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LITTLE WOMEN: THE ALCOTTIAN BILDUNGSROMAN

Abstract: *This paper argues that* Little Women *(1868–1869), Louisa May Alcott's most famous and enduring novel, both confirms and contests the conventions of the Bildungsroman genre. Although the book fits the definition of the genre with its theme of initiation and conflict between the individual and society, its conceptualisation of Bildung is peculiar. First, the vision of the home in* Little Women *as an ideal venue for the protagonist's development is at odds with the typical Bildungsroman plot, in which the family is limiting to personal growth. Second, the reconciliation between the problematic individual and society is transformed into striking a balance between the protagonists' wishes and family expectations. Third, we offer evidence that* Little Women *highlights the similarities between the maturation of heroines and their male friend, thus evolving into a Bildungsroman that transcends gender.*

Key words: Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, Bildungsroman, family, marriage.*

1. Introduction

From its publication to the present day, *Little Women* (1868–1869), Louisa May Alcott's most famous novel and literary classic, has become so influential that it gained mythical status and became a cultural phenomenon (see Showalter). Such a position of the novel is at least partly the result of interpreting its subject matter as "the primordial one of the passage from childhood, from girl to woman" (Bedell, 1983:p.xi). Since the book delves into what it meant to grow up as a woman in nineteenth-century America, as noticed by Nicole Maruo-Schröder (2018), it fits into the genre of Bildungsroman (p.403). Although there are many variations of the genre, according to Jerome Buckley, one of the greatest authori-

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ties on Anglo-Bildungsroman, the classic Bildungsroman story boils down to the following: the protagonist's dissatisfaction with growing up in the province or country, which, together with the family he grows up in, turns out to be limiting to his development and maturation. After a constraining experience and disagreeable schooling in his hometown, the protagonist sets out into the world, where, after a series of experiences and "at least two love affairs or sexual encounters" (Buckley, 1974:p.18), personal aspirations are reconciled with social expectations. The classic Bildungsroman ends with the protagonist returning home so that the family can gain insight into the maturity he has achieved (Ibid).

Although Buckley's concept of development mainly applies to male protagonists, a similar, but far more sophisticated scheme of growing up is also present in many Bildungsromane whose stories revolve around female protagonists. This paper argues that the concept of maturation offered by Alcott in *Little Women* is a revision of the classic Bildungsroman that Buckley discusses, in particular in its vision of the home and parental figure as crucial to the hero/ine's achievement of Bildung. An essential characteristic of the genre, apart from the passage from childhood to adulthood, is some conflict between "the problematic individual" (Lukács, 1971: p.132) and society. Both prevailing genre features, the initiation into adulthood, and the discord between the individual and society, are present in Alcott's most enduring novel. Moreover, the clash between the protagonists and the community in *Little Women* is largely a consequence of the gap between the heroines' creative aspirations and the social expectations of Victorian America, which were based on the principle of separate spheres, where women were confined to the domestic, private domain. This testifies to the female version of the genre.

As Soňa Šnircová (2021) aptly observes, "many of the constitutive elements which male critics of the classic Bildungsroman determined as crucial in the protagonist's development such as formal education, an independent life in the city, successive love affairs or an active participation in society were not traditionally available to women in that period" (p.245). This paper does not deny that *Little Women* is a protest against the narrowness of women's choices in nineteenth-century America. The spokesperson for the rebellion is Jo March, who cries out for excitement and action, envying men who can get an education, go out into the world, and participate in war. Jo desires the freedom to decide for herself the direction of her life, which, in her opinion, is the prerogative of men in her society. Thus, the novel is, on the one hand, a sharp critique of social restrictions on women that place them in a disadvantageous and unequal position compared to men, the exclusive rulers of public affairs.

However, that is only one side of the story. The secret to the complexity of *Little Women*'s vision of growing up lies in its progressive vision of home. The novel simultaneously represents a plea for expanding opportunities for women and depicts the home as an ideal place for the development and actualisation of an individual's potential, which stands in stark contrast to a typical Bildungsroman story as defined by Buckley. Or, as Šesnić (2022) succinctly puts it, "true emancipation begins at home [...] thus it is in the domestic precinct that we find the text laboring to chart new directions and possibilities for women" (p.5). For example, the novel suggests that the informal education offered by the home is sometimes an advantage over formal schooling because, in the warmth of the family home, values are also acquired, not just knowledge. In addition, a supporting family paves the way for initiation because girls develop emotionally through relationships with their mother and siblings. To go out into the world and face its limitations, Louisa May Alcott's heroines must first adopt the moral values of the enlightened March family.

The girls' inborn natures, that is, their unique combinations of values and failings, are presented as seeds, potential that needs to be developed. Such delineation of characters goes in line with Tobias Boes's (2006) claim that the concept of Bildung originally represented "a process of teleological and organic growth, in the manner of a seed that develops into a mature plant according to genetic principles" (p.232). The novel reflects an optimism about personal formation similar to Wilhelm Dilthey's original conception of Bildungsroman. As the girls develop under the guidance of their mother's progressive views, they adapt these views to their various personalities, so that each path to womanhood is unique (Ninčetović, 2024:p.325). In addition, the story of the girls' maturation (Jo's in particular) also aligns with Dilthey's observation that obstacles on the path of personal development are necessary, and overcoming them leads to a higher level of development (1985:p.336). As the following analysis aims to prove, the conflict between the dissatisfied individual and society ends with their reconciliation, which does not mean the subordination of the individual will to social expectations, but rather the imposition of ones own will on the wider community and the achievement of a Bildung that is not only an expression of individuality, but also has its place within society and contributes to its progress.

Whereas in the reconciliation between the problematic individual and society, *Little Women* resembles a traditional Bildungsroman, its peculiarity is reflected in highlighting numerous similarities between the development of boys and girls. The March sisters' growth is depicted in parallel with the maturation of Theodore Laurie Lawrence, who first represents an unofficial but integral, and by the novel's

end, an official part of the family by marrying Amy. Laurie's development is similar to that of the March sisters. They all have a flaw that needs to be overcome in order to mature. Moreover, Laurie's coming-of-age shows that Victorian society was cruel not only to women, but also to men who were not willing to step into the ruthless public sphere, but rather desired a different path for themselves. Thus, the argument of this paper goes in line with Parille's (2009) claim that *Little Women* is "almost as interested in Laurie's growth [...] as it is in Jo's" (p.62). As it turns out, the reconciliation between the individual and society of a classic Bildungsroman is modified into establishing a harmony between the individual's aspirations and the family's expectations in *Little Women* for both girls and boys. Consequently, Laurie's decision to compromise between his desires and his grandfather's expectations resembles the March sisters' decisions to strike a similar balance.

2. The Unconventional Upbringing of the March Sisters

A typical Bildungsroman begins with the depiction of the protagonist's childhood. So it is in *Little Women*, with the difference that this narrative focuses on the four sisters' formative years. The sisters' development is under the constant surveillance and guidance of their mother. Marmee is an all-enveloping figure who passes on her values to Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, which they to some extent internalise and adapt to their different personalities. There is still a heated debate among feminist critics about whether Marmee teaches her daughters to develop their potential or how to restrain and stifle it. The key objection of the circle that advocates the second thesis (Fetterley, Foote) is that Mrs March inculcates in her daughters values such as modesty, self-sacrifice, and self-control. However, what may obscure a clear insight into the progressive parenting that Marmee embodies is the excessive focus on the gender of the children.

To gain a thorough perception of the March sisters' upbringing, it is necessary to place their fictional world within the framework of the social reality of Victorian America. As Strickland (1985) explains, the period preceding the American Civil War was marked by great social turmoil and a desire for reform (p.4). One part of society, the so-called sentimentalists, feared the changes might go too far. Moreover, "many Americans worried in particular about the materialistic and secular tendencies of the age" (Ibid, p.5). According to the sentimentalists, the only way to achieve sustainable and long-term societal progress was to reform from within. In other words, only the transformation of the family to fit the epithet of a sacred institution could ensure lasting and profound changes. The Marches

are a typical representative of an enlightened family in which parents take their duty seriously and teach children self-control and morality, while simultaneously encouraging them to develop their individuality and creativity. The goal of this model of upbringing children is to raise individuals capable of striking a balance between individualism and care for others. Such children should grow up to be capable of taking care of themselves and contributing to society. Whereas individuality in children is encouraged in the March household, materialistic and selfish desires are daunted. The expected outcome is to build mentally strong and spiritually enlightened individuals who will "serve as a moral counterweight to a materialistic and individualistic society" (Ibid). In the sentimentalist model of upbringing, self-discipline and self-control are desirable traits in both girls and boys and are supposed to prepare them for the burdens that married life brings (Ibid, p.134). Hence, the sentimentalist worldview expresses the belief that moral development does not end with marriage, but rather that it is a lifelong process with ups and downs.

The March family is an enlightened family that inculcates in the children high standards of conduct, ethics, altruism, and hard work. Significantly, the sisters are encouraged to strive to perfect themselves, that is, to identify and conquer their faults and improve their talents. Such a perception of personal formation simultaneously goes in line with the original optimism about human perfectability and the growth of the Bildungsroman genre and the Protestant ethos of self-improvement. Therefore, Meg's efforts to overcome her materialistic desires, Jo's attempts to control her anger, Beth's struggle with shyness, and Amy's overcoming of vanity should not be interpreted as girls' acquiescence to the inferior role that society has assigned to them, but as the idealistic aspirations of children of highly moral parents to become the best versions of themselves.

In the context of their socio-cultural realities, the March girls have the unusual freedom to learn how to spend time on their own, have fun, make mistakes and learn from their failures, be unburdened by conventions, but ultimately they must learn to govern themselves. In their efforts to overcome their shortcomings and perfect their faculties, the sisters emulate their mother, a seemingly morally impeccable woman. As the story unfolds, it turns out that even Mrs March has her faults, as evidenced by her admission that she has been struggling with anger management for forty years. This statement by Marmee is important for at least two reasons. First, knowing that even the perfect Marmee has flaws reduces the pressure on daughters created by the presence of such a lofty role model. This makes it easier for the daughters, especially Jo, who also struggles with her tempestuous temper,

to identify with their mother and internalise her lessons. Second, the mother's confession suggests that the struggle with flaws is a lifelong struggle, which should make Jo realise that the path to maturity is long and strewn with thorns. Since Jo's flaw is potentially the most dangerous, her struggle is the most difficult, and her example most clearly shows how difficult it is to overcome oneself. The other sisters also face obstacles on their way of growing up, but none of them is "as vivid or as punished by conflict as Jo is" (Macleod, 2002:p.463). This is perhaps one of the reasons readers most often identify with Jo.

Importantly, Mrs March is not hostile to the children's desire to exercise their artistic talents. Marmee encourages her daughters to be true to themselves, respecting their different personalities and strivings. She supports activities significantly inconsistent with societal expectations for women, as the girls "set their sights on perfecting the talents that please them, whether or not these talents are valued by society" (May, 1994:p.22). Mrs March is her daughters' chief support in nourishing their artistic aspirations, which are their ways of expressing individuality. Unlike the embroidery of Meg (the most conventional sister), a mere "leisure pursuit for a bourgeois young woman who wishes to occupy her time, Jo's writing ... and Amy's drawing and sculpture are serious activities [...] providing vital imaginative sustenance" (Foster & Simons, 1995:p.93). Unfortunately, Amy's dream remains unfulfilled due to her lack of perseverance and romantic understanding of art, according to which talent is insufficient because it is not the same as genius. Moreover, her premature abandonment of pursuing an artistic career is at least partly due to "lacking any comparable female sources of inspiration outside the home" (Ibid, p.98).

Apart from her lessons on mastering self-control and encouragement of her daughters to hone their creativity, another feature of Marmee's upbringing that has provoked feminist criticism is her training of her daughters in household management. "Showing girls learning to cook and sew is today often regarded as reinforcing patriarchal structures" (Noomé, 2004:p.145), but these skills should rather be interpreted as necessary in preparation for an independent life. That the March sisters are truly capable of taking care of themselves is proven during Marmee's absence, when the entire burden of running the household falls on their shoulders. Therefore, the progressive model of development advocated by Mrs March includes struggling with one's own shortcomings, developing talents, and mastering the art of running a household. The novel therefore implies that homemaking and feminism are not mutually exclusive, that women can simultaneously be excellent cooks and housewives and pursue their professional ambitions. While the temptations and

obstacles the March sisters encounter during their experience in the world are a plea for the advancement of women's position, the novel is careful to emphasise that domestic work and caring for one's family is also a huge contribution to society that merits.

Therefore, Marmee should not be interpreted as an extended arm of patriarchal institutions who educates her daughters on how to be little and obedient. Rather, she embodies a progressive, self-sufficient, and pragmatic version of womanhood, one sustainable within the confines of contemporary society. Seemingly meek and gentle, Marmee is actually teaching her children how to be independent. For example, none of the March sisters attend school. The two oldest sisters work and help the family make ends meet. Beth is too shy, while Marmee expels Amy out of school, where she has been subjected to corporal punishment. The mother withdraws her child from a patriarchal institution, refusing to accept that the teacher, Mr Davis, humiliates her. As Rudin (2019) convincingly argues, Marmee's decision that Amy would be educated at home in the future, under the watchful eye of her older sisters, "does not stem from her desire to prepare her for a future role as a submissive woman, quite the contrary" (p.119). The vision of home education offered in the novel is in every way superior to the methods of Mr Davis, which are depicted as outdated: "Mr Davis knew any quantity of Greek, Latin, algebra, and ologies of all sorts, so he was called a fine teacher; and manners, morals, feelings, and examples were not considered of any particular importance" (Alcott, 1869:p.101).

In stark contrast to Mr Davis's concept of formal schooling that boils down to simple reproduction of what is read, the March household emphasises developing creativity, emotional formation, and adopting values such as equality, honesty, hard work, sharing, and support. As it happens, within the "confines" of the house, Amy can freely express her opinions, learn without hindrance, hone her artistic skills, and, perhaps most importantly, adopt the solid values promoted by the March family.

This aligns with Langland's (1983) claim that "the [March] home is not inimical and unsympathetic to the sisters' aspirations" (p.124).[3] This vision of home and family as an ideal venue for personal formation is at odds with the typical Bildungsroman plot, in which the family looks with disapproval at the protagonist's desires. The March home, with its emphasis on moral fortitude, mastering the art of running a household, and freedom of creative expression, represents a necessary

[3] However, whereas Langland argues that when Professor Bhaer appears, "Jo is already mature and self-defined" (p.122), this paper adopts the position that Jo's quest of self-realisation continues after she marries, which is evidenced by the delineation of her marital life in *Little Women*'s sequels, *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* (1871) and *Jo's Boys, and How They Turned Out* (1886).

phase in the maturation of inexperienced children that will function as a weapon against the constricting social norms of the outside world.

Regardless of the idyllic image of the March household, the sisters only prove to be truly mature when they finally step out of their safe matriarchy into the uncertain world. As Sarah Elbert (1987) aptly observes, "girls who take trial flights from secure homes will find their own paths to domestic happiness" (p.158). Significantly, the girls are allowed to explore the outside world, but the experiences they have there are always filtered through the prism of family values. For example, Meg visits the Moffats, Amy travels to Europe to explore her options as a budding artist, and Jo moves to New York to attempt to live on her own. Meg, Jo, and Amy's dissatisfaction with the status quo aligns with a typical Bildungsroman plot, in which the protagonist desires "to explore further, to travel, to find himself, to move up the social ladder" (Summerfield & Downward, 2010: p.28). However, in contrast with a traditional Bildung story, the parental figure does not limit such wishes but rather encourages them.

The mother's support for girls to explore their options beyond those traditionally reserved for women is particularly noticeable in Jo's case. In moments of greatest crisis, after Beth's death, it is Marmee who persuades Jo to take up ink and turn her grief into art. Interestingly, separation from the family home seems to amplify the effects of Marmee's upbringing rather than calling it into question, and the bond between children and mother only strengthens, paving the way for the internalisation of the mother's worldview. As in the classic story with the Bildung motif, in *Little Women*, the protagonists (Jo and Amy) return home, but only to demonstrate that Marmee has been right. Hence, while in a typical Bildungsroman the real thing, i.e. the experience that promotes the protagonists' maturation, is in the outside world, in Louisa May Alcott's most famous novel, what is crucial for maturation is what happens within the confines of the family home.

3. Beyond the "Confines" of the Home – Bridging the Gap Between the Sexes

Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy's character formation under the guidance of their mother paves the way for their further socialisation. The March household may be self-sufficient, but it is noticeable that it is closed and there are no men in it. According to the novel's vision, an individual develops through relationships, first within the family, and later through bonds with people outside that inner circle, especially through connections with members of the opposite sex. Contact with the

opposite sex contributes significantly to the development of individuals since the male and female characters in the fictional world of *Little Women* serve as a mirror and corrective factor for each other. At the novel's beginning, the Lawrence and March families are two isolated communities consisting of members of opposite sexes. The wall between the sexes is demolished by the friendship between Laurie and Jo. Their friendship contributes not only to bringing the two families together but also to the maturation of both the March sisters and Laurie.

As it turns out, the two families complement and balance each other perfectly. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Laurie is a lonely young man who feels trapped in a world of men "unable to communicate their deepest feelings to one another" (Simons & Foster, 1995:p.102). While Jo envies her newfound friend his wealth, vast library, and the opportunity to continue his education, Laurie longs for the warmth of her family home and the siblings' company she can enjoy to the fullest. Laurie's presence in the novel, often overlooked, may have a much more subversive function than is attributed to it. The life trajectory of Laurie, mostly interpreted as a supporting character, is perhaps the novel's most successful testimony to the impossibility of wealth and advantages reserved for the stronger sex to satisfy a man's true needs. Laurie, just like the March sisters, does not mature thanks to the formal education (mentorship from Mr Brooke and going to Harvard) that his privileged status allows him. In fact, the key transformation in his character comes about thanks to the beneficial influence of female characters and their affective impact.

In the unusual relationship between Jo and Laurie, two kindred spirits, which spills over to their respective households, an exchange occurs in which everyone benefits. After overcoming the prejudices of the sisters (first and foremost, Meg) that boys are dreadful, Laurie is accepted into the Marches' circle. After being admitted into this closed community and proving that men can be true gentlemen towards young girls, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy reward Laurie in treating him like a brother, even a son, and he is showered with love and care he lacks.

The sisters and mother provide unsolicited but valuable help to old Mr Lawrence in raising the inconsistent weathercock, Laurie. James Lawrence, challenged with the difficult task of being Laurie's father, mother, and grandfather at the same time, has an overly traditional and strict approach to raising him. His upbringing is tempered by the positive influence of the March sisters and Marmee, who demonstrate that a kind word and love sometimes have much greater power than discipline and rigidity. On the other hand, friendship with Laurie breaks down the prejudices the sisters have about men, which is necessary for their further socialisation and development. Bridging the gap between families and genders proves effective in the

maturation of both sisters and boys and serves as a model for reforming society. As Zehren (2015) correctly notices, "the balance between the sexes [...] is presented as essential to the education of children and the formation of society" (p.13).

Laurie's life trajectory demonstrates that both men and women were under the pressure of certain social (family) expectations in Victorian America. While Jo regrets being denied the opportunity to showcase her abilities in the public sphere, Laurie does not want to follow in her grandfather's footsteps and enter the world of commerce. Furthermore, Laurie, like the March sisters, is presented as a lovable young man with many virtues and one dominant flaw – a flaw that needs to be overcome to mature. His main flaw is laziness, a flaw that is a much bigger challenge for him than the sisters' flaws (save for Jo) due to his wealth. His initial wish is to be free to live for what he likes. As his desire is actually evidence of his innate indolence, it is in sharp contrast to the hard-working ethos of the Marches. His dream implies a selfish urge to please oneself, and "pleasing oneself", as Parille (2009) remarks, "must be abandoned by little men and women alike" (p.67) in the fictional world of *Little Women*.

While it is Marmee who teaches her children the harmfulness of selfish and materialistic pursuits, it is her daughters who pass this lesson on to their only friend. Now the sisters, first Jo and later Amy, use the special bond they created with the young man to "fix" him. If Laurie's grandfather's strictness has failed to introduce him to the world of adult businessmen, his desire to become part of the March family has. Laurie is, similar to Jo, disciplined through love, that is, the Marches' kindness and devotion. Laurie, just like the March sisters, seeks to find a balance between his desires and meeting his family's expectations. All of them mature, as exemplified by their decisions to redefine their childish dreams of wealth and fame and adjust their ambitions to the needs of their families. Therefore, domestication is universal in Alcott's fictional world, it refers to both men and women.

Whereas Laurie's decision to please his grandfather and enter the working trade testifies to his meeting socialisation demands, it should not be interpreted as succumbing to society. Instead, employment is something from which will benefit both lazy Laurie and his family, as well as the wider community – the family will live in prosperity, while part of the profits of the family business will be allocated to talented artists of modest means. In overcoming his greatest flaw and balancing his personal desires (the greatest of which is to be loved) with the expectations of his family and society, Laurie proves that he has achieved his Bildung, that is, an individuality that has a place within the framework of the community.

4. Marriage

The last phase of the characters' development in *Little Women* happens within the framework of the protagonists' conjugal life. The fact that all March sisters except Beth (who prematurely dies) marry to many critics evidences their final capitulation to an inferior role that society has allotted them. These claims are supported by the testimony of the author herself that publishers were exclusive in terms of the end of a girl's novel, which was to end either in the death or marriage of the heroines. However, focusing specifically on the case of Jo March, the only March sister who is a staunch opponent of the marital institution, can obscure Alcott's progressive vision of marriage. The fact is that Amy and Meg's desire has always been to get married, and their development consists of the rejection of marriage of convenience in favour of Marmee's vision of wedlock as an institution based on love, equality and respect.

In Victorian America, marriage was often represented as the final destination and pinnacle of a woman's life, who was then placed on the shelf and cut off from the world and public life (Welter, 1966). This trend is pointed out by an example of Meg, who is at risk of becoming a mother who puts herself in danger of tying her identity exclusively to parenthood, neglecting her own needs, and sacrificing time with her husband. Meg successfully overcomes this problem both by following her mother's advice and by involving John in the nursery. Marmee is a sharp opponent of the women's reduction to the decoration of society typical of Victorian America and an ardent advocate of "better marriage-unions based not on commodification, but on a foundation of collective self-mastery and shared spiritual growth" (Matthew, 2018:p.42). Mrs March teaches her daughters with a personal example that marriage is not the end, but a new beginning in which they continue to grow and develop, together with their husbands. Therefore, we may interpret their marriages as compromises, but also as opportunities to extend their experience through a specific nature of development that marital life impels.

Alcott's delineation of love rejects the concept of "a romantic flirtation that results in children and a perfect home" (May, 1994:p.22). For example, the conjugal life of Meg and John is not without vicissitudes. In contrast with the assertion that the description of their trials and tribulations aims at highlighting "the drudgery of housework and a rather grim picture of the married life" (Kornfield & Jackson, 1992:p.149), this paper argues that this delineation emphasises that the process of character development is never fully complete and that it continues during the marriage. Moreover, in opposition to some critics' claims that the marriages of

Alcott's "little women" reduce them to the status of romantic heroines (see Trites, 2009:p.35), we assert that the respective matrimonies of the March sisters, with the possible exception of Meg, are not romantic in nature, but represent equal partnerships. In this regard, the example of Jo's decision to choose the clumsy Professor Bhaer as her husband instead of the handsome and rich Laurie is particularly indicative. It is precisely accepting Laurie's marriage proposal that would reduce Jo to a romantic heroine who marries a man to whom she is inferior in class and wealth. Jo, who is aware that in such a marriage she would be restricted from writing, her most important passion, prefers to choose a partner with whom she will be on an equal footing. Only in a community where she is an equal partner can Jo remain true to herself and continue to grow and develop.

Similarly to Laurie's case, Jo's decision to marry a professor is not a sign of giving in to societal expectations, but rather of imposing her will on the community, from which will benefit both Jo's own development and that of society as a whole. The establishment of a coeducational school in which both husband and wife will have their function will simultaneously satisfy Jo's desire to step outside the framework of imposed gender roles, her aspiration for financial independence, but will also contribute to social progress. In merging household and work, Jo proves that she is ahead of her time, but that she has managed to reconcile not only her personal aspirations and the expectations of her family (especially her mother), but also an expression of her individuality in an unusual but acceptable way. By choosing a unique path for herself, Jo demonstrates that she has reached her Bildung, which, according to Moretti (1987), primarily means an ability "to direct the plot of life so that each moment strengthens one's sense of belonging to a wider community" (p.19).

5. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that the novel *Little Women*, with its very themes of maturation and conflict between the individual and society, fits into the Bildungsroman, we offer evidence that the Alcottian vision of Bildung both confirms and challenges the traditional conception of the genre. The most prominent feature of the genre, the clash between individual desires and social constraints, is present in the novel. In other words, the actualisation of the female protagonists' potential is greatly influenced by their gender, whose accomplishments in Victorian America were strictly linked to the private sphere. The novel simultaneously criticises the restriction of women to the private sphere and offers a vision of a progressive household in which

both women and men can not only develop their potential, but such a reformed household may also serve as a blueprint for reforming the nation. The novel implies that profound social changes can only come from within, from the very core and basic social unit, the family. The reconciliation of the individual and society of a typical Bildungsroman is modified in *Little Women* into the adjustment of the protagonists' personal aspirations with the needs and expectations of the family. Moreover, in focusing on the differentiated trajectories of the four March sisters, *Little Women* implies that there is no universal path to reaching maturity. Thus, the novel offers a greater choice of models of what it really means to grow into a fully realised person. Last, but not least important singularity of the Alcottian concept of Bildung is that it encompasses not only female but also male experience. Pointing out the similarities between the coming of age of Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth on the one hand, and Laurie on the other, this paper argues that *Little Women* is much more than a female coming-of-age story – it is, in fact, an unconventional Bildungsroman that transcends gender.

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МАЛЕ ЖЕНЕ: ОЛКОТОВСКИ ОБРАЗОВНИ РОМАН

Резиме

Овај рад тврди да *Мале жене* (1868–1869), најпопуларнији и најдуговечнији роман Луизе Меј Олкот, истовремено потврђује и доводи у питање конвенције образовног романа. Иако се роман уклапа у дефиницију образовног романа темама иницијације и сукоба појединца са друштвом, његова концептуализација билдунга је необична. Прво, визија породичног дома као идеалног места за развој појединца у *Малим женама* у супротности је са типичним заплетом образовног романа, у којем је породица ограничавајућа по лични развој. Друго, помирење појединца и друштва трансформисано је у успостављање равнотеже између жеља протагонисткиња и породичних очекивања. Треће, нудимо доказ да *Мале жене* наглашавају сличности у сазревању хероина и њиховог мушког пријатеља, развијајући се тако у образовни роман који превазилази род.

▸ ***Кључне речи***: *Мале жене*, Луиза Меј Олкот, образовни роман, породица, брак.