

IDH 2930
Alcott's *Little Women*: War, Gender, Age, and Popular Culture
Matt Gallman

A one credit seminar as part of (Un)Common Readings

W 4
LIT 0119

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Overview

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is recognized as an "iconic" novel in American History. Published in two parts (in 1868 and in 1869), the novel really launched Alcott's career as a highly successful novelist. There are ironies in Alcott's resulting celebrity, in that prior to *Little Women* she had not really seen herself as a children's author. Yet, suddenly she found herself with celebrity and an enthusiastic (largely young) audience. Several sequels followed.

I see this one-credit seminar as a shared exploration into what we should make of *Little Women*, particularly from the standpoint of historians. My own background and interests are more relevant here than in some courses I teach. I come to this course with several intertwined interests and areas of past scholarship and teaching. First, I am interested in the northern home front during the American Civil War. Part I of *Little Women* is set in that war, Part II considers the years immediately after the war. What does this novel (both in its content and its popularity) tell us about the Civil War? Second, I have a long history of teaching and writing about American Women's History, both as lived experience and as cultural expectations. Third, and very related, I have recently been thinking about and writing about how popular culture framed behavioral expectations. What does *Little Women* tell us about, well, the cultural messages aimed at little women?

Finally (and card on the table here), this summer I was invited to write a long essay about *Little Women* for a multi-volume collection of essays about iconic texts that emerged from the Civil War. I see this seminar as an opportunity to work through lots of complicated ideas.

Please be sure to acquire the Signet Classic edition of *Little Women* in paperback (not in a digital form). It is really inexpensive.

Readings and Weekly Meetings

Little Women is quite easy to read, but it is also fairly long (nearly 50 short chapters). For the first two-thirds of the semester we will be discussing the novel in fairly small chunks (perhaps 4-5 chapters a week). Your job is to come to class prepared to discuss those chapters with some care. You should be prepared to raise particular passages that you found interesting or important. *You should absolutely come to class with notes on the assigned chapters.* (If necessary, I will give content-based quizzes on the text.) I may tweak the chapter assignments a bit as the discussions progress.

As we discuss the novel, various themes will emerge that consider both Alcott and *Little Women* from multiple perspectives. I have lots of ideas to raise, but I also want those themes to emerge from our discussions.

Once we have completed the novel we will turn to a few weeks discussing Alcott the author, based on some of her own writings. (These will be on line.) Finally, we will devote at least one week to considering *Little Women's* enduring identity as the subject for popular film. We will watch one feature film version. (Details to be determined.)

More so than any course I have taught, we will be flexible about structure.

Grading and Written Requirements

Most of the grade for the course will be based on coming to class each week prepared to engage in discussion. You will write a short reflection on Part I, and a longer final essay based on a theme in *Little Women*. Although you will be allowed to consider other sources (in consultation with me), in most cases this final essay will be entirely based on considering a particular theme in some detail.

The short essay (February 8) will be about 3-4 pages (750-1000 words).

The final essay (April 19) will be 6-8 pages long (1500-2000 words).

Grade Breakdown:

- Participation and Preparation 40%
- Short Essay 20%
- Final Essay 40%

Class Schedule (Wednesdays)

[subject to change]

1. January 4 Introductions
2. January 11 LW, chapters 1-3
3. January 18 LW, chapters 4-9
4. January 25 LW, chapters 10-14
5. February 1 LW, chapters 15-19
6. February 8 LW, chapters 20-23 [end of Part I]

Short reflection: Is *Little Women* about the Civil War?

7. February 15 LW, chapters 24-28
8. February 22 LW, chapters 29-32
9. March 1 LW, chapters 33-36
- March 8 SPRING BREAK
10. March 15 LW, chapters 37-40
11. March 22 LW, chapters 41-47
12. March 29 Alcott's journals: On the Civil War (TBA).
13. April 5 Alcott's journals: On *Little Women* (TBA)
14. April 12 Little Women in the movies. (TBA)
15. April 19 Conclusions.

Final Essay due in class.