence of our beings (1938: 167). However, according to Emerson, it often happens that friends, family, or life circumstances encourage the individual to do what (s)he is not preordained for (1938: 166). Embodiments of such individuals are Meg and Jo at the beginning of the novel. As we learn, Meg works as a governess, whereas Jo works as a companion to the unpleasant Aunt March in order to help the family's finances. However, neither of them is satisfied with their "jobs". An integral and important part of their quest to self-reliance is rejecting the work that someone has chosen for them, which will pave the way for choices that will be theirs alone. Unsurprisingly, Meg, the most conventional sister, decides to be "just" a housewife and devote herself to her husband, home, and children. This decision is completely in accordance with Meg's nature, but the novel suggests that the life of a housewife is somewhat limiting and warns them to be aware of what they are getting into.

Jo's quest for the proper vocation is somewhat more complicated. As a talented writer, she attempts to turn what she loves doing into a source of income and independence. However, in order to accept her stories, publishers ask her to leave out the parts which contain moral and metaphysical implications. Although Jo reaches a compromise for selfless reasons, despite the fact that she is helping the family, she feels that she is not doing the right thing. This is best perceived in the fact that Jo refers to her sensational stories as "trash", aware that they have no depth. However, if readers and the public of her time are not yet ready for serious fiction, a strange twist of fate allows Jo to materialise her dream and do something meaningful and significant. The school she founds and runs along with her husband in the home of the late Aunt March allows her to be a wife, a mother, and a teacher at the same time. Jo is not forced to choose between home and work but lives her dream and puts her ideas into action.

As it may be, the novel's vision of work perhaps best reflects the fusion of Transcendentalism and the cult of domesticity advocated by Louisa May Alcott. Contrary to the sentimentalists, the author suggests that it is very important for a woman's personal development and fulfilment to be given the opportunity to work outside the home. Simultaneously, she does not deny that a woman's role in the house is substantial. Alcott's attitude is best reflected in the example of Jo, who is focused on pursuing her professional ambitions while also being encouraged to master domestic skills. Marmee's advice that Jo should learn to cook and run the household should not be interpreted as a mother's attempt to turn her daughter into a housewife. Mrs March, who is a practical idealist, wants her daughters to understand that cooking and sewing are skills that make life a lot easier. Therefore, her insistence on her daughters' mastering the art of running a household stems from her desire to inspire them to be truly self-reliant, that is, capable of taking care of themselves independently. The fact that Jo is not only able to manage the household but also earn a living is what makes her an embodiment of Alcott's vision of domestic Transcendentalism. By insisting on the importance of work outside the home for a woman's personal growth, while also stressing the value of household chores, she creates a feminine concept of work, which resembles Emerson's, but is authentic and gender-specific.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that *Little Women* is an unconventional female Bildungsroman, this paper offers evidence that it may be interpreted as a vivid illustration of Louisa May Alcott's version of Transcendentalism, one which combines progressive ideas with the cult of domesticity. It is argued that Louisa's vision was greatly shaped by Ralph Waldo Emerson and her father, Amos Bronson Alcott. She wholeheartedly embraced

their views on self-reliance, education, and work. However, Alcott was somewhat sceptical about the practical application of their philosophical ideas. Moreover, despite the fact that Emerson's concept of self-reliance was a prominent motif in Louisa's fiction, she was faced with a problem that he exclusively addressed male self-reliance.

In order to adapt Emerson's ideas to the female context, she combines them with the sentimental attitude. The novel suggests that home is a place where a woman learns the skills of self-reliance. Mastering the skills of running a household is not presented in a negative light, but as necessary for independent living. Moreover, within the family, girls are educated and develop their talents, all under the watchful eye of their parents. The enormous importance of parents, especially the mother, in the process of the March sisters' development, completely aligns with sentimental ideology. As suggested by the novel, the role of dedicated parents is not to confine their offspring, but to protect them from harmful external influences until they acquire virtues and are ready to go out into the world independently.

The paper argues that marriage is an integral phase of the March sisters's quest for self-actualisation. Moreover, the novel suggests that personal development does not end with the wedding day, but continues and lasts a lifetime. The husbands in *Little Women* often serve as mentors, which is a hallmark of the sentimental novel. However, while in this genre the woman is subordinate to the husband, this is not the case in Alcott's most famous book, where marriages are based on equality and equity.

When it comes to work, *Little Women* reflects the transcendental idea that work, both in its usual sense and in the context of self-improvement, is important in the quest to self-discovery. Furthermore, the vision of the novel matches Emerson's claim that work must emanate from the core of a person's being. However, Alcott slightly modifies Emerson's concept of work since she attaches meaning to unpaid and often unacknowledged household labour. The novel encourages women to explore the world and test their abilities while reminding them that their work at home, both in managing the household and in upbringing and educating children, is invaluable.

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Фузија трансцендентализма и сентиментализма у
Малим женама Луизе Меј Олкот

Резиме

Полазећи од запажања да је најпознатији роман Луизе Меј Олкот, *Мале жене* (1868), неконвенционални „роман за девојке“, овај чланак доказује да је роман заправо спој трансценденталних и сентименталних идеја. Почетна претпоставка је да Олкот покушава да Емерсонов концепт самопоуздања, који је у бити мушки, претвори у његову женску верзију. Поред Емерсонових, у роман су такође уткане идеје Бронсона Олкота о одгајању деце и образовању. Кроз подробну анализу самоактуализације, образовања и одгајања деце, али и рада у роману, чланак има за циљ да створи јасну слику о јединственој перспективи Луизе Меј Олкот. Управо необична комбинација филозофских идеја и домаћих тема овај роман чини интересантним како читаоцима тако и критичарима већ скоро 160 година, колико је прошло од објављивања.

Кључне речи: *Мале жене*, Луиза Меј Олкот, трансцендентализам, сентиментални, Емерсон, Бронсон Олкот, самопоуздање, одгајање деце, образовање, рад